



## Exploring Secondary-school EFL Teachers' Perception and Practices of Formative Assessment

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### Abstract

*Formative assessment is critical to effective classroom instruction and is widely acknowledged as a positive 'facilitator' of student learning and its careful implementation has powerful, positive effects on learning. This implies requirements for teachers to have an appropriate level of language assessment literacy or LAL since the effectiveness of teachers' practices is much influenced by their perceptions or beliefs and related experiences. This study aims at obtaining better insights into English Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' perceptions and practices of formative assessment. For this purpose, ninety-two EFL teachers of General and Vocational Secondary Schools in Jakarta and Bogor areas were involved as subjects of the study. The findings of the study reveal that teachers may not fully comprehend what FA is. This is reflected in the significant inconsistencies in their responses to the given questionnaires and interviews that suggest a misconception of FA. More rigorous study with better methodology is recommended as follow-up actions. In addition, the findings generate an urgent call for EFL teacher education programs to devise relevant professional development programs that can meet the actual needs of preset and inset program participants.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Formative assessment is critical to effective classroom instruction and is widely acknowledged as a positive 'facilitator' of student learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998). William (2010 in Andrade & Heritage, 2018) defines *formative assessment* (FA) as 'the practice of using evidence of student learning to make adjustments that advance learning'. Andrade & Heritage (2018) add that 'when implemented well, FA can have powerful, positive effects on learning'. This implies the important role of teachers in designing and implementing FA. Yet, this is very much influenced by teachers' beliefs, perceptions, and experience of FA (McMillan, 2016; Berry, Sheehan, & Munro, 2017; Yan, et al., 2021) that an appropriate level of teachers' language assessment literacy (LAL) is a necessity to support effective FA practices in the classrooms (Berry, Sheehan, & Munro, 2017; Yan, et al.,

2021). Thus, exploring teachers' perceptions of FA and their FA practices will return invaluable insights to teacher educators into factors that promote or hinder effective FA practices. This may eventually benefit teacher education programs.

FA is a 'planned process' (Popham W. J., 2017) in which teachers use appropriate methods and tools for (1) gathering information on students' learning and their mastery of the learning targets and (2) directing student learning towards the learning targets (Popham W. J., 2017; Andrade & Heritage, 2018; McMillan, 2018). FA needs to be well-planned and integrated into teachers' lesson scenarios. Such tasks are not simple. The findings of studies reveal that the tasks are too challenging for many teachers (Yan, et al., 2021). The tasks require teachers to have an acceptable level of understanding of the underlying concepts and principles as well as practical skills on effective FA deployment in the classrooms, from planning to designing, implementing, and utilizing FA results. This body of knowledge and skills is commonly referred to as teachers' Language Assessment Literacy or LAL. It has received increasing attention from scholars across countries due to the importance of classroom assessment as a positive variable of effective learning but poor LAL on the part of many teachers (Berry, Sheehan, & Munro, 2017).

In the Indonesian formal education context, the important role of FA is underlined by the existing law and regulations. The national standards on assessment of classroom learning (MENDIKBUD, 2018; MENDIKBUDRISTEK, 2022) emphasize teachers' more intensive use of FA in their respective classrooms to monitor and facilitate students' effective learning. However, teachers' language assessment literacy or LAL, particularly regarding FA, remains a problem for many teachers in the country. This can be inferred from teachers' poor scores on the National Teacher Competency test or UKG (53,02) which is below the minimum standard (60,00). This may be due to insufficient training during teachers' preparation training and/or lack of practical experience on how FA should be performed (MoNDP/NDP Agency, 2019). Thus, capacity building of existing preservice and in-service teacher education programs remains one major focus area of the national medium-term development program of 2020-2025 (MoNDP/NDP Agency, 2019).

This study is conducted as an integral part of the capacity-building endeavors of the English language education study program of Universitas Negeri Jakarta (UNJ). It aims at exploring Indonesian EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of FA in the upper secondary school context. The results of this study should provide a supporting database for the project. This study aimed to answer the following questions: (1) *What is High School EFL teachers' perception of formative assessment?* and (2) *How do the teachers practice formative assessment in their classrooms?*

## RESEARCH METHOD

### A. Design

This study employs an Explanatory Sequential Design, i.e., an exploratory, mixed-method approach where 'a qualitative strand' is used 'to explain initial quantitative results' (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Initial quantitative data were collected by means of a set of questionnaires. Based on this, follow-up, semi-structured, interviews were performed with selected subjects for a more detailed exploration of the topics of the study. Quantitative data analysis was then performed on the obtained data in search of emerging trends in the subjects' responses with reference to the research questions of this study.

This study is preliminary in nature. Therefore, teacher variables such as professional status, length of service time, educational background, and gender were not considered important in this context.

## B. Participants

The subjects of the study consist of ninety-two EFL teachers who were teaching at different high schools in Jakarta and Bogor areas. Purposive random sampling was employed in selecting them by approaching the MGMP (*Musyawarah Guru Mata Pelajaran*), which is the formal association of subject-matter teachers at the district level, for assistance in selecting eligible participants who were willing to voluntarily involved in the study.

## C. Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

### *Instrument*

A set of 5-point Likert questionnaires and a follow-up, semi-structured interview were used to collect data for the study. The questionnaires were devised based on the description of FA in the National Standards of School Assessment documents (MOEC, 2018; MOECRT, 2022) complemented by the results of the literature review on basic concepts and principles of FA topics. It comprises eight sections representing five dimensions of FA concepts and basic principles with a total of twenty-seven statements of indicator which varies across the five dimensions in number. The five dimensions are (1) Purposes of FA, (2) Strategies of FA, (3) Principles of FA, (4) Methods of FA, and (5) Techniques of FA. Table 1 presents the structure of the questionnaire by dimensions and the number of indicator statements.

FA Dimensions	Indicator Statements
A. Formative Assessment Purposes	Items 1-4
B. Formative Assessment Strategies	Items 5-7
C. Formative Assessment Principles	Items 8-11
D. Formative Assessment Methods	Items 12-13
E. Formative Assessment Techniques	Items 14-24

Table 1. The Questionnaire Structure

### *Procedures*

Participants were to complete the 5-point Likert questionnaires by indicating the extent to which each indicator statement in the questionnaire fits their respective context. They can choose from *strongly disagree* (= 1 point), *disagree* (= 2 points), *neutral* (= 3 points), *agree* (= 4 points), to *strongly agree* (= 5 points). A follow-up, semi-structured, individual interview was then performed with 15 (35.71%) of 42 teacher participants at random. This was intended to gather more detailed information on the topics.

To guard the data reliability, Indonesian has been used in administering the questionnaires. In addition, a try-out of the instrument was also conducted to ensure the validity and reliability. Cronbach's reliability test was then performed on the try-out results. Revision and refinement of the questionnaire were made based on the try-out data prior to the data collection activities. The interview protocol is basically built on the same framework used for the questionnaires.

## D. Data analysis and interpretation

Descriptive quantitative data analysis was performed on data obtained from the questionnaires and interviews. Questionnaire data were tabulated and processed using simple frequency analysis for emerging trends in terms of *mean* and *standard deviation*. Data were then compared, contrasted, and interpreted with reference to the questions of the study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims at investigating teachers' perceptions and practices of FA for which data were collected by means of questionnaires and interviews. Table 2 presents the summary of the data analysis obtained from both instruments.

STATEMENT OF INDICATORS	N	QUESTIONNAIRE		INTERVIEW	
		mean	sd	mean	sd
A. Formative Assessment Purposes	92	4.40	0.19	3.26	0.46
B. Formative Assessment Strategies	92	4.44	0.23	2.60	-0.20
C. Formative Assessment Principles	92	4.33	0.12	3.06	0.26
D. Formative Assessment Methods	92	3.76	-0.45	1.80	-1.00
E. Formative Assessment Techniques	92	4.13	-0.07	2.34	-0.46

*Table 2. Teachers' Perception of Formative Assessment: Data Summary*

The questionnaire data suggest that teachers perceive to have a sufficient understanding of FA and have applied appropriate FA practices in four dimensions: FA *Purposes*, *Strategies*, *Principles*, *Methods*, and *Techniques*. This is supported by the average *mean* score for each dimension which ranges from 4,02 to 4,44 on a 5-point scale, except for the *FA Method* dimension, and *standard deviation* or *sd* scores between -0,02 to 0.23. The average *mean* score for the FA Method dimension is 3,76 on a 5-point scale with an *sd* score of -0,45.

However, inconsistencies can be observed in the results of the interview data analysis, Overall, the interview data show that teachers' understanding of FA and their FA practices are of lesser degree compared to that suggested by the questionnaire data. This is evidenced in the significantly lower *mean* score for each dimension, i.e., 4.40 in the questionnaire data against 3.26 in the interview data on the *FA Purposes dimension*, 4.44 and 2.60 on *FA Strategies*, 4.33 and 3.06 on *FA Principles*, 3.76 and 1.80 on *FA Methods*, and 4.13 and 2.34 on *FA Techniques*.

Although most teachers share similar positive perceptions of their understanding and practices of FA, questionnaire and interview data reveal interesting evidence as shown by the occurring inconsistencies between the two groups of data (*cf. Table 2*) that also represent mismatches in teachers' perceptions. It is important to note that, considering the intention of semi-structured interviews and the characteristic of data elicitation technique in semi-structured interviews, a greater level of reliability can be expected of the interview data. In other words, a lower mean score in the interview data may signify teachers' less understanding of the topic/dimension in focus. On the other hand, a lower mean score in the questionnaire data may signify teachers' failure to realize that they do understand and/or have practiced the aspect of FA in focus.

### A. Purposes of Formative Assessment

The *FA purposes* dimension includes four subdimensions: (1) to identify student current learning and the gaps/obstacles they have in their learning, (2) to adapt lessons to facilitate students in achieving the desired outcomes, (3) to improve the quality of teaching and learning activities, and (4) to train students in recognizing their own strengths and weaknesses in learning (Heritage, 2007; 2010; Stiggins & DuFour, 2009; Popham, 2017). An appropriate understanding of these purposes and the purpose of their assessment practices will help teachers in selecting the best strategies, methods, and techniques to use with their assessments.

In this study, the questionnaire data signify that teachers perceive themselves to have sufficient knowledge about purposes and they apply them in their classroom teaching accordingly. However, interview data show less convincing information which is supported by inconsistency in the mean score for this dimension, i.e., a *mean* score of 4.40 at a 5-point scale with an *sd* score of 0.19 in the questionnaire data compared to 3.26 and 0.46 respectively in the interview data. Considering that data elicited from semi-structured interviews offer richer information than that of questionnaires, thus, allowing a higher level of reliability, the findings of this study may be interpreted as a low level of understanding and practices of FA on the part of the teachers.

## **B. Strategies of Formative Assessment**

Formative assessment involves a variety of strategies for evidence gathering. Heritage (2007; 2010) classifies these strategies into three broad types: *on-the-fly assessment*, *planned-for interaction*, and *curriculum-embedded assessment*. Later, McMillan (2018) suggests two categories of FA: *Embedded* and *Summative Based*. He classifies Heritage's *On-the-Fly* and *Planned* categories under the *Embedded* category. His other category, the *Summative Based*, is broken down into three subcategories: *Classroom*, *Common*, and *Large Scale*, which are similar to Heritage's *curriculum-embedded assessment*. *Embedded Assessment* refers to the day-to-day, ongoing, real-time assessment activities performed during instructions (Heritage, 2007; 2010; McMillan, 2018). The *Summative Based* FA, on the other hand, refers to the use of a more formal or traditional measure of achievement, such as a test, quiz, paper, project, or homework, to collect the evidence of learning that is used later to provide feedback. Decisions on which strategies to use in a particular assessment event depend on the assessment purposes. Thus, teachers' understanding influences this decision and influences the effectiveness of the respective assessment activities.

The data of this study show a significant inconsistency between the questionnaire and interview data on the *FA Strategies* dimension, i.e., a *mean* score of 4.44 and *sd* of 0.23 on the questionnaire and 2.60 and -0.20 respectively on interviews. Similar to the findings on the FA purposes, these findings suggest a low level of understanding and practices of FA strategies on the part of the teachers.

## **C. Principles of Formative Assessment**

To be effective, the FA process should be based on four core principles (Heritage, 2007; 2010): (1) *identifying the 'gap'*, (2) *feedback*, (3) *student involvement*, and (4) *learning progressions*. McMillan (2018) refers to these principles as the main elements of an FA Cycle. *Identifying the 'gap'* is the first focus of FA. It refers to the collection of evidence of learning that aims at identifying '*how close students are to the desired learning*' and '*what has made students come this far*'. The teacher should then provide students with *feedback*, the second principle, about the identified gaps, i.e., what is not right with their learning, with sufficiently clear information. To "close the gap", *student involvement*, is required. That is, teachers need to train students in working out the problems to build their independence in solving their learning problems. The fourth principle, *learning progression* or *competency-based pathways*, refers to the establishment of a set of sequenced "subskills or bodies of enabling knowledge" that students are to master at different points of their learning toward a desired outcome (Heritage, 2007; 2010; Popham, 2017; McMillan, 2018). Learning progressions function as a "road map" (McMillan, 2018) for both teachers and students that provides information about 'what' students are to achieve and 'what' teachers are to focus on in collecting evidence of learning.

The data of this study show a significant inconsistency between the questionnaire and interview data on the *FA Principles* dimension, i.e., a *mean* score of 4.33 and *sd* of 0.12 on the questionnaire and 3.06 and 0.26 respectively on interviews. These findings suggest a low level of understanding and practices of *FA Principles* on the part of the teachers. This implies a great risk of an ineffective FA process.

#### **D. Methods of Formative Assessment**

There are two types of methods to perform FA: *formal* and *informal* (Heritage, 2007; 2010; Popham, 2017), or referred to by McMillan (2018) as the *Embedded* and *Summative Based* FA. The findings of this study, once again, reveal a significant inconsistency between the questionnaire and interview data on the *FA Methods* dimension, i.e., a *mean* score of 3.76 and *sd* of -0.45 on the questionnaire and 1.80 and -1.00 respectively on interviews. As a matter of fact, the scores on this dimension are the lowest among the five dimensions observed in this study. These findings suggest teachers' poor understanding and practices of *FA Methods*.

#### **E. Techniques of Formative Assessment**

Assessment techniques refer to the kind of method or format to be used as the tool for collecting evidence of learning. Evidence of learning represents the assessment targets and desired to learn outcomes. They are commonly classified into three domains: attitude, knowledge, and skills (MOEC, 2016; MOECRT, 2022; McMillan, 2018; Suskie, 2018). To get accurate information, it is critical that the tool match its target. Some assessment tools are more effective in an eliciting particular types of learning targets while some others are not. Chapuis, *et al.* (2014) and McMillan (2018) provide a detailed explanation of this issue. Using the inappropriate tool in gathering learning evidence may lead to inaccurate information that eventually affects FA effectiveness (Chapuis, Stiggins, Chapuis, & Arter, 2014; McMillan, 2018; Suskie, 2018).

The findings of this study, signify a significant inconsistency between the questionnaire and interview data on the *FA Techniques* dimension, i.e., a *mean* score of 4.13 and *sd* of -0.07 on the questionnaire and 2.34 and -0.46 respectively on interviews. As a matter of fact, the scores on this dimension are the lowest among the five dimensions observed in this study. These findings suggest teachers' poor understanding and practices of *FA Techniques*.

The findings of the study signify unfavorable information related to teachers' understanding and practices of FA. They reveal inconsistency between teachers' perceptions of FA as reflected in their responses to the questionnaire and those presented through the interviews. This may be interpreted as teachers' insufficient understanding of the FA concepts that leads to inappropriate practices of FA in their classrooms.

Despite the invaluable information this study has managed to gather, there is a need for the interviews to be conducted in a more rigorous way. Observations of a real-time FA process in the classrooms as well as related instructional documents may provide better insights into the issue which is the focus of this study.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

The study was aimed at exploring teachers' perceptions and practices of FA to obtain better insights into their current level of LAL that will depict their needs for training in LAL. The findings of the study signify unfavorable information related to teachers' understanding and practices of FA. They reveal inconsistency between teachers' perceptions of FA as reflected in their responses to the questionnaire and those presented through the interviews. This may be interpreted as teachers' insufficient understanding of the FA concepts that leads to inappropriate practices of FA in their classrooms. The significant inconsistencies in teachers' responses to the questionnaire and interviews suggest that problems exist and hinder the teachers from either having an appropriate understanding of the FA concepts or properly applying the concepts in their classroom teaching.

Considering the critical role of FA in both moving students forward in their learning and promoting effective teaching, more rigorous studies with better methodology need to be conducted.

They shall provide more accurate and comprehensive information on teachers' readiness to plan and implement effective FA that truly supports learning and teaching. This is a necessity for the ELESF UNJ should they wish to produce professional programs that support the needs of their pre-service and in-service teacher candidates.

Furthermore, the findings place a call for EFL teacher education program providers' appropriate intervention in the form of pre-service and in-service training in LAL development. More effective interventions can be expected when they are initiated by a collaboration among EFL teacher education program providers, the MOEC office, and other related stakeholders.

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