

Synthesising Perspectives on Formative Assessment in ELT

Definitions, Benefits, and Future Directions

Gregor Vnučko¹

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53349/re-source.2026.is1.a1552>

Abstract

This review synthesises historical and contemporary perspectives on formative assessment in English Language Teaching (ELT), examines common practices and benefits, and identifies gaps in existing research. Peer-reviewed studies were retrieved primarily from Web of Science and Scopus using the keywords ‘formative assessment’ AND (“TEFL” OR “EFL”), supplemented by the snowball method. Findings indicate that common practices include feedback, peer and self-assessment, portfolios, questioning, and low-stakes testing, with technology-based tools increasingly supporting personalised learning. Reported benefits encompass enhanced motivation, autonomy, and achievement; however, implementation is frequently constrained by limited teacher expertise, insufficient training, time pressures, and institutional cultures that prioritise summative testing. Professional development and supportive school environments are critical for overcoming these barriers. A notable gap is the absence of empirical research on formative assessment practices in Slovakia, underscoring the need for localised studies. Despite methodological limitations and the lack of new empirical data, this review provides a conceptual framework for educators and researchers and offers directions for future research.

Keywords: ELT, Formative Assessment, Literature Review

1 Introduction

Research in language teaching has often been marked by claims that a particular approach, method, or technique is superior, only for subsequent studies to challenge those assertions. Over time, this debate has shifted towards the recognition that no single method works universally; rather, effectiveness depends on contextual factors and learner needs (Williams

¹ Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Drážovská 4, 94901 Nitra, Slovakia.

E-Mail: gvnucko@ukf.sk

et al., 2016). Among the practices considered beneficial across diverse contexts is the teacher's use of feedback to guide and improve learning, a process commonly referred to as formative assessment.

Formative assessment has gained global attention as a cornerstone of modern curricula. Many countries have introduced reforms to embed formative practices within competency-based learning frameworks (Bøhn & Tsagari, 2022; Li & Gu, 2023). Slovakia is following this trend through its Education for the 21st century reform, scheduled for implementation in 2026 (ŠPÚ, 2022). This approach seeks to move beyond summative testing towards assessment integrated with instruction, emphasising feedback for growth, transparency in learning goals, and learner involvement through self- and peer-assessment (Jančová et al., 2024). Similarly, the updated CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020) which serves as a foundation for the Slovak national EFL curricula promotes criterion-referenced formative assessment by providing 'can do' descriptors that support reflection, autonomy, and alignment between assessment and learning.

Despite its prominence, research on formative assessment remains extensive yet fragmented, making it difficult for educators to navigate. This review aims to synthesise historical and contemporary perspectives on formative assessment in ELT, outline common practices and benefits, and identify gaps in existing research. By doing so, it provides a conceptual framework for educators and curriculum designers and highlights directions for future localized studies in Slovakia.

The studies reviewed in this paper were identified through two methods. First, a search was conducted in the Web of Science and Scopus databases, chosen for their inclusion of high-quality, peer-reviewed research. Keywords used included 'formative assessment' AND ("TEFL" OR "EFL"). Additionally, the snowball method was applied by examining reference lists of relevant studies and reviewing accessible literature. To guide the review, three research questions were formulated.

Research Questions

1. How has formative assessment been defined and conceptualised in English Language Teaching over time?
2. What types of formative assessment practices are reported in English Language Teaching, and what potential benefits are associated with these strategies?
3. What factors influence the implementation of formative assessment in EFL classrooms?

2 Historical And Conceptual Foundations

The concept of formative assessment originates from early discussions of evaluation. Andrade et al. (2019) trace its roots to Cronbach (1963), who argued that evaluation conducted during the learning process, while instruction is still adaptable, contributes more to educational

improvement than evaluation applied after instruction is complete. Building on this idea, Scriven (1967) introduced the term formative evaluation as ‘assessment for learning’ and contrasted it with summative evaluation as ‘assessment of learning’.

Scriven’s ideas were later expanded and popularised by Bloom and colleagues (1971) in their Handbook for Formative and Summative Evaluation. Bloom’s framework emphasised formative assessment as a process aimed at helping learners understand rules and principles, master terminology and facts, apply procedures, and transfer knowledge to new contexts. This perspective reflects an effort to align formative assessment objectives with Bloom’s earlier taxonomy of educational objectives (Bloom et al., 1956), which organises learning outcomes from basic knowledge acquisition to higher order cognitive skills.

Sadler (1989) highlighted that closing the gap between a learner’s current state and the desired goal requires active engagement by the student. Simply following a teacher’s diagnostic prescription without understanding its purpose does not lead to learning, and therefore formative assessment cannot occur. Building on this principle, Black & Wiliam (1998) conceptualised formative activity as a sequence of two actions: first, the learner perceives a gap between the desired goal and their present state; second, the learner takes action to close that gap. The initial perception may arise from teacher feedback or student self-assessment, but the subsequent action must involve the learner.

Despite numerous attempts to define formative assessment, there is still no consensus on a single, unifying definition. Andrade et al. (2019) illustrate this by presenting eight different definitions, while Bennett (2011, p. 19) observes that formative assessment “does not yet represent a well-defined set of artefacts or practices.” Additionally, the term is often used interchangeably with related concepts such as benchmark, interim, or progress assessment (Andrade et al., 2019, p. 11), which adds to the ambiguity. This lack of clarity has significant implications: instructional techniques labelled as formative vary widely in form and effectiveness, classroom implementation can be inconsistent, and designing rigorous research becomes challenging.

Interest in formative assessment research grew substantially after Black and Wiliam’s (1998) influential review, which synthesised more than 250 studies and demonstrated the strong potential of formative assessment to enhance student achievement. They also identified several recurring elements that illustrate how formative assessment can be implemented in classroom settings. These practices include using classroom dialogue to elicit evidence of learning, providing feedback that helps students understand how to improve, and incorporating self-assessment and peer assessment into the learning process.

Building on these practical considerations, systematic reviews conducted in different educational settings have indicated various strategies for applying formative feedback. For example, Morris et al. (2021) reviewed 28 empirical studies and found that in higher education, formative assessment is commonly applied through feedback, low-stakes testing, peer assessment, and technology-based tools. They noted that frequent quizzes and tests support learning through retrieval practice, while detailed feedback without grades helps

guide revision. Similarly, Halim et al. (2024) reviewed practices in secondary schools and identified four common strategies: remedial interventions, meaningful learning activities, exit tickets, and assessments that are clear and understandable to students. These findings demonstrate a shift in the use of formative assessment strategies across educational contexts. However, the strategies remain broad and conceptually ambiguous, as many hands-on activities could fall under these labels.

3 Practices and Benefits in ELT

Formative assessment has been widely explored in English Language Teaching (ELT), with research highlighting its diverse practices and positive influence on learning outcomes. Studies conducted across different educational settings demonstrate how strategies such as feedback, peer and self-assessment, and technology-enhanced tools contribute to learner motivation, autonomy, and achievement. This section reviews key findings on the practices commonly employed in ELT and the benefits they offer to both teachers and learners.

Zhang et al. (2024) synthesised findings from forty studies on formative assessment in K–12 EFL education and categorized intervention practices into six main types: peer assessment, self-assessment, feedback, portfolios, questioning, and specific formative assessment tasks. Their review indicated that applying formative assessment through these practices significantly improved students' motivation, self-regulation, and achievement. These results align with Burner 's (2014) literature review, which highlighted the positive impact of portfolio assessment on learner motivation, autonomy, reflection, responsibility, and writing performance.

In higher education, Song and Mukundan (2025) reported that self-assessment, peer feedback, and growth-oriented feedback in EFL writing foster learner autonomy, emotional well-being, and writing proficiency, although challenges such as limited teacher training and reliance on summative frameworks persist. Within the ELT context, there is a clear overlap in the formative strategies employed by EFL teachers, particularly peer assessment, self-assessment, and formative feedback.

Given the increasing role of technology in education, numerous studies have examined how digital tools support formative assessment practices. Wannas and Abdel-Mohsen (2025), in their synthesis of 19 articles, reported that online tools such as Automated Essay Scoring systems, Moodle, and game-based platforms offer flexibility and personalised feedback. Additionally, Chien et al. (2020) found that Spherical Video-Based Virtual Reality, used as a formative tool, significantly improved students' English-speaking performance and critical thinking while reducing language learning anxiety and enhancing motivation. These findings highlight the potential of integrating innovative technologies into formative assessment processes in ELT.

4 Challenges and Barriers

The implementation of formative assessment in EFL classrooms is widely acknowledged as beneficial, yet it faces numerous obstacles that limit its effectiveness. These challenges often arise from teacher-related factors, institutional constraints, and cultural attitudes towards assessment. Understanding these barriers is essential for developing strategies that support teachers and promote the successful integration of formative practices into language instruction.

Teacher-related factors play a critical role in the success of formative assessment. Zhang et al. (2024) report that low assessment literacy, insufficient training, and time constraints frequently hinder effective implementation in school settings. These challenges are compounded by cultural norms that prioritise summative testing, making formative approaches appear secondary. Furthermore, Mäkipää (2021) identified a disconnect between teacher perceptions and student experiences: while teachers believed their feedback was motivating, students did not share this view. Similarly, Razali et al. (2021) observed that teachers often fail to provide feedback on student writing, or when feedback is provided, it lacks formative value because it does not guide students on how to improve.

The ability of teachers to integrate formative practices into instruction depends on multiple factors. Amirian (2025) found that teaching experience is a stronger predictor of formative assessment literacy than age. Additionally, Muhammadpour and Sabet (2025) reported that teachers in private institutions in Iran demonstrated more positive perceptions of formative assessment compared to those in public schools, highlighting potential disparities in training and resources. These findings underscore the importance of preparing teachers and providing opportunities for targeted professional development.

Teacher preparedness remains a critical challenge for the effective implementation of formative assessment. Research indicates that many teachers lack practical experience and sufficient assessment knowledge, limiting their ability to integrate formative methods into instruction (Vattøy and Gamlem, 2020; Widiastuti et al., 2020).

Targeted professional development has proven essential for addressing this gap. For example, Li and Gu (2023) designed a 12-week programme for five secondary school EFL teachers in China, where formative assessment has been promoted for over two decades. Initially, these teachers struggled to articulate clear learning targets and communicate them to students, but the intervention significantly improved their ability to set and share objectives, demonstrating the value of structured training.

Similarly, Phuong et al. (2025) found that Vietnamese EFL teachers, after participating in a British Council professional development programme, were able to reframe their methods to include more dialogic, responsive, and student-centred practices.

5 Conclusions

This study set out to synthesize historical and contemporary perspectives on formative assessment in English Language Teaching (ELT), outline common practices and benefits, and identify gaps in existing research. Three research questions guided this review.

RQ1: Formative assessment has evolved from a general idea of improving instruction during learning to a structured process aimed at identifying gaps and helping learners close them through feedback and active engagement. Over time, it has become associated with broader educational objectives and the promotion of learner autonomy. However, the absence of a single, clear definition has resulted in inconsistent interpretations and practices. This ambiguity complicates classroom implementation and makes it challenging for researchers to design comparable studies.

RQ2: Common formative assessment practices in ELT include feedback, peer and self-assessment, portfolios, questioning, and low-stakes testing. These strategies provide learners with clear goals and actionable steps for improvement. When implemented effectively, they enhance motivation, foster autonomy, and support achievement. Technology-based tools and innovative approaches, such as virtual reality and automated feedback systems, further expand opportunities for personalised learning and engagement. Overall, formative assessment is most effective when feedback is timely, specific, and integrated into the learning process.

RQ3: Despite its benefits, successful implementation is often hindered by limited teacher expertise, lack of training, time constraints, and institutional cultures that prioritise summative testing. Teachers may struggle to provide feedback that guides improvement, and disparities in resources can affect quality. Professional development is essential for overcoming these barriers, as it equips teachers with practical strategies, builds confidence, and promotes responsive teaching practices. Supportive school environments and clear curricular frameworks also play a critical role in embedding formative assessment into language instruction.

A notable finding of this review is the absence of empirical data on formative assessment practices in the Slovak context. This gap highlights the need for future localised research to inform policy and practice.

The limitations of this study relate primarily to its methodology and scope. Although the review focused on peer-reviewed studies from reputable databases, the lack of a standardized reporting system (such as PRISMA guidelines) limits generalizability. Furthermore, this review's scope remains broad and does not provide specific applications. As a secondary study, it also does not contribute new empirical data.

Despite these limitations, this review offers a conceptual framework that can help researchers and practitioners navigate the topic of formative assessment in ELT. It also provides a foundation for future studies, particularly those addressing gaps in localised Slovak research.

This paper was supported by the project UGA V/15/2025.

References

- Amirian, S. M. R. (2025). Understanding EFL teachers' formative assessment literacy: Insights from a mixed-methods study. *Language Testing in Asia*, 15(1). Scopus.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s40468-025-00363-y>
- Andrade, H. L., Randy, E. B., & Cizek, G. J. (2019). *Handbook of Formative Assessment in the Disciplines* (1st Edition). Routledge. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books>
- Bennett, R. E. (2011). Formative assessment: A critical review. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 18(1), 5–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969594X.2010.513678>
- Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998). Assessment and Classroom Learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 5(1), 7–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969595980050102>
- Bloom, B., Englehart, M. D., Furst, E. J., et al. (Eds). (1956). *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives Handbook I: The Cognitive Domain*. DAVID MCKAY COMPANY, INC.
- Bloom, B., Hastings, J. T., & Madaus, G. F. (Eds). (1971). *Handbook of formative and summative evaluation of student learning*. NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Bøhn, H., & Tzagari, D. (2022). Language assessment literacy: Understanding the construct from Norwegian EFL teachers' perspective. *Studies in Language Assessment*, 11(1), 119–148. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.58379/UNUD5510>
- Burner, T. (2014). The potential formative benefits of portfolio assessment in second and foreign language writing contexts: A review of the literature. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 43, 139–149. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2014.03.002>
- Chien, S.-Y., Hwang, G.-J., & Jong, M. S.-Y. (2020). Effects of peer assessment within the context of spherical video-based virtual reality on EFL students' English-Speaking performance and learning perceptions. *Computers & Education*, 146, 103751. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2019.103751>
- Council of Europe. (2020). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – Companion volume*. Council of Europe Publishing.
- Cronbach, L. J. (1963). Education for course improvement. *Teachers College Record*, 64, 231–248.
- Halim, H. A., Hamzah, M. I., & Zulkifli, H. (2024). A systematic review on the formative assessment practice in teaching and learning in secondary school. *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education*, 13(2), 1173–1183. Scopus.
<https://doi.org/10.11591/ijere.v13i2.26187>
- Jančová, A., Jurášková, J., Mátychová, M., et al. (2024). *Hodnotenie žiakov a ich vzdelávacích výsledkov* (1st edn). NIVaM.
- Li, J., & Gu, P. (2023). Developing Classroom-Based Formative Assessment Literacy: An EFL Teacher's Journey. *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 46(2), 198–218. Scopus.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/CJAL-2023-0204>

- Mäkipää, T. (2021). Students' and teachers' perceptions of self-assessment and teacher feedback in foreign language teaching in general upper secondary education – A case study in Finland. *Cogent Education*, 8(1), 1978622. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2021.1978622>
- Morris, R., Perry, T., & Wardle, L. (2021). Formative assessment and feedback for learning in higher education: A systematic review. *Review of Education*, 9(3), e3292. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3292>
- Muhammadpour, M., & Sabet, M. K. (2025). Iranian EFL teachers' and students' perceptions of different assessment-for-learning practices implemented in the Iranian EFL classrooms: Does teaching context matter? *Language Testing in Asia*, 15(1). Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40468-025-00372-x>
- Phuong, H., Le, T., & Pham, T. (2025). Assessment for learning or assessment for scoring? Washback of analytic rubrics in Vietnamese EFL classrooms. *LANGUAGE TESTING IN ASIA*, 15(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40468-025-00371-y>
- Razali, K. A., Rahman, Z. A., Ahman, I. S., & Othman, J. (2021). Malaysian ESL teachers' practice of written feedback on students' writing. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 29(3), 47–67. <https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.29.s3.03>
- Sadler, D. R. (1989). Formative assessment and the design of instructional systems. *Instructional Science*, 18(2), 119–144. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00117714>
- Scriven, M. (1967). The Methodology of Evaluation. In R. W. Tyler, R. M. Gagne, & M. Scriven (Eds), *Perspectives of Curriculum Evaluation Chicago* (pp. 39–83). Rand McNally.
- Song, Y., & Mukundan, J. (2025). The influence of humanistic education on tertiary English teachers' writing assessment practices: A systematic review. *Frontiers in Education*, Volume 10-2025. <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/education/articles/10.3389/educ.2025.1605368>
- ŠPÚ. (2022). *Vzdelávanie pre 21. Storočie – východiská zmien v kurikule základného vzdelávania* (B. Pupala, & P. Fridrichová, Eds; 1st edn).
- Vattøy, K.-D., & Gamlem, S. M. (2020). Teacher–student interactions and feedback in English as a foreign language classrooms. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 50(3), 371–389. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2019.1707512>
- Wannas, A. S., & AbdelMohsen, M. M. (2025). A systematic review of EFL online assessment in higher education: Effectiveness, attitudes, and challenges. *Knowledge Management & E-Learning*, 17(3), 435–453. <https://doi.org/10.34105/j.kmel.2025.17.020>
- Widiastuti, I. A. M. S., Mukminatien, N., Prayogo, N., & Irawati, E. (2020). Dissonances between Teachers' Beliefs and Practices of Formative Assessment in EFL Classes. *International Journal of Instruction*, 13(1), 71–84. <https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2020.1315a>
- Williams, M., Mercer, S., & Ryan, S. B. (2016). *Exploring Psychology in Language Learning and Teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- Zhang, H., Ge, S., & Mohd Saad, M. R. B. (2024). Formative assessment in K-12 English as a foreign language education: A systematic review. *Heliyon*, 10(10). Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e31367>