

Analysis and Reflection on Classroom Assessment Research in Chinese Primary and Secondary Schools

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Abstract: Classroom assessment serves as a pivotal driver for advancing student learning and holistic development. This study systematically reviews extant literature concerning classroom assessment within Chinese primary and secondary education contexts. Relevant articles were retrieved from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure journal database using five title-based search terms, with the sources restricted to Chinese core journals and CSSCI-indexed journals. After excluding duplicate and irrelevant publications, the selected studies were classified and analyzed in terms of author affiliation, educational stage, subject area, and research method. The results indicate that existing research is dominated by university researchers, whereas participation by primary and secondary school teachers as well as collaboration between academic researchers and practitioners remain limited. Most existing studies adopt generalized discussions across educational stages and school subjects rather than examining specific contexts. Moreover, non-empirical approaches, particularly theoretical analysis and experience-based reflection, occupy a dominant position over empirical methods. Future research should strengthen collaboration between universities and schools, focus on specific educational stages and subject areas, and increase the use of classroom observation, interviews, and case studies.

Keywords: Classroom assessment; Primary and secondary schools; Literature analysis; Empirical research; Research reflection

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1. Research background

In 2001, the State Council issued the Decision of the State Council on the Reform and Development of Basic Education, which advocated vigorous advancement of basic education curriculum reform covering objectives, principles, curriculum standards, curriculum structure, assessment, and management, so as to establish a new basic education curriculum system consistent with the quality-oriented education requirements^[1].

Assessment constitutes an indispensable component of curriculum reform and consists primarily of student assessment, teacher assessment, and curriculum evaluation. Given that the ultimate purpose of basic

education reform lies in fostering students' development and change, student assessment should stand at the core of assessment reform. National administrative authorities have continuously introduced various changes and innovations in student assessment. For example, the Implementation Opinions of the State Council on Deepening the Reform of the Examination and Enrollment System, issued by the State Council in 2014, explicitly identified students' comprehensive qualities as a critical indicator for examination and enrollment decisions ^[2].

Student assessment should therefore cover not only students' academic achievement but also their learning attitudes and the development of appropriate values, so as to promote students' multi-faceted developmental potentials. Meanwhile, methods of student assessment have shifted from reliance on a single paper-and-pencil test towards the use of multiple assessment methods. These changes in student assessment have also placed new demands on teachers' professional competence. Both the Ministry of Education's Professional Standards for Secondary School Teachers (Trial) and Professional Standards for Primary School Teachers (Trial) identify assessment skills as a core component of teachers' professional competence ^[3-4]. Teachers are expected to deploy assessment tools and multiple assessment methods, assess students' development and change from multiple perspectives and throughout the learning process, guide students in conducting positive self-assessment, and use assessment results to improve educational and instructional practices.

Among all assessment activities involving students, classroom assessment represents the only assessment that is closely related to both student learning and teachers' instructional practices. Therefore, in-class student assessment should be a central concern for teachers and educational researchers. As Stiggins argued, "If we cannot assess effectively in the classroom, then all other levels of assessment are a waste of time and money" ^[5]. Through classroom assessment, teachers can comprehensively and dynamically observe changes in students' multi-dimensional abilities, which in turn facilitates student learning and teachers' professional development. Accordingly, research on classroom assessment carries substantial theoretical and practical significance.

However, summative assessment has long occupied a predominant position in China's student achievement assessment system, whereas formative classroom assessment has received relatively limited scholarly attention ^[6]. A review of the existing literature shows that research on classroom assessment in Chinese primary and secondary schools began to emerge only after the implementation of the 2001 new curriculum reform.

Against this background, several questions merit further exploration: How has classroom assessment research developed in China? What progress has been achieved? What problems remain unresolved? To address these questions, this study conducts a statistical and content-based analysis of articles concerning classroom assessment in primary and secondary schools published in Chinese core academic journals.

2. Research methods and results

2.1. Literature collection and screening

Relevant articles were retrieved from the journal database of China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). To ensure the quality and reliability of the selected literature, the source category was restricted to journals indexed in the Chinese Core Journal Catalogue or the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI).

To maximize the coverage of the search, articles whose titles contained any of the following terms were retrieved: “classroom assessment,” “classroom evaluation,” “classroom appraisal,” “classroom review,” and “classroom examination.” The retrieved publications were then screened according to two criteria. First, the research had to focus on primary or secondary education. Second, the research had to examine student assessment, specifically the assessment of students conducted by teachers in the classroom. Conference papers, book reviews, brief reports, and other non-research publications were excluded to maintain the academic relevance and accuracy of the sample.

2.2. Analytical framework

The selected articles were analyzed in terms of four dimensions: author affiliation, educational stage, subject area, and research method. The specific categories are presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Analytical framework for the selected articles

Dimension	Categories
Author affiliation	1. University researchers, including faculty members, researchers, and students; 2. primary and secondary school teachers or teaching researchers; 3. collaboration between the two groups
Educational stage	1. General educational stage without further specification; 2. primary school; 3. junior secondary school; 4. senior secondary school
Subject area	1. General subject category without further specification; 2. Chinese; 3. English; 4. Mathematics; 5. other subjects
Research method	1. Theoretical analysis; 2. experience-based reflection; 3. questionnaire survey; 4. observation; 5. interview; 6. case study

2.3. Distribution by author affiliation

The analysis indicates that university researchers constitute the principal contributors to classroom assessment research. Most of the selected articles were independently written by university faculty members, researchers, or students. By comparison, substantially fewer studies were independently conducted by primary and secondary school teachers or teaching researchers, and collaborative studies involving both university researchers and school practitioners were particularly scarce.

Such distribution suggests that the academic production of knowledge about classroom assessment is highly concentrated in higher education institutions. Frontline practitioners have limited participation in academic publication as independent researchers, while sustained collaboration mechanisms between academic researchers and school practitioners have not yet been well-established on a meaningful scale.

2.4. Distribution by educational stage

The studies were classified into four categories according to the educational stage examined: general educational stage, primary school, junior secondary school, and senior secondary school. The general category refers to studies that discuss classroom assessment across primary and secondary education or basic education without distinguishing among specific stages.

The results show that general studies account for the largest proportion of the literature, whereas studies focusing specifically on primary, junior secondary, or senior secondary education are relatively scarce. Existing research therefore tends to propose general conclusions applicable to the entire basic education system, with insufficient attention paid to the distinctive characteristics of classroom assessment across

different educational stages.

Students at different stages vary in physical-psychological development, knowledge structures, learning demands, and instructional reception modes. Consequently, broadly applicable principles may not provide sufficiently targeted guidance for teachers working at specific educational stages.

2.5. Distribution by subject area

The subject areas examined in the selected studies include the general subject category, Chinese, mathematics, English, politics, physics, science, and art. The general category refers to studies that do not distinguish among individual school subjects but instead investigate classroom assessment across primary and secondary education as a whole.

The results show that general studies constitute the largest category, while the overall number of studies devoted to specific subjects is limited. Only a small number of specialized studies were identified for some subjects, and no directly relevant articles were found for certain other subjects. This pattern is consistent with the distribution by educational stage: broadly defined categories dominate the literature, whereas research situated in specific educational contexts remains insufficient.

Given divergent knowledge structures and teaching-learning approaches across disciplines, classroom assessment practices cannot be applied uniformly across all subjects. General studies can provide principles relevant to multiple subjects, but subject teachers must make assessment decisions within specific disciplinary contexts. General principles cannot replace practical assessment strategies tailored to individual subjects. The shortage of subject-specific research therefore leaves teachers with few assessment models aligned with disciplinary attributes.

2.6. Distribution by research method

The research methods were classified into six categories: theoretical analysis, experience-based reflection, questionnaire survey, observation, interview, and case study. The classification was based on the research procedures actually reported in each article rather than solely relying on authors' descriptions of their methods.

Theoretical analysis refers to research based primarily on conceptual examination and logical reasoning. Experience-based reflection involves the generalization and interpretation of teaching experience. Questionnaire surveys collect data through structured questionnaires, while observational studies involve systematic observation conducted in classroom settings. Interview studies obtain information through in-depth conversations with teachers or students, and case studies investigate a particular classroom, participant group, or research object over a specified period.

When an article employed multiple methods, it was classified according to its principal research method. If no primary method could be identified, the article was included in all applicable methodological categories. Theoretical analysis and experience-based reflection were grouped as non-empirical research because they did not use systematically collected empirical evidence as their primary knowledge base. Questionnaire surveys, observations, interviews, and case studies were categorized as empirical research whose conclusions were anchored in systematically collected data.

The results indicate that non-empirical studies occupy a substantial proportion of the literature. Theoretical analysis is the most frequently used approach, followed by experience-based reflection.

Empirical studies are comparatively limited, with interview-based and case-study research being particularly uncommon. Existing research therefore relies primarily on textual analysis, conceptual reasoning, and the generalization of personal experience. Only a small proportion of the studies support their conclusions with systematically collected empirical evidence. As a result, the existing literature lacks sufficient observational and interview-based data to explain how classroom assessment actually operates in practice.

2.7. Summary of results

The findings across the four dimensions reveal four prominent structural characteristics of classroom assessment research in Chinese primary and secondary schools.

First, research is dominated by university researchers. Most articles were independently produced by university researchers, whereas substantially fewer were independently written by primary and secondary school teachers or teaching researchers. Collaborative research between the two groups was particularly scarce. This pattern indicates that academic knowledge production in classroom assessment remains concentrated in higher education institutions and that collaboration between researchers and practitioners has not yet developed on a substantial scale.

Second, research tends to address educational stages in general terms. Studies covering basic education or primary and secondary education as a whole outnumber those devoted specifically to primary, junior secondary, or senior secondary education. Existing research consequently emphasizes conclusions intended to apply across basic education while paying insufficient attention to differences across educational stages.

Third, research is predominantly subject-general. Most articles do not distinguish among individual subjects, and the total number of subject-specific studies remains small. Some subjects have received virtually no direct scholarly attention. Existing findings are therefore generally presented as principles applicable across the curriculum, while specialized research adapted to particular subjects remains seriously inadequate.

Fourth, non-empirical methods predominate. Theoretical analysis and experience-based reflection account for a large proportion of the literature, with theoretical analysis being the most common approach. Empirical methods, including questionnaire surveys, classroom observations, interviews, and case studies, are used less frequently; interview and case-study methods are especially rare. Thus, discussions of classroom assessment are primarily grounded in conceptual reasoning and personal experience rather than systematically collected empirical evidence.

These four characteristics describe the distribution of existing classroom assessment research by identifying who conducts the research, what educational contexts and subjects are investigated, and which methods are employed. However, this distribution itself does not directly determine whether the current research structure is appropriate. Further analysis is required to establish whether the concentration of research within universities has resulted in disconnection from classroom practice and whether the lack of stage-specific, subject-specific, and empirical studies has reduced the practical value of existing findings.

3. Analysis and discussion

3.1. Lack of standardization in classroom assessment research

A review of the selected literature reveals that classroom assessment research targeting Chinese primary and secondary schools lacks standardization, manifested in three dimensions.

First, there is inconsistency in the deployment of disciplinary terminology. Researchers frequently

use terms corresponding to “assessment,” “appraisal,” and “evaluation” interchangeably, even though these concepts have similar but distinct meanings. “Assessment” generally focuses on individuals and, in educational contexts, particularly on students. By contrast, “evaluation” is more commonly associated with educational institutions, programs, or other non-person entities. The broader concept of evaluation may nevertheless apply to either individuals or objects ^[7]. The interchangeable use of these terms gives rise to conceptual ambiguity and blurs the demarcation of research scope.

Second, there exists inconsistency in the definition of the object of classroom assessment. The objects examined in the literature can be divided into three categories: teachers, students, and both teachers and students. Studies in the first category mainly center on the assessment of teachers’ classroom instruction. Those in the second category examine teachers’ assessment of students in classroom settings. Studies in the third category address both teaching and learning.

This inconsistency may partly stem from the translation and interpretation of the English term “classroom assessment.” In the relevant international literature, “assessment” generally denotes the collection and interpretation of evidence pertaining to student learning. Accordingly, “classroom assessment” primarily denotes teacher-implemented assessment of students within classroom contexts. However, Chinese researchers frequently adopt an extended definition that encompasses the evaluation of either teachers or students. This difference between the literal meaning of the translated expression and its intended academic connotation has contributed to ambiguity regarding the object of classroom assessment research. However, these macro-level theories can provide only general value orientations at the conceptual level, rather than developing tailored theoretical frameworks for classroom assessment research ^[8].

Similar inconsistencies can also be found in English academic usage. For example, although the assessment of student achievement focuses on students and would therefore ordinarily be described using the term “assessment,” some scholars use the established expression “evaluation of student achievement.” Such usage illustrates that terminological boundaries are not always strictly maintained. Nevertheless, researchers should explicitly define their key concepts and apply them consistently throughout a study.

Third, inconsistency persists regarding the definition of classroom-assessment scope. Most researchers agree that classroom assessment concerns students and refers primarily to assessment activities conducted by teachers. However, two distinct approaches to its conceptual scope can be identified.

The first is a narrow definition, whereby classroom assessment is confined exclusively to assessment activities implemented during classroom instruction. This interpretation emphasizes the literal classroom setting and focuses on activities such as questioning, feedback, observation, and the evaluation of student performance.

The second is a broad definition, which includes the full range of activities required for classroom assessment to be successfully designed and implemented. In addition to assessment conducted during lessons, this definition covers teachers’ preparatory work before instruction and their subsequent analysis, interpretation, and feedback after the lesson. The coexistence of these definitions makes it difficult to compare findings across studies and may weaken the cumulative development of research in this field.

3.2. Lack of operational applicability

Research on classroom assessment in China began relatively late and remains at an exploratory stage. Existing studies place considerable emphasis on theoretical discussion but devote substantially less attention to practical investigation. Consequently, numerous findings lack operational applicability and provide limited guidance for classroom practice.

One manifestation of this problem is the shortage of research focusing on specific educational stages. The literature analysis shows that most studies discuss classroom assessment across primary and secondary education as a whole, whereas relatively few investigate primary school, junior secondary school, or senior secondary school separately. Such general studies may identify broad principles, but they cannot fully account for differences in students' developmental characteristics, learning demands, curricular content, and instructional practices across educational stages. As a result, their conclusions may be too general to offer teachers concrete and directly applicable assessment strategies.

4. Conclusion

This study reviewed classroom assessment research in Chinese primary and secondary schools from four dimensions: author affiliation, educational stage, subject area, and research method. The findings show that existing studies are mainly conducted by university researchers and generally focus on broad educational stages and subject areas. Empirical research remains limited, while theoretical analysis and experience-based reflection predominate. In addition, inconsistent terminology and unclear research boundaries have weakened the standardization and practical value of this field.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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