

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT PRACTICES IN THE MALAYSIAN ENGLISH LANGUAGE PRIMARY CLASSROOM

SUMATI MUNIANDY*

Faculty of Social Sciences & Leisure Management, Taylor's University, Malaysia.
*Corresponding Author Email: sumati8888@gmail.com

JASMINE JAIN

Faculty of Social Sciences & Leisure Management, Taylor's University, Malaysia.

RAMESH NAIR

Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Research Fellow, Accounting Research Institute, Malaysia.

Abstract

The CEFR-aligned Malaysian English language curriculum prioritises English language teachers' incorporation of formative assessment (FA) practices in primary schools. Nevertheless, studies on FA practices remain lacking despite much research on internalising the curriculum implications on classroom practices. This study aimed to examine primary English language teachers' FA practices to better comprehend the degree to which the new curriculum is implemented in class. The FA practices of three teachers from various schools were assessed through interview sessions. Resultantly, discrepancies in how teachers internalise FA were identified. Large class sizes, insufficient time, heavy syllabus and timetable load, mixed learner abilities, incomprehensive assessment handbook, unsupportive parent attitudes, and inadequate assessment training. The findings have implications for improving the quality of in-service training of teachers, and the effective implementation of FA practices in the classroom to improve the delivery of English language lessons.

Keywords: FA, Primary School, Summative Assessment, Teacher Training.

INTRODUCTION

Black and Wiliam (2009) holistically defined formative assessment (FA) as follows:

Practice in a classroom is formative to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers, to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have taken in the absence of the evidence that was elicited. (p. 9)

The FA, which serves to gauge students' lesson comprehension and facilitates both teachers and students to make periodical adjustments, significantly influences English language teaching and learning. In other words, FA implies using educational practices with evidence of students' learning levels. Students are open to peer feedback and take more accountability for their learning in a dynamic and student-centric classroom environment. As such, FA plays a pivotal role in facilitating reflections, thoughts, and learning in the classroom (Alabid et al, 2022). The new CEFR-aligned curriculum, which was gradually implemented in Malaysian primary schools in 2018, led to the delivery of English language lessons between Years 1 and 6 within six years. Specifically, the

Ministry of Education Malaysia adopted a cascade model to sufficiently equip primary school English language teachers with optimal tools following the new curriculum. In-service English language teachers participated in four workshops (familiarisation workshop, curriculum induction, material adaptation workshop, and FA workshop) in the span of six years. Familiarisation workshop was about the introduction of CEFR in the curriculum, material adaptation was about the how to use CEFR-aligned materials whereas FA workshop was about the assessment strategies which can be used in the classroom.

Problem Statement

English language teachers were introduced to FA in 2018 through nationwide CEFR cascading, which aligns the curriculum, teaching and learning, and assessment to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) following Black and William (1998). Notably, the Council of Europe acknowledges FA as a key determinant of this “can do” approach (The Council of Europe, 2020). This model also focuses on the essentiality of language action. The 2016 English Language Standards and Quality Council (ELSQC) facilitated the CEFR adoption in Malaysia. Furthermore, the English Language Teaching Centre (ELTC) and ELSQC collaborated with the Ministry of Education to increase Malaysian students’ English language proficiency. Following the English Language Education Reform in Malaysia 2015-2025 (Don et al, 2015), the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 prioritises the importance of English in meeting global demands, specifically concerning human capital development. As the second official language in Malaysia, it is deemed essential to learn English. Luthfiyyah et al. (2021) highlighted the necessity for optimal FA knowledge and practices through a large-scale research programme. As such, Jonglai et al (2021) proposed involving teachers’ roles in FA practices in future studies. Despite much research on teachers’ incorporation of FA approaches in class and their general perception of FA (Johnson et al, 2019; Mudin, 2019; Sidhu et al, 2018; Widiastuti & Saukah, 2020), the extent to which Malaysian primary school English language teachers are aware of their new roles regarding CEFR (Brown, 2019) remains relatively unknown. Therefore, this present study addressed the aforementioned gap with the following research questions:

1. What do Malaysian primary school English language teachers understand about FA in the CEFR curriculum?
2. How is FA implemented in the Malaysian primary school CEFR curriculum?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The FA approach constitutes three key components: (i) goal setting for instruction, (ii) assessment, and (iii) instructional feedback to catalyse adaptive teaching (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Wiliam & Thompson, 2007). As a recurring process with assessment-oriented evidence to make instruction-related decisions during the learning process (Black & Wiliam, 2009), Burke and Depka (2011) denoted FA as activities that track student progress and modify pedagogical approaches based on learning requirements

(Burke & Depka, 2011). Both teachers and students incorporate this process to acknowledge and address students' learning needs for an optimal learning process (Cowie & Bell, 1999). In Sadler (1998), FA intends to generate performance feedback for accelerated and improved learning. This assessment type, which is also known as assessment for learning, offers students the opportunity to explore, discover, and ask questions with little emphasis on their academic performance. The associated activities improve students' proficiency with specific skills (Chappius & Chappius, 2007). Heritage (2007) presented four key FA elements as follows: (i) identify the "gap", (ii) feedback, (iii) student involvement, and (iv) learning progressions. Meanwhile, Sadler (1989) concluded that FA aims to determine the discrepancy between students' present learning experience and the desired goal. This difference varies across students with pedagogical implications. For example, students who perceive the gap as too wide may not attain their objective, thus resulting in demotivation and a sense of failure. Furthermore, efforts to bridge the gap may prove futile in cases with minimal differences. Thus, it proves pivotal for FA to determine the "just right gap" between formal and informal techniques. Formal procedures enable learning documentation with a clear depiction of student attainment. For example, teachers use daily checks involving conversations, inquiries, or in-progress checks while teaching as a non-formal means of measuring student comprehension. William and Leahy (2015) claimed that FA reveals students' strengths and weaknesses with multiple teaching methods to enhance questioning. Although learning through formal or informal assessment is vital, timely data use proves vital for enhancement. Brookhart (2007) and Burke and Depka (2011) underscored the significance of feedback in teaching and learning, which forms the basis of FA (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Feedback is one of the core components (Bell & Cowie, 2001; Sadler, 1989; Black & William, 1998; Crooks, 1988; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Hattie, 2009) that strive to optimise student learning (Black & William, 1998b; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Wiggins, 2012), such as their ability to complete an assignment (William, 2012). Based on Hattie and Timperley's (2007) highly-cited essay, "The Power of Feedback", the authors structured a feedback model to evaluate learners through the following questions: (i) Where am I going?; (ii) How am I going to get there?; (iii) And where to next?. The first question concerns learning objectives, the second outlines feedback on learner progress, and the third seeks to determine the possible complexities underpinning learner autonomy (p. 4-5). Learning is deemed unsuccessful without effective feedback, which should be promptly provided (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Students should be provided with opportunities to obtain feedback and revise their learning from teachers using FA (Bransford et al., 2000). Hence, teachers must offer "timely feedback" and determine effective feedback methods or interventions for improved student learning and achievement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Hattie, 2012; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Conventional classroom instructions prove inconducive for teachers to provide their students with formative feedback (Bransford et al. 2000, pp. 140–141), which should emphasise learning activities or processes that bridge the gap between what is (i) known and (ii) intended to be learned. (Sadler, 1989).

Formative Assessment Strategies/Activities

Shavelson et al (2008) presented three different FA types: (i) on-the-fly assessment, which occurs spontaneously in class to ascertain student progress; (ii) planned-for interaction, where teachers pre-determine ways to derive student thoughts throughout instructions; (iii) curriculum-embedded assessment, which is integrated with the curriculum to identify students' attainment of specific learning objectives. Pro-FA teachers engage with students to make prompt decisions and offer assistance and motivation. Specifically, Cambridge Assessment (2018) established nine FA building blocks that prove essential in teachers' lessons. The teachers were provided with a training module as a reference during the cascading of the CEFR FA in 2018. Table 1 presents the aforementioned building blocks. These FA tools facilitate classroom teaching.

Table 1: The FA tools

Building Block	Explanation
Sharing learning objectives and success criteria	Teachers must explain what students are expected to achieve and perform in class while making their learners aware of their current standing.
Exemplars	Examples provide students with ideas on their expected learning outcomes. Modelling skills depict what is expected of the learners.
Starters and plenaries	Starters inform students of their expected learning outcome by activating learners' schemata using set induction, whereas plenaries enable teachers to monitor student progress.
Questioning	Multiple question types facilitate teachers to ascertain their learners' comprehension level and gauge their performance.
Discussion	Teachers can evaluate students by encouraging discussions among themselves. In this vein, students can also proactively perform self- and peer assessments by comparing responses.
Quick scans	Teachers collect most of the responses by posing questions to the entire class or executing response-eliciting activities. Teachers could use the obtained responses to plan the following steps for their students.
Self-assessment and peer assessment	Student-centric assessment encourages peer-assisted learning. Students' active involvement in self-assessment is a core FA component.
Feedback	Feedback informs teachers on students' progress using planned FA activities and lessons with acknowledgements of student performance and associated issues. Consequently, teachers could proceed to the next step.

(Cambridge Assessment, 2018, p.11)

Numerous FA exercises can be implemented to gather proof of learning and monitor student development. For example, teachers could utilise questions to determine learners' lesson comprehension (Burke & Depka, 2011; Wiliam, 2011). Students can record their responses on dry erase boards to collect responses. Furthermore, student practices can be tracked through observations after a skill is introduced. Learning logs and ABCD cards are further examples of FA instruments (Wiliam, 2011). Students are provided with cards labelled A, B, C, or D. These cards parallel the responses for multiple-

choice prompts when the teacher poses a question (Wiliam, 2011). The teacher reads the students' written responses to evaluate their lesson comprehension. Dirksen (2011 p. 29) presented "pair-and-share activities" as another FA tool, where learners engage in content discussions or collective project works (Dirksen, 2011). Teachers could observe students during peer work to determine their understanding of the lesson. Wiliam (2011) highlighted exit passes: student cards that record their answers in response to the teacher's questions. Teachers collect these cards, listen to students' comments, and employ the derived data to ascertain how instruction should proceed. In line with Wiliam (2011), teachers should collect all student responses at once rather than individually pose a question to each student through the "all-student response system" (p. 87). This method enables teachers to access all their students' learning status during or post-lesson based on circumstances. Teachers could ask a question and rapidly obtain a response from the entire (Wiliam, 2011). Linn and Miller (2005) provided multiple recommendations for pertinent assessment task development, such as matching between the tasks and desired outcomes, gaining a representative sample of tasks, mitigating performance-related barriers, and removing inadvertent clues in objective test items. The assessment method should be selected following the performance types to be assessed (in terms of validity and reliability) and the assessment of knowledge, reasoning, skills, products, and attitudes (Butler & McMunn, 2006).

METHODOLOGY

This case study aimed to explore English language primary school teachers' FA internalisation and practices. Empirical data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with three teachers in different schools in Johor Bahru. The samples were selected through purposive sampling following their educational qualification in line with the research objectives. In Creswell (2017), purposive sampling is used to learn or comprehend a phenomenon through deliberate sample and site selection. Three different schools were selected as the schools have been extensively implementing FA in class. The school administrators organised various local workshops and webinars for English language teachers. Essentially, the study participants were individuals selected from a particular site following their ability to provide a sound understanding of FA adoption, which is central to the study problem (Creswell, 2007). Creswell and Poth (2018) claimed that there is no specific number for qualitative study participants as the number relies on the research approach. Apart from knowledge and experience, Bernard (2002) and Spradley (1979) denoted the significance of participation availability and willingness and the capacity to fluently, expressively, and reflectively convey experiences and opinions. This study also utilised document analysis (teachers' lesson plans and other relevant materials) for data-gathering purposes (see **Table 2**). Evaluating teachers' lesson plans would provide a sound comprehension of the methods used and their subsequent implementation in a lesson (McKenzie, 2021). Summarily, data triangulation was achieved from the semi-structured interviews and documentation analyses to draw reliable and accurate conclusions. The researcher sought the experts in the area of research to view the interview questions.

Table 2: List of documents

Document Type
1. Teacher’s lesson plan ✓ checked if FA approaches entailing differentiated methods, learning objectives, and success criteria are included in the lesson plan and the assessment tool or practice types employed in class.
2. Formative Assessment Training Module (March 2018) ✓ checked if the assessment type, assignment frequency and duration, and feedback type in the module are employed in the lesson plan.

The data derived from document analysis served to crosscheck those from the semi-structured interview. The three teachers in this study (teachers A, B, and C) who have the same educational background, voluntarily participated in this study. Two teachers attended the 2018 Cambridge English (UK) practical training on CEFR FA. One teacher did not attend this training as she had not joined the school yet. Notwithstanding, the teachers have attended several local training sessions arranged by their respective schools. Table 3 presents the participants’ profiles.

Table 3: Participant profile

Teacher Educational	Qualification	Experience	FA Training_by Cambridge English_____
Teacher A	TESL	33	Yes
Teacher B	TESL	2	No
Teacher C	TESL	10	Yes

Data from the semi-structured interview were collected through the Google Meet platform. Teachers were contacted via WhatsApp message to fix the online interview time. Participants were briefed on the research objectives and signed the consent form pre-interview. The researcher posed some open-ended questions to elicit the participants’ FA adoption experiences. The transcripts were thematically analysed and subsequently shared with all three participants to ensure the accuracy of the researcher’s interpretations. Braun and Clarke (2006) denoted thematic analysis as follows: “A method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within data” (p. 79). This cross-checking proves pivotal to improving data credibility and trustworthiness and preventing potential bias.

Findings from The Semi Structured Interview

The research outcomes were derived through semi-structured interviews and document analyses and thematically analysed for a qualitative, detailed, and nuanced data representation. This analysis proves suitable to internalise experiences, thoughts, or behaviours across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Table 4: Key themes identified with related sub-themes

Category	Main themes	Sub-themes
Themes on teachers’ understanding	Developing understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose and benefit of FA
Themes on implementation of FA strategies	FA practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FA strategies/activities • Types of assessment

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning objectives and success criteria • Feedback
Themes on FA challenges	FA challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • workload, time constraints, big class

The themes were outlined following their significance in the transcripts and individual teachers' accounts. The following section presents the research outcomes using two research questions with discussions on the themes in the context of these questions. A novel theme, FA challenges, emerged from the interview session and was duly explained in the findings.

Teachers' Understanding

“Formative assessment is part of the classroom-based assessment. Formative assessment allows teachers to identify pupils' level of proficiency and also learning performance. Formative assessment acts as a guideline for the teachers to plan the upcoming lessons which suit the students' preferences and backgrounds”. (Teacher A)

“Formative assessment is vital for language learning. It helps the students to understand better during the lesson”. (Teacher B)

Teacher A holistically understands FA as a guide in planning lessons. Teacher B also understands FA methods in the classroom despite only having two years of teaching experience. This teacher had been briefed by the head teacher in her school. Furthermore, the assessment subject constituted part of her tertiary education curriculum. Despite not having attended the nationwide CEFR FA training organised by Cambridge English in 2018, Teacher B participated in several webinars organised by the school.

“I plan what types of assessment to be used before the lesson starts. I evaluate the students accordingly. My goal is to make students understand the tasks and complete the task”. (Teacher B)

Formative assessment allows teachers to identify pupils' level of proficiency and also learning performance”. (Teacher C)

Teachers B and C clearly understand what constitutes FA. In line with the interview session, all the teachers possess a sound comprehension of FA. The gap in teaching experiences did not affect their internalisation of FA. These findings parallel that of Johnson et.al (2019), Onalan and Karagui (2018) and Calveric (2010), where working experience does not influence FA comprehension.

teachers' purpose for implementing formative assessment

“My main objective is to examine their instructional practices in order to determine which are producing the desired results and which are not. Some that work for one group of students may not work for another group”. (Teacher A).

“I think if the assessment is done properly, then the students will be able to understand the teaching and learning process and become independent learners”. (Teacher C)

“But I am still struggling to use peer assessment and self-assessment to evaluate students’ understanding of the lesson. This is mainly because I don’t have much time to do so”. (Teacher B)

Following this statement, Teacher A implements FA in class to assess and enhance teaching practices for optimal student learning. Such practices would enable him to modify teaching approaches following students’ needs.

Benefits of Formative Assessment

“For me, formative assessment helps my students to improve their learning in the class. And also, I can easily detect students’ learning difficulties in certain areas”. (Teacher A)

“Formative assessment analyses the strengths and weaknesses of both teachers and the students”. (Teacher C)

“I think teachers can plan for the next action based on the formative assessment in class”. (Teacher B)

Both teachers acknowledge the FA advantages in class, which facilitate learners to attain target lesson goals. Teachers who perceive a learning gap can take precautionary measures. This information could be used to ascertain whether additional instructions prove necessary and make relevant teaching adjustments.

Formative Assessment Practises

“I use role play during my lesson. It is easier to conduct. I just want to be practical in the classroom as we teachers are bogged down with other work too”. (Teacher A)

“Most of the time, I ask questions to test their understanding”. That’s the easiest method to do. I wish I had more time in class. (Teacher B)

“I give the worksheet to do. This is what I have been doing”. I still use chalk and talk method which I am comfortable with (Teacher C)

Peer assessment? Yes, I know but I don’t know how to carry it out. I don’t really fancy doing all that as I prefer to use the old method of assessing the students as long as they learn in my class. (Teacher A)

Peer assessment and self-assessment may take a lot of time to conduct. I need to study more on that (Teacher B)

The teachers were unfamiliar with how to conduct the FA in the long, medium, and short cycles of FA approaches despite being exposed to the stipulated cycles in FA training. Following time constraints, FA was implemented towards the end of the lesson. Teachers

A and B were unaware of how to conduct peer assessment and self-assessment in class and cited the need for more time.

Challenges of Formative Assessment

“Formative assessment is benefiting students and teachers but it's a challenge to implement in Malaysia because we have large classroom sizes. teachers do not have ample time and opportunities to observe/monitor all students formatively. what more if teachers are teaching many classes”. (Teacher C)

“I did my best to give a formative evaluation after completing the teaching of each basic competency on the syllabus, but due to various factors like the time constraints, the fact that some students didn't seem to understand the material, and the involvement of some students in extracurricular activities... No, I didn't do it”. ((Teacher A)

“I am a novice teacher, newly posted and I think I need more guidance from the head teacher or senior teachers. I always consult them regarding the FA. And they are very helpful”. (Teacher B)

Following Yan et. al (2021, p.253), “an encouraging school environment, supportive school-based policies, and sufficient school support measures are necessary for teachers to be willing to and actually conduct FA. Wylie et al. (2012) claimed that instructors could acquire knowledge on FA methods by observing other educators, communicating with their peers, and collecting samples of colleagues' classroom activities. Overall, teachers could collectively enhance their FA capacity with appropriate facilitation (Wylie et. al 2012).

Findings from The Document Analysis

Each document in this study was descriptively analysed. Essentially, documents provide background information and wide data coverage that contextualises a study within its domain (Bowen, 2009). The current work performed document analysis to identify FA strategies and when and how were implemented in the classroom. Bowen (2009) considered thematic analysis as a form of pattern recognition with the data elicited from a document. This analysis, which entails meticulous, focused reading and re-reading of data, coding, and category construction (Bowen, 2009), resulted in emerging themes that were subsequently classified for further examination, thus rendering it a useful practice for grounded theory. The emergent codes and themes may also “integrate data gathered by different methods” (Bowen, 2009, p. 32). In this study, documentation was primarily performed to examine teachers; written records of FA usage in class. The documents listed in **Table 2** were paired to determine whether they matched or otherwise. All three participants submitted lesson plans that detailed the date, course, and standards, learning intentions, success criteria, differentiated strategies, FA approaches, and teaching-learning activities for the lessons. Despite not being developed following the research questions, the documents corroborated and triangulated other information during the data

evaluation process (Merriam, 1998). The documents were also validated by the researcher's interviews, which renders the outcome reliable.

Student work was not evaluated in this study as class observation was not permitted at the time. Based on the document analysis outcomes, not all the FA methods or tools were incorporated into the lesson plan. Only role-playing and collective written assignments were used following the lesson plans which complied with the CEFR curriculum and syllabus. Few English teachers actually varied their FA approaches in class despite demonstrating a sound comprehension of FA in the CEFR curriculum. Some of them struggle to adopt the methods acquired during the 2018 intensive FA training. The approaches, which did not incorporate all the methods presented in the CEFR FA training, proved insufficient. Yan and Cheng's (2015) survey of 450 primary school teachers in Hong Kong discovered that educators with relatively positive attitudes, high self-efficacy, and strong FA intentions did not effectively implement objective classroom assessments. Lam (2016), who reviewed the effectiveness of assessing learning practices in English classrooms from 2004 to 2014 indicated Hong Kong teachers' scepticism about the new assessment despite having embraced innovative assessment techniques. Conclusively, FA requires further examination pre-integration with local classrooms.

DISCUSSION

Teacher proficiency in terms of assessment literacy is a key component of student achievement. Educators must be capable of conducting optimal assessments. Based on the data analysis, teachers understood FA usage and the enhancement of instruction and learning, which facilitates self-reflection on their instruction and assessment techniques and provides students and parents with timely feedback. Teachers would not enhance students' quality based on the educational objectives without accurate learner assessments. Likewise, Schaffer (1993 as cited in Plake & Impara, 1997) prioritised the need for instructors to reflect evaluation-oriented skills. Despite empirical results on Cypriot teachers' positive FA attitudes (Kyriakides, 1997), only a handful of teachers actually incorporated such practices in class (Creemers et al., 2012; Christopholidou et al., 2013). Furthermore, FA was perceived to be associated with the teaching process and facilitates students' learning outcomes. Teachers also discussed the importance of using multiple assessment tools to fulfil learning objectives. Notwithstanding, FA adoption allegedly led to additional obligations that involve formative and summative assessments. Teachers failed to meet all the assessment requirements including daily planning for the assessment, integration of assessment with teaching, detailed feedback for students to identify their strengths, weaknesses, and assessment criteria, and students' involvement in the assessment process through self- and peer assessment. Incongruencies were also highlighted between teachers' FA comprehension and their periodical assessment techniques owing to large class sizes, insufficient time, a heavy load of syllabus and timetable, mixed learner skills, parents' attitudes, and inadequate assessment training. Based on the study outcome, teachers need more professional exposure to and training on assessment knowledge to select assessment objectives that complement learning

goals. Summarily, ESL teaching denotes an adequate assessment level to score or evaluate students' achievement of learning outputs.

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATION, AND RECOMMENDATION

Some of the points highlighted in this study could expand the current body of literature on assessment. First, the study participants possessed a sound comprehension of FA. Second, the individuals performed typical FA methods, albeit moderately, owing to the following drawbacks: crowded classrooms, large class sizes, insufficient time, a heavy syllabus and timetable load, and additional activities in school. Third, the participants were willing to self-upgrade through formal FA training. Future works could include more participants to elicit comprehensive data on English teachers' FA internalisation and practices as this study only encompassed three English teachers. Issues underpinning mentor or head teachers could be examined in terms of FA. Additionally, future FA studies could use a larger sample size of schools and emphasise specific concerns about English language skills and features. Teachers' literacy in summative assessment and assessment as learning denotes other issues that require in-depth analysis.

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