

## The Impact of Teachers' Beliefs and Perceptions about Formative Assessment in the University ESL Class

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### Abstract

The topic of formative assessment and its implementation in the higher educational institutions of Iraqi Kurdistan have not attracted the attention of researchers and educators. And teachers' beliefs about formative assessment as well as their assessment roles have remained unexplored.

This paper reports on the research results of our survey which is conducted in the Fall of 2014 to examine issues relating to formative assessment in the university ESL classroom settings.

The paper portrays the findings of a qualitative study on the formative assessment role and beliefs of a group of teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) in the departments of English Languages in Iraqi Kurdistan universities. Participants of the study are 25 Kurdish ESL teachers from different departments of English languages.

A questionnaire is used to collect teacher's beliefs and perceptions about the importance of formative assessment to improve the process of teaching and learning English language.

ESL participants of the study complain that because of the top-down managerial approaches and educational system teachers do not play a significant role in the assessment process. But the results prove that the teachers' beliefs and their key role in assessment should not be neglected.

Our research paper pursued the following questions:

1. What is the nature of formative assessment in a second language classroom setting?
2. Do the teacher's assessment practices reflect what s/he thinks about formative assessment?
3. What are the teachers' perceptions regarding the benefits of formative assessment for teaching and learning English language at the university level?

**Keywords:** Formative Assessment; Teachers' Beliefs; Perceptions; Assessment; ESL.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Educators and researchers in the field of education highly believe that assessment and evaluation are two important pillars of the teaching and learning process. In order to verify the learning outcomes every educational model requires that university instructors base their instructional decisions, grading, and reporting on the degree to which their students have progressed toward and achieved desired learning outcomes [21]. Consequently, teachers consume between a quarter and a third of their instructional time creating assessment instruments, checking, and grading the results [16].

Teachers can describe any method, or strategy as assessment that elicits evidence of student's progress towards the stated goals [20]. Here, the generic version of the definition refers to as an exercise of power that is caught up in an array of issues about testers and test-takers voices, roles, and beliefs.

Depending on the nature of the tests, educators have observed that tests may be positive or negative and poorly administered tests have an undesirable effect on both teaching and learning [2].

Universities in Iraqi Kurdistan use formative assessment to assess learner's performance during a course along with its summative assessment counterpart. Formative assessment or small scale tests help the learners know how far they have achieved the set objectives and where they have to be by the end of the course and this makes assessment become a part of the curriculum [3].

Therefore, the prime purpose of formative assessment is raising the standard of learners' learning by helping them know their progress and improve themselves where needed.

However, the situation is not that straightforward as it might appear on paper. There are factors that might hinder learners' successful learning despite the presence of formative assessment in the curriculum.

In recent decades, issues of assessment design and implementation has gained increased attention in education. However, teachers' beliefs about language assessment as well as their assessment roles have remained unexplored.

This study attempted to investigate the factors that tended to maximise the positive effect of formative assessment as a pedagogical tool in the context of teaching and learning English language in the Kurdish public universities.

## **2. FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL TO ASSESS AND EVALUATE LEARNING OUTCOMES OF STUDENTS**

The concept of formative assessment first appeared in the late 1960s [18] but it took time for this concept to be adopted by education researchers; in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, researchers and educators shifted their focus towards emphasizing the role of assessment in enhancing learning [4]. This shifting trend in research reflected and affected the roles of teachers and learners in the assessment process to a certain extent. As literature in the field of assessment suggests, the assessment process in education has changed dramatically from the learner being dependent on the teacher to the learner being able (and encouraged) to form a partnership in learning with their teacher.

The identification of the function of the formative assessment conceptualized learning, teaching and assessment as an integrative process [11]. Influenced by the current thinking on effective learning, researchers increasingly discussed formative assessment as a tool for enhancing learning rather than evaluating it [4].

Formative assessment according to Lynch implies decisions being made concerning the progress and needs of students in a language program to determine what elements of the program are working well and what needs to be modified [13]. Black and William have stated that formative assessment is a crucial component of classroom work. They have argued that improved formative assessment can raise the standards of learners' achievements and serve more as a teaching and learning tool rather than merely assessing learners' achievements [3]. In addition, effective formative assessment is considered to be the best means to enhance the quality of an educational system [20]. The open secret of all such quality improvement is the feedback given to students about their progress, i.e., informing them about where they are and where they have to be, which allows them to be self-regulated learners eventually.

A better understanding of formative assessment can help teachers focus their practices on enhancing student learning and adjust instruction accordingly. ESL instructors have to understand that a complex set of integrated skills such as providing feedback to students and analyzing learners' responses to adjust instruction [5].

Teachers tend to start developing their formative-assessment practices in the area that they are most comfortable with [19], so when teachers work collaboratively, they can learn from experiences used in other subjects and transfer that to their own particular subjects [1].

Many researchers argue that few teachers understand formative assessment as classroom practices to improve teaching and learning rather than grading, therefore, new teachers have to have opportunities to learn about sound classroom assessment practices.

Thus, teachers need to understand formative assessment as an instrument to facilitate teaching and learning and as part of an interactive learning environment, with an emphasis on learning

that takes place at individual rate [8], and this is in contrast to behaviourism, particularly to the centrality of teacher control of the transmission of knowledge.

### **3. TEACHERS' BELIEFS AND PERCEPTION ABOUT FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT**

Many studies have shown that teachers' beliefs and attitudes are important keys for understanding and improving educational processes. Teachers' beliefs are closely linked to their strategies for coping with challenges in their daily professional life and they shape students' learning environment and influence student motivation and achievement.

Researchers showed that teachers' beliefs about assessment and evaluation can directly affect how they design and implement their student assessments and evaluations and how they interpret the results. The term belief, as used in this study, corresponds to the definition proposed and used by Pajares: "an individual's judgment of the truth or falsity of a proposition" [15]. In the present study, the propositions comprise the functions and forms of assessment and evaluation as perceived by university instructors in their classrooms within the contexts of English as a Second Language (ESL).

Few educators argue that the beliefs held by teachers and instructors influence their perceptions and influence their behaviours in their classrooms [15]. Study by Brown, Hui, Flora and Kennedy showed that teachers' beliefs about assessment reflect their societal and cultural differences and affect their teaching practices [7].

The results showed that the teachers' beliefs are crucial and these beliefs are shaped by cultural and institutional context. Teachers who possess positive perceptions about formative assessment are strongly adhered to use assessment to improve the quality of teaching as well as students learning [9].

Many studies have shown that the implementation of formative assessment is related to teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions about teaching and learning. Thus, teachers need to have appropriate knowledge and skills in order to make formative assessment a pedagogical tool to enhance teaching and learning [12].

Research on teachers' beliefs in formative assessment illustrates how these beliefs interact with the cultural milieu present in classrooms. Matese argues that teacher's knowledge and skills affect the purpose of assessment (i.e., what to teach and what to assess [14].

In the past years, test results have a significant impact on the lives of children and their future career, therefore, this critical issue should be taken to consideration and teachers need to work to move the focus of assessment from memorization and passing the exams to more authentic forms of assessment [10].

### **4. THE STUDY**

This paper provides some detailed information of the research subject instruments and data analysis.

#### **4.1. Purpose of the Study**

This study aims at investigating the importance of The Impact of Teachers' Beliefs and Perceptions about Formative Assessment in the University ESL Class. The results obtained may provide the beneficial ideas and useful information for any Kurdish university which intend to implement this approach as the studied conducted in the Kurdish universities.

#### **4.2. Sampling**

The sample of this study consists of 25 lecturers from five public universities in Iraqi Kurdistan namely, Halabja University, Sulaimani University, Germian University, Raparin University, and Zakho University, the participants were all instructors of English language.

The teaching experience of the lecturers ranged from one year to more than fifteen years, 12 participants with 1-5 years, 8 with 6-10 years, 3 with 11-15 years and 2 with 15 or more years of experience. The majority, 18 participants held master's degrees, 7 held doctorates.

The survey was conducted in Autumn of the 2014-2015 academic year in Iraqi Kurdistan.

**Table I.** Distribution of Instructors According to their Genders

Gender	Frequency	%
Male	20	80
Female	5	20

As it is shown in the Table I, the number of male instructors are more than their opposite gender partners.

### 4.3. Methodology

The researcher used survey as a research strategy to take a “panoramic view” of the teachers’ beliefs and perceptions of formative assessment methods at 5 Kurdish universities. The instrument used to measure their beliefs and perceptions was a questionnaire with five-point Likert scale items and open ended questions.

### 4.4. Data Collection and Analysis, Findings and Interpretations

In order to determine what trends in the data suggested about The Impact of Teachers’ Beliefs and Perceptions about Formative Assessment in the University ESL Class, responses of the participants were analysed descriptively by calculating percentages and average scores.

#### Teachers’ beliefs about providing students with constructive feedback

##### Q.1 Do you think formative assessment conceived as a feedback loop to close the gap between the students’s current learning statuses and desired learning goals?

One of the significant findings of this study is that most of the participants put a great emphasis on the role of feedback. One of the participants mentioned that: Giving feedback to the students is essential. Feedback can provide students with information about strengths and weaknesses of their responses, the quality of their performance, and the outcomes achieved.

This is in line with Sadler’s view who believed that giving feedback to the students helps them understand where they are relative to the learning goals and where they should go and feedback helps the students alter this gap [17]. Another participant claimed that “Formative assessment has to help students improve their learning. So, providing students with feedback helps them understand what is expected from them, gives them information about the quality of their learning outcome”.

One of the participants believed that “teachers need to provide students with descriptive feedback rather than just judging them because descriptive feedback informs students of how their learning and performance can be improved”.

Participants of this study believed that feedback is a significant part of assessment and learning process because it lets students know if they are on the right track. They believed that feedback should be used to promote students’ learning and it should be about learning-oriented not grading-oriented. As one of the participant added “the purpose of feedback should provide students useful information in order to support effective behavior and also to guide the student back on track toward successful performance”.

In sum, the participants of this study regard feedback as information about students’ learning improvement. The findings of study on teachers’ conceptions of feedback is in line with Brown, Harris, and Hamett study which revealed that feedback should provide information about students’ academic performance [6].

**Q.2 How much do you agree with the importance of Frequency of Contribution of the following types of assessments of learners' final grades; rate your opinion according to the rating scales below.**

Strong agree = 5      Agree = 4      Uncertain = 3      Disagree = 2      strong disagree = 1

**Table II.** Frequency of Contribution of the formative types of assessments of learners' final grades

Types of Assessments	1		2		3		4		5	
	F.	%	F.	%	F.	%	F.	%	F.	%
Written exams	0	0	1	1	0	0	6	24	18	72
Oral interviews	0	0	2	8	0	0	9	36	14	56
Quizzes	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	16	21	84

**Q.3 In answer to an open-ended question "If you agree or strongly agree with written assessment, please explain it", the teachers mentioned different reasons.**

Lecturers' perceptions of the importance of writing skills may be varied depending on a number of factors including disciplinary background and years of experience. 100% of respondents from the English Departments of Kurdish Universities indicated that writing assessments are very important.

In terms of the relative contributions of each of these assessments to the calculation of learners' final grades, written tests are the most important tests at the same time almost all the participants believe that quizzes are important tools to be frequently used to assess learning outcomes of the students. 40% of the participants rated presentations as an important pedagogical tool to assess ESL learners.

Almost all the participants of the survey use written as a type of formative assessment to assess their students. ESL teachers believe that assessing the students to write the answer of a question eliminates the need for the student to develop good written communication skills. As one of the teachers added that "In a written exam we can test the student's ability to write and in some cases it helps the students to learn how to write and at the same time to find out how much they have learned about the subject". Another teacher believes that "One of the purposes of written exams is to provide a way of assessing students' written skills". Another teacher mentions that "written type of formative assessment is fit to test the ESL learners because of the big class sizes".

**Q.4 In answer to an open-ended question "If you agree or strongly agree with oral interview as a formative assessment, please explain it", teachers explained different reasons.**

84% of the participants agree that oral interviews can be used as a type of formative assessment to find out ESL student's learning outcome. Participants believe that one of the distinctive features of oral assessment is that it allows for interaction between the examiner/s and the student which is followed by discussion; question and response followed by probing; or the debate with its presentations, challenges and final summing up. A teacher added that "it is harder to cheat on an oral exam or to plagiarize from other students and many other memory cues like notes written on the arms". In order to make oral interview take place teachers need to prepare students in advance by explaining how the oral examination will work, and having practice exams in class so that the students are aware of what is expected of them. A teacher added that "oral interview is a better method to assess students because on a written exam, there are often inaccurate questions, and this can be easily solved when an oral examination is used and the student can ask for clarification" and another teacher preferred oral exam because "one of the advantages of oral assessment is that it can often be marked quickly on the spot".

**Q.5 How much do you agree with the importance of the Beliefs about Enhancing Instruction and Student Learning; rate your opinion according to the rating scales below.**

Strong agree = 5      Agree = 4      Uncertain = 3      Disagree = 2      strong disagree = 1



**Table III.** The importance of the Teachers' Beliefs about Enhancing Instruction and Student Learning

Teachers' Beliefs	1		2		3		4		5	
	F.	%	F.	%	F.	%	F.	%	F.	%
Assessment results tell me how well I have taught my students.	0	0	0	0	3	12	4	16	18	72
Assessment and evaluation results are important for instruction	0	0	0	0	0	0	9	36	16	64
My instruction is tied closely to student assessment results.	0	0	0	0	4	16	17	58	4	16
Assessment and evaluation create competition among students	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	16	21	84
Assessments provide a valuable learning experience for students	0	0	2	8	2	8	9	36	12	48
Assessment results have an important effect on student self-concept.	0	0	3	12	0	0	2	8	20	80
Assessment and evaluation improve ESL.	0	0	0	0	3	12	4	16	18	72
Assessments and evaluations make my students work harder.	0	0	3	12	0	0	5	20	17	68

**Q.6 In answer to an open-ended question "If you tie your instruction with the result of the assessment results, please explain it", teachers mentioned different reasons.**

One of the big beliefs for using formative assessment by the teachers is to be sure about how well they have taught their students. All the participants agree that the results of the assessment are quite important in teaching and learning process. 80% of the participants tied their instruction to the student's assessment results. All the instructors believe that formative assessment is an effective tool to create competition among students. 80% of the instructors believe that assessment helps the students to get learning experience and 88% of them agree that assessment results have an important effect on the student's self-concept. 88% of the teachers agree that formative assessment improve ESL learning and 80% of them agree that assessments encourage students to study hard.

**Q.7 How much do you agree with the importance of the Beliefs about Item Formats and Classroom Assessment Procedures, rate your opinion according to the rating scales below.**

Strong agree = 5      Agree = 4      Uncertain = 3      Disagree = 2      strong disagree = 1

**Q.8 In answer to an open-ended question "If you believe that formal assessments provide for a better evaluation of ESL students than do informal assessments, please explain it", teachers added different opinions.**

All the teachers believe that formal assessment provide for better evaluation of ESL than informal. A teacher believes that "formal assessments are systematically planned and designed to get information about students' achievement and a fair and reliable decision of students' performance and learning can be made". Another teacher believes that "formal assessment occurs when teacher clearly announce the assessment and the students know that the process which is going on is an assessment".

Many participants of the studied explained that the main aim of informal assessment is not collecting scores but rather gathering pieces of evidence about students' knowledge and one of them added that "informal assessment cannot be effective because it is unplanned and unsystematic. Daily observation which is not systematic will result in a pile of useless information".

**Table IV.** Teachers' Beliefs about the Importance of formative assessment

Teachers' Beliefs	1		2		3		4		5	
	F.	%	F.	%	F.	%	F.	%	F.	%
formal assessments provide for a better evaluation of ESL students than do informal	1	4	0	0	0	0	10	40	14	56
Paper and pencil assessments provide the primary basis for the grades I assign to my students.	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	16	21	84
Speaking and listening assessments are better for Assessing ESL learning than paper-and-pencil assessments.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	28	18	72
I need a variety of assessment methods to assess my students.	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	8	23	92
I am happy about the quality of my assessment	2	8	0	0	2	8	17	68	4	16
I have sufficient time to develop the methods I use to assess my students.	0	0	0	0	0	20	12	48	8	32

The results of the table are good evidence to indicate that teachers are highly influenced by their beliefs. At the same time 100% of our participants use Paper and pencil assessments as primary basis for the grades they assign to their students. At the same time all the language instructors agree that speaking and listening are as useful as paper-pencil assessment. And 100% of the participants want to use different methods to assess the learning outcomes of their students. 84% of the teachers are happy about the quality of their assessments. 80% of the teachers have sufficient time in order to develop the methods they use to assess their students.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that formative assessment needs to be seen as a process rather than a product. And this leads us to a point that formative assessment does not impact students unless teachers' beliefs and perception are not taken to concentration. Moreover, teachers need to feel comfortable in taking formative assessment strategies and incorporating them into their patterns of classroom practice.

Despite its importance for improving student learning, teachers, especially those beginning their careers struggle to implement formative assessment practices to effectively promote student learning. Thus, understanding the factors that affect teachers' implementation of formative assessment in the classroom is important in the development of professional development programs.

ESL teachers need to believe in the value of all aspects of developing formative assessments in order to interpret and score student responses and make decisions that are crucial to the future of their students. To achieve this aim it is essential that ESL teachers should be knowledgeable about the strengths and weaknesses of the formative assessment and its methods and procedures they use in order for the formative assessment to be reliable and valid.

In sum, the data of the study have shown that English teachers have positive attitudes about formative assessment and they try to use the formative practices for the sake of enhancing their students' learning.

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His experience as a lecturer has caused him to consider the question of where the relationships between foreign language methodologies and their impacts on the learning of students matched.

Pedagogy and Methods of Teaching play prominent role in Hama Karim's career goals. He has just begun writing and carrying out papers which are published in international conferences and academic journals. The dominant themes of these papers rely on class size, classroom management, assessment and language testing and Language Methodology. His pedagogy is based and influenced by his academic studies, since much of what he read and studied found a place in his creative work as subject.

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