

# A literature review of Formative assessment in English education

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**Abstract—** In the classroom, teachers need to evaluate students based on their individual learning characteristics, tailoring their assessment methods to each student's unique needs. American psychologist Bloom classified educational evaluation mainly into three types based on its functions. They are diagnostic assessment, summative assessment and formative assessment respectively. Since the teaching process determines the teaching outcome, formative assessment should become the foundation and key component of the teaching evaluation. Xie Na (2010) pointed out that evaluating students' performance in their daily learning process, the achievements they have made, as well as their emotions, attitudes, and learning strategies reflects a significant advantage compared to summative evaluation. In the field of foreign language education, formative evaluation research emerged in the early 21st century. Driven by policies such as "Teaching Requirements for College English Courses" (2004) and "English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education" (2022 edition), it gradually became a hot topic (Yuan Shuhou&Shu Dingfang, 2017). Many scholars have conducted research and discussions on formative evaluation. This article provides a review of such research.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Educational evaluation serves as the guiding principle for curriculum reform, and its paradigm shift directly affects the realization of educational goals. The "English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education(2022 Edition)" clearly states that "we should adhere to process evaluation to promote the development of students' core competencies", marking a profound transformation in English education in China from a "knowledge-based" approach to a "competency-based" one (Ministry of Education, 2022). However, the long-term dominance of traditional summative evaluation has led to three major dilemmas in teaching practice: narrow functionality: evaluation has become a screening tool, ignoring the value of the learning process; single subject: teachers monopolize the evaluation rights, and students passively accept judgments; rigid tools: reliance on standardized tests makes it difficult to meet the needs of competency

cultivation. Formative assessment is the key path to resolving these dilemmas. Its core concept originates from Scriven and Bloom, emphasizing the optimization of teaching and learning processes through continuous feedback. In the field of foreign language education in China, formative assessment research emerged in the early 21st century and was catalyzed by the policy of the "University English Curriculum Teaching Requirements" in 2004, gradually becoming an academic hotspot (Yuan Shuhou&Shu Dingfang, 2017).

Formative assessment was proposed by American evaluation expert M. Scfiven in 1967 and later applied to the teaching field by American educator B. S. Bloom. Specifically, formative assessment refers to the process of evaluating students' progress during the formation of their knowledge, skills, and attitudes in educational activities. It also involves monitoring the acquisition of students' knowledge and skills and evaluating their learning

progress. Ultimately, feedback is provided to adjust teaching and improve teaching quality. Bloom believed: "Formative assessment is a systematic evaluation conducted during the teaching process to obtain feedback information about teaching, improve teaching, and enable students' knowledge to reach the mastery level, that is, to evaluate the content that students have not yet mastered." Formative assessment emphasizes multi-level and diversified analysis and judgment of the teaching and learning process, providing timely and accurate diagnostic information for both teaching and learning, promoting the improvement and development of the teaching and learning process. At the same time, formative assessment also emphasizes evaluating students' learning process. It not only starts from the needs of the evaluator but also pays more attention to the needs of the evaluated, emphasizing students' experiences in learning, the communication between teachers and students, enabling students to actively and correctly understand themselves and improve themselves. This is conducive to cultivating students' autonomous learning ability.

Formative assessment is in contrast to traditional summative assessment. The so-called formative assessment is an evaluation of "students' performance during the daily learning process, the achievements they have made, and the development of their emotions, attitudes, and strategies reflected" and is a developmental evaluation based on continuous observation, recording, and reflection of the entire learning process of students. Its purpose is "to motivate students to learn, help students effectively regulate their learning process, enable students to gain a sense of achievement, enhance self-confidence, and cultivate a cooperative spirit". Formative assessment enables students "to transform from passive acceptance of evaluation to becoming the subject and active participant of evaluation".

In practical terms, under the backdrop of the new round of English curriculum reform, formative assessment and autonomous learning have become two major hot issues that have disrupted traditional English teaching. In the process of English teaching, systematically implementing formative assessment can stimulate students' intrinsic motivation for learning, help them break away from bad habits such as procrastination and laziness, provide them with the experience of success after making progress, and gradually cultivate their awareness of autonomous learning and strengthen their autonomous learning behavior.

From a theoretical perspective, formative assessment runs through the entire process of students' learning and has more advantages compared to summative assessment. First, it can make the evaluation subjects more diverse. Traditional summative assessment mainly involves

teachers evaluating students, which cannot fully leverage students' subjectivity. In contrast, formative assessment emphasizes students' active participation, transforming students from passive evaluation to active evaluation. This helps cultivate students' enthusiasm and initiative. Second, the content of formative assessment is more comprehensive. Summative assessment focuses on evaluating learning outcomes, while formative assessment evaluates the entire learning process. It not only assesses students' mastery of knowledge but also evaluates their learning attitudes, strategies, and emotional factors. Therefore, its evaluation results are more scientific and complete. Third, the formative assessment methods are more diverse. Summative assessment mainly uses paper-and-pencil tests for evaluation. In contrast, formative assessment can be evaluated through teachers' observations of students' classroom performance, as well as through classroom discussions, student diaries, homework and quizzes, questionnaires, and interviews. Such evaluation results can better reflect students' true levels. Fourth, the feedback effect of formative assessment is more targeted. Since formative assessment can accurately and timely reflect students' learning situation at a certain stage, it can provide students with timely feedback. It can also help cultivate students' good learning habits (Xie Na, 2010).

## II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Formative assessment is a concentrated manifestation of modern educational concepts. The theories of multiple intelligence and constructivism all embody this assessment perspective.

### 2.1 The evaluation perspective of multiple intelligence theory

The theory of multiple intelligence was proposed by Howard Gardner, a professor from the Harvard Graduate School of Education in the United States, in 1983. Gardner believes that a person's intelligence should be a measure of his problem-solving ability. According to this definition, human intelligence has at least the following nine types: linguistic-linguistic intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence, visual-spatial intelligence, bodily-motor intelligence, musical intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, naturalistic intelligence, and existential intelligence. Education plays a significant role in the development and utilization of these intelligence. The differences in individual intelligence are determined by the combination of different intelligence. Everyone has their own dominant intelligence and also has their own weak intelligence. Various intelligence can be continuously improved through effective postnatal

cultivation. Therefore, the evaluation concept under the guidance of the theory of multiple intelligences includes the following aspects: 1. Cultivate students' subjective initiative and attach importance to the role of timely feedback in evaluation. 2. Expand the evaluation subjects and form a comprehensive evaluation involving teachers, students, and parents. 3. Improve the evaluation content and take into account the evaluation of students with different developmental needs. 4. Evaluation should pay more attention to the process and be less focused on the results.

## 2.2 Evaluation Perspective of Constructivist Theory

The constructivist theory was initially proposed by Piaget. According to constructivism, the acquisition of knowledge does not occur through the transmission by teachers; instead, students actively construct knowledge through their existing experiences in a certain context. Students are the center of learning and active learners. Learning is a meaningful construction process of knowledge. The central task of constructivist learning is to create positive, active, and enjoyable learning situations. The evaluation perspective of constructivism has the following characteristics: 1. Evaluation focuses on the process of knowledge. 2. Evaluation emphasizes the development of students' own selves. 3. Evaluation methods are diversified. 4. Evaluation subjects are diverse.

## III. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 3.1 Research Progress Abroad

From the historical perspective of the development of formative assessment abroad, it has gone through a process from academic assessment to educational assessment and then to formative assessment. In 1897, American educator T.M. Rice conducted a spelling test on 30,000 primary school students, which was regarded as the beginning of assessment research in the field of evaluation. In the 1930s to 1950s, the College Follow-up Survey Group led by Taylor evaluated the results of the "Eight-Year Study". One of the important achievements of the "Eight-Year Study" was the replacement of testing with educational evaluation.

The period from the 1960s to the late 1970s was a time of great development in educational evaluation. Many educators studied it from different perspectives, and evaluation methods such as "goal-free evaluation" and "response evaluation" emerged. It was also during this period that in 1967, American evaluation expert Michael Scriven first proposed the concept of formative assessment in "Evaluation Thesaurus": he pointed out that the two functions of evaluation are to continuously improve the

plan and help managers analyze the effectiveness of the plan. In 1969, American evaluation expert Bloom transplanted formative assessment into the field of learning evaluation. He believed that traditional tests only judged and classified students, but formative assessment could provide feedback and correction to students at any stage of the teaching process. In the 1980s, foreign research on formative assessment mainly focused on the differences between summative assessment and formative assessment.

### 3.2 Domestic Research Progress

In China, research on academic evaluation began in the early 1980s. In 1983, China officially joined the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, and since then, China has actively carried out evaluation and pilot projects as well as domestic and international academic exchanges. In the 1990s, China issued the "Outline for the Reform of Basic Education", and in the "Notice on Actively Promoting the Reform of Evaluation and Examination Systems in Primary and Secondary Schools" (2000), it was pointed out that formative evaluation should be combined with summative evaluation, with formative evaluation as the main focus. He Genyou and Wang Xiaoqin (2015) also pointed out that traditional university English teaching evaluation overly relies on summative evaluation (such as CET-4 and CET-6), which has the drawbacks of emphasizing results over processes, having a single evaluation subject, being one-sided in content (ignoring abilities, emotions, strategies, etc.), and being biased towards discrimination rather than motivation, thus restricting students' development and teaching reform.

Since then, many scholars have been studying the theoretical development and practical application of formative evaluation in English teaching. Zhao Nanyu and Yin Hong (2021) explored how to implement formative evaluation in primary school English classrooms. Luo Shaoqian and Zhang Shuai (2019) used learning portfolios to evaluate the development of students' core English subject literacy. A learning portfolio is an archive based on a student's growth process, collecting all the output tasks completed by the student. This not only allows students to personally experience their progress over a semester but also serves as the basis for formative evaluation of the student during that semester. Through the use of learning portfolios, teachers can conduct a more comprehensive evaluation of students.

Many scholars have also conducted more detailed research on the impact of formative evaluation on different texts. Wei Li and Zhang Lintao (2023) focused on the role of formative evaluation in improving junior high school students' reading comprehension ability of narrative texts.

The study found that through the intervention of formative evaluation, students' reading comprehension ability in English narrative texts improved significantly, achieving the expected goal. Through participation in the research, students made significant progress in information extraction, strategy application, and multi-dimensional thinking. Students no longer regarded doing exercises and tests as the purpose of reading but were able to participate in various reading and evaluation activities, experiencing the joy of learning English. Since this study only focused on narrative reading texts, future research can expand the genre and conduct research on reading teaching of different genres such as expository and argumentative texts through formative evaluation, thereby comprehensively enhancing students' English reading comprehension ability and promoting the development of students' core literacy. Fei Xiaolan (2023) focused on English reading ability and designed formative evaluation methods suitable for the initial stage of extracurricular reading based on the two major elements of reading literacy. On the one hand, by establishing class systems and clarifying personal goals, students' reading character is enhanced; on the other hand, various templates targeting language accumulation, strategy application, cultural perception, and opinion expression are used to cultivate reading ability. These methods can help students improve their reading literacy and also facilitate the implementation and sustainable development of extracurricular reading. Li Xiangqin (2019) focused on the application of formative evaluation in writing. She proposed strategies for the application of formative evaluation in high school English writing teaching. Specifically, these include: clarifying writing goals and internalizing evaluation standards; implementing reading-to-write and providing strategy guidance; strengthening teacher-student interaction and activating the writing process.

In addition to different texts and the cultivation of students' different abilities, some scholars have also focused on how to make formative evaluation more interesting and integrate it into the classroom. For example, Liu Jianda and Ma Siyu (2023) explored gamified formative evaluation in foreign language teaching. Gamified formative evaluation involves introducing game elements into the formative evaluation teaching process to improve the implementation method of formative evaluation, stimulate students' learning motivation, enhance students' classroom experience, and ultimately promote learning. It is pointed out that the game-based formative assessment tool is not merely a medium for information transmission, but also a new teaching concept that shifts the teaching focus from the teacher's dissemination of knowledge to the students' critical processing of information. It is also noted

that in the practice of game-based formative assessment, teachers can observe and collect various game elements (such as points, badges, and levels) and different game modes (such as challenge settings, group cooperation, and story background settings), as well as information that affects students' language learning, such as whether it has an effect, what effect it has, and on which students it has an effect. Based on this information, teachers can improve their teaching methods and provide targeted feedback to students, thereby helping students improve their learning efficiency and truly achieve the goal of promoting learning.

### 3.3 Summary

Research abroad has laid a theoretical foundation since the 1960s, emphasizing the feedback and improvement value of formative assessment. Domestic research in recent years has focused on localized practices, overcoming the drawbacks of summative assessment (such as exam-oriented and process neglect), and exploring innovative models - such as gamified assessment (motivation stimulation), stratified reading literacy assessment (improving information extraction and strategy application), etc., confirming its positive role in students' ability development and learning experience optimization. In the future, formative assessment needs to further explore the deep integration of technology (such as AI-driven real-time feedback, gamified intelligent tools), the guarantee mechanism of assessment fairness (adaptability in cross-cultural or large-class teaching scenarios), and a multi-dimensional ability assessment system (such as cross-genre text reading, critical thinking, and other core competencies), and build an integrated "assessment-teaching-learning" ecosystem to promote the transformation of formative assessment from tool innovation to systematic educational reform.

## IV. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The theoretical foundation of formative assessment can be traced back to Scriven's functional definition and Bloom's teaching application. Its core value lies in dynamically optimizing teaching and learning through continuous feedback. Domestic research has flourished under policy-driven circumstances (such as "University English Curriculum Teaching Requirements" in 2004 and "Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards" in 2022), shifting from a "screening tool" to a "learning accelerator", emphasizing the role of assessment in cultivating autonomous learning abilities (Xie Na, 2010) and core competencies; breaking the monopoly of evaluation by teachers and promoting students to become "evaluation subjects" (such as self-evaluation and mutual

evaluation), which aligns with the constructivist concept of "centering on students"; evolving from a single mode of paper-and-pencil tests to game-based evaluation (Liu Jianda and Ma Siyu, 2023), reading literacy stratification templates (Fei Xiaolan, 2023), and other diversified tool systems, significantly enhancing learning motivation and strategic application abilities (Wei Li and Zhang Lintao, 2023). Notably, local practices have created distinctive paths while addressing the drawbacks of traditional assessment: game design integrates elements such as points and challenges into evaluation, stimulating students' critical information processing abilities; reading literacy assessment through targeted intervention by genre (such as narrative essays) significantly improves information extraction and multi-dimensional thinking levels, laying the foundation for cross-genre promotion.

Despite the abundant achievements, current research still presents significant contradictions: diverse assessment activities (such as portfolios, observation records) are difficult to implement in large-class teaching, with teachers facing overburdened time and energy; the reliability and validity of student self-evaluation/peer evaluation are questionable, prone to being influenced by subjectivity, and lacking a fairness guarantee mechanism; in the context of deeply rooted traditional exam-oriented education, students and parents have limited recognition of non-exam assessment, and the concept of "emphasizing results over processes" has not been fundamentally reversed.

To break through the current bottleneck, future research can evolve towards a systematic and intelligent direction, promoting the deep integration of technology, as proposed by Liu Liping and Qu Lingyun (2024), with technology empowerment and evaluation innovation. In the future, such as developing AI-driven assessment systems (such as intelligent essay grading, learning behavior analysis), this can alleviate teachers' burden and improve the timeliness of feedback. In the future, technology empowerment should solve operational problems, system reform should reconcile the tension of evaluation functions, and ultimately build a "evaluation - teaching - learning" deeply coupled educational ecosystem. Only in this way can formative assessment truly implement core competencies, rather than remaining superficial.

## V. LIMITATIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

1. Implementation challenges in large-class settings. Despite abundant achievements, current research reveals significant contradictions: diverse assessment activities (portfolios, observation records) remain difficult to implement in large-class teaching, with teachers facing time and energy burdens. Future research should explore

efficient implementation models and technological solutions to reduce teacher workload while maintaining assessment quality.

2. Reliability and validity concerns. Student self-evaluation and peer evaluation remain questionable in reliability and validity, prone to subjectivity influences and lacking fairness guarantee mechanisms. Future research should develop standardized training protocols and calibration procedures to enhance the credibility of student-involved assessment.

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