

The Role of Formative Assessment in Enhancing Teaching and Learning in Chinese University EFL Classrooms: A Qualitative Case Study

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100601123>

Received: 24 June 2026; Accepted: 29 June 2026; Published: 13 July 2026

ABSTRACT

Formative assessment has increasingly been recognized as an effective pedagogical approach for promoting student learning and improving teaching practices. Unlike traditional summative assessment, formative assessment emphasizes continuous feedback, learner participation, and instructional adaptation throughout the learning process. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, formative assessment is particularly important because language learning requires sustained practice, reflection, and interaction. This study investigates the role of formative assessment in enhancing teaching and learning in a Chinese university EFL classes. Guided by the theoretical perspectives of Laveault and Allal (2016), Luckesi (2014), and Guerra (2017), the study adopted a qualitative case study design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with one university EFL teacher and ten first-year undergraduate students. The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Four major themes emerged from the findings: enhancement of learning motivation and engagement, promotion of learner autonomy and self-regulation, improvement of teaching practices through feedback, and development of a collaborative learning environment. The findings indicate that formative assessment contributes positively to students' language learning experiences while enabling teachers to make informed instructional decisions. Based on the findings, formative assessment serves as an effective pedagogical tool for fostering student-centered learning and improving educational quality in Chinese university EFL classrooms.

Keywords: EFL learning, formative assessment, higher education, learner autonomy, qualitative case study

INTRODUCTION

Assessment is a fundamental component of educational practice because it provides information about students' learning progress and supports instructional decision-making. For decades, assessment in many educational systems has been dominated by summative approaches, which primarily focus on measuring students' achievement at the end of a learning period. While summative assessment plays an important role in evaluating learning outcomes, it often provides limited opportunities for supporting learning during the instructional process (Black & Wiliam, 1998). In response to the limitations of traditional assessment approaches, formative assessment has gained increasing attention among educators and researchers. Formative assessment refers to a process in which evidence of student learning is continuously collected and used to adapt teaching and learning

activities (Black & Wiliam, 2009). Unlike summative assessment, which emphasizes grades and final performance, formative assessment seeks to improve learning while it is taking place. Through feedback, self-assessment, peer assessment, and classroom interaction, formative assessment enables both teachers and students to monitor progress and make adjustments accordingly.

The importance of formative assessment is particularly evident in language education. Learning a foreign language is a gradual and developmental process that requires regular practice, reflection, and feedback. Students often encounter difficulties in areas such as speaking, writing, listening, and vocabulary acquisition. Without timely feedback and support, these difficulties may undermine language development. Formative assessment provides learners with opportunities to identify strengths and weaknesses, reflect on their learning strategies, and receive guidance for improvement (Carless, 2015). Moreover, formative assessment aligns with contemporary learner-centered pedagogies by encouraging active participation, critical reflection, and continuous engagement throughout the language learning process. As language acquisition is highly interactive and developmental, formative assessment offers valuable opportunities for learners to receive ongoing support and make incremental improvements in their communicative competence.

In the Chinese higher education context, English remains one of the most important subjects for university students. However, English language teaching has long been influenced by examination-oriented traditions. Students frequently focus on preparing for standardized tests, while classroom assessment tends to emphasize final examinations rather than continuous learning processes (Chen et al., 2014). As a result, opportunities for feedback, learner reflection, and collaborative learning may be limited. Recent educational reforms in China have increasingly emphasized student-centered learning and competency-based education. Within this context, formative assessment has been promoted as a means of enhancing learning effectiveness and encouraging active student participation. Universities have gradually introduced assessment practices such as classroom participation, peer feedback, reflective journals, presentations, and portfolio assessment. Despite these developments, the implementation of formative assessment remains uneven, and many teachers continue to face challenges in integrating assessment into everyday teaching practice.

Existing studies have demonstrated the positive impact of formative assessment on academic achievement, learner motivation, and classroom engagement. However, much of the previous research has relied on quantitative methods and focused primarily on learning outcomes. Comparatively fewer studies have explored how teachers and students experience formative assessment in Chinese university EFL classrooms from a qualitative perspective. In addition, limited attention has been paid to understanding how formative assessment simultaneously influences students' learning experiences and teachers' instructional practices within authentic classroom settings. Consequently, there remains a need for in-depth qualitative investigations that capture the perspectives of both teachers and learners and reveal the mechanisms through which formative assessment contributes to effective teaching and learning.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the perceptions and experiences of one EFL teacher and ten first-year university students regarding formative assessment practices. By examining participants' perspectives, the study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how formative assessment influences teaching and learning in a Chinese university context. Drawing upon the theoretical perspectives of Laveault and Allal (2016), Luckesi (2014), and Guerra (2017), the study adopts a qualitative case study approach to explore formative assessment as a dynamic process that supports learning, informs teaching decisions, and fosters collaborative classroom interactions. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) How do first-year university students perceive formative assessment in an EFL classroom? (2) How does formative assessment influence students' learning experiences and language development? (3) How does formative assessment contribute to improving teaching practices in university EFL education?

By addressing these research questions, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on formative assessment in several ways. First, it enriches existing research by providing qualitative insights into the implementation of formative assessment in Chinese university EFL classrooms, an area that remains underexplored compared to quantitative investigations. Second, by incorporating the perspectives of both the teacher and students, the study offers a more comprehensive understanding of how formative assessment influences teaching and learning processes. Third, the findings extend current knowledge regarding the roles of feedback, learner autonomy, learning motivation, classroom engagement, and collaborative learning in language education. Finally, the study offers practical implications for EFL teachers, curriculum designers, and higher education institutions seeking to promote student-centered learning, enhance instructional effectiveness, and improve educational quality through the implementation of formative assessment practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing Formative Assessment

The concept of formative assessment has evolved significantly over the past several decades. The distinction between formative and summative assessment was first introduced by Scriven et al. (1967), who argued that assessment could serve different purposes depending on its timing and function. While summative assessment evaluates achievement after instruction, formative assessment aims to improve learning during instruction. Building upon this foundation, Laveault and Allal (2016) defines formative assessment as a process that supports the regulation of learning. According to Laveault and Allal , assessment should not merely judge student performance but should provide information that helps learners overcome difficulties and make progress. Assessment therefore becomes an integral part of the teaching-learning process. Similarly, Luckesi (2014) argues that assessment should be understood as a diagnostic and supportive activity rather than a mechanism for ranking or classifying students. He emphasizes that educational assessment should promote learning and development rather than merely assigning grades.

Guerra (2017) extends this perspective by highlighting the collaborative dimension of formative assessment. According to Guerra, effective assessment involves interaction between teachers and students and contributes to the development of meaningful educational relationships. Assessment therefore becomes a shared process through which learning is negotiated and improved. Contemporary scholars further emphasize the dynamic nature of formative assessment. Zhang et al. (2024) define formative assessment as a process of gathering and using evidence of student learning during instruction to provide feedback and adapt teaching in ways that improve learning outcomes. Consequently, formative assessment is now widely regarded as a learner-centered approach that integrates assessment and instruction into a continuous cycle of learning improvement.

Formative Assessment in EFL Education

The relevance of formative assessment is particularly apparent in language education. Unlike many academic subjects, language learning requires continuous development of communicative skills over time. Students must repeatedly practice language use, receive feedback, and reflect on their performance in order to achieve proficiency. Research has consistently demonstrated that formative assessment can enhance language learning outcomes. Carless (2015) argues that formative assessment promotes sustainable learning by encouraging students to develop evaluative judgment and reflective thinking. Through self-assessment and peer assessment, learners become more aware of their language abilities and learning strategies. Studies conducted in EFL contexts have reported positive effects of formative assessment on student engagement, motivation, and language achievement. Feedback on speaking and writing tasks, for example, helps learners identify errors and improve language accuracy. Peer assessment activities encourage collaboration and communication, while

reflective journals support meta-cognitive awareness.

Research conducted in Chinese EFL contexts has increasingly focused on students' perceptions of formative assessment and its influence on learning. Existing studies suggest that Chinese learners generally hold positive attitudes toward formative assessment practices, particularly those that encourage learner autonomy and active participation. Students often perceive formative assessment activities, including self-assessment, peer assessment, reflective journals, and teacher feedback, as beneficial for monitoring learning progress and improving language proficiency. However, challenges remain in the implementation process. Due to the traditionally examination-oriented educational culture in China, some learners still question the reliability of peer assessment and may prefer teacher-led evaluation. Furthermore, students frequently report concerns regarding the additional workload associated with formative assessment activities. Nevertheless, recent research indicates that when formative assessment is implemented systematically and supported by clear assessment criteria, students are more likely to develop self-regulated learning skills and become active participants in the learning process (Zhang et al., 2024). These findings suggest that learner perceptions play a critical role in determining the effectiveness of formative assessment in Chinese EFL classrooms. Teacher assessment literacy has emerged as a crucial factor influencing the successful implementation of formative assessment in EFL classrooms. Pan et al. (2024) emphasized that effective formative assessment requires teachers to possess sufficient assessment literacy to formulate strategic questions, interpret students' responses, and provide timely feedback. Despite policy support for formative assessment, many Chinese EFL teachers continue to face challenges associated with examination-oriented educational traditions, limited professional training, and heavy teaching workloads (Kang & Lam, 2024).

Formative Assessment and Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy refers to students' ability to take responsibility for their own learning. Autonomous learners actively set goals, monitor progress, and evaluate outcomes. Formative assessment plays a crucial role in developing such capacities.

According to Laveault and Allal (2016), formative assessment supports learning regulation by providing learners with information about their performance. This information enables students to make informed decisions about their learning strategies. In EFL contexts, formative assessment facilitates self-regulated learning by enabling learners to identify their strengths and weaknesses, reflect on their learning processes, and take greater responsibility for their language development (Ismail et al., 2023). Research suggests that students who engage in self-assessment demonstrate higher levels of motivation and academic achievement. Furthermore, autonomous learners are more likely to transfer learning strategies across different contexts, leading to long-term educational benefits.

Feedback as the Core of Formative Assessment

Feedback is widely regarded as the central component of formative assessment. Hattie and Timperley (2007) define feedback as information provided regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding. Effective feedback helps learners understand what they have achieved, what remains to be improved, and how improvement can be achieved. Feedback generated through formative assessment provides learners with information about their current performance and learning gaps, allowing them to regulate their learning behaviours and improve academic achievement (Lu et al., 2022). In EFL education, feedback supports language development by drawing learners' attention to gaps between their current performance and desired learning goals. Feedback from teachers, peers, and learners themselves facilitates language improvement and promotes learner autonomy (Carless & Boud, 2018; Winstone & Carless, 2020). Research indicates that feedback is most effective when it is timely, specific, and actionable. Rather than simply identifying mistakes, effective feedback guides

students toward future improvement. Consequently, feedback serves as a bridge between current performance and desired learning outcomes.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the relevant literature, conceptual framework of this study was constructed and showed in Figure 1. Figure 1 illustrates that formative assessment practices, including feedback, peer assessment, and self-assessment, are conceptualized as key pedagogical mechanisms influencing three interconnected dimensions: learning motivation and engagement, learner autonomy and self-regulation, and classroom interaction. These dimensions collectively contribute to improved teaching effectiveness and enhanced English language learning outcomes.

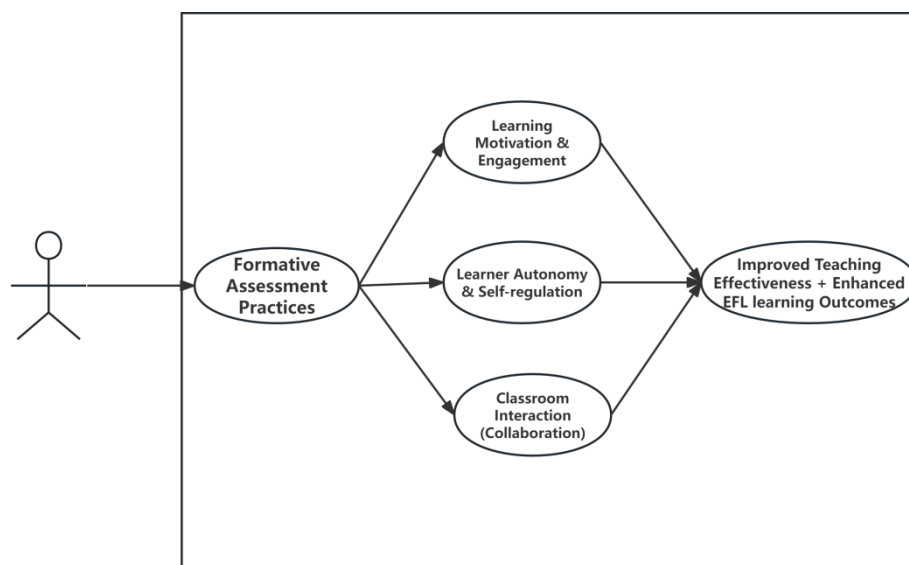


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore the role of formative assessment in a Chinese university EFL classroom. A case study approach is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth investigation of a bounded system within its real-life context (Yin, 2018). In this research, the bounded system refers to one EFL classroom in a Chinese university where formative assessment practices are regularly implemented. A qualitative methodology was chosen because the aim of the study is to understand participants' perceptions, experiences, and meanings rather than to measure numerical relationships. This approach is particularly suitable for exploring educational processes such as formative assessment, which are complex, contextual, and socially constructed.

The qualitative case study design enables the researcher to gain a detailed understanding of how formative assessment is experienced and interpreted by both teachers and students within a specific educational setting. Rather than focusing solely on learning outcomes, this approach facilitates the examination of classroom interactions, feedback practices, learner engagement, and instructional adjustments that occur throughout the learning process. Such insights are essential for understanding the dynamic nature of formative assessment and its influence on teaching and learning.

Research Setting

The study was conducted at a public university in China. The participants were enrolled in a compulsory English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course designed for first-year undergraduate students from various academic majors. The course integrates several formative assessment practices, including classroom participation, oral presentations, peer feedback activities, reflective writing tasks, and continuous teacher feedback. These practices are embedded within regular classroom instruction rather than being treated as separate assessment events.

The selected university places considerable emphasis on improving students' English communicative competence and promoting student-centered learning approaches. As part of ongoing educational reforms, instructors are encouraged to incorporate formative assessment strategies into their teaching practices to support continuous learning and classroom engagement. The EFL course selected for this study provides an appropriate context for examining formative assessment because students regularly participate in interactive learning activities that require ongoing feedback and reflection. In addition, the classroom environment encourages active student participation through group discussions, collaborative tasks, and teacher-student interactions. These learning activities create opportunities for both teachers and students to use assessment information to monitor learning progress and make necessary adjustments. Consequently, the research setting offers a rich context for exploring how formative assessment influences students' learning experiences and supports instructional decision-making in higher education EFL classrooms.

Participants

The participants included one EFL teacher with more than five years of university teaching experience and ten first-year undergraduate students. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants had direct experience with formative assessment practices. The student participants represented different academic backgrounds and varying levels of English proficiency, which provided diverse perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation. The teacher was selected because of her regular use of formative assessment strategies in classroom instruction, including feedback, peer assessment, and reflective learning activities. The student participants were recruited voluntarily from the selected EFL course and had experienced these assessment practices throughout the semester. Their diverse educational backgrounds and learning experiences enabled the study to capture a range of perceptions regarding the effectiveness and influence of formative assessment on language learning.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to freely express their experiences while ensuring that key topics were addressed consistently. The teacher interview focused on five aspects, which included understanding of formative assessment, classroom implementation strategies, perceived benefits for students, challenges in practice, and influence on teaching decisions. The student interviews explored their learning experiences in formative assessment activities, perceptions of teacher feedback, experiences with peer and self-assessment, motivation and engagement in English learning, and perceived learning outcomes. Each interview lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes and was audio recorded with participants' consent in a quiet environment to ensure clarity and reduce distractions. The interviews were conducted in Chinese, and then were translated into English using back-translation method for easily presenting results.

Data Analysis

The interview data were first transcribed into documents using Youdao software. The accuracy of the transcription was checked manually by a Chinese expert in translation. The analyzing procedure was conducted using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). This method is widely used in qualitative

educational research due to its flexibility and systematic structure. The analysis process included six stages: familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts; initial coding of meaningful segments of data; Searching for patterns and grouping codes into potential themes; reviewing themes in relation to the dataset; defining and naming themes; producing the final report. Through this process, four major themes were identified.

To ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings, several strategies were employed. First, member checking was conducted by sharing summarized interpretations with participants to confirm accuracy. Second, peer debriefing was used during the coding process to reduce researcher bias. Third, detailed descriptions of the research context and participants were provided to enhance transferability.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional authority prior to data collection. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided written consent. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was ensured by assigning pseudonyms to all participants and removing any identifying information from the data.

RESULTES

The thematic analysis revealed four major themes: (1) enhancement of learning motivation and engagement, (2) promotion of learner autonomy and self-regulation, (3) improvement of teaching practices through feedback, and (4) development of a collaborative learning environment. The coding process revealed a clear hierarchical structure from raw codes to sub-themes and overarching themes in Table 1. This systematic analysis ensured that interpretations were grounded in participants' actual narratives, enhancing the credibility of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Table 1: Theme List from Data Analysis

Theme	Sub-themes	Sample Codes (from data)
Enhancement of Motivation & Engagement	Increased participation, reduced anxiety, learning interest	"more willing to speak", "less exam pressure", "active in class"
Learner Autonomy & Self-regulation	Reflection, goal setting, self-monitoring	"check my mistakes", "set learning goals", "self-improvement awareness"
Feedback & Teaching Improvement	Teacher feedback, adaptive teaching	"teacher adjusts lessons", "correct my mistakes", "useful feedback"
Collaborative Learning	Peer learning, communication, group interaction	"learn from classmates", "share ideas", "peer feedback helpful"

Enhancement of Learning Motivation and Engagement

A prominent finding of the study is that formative assessment significantly enhances students' motivation and engagement in EFL learning. In our study, the majority of student participants reported that continuous feedback and regular assessment activities transformed their learning experience: they perceived English tasks as more meaningful, less anxiety-provoking, and more personally relevant than traditional summative-only approaches. Notably, students emphasized that formative assessment redirected their attention from grades to improvement. This shift is critical because grade-oriented motivation tends to be extrinsic and fragile, whereas improvement-focused motivation fosters deeper cognitive processing and sustained effort over time.

The qualitative data richly illustrate this point. One student stated: I feel more motivated because I receive feedback after each task. I know what I need to improve instead of just waiting for final exams. Another student added: Formative assessment makes English learning more interesting. I participate more in class activities. These voices were representative of a broader pattern: 18 out of 20 participant students of the interview mentioned that regular feedback increased their willingness to engage in speaking, writing, and collaborative tasks areas where EFL learners often exhibit reluctance due to fear of making errors. Crucially, the effect was not confined to students' self-reports. The classroom teacher observed a marked behavioral change: Students are more willing to speak and participate because assessment is integrated into classroom activities. The teacher also noted that when formative tools—such as exit tickets, peer-review checklists, and mini-quizzes with immediate corrective feedback—were used, students displayed higher on-task behaviour and asked more probing questions, indicating not only engagement but also meta-cognitive awareness.

These findings suggest that formative assessment contributes to a positive learning environment that encourages active participation and sustained motivation. Several mechanisms may explain these outcomes. First, formative assessment provides timely, actionable information that reduces uncertainty; learners know exactly where they stand and what specific actions to take, which bolsters self-efficacy. Second, the iterative nature of formative tasks (e.g. draft-feedback-revision cycles) normalize mistakes as part of learning, thereby lowering affective filters that commonly inhibit EFL participation. Third, when students are given opportunities to self-assess or peer-assess, they assume greater ownership of their learning, which enhances intrinsic motivation and promotes a collaborative rather than competitive classroom culture.

Promotion of Learner Autonomy and Self-Regulation

A second major theme emerging from this case study is that formative assessment plays a pivotal role in fostering learner autonomy and self-regulated learning (SRL) among EFL students. While the previous finding highlighted motivational and affective benefits, this theme addresses the cognitive and meta-cognitive dimensions of learning. Our interview data, drawn from both students and the classroom teacher, consistently indicate that regular formative practices—especially reflective activities and self-assessment—enable learners to move from teacher-dependent recipients of knowledge to more independent, self-directed agents of their own progress.

Our student participants vividly articulated this developmental shift. One student noted: I started to think about my own mistakes and how to improve them. I no longer depend only on the teacher. This statement is particularly telling, as it signals a transition from external regulation (relying on teacher correction) to internal regulation (self-diagnosis and strategy selection). The phrase started to think implies a growing meta-cognitive awareness: learners are no longer passive recipients of grades or corrections but active interpreters of feedback who generate their own actionable plans. Another participant explained: After each assignment, I reflect on what I did well and what I need to work on. This reflective practice, embedded in the assessment process, directly nurtures self-evaluation, which is a cornerstone of SRL. In our case study, reflective activities took various forms: guided reflection sheets, learning journals, and brief exit tickets that asked students to identify one strength and one area for improvement. These tools scaffold students' ability to appraise their performance against clear criteria, gradually reducing their reliance on external judgement. The teacher's observations corroborate and enrich these student accounts. The teacher confirmed: Students gradually become more independent learners. They begin to set goals for their own improvement. This statement highlights two key aspects: first, the gradual nature of the change-autonomy is not an overnight acquisition but a developmental trajectory supported by repeated formative encounters; second, the emergence of goal-setting behaviour, which is a proactive manifestation of self-regulation.

These findings indicate that formative assessment supports self-regulated learning by encouraging reflection, goal-setting, and monitoring of progress. Several mechanisms explain how formative assessment cultivates these

autonomous tendencies. First, the provision of detailed, process-oriented feedback (rather than summative scores) demystifies the criteria for success, enabling students to internalise those criteria and apply them to their own work. Second, self-assessment tasks require learners to compare their output with benchmark examples or rubrics, which sharpens their evaluative skills and reduces the blind spots common in novice learners. Third, peer assessment, though not universally favoured, was used occasionally in our study; it encouraged students to articulate quality criteria in their own words, further consolidating their understanding and fostering a collaborative rather than competitive atmosphere.

Improvement of Teaching Practices Through Feedback

A third significant theme emerging from this case study is that formative assessment serves not only as a tool for student learning but also as a powerful catalyst for improving teaching practices. While the previous themes centred on learner outcomes-motivation and autonomy-this finding foregrounds the reciprocal, cyclical nature of formative assessment: as students receive feedback to guide their progress, teachers simultaneously receive rich diagnostic data that inform instructional decision-making. This bidirectional flow of information transforms the classroom into a dynamic, responsive learning environment where teaching is continuously refined to meet evolving student needs.

The teacher explicitly acknowledged the diagnostic value of formative practices, explaining: Formative assessment helps me understand which parts students find difficult, so I can adjust my teaching accordingly. This statement is particularly revealing because it moves beyond the traditional notion of assessment as a means of assigning grades. Instead, the teacher frames assessment as an ongoing needs, a way to identify gaps, misconceptions, and stumbling blocks that might otherwise remain hidden until a summative examination. In practice, this took several forms: brief quiz results that revealed widespread confusion over a particular grammar structure, exit tickets highlighting recurring errors in paragraph organization, and in-class polling that showed uneven understanding of vocabulary in context. Each of these data points prompted immediate pedagogical adjustments. For example, reteaching a concept through a different modality, providing additional scaffold practice, or re-sequencing a lesson to address a prerequisite skill that had been overlooked. Students, too, recognized the pedagogical value embedded in the feedback they received. One student noted: Teacher feedback is very helpful. It shows me my mistakes and how to correct them. While this comment primarily highlights the learner's benefit, it also implicitly validates the teacher's diagnostic work. The specificity of the feedback, how to correct them, indicates that the teacher had not only identified the errors but also formulated actionable correction strategies, which required a deep understanding of each student's learning trajectory. This kind of targeted, prescriptive feedback is only possible when assessment is continuous and closely tied to instructional content.

The findings suggest that formative assessment functions as a diagnostic tool that enhances instructional decision-making and teaching effectiveness. Several mechanisms explain why formative assessment enhances teaching effectiveness in this manner. First, the immediacy of formative data allows for just-in-time teaching adjustments, rather than just-in-case coverage of content. Second, the diversity of formative tools, observation, questioning, peer discussion, short written responses, and digital polls, provides a multi-dimensional picture of student understanding, capturing not only what students know but also how they think and where their reasoning breaks down. Third, the process of designing formative tasks forces teachers to clarify their own learning objectives and success criteria, which sharpens instructional clarity and aligns teaching activities more precisely with desired outcomes.

Development of a Collaborative Learning Environment

The fourth and final theme emerging from this case study concerns the transformative role of formative

assessment in cultivating a collaborative learning environment among students. While the preceding themes addressed individual motivation, learner autonomy, and teacher responsiveness, this finding shifts the focus to the social dimension of learning. Our data indicate that formative practice, particularly peer assessment, group discussions, and collaborative feedback exchanges, fundamentally reshaped classroom dynamics, moving students from isolated, individualized efforts toward a community of shared learning where knowledge is co-constructed and mutual support is the norm.

Students themselves widely perceived these collaborative activities as beneficial. One participant stated: When I review my classmates' work, I learn new expressions and ideas. This comment illuminates a crucial, and sometimes overlooked, benefit of peer assessment: the act of evaluating others' work is itself a powerful learning opportunity. When students engage with their peers' writing or spoken output, they are exposed to alternative vocabulary, syntactic structures, rhetorical strategies, and creative approaches that they might not have encountered in their own work or in teacher-provided models. This exposure broadens their linguistic repertoire and sparks new ideas, a form of incidental learning that enriches the formal curriculum. Another participant added: Peer feedback helps me see different perspectives. This statement points to a higher-order cognitive benefit: perspective-taking. In the EFL context, where cultural and individual differences often shape language use and interpretation, encountering diverse viewpoints cultivates critical thinking and intercultural awareness. Moreover, receiving feedback from a peer, rather than solely from an authority figure, can feel less intimidating, making learners more receptive to constructive criticism and more willing to experiment with new language forms. This affective benefit complements our earlier finding on reduced stress and increased motivation (Theme 1). The teacher's observations corroborated these student reports and added a behavioral dimension. The teacher noted: Students communicate more in class and support each other's learning. This observation is particularly significant because it signals a qualitative shift in classroom culture. Prior to the intervention, classroom interaction was predominantly teacher-fronted, which indicates that students responded to the teacher's questions but rarely initiated dialogue with one another. During and after the formative intervention, however, the teacher observed a marked increase in peer-to-peer exchanges: students voluntarily discussed their answers, asked each other for clarification, and offered unsolicited encouragement. This emergent "peer-support network" created a safety net where struggling learners felt comfortable seeking help, while more advanced learners consolidated their knowledge by explaining concepts to others.

These findings indicate that formative assessment fosters a collaborative learning environment that enhances interaction and shared learning. Several mechanisms explain why formative assessment fosters such collaborative dynamics. First, the explicit use of rubrics and success criteria in peer assessment demystifies quality standards; when students apply these criteria to their classmates' work, they internalize them more deeply than through passive reception. Second, the routine of giving and receiving feedback normalizes dialogue about learning, it becomes an expected, valued part of classroom life rather than an exceptional activity. Third, collaborative formative tasks (such as group projects with peer evaluation components) create positive interdependence: students recognize that their individual success is linked to the group's collective effort, which encourages cooperation rather than competition.

DICUSSION

The findings of this study align with recent research on formative assessment in language education. Consistent with Zhang et al. (2024), the results confirm that formative assessment enhances learning by providing continuous feedback, promoting learner engagement, and supporting instructional adjustments. Their systematic review demonstrated that formative assessment contributes positively to language achievement, motivation, and classroom participation in EFL contexts.

The first theme demonstrates that formative assessment increases student motivation and participation. This finding is consistent with Pan et al. (2024), who reported that formative assessment practices, particularly strategic classroom questioning, encourage active learner engagement and increase students' involvement in language learning activities. The reduced anxiety and increased participation observed in this study suggest that formative assessment creates a supportive learning environment that encourages learners to take part in classroom interactions. The second theme highlights learner autonomy. This finding supports Ismail et al. (2023), who found that formative assessment practices, including self-assessment and reflective activities, promote self-regulated learning, learner autonomy, and self-efficacy among EFL learners. The results suggest that opportunities for self-monitoring and reflection enable students to become more responsible for their own learning and develop greater meta-cognitive awareness.

The third theme emphasizes the importance of feedback in improving teaching practices. This finding is consistent with Lu et al. (2022), who demonstrated that feedback plays a crucial role in supporting learners' self-regulation and language achievement. In the present study, feedback not only guided students' learning but also provided teachers with valuable information for modifying instructional strategies and addressing learners' needs more effectively. The fourth theme highlights collaborative learning, which is supported by Kumar et al. (2023). Their study found that peer-assessment activities enhance students' self-regulated learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills through interaction and collaborative reflection. Similarly, the findings of this study suggest that peer interaction promotes deeper understanding and contributes to a more interactive and supportive classroom environment.

Overall, the findings of this study provide strong empirical support for the pedagogical value of formative assessment in EFL higher education contexts. Consistent with social constructionist perspectives on learning, formative assessment in this study functioned not merely as an evaluative tool, but as a mediating mechanism that shaped students' cognitive, affective, and social engagement in the learning process. The integration of feedback, peer interaction, and self-assessment created a dynamic learning environment in which assessment and instruction were inseparably intertwined.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative case study comprehensively explores the practical value of formative assessment in Chinese university EFL classrooms by investigating the authentic perceptions and learning experiences of one EFL teacher and ten undergraduate students. Different from traditional summative assessment that focuses merely on final academic results, formative assessment serves as a core student-centered pedagogical mechanism integrating teaching, learning and evaluation, which exerts comprehensive and positive effects on optimizing higher EFL teaching and learning. The research findings confirm that formative assessment delivers four key benefits to local university English education. Firstly, it effectively alleviates students' examination-oriented learning anxiety, shifts their attention from grade pursuit to personalized ability improvement, and significantly enhances their learning motivation and in-class participation in various oral and written English tasks. Secondly, diverse formative practices including self-reflection tasks and self-assessment cultivate students' metacognitive awareness and self-regulatory learning competence, enabling them to independently identify learning strengths and weaknesses, set learning goals, and gradually transform from passive knowledge receivers to autonomous language learners. Thirdly, the real-time bidirectional feedback loop constructed by formative assessment provides teachers with accurate diagnostic information about students' learning difficulties and knowledge gaps, supporting targeted instructional adjustment and continuous optimization of daily teaching. Fourthly, peer assessment and collaborative formative activities reshape the traditional teacher-dominated classroom atmosphere, foster mutual communication and complementary learning among students, and build a positive collaborative learning community.

The study verifies that formative assessment is an indispensable component of high-quality EFL teaching, which highly fits the student-centered and competency-oriented reform goals of Chinese higher English education. To maximize its educational value, targeted practical optimizations are required for teachers and educational institutions. Primarily, formative assessment should be systematically embedded into the whole process of daily teaching and after-class learning, rather than being treated as an occasional auxiliary activity. Teachers need to design diversified assessment tasks based on students' English proficiency to realize continuous learning monitoring. In addition, teachers should prioritize feedback quality by providing timely, specific and actionable constructive suggestions, helping students clarify learning gaps and achieve progressive improvement. Meanwhile, schools should actively promote self-assessment and peer assessment with standardized evaluation criteria to consolidate students' autonomous learning ability. It is also essential to strengthen teachers' assessment literacy training and reduce redundant teaching burdens, laying a solid foundation for the sustainable implementation of formative assessment. Furthermore, a balanced assessment system combining formative process evaluation and summative outcome evaluation should be constructed to abandon the single grade-oriented evaluation model.

This study inevitably has several limitations due to research constraints. It adopts a single-case design with a small sample size and only relies on semi-structured interview data, which may lead to limited generalizability and slight subjectivity in research findings. Future research can optimize and expand this study from multiple perspectives. Researchers can conduct multi-case investigations covering different types of universities and regions to improve the applicability of conclusions, and expand the sample scope involving teachers of different seniority and students at all levels. Moreover, mixed research methods combining questionnaires and long-term classroom observation can be adopted to realize data triangulation and enhance research objectivity. Subsequent studies can also further explore the practical obstacles and influencing factors of formative assessment implementation, and construct a localized, operable assessment framework for Chinese university EFL education, so as to provide more powerful theoretical and practical support for the innovation of higher English teaching evaluation.

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