

THE POTENTIAL OF THE ESSAY IN FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT: LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract. *This scientific research explores the potential of using essays as a formative assessment tool in the context of the competencies approach. The competencies approach emphasises the importance of focusing on learning progress and needs to promote successful learning, thus formative assessment plays a pivotal role in facilitating effective learning. The study highlights the significance of essay writing in promoting critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-directed learning. However, students often perceive essays solely as a means of summative assessment, lacking a comprehensive understanding of the assessment criteria. To address this issue, the research emphasizes the importance of involving students in the learning process by collectively defining outcomes, establishing assessment criteria, and providing constructive feedback. Clear objectives and feedback are crucial in fostering self-regulated learning and lifelong learning. The study highlights the need for student-teacher collaboration to enhance students' attitudes towards learning. Challenges in implementing formative assessment, such as providing quality feedback to each student, are acknowledged. In the context of foreign language learning, essays serve as valuable tools for formative assessment, providing insights into students' learning achievements. Furthermore, the development of criteria for self-assessment and self-regulated learning skills is essential for effective formative assessment.*

Keywords: *essay writing, foreign language learning, formative assessment, writing skills.*

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Introduction

Formative assessment, which involves clearly articulating outcomes, discussing and identifying levels of performance, and providing feedback, has become relevant in the context of the competence approach. Achieving the learning objective requires a focus on both learning progress and learning needs, thus facilitating the most successful and effective learning. Čakāne (2018) emphasizes the importance of finding new solutions to facilitate and improve formative assessment. Nagowah & Nagowah (2009) highlight the essay as one of the formative assessment methods, as students analyse, synthesise, and critically evaluate information when writing an essay. Essay writing is particularly conducive to:

- **critical thinking and problem-solving**, involving the precise formulation of questions; critical evaluation, exploration, and analysis of complex situations, including ideas and multiple contexts; synthesising and interpreting information; reasoning and drawing valid conclusions; articulating the problem, justifying the need for solutions, proposing solutions, and applying the findings in a different context; using problem-solving strategies. Writing an essay is an effective way to promote critical thinking. Marni, Silvia, & Titik's (2019) research indicates that critical thinking in an argumentative essay is expressed through analytical thinking, in which a situation is analysed, and evidence and reasons are sought to point to solutions through the knowledge and information provided to the student. Writing an argument is a process of problem-solving, which in turn promotes self-regulation in order to achieve goals.
- **self-directed learning** in which the learner regularly sets goals, develops a plan for achieving goals, formulates criteria, and uses them to evaluate performance, plan, and improve goal achievement; independently analyses their own behavior and emotions and seeks ways to manage them; independently selects, adapts and develops their own

thinking strategies in complex situations; independently uses criteria to help monitor and improve their work, evaluates, summarises and purposefully uses gained experience in the future (Ministru kabinets, 2019).

The professional experience of the author shows that students often associate essay writing with a summative assessment, do not always fully understand the criteria for essay writing, and do not always receive feedback, for example, due to time constraints. The observations of the author also show that, when writing an essay, students are aware of what exactly they have learned in the context of the essay topic. Also, a study of theoretical sources of knowledge reveals that assessment needs to focus primarily on formative assessment, even when the work is assessed by summative assessment (Dunn & Mulvenon, 2009). There are also situations in which students or their parents feel that summative assessment is more important than formative assessment. Sasser (2018) also highlights that a point score's summative assessment outcome can be considered the most important assessment outcome. Achieving the learning goal requires a focus on both learning progress and learning needs, thus facilitating the student's ability to learn most successfully and efficiently. Learning to write involves a variety of activities such as generating and organizing ideas, analysing texts in different genres, summarising information, and refining texts (Chen, 2022). West, Malcolm, Keywood, and Hill (2019) emphasize not only problem posing, source exploration, analysis, and synthesis, but also drafting, essay development, self-reflection, and feedback as tools for essay development. Thus, the focus is on opportunities for essay development, clarifying questions, and improving students' self-directed learning skills. The criteria sheet, which is available to students during the essay writing process, is also becoming relevant. Flaksa (2021) points out that students need to have clear achievable results for formative assessment to be of high quality. When writing an essay, it is important for the student to be aware of current affairs in the context of different areas and events in society. The aim of this publication is to analyse the scientific knowledge of the essay as a method of formative assessment and to describe the potential of the essay in formative assessment. The analysis of pedagogical and psychological literature provides a comprehensive overview of the potential of essays in promoting student learning and educational quality.

Current affairs of formative assessment in the context of the competence approach

Changes in the curriculum also mean changes in the assessment system, which fundamentally changes the role of assessment. Formative assessment is widely brought up to date and in a competence-oriented approach to learning content. Formative assessment is widely actualized and used in a competence-based approach to learning for learning the curriculum. *Assessment for learning* turns everyday assessment into a learning process (Stiggins, 2011). To achieve this, Čakāne (2018) and Stiggins (2011) argue that it is necessary to involve students in their own learning process, in which outcomes are jointly defined and criteria are created, and students are involved in analysing their final results, leading to the definition of new outcomes. An essential part of formative assessment is the provision of feedback between the student and the teacher or between students. This type of assessment helps to better understand what the student knows or does not know and what needs to be improved. Schools and teachers are looking at how to implement formative assessment - how to check whether the intended outcome has been achieved and how to provide constructive feedback to students (Čakāne, 2018). The foreign language curriculum also emphasizes the setting of clear objectives while providing feedback. Formative assessment encourages students to engage more actively in the learning process and promotes self-regulated learning, which in turn will lead to more successful lifelong learning (Bullock, n.d.).

Essay writing has different purposes, such as improving writing skills, communication, learning, expressing an opinion, etc. (Graham & Harris, 2019). Stikute (2006) emphasizes that writing an essay is a useful method for students' self-assessment and consciousness-raising at the level of knowledge, skills, and emotions because by writing an essay, students reveal their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and opinions, which are formed through evaluation, analysis, comparison: students form their views on a particular topic.

In order to improve student learning and the quality of education, the use of formative assessment is emphasised, stressing that teachers need to facilitate changes in students' attitudes towards learning, but this cannot be achieved without student-teacher collaboration (Gaybullaevna, 2021). Bērziņš (2020) notes the importance of an individual approach, including individual discussion for feedback using a criteria sheet, emphasizing the need to develop a criteria sheet for self-assessment and self-skills development. Dunn and Mulvenon (2009) also emphasize that in evaluation it is very important to focus on formative assessment, even if the work is evaluated with summative assessment.

Black and William (2005) point out that a challenge in formative assessment can be the inadequate provision of quality feedback to every student in the classroom. If formative assessment is not implemented appropriately, it does not provide information on learning progress and needs, then the purpose of formative assessment is not achieved (Akram, Siddiga, Nami, Shahzad, & Rashid, 2020). Black and William (2015) emphasize that students need to be actively engaged in both the learning and formative assessment process, but motivation also becomes important. Čakāne (2018) emphasizes that the lack of clear criteria, feedback, and constructive collaboration between teachers and students, as well as the lack of awareness of the formulated objectives, are obstacles to qualitative formative assessment. Dodge (2009) and Akram, Siddiga, Nami, Shahzad, & Rashid (2020) also believe that teachers often do not have time to provide feedback to the student during the lesson because teachers often try to proceed faster with the learning content. Sasser (2018), on the other hand, argues that formative assessment may not be taken seriously if the summative assessment outcome value in points can be taken as a more meaningful assessment outcome. This helps to identify complicating factors that could have a negative impact on the implementation of formative assessment:

- lack of motivation;
- lack of time and opportunity in lessons to give individual attention to each student;
- lack of appropriate methodological material for formative assessment;
- insufficient understanding of formative assessment for both teacher and students;
- negative attitudes of parents and students towards learning and changes in the learning process.

Therefore, the essay becomes an important assessment tool because, firstly, it provides important information about the learning achievement of the student himself. At the same time, however, the development of a set of criteria for students' self-assessment and self-regulated learning skills becomes necessary.

Analysis of Formative Assessment Opportunities in Students' Essays

Andrade (2019) defines *self-assessment* as the process of monitoring one's actions in order to make adjustments that improve learning and performance. Self-assessment is an essential part of self-regulated learning, through which learners critically evaluate their own learning (Lam, 2010). Self-regulated learning occurs when the learner sets goals, monitors, and controls their emotions and actions to achieve the goals (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011). As Lam (2010) points out, self-assessment in writing tasks promotes metacognitive skills, including the ability to evaluate the content, set goals, and develop learning strategies and their effectiveness. Yan and Brown (2017) point out that self-esteem also depends on psychological factors such as

self-worth, self-efficacy, and motivation, as well as psychological factors of interpersonal relationships- relationships with peers, parents, mentors, etc. However, it is also important to recognize that the successful implementation and accuracy of self-assessment depends on the learner's autonomy in foreign language learning (Jamrus & Razali, 2019). Graham and Harris (2019) point out that students become better writers by learning to evaluate their own work and giving feedback to classmates. Fung and Mei (2015), on the other hand, in their study show that vocabulary, language use, organization, maturity of thinking, and awareness of mistakes improve after self-assessment. Fahimi and Rahimi (2015) in their study reveal that self-assessment provides knowledge on how to plan and review an essay. Therefore, self-assessment of the essay before it is submitted to the teacher for summative assessment is very important (West, Malcolm, Keyword, & Hill, 2019). A schematic representation of the factors and benefits influencing the effectiveness of self-assessment in the context of formative evaluation is presented in Figure 1.

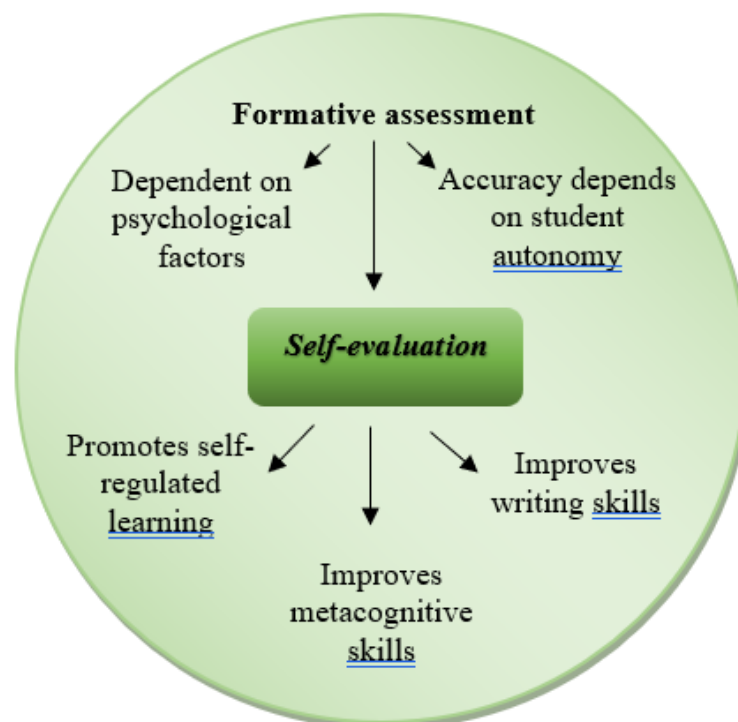


Figure 1 Schematic representation of the factors and benefits influencing the effectiveness of self-assessment in the context of formative assessment (Fung & Mei, 2015; Graham & Harris, 2019; Jamrus & Razali, 2019; Lam, 2020; Yan & Brown, 2017; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011)

Dodge (2009) and Akram, Siddiqa, Nami, Shahzad, and Rashid (2020) highlight that it is essays and other types of writing that take more time to implement formative assessment. The 4 types of formative assessment strategies mentioned by Dodge (2009) can be implemented when writing an essay:

- **summarising and reflecting** – students reflect on and make sense of what they have heard or read, relating it to their own learning experiences;
- **organization using lists, charts, and graphic organisers** – students organize information, make connections, and indicate understanding using graphic organizers;
- **expressing information** – students use words and/or pictures to make connections and enhance memory, making it easier to recall information;
- **collaborative group activities** – students are given the opportunity to interact with other classmates to develop and demonstrate their conception of knowledge.

As Graham and Harris (2019), Lam (2010), and Fung and Mei (2010) point out, students' collaboration leads to a better understanding of the topic and motivates them to strive to improve their performance.

Promoting mastery learning is important for every student. Mastery learning is defined as a strategy based on each student achieving a desired goal or competency, linked to formative assessment: students acquire knowledge, skills, and attitudes, do formative assessment of what they have learned and, if they achieve the desired result, have the opportunity to do more in-depth, creative tasks, while students who do not achieve the desired result improve and retest (Winget & Persky, 2022).

Conclusions

In the competencies approach, the main purpose of assessment is to promote learning. However, for assessment to be successful, it is essential to involve learners in their own learning process, in which they collectively define the outcomes to be achieved and set criteria for achieving the objectives, while being involved in analysing their own final results, leading to the definition of new outcomes. Formative assessment encourages students to actively engage in their learning, developing self-regulated learning skills and thus more successfully continuing their learning throughout their lives.

To improve student learning and the quality of education, it is important to promote changes in students' attitudes to learning, which cannot be achieved without student-teacher cooperation. A challenge in the context of formative assessment may be the lack of quality feedback for each student.

In foreign language learning at secondary school, the essay becomes an important formative assessment tool, as it provides important information about the student's own learning achievements. At the same time, however, the development of a set of criteria for students' self-assessment and self-regulated learning skills becomes necessary.

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