



Teachers' attitudes towards formative assessment in the context of Slovakia's new curriculum reform

Natália Rozmanová

University of Prešov, Slovakia

Abstract

The current paper seeks to investigate the attitudes of teachers working in primary schools towards formative assessment in connection with the new curriculum reform in Slovakia, with a focus on its implementation in foreign language education. It particularly focuses on formative assessment strategies to understand how it is used in practice. The primary research tool used to collect data was semi-structured interviews. The new curriculum reform emphasizes developing pupils' metacognitive skills; thus, encouraging them to plan, reflect on, and take ownership of their own learning. Moreover, it promotes a more student-centred approach. The present research intends to examine how teachers perceive formative assessment within the framework of the new curriculum reform in Slovakia. It aims to determine the extent of teachers' awareness of formative assessment strategies, including peer assessment or self-assessment, and how they are applied in daily teaching practice. Furthermore, the research explores whether teachers adjust their assessment strategies to support pupils' engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes. However, the findings suggest that while most teachers are aware of the principles of formative assessment, its consistent implementation prevails, and remains a challenge. As a result, many teachers still rely solely on summative assessment because of time constraints.

Keywords: attitudes, curriculum reform, formative assessment, foreign language

1 Introduction

Evaluation of pupils in primary schools is a key element of education, playing a crucial part in shaping both teaching and learning. Its purpose goes beyond simply measuring academic achievement against established standards. It also serves to inspire pupils, offer meaningful feedback, and nurture their personal growth. Nowadays, there is increasing recognition of assessment as an evolving process that should not only capture learning outcomes but also take into account the pupil's effort, planning, and self-reflection, thus, supporting the development of metacognitive skills. Accordingly, to encourage this broader perspective, primary schools are increasingly adopting diverse assessment methods that provide a fuller picture of each learner. The educational system in Slovakia is undergoing transformation in terms of the curriculum. It aims to bring assessment practices up to date, with a particular focus on formative methods, including, for example, the implementation of self-assessment or peer assessment. Therefore, this paper explores how primary school teachers are approaching assessment within the framework of this curriculum reform, specifically in the context of foreign language teaching. It also investigates the potential challenges teachers face as they adapt to these new methods.

2 Assessment in Primary Schools

The assessment of pupils in primary education represents a pivotal aspect of the teaching and learning process, which serves not only as a means of measuring academic achievement, but also as a tool to achieve and support broader educational aims. "An assessment becomes one of the crucial steps in the teaching-learning process because it is used to know whether the pupils undergo progress and development or not." [9]: 18. That is to say, how assessment is implemented can have a profound impact on a pupil's motivation, attitude, and engagement with learning. On the other hand, the assessment serves as a tool to collect data on whether the learner can perform a certain task or not [3]. Even though summative assessment, mainly in the form of grades, remains a common



practice, there is a growing emphasis on alternative methods. These include formative assessments, namely self-assessment, verbal assessment, or even peer assessment. Formative assessment plays a crucial role in aligning assessment closely with teaching, making it an integral part of effective classroom practice [13]. Consequently, different assessment methods offer different benefits and limitations too. Their selection often depends on the individual learning needs of pupils, the character of the subject being taught, and the educational philosophy of the institution or teachers. It is stressed that the main objective of assessment is to enhance learning by bridging the gap between a learner's current performance and their desired learning goals [6]. A well-designed assessment system contributes to a positive and inclusive classroom climate, where pupils feel encouraged and supported. Enabling learners to assess their progress fosters independence and helps develop metacognitive skills [15]. Such practices not only improve immediate learning outcomes, but also encourage habits that support lifelong learning. A balanced assessment approach involves the use of multiple techniques, each serving a distinct purpose.

2.1 Summative Assessment

Grading remains one of the most commonly used methods for evaluating pupil performance in primary education. As a conventional form of summative assessment, or known as assessment of learning, it typically implements a numerical scale ranging from 1 (excellent) to 5 (unsatisfactory). It is most often administered at the end of a teaching unit or term [14]. The summative assessment intends to summarize what learners have learnt [3]. This method provides teachers with a straightforward way to communicate academic achievement, and it facilitates comparison across students. Furthermore, as stated, summative assessment aims to focus fundamentally on assigning grades rather than offering meaningful insight into pupils' learning progress [5]. Grades often come with limited feedback, hence, fostering a competitive environment where pupils are more concerned with outperforming peers than truly comprehending the taught subject [12]. This dynamic can shift pupils' motivation away from personal and individual growth. Although grading delivers a clear indication of the level of knowledge or skill acquired, it often fails to indicate where learning gaps remain. As noted [4], this method of evaluation is primarily judgement-based, with the focus on outcomes rather than the learning journey itself. Subsequently, pupils may begin to equate success with grades; therefore, this may result in surface learning such as memorisation instead of deeper cognitive engagement and challenge, as well as the incorporation of higher-order thinking skills. Besides that, for some learners, continual pressure to achieve top grades can contribute to stress, anxiety, and a negative attitude towards school and learning itself. In response to these concerns, growing attention is being paid to other assessment methods, particularly formative assessment. These methods tend to prioritize individual learning progress, offer detailed feedback, and aim to support a more constructive and student-centred educational experience.

2.2 Formative Assessment

In recent years, formative assessment has become an increasingly dominant method of assessment in primary education, offering ongoing feedback that supports learning through active reflection. This form of assessment encompasses a variety of strategies, including verbal assessment, self-assessment, or peer assessment. Tools such as pupils' portfolios and project-based tasks are also commonly employed to document progress and encourage deeper engagement [12]. Within this framework, the role of the teacher shifts from that of an evaluator to a facilitator, guiding pupils through their learning journey and helping them identify areas for growth. On the contrary, traditional assessment methods that focus on final outcomes, formative assessment is centred on the learning process itself. Its purpose is not merely to judge a pupil's performance but to provide meaningful insights that help tailor instruction to individual needs. As stated that formative assessment refers mainly to frequent assessment of learners' development as well as to deeply understanding their needs, thus adjusting subsequent teaching which is appropriate to each pupil [1]. Furthermore, formative assessment serves as a tool for delivering regular, constructive feedback that enables learners to recognise their strengths and address areas needing improvement [16]. Unlike summative assessment, which is typically administered at the end of a teaching unit, formative assessment methods are integrated throughout the teaching process, allowing educators to adjust their strategies in real time. Formative assessment focuses on helping learners develop their own learning [2]. This continuous approach not only supports academic achievement but also fosters essential skills, such



as critical thinking and problem-solving. Moreover, formative assessment promotes active learning by encouraging pupils to take an active role in evaluating and reflecting on their own progress. When applied effectively, formative assessment contributes to the creation of a pleasing classroom environment in which learners feel safe to make mistakes. Pupils view learning as an ongoing process rather than a judgement. As pointed out [17], formative assessment benefits both the learner and the teacher: while a pupil gains insight into their development and educational progress, a teacher is given the opportunity to reflect on the quality of their instruction and further develop their professional competence.

2.2.1 *Types of Formative Assessment*

Formative assessment can take various forms. It serves as a rudimentary function that helps to evaluate the learners in their own process of forming their competencies [9]. One of the assessment methods is verbal assessment, which offers educators the opportunity to deliver more nuanced and meaningful feedback to individual pupils. In contrast to traditional grading, which tries to reduce achievement to a numerical value, verbal assessment, on the contrary, provides a profuse description of each pupil's progress. Therefore, it identifies both strengths and areas in need of improvement. It encourages self-awareness and reflection, helping learners to better understand their own learning processes rather than being passive recipients of grades. Pupils take on a more active role, becoming participants in the assessment process itself [12]. On top of that, verbal assessment is prone to reduce the pressure, stress, and anxiety often associated with grading and testing, hence, fostering a more supportive and trusting relationship between teacher and pupil. Moreover, it is mentioned that traditional grading caused anxiety among pupils because they perceived teachers to be too strict due to continuous examination [11]. That is why the verbal assessment method is especially valuable in the early years of primary education, where nurturing a positive attitude towards learning and encouraging intrinsic motivation are essential. Nevertheless, to be effective, verbal assessment must be clear, eloquent, and constructive, guiding pupils on how to improve rather than merely pointing out their weaknesses. It should affirm effort and progress while offering practical suggestions for future development. Despite the fact that it has many advantages, verbal assessment also presents certain challenges since it is more time-consuming and demands a thoughtful, individualized approach from teachers. Self-assessment represents another dominant part of formative assessment because it encourages learners to actively reflect on their own learning. Through this process, pupils learn to recognise and evaluate their achievements, identify areas for growth and further improvement, and last but not least, to set personal learning goals, which is an essential step towards developing their metacognitive skills [15]. This method of self-reflection fosters greater responsibility for learners' own learning and supports long-term motivation. As a result, pupils become more independent and engaged. This is supported by several articles that found out about the motivation of the learners in learning English. For instance, the motivation of learners is thoroughly assisted by self-assessment [8]. Moreover, discussed self-assessment can take various forms, which include written journals, logs, or even peer discussions. Drawing on a study [10], self-assessment aligns with the development of multiple intelligences and is a dominant cognitive strategy for learning. Pupils who regularly engage in self-assessment are prone to become more confident learners, better equipped to evaluate their performance and plan their next steps. Modern educational practices also underline the value of peer assessment, in which pupils evaluate and offer feedback to one another. This method promotes collaboration, strengthens communication skills, and cultivates critical thinking. For peer assessment to be successful, however, teachers must provide clear guidance to ensure feedback remains respectful, objective, and helpful. Learners might acknowledge feedback from their peers due to the shared point of view and a closer level of personal development and relations [7]. Peer assessment often fosters mutual trust and can lead to more open and constructive dialogue. In addition, peer assessment makes formative assessment more learner-centred [10].

3 Methodolo

The present paper takes a qualitative approach. The main aim of the study was to examine the attitudes of teachers working in primary schools towards formative assessment in connection with the new curriculum reform in Slovakia, with a focus on its implementation in foreign language education. It especially explored formative assessment methods to understand how it is used in practice. The method of primary data collection used was semi-structured interviews, which provided in-depth



insights into teachers' attitudes towards formative assessment, teachers' individual experiences, as well as challenges teachers encounter in employing formative assessment.

In terms of recordings, audio recordings conducted with Apple's Voice Memos® were used. The interviews were designed to address the following research questions. Firstly, how do primary school teachers in Slovakia perceive and implement formative assessment in foreign language education within the context of the new curriculum reform? Secondly, to what extent are teachers familiar with specific formative assessment methods? Thirdly, what challenges do teachers face in implementing formative assessment in their classrooms?

Semi-structured interviews with a total of nine teachers were conducted. Three teachers from primary schools where the reform has not yet been implemented, and six teachers from schools where it has been implemented were chosen purposively. All respondents who participated in the research had at least five years of experience in teaching English language as a foreign language at the primary school level. Additionally, this criterion was established to ensure that participants had the necessary experience to offer meaningful reflections and insights into the use of formative assessment in practice.

4 Findings and Discussion

The data collected through the semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. This approach helped identify key themes in line with the research questions, which were then organized into the following categories: teachers' perceptions and understanding of the term formative assessment - how teachers teaching in primary school interpret the concept of formative assessment; use of formative assessment methods in foreign language education - it examines the practical application of formative assessment methods, including peer assessment, self-assessment, verbal assessment, or even portfolios; and challenges to effective implementation of formative assessment - highlights the obstacles teachers face in consistently applying formative assessment in their classrooms.

Based on the findings, the interviews showed that teachers teaching in primary schools where the curricular reform is already implemented generally understand the term formative assessment, as well as were able to provide a difference between the concepts of formative and summative assessment. Summative assessment was described by all participants as the traditional way, which is represented in grades as well as in the form of tests at the end of a unit or term. On the other hand, formative assessment was seen as a more modern method that focuses on giving feedback during the learning process. The majority of teachers often mentioned verbal assessment as an example of formative assessment. For example, one teacher with 15 years of experience described formative assessment as "feedback for pupils during the learning process," while others spoke of it as a way to point out mistakes or guide pupils in the learning process. Both groups of teachers, whether the curriculum reform has already been implemented or not yet, the findings indicate that the concept of formative assessment is generally well understood.

In the second category based on the collected data, it is evident that teachers are generally aware of various formative assessment methods, namely peer assessment, self-assessment, verbal assessment, and portfolios. However, the extent of their practical use in foreign language classrooms varies widely. According to the data obtained, the majority of teachers still heavily rely on summative assessment, mostly because it is embedded and familiar in classrooms. As one teacher noted, "Definitely summative, meaning traditional grading, since that is what pupils are used to and why change something that works?" Although many teachers expressed a positive attitude towards formative methods, the implementation is often limited due to time constraints and pressure to complete the curriculum. Another teacher explained, "Peer assessment sounds nice, but one lesson takes 45 minutes; it is impossible to do that when you have to cover the curriculum." In addition, some teachers employ verbal assessment in the form of praise or encouragement, but other formative methods, for example, self-assessment or peer assessment, are less common. One teacher said, "I do not implement self-assessment because the teacher manages the teaching process, and therefore he also evaluates," which suggests a belief that formative assessment undermines the teacher's role. Another teacher commented, "I use self-assessment, in the form of what I liked, what I did well at the lesson, but it is very time-consuming," reflecting both interest and frustration with limited classroom time. Nevertheless, not all respondents were sceptical. One teacher with 15 years of experience shared a rich example of how formative assessment can be fully integrated into classroom practice. This teacher uses self-assessment with young learners by teaching them simple reflection at the end



of the lesson. Pupils try to reflect on “what you liked, what you did not like.” The mentioned teacher also described the use of portfolios, where “pupils collect all the results of their work, including tests... then they evaluate it once a quarter by themselves, which they want to show off.” These pupils also use progress maps to track their progress in learning visually. Another teacher also attempts to incorporate more structured self-reflection methods when possible. One teacher described using “emoticons, how I felt, to a specific analysis of what I learned, what I did not learn, what I still want to know...,” though these are not implemented consistently and are often dependent on classroom time and flexibility.

In conclusion, while teachers are familiar with formative assessment methods and recognize their educational value, the actual use of these methods in practice is inconsistent and rare. For the majority, formative assessment is limited to praise or occasional self-reflection due to time limitations, curriculum demands, and deeply rooted habits of traditional grading. Across interviews, summative assessment in the form of grades continues to dominate, largely due to a lack of time and curriculum demands. One teacher stated, “Rather summative, it is more time-efficient. For example, I give pupils a 5-minute test at the beginning of the lesson, and 20 pupils immediately have a grade.”

The last category encompasses the challenges teachers face in employing formative assessment in their classrooms. The analysis of teacher responses highlights a clear and consistent theme, that is to say, mainly time constraints, which are seen as the most frequently mentioned challenge to the effective implementation of formative assessment in primary schools. Whether teachers are already working within the context of the new curriculum reform in the primary schools or not, teachers expressed frustration with the limited time available during a typical 45-minute lesson to engage in deeper, more individualized forms of assessment. One teacher stated, “It is very time-consuming and pupils are not used to it. They want grades.” Another interviewed teacher shared a similar point of view, saying, “You still only have 45 minutes, so I do not see any space for it. Moreover, traditional grades have always been standard, so why change them?” It may be said that these statements reflect the tension between the ideals of formative assessment and the practical usage in day-to-day teaching. Additionally, many teachers highlighted the overloaded curriculum as an obstacle, which leaves little flexibility for formative methods, specifically peer assessment or self-assessment. One teacher noted, “There is so much material to cover, for there to be time for verbal assessment or self-assessment.” Another challenge that emerged from the data is cultural resistance to formative methods. Several teachers mentioned that pupils are accustomed to traditional grading and may not understand or value formative assessment. As one teacher explained, “Pupils do not know what the criteria are, and if I explain it to them, their imagination and creativity have no limits; thus, it would only be time-consuming rather than beneficial.” Furthermore, teachers consistently reported that assessment criteria are determined solely by them, rather than co-developed with pupils. As one teacher said, “No, I, as a teacher, determine what will be assessed.” This top-down approach to evaluation limits the core formative principle of involving pupils in their own learning, including assessment. On the contrary, despite these concerns, some teachers acknowledged the long-term benefits of formative assessment. The one of interviewed teacher was reflecting on her change of perspective by saying, “I used to tell you that I do not know what is going on, but now I am definitely in favour of it after the experiences I have had since it is very effective.” In conclusion, while teachers generally support the idea of formative assessment in theory, the practical challenges, such as lack of time, curriculum demands, and teacher-centred practices, make its consistent application difficult.

5 Conclusions

The present study aimed to investigate the attitudes of primary school teachers in Slovakia towards formative assessment in the context of the new curriculum reform, with a specific focus on its implementation in foreign language education. A qualitative method was used; the study utilized insights from nine semi-structured interviews with experienced English language teachers from primary schools, both implementing and yet to implement the new curriculum reform. The findings revealed key perspectives on how formative assessment is understood, employed, and challenged in daily classrooms. The obtained data show that interviewed teachers generally possess a conceptual understanding of the term formative assessment. As a result, many teachers defined formative assessment as an ongoing process that supports learning by providing pupils with constructive feedback. In spite of that, even though teachers acknowledge the benefits of formative assessment, its implementation in practice remains uncommon. Based on the results obtained, verbal assessment was the most commonly used formative method; however, it often took the form of praise. More



structured methods, including self-assessment, peer assessment, and the use of portfolios, were, however, used far less frequently. The reasons for this were repeatedly mentioned: the challenge of time constraints within the typical 45-minute lesson. Many teachers felt that formative methods were too time-consuming and difficult to integrate alongside the demand to cover all required curriculum content during the lesson. Despite the expressed barriers, some teachers expressed successful examples of incorporating formative assessment in their classrooms. Either it was in the form of a reflection at the end of the lesson or progress maps. These practices, although limited, demonstrate that with sufficient support, formative assessment can be meaningfully integrated into classrooms. Although this study provides valuable findings, but limitations must be considered. Importantly, the sample size was relatively small, consisting of only nine teachers, which results in a limitation of the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the reliance on self-reported data through interviews may also introduce bias, as participants might have provided socially desirable responses or emphasized certain experiences over others.

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