

## For-Learning transfer of formative assessment in the EFL area of China: A thematic analysis of the past two decades

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**ABSTRACT :** The past decades has seen formative assessment, which is of an Anglophone origin, being introduced into the policy discourse of many educational contexts including China. Nonetheless, whether its for-learning function can be transferred across cultures and borders just as the policy did is a question to be answered. This paper, based on the EFL education in China, attempts to address this question with a thematic analysis of major empirical literature collected from databases such as CNKI, Web of Science and ERIC. The results reveal that the for-learning function of formative assessment, such as students' role, affective situations, learning strategies and achievement, has been positively transferred and hence verified, in some degree, its feasibility of in the EFL area of China. This conclusion, however, is limited in some ways, and needs further investigation into the details.

**KEYWORDS** - EFL in China, Formative assessment, For-learning function, Transfer, Thematic analysis

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Black and Wiliam[1], based on a large-scale literature review and calculated effect sizes (0.4-0.7), announced the “for-learning” nature of formative assessment in promoting learners' learning cognitive outcomes, metacognitive skills, and (lifelong) learning abilities. The announcement, regardless of critiques such as Bennet [2], Dunn and Mulvenon[3] and etc., has been acknowledged as one of the major impetuses for the globe-wide changing climate at the educational arena[4][5]. Indeed, the early 2000s have witnessed formative assessment cross borders and cultures and find its way into the educational policy discourse of a multitude of social contexts. It needs noting, however, formative assessment may have compatibility and adaptability issues in contexts where social, cultural and historical conditions differ from or conflict with its Anglophone origin. China is such a case. Its educational philosophy and cultural values deep-rooted in a typical Confucian Heritage Culture context have long been perceived as at odds with the principles embedded with formative assessment[6][7][8][9] and so whether the “for-learning” functions of formative assessment can be transferred or not remains a big concern. This thematic analysis, situated in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) domain of China, attempts to elicit some evidence from empirical studies published in major journals at home and abroad in the past two decades and gives a tentative answer to this question.

**Background: The incorporation of formative assessment to the EFL domain in China :** Starting from early 2000s, the Chinese Ministry of Education (CMoE) has endeavored to introduce formative assessment to the EFL education. English syllabuses of varied levels such as *the National English Curriculum Standards for Basic Education* [10], *the National English Curriculum Standards for Senior High School* [11], *the Nine-year compulsory education English curriculum standards* [12], *the College English Curriculum Requirements*[13], and *the Guidelines on College English Teaching* [14],

Have unanimously advocated the incorporation of formative assessment within the curriculum assessment frameworks. These initiatives are revolutionary in that they have put an end to an assessment regime, which is solely dominated by summative assessment, and started a new era of assessment, which is more diverse and inclusive. The dual policy intent to enhance learning and to level off the severe washback effects from the extended use of standardised tests of summative nature is clearly articulated therein.

The subsequent investigations into formative assessment in the EFL area, as showcased in multiple reviews[15][16][17][18][19][20] have covered the current situations, prospects and “problems” or “predicaments” . The transferrability (or non-transferrability) of the “for learning” functions of formative assessment is rarely the focus of these large scale reviews except a meta-analysis[21], which landed an effect size of 0.46 out of 27 experimental studies published over the period of 2000-2020. Compared with the 0.4-0.7 in Black and Wiliam[1], this effect size indicates a medium to low positive impact of formative assessment on the EFL education in China. This far-from-satisfactory result, however, needs further evidence to be concluded since meta-analysis includes experimental studies only. This study seeks to explore the findings of those that have not been included in the meta-analysis and address the transferrability question with a thematic analysis.

## II. METHODOLOGY

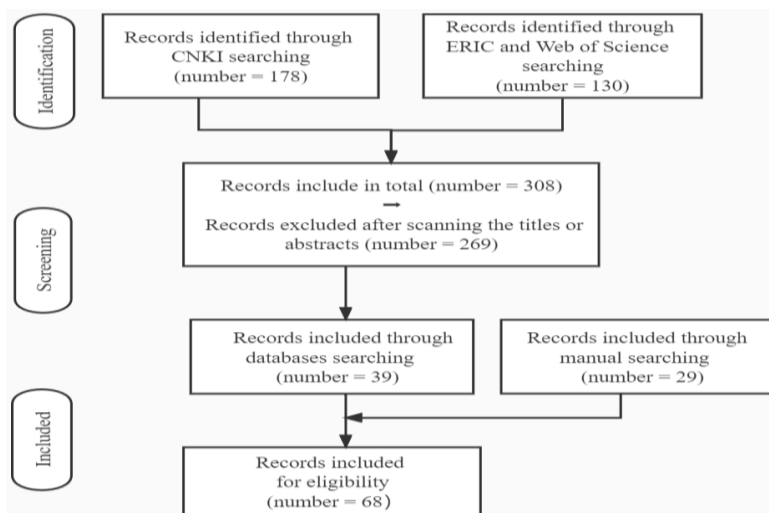
With a purpose to elicit evidence from the finding sections of the formative assessment-relevant studies, this study has adopted a thematic analysis approach[22]. As a “fundamentally question-driven” approach[23], thematic analysis, first of all, fits the very purpose of this study to address the transfer/non-transferability question of formative assessment in the EFL area of China. This approach’s descriptive, explanatory, and/or critical nature and its applicability with secondary data source, such as the findings in this study, also makes it a good choice. Following the thematic analysis approach, this study has gone through two stages: identifying data source and data analysis, with the latter further split into three phases - setup, analysis and interpretation[23].

**Data source identifying:** As mentioned earlier, this study has used the findings of formative-assessment relevant studies published in the past two decades as data source. The first thing is hence to retrieve these studies from databases. We have searched three databases available to the authors - CNKI<sup>1</sup>, the most acknowledged Chinese academic database in China, ERIC and Web of Science, which was supplemented by manual retrieval. The literature retrieval has followed three steps: 1) Key words searching: CNKI was searched with keywords “形成性评价/促学评价” and “英语”, and the journal type and time range were limited to “CSSCI” and “2000 - to present”, from which 178 journal articles were collected; ERIC and Web of Science were searched with keywords - “formative assessment/assessment for learning”, “China” and “English”, which led to 53 and 77 articles respectively; 2) Screening out: abstracts of these studies(178+53+77=308) were then read to screen out those that were not empirical or have not covered the impact of formative assessment, which resulted in 39 studies meeting the criteria; 3) Manual searching: 29 studies were collected through manual searching from other sources as a supplement. As a result of retrieval, 68 eligible studies were included altogether for further analysis. The data-searching and identifying route is illustrated in Fig. 1.

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<sup>1</sup> CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure; Chinese: 中国知网) is a Chinese database of academic journals, conference proceedings, newspapers, reference works, and patent documents. It was launched in 1999 by Tsinghua University.

Figure 1. data source tracking route.



### III. DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis has gone through three phases.

**1) Setup.** The demographic information, such as publication date, sample size, educational level, experimental methods and duration, of the 68 identified studies, were sorted out through a second reading. Then, the findings or results of, particularly those related to the impact of formative assessment, of these studies were extracted into an Excel file.

**2) Analysis.** The demographic information of these studies were firstly analyzed descriptively to give an overall picture of this dataset. The analysis, as illustrated in Fig.2 below, indicates the distribution of these studies across subjects, educational levels, research types and duration. Specifically, 37 studies have been conducted in the Comprehensive English subject, accounting for more than half (54.4%) of the identified 68. This is followed by English Writing (15, 22.1%), English Speaking (7, 10.3%) and Reading, Listening and others (translation, literature, vocabulary) (5, 7.4%). These subjects has covered most of the basic courses of the English subject. In terms of education level, 57 of the 68 studies are at the tertiary level (83.8%), which leaves 11 (16.2%) at the senior level (including the senior and secondary vocational school), and zero to the primary level.

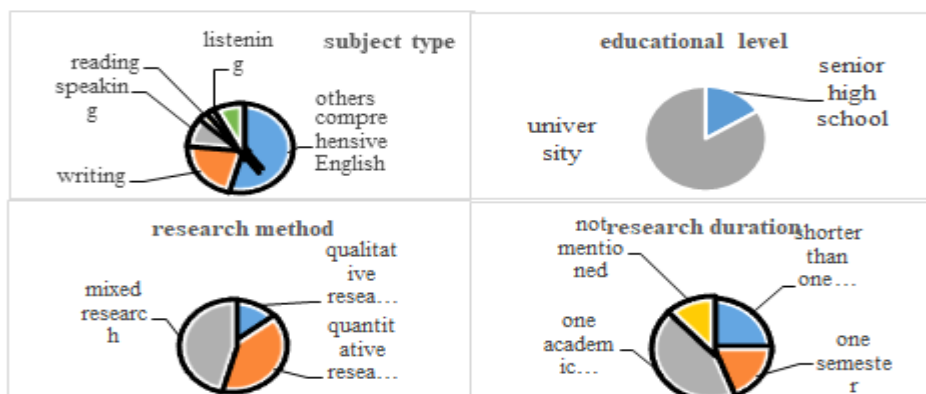


Figure 2. Distribution of the studies

This proportion indicates differed degrees of attention of the academic circle to the varied levels of EFL education. These studies are all empirical in nature and adopted all three major research methods, with 27 (39.7%) and 10 (14.7%) being quantitative and qualitative, and 31 (45.6%) mixed. The duration of these research ranges from 6 weeks to 5 years, with 17 (25.0%) shorter than one semester, 13 (19.1%) one semester and 30 (44.1%) one academic year or more. The varieties of the 68 studies in these variables have ensured the adequate coverage of data source. Then, the findings, or the qualitative part of the data were read backward and forward and compared constantly to code, which were further clustered to generate categories and then themes[22]. This iteratively process resulted in four themes relating to the impact of formative assessment: students' roles, affective influences, learning strategies, and learning achievements. These themes were then labeled as positive impact (+), negative impact (-), no significant difference (0) and not-mentioned (N) according to the findings. The process were completed by second and third authors and double-checked by the first author to ensure the validity and reliability. These themes were then be interpreted to inform the question regarding the transfer of formative assessment in the EFL area of China.

#### IV. DATA INTERPRETATION :

The generated themes indicate that the incorporation of formative assessment has impacted the Chinese EFL education in four main aspects: student' roles, affective influence, learning strategies and learning outcomes. This section details what the impact is like.

**Students' roles :** The impact of incorporated formative assessment on Chinese students' conception of roles can be seen, firstly, in a statistical frequency.

Table 1. Impact on students' roles

	Students' roles	Frequency	Percentage
Valid	Positive effect	21	30.9
	Negative effect	5	7.4
	No significant difference	3	4.4
Not mentioned		39	57.3
Total		68	100

As can be seen from the Table, 39 (57.3%) out of the 68 studies did not mention the impact on students' roles. Of the 29 (42.7%) studies that did, 21 (30.9%) studies reported the incorporation of formative assessment in the EFL classrooms has had a positive impact on students' role change. This was showcased by the increase of students' participation in classroom activities[24] and their learning autonomy[25]. Also, as a result of the formative assessment initiative, peer assessment was advocated, which has secured a more relaxed learning environment to accommodate students of various personalities[26], and helped students to better understand each other and further develop the ability of cooperative learning[27]. Thus said, the implementation of formative assessment in the EFL classroom has indeed led to positive change in students' roles, to some degree at least, from the salient and silent stereotype. This was manifested by Wang et al.[28:125], who stated: "formative assessment has made educational assessment shift from one way to two ways. Students have become one of the agents of assessment[rather than the objects of assessment only], and gained the right to know, speak and make decisions in the whole process of assessment". The finding, however, is somewhat leveled off by the remaining 8 studies, which reported no (5, 7.4%) or negative (3, 4.4%) changes in students' roles. The students in Chen and Xu[29], for instance, shows certain degree of maladjustment to the incorporated formative assessment and refused to accept its principles, change their roles immediately and actively participate.

They refuse to make revision according to the suggestion from their peers for the lack of constructive opinions[30]. Introverted students[31][32] even showed resistance to or reluctance in group activities and peer cooperation. Students' engagement in, regulation and monitoring of their own learning as autonomous agents is the essence of formative assessment[33]. Taking up a active role like this is certainly not an easy thing for Chinese students, who are deeply influenced by the Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) and used to being passive recipients of knowledge and the objects of assessment[34]. As the above analysis indicates, well-practised formative assessment has induced shifts to the identity of some EFL learners in China. Those students who refuse to change certainly need more attention. To respect their learning preferences or take more effective measures to help them to understand and transform their roles is a decision to be made on the teacher as well as policy-makers' part.

**Affective influences :** The impact of formative assessment on learners' affective situations in Chinese English classrooms can be seen firstly in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Impact on emotions

Affective situations		frequency	percentage
Valid	Positive effect	33	48.5
	Negative effect	5	7.4
	No significant difference	4	5.9
No mentioned		26	38.2
Total		68	100

As can be seen, 42 (51.5%) studies has included the affective influences of formative assessment on EFL students in their findings. Of which, 33 reported the influence as positive in terms of, for example, reduced learning pressure and anxiety[35] and changed attitudes towards assessment[36]. More interest in English learning, clearer learning orientation, and greater motivation to move forward[37] and positive emotional support for each other[38] are also among the impact formative assessment. In addition, formative assessment is perceived as capable of building bridges for student- teacher-parent communication[24]. It is particularly noteworthy that formative assessment seems to have a more pronounced affective impact on low-achieving students. The students in Zhang and Shen[39], for example, noted a humanistic care from formative assessment, which motivated them to learn English in a more confident manner.

In contrast to this positive rein, nine out the 42 studies indicated a negative or insignificant value in term of the affective impact of formative assessment on students. The non-English majors in Zhang and Wen [40], for example, held a positive attitude toward formative assessment due to their excessive attention to the learning outcomes than the process. The students in Zhao[32], particularly those who were not interested in English learning, showed an aversion to formative assessment for its demanding work, and the students in Wang et al.[41] doubted the possible effects of formative assessment. The negative impact is also visible in the group activities, with students preferring feedback from teachers rather than from peers[42], and showing impatience over self-assessment and peer assessment[38].

Formative assessment emphasizes students' engagement in or ownership of learning and thereby affecting their motivation, attitudes, etc in a positive way[43]. While majority of the studies in the above analysis seems to confirm this effect in the field of English education in China, the negative or nil attitude revealed in the nine studies points to another research agenda in the field: to figure out why so and explore how to foster in students

positive attitudes towards formative assessment and so as to motivate and engage them in learning-oriented assessment activities.

**Learning strategies/approaches :** The effects of formative assessment on EFL students’ learning strategies and approaches are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Impact on learning strategies

Learning strategies	frequency	Percentage
Valid	Positive effect	31      45.6
	Negative effect	0      31      0
	No significant difference	0      0
Not mentioned		37      54.4
Total		68      100

As shown in the Table, 31 studies (45.6%) has covered the impact of formative assessment on EFL students’ learning strategies/approaches in their finding sections and they all found the impact positive. The details varied though. The students in Ren[44] and Wang and Ma[45], for instance, developed more effective learning strategies and independent learning methods as a result of engaging in assessment activities of formative nature. The questionnaire by Gan and colleagues[46] revealed that the implementation of formative assessment was significantly and positively correlated with EFL students’ frequent use of deeper learning strategies, and students learned to optimally select and adjust their strategies in English learning. A 2-year study on the effects of formative assessment[35] reported that 71% of the participants could monitor their learning plans, adjust their use of learning skills, and choose appropriate learning strategies in accordance with their learning goals, that is, meta-cognitive abilities.

Formative assessment advocates student-centered and learning-oriented and aims to improve students’ learning through the use of various strategies[47]. In other words, formative assessment is to facilitate students’ learning achievements and competencies by innovating or optimizing their learning strategies, especially meta-cognitive strategies. The above analysis seems to suggest that the positive effects of formative assessment on learning strategies and approaches have been transferred.

#### 4.4 Learning achievements

The use of formative assessment in English classrooms has had a mixed impact on the Chinese EFL learners’ learning achievements (see Table 4).

Table 4. Impact on students’ learning achievements

Learning achievements	frequency	percentage
Valid	Positive effect	35      51.5
	Negative effect	1      47      1.5
	No significant difference	11      16.2
Not mentioned		21      30.8
Total		68      100

As shown in Table 4.4, of the 47 studies whose findings covered the impact of formative assessment, 35 have reported a positive value on the learning achievements of EFL students in China. Both tertiary[48][49][50] and

secondary[24][51] students in the experimental group achieved higher grades than those in the control group in their achievement tests. The positive impact of formative assessment was also demonstrated in students' improved English learning skills in writing[52], speaking, lifelong learning[53] and meta-cognitive abilities[54][55]. Against this largely optimistic picture is the none or negative effects on English learning achievements reported in the remaining 12 studies. Zeng and Liang[30], for example, have found that the short-term intervention of formative assessment failed to improve students' learning outcomes, especially for those with limited English language proficiency. Worse still, the students in Liu, Hu and Zhang's[31] experimental group reported lower grades than those in the control group so that it was concluded that formative assessment might have little advantage over traditional assessment in improving students' English proficiency.

## V. CONCLUSION

The above analysis of the finding sections of 68 identified studies shows that formative assessment in the EFL area of China has produced positive transfer in varied degrees in terms of students' roles transformation (30.9%), affective situations towards English learning (48.5%), learning strategies and approaches (45.6%), and learning achievements (51.5%). These findings seem to correlate with the mean effect size of 0.46 in Chen and Li[21], which falls at the low end of the 0.4-0.7 range by Black and Wiliam[1] and hence confirms that formative assessment interventions have been moderately effective in promoting the acquisition of Chinese EFL students.

That is, two decades' adoption of formative assessment in the EFL area of China has indeed brought about some changes not only in the learning outcomes, which used to be measured by summative standardised tests only, but also to some students' approaches to learning, their conceptions of role in learning, as well as their psychological being. These findings tend to lead to the conclusion that the for-learning functions of formative assessment is transferrable to China, in part and in the EFL area at least. Those negative or no significant findings, however, point to another facet of the issue. The traditional Chinese culture and residual philosophies in education and teaching persist and seem to have, to certain extent, restricted the implementation of formative assessment and further its impact in the EFL classrooms. For one, the transmissive pedagogy and the resultant students' over-reliance on teachers' feedback still hinder the exercise and improvement of students' independent learning. Summative assessment and the utilitarian view of learning still dominate some students' learning behaviors and emotions. While acknowledging it takes time for a policy, and perhaps longer for a borrowed initiative, to effect substantial change(s) in the classrooms and learners at the end[58], a call for opener attitudes towards more learning-oriented pedagogy such as formative assessment is really needed on the learners, teachers, administrators as well as the system level. Only in this way, could the benefits concomitant with formative assessment be realised to the expectations of policy-makers and the Chinese government, that is, to shift the orientation of assessment as well as learning from results to process, injecting visible vitality into classrooms and uplift the quality of EFL education and beyond.

This conclusion has some limitations though. First of all, the literature used in the study lacks evidence from the primary education level. As Yuan and Su[20] noted, the implementation and impact of formative assessment at this level remain an area to be explored. Secondly, majority of these studies are no longer than a year. Whether these reported positive effects be carried on to next stage of learning or just end with these experiments is another cause for concern. Thirdly, the designs of some studies could be flawed[16]. All these limitations have left the conclusion of this study to be further verified in the future.

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