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## BEATING BARRIERS TO FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN A TESTING-ORIENTED NATION

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### Abstract

Indonesia has been a testing-oriented country since its inception. Yet, over the past decade, assessment policies in Indonesia have gradually strengthened their emphasis on formative assessment. In general, Indonesian teachers' understanding of formative assessment is still relatively modest; in fact, some teachers still consider formative assessment to be challenging, if not impossible. Nevertheless, others have embraced the concept and have managed to overcome the barriers of large classes, limited time, and the long-standing culture of high-stakes testing. This article aims to provide examples of good practice in formative assessment in ELT. We present the results of a multiple case study, involving eight ELT senior high school teachers representing various learning contexts in Indonesia. Drawing on data from interviews and classroom observations, the study revealed that these teachers recognized the barriers in implementing formative assessment deriving from limited time and large classes, yet they were able to overcome these barriers by using teaching modifications and technological tools as solutions to applying formative assessment. This study highlights the pivotal role of teachers' assessment literacy to enhance and reap the benefits from formative assessment.

**Keywords:** formative assessment; barriers; ELT

### Abstrak

Indonesia telah menjadi negara yang berorientasi pada ujian sejak awal berdirinya. Tetapi, selama dekade terakhir, kebijakan penilaian di Indonesia secara bertahap semakin menekankan pada penilaian formatif. Secara umum, pemahaman guru-guru Indonesia tentang penilaian formatif masih relatif terbatas; faktanya, beberapa guru masih menganggap penilaian formatif sebagai hal yang menantang, bahkan tidak mungkin dilakukan. Meskipun demikian, beberapa guru telah menerima konsep ini dan berhasil mengatasi hambatan seperti kelas yang besar, waktu yang terbatas, dan budaya ujian berisiko tinggi yang telah berlangsung lama. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk memberikan contoh praktik baik dalam penilaian formatif dalam pengajaran Bahasa Inggris. Kami menyajikan hasil studi multi-kasus, yang melibatkan delapan guru Bahasa Inggris sekolah menengah atas yang mewakili berbagai konteks pembelajaran di Indonesia. Berdasarkan data dari wawancara dan observasi kelas, studi ini mengungkapkan bahwa para guru ini menyadari hambatan dalam menerapkan penilaian formatif yang berasal dari waktu yang terbatas dan kelas yang besar, namun mereka mampu mengatasi hambatan tersebut dengan menggunakan modifikasi pengajaran dan alat teknologi sebagai solusi untuk menerapkan penilaian formatif. Studi ini menyoroti peran penting literasi penilaian guru untuk meningkatkan dan memetik manfaat dari penilaian formatif.

**Kata kunci:** penilaian formatif; hambatan; pengajaran Bahasa Inggris

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## Introduction

Recent developments in assessment in ELT have emphasised the need for collecting evidence of students' learning and using it to improve learning. As pointed out by Purpura (2016) in his meta-analysis study, the focus of L2 classroom-based assessment has shifted from test construction to formative assessment or 'assessment for learning', that is, assessment which focuses on closing learning gaps on the basis of collected learning evidence. A seminal study in this area is the work of Black and Wiliam (1998) who gathered 250 publications dated from 1987 to 1997. They concluded that formative assessment has the potential to improve learning standards. Subsequent studies in the field have also revealed the positive impacts of the implementation of formative assessment.

In the past few decades, many countries have begun to include the notion of formative assessment in their assessment policies, including in Indonesia. In fact, in its latest assessment guidance, teachers are actually required to implement formative assessment. It would seem that implementing formative assessment poses no problems for teachers in Indonesia; however, studies report that some teachers in Indonesia still find applying formative assessment to be complicated and difficult. Widiastuti and Saukah (2017) found that the EFL secondary teachers who participated in their study needed training on how to apply formative assessment. Similarly, Arrafii and Suhaili (2015) reported that teachers need further training on formative assessment.

There are three conspicuous reasons why implementing formative assessment is challenging for teachers in Indonesia: large classes, the prevalence of standardized high-stakes testing, and the limited number of studies on formative assessment, specifically in the ELT context.

Among the few studies of formative assessment in ELT, overcoming barriers to formative assessment has rarely been studied directly. The topic has only been discussed implicitly as an aspect of professional development programs that aim to enhance teachers' understanding of formative assessment practice, or in terms of introducing an educational technology device that aims to enhance formative assessment practice; however, how challenges to formative assessment are overcome by teachers in real classroom contexts has not been extensively studied. So, teachers still lack real examples of how their problems can be solved.

This paper explores the ways in which teachers in secondary schools in Indonesia overcome challenges in formative assessment practice. The study makes a major contribution to research on formative assessment in ELT by demonstrating how problems in formative assessment practice have been overcome by teachers in actual classroom settings, in the hope that this will inspire other teachers to adapt or adopt such formative assessment practices in their own classes.

Thus far, a number of influential studies have reported the potential benefits of formative assessment. For example, Cauley and McMillan (2010, p. 2) argue there are four reasons why assessment can improve students' learning: 1) Frequent, ongoing assessment allows for fine-tuning of instruction and student focus on progress; 2) Immediate assessment helps ensure meaningful feedback; 3) Specific, rather than global, assessment allow students to see concretely how they can improve; 4) Formative assessment is consistent with recent constructivist theories of learning and motivation.

Black and Wiliam (1998, p.6) defined formative assessment as follows: ...all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 6)

This definition raised questions about what activities could be categorized as formative assessment and what could not. Despite various attempts that scholars have made to clarify the definition, a consensus has not yet been reached. However, many have agreed that the key point of formative assessment is its purpose to improve learning. Pinchock and Brandt (2009) affirmed that formative assessment is not confined to particular assessment instruments such as tests, dialog journals, or portfolios; rather, it depends on how teachers (and learners) use the results from those assessments to adapt teaching-learning if it is necessary. Further, Wiliam and Leahy (2015) formulated what they referred to as 'formative assessment strategies': 1)Clarifying, sharing and understanding learning; 2)Engineering effective classroom discussion, questions, and learning tasks; 3)Providing feedback that moves learning forward; 4)Activating students as the owners of their own learning; 5)Activating students as instructional resources for one another.

Although the notion of formative assessment has long been implemented by many education institutions, the literature has highlighted that formative assessment can be challenging for some teachers. This might be due to the nature of formative assessment itself, as it is contextually-bound, and requires teachers to tailor the concept in relation to their own teaching and learning situation (Pinchock & Brandt, 2009). This is particularly challenging for teachers in hierarchical education systems who are not accustomed to having agency in their own teaching, but rather accept curriculum and assessment procedures dictated by top-down mechanisms. In such systems, if teachers need to make independent decisions about testing instruments, they are liable to choose "off-the-shelf" tests which may not relate to their own teaching context. In addition, previous studies have almost exclusively focused on confirming the benefits of formative assessment.

In fact, questioning as one of the most frequent instruments teachers used in classroom can be an effective formative assessment means as revealed by a study conducted by Jiang (2014), The study was carried out in two universities in the Republic of China context involving 6 teachers and 21 students. Drawing on data from classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, the study found that questioning can be employed as formative assessment instruments; further, Jiang (2014) suggested that teachers should improve their questioning technique in order to benefit students' learning.

To date, far too little attention has been paid to investigating challenges encountered by teachers in the application of formative assessment. However, it is noteworthy that these few studies have identified several formidable obstacles to formative assessment practice. First, data from several studies suggests that high-stakes testing is one of the factors that hamper formative assessment. For example, Gu (2014) identifies that high-stakes tests have a more profound impact on teaching than the curriculum itself. This single case study involved a secondary teacher of English at a prestigious school in China whose curriculum and assessment policies promoted formative assessment. Drawing on data from interviews and video recordings, the researcher concluded that high-stakes tests dominate teaching practice rather than the curriculum standards.

High-stakes tests not only affect teachers' assessment practice, but also shape students' learning focus. For example, Box et al. (2015) found that high-stakes tests create a testing culture which permeates teaching and learning. This multiple case study involved three teachers in secondary schools in a Western Texan suburban community. Data collected from classroom observations, teacher interviews, informal communication, and physical artefacts showed high-stakes tests not only affect teachers' formative assessment practice but also students, whose learning focus is to pass the tests.

The second factor that hampers formative assessment implementation is class size. Teachers with large classes may find implementing formative assessment strategies to be challenging. As Chen et al. (2014) found, providing individual feedback, as suggested by the concept of formative assessment, is challenging if teachers have large classes. Another favoured technique for formative assessment is collaborative learning such as peer and group feedback; however, this may be difficult to manage in large classes (Carless, 2011; Panadero, et al., 2016; Topping, 2009).

Quyen and Khairani (2016) provide a broader perspective in identifying barriers in formative assessment implementation. In their meta-analysis, they argued that, although large classes and high-stakes testing are factors that may hamper formative assessment implementation, it is teachers' understanding in relation to these factors that creates the most significant barrier in applying formative assessment. Another study conducted by Akhmedina (2017) revealed similar findings. This interview study, which involved eight teachers in Russia, revealed that challenges in applying formative assessment were mostly derived from insufficient knowledge and experience of formative assessment.

Meanwhile, a study of formative assessment in ELT in the Indonesian context by Widiastuti and Saukah (2017) found that teachers' understanding of formative assessment had powerful impacts on their practice. Drawing data from interviews with three teachers and three students, the researchers concluded that teachers were not able to adapt learning based on the learning evidence that they had collected because of their limited understanding of formative assessment. Similarly, Arrafii and Sumarni (2018) in a qualitative study of four EFL teachers in Lombok, Indonesia, found that their understanding and practice of formative assessment was limited.

These studies provide evidence that implementing formative assessment can be challenging for teachers. Nevertheless, little is known about how teachers can overcome the barriers to formative assessment practice. Most studies only focused on teachers' challenges in implementing formative assessment, while the possible solutions are not discussed. This paper attempts to fill this gap by showing how a group of EFL teachers in Indonesia overcome their challenges in implementing formative assessment. Specifically, this study aims to seek answer for the following questions: 1) What challenges encountered by teachers in implementing formative assessment?; 2) How do teachers cope with the challenges (research question no.1)?

## Method

This study aimed to identify challenges encountered by teachers in implementing formative assessment and the solutions they implement to overcome the challenges. In order to explore these questions, this study employed a multiple case study design. A case is a bounded system (Johnson & Christensen, 2012) which can be applied to a person, group, institution, an activity (or set of activities), or a process (Creswell, 2005; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003). Case studies allow the researcher to gain in-depth information from research data such as interviews, observations, and artefacts (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2003). This study used a multiple case study design which involved several cases as the education context in Indonesia is diverse; as Stake (2005, p.446) said “it is believed that understanding them (the cases) will lead to a better understanding, and perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases”.

Purposive sampling was applied to select the participants involved in the study; they were selected based on their potential to provide information for the study (Creswell, 2005; Flick, 2014). The participants fulfilled three criteria, as outlined by Stake (2006), they are: relevant, diverse, and complex at the same time. Selected participants in this study were teachers who already had training on formative assessment and were recommended by their ELT teachers’ association as excellent teachers. These teachers were liable to be able to both identify barriers effectively and to demonstrate solutions. Table 1 shows the profiles of the five teachers who participated in the study.

Table 1. The participants’ profiles

Participant*	Educational background	Teaching experience	Participation in teachers’ professional development program	School context
Wendy	MA TESOL	28 years	Participated in various workshops and seminars; Presented several topics related to ICT and curriculum	Public school. An accelerated class with less than 15 students and a regular class with approximately 40 students
Alfred	BA TESOL	8 years	Has participated in workshops and seminars mostly in curriculum and teaching methods	Private school Each class consists of less than 35 students
Anne	PhD in Language Study	17 years	Participated in various workshops and seminars; Presented in various workshops and seminars, especially on topics related to classroom action research and literacy	Private school Each class consists of less than 35 students
Brenda	MA TESOL	20 years	Participated and presented in various workshops and seminars, especially on topics related to curriculum, including formative assessment.	Public school Each class consists of approximately 40 students
Evelyn	MA TESOL	18 years	Participated and presented in various workshops and seminars, especially for secondary schools managed by the Ministry of Education and Culture	Public boarding school Maximum number of students in each class is 20 students.

Data was collected from three sources: semi-structured interviews, observations, and documents. The interview protocol was developed based on formative assessment strategies proposed by Wiliam and Leahy (2015), and also on what difficulties teachers encountered in implementing formative assessment strategies in the classroom context. In the non-participatory observation an observation protocol from Oswalt (2013) was adopted. The focus was on teachers’ application of formative assessment strategies and the challenges they faced in implementing these.

The second interviews were carried out after completing the observation process and aimed to clarify data from the first interview, and to confirm data gained from observations. All observations and interviews were audio-recorded, and fieldnotes were also made during the observations.

## Results and Discussion

### Barriers to formative assessment

The study found that two factors in particular posed difficulties for these teachers in implementing formative assessment: the limited time allotted for EFL classes and the large class sizes. In all cases, the participants claimed that these factors can hamper formative assessment practice; they stated that they could not select appropriate assessment instruments due to the time allotment in class and the number of students. Based on the MoEC Decree Number 129a Year 2004 (Peraturan Menteri Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Nomor 129a/U/2004, 2004), classes in Indonesia may consist of 30 to 40 students.

Evelyn, for example, explained that she needed to forgo several formative assessment instruments although they would present more comprehensive information about her students' learning progress that would be valuable to enhance students' learning. As she said in the interview, "... children don't have enough time. So, there isn't a portfolio and journal now"

Besides narrowing possible assessment to be implemented in the class, limited time and large classes also become barrier prevent for teachers to give formative feedback for students. The participants on the whole demonstrated that they strongly valued providing effective feedback for students. In the interview, Brenda explained the pivotal role of feedback as follows:

Students need different feedback. It helps. They learn from their errors and the feedback we provide for the future: "Oh the student doesn't make the same mistakes, this means they've understood the feedback that we gave". So when a student doesn't make the same mistake we can be sure the feedback helped, it was received. Sometimes we notice "Oh they're still making the same mistake", meaning our feedback hasn't been understood.

This view was echoed by other participants; in addition, the majority of the participants agreed that feedback will motivate students; as Alfred put it when he was asked about the importance of feedback:

Very much so...and they feel they are valued "Oh my work has been checked, oh yeah, this, this and this". In written form, it is really good. But it's very necessary and I'll give it.

Thus, it is not surprising that concerns were expressed about how limited time and large classes might affect how they could provide effective feedback. For example, Nelly stated that assessing students' writing and giving feedback were very challenging for her due to the limited time. Other participants shared similar opinion, giving feedback was challenging especially if they wanted to provide formative feedback in which it should be personalized for each student.

Nevertheless, an interesting finding revealed from the observation data. Alfred who had 32 students was more able to provide data for the students compare to Wendy who had 13 students.

In the observation data, Wendy informed her students that she had not finished providing feedback for their writing which was submitted last week.

### Coping with Barriers

Data from interviews and observations showed that despite the challenges, the participants were still able to conduct formative assessment. Their solutions towards the challenges can be divided into two categories: using educational technology and making teaching modifications.

In terms of integrating educational technology, Wendy, for example, applied Quipper, a web-based learning tool that provides various practice lessons and tests. Students may take the practice tests whenever they choose, and they get automatic feedback as soon as they finish. According to Wendy, this tool supports the application of formative assessment because she was able to monitor students' progress via the software, and make relevant teaching adaptations in response.

Wendy also used video conferencing using an online community FacetoFaith. This website enables students from different parts of the world to communicate about topics which have been selected and announced prior to video conferencing. The activity is moderated by the host and is recorded by the website. Wendy used the website to promote students' speaking practice, but data from classroom observation showed that she also used the website to support formative assessment, by playing back the recording and asking her students to self- and peer-assess.

Further, the website also facilitated Wendy's students for team blogging which enabled students to get feedback from a real audience. She explained the activity in the interview as follows:

So, team blogging is like this, I'm a part of FacetoFaithonline.org community that I've talked about. On FacetoFaith.online.org we can book team blogging, and video conferences. I can add the children into the names of registered students on FacetoFaith. So, I can add them, so they have to be registered in order to link up or make you posts, we have to become a member of FacetoFaith. Yesterday we were with students from Pakistan, America and Indonesia. Every post from the two countries will receive comments, or other friends in the FacetoFaith community will later respond.

Participating in this website provided two-fold benefits. First, it provided more feedback not only from Wendy as a teacher, but also from the moderator who managed the activities. In addition, as shown by the data from the observation, Wendy replayed the teleconference recording, and asked students to assess themselves and their peers at the same time. Thus, students also practice self-and peer assessment from the activity.

Another participant who integrated technology with the aim of providing effective feedback was Alfred. In the interview, he explained that in order to provide immediate feedback, he asked students to submit their writing assignment online via Google drive. In one of the observed sessions, Alfred assigned students to write an essay using three keywords that they had discussed earlier. As students completed their assignments at different paces, Alfred was able to provide immediate feedback during the class for the first few students who submitted their work.

In a different case study, Anne also made use of educational technology to assist her in giving feedback on her students' writing. She used WritetoLearn, a software that provides automatic feedback on students' writing in terms of grammar and vocabulary. This software also enabled Anne to focus on the content of the students' writing in her own feedback rather than being distracted by their basic grammatical mistakes.

Secondly, the results of the study highlight various teaching modifications which teachers used to overcome the barriers of formative assessment implementation. Brenda, for example, would cluster students into different ability groups based on their results from the previous year and a writing assessment that she assigned at the very first meeting with her class. Grouping students in this way enabled her to select suitable assessment instruments for each group, and to give targeted feedback to different groups. She also used the groupings as a basis for peer feedback.

In a different setting, Evelyn, who taught in a boarding school, was more fortunate in dealing with time. Although she had the same allotment of in-class time, she said that her students could also meet her outside school hours. She made use of this opportunity to assign further lessons to individual students to meet their particular needs.

## Discussion

The present findings seem to be consistent with other research which found large classes and limited time as barriers to formative assessment such as in the cross-sectional survey research conducted by Figa et al. (2020) in the Ethiopian context. Drawing on data from questionnaire and interviews, the researchers found that the participants considered large classes and short time allotment hampered formative assessment in addition to lack of facilities and teachers' competencies. Another study, in Nepal, involving 4 teachers in higher education also revealed similar result (Bhandari et al., 2020). Interestingly, time constraints have also been identified as a barrier to formative assessment in the online mode as shown by the result of a qualitative study conducted by Astiandini and Anam (2021).

Furthermore, this study also confirms the association between large classes and limited time to feedback provision. For example, in the OECD (2015) report, secondary teachers from eight participating countries reported that large classes hampered them in applying formative assessment as they needed to teach the learning materials stipulated in the curriculum. This study found that large classes are a barrier to the application of assessment instruments and feedback provision. These findings corroborate the ideas of Brady (2012), who argued that aligning feedback with learners' needs is difficult when there are too many disparate students in the class. Large classes essentially mean more time is needed to give feedback to students. In fact, Proudfoot (2024) argued that implementing formative assessment itself, which include designing, administering and interpreting the results, has already been time consuming.

One unanticipated finding from this study is that teachers did not consider standardized high-stakes tests as a barrier to applying formative assessment. Which is contrary to previous studies which have suggested that high-stakes tests disrupt formative assessment practice (Box, 2015; Gu, 2014). It is difficult to explain this result, but it might be related to the longevity of standardized tests in Indonesia which might have shaped teachers' belief in the central role of tests. The teachers



themselves took such tests during their schooling years, and high-stakes testing has been around ever since they started their teaching career.

The second question in this research was how teachers overcome formative assessment barriers. On the question of how teachers overcome challenges in formative assessment implementation, this study found that there are two ways in which teachers deal with the problem: integrating educational technology and modifying teaching activities. This finding confirmed Russel's (2010) argument that that educational technology can be an effective means to cope with difficulties in implementing formative assessment.

The use of educational technology in assessment cannot be considered as novel. A number of studies have reported its value (Beatty & Gerace, 2009; Hargreaves, 2003; Looney, 2010; Trucano, 2012). Take, for example, one of the earliest application is classroom response systems commonly known as clickers (White et al., 2011). Since the device helps teachers to collect data and analyze students' individual answers every time teachers ask questions, it can support the implementation of formative assessment by fostering the use of questioning techniques to improve learning.

Nevertheless, the results of this study go beyond previous results, showing that the chosen technology may not be purposely designed for assessment. For example, Wendy, who conducted videoconferencing with an online community, used the session recordings to implement a productive formative assessment strategy by involving learners in peer feedback.

All in all, the findings of this study provide support for the argument that teachers' assessment literacy plays a central role in formative assessment. These findings indicate that teachers with an understanding of formative assessment will be able to find ways of overcoming their difficulties, which may not be prescribed. An explanation for this might be that formative assessment is context-embedded – and every context is different. Some teachers made use of technology, and others focused on modifying their teaching in dealing with challenges. For example, Wendy, with fewer students, still found it difficult to provide immediate feedback compared to Alfred who had twice as many students. Alfred handled the barriers by integrating an educational technology platform which was not primarily designed for formative purposes. This finding has important implications for developing teachers' assessment literacy in order to improve teachers' formative assessment practice. As suggested by Berry et al., (2019), it is high time to develop teachers' assessment literacy so as to enrich their teaching practice with the multiple benefits of formative assessment.

## Conclusion

The present study was designed to provide examples of how barriers to formative assessment can be overcome. Teachers' challenges were first identified prior to identifying solutions towards the barriers. Teachers explained that implementing formative assessment was made difficult due to the limited time in class and the large classes that most teachers struggled with. However, interestingly some teachers were able to overcome these challenges through innovative application of educational technology. Others made modifications to their teaching, such as by grouping students of similar levels, using Google Drive to manage immediate feedback, and making use of learning interaction platform to assess students' speaking ability in real life context. The current findings add to a growing body of literature on formative assessment, specifically on coping with

the prevailing barriers of formative assessment application. Taken together, these findings support strong recommendation for the government to improve teachers' assessment literacy.

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