

Students' Perception on Online Formative Assessment in English as a Foreign Language Class

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Abstract

In the context of economic globalization and the advancement of science and technology, English has emerged as the predominant language for international communication. In 2020, the Chinese Ministry of Education issued “College English Teaching Guide” and emphasized the role of modern educational technology in assessing students’ learning and enhancing their outcomes. It advocated for the creation of online interactive learning platforms by universities to facilitate teaching, tutoring, practice, feedback, assessment, and other educational aspects, enabling students to learn anytime and anywhere. In response, an increasing number of Chinese universities have started implementing online platforms for formative assessment. This qualitative study explores the perceptions of university-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in China regarding online formative assessments, utilizing the Xuexitong platform. Through semi-structured interviews with 12 participants, the study investigates how these assessments impact learning, engagement, and student challenges. Findings indicate that students perceive online formative assessments as less stressful and more engaging compared to traditional methods, appreciating the immediate feedback and interactive elements. However, challenges such as technical issues and grading fairness are highlighted, affecting the learning experience. The study suggests enhancements in technical support, fair grading practices, and personalized assessment strategies to improve the effectiveness and fairness of online formative assessments in EFL contexts. Future research should focus on optimizing online assessment methods to better support EFL learning outcomes.

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Introduction and Background

In the context of economic globalization and technological advancement, English has become the dominant language for international communication. The College English Teaching Guide emphasized “modern educational technology’s role in student assessment, advocating for the creation of online interactive learning platforms” (National College Foreign Language Teaching Advisory Board, 2020). Many Chinese universities have adopted online formative assessments to enhance learning outcomes, using learning management systems like the Xuexitong platform, which integrates courses, materials, communication, testing, and evaluation (Yu, 2020).

Assessment is a vital part of the learning process, encouraging students to set clear goals, reflect on their performance, and receive constructive feedback. Traditionally, Chinese English classes relied heavily on summative assessments, with an emphasis on achieving high standards and tangible results through education. These assessments are typically high-stakes, such as final exams, which can significantly influence the educational trajectory and career opportunities for students. Formative assessment such as self-assessment, peer assessment, and portfolio, which provide regular feedback to help students improve, are gaining traction. Online formative assessment offers numerous benefits, including immediate feedback and engaging learning tasks, as supported by various studies (Chen et al., 2021; Fitriyah & Jannah, 2021; Lailaturrahmi et al., 2020).

Despite the growing interest, few studies have focused on students’ perceptions of online formative assessment in EFL contexts, particularly using platforms like Xuexitong. This study aims to fill that gap by investigating EFL learners’ perceptions of online formative assessment in China. Therefore, the following research questions guide this study:

1. How do university-level students in China perceive the impact of online formative assessments on their EFL learning?
2. What are the contextual factors and challenges for university-level students in China that affect online formative assessment in EFL learning?

Methodology

This qualitative study involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 EFL students from Hebei Normal University for Nationalities. The interviews

explored students' perceptions, engagement, preferences, challenges, and the impact of online formative assessments on their EFL learning, particularly via the Xuexitong platform. The interview guide covered initial perceptions, engagement, assessment preferences, feedback mechanisms, impact on EFL learning, and challenges.

Findings and Discussion

RQ1: How do university-level students in China perceive the impact of online formative assessments on their EFL learning?

The interviews revealed diverse perceptions among university-level students in China regarding the impact of online formative assessments on their EFL learning. Many students reported that online assessments were less stressful and more convenient than traditional methods, facilitating a better demonstration of their knowledge. Interactive elements, such as quizzes and games, were highlighted as particularly engaging, though some EFL students expressed a preference for tasks that resembled traditional exams.

Feedback from the online platforms was highly valued for its immediacy and accessibility, which enhanced the students' ability to reflect on and continuously improve their skills. One student emphasized the benefit of being able to revisit feedback at any time, supporting ongoing reflection and self-improvement.

Commonly used online assessment practices included tests and quizzes that provided immediate feedback, helping students to adjust their learning strategies effectively. These assessments, often featuring gamification elements, were noted to increase motivation and engagement. Students appreciated the instant visibility of their scores and rankings, which fostered a competitive spirit and further engagement. Online discussion boards were also significant, as they facilitated a deeper understanding of the content and increased interaction among students, thus fostering a community of learners. Through these discussions, students engaged in deeper cognitive processes and collaborative problem-solving.

Additionally, electronic learning logs and reflective practices were integral, allowing students to document their learning experiences and reflect on their progress. These tools were instrumental in developing self-regulation skills and provided educators with valuable insights into each student's journey. Peer and self-assessments were also beneficial, as they promoted critical thinking and self-awareness, ultimately enhancing students' confidence and overall learning outcomes. By evaluating their work and that of their peers, students gained a better understanding of what constitutes quality and identified areas needing improvement.

RQ2: What are the contextual factors and challenges for university-level students in China that affect online formative assessment in EFL learning?

There are some challenges, including technical issues, grading fairness, and a reduction of face-to-face assessment. Furthermore, the findings highlight the need for personalization of assessments, considering the diverse preferences and learning styles of EFL learners.

Technical issues include unstable network connections, platform failures, and insufficient hardware equipment. Many students reported that unstable network connections disrupted their learning experience or even prevented them from completing assessments when taking online quizzes or participating in online discussions. Occasionally, technical failures occur in online learning management systems and quiz platforms, affecting the smooth progress of assessments and students' learning experience. In addition, some EFL students lacked sufficient hardware equipment (such as computers and tablets) and could only rely on their mobile phones to study, which limited their learning efficiency and participation.

Grading fairness is another major challenge. In peer review and self-assessment, students' subjectivity may affect the fairness of grading, and students said that not everyone is willing to accept criticism. Moreover, if teachers rely on the automatic grading mechanisms of online formative assessments, there may be issues of fairness in grading. These systems typically evaluate only the grammatical correctness and linguistic accuracy of responses. They are not equipped to assess the creativity, structural coherence, or deeper content aspects of students' answers, potentially leading to an incomplete and inaccurate evaluation of EFL student performance.

Conclusion

This study highlights the significant role of online formative assessments in EFL learning, promoting timely feedback, self-regulated learning, critical thinking, and interactivity. However, it also underscores the need to address technical issues, ensure grading fairness, maintain face-to-face interaction, and personalize assessments to accommodate EFL learner needs.

To improve online formative assessments' effectiveness and fairness, educators must ensure robust technical support, adopt fair grading standards, and implement flexible, diverse assessment methods tailored to individual learning needs. Schools should invest in reliable technology infrastructure to minimize disruptions and provide training for teachers to utilize these tools effectively.

Future research should focus on optimizing and integrating online formative assessment methods and technologies to better address technical issues,

grading fairness, and enhance EFL learning outcomes. Investigating the long-term effects of these assessments on student achievement and exploring innovative assessment methods will contribute to more effective teaching practices.

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