THE EFFECTIVENESS OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT METHODS IN EFL HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: This article examines the effectiveness of formative assessment methods in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in higher education. It discusses how timely feedback, self-assessment, peer assessment, short quizzes, and teacher questioning can help identify learning difficulties and develop students' autonomy. Drawing on a review of relevant academic literature, the article outlines the potential benefits and limitations of formative assessment and offers practical recommendations for integrating it into university English classes. It argues that effectiveness depends not simply on the tool selected, but also on the quality of feedback, the clarity of assessment criteria, and students' ability to act on the guidance they receive.

Keywords: formative assessment, English as a foreign language, higher education, feedback, self-assessment, peer assessment.

Introduction

Assessment is an essential part of language education because it provides information about what learners know, what they can do, and what they still need to develop. In higher education, assessment is often associated with midterm tests, final examinations, and grades. Although these summative procedures are useful for documenting achievement, they may not provide enough information for students to improve while learning is still taking place. Formative assessment addresses this gap by collecting evidence of learning during instruction and using it to guide the next steps for both teachers and students.

The central problem addressed in this article is that formative assessment may be used inconsistently or reduced to frequent testing without meaningful feedback. A quiz or classroom question becomes formative only when its results are interpreted and used to improve learning. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to analyse the potential effectiveness of formative assessment methods in EFL higher education and identify conditions that make them educationally useful. The objectives are to clarify the concept of formative

assessment, examine key methods, discuss benefits and limitations, and propose practical recommendations for university English teachers.

Materials And Methods

The article uses a qualitative, literature-based approach. It draws on influential publications on formative assessment and feedback, research concerning self-regulated learning in higher education, and recent reviews and studies addressing formative assessment in university and EFL contexts. The selected literature was examined thematically, with attention to four areas: the purpose of formative assessment, feedback quality, student participation in assessment, and practical implementation in language classrooms. The analysis is interpretive rather than experimental: no new student sample, questionnaire, or classroom intervention was conducted for this article. Consequently, the findings presented below are a synthesis of published research and pedagogical analysis, not results from an original experiment.

Results And Discussion

Formative assessment as a process for improving learning

Formative assessment is best understood as an ongoing process rather than a single instrument. Teachers gather evidence of students' understanding, interpret it in relation to learning objectives, and adjust instruction or provide guidance. Black and Wiliam's review indicates that strengthening classroom assessment and feedback can contribute to learning gains.

In an EFL classroom, formative assessment can take place during a speaking task, a reading activity, a writing draft, or a short vocabulary check. For example, after a pair discussion, a teacher may note that students communicate ideas successfully but frequently use incorrect past-tense forms. The teacher can then provide a brief explanation and a follow-up activity focused on that language point. The evidence is useful because it directly informs the next teaching decision.

Teacher feedback and feedforward

Feedback is one of the most important components of formative assessment, but its effect depends on its content and delivery. Hattie and Timperley argue that feedback can have positive or negative effects and that its usefulness depends on the information it provides and how learners can use it. General comments such as "Good job" or "Improve your writing" may encourage students, but they do not necessarily show what should be done next. More useful feedback identifies a specific strength, explains a gap in relation to a criterion, and suggests an actionable next step.

For example, a comment on an argumentative paragraph might state: "Your position is clear, but the second argument needs evidence. Add a relevant example and explain how it supports your claim." This response

connects performance to a criterion and gives the learner a practical revision target. In speaking lessons, feedback can focus on one or two priorities, such as extending answers with reasons or improving the use of linking expressions, rather than correcting every error at once.

Feedforward is equally important: students should understand how to use feedback in future tasks. If a teacher returns written work but does not provide time for revision, learners may read the comments without acting on them. A stronger routine is to ask students to revise a paragraph, record recurring errors, or set one language goal for the next lesson. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick emphasise the relationship between feedback and students' capacity to regulate their own learning.

Self-assessment and peer assessment

Self-assessment encourages students to compare their work with clear learning objectives and criteria. It can develop reflection, responsibility, and awareness of progress. In a writing lesson, students can use a checklist to check whether an essay has a clear thesis statement, supporting arguments, examples, and a conclusion. In speaking activities, learners can reflect on whether they answered the question fully, supported their opinions, and used appropriate vocabulary. Self-assessment should not mean that students simply give themselves a grade; its main purpose is to help them recognise strengths and identify realistic areas for improvement.

Peer assessment allows students to give structured feedback on one another's work. It can increase engagement with assessment criteria and expose learners to different ways of expressing ideas. For instance, pairs can exchange short paragraphs and identify one effective feature and one area for improvement. However, peer assessment requires preparation. Students may hesitate to criticise friends, provide vague comments, or focus on minor grammar errors while overlooking the task's main objective. Teachers can reduce these risks by modelling constructive language, using short rubrics, and reminding students that feedback should refer to the work rather than the person.

Both approaches are more effective when criteria are discussed before the task. A rubric for an oral presentation might include task completion, organisation, clarity, vocabulary, and interaction. Students can examine examples of stronger and weaker performance before assessing their own or a peer's work.

Quizzes, questioning, and digital tools

Low-stakes quizzes and classroom questioning provide teachers with quick evidence of understanding. Short vocabulary checks, grammar questions, exit tickets, and reading-comprehension questions can reveal

misunderstandings before they become persistent problems. A systematic review of formative assessment and feedback in higher education identifies low-stakes quizzing as a promising approach, while also noting that peer and tutor feedback depend on how they are implemented.

Questioning can also make students' thinking visible. Instead of asking only "Is everything clear?", teachers can ask learners to explain a concept in their own words, choose between two answers and justify the choice, or identify the most difficult part of a task. Such questions are more informative because students may say they understand even when they remain uncertain. Anonymous response tools or digital quizzes can help quieter students participate, although technology itself does not guarantee better learning.

Benefits and limitations in EFL higher education

The literature suggests several potential benefits of formative assessment. First, it helps identify learning gaps early. Second, specific feedback can guide improvement in speaking, writing, vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension. Third, self-assessment and peer assessment can strengthen learner autonomy and engagement. Fourth, frequent low-stakes checks can make progress visible and reduce the risk that students discover major difficulties only during a final examination. Recent research focused on university EFL classrooms similarly highlights the importance of feedback, student participation, and the way formative assessment is enacted in practice.

However, formative assessment is not automatically effective. Providing detailed feedback to every student can increase teachers' workload, particularly in large classes. Students may also lack the confidence or skills to interpret comments, and peer feedback may be inaccurate unless criteria are clear. In examination-oriented settings, learners may prioritise marks over reflection and revision. Differences in English proficiency can further affect how students understand feedback and evaluate classmates' work.

These limitations suggest that quality matters more than the number of assessment activities. Teachers do not need to use every method in every lesson. Instead, they should choose a small number of strategies that match the lesson objective, give students clear criteria, and ensure that there is time to act on the evidence. Feedback should be manageable, specific, respectful, and focused on improvement.

Practical recommendations for university English teachers

Based on the literature analysis, several recommendations can be proposed. First, teachers should communicate lesson objectives and success criteria in accessible language before students begin a task. Second, they should use short checks during lessons to identify misunderstandings and adapt instruction. Third, feedback should prioritise the most important issues and

include a clear next step. Fourth, self-assessment and peer assessment should be supported with checklists, examples, and brief training in constructive feedback. Finally, formative assessment should be inclusive: oral contributions, written responses, pair work, and anonymous digital responses can provide different ways for students to demonstrate understanding.

A practical example is a three-stage writing cycle. Before writing, the teacher shares a short rubric and analyses a sample paragraph with the class. During writing, students submit a draft and receive one or two targeted comments. After feedback, they revise the paragraph and briefly explain which changes they made. A similar cycle can be used for speaking: students complete a short discussion, receive feedback on one communicative goal, and repeat the task with a partner. In both cases, assessment becomes part of learning rather than an endpoint.

Conclusion

The analysis indicates that formative assessment has considerable potential to support English language learning in higher education when it is integrated into everyday teaching and linked to clear learning objectives. Teacher feedback, feedforward, self-assessment, peer assessment, questioning, and low-stakes quizzes can help identify learning difficulties, clarify expectations, and encourage students to take greater responsibility for their progress. Their effectiveness, however, depends on how the methods are designed and used.

The main practical implication is that university English teachers should treat assessment as a continuous cycle: establish criteria, gather evidence, interpret it, provide actionable feedback, and allow learners to respond. Institutions can support this process by offering professional development in assessment literacy and by recognising the time required for meaningful feedback. Since this article is based on published literature rather than original classroom data, future research could examine particular formative methods in Uzbek university EFL contexts through classroom observation, student questionnaires, interviews, or a carefully designed intervention. Such research would help establish which approaches work best for different language skills and student groups.

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