

## Original Research Article

### **Efficacy of Formative Assessment Practices in Social Studies Instructions: A Case Study of Holy Child College of Education**

#### **Abstract**

Assessment has become the foundation of all levels of education. A qualitative approach and a case study research design were adopted for this study. The case study focused on the teacher-trainees views and roles of formative assessment in the teaching and learning process in Social Studies lessons. The population for this study included all seventy-five (75) final-year teacher-trainees offering a general programme for a Bachelor of Education in Social Studies in the Holy Child College of Education in the Western Region of Ghana. Purposive and convenience sampling techniques were used to select the College of Education and respondents for the study. A purposive sampling technique was used to sample the college and municipality in the Western Region. Twenty (20) teacher trainees on teaching practice were conveniently sampled for the study. A semi-structured interview guide was the main tool used in data collection. The data was analysed by the use of the interpretative technique based on the themes arrived at during the data collection from the interview. Formative assessment is an act or the process of finding out what students have learnt through questions and answers, before, during and at the end of the lesson. Formative assessment is an effective diagnostic tool for assessors and assesses to remedy deficiencies while learning is ongoing. Formative assessment helps teachers to establish what students already know and what they need to learn. The effectiveness of every concept taught in the classroom depends solely on formative assessment, whereby both teachers and learners receive feedback during the learning interactions. It should also be noted that formative assessment contributes to the learner's learning performance and views, and teachers can identify the weaknesses of learners for guidance to be given in the learning process. It shows that its usage can enhance the efficacy of instructional strategies. The indication is that formative assessment ensures effective classroom engagement for teachers and students. On the whole, assessment for learning is a gradual engagement that takes place endlessly throughout ongoing classroom learning activities to offer immediate feedback for assessors and assesses to close the gap identified in the ongoing learning situation.

**Keywords:** Efficacy, Formative Assessment, Social Studies, Instructions

## 1. Introduction

Assessment has become the foundation in all levels of education. A study states that “assessment is process fundamental process and indigenous to the practice of teaching and learning” [1]. Indeed, the practice of classroom assessment sits at the heart of the instructional process, always guiding learners forward to the next or most proximal stage of development [2]. An assessment becomes formative when the results of the assessment are used to inform or guide future teachings [3]. A **writer** asserts that “formative classroom assessment is a potentially instructional process because the practice of sharing assessment information that supports learning is embedded in the instructional process by design” [4]. The research focuses on the essence of formative assessment. Other authors defined formative assessment “as a systematic process for continually gathering evidence on what is being learned while instruction is underway” [5]. This is supported by a previous study that “formative assessment as the “hands-on-deck” process of information on the student’s academic achievements in the classroom”. It is ongoing or goes on in the course of instructional delivery. It is used to provide information on the likely performance of students; to describe strengths or weaknesses and feedback given to students, telling them which items they got correct or wrong. This implies that the effective assessment initiated during teaching and learning is the learning progression of every learner. This shows that formative assessment (*Assessment for learning*) is designed to give teachers information to modify and differentiate or vary teaching and learning activities. It acknowledges that individual students learn in idiosyncratic ways, but it also recognizes that there are predictable patterns and pathways that many students follow.

From this point, if the teacher trainees were taught all the ideal formative assessment techniques in the Social Studies instructions, then they should form a better conception of the subject and the nature of its assessment during teaching practice. Although many efforts have been made by Colleges of Education tutors to improve the assessment of the subject of Social Studies during teaching and learning, it is believed that the goals of the subject are not being achieved, hence the study on teacher trainees' conceptions of formative assessment and use of feedback in Social Studies instructions in Ghana. The curriculum of Social Studies in the Colleges of Education is about the Basic School Social Studies curriculum to provide an ideal context for formative assessment, which requires teachers to focus on individual differences and abilities [7, 8]. The question is, "Do teacher-trainees in Colleges of Education have a positive conception that they are teaching to achieve assessment for learning (formative assessment)?" Even if teacher-trainees have all the knowledge and skills for formative assessment, without the appropriate conception of the role that formative assessment can play in teaching and learning, their knowledge and skills may lie dormant. There is a consensus that formative assessment is beneficial to both students and teachers if it is properly handled. The study was guided by these research questions (1) what does formative assessment mean to you? (2) What is the role of formative assessment in the teaching and learning process?

A study alluded that "formative assessment, in particular, is something teachers do with and for students". Within the four corners of the classroom teachers and students are partners in assessment, they share responsibility for learning [1]. Indeed, to emphasize this function, it is often referred to as "*assessment for learning*". At this wavelength, researchers posit that "formative assessment is those activities such as

brainstorming, discussion, role play, etc. that are used to improve student learning, show the efficacy of teachers' classroom instructions, and the usefulness of the curriculum materials being used in the teaching and learning process" [9]. This implies that "formative assessment plays a major role in informing the teacher on whether the objective of the lesson has been achieved and if the students are improving on what is taught" [9]. A similar study also holds a firm stand that "formative assessment is the purpose, process and practices to improve student's learning and teachers' teaching across a time period". Researchers also assert that "formative assessment is the "hands-on-deck" process of information on the student's academic achievements in the classroom" [6]. **Researchers** emphasized that "formative assessment is used to provide information on the likely performance of students; to describe strengths or weaknesses and feedback given to students, telling them which items they got correct or wrong" [6]. This posits that formative assessment tracks the progress of both students and teachers for effective teaching and learning in Social Studies instructions. The ideal conception of formative assessment by teachers will encourage them to use it as an effective tool to monitor the progress of learners in the classroom situation.

From this standpoint, the efficacy of the formative assessment can **realized** when it provides immediate constructive and descriptive feedback. A study on Teacher trainees' use of feedback in assessing student learning in Social Studies lessons in basic schools in Ghana: A Study of selected colleges of education in Western and Northern Regions published in Social Educator Journal concluded that "most of the teachers shared criteria for success with learners by providing feedback as they both worked towards the attainment of the objective of the lesson. Teachers' swift responses to questions made

learners involved in lesson activities resulting in the achievement of learning goals. The study also revealed that effective feedback is the one that closes the gap between the intended and actual outcome of a lesson. Constructive feedback devoid of a teacher-centred approach will lead to the success of Social Studies lessons” [7, 11]. This further implies that “the effective use of feedback in teaching and learning assists in revision purposes; assesses learners’ understanding level; and evaluates concepts taught in class to diagnose learners’ strengths and weaknesses acting as a benchmark to prepare for the next lesson” [11]. This will help teachers to see feedback as an important criterion in the teaching and learning process as it is used to revise the previous lesson taught and to find out if the objectives set in a lesson are achieved. Notably, formative assessment serves as a benchmark for teachers to offer feedback to learners during the introduction, presentation and evaluation stages of Social Studies lessons [7, 11]. This shows that formative assessment can never be done in isolation but through a series of classroom activities with the provision of effective feedback. When feed is effectively provided, it serves as an immensely powerful engine for improving learning. It is against this background that “feedback teachers get from assessment evidence, which they use to make adjustments to teaching to keep learning moving forward” [12, 13].

A study on “Social Studies tutors’ cognition in formative assessment in colleges of education in Ghana” published in *Development Country Studies* emphasizes that “formative assessment enhances the efficacy of instructional strategies of Social Studies tutors” [6]. The function of formative assessment as a means “to improve learning during instruction comes through, as does the idea that not only teachers but also students are active users of formative assessment”. The summation here is that “formative assessment

is a process that takes place continuously during teaching and learning to provide teachers and students with feedback to close the gap between current learning and desired goals” [1]. The implication here is that “the identified gap in teaching and learning activities can never be effectively closed if teachers do not choose appropriate formative assessment techniques or practices during teaching and learning activities in the classroom” [14]. A study posits that “Profile dimensions assessment techniques such as portfolio and peer and self-assessment lay a strong foundation for the knowledge base for teaching and assessing the learners’ learning outcomes” [15]. A similar study alluded that “formative techniques ensure systematic teaching and employ appropriate evaluation procedures to find out the extent of student achievement in a lesson. It also enhances students’ motivation, helps focus student learning and decreases classroom management challenges” [9, 16].

## **2. Methods**

Qualitatively, this study adopted a case study research design. The case study focused on the teacher-trainees views on formative assessment and the Role of formative assessment in the teaching and learning process in Social Studies lessons. The design was seen as descriptive and heuristic and has a more human face than other research methods and used to explore the teacher-trainees’ conceptions of formative assessment and the Role of formative assessment in the teaching and learning process in Social Studies instructions in Ghana. The study considered interviews as data collection for the study which gives self-reports to gather information regarding teacher-trainees’ understanding of formative assessment and its role in providing feedback during instructions. The

population for this study included all seventy-five (75) final-year teacher-trainees offering a general programme for a Bachelor of Education in Social Studies in the Holy Child Colleges of Education in the Western Region of Ghana. Purposive and convenience sampling techniques were used to select the College of Education and respondents for the study. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the college and municipality in the region. These teacher-trainees were purposively selected to go through the four cycles of their professional training - Beginning teaching; Developing teaching; Embedding teaching; and Extending teaching. Also, these teacher trainees have progressively developed skills, knowledge, and understanding of being an effective teacher.

Holy Child College of Education was selected as the sole teacher training institution in the Western Region of Ghana. A convenience sampling technique was used to select twenty (20) teacher trainees on teaching practice. *Bryman's social research methods* explained that “a convenience sample is simply available to the researcher by its accessibility” [17]. The main tool for data collection was a semi-structured interview guide. This posits that the respondents have the privilege to further explain questions asked without restriction. The data was analyzed by the use of the interpretative technique based on the themes arrived at during the data collection from the interview.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

#### **3.1 Meaning of Formative Assessment**

The main objective of this section was to find out the meanings of formative assessment in education by trainees. Teacher trainees were interviewed to elicit their views on the issue. The main question and the prompt question used in this section were

– *What does formative assessment mean to you? A prompt question - How different is it from summative assessment?* The outcomes are presented below.

Almost all the respondents said formative assessment is a form of evaluating the performance of learners through the feedback given during the teaching period. The respondents' understanding of formative assessment indicates that feedback plays a pivotal role in teaching and learning activities. The respondents' understanding of formative assessment was in line with an earlier study that "formative assessment consisted of activities used by the teacher to determine students' levels of knowledge and understanding, to provide the students with feedback and plan future instructions" [18]. This implies that descriptive and constructive feedback received in formative assessment practices are used for future instruction, remediation or the provision of additional learning opportunities.

Other respondents assert that "*formative assessment is a type of assessment which teachers use to find out the outcome of learning from pupils on concepts taught*". In this sense, teachers do not wait till the lesson ends before questions are asked, but through the learning process, teachers pause and ask questions to find out from pupils if indeed the lesson is having an impact on them before moving on to the next level in the lesson. This affirms that assessment for learning is initiated from the start of the lesson till it ends, by using formative techniques such as questioning to evaluate the understanding of the learners. This was in support of an earlier study that "formative assessment is continuous monitoring and regulation of learner participation in the course of a learning programme, intending to support the learning process. Formative assessment has a central role in the evolving learning process" [19].

Esi a respondent posits that: *“formative assessment involves all pupils in the lesson process whereby teaching touches on the needs of the child from the onset to the end of the instructional period.”* Esi’s position on the role of formative assessment establishes the fact that it engages every learner in the learning process to know about their understanding levels. The locus of the respondent was supported by a previous study that “formative assessment is a planned process in which assessment-elicited evidence of students’ status is used by teachers to adjust their ongoing instructional procedures or by students to adjust their current learning needs” [20]. On another wavelength, other respondents said formative assessment is a way of asking questions and evaluating learners, while teaching and learning are in progress to give and receive immediate feedback from both teachers and pupils to determine their level of progress and understanding. This is done in the learning process to aid teachers in achieving the lesson objectives. In the learning process, teachers assess pupils on the objectives before the lesson ends.

The formative assessment definition perspectives alluded to by the trainees is supported by a similar study that “formative assessment is a planned process in which assessment-elicited evidence of students’ status is used by teachers to adjust their ongoing instructional procedures or by students to adjust their current learning tactics” [20]. On the same wavelength, other researchers assert that “formative assessment is those activities that are used to improve student learning, show the efficacy of teachers’ classroom instructions, and the usefulness of the curriculum materials being used in the teaching and learning process” [9]. Another study also, holds a firm stand that “formative assessment is the purpose, process and practices to improve students’ learning and

teachers' teaching across a time period" [10]. This implies that "formative assessment plays a major role in informing the teacher whether the objective of the lesson has been achieved and the students are improving upon what is taught".

With the prompt question: *How different is the summative assessment from the formative assessment?* The trainees responded as follows:

A greater number of the respondents said: "*Summative assessment is the type of assessment that evaluates the teaching and learning outcome which is carried out at the end of the term, course or programme to promote pupils and to assess the level of performance of teachers.*" The position of the respondents on summative assessment shows that the learners' actual performance and level of understanding in the teaching and learning can be seen only at the end of a term or a programme but not during the lesson period. Assessment is done for the teacher to assess himself or herself based on the methods used. To this point, if it is done at the end of the term or a programme then the assessor cannot identify the gap in the lesson period and close it.

In the case of Tabi a respondent: "*summative assessment covers the sum up of the student's work within a term or at the end of the academic year.*" Tabi's assertion on summative assessment indicates that learners' strengths and weaknesses can be seen in term or at the end of the academic year but not during the actual learning activities in the classroom. This implies that "teachers can make their assessment at the end of the process of learning, identify students' current capability, and grade the student's proficiency or competence".

Another respondent Veronica said:

*“Summative assessment is done at the end of the year or term. eg BECE, WASSCE, end of semester examination or terminal exams for grading; summative assessment is a long term...summative assessment serves as hard core evidence to parents on their children’s performance in school.”*

The respondent’s standpoint on Summative assessment affirms the world views that *“teachers make it to the end of the process of learning, identify students’ current capability, and require that the teacher grade the students’ proficiency or competence”*. This provides opportunities for policymakers, teachers, parents, and students themselves to monitor the educational progress a student makes, compared to external standards or the performance of their peers.

The views on summative assessment by the respondents were backed by other researchers that “summative assessment is done in retrospect; it is a summation of what the student has learned at a particular point in time” [3, 21]. This indicates that the summative function of assessment has significant consequences for students in areas of awarding of grades; awarding of prizes, scholarships, or qualifications and serves as a benchmark for students to be accountable for the resources made available to them and subsequently open a new gate in their academic career.

Concluding this section, it is realized that, the majority of the respondents (trainees) were on point of what formative and summative are. Expressed views by trainees show that both formative and summative assessments are tools used in evaluating learners. Varied opinions were given on the meaning of formative and summative assessments. Formative assessment is seen as the assessment done before, during and after the instructional period. As teaching and learning is ongoing teacher pauses to ask

questions to receive feedback and moves on with the lesson again. Formative assessment is an act or the process of finding out what students have learnt through questions and answers, before, during and at the end of the lesson taught. The foregoing indicates that “formative assessment can be seen as a logical process for continually collecting evidence on what is being learned while instruction is underway and informing the teacher about what students think and about how they think”. This implies that “formative assessment helps teachers to establish what students already know and what they need to learn”. This clearly shows that the effectiveness of every concept taught in the classroom depends solely on formative assessment, whereby both teachers and learners receive feedback during the learning interactions. Though summative assessment is also taught in the classroom, it can be done at the end of the lesson, monthly, mid-term, termly, semester, or yearly. Summative assessment is done for the purposes of establishing performance, grading, judgment, promotion of learners, hard core evidence for stakeholders, and testing the effectiveness of teachers and educational curriculum.

### **3.2 Role of Formative Assessment in the Teaching and Learning Process**

The theme for this sub-section was to find out the role of formative assessment in the teaching and learning process in education by trainees. Teacher-trainees were interviewed in their practice schools. The main question used in this section was – *What is the role of formative assessment in the teaching and learning process?* The outcomes of the respondent’s position on the role of formative assessment in the teaching and learning process are presented below.

Acquah a respondent said: *“It enables the teacher to determine whether the pupils are participating in the lesson or not; it makes the learners to be attentive in class; it*

*makes the lesson to be more learner-centred than teacher-centred.*” The respondent’s position on the role of formative assessment in the teaching and learning process assists the teacher in making the learners active members of the learning process. This prevents the teacher from being seen in the centre stage of the lesson but acts as a facilitator to streamline instruction and to provide feedback to students to help them advance in their learning as well as to monitor and self-regulate it, leading to autonomous learners. This was supported by a similar study that “Teachers use formative assessment to streamline and target instruction and resources and to provide feedback to students to help them advance their learning [22]”

Another respondent Abena said:

*“It helps us to achieve lesson objectives and also helps to know the strengths and weaknesses of the learners, thereby giving the teacher some clues on how to teach well for an understanding of his/her pupils.... It helps you the teacher to know whether you are on course with the selected methods of teaching.”*

Abena’s assertion on the significant role of formative assessment in teaching and learning is to help teachers evaluate the learning process, know the strengths and weaknesses of the learners, and select appropriate methods to remedy gaps in the lesson.

Another respondent Cobbinah also said:

*“It helps the pupils to understand the teaching concept. Previously, I waited till the end of the lesson before evaluating the lesson. I realized that it does not benefit me the teacher as well as the pupils. Assessing pupils at the end of the lesson does help the teacher to find out the understanding level of the pupils but...using formative assessment helps to know the level of understanding of the pupil. This does not become a double work for the teacher to repeat the lesson, keeping both learners and teachers on track.”*

Cobbinah's position is that formative assessment becomes double stands, by continuously assessing the learners during the lesson and in the end, becomes a waste of time in the domain of assessment. This clearly shows that the respondent's conception will affect the active role of formative assessment theatres in the classroom situation.

Gifty said:

*"It helps to identify the learners' learning difficulties during the course of teaching before proceeding to the next level...helping the teacher to know the stage at which he/she got to in the lesson with the learners...whether they have grabbed or captured the teaching concept...helping the learner to ask questions for clarification to clear doubts in their mind, to pay attention in class, to challenge themselves when feedback is given after performing classroom tasks."*

Gifty negated what Cobbinah said, alluded that without formative assessment the assessor cannot identify the learning deficiencies of the learners in order to find a remedy to it. The respondent was of the view that formative assessment serves as the catalyst for the assessor a clear understanding of the learners before moving on to the next stage of the lesson. Gifty holds the view that feedback is always in the centre stage of formative assessment during teaching and learning which encourages learners to assess themselves.

Sheriff a respondent said:

*"What is to be assessed is done within the lesson period, in order to prevent forgetfulness. It guides the teacher to know the understanding level of the pupils, whether all of them have gotten a fair idea about the lesson taught through the way they participate during teaching and learning. Finally, it helps to promote the learners to the next level."*

Sheriff also shares the same position on the role of formative assessment in teaching and learning. It assists both teachers and learners to become partnerships in the learning

process and helps learners to monitor the learning progression of learners and to become metacognition learners.

Another respondent Dadzie said:

*“It engages pupils in teaching and learning activities as questions are asked and feedback provided; motivating them to contribute in class. This helps teachers to diagnose the learning difficulties of their learners and to reflect on the strength of their teaching techniques which aid for immediateremedial teaching and assessment.”*

Dadzie’s assertion on the important role formative assessment can play in teaching and learning is that *“it facilitates students’ involvement and engagement in their learning, thus increasing students’ peer and self-assessment abilities”*. The respondent was of the view that *“feedback provided by the teacher, improves the classroom culture of formative assessment in teaching and learning activities, thus increasing students’ peer and self-assessment abilities”*. However, previous research supported this assertion that *“formative assessment plays a major role in informing the teacher whether the objective of the lesson has been achieved and if the students are improving on what is taught”*. An earlier study considered that *“formative assessment consisted of activities used by the teacher to determine students’ levels of knowledge and understanding, to provide the students with feedback”* [18]. The feedback and future instructions may be concerned with remediation or the provision of further learning opportunities. Formative assessment is anchored on the continuous monitoring and regulation of learner participation in the course of a learning programme, to support the learning process. Formative assessment has a central role in the evolving learning process” [19]. This implies *“that formative assessment has both informative and regulatory characteristics as it forms the teacher’s pedagogic actions and allows him/her to regulate his/her actions, as well as guiding the*

learner to become aware of his/her difficulties and possibly to recognize and correct his/her own errors”.

It could be realized from the above discussions and findings that trainees have a fair idea of the role of formative assessment in the teaching and learning process. It makes the teacher alert or active in class and enables him/her to determine the learning output of the learners. It also enables the assessor to identify the learning difficulties of the learners. It once again helps the teacher to assess him/herself in terms of the usage of methods and techniques in teaching. A major role of formative assessment is that it contributes to the learner's learning performance and views, and teachers can identify the weaknesses of learners for guidance to be given in the learning process. It shows that its usage can enhance the efficacy of instructional strategies. The function of formative assessment as a means to improve learning during instruction comes through, as does the idea that not only teachers but also students are active users of formative assessment. On the whole, formative assessment is a process that takes place endlessly throughout teaching and learning to provide teachers and students with feedback to close the yawning gap between contemporary learning and preferred goals.

#### **4. Conclusions and Recommendations**

Formative assessment is an act or the process of finding out what students have learnt through questions and answers, before, during and at the end of the lesson. Formative assessment is an effective diagnostic tool for assessors and assesses to remedy deficiencies while learning is ongoing. Formative assessment helps teachers to establish what students already know and what they need to learn. The effectiveness of every

concept taught in the classroom depends solely on formative assessment, whereby both teachers and learners receive feedback during the learning interactions.

It should also be noted that formative assessment contributes to the learner's learning performance and views, and teachers can identify the weaknesses of learners for guidance to be given in the learning process. It shows that its usage can enhance the efficacy of instructional strategies. The indication is that formative assessment ensures effective classroom engagement for teachers and students. On the whole, assessment for learning is a gradual engagement that takes place endlessly throughout ongoing classroom learning activities to offer immediate feedback for assessors and assesses to close the gap identified in the ongoing learning situation.

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