



English Language Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences on Formative Assessment in Nepal

Gita Kafle¹, Bharat Prasad Neupane (*PhD*)²

¹MPhil Scholar, Kathmandu University, Nepal

²Kathmandu University, Nepal

Corresponding Author: Gita Kafle, Email: gita_mpele2023aug@kusoed.edu.np

Abstract

This study explores English language teachers' perception of formative assessment, their execution in the classroom, and the opportunities and challenges they faced while implementing it. We employed narrative inquiry to investigate the formative assessment practices of teachers working in public schools in Kathmandu. Four teachers from two public schools were purposively selected. We interviewed them to derive in-depth information on formative assessment. Later, we analyzed the interview transcript thematically. The findings highlight significant obstacles such as teachers' unpreparedness, infrastructure limitations, and alignment issues with curriculum guidelines. Despite these challenges, formative assessment positively impacts student learning outcomes by fostering engagement and personalized learning experiences. The study recommends targeted teacher training, resource allocation and policy alignment to optimize formative assessment practices in the public schools in Nepal.

Keywords: English language teachers, language learning, narrative inquiry, Nepal

Introduction

Choosing "English Language Teachers' Perception and Experiences on Formative Assessment in Nepal" as a research topic holds significant meaning as it is deeply rooted in our journey as teachers and teacher educators. We have taught at public and private schools for many years, and throughout our teaching career, we have observed various challenges and limitations in implementing effective assessment techniques. Proper understanding and implementation are critical because assessment is integral to the curriculum. As our curriculum evolved, with



the introduction of internal and external evaluations, we became acutely aware of the need to improve formative assessment practices. While observing practices such as maintaining portfolios, providing regular feedback, and tracking student progress from our colleagues, we felt there was still much to do. In our teaching practices, we have emphasized the use of rubrics, regularly provided opportunities for improvement, and encouraged self-assessment through critical self-reflection. We have witnessed the positive impact of these approaches. Hence, this article aims to explore further and understand how other teachers approach formative assessment methods for positive learning outcomes.

By delving into this research topic, we aim to gain valuable insights into the perceptions and practices of teachers who have employed formative assessment methods in their actual classrooms. We strive to understand how they perceive formative assessment and practice it within this framework, identify the challenges they face during implementation, and explore the strategies they employ to maximize the effectiveness of the assessment practices. Through narrative inquiry, we intend to capture teachers' experiences and contribute to the subject's existing body of knowledge. Hence, our narrative deeply intertwines with our desire to enhance teachers' assessment practices and positively impact students' learning outcomes. This research provides valuable insights into formative assessment approaches contributing to the broader educational community.

Generally, assessment means any method or tool that helps the teachers to collect necessary information regarding the learning process of the learners with pre-established goals. Assessment is an integral part of the teaching-learning process. Without the proper assessment, teaching-learning cannot be successful. The school education system has different assessment practices, such as oral tests, paper-pencil tests, project work, and portfolios. Among them, the paper-pencil test is the most commonly used in public schools in Nepal. According to the Curriculum Development Center (CDC, 2007), assessment is a process of gathering, interpreting, recording, and analyzing data, using information, and obtaining feedback for re-planning educational programs. It is a systematic process of measuring every individual's goals, outcomes, and progress. Assessment is used to monitor the progress of the education system. It also assists teachers in performing better. Assessment makes parents, teachers, administrators, policymakers, and textbook writers aware of the situation. Assessment is an integral part of every instructional activity and education system. It is a continuous process that intends to provide diverse opportunities to students based on their learning evidence.

Most importantly, the Education Policy 2016 has specifically emphasized instructional assessment. It clearly states that the examination system will be

revised to improve the quality enhancement of education across all levels. It is crucial to establish appropriate and efficient examination frameworks or strategies. Additionally, it emphasizes that effective assessment methods must be integrated into the educational system. However, the lack of proper training and development opportunities (Neupane & Joshi, 2022; Neupane, 2023, 2024; Neupane & Bhatt, 2023) has been a hindrance to proper teacher professional development and the development of required knowledge and skills in teachers, including assessment practices. The importance of this study lies in exploring the formative assessment method from the teachers' perspective, investigating their perceptions, experiences, and challenges in implementing this assessment approach. By gaining insights into teachers' attitudes, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence the successful implementation of the formative assessment method and its impact on students' learning outcomes.

In the context of Nepal, the history of formative assessment practice dates back to the piloting program, which was initiated in the five-year Compulsory Primary Education (CPE) in the education year 2000/2001 in grade one. However, the Basic and Primary Education Project (BPEP) also made efforts to support the Continuous Assessment System from 1996 to 1998. Gradually, the Ninth and Tenth plans introduced the Continuous Assessment System (CAS) at the primary level, with the Ninth plan focusing on grade 1 to 3 students and the Tenth plan on students up to grade five. The continuous assessment system has been implemented from grade one to grades 11 and 12 at present.

The basic principle of the CAS system is that the teaching methodology is student-centred (Nepali, 2012). It also provides that learning outcomes of the curriculum shall be used as the basis of teaching and assessment. Additionally, the teacher is supposed to assess the students continuously without the periodical examinations. Finally, the student's work and progress reports should be kept in their personalized portfolios. Both formative and summative assessments are equally important to enhancing students' learning. In the evaluation process, one cannot exist without another. At the school level in Nepal, there is a blended system of the evaluation process, which includes both formative and summative procedures (Regmi, 2014). National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2076 established a policy regarding the assessment system, introducing both at the school level. According to the policy, at the basic level, especially from Grades one to three, there is a complete assessment for learning (formative assessment), and the school has an autonomous system to implement it independently. The Curriculum Development Center (CDC) has prepared guidelines for the internal evaluation based on the approved curriculum of each level. The main aim of developing these guidelines is to assist teachers

in effectively implementing the internal assessment provision envisioned by the curriculum.

Assessment for learning (formative assessment) of the students is documented based on homework, classwork, attendance, classroom participation, project work, creative work, discipline, and behavioural change. The curriculum indicates that scores from formative assessment provide the basis for the internal evaluation. For this, the teacher should maintain each student's portfolio. The portfolio details students' performance in different assessment areas (e.g., participation, project work, unit tests, terminal exams, listening and speaking in language subjects, etc.). The Basic Education Curriculum, 2077 (Grade 6-8) was approved by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MoEST) on 28 January 2021 (CDC, 2022). According to this curriculum, there is provision for internal (50 %) and external (50 %) assessment. The record of project work, test papers, or other proof of the student's performance should be kept in their portfolio. Regarding the assessment system at the secondary level, there is a provision for 25% formative assessment and 75 % summative assessment.

In the context of Nepal, some studies have been carried out on assessment (Sapkota, 2023; Saud et al., 2024; Neupane, 2021). Saud et al. (2024) examined the existing internal assessment practices adopted by the English language teachers in the Secondary Education Examination of the community schools in Nepal. Their study found that the prominence of assessment of learning as the dominant practice has resulted in the marginalization of the other two purposes of the assessment for learning and assessment as learning. Sapkota's (2023) study found that very few tools were used to evaluate the student's learning achievements. According to him, both formative and summative assessments contribute equally to enhancing the student's learning, but formative assessment tools like portfolios, project work, classwork, etc., are rarely used during teaching-learning activities in the public schools of Nepal. Similarly, Neupane (2021) carried out research on assessment experiences of English language teachers. The findings revealed that assessment significantly affects learners' overall development and teachers' professional growth. Summative assessment was found to be a challenging task, primarily focusing on testing language contents. The study's findings suggest that teaching and learning become effective by accurately applying assessment strategies in English language classrooms.

Despite the development and revision of policies over time to accommodate both formative and summative assessments in teaching-learning activities, their implementation has not been satisfactory. By conducting a literature review and identifying these gaps, this study aims to contribute to the existing body of

knowledge by focusing on teachers' perspectives regarding formative assessment practice. It seeks to address the identified gaps and provide insights into this system's implementation, challenges, and outcomes. For this purpose, the following research questions become pertinent.

1. How do the teachers practise formative assessment?
2. What are their perspectives on factors that facilitate or hinder its implementation?

Methods and Procedures

To explore public school teachers' experience in assessment practice, we engaged in a prolonged interaction with our participants under an interpretive research paradigm. This study employed a qualitative method to collect information. Two schools in Kathmandu Metropolitan City (one basic and one secondary) were significant areas of study, where we collected data related to assessment practices. Both primary and secondary sources of data were used. The primary data were collected from teachers at selected public schools in Kathmandu Metropolitan City. As secondary data, we consulted government policies such as the National Curriculum Framework, assessment records of the schools, and different research articles and books on testing and evaluation, as mentioned in the theoretical section.

Using non-random purposive sampling, we selected four teachers from two different public schools who were teaching at various levels. Data collection involved conducting semi-structured interviews with teachers, either in-person or via video conferencing, depending on the participant's preferences and availability. Semi-structured interviews provided flexibility in exploring participant's perspectives while ensuring that key research questions and themes were addressed. The interview questions were carefully crafted to elicit teacher's experiences, perceptions, challenges, and strategies related to the formative assessment system. Probing questions were used to gather rich and detailed data on specific topics of interest. Taking permission from the participants, we recorded the interview, and later, we transcribed, translated, and thematized it. The analysis process was iterative, including familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing and refining the themes, and producing a final report.

Findings and Discussion

Three main themes emerged from analyzing participants' responses: understanding of formative assessment, school assessment practices, and opportunities and challenges in implementing formative assessment.

Understanding the Formative Assessment

Our primary concern was understanding the teachers' perception of formative

assessment. When I asked one of the participants, Umesh, about his understanding of formative assessment, he replied:

Formative assessment is a scientific system used to evaluate the overall aspects of a student. The areas that cannot be measured with paper-pencil tests can be assessed through formative assessment. It is developed to fill the gap created by summative assessment. Though it is the scientific system, we teachers are not ready to transform ourselves into a new one and prefer to follow the conventional evaluation system. The implementation part is not as envisioned by the policy or guideline.

Umesh's statement aligns with Black and Wiliam (1998), who noted that teachers often resist new assessment forms due to their comfort with traditional methods and concerns about the practicality and impact of new approaches on student outcomes. Here, the participant has talked about the teachers' resistance to adopting formative assessment despite its benefits. This resistance is often attributed to the disinterest of traditional evaluation methods, challenges in implementation, and possibly a lack of professional development or support in transitioning to new assessment paradigms.

Similarly, Muna explained the positive impact of formative assessment, which has increased the students' learning habits. She mentioned that students had become familiar with different assessment criteria and were motivated by various activities. However, she did not focus much on the reluctance to implement formative assessment, as Umesh shared. Her reflection resonates with the view of Black and Wiliam (1998), who argued that formative assessment practices enhance student learning habits by providing ongoing feedback that helps students understand different assessment criteria and encourages them to engage more actively in various learning activities. Teachers should articulate achievement targets in advance of teaching. Teachers should inform the students about their learning goals from the beginning of the teaching and learning process.

When Sima, another participant, was asked about her understanding of formative assessment, she responded:

The overall evaluation of students within school hours is known as formative assessment. We observe their behaviour, whether they respect the seniors or teachers, behave with the visitors, and respond to classroom activities apart from just learning. Learning is, of course, the central part of assessment.

This response emphasizes a holistic view of student evaluation within the school environment, encompassing behaviours, interactions, and reactions during school hours. While this interpretation includes essential aspects of student conduct and social skills, it extends beyond the traditional scope of formative assessment in

educational literature. Her perception aligns with Black and William (1998), who emphasize that formative assessment helps teachers understand what students know and can do at various stages of the learning process. This understanding allows teachers to tailor instruction to address learning gaps and promote a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Unlike the participants' broader interpretation, which includes behavioral observations and social interactions, formative assessment aims to improve academic outcomes by providing timely feedback and adjusting teaching strategies to meet student needs better.

Likewise, when asked about her perception of formative assessment, Rima responded that there were loopholes regarding its implementation. She noted:

It is a good provision if it is implemented well, but if it is used only to provide marks on the basis of subjective evaluation, then it becomes a complete failure. It should be practised as per its actual norms. It is a good practice to conduct continuous assessments, as summative evaluation cannot evaluate all aspects of a learner. This system can assess the things that paper-pencil tests cannot evaluate. For example, some students can perform well in the classroom but cannot write in the exam; they can do different project works perfectly, present them in class, deliver a speech, manage group activities, and many more.

She emphasized that the formative assessment should be practised according to the Students' Assessment Guidelines 2080 norms. The participant's perspective suggests that while formative assessment is viewed positively in theory, challenges arise during implementation. This viewpoint aligns with Sapkota (2023), who emphasizes that effective use of formative assessment requires proper training and support for teachers to use it as intended- as a tool for continuous monitoring and improvement of learning rather than just for grading purposes.

Assessment Practices in Schools

Another central theme from the participants' experiences is implementing the formative assessment. While Umesh was asked to explain his practice of implementing formative assessment in his teaching-learning activities, he responded:

I teach English subjects at the basic level. As per the criteria mentioned in the assessment guidelines, for evaluating speaking skills, I always ask the students to speak on a specific topic at the beginning of the class. The self-reading habit of the students is weak, so to compel them morally, I ask them to read any topic from the library and prepare to speak for the next day. It has motivated them to read, and everyone has to speak, so it has developed confidence in the students. I keep a continuous record of it. They should also

show me the preparation notes based on it, and based on that, I evaluate their speaking skill and connect them with formative assessment. I record their speech on my mobile phone and post it in their class group. After the speech, I ask them to reflect on their work. This develops all aspects of language, such as reading, writing, and speaking.

When further asked about his practice of project work, he explained, “I ask my students to visit a shop and observe the customer and shopkeeper conversation and prepare the actual dialogue based on their observation.”

The teacher’s approach aligns with formative assessment principles, which involve gathering data on students learning, providing feedback, and using that information to modify teaching and learning. This aligns with Acharya (2021), who argues that having students speak, reflect, and receive feedback enables the teacher to identify gaps in understanding and adjust their instruction accordingly. While most teachers in Nepal still rely on summative exams, this example demonstrates that some educators are trying to implement more formative assessment practices in their classrooms. Adopting such practices improves the quality of teaching and learning in public schools in Nepal (Acharya, 2021; Sapkota, 2023). When Muna, another participant, was asked about her practice, she remarked:

After one unit is finished, I assign project and practical work to be finished within a certain time, evaluate it, and do record keeping. I enjoy working with students. I follow the complete Student Internal Evaluation Guideline of 2080.

When further asked about time constraints, she replied, “If we budget the time accordingly, it becomes easy.” The participants’ responses highlight several key points about their formative assessment practices in the classroom. The teacher assigns project work and practical activities after completing a unit, which aligns with the views of Sapkota (2023), who says that this allows them to evaluate students learning on an ongoing basis rather than relying solely on summative exams.

When we asked Sima about the practice, she said she followed the CDC’s guidelines. She also provides the assessment criteria to the students and evaluates their learning continuously. The participants’ responses highlight the importance of delivering assessment criteria to students, helping them understand learning goals and expectations and enabling them to participate actively in their learning. As she evaluates students’ learning continuously, formative assessment becomes an ongoing process in her classroom. This allows her to gather real-time data on students’ progress and make timely adjustments to her teaching. If students are given opportunities to discuss the learning process with their teachers and peers, they can

develop a deeper understanding of their learning (Assessment Action Group [AAG], 2001-2005).

Regarding the practice of continuous assessment, Rima responded that she adheres to the guidelines provided by CDC. She noted:

It has been implemented after the change in curriculum. For this, I have developed an assessment format on my laptop. Every day, I go to class with a laptop. I teach students using activity-based techniques and record their participation on my laptop. Similarly, following the CDC guidelines, I assess all other practical and project work and provide marks accordingly. I take unit tests after the completion of each of the units and keep a record of them. The policy and guidelines have provided ways to implement it effectively in the classroom.

Rima's statement suggests clear policy directives and guidelines to promote using formative assessment in schools. Using technology and activity-based teaching techniques allows teachers to observe and assess students in real-time learning, providing opportunities for immediate feedback and adjustment. Overall, the response from Rima demonstrates a comprehensive and well-structured approach to formative assessment, incorporating technology, activity-based techniques, and transparent assessment criteria aligned with the policy and curriculum guidelines.

Opportunities and Challenges

Participants' narratives showed that formative assessment has significant potential to enhance teaching and learning, but its implementation has several challenges. While talking with Umesh about formative assessment implementation, he argued:

The dedication and commitment of teachers are essential. Our classroom size, number of students, and infrastructure are also inappropriate. The lack of dissemination of ideas and proper supervision from the concerned authorities are reasons for the system not being implemented thoroughly.

Despite these challenges, Umesh seemed confident about implementing the provision as guided by the policy. He further noted that many teachers do not fully understand the purpose and practice of formative assessment, so training is needed. This belief aligns with Acharya (2022), who argued that teachers are not receiving proper guidance for implementing formative assessment. Teachers require support to strengthen and adequately implement the formative assessment.

When Muna was asked about the opportunities created by formative assessment, she said, "It has been a boon for the weaker students who cannot

perform in paper-pencil tests. They become more motivated and inspired to get involved in practical work.” This indicates that formative assessment allows weaker students to demonstrate skills and knowledge that may not be captured through traditional summative tests, aligning with Stiggins’s (2002) and William’s (2011) view. The participants’ views highlight the benefits of formative assessment for weaker students, including increased motivation and engagement, improved time management, showcasing hidden strengths, and reduced disciplinary issues. Formative assessment also promotes self-directed learning. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006), Stiggins (2002), William (2011), and Cauley and McMillan (2010) reinforce the assertions of Muna. They argue that formative assessment can help engage struggling students and reduce behavioural problems in the classroom. When asked about the challenges, Muna replied:

In the beginning, it was more complicated when it came to policy; it took time to understand it, and there was more confusion for the teachers. How to give the marks, how to manage grade sheets, it all was a problem. The concept was not clear. We practised it for a year, attended the training, and reviewed the guidelines many times. But now, in 2081, we all are clear. We have made it paperless. We have created all formats on the laptop and filled in the class immediately. We assess their learning based on the criteria. I trained all my colleagues. Now we are used to it.

This statement from Muna highlights teachers’ significant challenges when formative assessment was first introduced. She also shared her coping strategies for overcoming these problems or challenges. Her initial confusion and lack of understanding align with the research, indicating that teachers often struggle to grasp the purpose and practice of formative assessment, particularly when it is mandated by policy changes (William, 2011; Wyle & Lyon, 2015). Regarding the implementation difficulties, Black and William (1998) argue that implementing formative assessment requires significant changes to assessment practices, which can be challenging for teachers.

Muna argued overcoming challenges through practice and training, which aligns with the view of Wylie and Lyon (2015) that teachers need support to implement formative assessment effectively. As the participant mentioned, her effort to train and support her colleagues highlights the importance of building a community of practice around formative assessment. According to Cauley and McMillan (2010), by sharing knowledge and expertise, teachers can help each other overcome the challenge and implement the approach more effectively. The participant’s story reflected that formative assessment provided many opportunities for students to engage, fostering creativity. It helps them showcase their unique

interest and talents, and teachers understand learners' preferences. Engaging in project work allows students to acquire practical skills applicable to real-life situations.

Rima, another participant, noted that despite challenges, the implementation primarily depends on the teachers' willingness. She further explained:

The implementation part depends on the teachers' willingness; few of them are doing it effectively, they have followed the norms of the guidelines, and some are just doing it for formality. They fill out the form sitting in the office room without giving tasks and engaging in activities. I have also been unable to implement it perfectly, but I am doing my best. Time constraints are also one of the challenges; resource limitations, classroom infrastructure, and teachers' unwillingness are some of the major challenges. Teachers have not understood its norms because they haven't read the curriculum and assessment guidelines. They start to fill out the form after the terminal exam is finished. Classrooms are small and congested. Even the government has not organized a dissemination program; the setting is conventional, and training is not given to teachers, as it is the new system.

The sharing of Rima reflects that some teachers may not fully embrace formative assessment practices, treating them as mere formalities rather than meaningful learning tools. They may not have thoroughly read or understood the curriculum and assessment guidelines, leading to superficial implementation. The practice of filling out assessment forms only after terminal exams rather than throughout the learning process aligns with the view of William (2011), who says that this kind of practice undermines the purpose of formative assessment. Moreover, teachers are overloaded with practical activities required in the classroom. The lack of appropriate resources and overcrowded classrooms hinder the implementation of formative assessment. Additionally, teachers lack sufficient training, particularly in the new evaluation system. The problem mentioned by Rima aligns with the view of William (2011) that the lack of a dissemination program from the government can further exacerbate the challenge of implementing formative assessment effectively.

Conclusion

Participants' narratives revealed that when the government introduced formative assessment, many teachers were initially confused about fully implementing it. While some motivated and updated teachers tried to follow the guidelines, others just fulfilled formality. Some participant shared their successful practices, such as keeping the portfolio of each of the students, assessing based on active participation in the learning process, engaging the students in project-

based learning, and motivating them towards creative work. As they navigated the formative assessment process, the participants highlighted the opportunities and challenges they faced. Regarding the opportunities, teachers who have embraced formative assessment found that it excites and engages students, stimulates creativity, allows students to explore their interests and talents, and promotes project-based learning and creative work.

However, they also mentioned several challenges. Lack of teacher readiness and willingness, overloaded teachers and overcrowded classrooms, limited resources, and inadequate teacher training and support were some of the factors hindering the effective implementation of the formative assessment system. To address the challenges and fully realize the benefits of formative assessment, schools and educational authorities should prioritize comprehensive teacher training, allocate sufficient time and resources for implementation, encourage teachers to embrace formative assessment as an integral part of the teaching and learning process and create an environment that enhances the student engagement and learning achievement.

Teachers should be responsible and accountable for their duties to implement the provision of the government. They should employ various strategies like project work, field visits, classroom observation, attendance, participation in the learning task, etc. while evaluating the learners. They should not solely depend on paper-pencil tests. To support the teachers, concerned authorities like School Management Committee (SMC) members, School Supervisors, and headmasters must monitor their assessment practices and provide feedback to implement the government's provisions better.

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