



Formative Assessment: A Bridge to Academic Excellence

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Abstract:

This study examines how formative assessment contributes to academic excellence in Algerian higher education. The primary objective was to investigate formative assessment strategies used by teachers at Oran-2 University, Algeria. The focus is on assessing teachers' knowledge and understanding of evaluating students' competencies, including learner engagement, skill acquisition, and learning outcomes. The study utilizes a mixed-method case study design, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The target population consists of 30 tertiary teachers during the second semester of the academic year 2022. The findings indicate that formative assessment is employed at Oran-2 University, but there is inconsistency in its usage.

Keywords: assessment strategies; competencies; formative assessment; higher education; learning outcomes; learning quality

- **Introduction**

Higher education plays a pivotal role in fostering the intellectual growth of students. It serves as a dynamic hub where advanced knowledge is cultivated, critical thinking is nurtured, and intellectual exploration is actively encouraged. Within this context, higher education teachers stand as the bedrock for facilitating interdisciplinary learning, promoting research, and fostering innovation. Their guidance and expertise contribute to the seamless integration of diverse fields of study, fostering a holistic understanding of complex topics and driving forward academic excellence. Formative assessment provides targeted feedback that empowers students to actively engage with their learning process. Every student is unique, possessing varying learning styles and challenges. The interplay between formative assessment, differentiated instruction, and accurate perceptions is crucial for fostering effective learning environments.

- **Literature Review**

The assessment process plays a paramount role in determining the quality of learning outcomes. A comprehensive and valid assessment framework ensures that students have acquired the desired knowledge and skills and facilitates the identification of areas that require further attention or refinement. Thus, enhancing formative assessment as an integral part of instructional practices in the classroom offer teachers valuable insights into the effectiveness of the teaching learning process.

Research has shown that formative assessment can have powerful, positive effects on learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003; Popham, 2008; Kingston & Nash, 2011; Bennett, 2011; Heritage, 2017). Practitioners claim that formative assessment facilitates improved instructional practices, identifies gaps in the curriculum and contributes to increased learner performance. Formative assessment provides continuous feedback on students' learning progress. It is a process of gathering information about student learning to inform teaching and learning. (Sadler, 1989; Susuwele, 2005; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kerma, 2019). This information can be used to identify students' strengths and weaknesses, provide timely feedback, and adjust instruction accordingly.

Formative assessments are carried out simultaneously with instructions. It is integrated into teaching activities. Popham (2008: 6) claims that: "Formative assessment is a planned process in which assessment-elicited evidence of students' status is used by teachers to adjust their ongoing instructional procedures or by students to adjust their current learning tactics." Antoniou & James (2014) states that formative assessment is a suitable tool used to guide students and keep them on track to master the subject skills. It raises the students' awareness and supplies them with information that satisfy their needs to promote learning and improve performance to reach their goals.

Accordingly, formative assessment stands as a major factor in fostering both student learning and engagement within educational settings. A growing body of research, (Biggs, 1996; Anderson, 2003; Baer, 2006; Rowntree, 2015) emphasizes the pivotal role of classroom assessment in facilitating effective teaching and learning practices. These scholars posit that teachers' perspectives on assessment can significantly influence their methods of assessing learners' progress.

This field of research delves into the realm of formative assessment strategies adopted by tertiary-level teachers in the Algerian context. It aims to uncover assessment practices that hold the potential to elevate the quality of learning outcomes and enhance student engagement. By investigating a range of formative assessment techniques, this study endeavors to provide valuable insights that could shape the development of more impactful assessment practices and optimize the learning experience for students. The research aims to empower teachers with the adequate assessment tools to create a more dynamic and

personalized learning environment, ultimately enriching the overall educational journey for learners.

2. Rationale of the Study

Education is a sensitive field where the assessment issue remains the most important. It is an integrated process that gauges the nature and extent of learners' advancement and development (Bell, 2001; Stiggins, 2006; *Heritage, 2010*; Boud, 2013). Assessment is critical to the teaching learning process. Popham (2008) states that teachers who can test well will be better teachers and effective teaching will enhance a teacher's instructional effectiveness. Formative assessment is a significant component of effective classroom instruction. Concerns over students' development and achievements in classroom practices have been widely reported internationally (Sahlberg, 2015; Freitas, 2016; Kanwar, 2016; Knight, 2019; de Montigny, 2018; Li, 2019; Phalet, 2019).

Accurate assessment of learners' achievement is becoming increasingly imperative at the national level. Hence, classroom assessment is a cornerstone of the teaching and learning process. It is through assessment that teachers can gather information about student learning and make informed decisions about instruction. Accordingly, it is vital to understand the strategies and dimensions of assessment practices in order to ensure alignment with educational standards and effective student assessment. This critical phenomenon motivated me to conduct a field- study aimed at identifying teachers' formative assessment strategies and examining their correlation with classroom practices and its impact on promoting academic excellence. By delving into these aspects, the research endeavors to shed light on the intricate relationship between assessment strategies, classroom dynamics, and student achievement.

2.1 Research Questions

The primary objective of this research is to examine the effectiveness of formative assessment in enhancing students' learning proficiency. To reach this end, the following research questions are asked to elucidate the impact of formative assessment on learners' academic excellence:

1. How do formative assessment influences learning and self-regulation?
2. How can formative assessment impact students learning quality?
3. How can teachers promote the use of formative assessment?

Following these questions, it is hypothesized that:

1. The integration of formative assessment methodologies into the teaching- learning process will result in noticeable improvements in students' learning quality and overall skill development.
2. Timely feedback provided through formative assessment practices will contribute to a deeper understanding leading to enhanced self-regulation and greater engagement among students.
3. The consistent application of formative assessment will foster an environment conducive to incremental progress, encouraging students to address learning challenges, rectify errors, and refine their learning strategies over time.

II. Methods and Materials

This field research adopts a descriptive approach to investigate the phenomenon under study. The data collection process encompasses the use of questionnaires, interviews, and observation checklists, providing a comprehensive and computable approach to data

gathering. The use of these multiple data collection methods allows for a rich and multifaceted understanding of the research topic.

To analyze the quantitative data, the researcher employs SPSS 24, a statistical software widely used for data analysis. This software enables the researcher to apply various statistical techniques to extract meaningful and actionable insights from the collected data. The quantitative analysis provides numerical evidence and statistical patterns, contributing to a quantitative understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Babbie (2016) emphasizes the importance of using quantitative methods in social research to obtain reliable and valid results. Smith & Johnson (2010) claim that quantitative methods play a crucial role in social research, allowing researchers to collect and analyze large amounts of data efficiently.

However, recognizing the potential limitations of relying solely on quantitative analysis, the researcher incorporates a qualitative approach into the study for triangulation purposes Bryman, (2006). The qualitative approach involves in-depth exploration and interpretation of the collected qualitative data, which includes interview transcripts and observational notes. This additional qualitative analysis allows for a deeper understanding of the research topic, capturing nuances, contextual factors, and participants' perspectives that may not be fully captured by quantitative data alone Bogdan (2007).

By combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, the researcher aims to enhance the completeness and validity of the study. Triangulation, the convergence of findings from different sources and methods, helps strengthen the overall credibility and trustworthiness of the research outcomes Creswell (2014). The integration of quantitative and qualitative data allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation, providing a holistic view that goes beyond numerical trends and statistics.

1. Population and Sample

This study was carried out at the University of Oran², located in Oran, Western Algeria during the second semester of 2022. The target group is academics who were working and teaching first-year students. A random sample of 30 teachers was selected for the study. Sampling is an important constituent in field research because it is often neither possible nor desirable to collect data from the entire population Best & Kahn (1993:73). The researcher selected respondents and research sites that can best provide accurate data to effectively address the research questions at hand. The target teachers for this study are categorized based on their varying levels of teacher training and professional background. They all have a university diploma in a field of expertise such linguistics, literature, and civilization. Table 1 shows the sampling population used in this study.

Table 1: Demographic information

Percentage%	No	Variables	Characteristics
40	12	Male	Gender
60	18	Female	
20	06	Professor	Level
50	15	Associate professor	
30	09	Assistant professor	
20	06	5-10years	

60	18	10-19 years	Teaching experience
20	06	+ 20years	

The study found that 60% or 18 respondents were female, while 40% or 12 were male. The majority of respondents 80% or 24 had a doctorate degree, while only 20% or 6 had a magister's degree. Additionally, 80% of the respondents had over 10 years of teaching experience, while only 20% or 6 respondents had between 5 to 10 years of teaching experience. These findings suggest that the lecturers in the study had considerable experience in conducting assessment practices.

2. Instrumentation and Data Collection

To gather relevant information, three data collection instruments were employed in this field study. These instruments included a Likert-type scale questionnaire, a classroom observation protocol, and a pre- and post-lesson observation interview protocol. By employing this combination of instruments, the researcher aimed to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation in a holistic manner.

The quantitative data collected in this study was analyzed using descriptive statistics, including percentages and mean scores. These statistical measures provided a clear and concise summary of the data, allowing for a quantitative understanding of various aspects related to the research objectives. Additionally, inferential statistics, such as correlation analysis, were employed to examine relationships and associations between different variables of interest.

On the other hand, the qualitative data obtained from sources such as classroom observations and interviews were analyzed using a thematic approach. The analysis involved identifying predetermined themes that corresponded to the research questions and objectives. These themes were derived from the observations made during the classroom sessions and the content of the interviews. By using predetermined themes, the analysis focused on specific areas of interest and facilitated a structured and systematic examination of the qualitative data.

To streamline the analysis process, each participating teacher was assigned a unique code, such as P1, P2, P3, and so on, up to P30. This coding system allowed for anonymity and confidentiality while organizing and categorizing the data. It also facilitated the integration of data from different sources and ensured consistency in the analysis across the various participants.

By employing a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis techniques, the researcher aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research topic, capturing both numerical trends and in-depth insights. This mixed-methods approach helped to triangulate the findings and provided a more comprehensive and nuanced interpretation of the data.

3. Reliability and Validity

In order to evaluate the reliability of the questionnaire used in this study, a Cronbach's alpha (α) test was conducted using SPSS version 24. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient assesses the internal consistency of the items in a questionnaire, with a value above 0.60 generally indicating good reliability. In the data analysis, the overall reliability coefficient obtained was 0.78, indicating that the questionnaire employed in this study was reliable.

To further ensure the accuracy and validity of the questionnaire, a rigorous review process was undertaken. The initial draft of the questionnaire was carefully examined by three college professors in Algeria who were recognized as content experts in the field of classroom assessment. Their expertise and knowledge in this area allowed them to scrutinize the

questionnaire for clarity, completeness, and coverage of various assessment and grading practices commonly employed by teachers in classroom settings. The professors' feedback and suggestions were instrumental in refining the questionnaire. Some items were modified or rephrased to enhance clarity and ensure comprehensive coverage of the intended constructs. This iterative process aimed to establish face and content validity of the instrument and items, ensuring that they accurately measured the intended variables.

Based on the valuable analyses and insights provided by the content experts, necessary revisions were made to the questionnaire. These revisions helped to enhance the instrument's validity, ensuring that it effectively measured the targeted aspects of classroom assessment. Through this rigorous review process, the questionnaire was refined and improved, strengthening its accuracy and suitability for the study's objectives.

III. Results and Discussion

This study focuses on examining and analyzing the relationship between teachers' knowledge and practices of formative assessment in classrooms. The analysis is structured under two main headings to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Firstly, the study explores teachers' perspectives when evaluating their students' competencies, focusing on the qualities of learner engagement, skill acquisition, and learning outcomes. It delves into their conceptual understanding regarding the principles, purposes, and benefits of formative assessment that empowers students to actively engage with their learning process.

Secondly, the study investigates teachers' understanding of actual practice of formative assessment strategies. It explores whether teachers' knowledge and awareness of formative assessment translate into effective classroom practices. By examining the alignment between teachers' understanding and their practical implementation of formative assessment strategies, the study seeks to determine the extent to which awareness and practice are related to one another.

- **Formative Assessment from Teachers' Perspective**

It was hypothesized that teachers' initial understanding of assessment and evaluation would serve as an indication of their comprehension regarding the strategies and significance of formative assessment practices. The findings revealed that among the surveyed teachers, 60% reported having a good mastery of assessment knowledge, suggesting a solid understanding of different assessment strategies. On the other hand, 30% of teachers indicated that they exclusively relied on few methods of assessment, potentially indicating a limited familiarity with formative assessment practices. Surprisingly, 10% of the teachers reported having limited knowledge related to various forms of assessment, suggesting a significant gap in their understanding of assessment practices.

Figure 1: The Distribution of Teachers' Familiarity with Formative Assessment

Figure 1 depicts the distribution of teachers' familiarity with formative assessment practices. Out of the 30 teachers surveyed, it can be observed that 18 teachers, representing 60% of the sample, demonstrated a good mastery of formative assessment background. These teachers displayed a clear understanding of the principles and strategies associated with formative assessment, indicating their potential to implement effective classroom assessment practices. On the other hand, 9 teachers (30% of the sample) exclusively relied on few methods of assessment, indicating a limited familiarity with formative assessment practices. Remarkably, 3 teachers (10% of the sample) reported having low assessment background. These findings highlight the need for targeted interventions and professional development opportunities to enhance teachers' awareness and understanding of formative assessment strategies to promote effective classroom assessment practices.

2. Teachers' Actual Practice of Formative Assessment Strategies

The findings indicate that while there is a level of recognition among teachers regarding the critical role of formative assessment in the teaching and learning process, there is room for improvement in terms of providing engaging content to keep students fully immersed and focused. They recognized the potential of formative assessment to inform instructional decisions, monitor student progress, and provide timely feedback. However, despite this recognition, the findings suggest that there is a gap in effectively leveraging formative assessment to create engaging and immersive learning experiences for students. Some teachers did not place a high priority on addressing students' engagement about their learning. This lack of focus on individualized instruction may hinder students' learning progress. Teachers' assessment practice was investigated through four major constructs:

2.1 Discussing the Goals for Learning and Criteria for Success with Learners

The findings of statement 1 in Table 2 presents the results of teachers' responses regarding specific aspects of their instructional practices. The findings reveal that teachers displayed strong agreement towards discussing the goals for learning and the criteria for success with learners, with a mean score of (M=3.40). This suggests that teachers recognize the importance of clearly communicating learning objectives and providing students with a clear understanding of the criteria by which their success will be evaluated.

Table 2: The results of Teachers' Responses

Correlation Coefficient	Practice Mean	Perception Mean	N	Statements
0.193ns	2.47	3.40	30	1. Discussing the goals for learning and criteria for success with learners
0.21ns	3.13	3.33	30	2. Providing feedback that moves learning forward
0.131ns	1.90	3.37	30	3. Activating students as owners of their own learning
0.131ns	1.90	3.37	30	4. Promoting Critical Thinking in Class

However, despite this recognition, teachers rarely opened discussion about the goals for learning and criteria for success with learners. This lack of communication made it difficult for

students to understand what they were expected to learn and how they would be assessed. Smith & Johnson (2018) claim that "The limited communication between teachers and students regarding learning goals and assessment methods created confusion, making it arduous for students to grasp the intended learning outcomes and evaluation procedures." Some teachers failed to place a high priority on addressing students' engagement about their learning ($M=2.47$). One possible explanation for this discrepancy could be the need for further professional development and support in instructional strategies to enhance their ability to design and deliver formative content that captivates students' attention and maintains their focus throughout the learning process.

2.2 Providing Feedback that Moves Learning Forward

The findings of statement 2 in Table 2 reveal that teachers strongly agreed on the importance of using feedback that moves learning forward ($M=3.33$) as a valuable approach to evaluating learners' learning skills. This finding suggests that teachers recognize the crucial role feedback plays in supporting students' progress and development. Teachers aim to provide meaningful and constructive guidance to students that goes beyond mere evaluation. They understand that feedback should not only inform students of their current level of achievement but also provide specific suggestions and strategies to help students improve their learning outcomes. The recognition of the significance of feedback that moves learning forward reflects a pedagogical approach that values formative assessment practices. It aligns with the belief that assessment should be seen as an ongoing and dynamic process that informs teaching and learning, rather than a static evaluation of students' performance.

Most teachers provided continuous feedback to students. This feedback was often limited to providing comments on student work. More rarely, teachers engaged in brainstorming sessions with students to help them identify areas for improvement ($M=3.13$). This means that students were not given the opportunity to reflect on their learning or to set goals for themselves.

2.3 Activating Students as Owners of their own Learning

The findings of statement 3 in Table 2 suggest that teachers are less inclined to adopt strategies that actively engage students in taking ownership of their learning process ($M=3.37$). They rarely use approaches such as promoting student autonomy, self-assessment, goal-setting, and reflection ($M=1.90$). Additionally, few teachers encouraged students to be owners of their own learning. Teachers might perceive implementing such measures as challenging or time-consuming. They show uncertainty about how to effectively facilitate and support student ownership of learning within the constraints of the curriculum and assessment requirements.

However, it is important to note that activating students as owners of their own learning has been widely recognized as a powerful approach to foster student motivation, engagement, and deeper learning. By actively involving students in their own learning process, teachers can empower them to take responsibility for their academic growth, develop metacognitive skills, and become self-directed learners.

2.4 Promoting Critical Thinking in Class

The findings of statement 4 in Table 2 indicate that some teachers expressed interest in promoting critical thinking in classroom, as well as their efforts to identify and address students' creativity ($M=3.30$). However, teachers did not provide students with enough opportunity to share their ideas ($M=2.37$). Most teachers did not encourage students to develop higher-order thinking abilities and enhance problem-solving capabilities. Additionally, teachers rarely permitted students to talk or share ideas about any topic discussed in the

classroom and enhance their problem-solving capabilities. The study's findings suggest that there is a need for improvement in the way that teachers facilitate student participation in the classroom.

2. Results of the Study

The surveyed teachers demonstrated a keen interest in promoting formative assessment practices within their classrooms, recognizing the need to transcend rote memorization and surface-level learning. They expressed the interest to actively engage learners in activities that necessitate the analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of information that can generate a deeper understanding of subject matter and foster independent thinking. They stated that emphasizing formative assessment allows teachers to continually monitor student progress, identify areas for improvement, and provide timely feedback that guides students towards higher-order thinking and a more meaningful grasp of the material. Thus, prioritizing formative assessment empower learners to become active participants in their own learning journey and support their critical thinking and metacognitive skills development.

The distribution of teachers' familiarity with formative assessment practices indicates that some of the target teachers lack a clear-cut understanding of the strategies intended to promote effective classroom assessment practices. While teachers possess a theoretical understanding of the significance of formative assessment and an agreement on its importance, there is a significant variation in how these practices are actually executed within the classroom setting. Findings show that there is no significant correlation between teachers' knowledge of formative assessment and their classroom practices, as the p value is greater than 0.05. Thus, the findings are considered statistically insignificant.

This disparity suggests that there may be challenges or barriers hindering the effective application of formative assessment strategies. It is crucial to investigate and address these obstacles to ensure that the intended benefits of formative assessment, such as providing timely feedback, fostering student engagement, and supporting learning progression, are fully realized in practice. By identifying and addressing the factors contributing to this disparity, teachers can work towards establishing a consistent and effective implementation of formative assessment practices that align with the intended goals and objectives of the educational system.

Johnson & Brown (2020) claim that without a clear understanding of the purpose of formative assessment, teachers may struggle to effectively utilize its potential to enhance student learning outcomes. In the same line of thought Smith (2019) considers the lack of clarity surrounding the purpose of formative assessment poses a significant challenge, as it hampers its effectiveness in supporting student learning. Wang & Jones (2021) state that when the purpose of formative assessment remains unclear, its impact on student learning becomes limited, as teachers may struggle to align assessment practices with desired learning outcomes.

The research findings reveal a divergence between teachers' professed purpose of formative assessment as a tool to guide and support student learning and the actual practices observed in their classrooms. Despite expressing a commitment to prioritize student learning, teachers rarely use formative assessment strategies to support students learning outcomes. This discrepancy suggests a misalignment between teachers' stated intentions and their practical implementation of assessment strategies. To bridge this gap, it is imperative to provide teachers with the necessary tools, resources, and professional development opportunities that improve their assessment practices. A more comprehensive understanding of formative assessment, as a dynamic process, can inform adequate instructional decisions, facilitate targeted classroom interventions, and fosters ongoing student growth. By embracing a holistic approach to formative assessment, teachers can better align their practices with their

professed goals of promoting meaningful learning experiences and supporting students' growth and achievement.

To address these shortcomings, it is imperative for teachers to adopt a more comprehensive approach to formative assessment. This includes implementing a variety of assessment strategies that actively involve students in the assessment process, fostering open discussions about learning goals and success criteria, and providing regular and constructive feedback to support students' growth and empowerment as active learners. By doing so, teachers can gain a better understanding of student learning, provide more timely feedback, and help students become more self-directed learners.

IV. Conclusion

The present study aims to enhance the understanding of teachers' knowledge and practices concerning formative assessment activities at the tertiary level. Specifically, this study tried to examine the relationship between teachers' theoretical understanding of formative assessment and their actual classroom practices. Findings show that some teachers have a good understanding of formative assessment but do not use it effectively in their classrooms. They view formative assessment primarily as a means of evaluation rather than a tool for brainstorming sessions and guiding student learning. Additionally, teachers rarely engage in discussions with students about their learning goals and progress. This suggests that teachers may not be fully understanding the purpose of formative assessment or how to use it effectively. Efficient day-to-day formative assessment practices diagnose learners' requirements and gauge the effectiveness of instructional methods. Unfortunately, some teachers lack a clear conception of formative assessment, which may lead to a mismatch for integrating and executing diverse assessment methods within the teaching-learning process. This could be attributed to teachers' limited exposure to effective assessment strategies, which in turn can lead to focus on results rather than holistic learning experience. Teachers should incorporate various formative assessment techniques, such as constructive feedback that would stimulate learners to reach a high level of critical thinking. Thus, facilitate students' learning progress rather than simply evaluating their knowledge or memorization abilities.

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