Formative Assessment in Chinese EFL Classrooms: Teachers' Perceptions and Practices

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Abstract

The mixed methods study investigates Chinese EFL teachers' perceptions and practices on formative assessment (FA) across different educational levels and institutional contexts in southern China. Data were collected through an online questionnaire completed by sixty teachers and semi-structured interviews with six of them. Findings show that while most teachers have only a limited understanding of FA, many routinely employ FA-related practices, such as questioning, quizzes or tests, and written or oral feedback, either consciously or unconsciously. Teachers generally hold positive views about the value of FA for supporting English teaching and learning, particularly in identifying learners' current proficiency and informing instructional adjustments. However, several contextual factors constrain effective implementation. These include limited professional knowledge of FA, large class sizes, exam-oriented curricula, and the need to adapt FA practices to younger learners. The study contributes to a clear understanding of how FA is perceived and enacted in Chinese EFL classrooms and highlights implications for teacher training and policy support.

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1. Introduction

Formative assessment (FA) has engaged educators for over five decades since Scriven coined the term in 1967. Despite efforts to define and expand its scope, FA's definition remains fluid, influenced by factors such as its beneficiaries, application reasons, and data utilization [1]. Originating from European or English-speaking contexts [2], FA concepts may vary across different cultural settings, like Asian countries. This study, therefore, explores Chinese EFL teachers' perceptions of FA amidst an evolving global understanding.

FA is pivotal in education but sparks debate due to its evolving nature and the involvement of four key components: identifying the learning gap, providing effective feedback, student engagement, and learning progression [3]. This research delves into the effectiveness and implementation challenges of FA in Chinese EFL classrooms, employing a mixed-methods approach—

quantitative (online questionnaire analyzed via SPSS) and qualitative (face-to-face interviews) strategies.

Convenience sampling recruited 60 southern Chinese EFL teachers across educational levels and six for in-depth interviews. The study aims to address gaps in understanding Chinese EFL teachers' beliefs and practices surrounding FA, guided by four key research questions:

(1) How do Chinese EFL teachers define formative assessment?

(2) What are Chinese EFL teachers' opinions on the effectiveness of formative assessment?

(3) What forms or elements of formative assessment are involved in Chinese EFL teachers' actual practices?

(4) What challenges do Chinese EFL teachers face while promoting formative assessment in their actual practices?

2. Literature review

Formative assessment is widely recognized as an effective means of improving teaching and learning. It involves a range of formal or informal types of activities, such as formative use of summative tests, brainstorming, and classroom questioning [4]. The information gathered is interpreted as feedback by teachers and learners to adjust future teaching and learning, underscoring FA as a mechanism that directly supports learning.

Across decades, research converges on viewing FA as an ongoing process rather than a single tool. Definitions from Scriven to Black and Wiliam emphasize that any activity becomes formative when information is used to adapt teaching and learning. Other scholars describe FA as planned, systematic diagnostic and anchored in performance data [3,5]. In this study, FA is defined as the continuous collection and use of learning evidence to guide instructional adjustments.

FA includes both formal and informal practices. Formal FA refers to planned activities, such as ungraded quizzes, while informal FA occurs spontaneously through interactions, including direct questioning or classroom dialogue [4]. Unlike formal FA, informal FA yields immediate evidence and positions teachers as facilitators who continuously monitor and respond dynamically to learners' understanding.

Four essential elements of effective FA are identified: identifying the learning gap, providing effective feedback, student involvement, and learning progressions [3]. The "gap" refers to the distance between a learner's current and desired performance level. Effective feedback clarifies this gap and supports instructional adjustments, involving both external (teacher/peer) and internal (self-regulated) processes. Student involvement emphasizes meta-cognition and active participation [6], while learning progressions map how understanding develops and guide teaching directions [7]. Thus, learning progressions and FA reinforce one another to guide instructional decisions [3].

FA is widely recognized for improving student performance across disciplines. In science education, stronger FA implementation correlates with higher achievement. Well-designed FA enhances summative outcomes, improving students' marks and motivating them to achieve targeted competencies [8].

In language learning, FA, particularly through feedback, improves writing accuracy, organization, and motivation [9] and promotes speaking fluency and grammatical awareness [10].

Research further indicates that FA enables teachers to personalize instruction through interactive tasks, collaboration, and feedback. Experienced EFL teachers naturally integrate FA into their lessons without formal training [11]. However, challenges persist, such as limited personalized feedback, variable implementation, cultural constraints [12], and exam-driven systems often hinder FA [2]. In East and Southeast Asia, cultural values such as maintaining teacher authority and concerns about face also influence FA practices [13,14].

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study employed a mixed-methods design to address the limited empirical evidence on teachers' beliefs and practices regarding formative assessment. Mixed methods allow for the integration of quantitative and qualitative data, providing a more comprehensive understanding than either approach alone. The research followed a sequential explanatory design, beginning with a quantitative phase to capture overall trends in Chinese EFL teachers' understandings and classroom practices of FA. This

was followed by a qualitative phase, which explored individual teachers' interpretations of FA, including their perceived benefits, challenges, and contextual constraints. Both phases were given equal weight, enabling reciprocal corroboration and offering a more nuanced account of FA use in China.

3.2. Instruments

Two instruments were used: an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire, adapted from the Formative Assessment Benchmarking (FAB), included both closed-ended questions, many using Likert scales, and open-ended prompts for elaboration elicited teachers' definitions of FA, their perceptions of its effectiveness, and their reported use of specific FA strategies.

Semi-structured interviews were then conducted to deepen understanding of teachers' perceptions and practices. The interview focused on definitions of FA, attitudes towards its use, common FA approaches, perceived effectiveness, and challenges in implementation, serving to validate and extend the questionnaire findings.

3.3. Participants and sampling procedure

Participants were selected to capture variation in teaching contexts in southern China, a region characterized by economic development and openness to educational innovation. Factors such as school level, class size, examination pressure, and teaching experience were considered because they shape teachers' beliefs and assessment practices.

A total of 60 Chinese EFL teachers completed the questionnaire, and six volunteered for follow-up interviews. Participants represented primary (30%), secondary (26.7%), senior high (6.7%), and university (36.7%) school levels. The majority (88.3%) had more than one year of teaching experience, including 30% with over 10 years. Class sizes varied, with 63.24% teaching classes of more than 35 students, and 20.59% teaching fewer than 15 students.

3.4. Data analysis

Data analysis occurred in three phases. Questionnaire data were processed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were used to address research questions concerning teachers'

perceptions of FA effectiveness and the extent to which FA strategies were implemented in their classrooms. Interview recordings were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. Data were coded deductively using predetermined themes (e.g., beliefs, FA practices, perceived effectiveness) while inductive codes were developed to capture emergent themes. Cross-participant comparisons were conducted to identify commonalities and variations.

Findings from both datasets were compared to triangulate evidence. Questionnaire results offered a broad overview of teachers' FA beliefs and practices, while interview data provided explanatory depth. The comparative analysis identified convergences and divergences between self-reported practices and personal narratives, thereby enhancing the overall validity and interpretability of the results.

4. Findings

4.1. Teachers' definitions of formative assessment

Most teachers reported at least some familiarity with formative assessment. As the questionnaire shows, 73.3% (44/60) had heard of FA, including 28.3% who were "quite familiar" and 45% who knew "a little." Sixteen teachers (26.7%) reported no prior knowledge, though many became aware of using FA practices once examples were provided.

Among the interviewees, only participant F demonstrated clear familiarity with FA; participants A and C had limited prior understanding, while the remaining interviewees initially did not recognize the term despite using FA-like techniques.

Interview data further revealed varying conceptualizations of FA. Participant F defined FA as an ongoing process focused on monitoring learning rather than scores, noting differences between language learning and other subjects, as the former requires learners' long-term efforts. Participants A and C compared FA with summative assessment (SA). A emphasized that FA is less formal, reduces anxiety, and highlights current learning status and areas for improvement; C viewed FA as a component of SA that distributes assessment responsibilities through ongoing grading. Although

three interviewees lacked conceptual knowledge of FA, their descriptions confirmed that they routinely applied formative strategies in practice.

4.2. The effectiveness of formative assessment

4.2.1. Teachers' perceptions of effectiveness

Only 44.68% of teachers reported using FA, while 40.43% were unsure, an uncertainty likely reflecting the 26.7% unfamiliar with the term. Seven teachers (10.64%) stated explicitly that they did not use FA.

Despite inconsistencies in labeling their practices as FA, teachers rated specific FA types positively. Over half considered direct questioning (55.93%), real-time oral feedback (54.24%), clarification of the assessment criteria (49.15%), and timely written feedback (42.37%) "very effective."

However, interviews revealed tensions between perceived effectiveness and actual implementation. Teachers, particularly at the tertiary level, cited time constraints as barriers to providing detailed feedback. Some addressed this by using platforms such as Pigai Wang or Xuexi Tong to automate quizzes and feedback. Three interviewees (A, B, and E) questioned the usefulness of clarifying task criteria for young learners, arguing that abstract expectations exceeded their developmental readiness.

4.2.2. Actual effectiveness of FA

The questionnaire also indicates that teachers' perceptions of FA's actual impact were less positive. Although teachers acknowledged FA's usefulness for diagnosing learning needs, many disagreed that it improved classroom atmosphere (51.72%), increased motivation (48.28%), or enhanced overall learning outcomes (55.17%). These findings were corroborated by interview data. Teachers generally reported no noticeable improvement in engagement or environment, though they consistently highlighted FA's role in identifying students' current learning levels.

Interviewees A, C, D, and F did note improvements in learners' writing performance, citing reductions in errors, clearer organization, and even success in writing competitions. Teachers also described FA as beneficial for instructional adjustment. For example, participant C reported redesigning lessons after identifying widespread

confusion, while participant E indicated that FA guided lesson planning and classroom structuring. Teachers also noted gaining insights into learner needs, opportunities for peer discussion, and greater self-reflection.

4.3. The role of formative assessment in Chinese EFL classrooms

Among the 55 teachers who reported using FA, many indicated that they implemented multiple FA elements in "most of the class." Higher frequencies were reported for creating an encouraging learning environment (43.64%), clarifying lesson objectives (45.45%), assigning responsibilities (41.82%), allowing adequate response time (54.55%), and ensuring understanding of task expectations (49.09%). However, only 29.09% reported consistently clarifying assessment criteria.

Feedback practices were common. Most teachers provided either oral or written feedback, with only a small proportion rarely doing so (oral: 10.91%, written: 12.73%). In-class presentations were used less frequently.

Interview data identified questioning, testing, and feedback as the most widely used FA strategies. Questioning was embedded throughout lessons to check comprehension and guided instruction. Tests or quizzes were used to monitor progress, reinforce previewing, and identify improvements over time. Teachers emphasized positive corrective feedback, avoiding negative feedback due to its potential to discourage learners.

Developmental considerations shaped FA use with younger learners; teachers often replaced explicit criteria with guided inference, modeling, or role-play to foster engagement and comprehension.

4.4. Challenges in implementing formative assessment

Interview findings highlighted several challenges. First, large class sizes limited opportunities for timely and individualized FA, as noted by participant C. Second, curriculum pressures and examination-oriented expectations constrained the use of FA, with students prioritizing test preparation over ongoing learning diagnosis. Third, student age posed difficulties that younger learners who struggled to understand abstract goals or criteria. Nonetheless, experienced teachers reported adapting FA techniques to meet developmental

needs, suggesting that pedagogical expertise mitigates some challenges.

5. Discussion

Formative assessment has been prevalent in European and English-speaking countries for decades, yet definitions continue to evolve depending on purpose and application. This study contributes to the literature by clarifying the concept and examining Chinese EFL teachers' understanding, use, and perceptions of FA.

5.1. Teachers' knowledge and definitions of FA

Findings from both phases indicate that most respondents had at least heard of FA, although only a minority reported strong familiarity. In interviews, only one participant clearly understood the concept; however, several teachers who initially claimed no knowledge recognized their own FA practices once examples were presented. This suggests that teachers may implement FA intuitively even without explicit conceptual awareness. Similar to Wang's study result [11], the present study shows that both experienced and relatively novice teachers can engage in FA practices unconsciously or purposefully, regardless of their formal training.

5.2. Teachers' purpose for using FA

Interview data show that teachers mainly use FA to:

(1) identify learners' current proficiency,

(2) monitor learning progress, and

(3) adjust instruction accordingly.

These purposes align with findings from Chen and her colleagues [12], who noted that institutional contexts shape teachers' beliefs and assessment behaviors. Additional contextual factors also influenced teachers' use of FA in this study, particularly class size, learners' age, and learners' language levels, which shaped decisions regarding the appropriateness or feasibility of particular FA activities.

5.3. Perceived effectiveness of FA

Consistent with existing research, teachers in this study generally viewed FA as effective. Questionnaire results reflect a positive view towards direct questioning, clarifying criteria and providing written and oral feedback, etc. Interviews further revealed that questioning is considered the most efficient means of identifying learners' immediate understanding. Importantly, interviewee C highlighted the advantages of e-formative assessment tools, which reduce marking workload and improve efficiency, indicating a growing technological dimension in FA practices.

Feedback remains central to FA [1,3]. Teachers in this study particularly valued feedback on writing, noting improvements in accuracy and performance. However, some expressed reservations related to large class sizes and exam-driven contexts, which echo concerns raised by Brown and Gao [13]. Moreover, passive learner attitudes, commonly reported in Chinese contexts [14], may further limit the effectiveness of feedback.

5.4. FA practices in Chinese EFL classrooms

Results show frequent use of three core elements: cultivating an encouraging environment, providing timely feedback and monitoring learners' progress. Teachers also reported using a range of FA activities, such as clarifying objectives, expected outcomes and task requirements, albeit with adaptations for younger learners (e.g., role-play or guided inference).

Traditional assessments like tests or quizzes remain widespread. However, unlike earlier findings, teachers in this study often used test results diagnostically rather than for grading, indicating a shift in the function rather than the form of assessment. Some interviewees also integrated technology to support large-class assessment, consistent with recent trends in computer assisted FA.

5.5. Challenges in implementing FA

Despite its perceived value, several challenges hinder FA implementation. Large class sizes were repeatedly cited as a barrier, particularly in state schools. Although "high power distance" has been identified in previous research [15], participants did not explicitly frame it as a difficulty. Instead, they highlighted students' passive orientation toward teachers as authoritative figures, which reduces active engagement in the assessment process.

Private institution teachers reported a different challenge. FA is institutionally encouraged, yet young learners often lack the cognitive readiness to understand assessment purpose. As a result, teachers must adapt or

redesign FA activities to suit developmental needs, which is an effort constrained by teachers' assessment literacy and professional experience.

6. Conclusion

Firstly, most Chinese EFL teachers involved in this research have some knowledge on FA, though few could define it precisely. With prompting, many recognized their teaching practices as forms of FA, mainly used to monitor learning and adjust teaching methods or plans. Secondly, regular tests or quizzes, directing questioning, and positive corrective feedback are popular as selections of FA. However, large class sizes make providing feedback time-consuming, as a hindrance of the implementation of FA, Although technology reduces this burden. FA is not universally and efficiently used. Thirdly, teachers of younger learners seldom clarify objectives due to potential distractions, focusing instead on promoting learning interest. State-school teachers often grade assignments without providing feedback, while private school teachers vary more in their teaching approaches and forms of FA based on student characteristics.

7. Recommendations

Future studies could ensure a more balanced and diverse sample, taking students' perspectives on FA into consideration could enrich the results. If feasible, classroom observations could provide a more objective and vivid picture of FA implementation in Chinese EFL contexts.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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