

## **FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT AS A MEANS OF ENCOURAGING TEENAGER ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING<sup>1</sup>**

**Jenifer Paola Leguizamón Lesmes<sup>2</sup>**

**Angélica Lorena Rodríguez Cuervo<sup>3</sup>**

*Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas  
Bogotá-Colombia*

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### **ABSTRACT**

Testing, assessment and evaluation attempt to measure, control and monitor the learning process nevertheless, for some educators this does not seem to contribute to learning. This paper reports a qualitative action research study that analyzes the teenagers' attitudes and behaviors towards formative assessment. It also examines the use of prior knowledge to assess English Language Learning. The two pre-service teachers-researchers collected data about the learners' engagement or disengagement with English at a school in Bogotá. The findings suggest that by using Formative Assessment, perceptions towards English language learning can change. Before the intervention, learners were not aware of the role English played in their life; at the end more than half of them highlighted the relevance of English in their education.

**Keywords:** Engagement, English Language Learning (ELL), Formative assessment, Summative evaluation, teacher education.

### **EVALUACION FORMATIVA COMO MEDIO DE MOTIVACIÓN A ADOLESCENTES EN EL APRENDIZAJE DEL IDIOMA INGLÉS.**

### **RESUMEN**

Las pruebas y la valoración intentan medir, controlar y monitorear el proceso de aprendizaje en la escuela. Sin embargo, para algunos educadores estas no parecen contribuir al aprendizaje. Este artículo explora un estudio cualitativo de investigación-acción que analiza las actitudes y comportamientos de los adolescentes hacia la evaluación formativa, y se examina el uso del conocimiento previo para evaluar el aprendizaje del inglés. El estudio se llevó a cabo en un colegio de Bogotá. Los practicantes-investigadores recopilieron datos relacionados a la motivación de los estudiantes con el idioma inglés. Los resultados sugieren que con la introducción de la evaluación formativa, la percepción hacia el aprendizaje del inglés puede cambiar. Al principio los estudiantes no eran conscientes del rol que el inglés tenía en sus vidas; al final, más de la mitad resalta la importancia del inglés en su educación.

**Palabras clave:** Compromiso, Aprendizaje de inglés, evaluación formativa, evaluación sumativa, formación de docentes.

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2 Docente en formación de la Licenciatura en Educación Básica con énfasis en inglés. Contacto: jenilesmes@gmail.com

3 Docente en formación de la Licenciatura en Educación Básica con énfasis en Inglés. Contacto: anglorenarc@gmail.com

## INTRODUCTION

This study looks into assessment practices and how evaluation influences learning. We, the pre-service teachers, conducted a qualitative study to analyze the learners' reactions when formative assessment (FA) is introduced in an attempt to help learners build self-confidence and to become engaged. Testing, assessment, and evaluation (TAE) are essential. Assessment for learning is formative since it uses constant feedback (Stiggins, 2005); and it identifies needs which are made visible to the student. (Black y Wiliam, 1998, as cited in Stull et.al, 2011).

In the game of learning, however, learners become accustomed to consider errors as faults and not as opportunities to enhance their competence (Assessment Reform Group, 2002), this causes disengagement. Three constructs are covered in the literature review: students learning, formative assessment and engagement.

**On Learning:** Vygotsky's social constructivism (1978) can be mentioned as the pioneer; the core of Social Constructivism according to Naylor and Keogh (1999) is that "learners can only make sense of new situations in terms of their existing understanding. Learning involves an active process in which individual construct meaning by linking new ideas with their existing knowledge" (p.93). This active process helps developing meaningful learning for it enables peer feedback as well as teacher feedback.

To develop knowledge, it has to be promoted as a construction of meanings. Hence, constructivism considers knowledge not as a product but as a process (Piaget, 1970). Language is not only used as a means of communicating with each other, it allows us to learn. It is the tool that we use to rebuild the world and to structure reality. As Piaget (1970) would argue, what we understand as reality changes and rebuilds constantly through exposing us in new experiences. Even so, everything that we know (the world and reality) are reconstructions of what was constructed before, without being aware of it. For a student to change a concept already

established, the student has to be unsatisfied with what he/she already knows in order to consider another concept true.

Jones and Brader-Araje, (2002) note that "It is through checking out our understandings and perspectives with others that we develop a sense of the viability of ideas. This process of idea testing can be seen in the classrooms of teachers who value students' ideas and promote the process of critical thinking. The diversity of students' prior concepts [...] provides evidence that students do not enter instruction as blank slates, but instead possess a variety of pre-conceptions tied to prior experiences that teachers must take into account during curriculum planning and instruction." (p.3)

Also, for Ausubel (1963) that teachers acknowledge what the student already knows constitutes a demand for the learning process. Once you have that information, you should instruct appropriately. Furthermore, it is important to know the students' context, likes, dislikes and prior knowledge before planning the course, then you may develop the course learning objectives and assessments (Kester et al, 2002). When a teacher incorporates students to the planning process, especially on assessment, they are aiding learners to have a clear understanding of what are they being assessed on and how.

**Students' engagement:** In the most basic sense motivation is the need or desire to do something, whether that need is biological, social or emotional; whether that includes going to college, or learning a foreign language. Motivation is what gets you moving. The study of Maslow's hierarchy of needs deals with motivation and is illustrated in a pyramid that goes as follows: first our psychological needs, then safety, belongingness and love, esteem, self-actualization and finally self-transcendence (Maslow, 1943). In the classroom many times assessment plays that role of motivation and at the same time of exclusion. There is nothing worse than receiving a bad remark on school. We instantly feel stressed and rejected. Not willing to complete successfully a task will influence self-actualization and can be a determinant factor on a student's engagement in that failed field of knowledge (Kenrick, et al. 2010)

Motivation then, is part of the individual, something that the student cannot leave when entering the classroom. Similarly to students' mind, eyes, context, likes, dislikes and prior knowledge, motivation has a function in the learning process. For the pedagogical implementation based on FA that pre-service teachers are conducting, motivation influences learning directly and is enhanced thanks to mechanisms such as the establishment of goals, self-sufficiency and well known expected results (Schunk, 1996). All of these mechanisms are also recognized as assessment practices that are both done by teachers and students individually and also collectively before, during and at the end of the course.

**Assessment and Formative Assessment:** Allen (2004) states that "assessment involves the use of empirical data on students learning to refine programs and improve students learning". Moreover, Huba and Freed (2000) recognize "assessment as the process of gathering and discussing information from multiple and diverse sources in order to develop a deep understanding of what students know, understand, and can do with their knowledge as a result of their educational experiences; the process culminates when assessment results are used to improve subsequent learning." (p.8) Based upon these definitions, assessment is a compilation of qualitative data that will enable the accomplishment of an integral assessment. In the group under study, pre-service teachers collected empirical data to enhance future assessments practices.

Stiggins (2005) points out that assessment was designed to increase student's learning and to strengthen the low achievers; he calls it "Assess for Learning". In detail, teachers assesses for two reasons: to inform instructional decisions and to motivate students to learn. Stiggins poses a key question that is part of Assessment for Learning, which is: What comes next in the learning? This

question allows teachers to focus on students in order to advance.

Two types of assessment are relevant to this study: summative (SA) and formative (FA). The participants had been assessed with summative assessment. Taras (2009) points out that summative assessment is characterized by those tasks which determine if learners have achieved the goals in regards to the standards of a course or a program. Conversely, FA is a common classroom procedure that focuses on the learning process and it is by nature diagnostic, remedial, regulatory ongoing, self-regulatory, timely, and accurate (Cizek, 2010). Meanwhile, formative assessment plays an important role in learning; the use of feedback adapts the course according to the students' necessities that are essential to achieve learning goals (Herman et al. 2006).

Taking into account the literature, the inquiry moved around the question: *How may formative assessment contribute to students' engagement to learn English?*

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Focusing on natural settings that enable natural experiments, this case study was framed within the qualitative research tradition. The inquiry on attitudes and behaviors towards formative assessment took place at a school in Bogotá with fourteen boys and nineteen girls, aged 15-18 from an eighth grade class. The intervention was carried out in ten sessions of two hours each.

By integrating current assessment practices and Formative Assessment in classroom, this study aimed at observing, understanding, and interpreting the role of FA on students' views of learning and their views on this kind of assessment. Each class was divided into six steps.

STAGE	PROCEDURE
Play time = Game	Students play to create a good classroom climate.
Adventure time = Video	Students move from easy to complex content. They watch videos with varying degrees of difficulty in an attempt to give them a sense of challenge as well as a sense of achievement. One of the purposes being to work with English in a practical manner while making it learnable.
Meaningful learning	The teacher activates their previous knowledge by asking what they know about the new topic. Learners are encouraged to make connections with other readings, films, or TV shows they recall.
Work time/ Creation	The teacher explains the topic and students apply it to similar situations or to practice the forms of language.
Assessment	Students receive encouraging feedback about their work. This feedback is constant until learners consider they have mastered the topics or the language covered.
Comments	At the end of the class, students express without judgment, their opinions, and feelings. They are stimulated to propose activities or content that they would like to follow up.

The stages and procedures followed two principles. First, teachers use positive statements in their feedback. This allows boosting the learners' self-confidence. Second, students are able to participate as many times they want, even if their attempts are not accurate. Communication is central to build rapport between students and teachers.

**FINDINGS**

The main functions of data were: to collect facts related to the participants' level of awareness in assessment, to find evidence of students' knowledge while formative assessment was implemented, and to observe engagement. The Pre-service teachers' journals, questionnaires, students' artifacts, and video-recordings supported classroom observations. The use of mechanical recording devices

gives greater flexibility than observations done by hand (Bowman, 1994).

The findings fall into three main categories: students' insights, students' perception of evaluation and students' engagement. The learners' beliefs, and perceptions towards ELL were revealed.

**Students' insights.**

The evidence seems to suggest that during the first session several students had a predisposition to learn; others were not on task. The samples below provide information on the students' awareness throughout assessment's practices. Sample 1 indicates that FA had an impact on their point of view towards English language learning.

**Sample 1 –Students’ Perceptions 1**

English version	Spanish version
Ss 1: I do not like to learn English on my own, I just see it as a subject	No quiero aprender inglés por mi cuenta, solo lo veo como una materia.
Ss 2: In fact, is a subject else to see, but it is essential for life.	En realidad, es una material más que ver, pero es fundamental para la vida.
Ss 3: The truth is I won't like. It is just a subject, anyway, I like it.	La verdad no me gustaría. Es solo una materia más y al igual me gusta mucho.

On the other hand, in Sample 2 most learners expressed they would want to learn English on their own, indicating the possible impact that formative assessment had. Students also recognize a cultural value to learning English. This goes along with Crystal (2003) who emphasizes that there is a proliferation of new linguistic varieties present in the world-wide implementation of the internet and in the increasing public recognition of the global position of English.

**Sample 2 –Students’ Perceptions 2**

Spanish	English
<b>Ss 1:</b> I like that school gives English classes but I would like to learn or reinforce the English in another place, I mean, to take a course.	Me gusta que den inglés en el colegio, pero me gustaría aprender o reforzar en inglés en otro lado, ósea, hacer un curso de inglés.
<b>Ss 2:</b> I would like to learn English by my own because it is very important.	Me gustaría aprender inglés por mi cuenta porque es muy importante.
<b>Ss 3:</b> Yes, I would like, it is like to open the doors of the future.	Pues si me gustaría es como una forma de abrir las puertas del futuro.

**Students’ perception of the evaluation of learning:**

Sample 3 collects those school practices that attempt to measure outcomes and that may not be used to adjust teaching.

**Sample 3: Students’ perception of evaluation**

English	Spanish
<b>T:</b> What do you understand by assessment?	<b>T:</b> ¿Que entienden por evaluación?
<b>S1:</b> To evaluate the knowledge.	<b>S1:</b> Es evaluar el conocimiento.
<b>S2:</b> To test what we know, the language.	<b>S2:</b> Evaluar que se sabe, el idioma.
<b>S3:</b> To test what we have studied	<b>S3:</b> Evaluar lo que hemos estudiado.
<b>T:</b> and what is knowledge?	<b>T:</b> ¿Y que es conocimiento?
<b>S1:</b> What we have learning... what they have taught us.	<b>S1:</b> lo que hemos aprendido, lo que nos han enseñado.
<b>T:</b> Who has been fail in the evaluation?	<b>T:</b> ¿Quién ha perdido las evaluaciones?
<b>S:</b> (More than half rise up their hands)	<b>S:</b> (Más de la mitad levantaron su mano)
<b>T:</b> Why do you consider that you have been fail?	<b>T:</b> ¿Por qué creen que han perdido?
<b>S1:</b> Because we did not pay attention in the classes and we got lost	<b>S1:</b> Porque no prestamos atención en las clases y nos perdemos.
<b>S2:</b> The teachers did not explain well, so we get confused when doing the evaluation.	<b>S2:</b> Los profesores no explican bien, entonces nos perdemos cuando hacemos la evaluación.
<b>S3:</b> Because nobody studies.	<b>S3:</b> Porque nadie estudia.
<b>T:</b> Do you believe that those fails is due to the way teachers evaluate? Did they gave you a piece of paper, you have to answer and that's it?	<b>T:</b> ¿Ustedes creen que perder esas evaluaciones es por culpa de la forma como el profesor los evalúa? ¿Ellos solo les entrega una hoja, ustedes tienen que responder y eso es todo?
<b>S:</b> (The whole group said yes)	<b>S:</b> (Todo el grupo dijo sí)
<b>T:</b> So, How do you like to be assessed?	<b>T:</b> Entonces, ¿Cómo les gustaría ser evaluados?
<b>S:</b> (Nobody knows how to answer)	<b>S:</b> (Nadie respondió)

On the other hand, the data gathered from interviews indicates that the students had little knowledge about formative assessment. Therefore they could not attribute success or failure to it.

In the last session, we surveyed learners. We asked if they felt a contrast between these assessment practices as mentioned above in the methodology (See sample 4) the whole group perceives a variance among putting into effect FA with other classes.

**Sample 4** – Students' Perceptions Related to FA

English	Spanish
<p><b>1.</b> Do you think that teacher assess different from other subjects? Why?</p> <p><b>Ss 1:</b> Yes, because she assessed with points and no putting grades as other teachers.</p> <p><b>Ss 2:</b> Yes, because she not only checked the works done in class but also the behavior, the attitude and a lot of things</p> <p><b>Ss 3:</b> Yes, while the other teachers assess with evaluations, J. assessed more didactically in which we can learn.</p> <p><b>2.</b> The way of the teacher assessed does it help you to see learning English differently? Why?</p> <p><b>Ss 1:</b> Yes because it taught me that through the ordinary activities such as movies, we can learn a lot from a language.</p> <p><b>Ss 2:</b> Yes, due to assessments were easy topics and we did not have the pressure that this was an important grade.</p>	<p><b>1.</b> ¿Crees que la docente evaluó de una forma diferente a la que suelen evaluarte en otras materias? ¿Por qué?</p> <p><b>Ss 1:</b> Si porque ella evaluó con puntos y no poniendo notas como otros profesores.</p> <p><b>Ss 2:</b> Si porque ella no solo revisaba los trabajos en clase si no también el comportamiento, la actitud y muchas cosas.</p> <p><b>Ss 3:</b> Si, mientras otros profesores evaluaban con evaluaciones, J. evaluaba más didácticamente en donde uno podía aprender.</p> <p><b>2.</b> ¿La forma de evaluar de la docente te ayudó a ver el aprendizaje del inglés de una forma diferente? ¿Por qué?</p> <p><b>Ss 1:</b> Si porque me enseñó que a través de actividades ordinarias como ver una película podemos aprender mucho de un idioma</p> <p><b>Ss 2:</b> Si, ya que la evaluación eran temas fáciles y no teníamos la presión de que fuera una nota importante.</p>

The data on the development of the intervention allowed the identification of three categories: Recognition, adaptation and appropriation. Adaption is considered as how students and teachers interact (sessions 1, 2, 3,). Recognition refer to how students assume and identify FA, especially to understand their responsibilities as learners (sessions 4, 5, 6, 7), and Appropriation is the development to perceive the FA procedure as new element to acquire knowledge and to do the tasks (sessions 8, 9, 10). Also, the findings show the importance of modeling activities and of explicitly teaching and providing feedback on how to tackle language learning using strategies (See Castillo, 2014).

**Students' engagement and interaction via formative assessment**

On the basis of the evidence seems to suggest the increase of students' engagement. At the beginning of the sessions, students had low discipline, they distracted easily. As a result visual aids and didactic material helped students to develop the ELL's engagement.

The implementation of FA was crucial for exploring their participation and motivation. An effect of FA on academic achievement is that students who feel empowered through self-determination will likely have greater motivation (Fletcher et al. 2001). The pedagogical implementation is related to the voluntary participation in class. When a student tried to give an answer about something, he/she received an extra-remark; this allowed students to reduce stress about grades.

On one hand, learners promoted unconsciously a pressure to get good grades due to the fact that school rewards the highest students' grades, in fact, they can go to educational outings, received honorable mentions, and so on. On the other hand, in an interview, students did not associate grades with intelligence. (see sample 5)

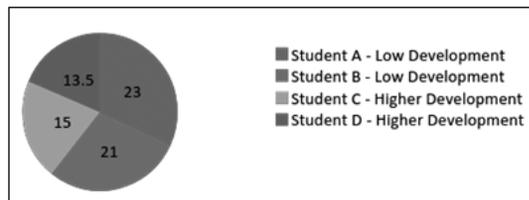
**Sample 5:** Students' perception about grades.

English	Spanish
<b>S1:</b> The grades doesn't evaluate the intelligence	<b>S1:</b> Las notas no evalúan la inteligencia.
<b>T:</b> But it's affect to you, your parents tell off if you have a bad grade.	<b>T:</b> Pero las notas les afectan, sus padres los regañan si tienen una mala nota
<b>S2:</b> For example, I am wrong when doing evaluations but let's say I know but when doing the exam I felt nervous because I know that something goes wrong. Let's say, yes, the grades affect your academic achievement but it does not mean that we do not the things well.	<b>S2:</b> Pues por ejemplo, a mí me va mal pero yo sé, pero digamos al momento de presentar un examen me pongo nerviosa porque sé que me va a ir mal. Digamos, sí las notas afectan tu rendimiento pero eso no significa que uno no sepa las cosas bien.
<b>T:</b> So, you don't care about grades.	<b>T:</b> Entonces, a ustedes no les importa las notas.
<b>S:</b> (The whole group said no)	<b>S:</b> (El grupo completo dijo no)
<b>S1:</b> Well, for parents grades are everything but for us they are not. For us, grades sucks, it is good for nothing, because our intelligence is inside us, not in a paper that we gave to a teacher.	<b>S1:</b> Pues para los papás eso es todo ¿Si?, pero para uno no, eso es una porquería, eso no sirve para nada, porque, ósea, la inteligencia está dentro de uno; no en un papel que uno entrega a un profesor.
<b>S2:</b> Let's say, there are an amount of students that often do very well academically but when the ICFES appears, it throws everything to the garbage	<b>S2:</b> Pues porque a veces, por decir algo, hay muchos que les va bien en el periodo, luego llega el ICFES y se tira todo

Taking into account the school tradition, the points were translated into grades. An interesting finding emerged, those low-achievers obtained the most points in formative assessment tasks. Brown and Glasner (1999, in Jenkins 2004) highlight the strategic use of assessment as an extrinsic motivator

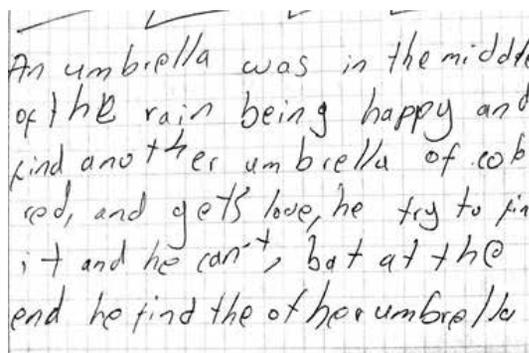
for learning. They argue that assessment is closely linked with evaluation for summative purposes; any assessment forms part of a formative–summative continuum.

**1.1** Student's development evaluated with points.



Although this type of assessment was welcomed by the participants, it was emphasized that the relation between students and English proficiency increased. Before implementing Formative Assessment - Adaptation category – Students merely used English words separately. In the last category – Appropriation – students were able to narrate in a piece of paper a short film (2013) “The blue umbrella”. Students were able to move from writing single words to small paragraphs.

*“An umbrella was in the middle of the rain being happy and find another umbrella of cobí red, and gets love, he try to find it and he can't, bat at the end he find the of her umbrella” (Sample).*



Additionally, students commented that by learning through formative assessment, they did not feel pressure for making mistakes they insisted that they had fun. This fact allowed pre-service teachers to recognize FA as an opportunity to boost students' ELL and participation. It can be safely argued that formative assessment fosters student involvement. As Gareis (2007) maintains: when used effectively, formative assessment is sensitive to the role of motivation in learning.

## CONCLUSIONS

An inquiry on practices of teaching assessment and evaluation shed light on school practices. They reveal paradigms, traditions and sets of beliefs that need to be examined. The findings of this study suggest that the introduction of Formative Assessment may positively change the learners' perceptions towards English Language Learning. At the beginning learners did not assign importance to learning English; at the end of the process, more than a half realized about the relevance of this language and the usefulness for their academic development. Given them a sense of achievement and success modifies their behavior.

Also, Formative Assessment proved to be a key factor to understand how learners tackle tasks, and what they have difficulties with. Schools can use this information to make the necessary instructional adjustments, such as re-teaching, trying alternative instructional approaches, or offering more opportunities for practice. As Boston (2002) claims: these activities can lead to improved student success.

Finally, there are two main areas for further research. First, to comprehend the relationship between summative assessment and high achievers. Knight (2002) points out that that summative assessment may not be able to deliver what it is widely supposed to, generating a predictable memorization of meanings; besides summative assessment's contribution to learning is less palpable than formative assessment. The second area worth researching has to do with how teachers deal with their formative and summative roles. We need to cognize how teachers' classroom assessment relate to external test results, and how external test results can be made more helpful in terms of improving student performance (Boston, 2002).

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