
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring the Moroccan EFL High School Teachers' Feedback Practices as a Form of Formative Assessment: Opportunities and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the extent to which Moroccan EFL secondary school teachers use feedback as a form of formative assessment. It also aims at identifying the main challenges that render such practice difficult. Feedback is crucially important in the learning-teaching process. It is considered a key strategy of formative assessment. Despite the existence of several studies that recommend the use of formative assessment, it has not been properly addressed by research in the Moroccan educational system. Thus, exploring the Moroccan EFL teachers' feedback practice can provide a clear picture of the opportunities and challenges of its implementation in the Moroccan context. The study follows a quantitative research design in which data were collected from 100 EFL secondary school teachers through questionnaires. Results revealed that the majority of teachers implement feedback as a formative tool to assess their students. However, they reported that workload, lack of time, and school regulations are the main obstacles which render formative feedback practices challenging. The findings will benefit policy makers, practitioners, researchers, and teacher trainers as well.

KEYWORDS

Teachers' feedback; Formative assessment; Assessment *for/as* learning; Opportunities; Challenges

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, the assessment paradigm is shifting from assessment *of* learning towards assessment *for/as* learning. This latter is created and implemented by researchers to support and scaffold students in their learning journey. Unfortunately, in the traditional way of assessment, students do not receive supportive, meaningful and precise feedback that enables them to bridge the gap between what they grasp and what they do not. Black et al. (2004) stated that "a numerical score or a grade does not tell students how to improve their work, so an opportunity to enhance learning is lost" (p. 13). However, teachers still lean towards the use of traditional summative tools to evaluate their students in a culture such as Morocco, where exam results are more valued than learning. On the one hand, current research introduces strong evidence that the use of summative tests leads to deleterious effects (Black & William, 1998b; Harlen & Deakin, 2002; Harlen & Crick, 2003). It is famous in educational research as the *backwash* effect. On the other hand, several studies have proven the efficiency of assessment *for/* learning. There are many forms of formative assessment, and teachers' feedback is one of them. It is considered one of the core strategies of formative assessment. Formative feedback provides students with the means to achieve a goal and thus orients students towards a learning goal (McAlpine 2004). As a result, students may invest more effort or adopt different strategies when they face failure (Elliott and Dweck 1988). The main objective of the current study is to explore the Moroccan EFL high school teachers' feedback practices as a form of formative assessment and investigate obstacles that render such practices challenging. The study is significantly important because, first, it

fills the gap in the assessment practices literature by investigating the Moroccan teachers' feedback practices as a form of formative assessment. Second, the paper highlights the importance of feedback and encourages Moroccan practitioners to implement this strategy to continuously assess their students in an anxiety-free atmosphere. Third, it investigates the major factors that make formative feedback practice challenging. Further, the area of assessment for/as learning in Morocco is still virgin and promising; therefore, exploring the main obstacles to efficient teachers' feedback practices may help teachers and practitioners in general to find suitable ways to cope with those classroom implementation challenges.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Using Feedback as one form of formative assessment

2.1.1 Formative assessment effectiveness

When talking about formative assessment, the idea of supporting students in their learning is essentially present. Several studies have proven the effectiveness of assessment for/ learning. Now, more than ever, there is strong evidence that formative assessment supports students in improving their learning. Crooks (1988) has proven, such evidence, that continuous classroom assessment practices affect the learners' judgments of what is crucial to learn, self-perception, competence, decision making and motivation. Formative assessment, or assessment for/as learning, is a way to monitor learning as students demonstrate to an instructor the degree to which they have mastered the content; thus, it is an essential component of the learning operation. Teachers use grades to guide instruction, while students use feedback to enhance and support their learning. Black and Wiliams' (1998b) highly regarded work on formative assessment, in which they analyzed 700 papers on formative assessment, is often regarded as the most important in educational assessment. They came up with an important conclusion that "improved formative assessment helps low-achievers more than other students and so reduces the range of achievement while raising achievement overall" (p.141). Besides, if formative assessment is effective, over time, students should begin to analyze their own work and develop the skills for self-assessment (Gipps, 1993). In addition to that, Black et al. (2004) stated that "we set up our main findings about classroom work under four headings: questioning, teacher feedback, self-assessment and peer assessment" (p.14). The study showed clear evidence that improving formative assessment practices have a positive impact on raising learners' achievements.

2.1.2 Teacher formative feedback effectiveness

Feedback is seen as a primary component in formative assessment and one of the factors that have the strongest influence on learning (Black &William, 1998; Crooks, 1988; Hattie). "Formative feedback represents information communicated to the learner that is intended to modify the learner's thinking or behavior for the purpose of improving learning" (Shute 2007, 1). Effective formative feedback must be specific, clear, simple, descriptive, and focused on the task. Formative feedback can clearly enhance learning processes and outcomes if delivered correctly. Further, teacher feedback can be oral or in written form, and it should be timely, accurate, comprehensive, appropriate, and accessible to learners' work (Brookhart, 2013; Sadler, 1998). Several studies showed clear evidence that teacher feedback has a positive impact on students' self-efficacy, learning, teaching and motivation to learn. In their research, Chan & Lam (2010) investigated the effect of summative and formative feedback on 79 students' self-efficacy. The findings indicated that in participants who received summative feedback, their self-efficacy decreased from test one to test two. Nevertheless, in the other group of participants, who were provided with formative feedback, their self-efficacy remarkably increased. With respect to teacher feedback effectiveness, Volente & Beckett (2011) investigated the feedback practices of 20 teachers from two school districts in Ontario, Canada. The main results revealed the importance of teacher feedback in the learning process. 70 % of participants admitted that students focus on learning improvement when offered feedback without numerical grades. However, Feedback is not only differentially given but also differentially received (Diehl & Sterman, 1995). Further, culture plays an important role in shaping students' feedback type preferences. The study of De Luque and Sommer (2000) clearly showed that students from collectivist cultures (e.g., Confucian-based Asia and South Pacific nations) like indirect and implicit feedback, more group-focused feedback. Whereas learners from individualist Western cultures (e.g., the United States) preferred more direct explicit feedback particularly related to their learning efforts and progress. Overall, formative feedback assists students in identifying their learning gaps, areas for growth, potential support needs, and learning strategies to meet course objectives. Without formative feedback, students might not be aware of their own areas of weakness in their learning journey, which, later on, may cause confusion and demotivate the students.

2.1.3 Examples of teacher feedback

Generally speaking, teacher feedback falls under two broad categories: formal and informal. In the following paragraph, examples of teacher feedback, whether in written or oral forms, will be discussed.

- *Synchronous in-person oral feedback*

This type of feedback allows teachers to communicate with students one-on-one during a conference call or in class. It encourages them to interact with students in a conversation during which they can pose and respond to inquiries. This can give teachers a clear picture of how the learning process is progressing. Additionally, it helps in identifying learning gaps, offering support, and seeking out corrective measures.

- *Teacher's written notes*

In this kind of feedback, teachers give their students written comments on brief assignments. This can be helpful, especially when there are few opportunities for informal in-person feedback. To avoid spending too much time responding to every little piece of work, teachers can create a spreadsheet or grid with the students' names and keep track of when they are offering specific students comments on brief assignments. This makes it possible to distribute feedback equally, ensuring that each student gets feedback on a smaller project at some point during the session before receiving a grade or final feedback on a large assignment.

- *Audio/video-based feedback from the teacher*

This is another way to convey feedback the teacher might have otherwise given in person by recording an audio message or a video. To start with, audio-based feedback is a good opportunity for a student to hear his or her voice and get feedback in a less formal setting. This kind of feedback is less stressful and can also inspire students. However, there are some students who require written text instead of audio; therefore, the teacher should be prepared to be flexible. Second, it might be useful to make a video interacting with the student's work when providing feedback on a project or assignment that has a lot of visual components. This type of feedback can include audio feedback and screen recording. In this context, it can be extremely powerful to show students what the teacher is observing and noting about their work.

2.1.4 Challenges of incorporating formative feedback

Offering feedback as one form of formative assessment is not always easy to implement. There are certain criteria that make this practice challenging. To start with, the teachers' workload makes it almost impossible for them to assess their students through the provision of formative feedback. Another major factor that hampers feedback implementation is the school regulations. In other words, some school principals don't encourage these assessment practices because they have some drawbacks, such as the fact that it is a time-consuming assessment tool, particularly if it is given individually. Furthermore, receiving feedback in this manner may embarrass some students, so their parents start to complain. In addition to that, the lack of teacher training in formative feedback assessment practices is among these challenges.

2.1.5 Research questions

To meet the aforementioned research objectives, the following inquiries were formulated:

RQ1: To what extent do Moroccan EFL secondary school teachers use different types of feedback as a form of formative assessment?

RQ2: What are the major obstacles that render teachers' feedback as one form of formative assessment practices difficult to be implemented in EFL Moroccan classrooms?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

Even though the amount of qualitative research has been increasing recently, the majority of published applied linguistics studies still employ quantitative analysis (Khany & Tazik, 2018). The current study follows a quantitative research method design. Scholars who use this research paradigm, as Glesne and Peshkin (1992) argue, view the "world as made up of observable and measurable facts" (p.6). This can be accomplished through the "use of standardized measures"- such as questionnaires and tests- to which "varying perspectives and experiences of people can fit" (Patton, 2002, p.14). In this piece of research, data were collected through an online questionnaire administered to Moroccan EFL secondary teachers. The quantitative method is based on positivism and post positivist thinking, which rests on the premise that "there exists a reality "out there," independent of us, waiting to be discovered" (Fraenkel et al., 2012, p.428). Supporters of this view believe in the existence of a single objective "truth" which can be reached through fragmenting complex phenomena into manageable and measurable categories, far from the researcher's subjective experience and biases (Winter, 2000). In this type of research, the collected data take the form of figures that can be quantified, summarized and analyzed by means of mathematical processes and presented in statistical terminologies. This method was adopted because it maximizes the objectivity, replicability, and generalizability of the findings (Harwell, 2011).

3.2 Participants

Participants of the study were 100 EFL teachers from different regions in Morocco from both the public and private sectors. They were males (57) and females (43). Their teaching experience varies between two and eighteen years. Regarding the selection process of participants, a snow-ball sampling has been adopted. "Snowball sampling requires the researcher to ask participants to identify others to become members of the sample" Cresswell (2012). The purpose behind this sampling approach choice was the limited number of available participants, so sharing the online questionnaire with those who showed their cooperation willingness and asking them to share it again online with a maximum of EFL teachers was an efficient way to expand the target population.

3.3 Data collection instrument

As mentioned before, the main objective of this research paper is to explore feedback practices as one form of formative assessment in Moroccan EFL classrooms and the major hindrances that render such practices challenging. To reach the target goal, an online questionnaire was administered to Moroccan EFL secondary school teachers. This research instrument is a practical way to collect different types of data from participants like facts, points of view, suggestions ...etc. "The information from a questionnaire tends to fall into two broad categories-facts and opinions" Denscombe (2003, P.146). The questionnaire deployed in the current study consisted of four sections comprising twenty closed-questions. These kinds of questions were used to collect quantitative data from participants related to their feedback practices as a form of formative assessment as well as obstacles that make such practices difficult.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedure

The quantitative nature of the study imposed on the researchers the way data would be analyzed. Since the study is grounded on the quantitative research design, the closed questions in the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively through the most known statistical software (SPSS). Therefore, frequencies and percentages were used in the data analysis process. The first procedure in the analysis was the codification of data. For example: (number 5 was given to *always*, 4 to *often*, 3 to *sometimes*, 1=Male, 2= to Female, 1= Public feedback, 2=Individual feedback ...etc.) Some data were analyzed using percentages and measures of central tendencies to thoroughly describe participants' variation in terms of gender and teaching experiences. The researchers also used descriptive statistics such as frequencies and cross-tabulation to analyze other data. Graphs and tables or both were also deployed in this study to visualize the results and make comparisons possible and easier.

4. Results and Discussion

The study revealed the extent to which Moroccan EFL secondary school teachers use different types of feedback as one form of formative assessment and the prominent obstacles that render such practice challenging. The findings are shown and discussed according to the research questions. This section presents the main results, and every research question is followed by a discussion.

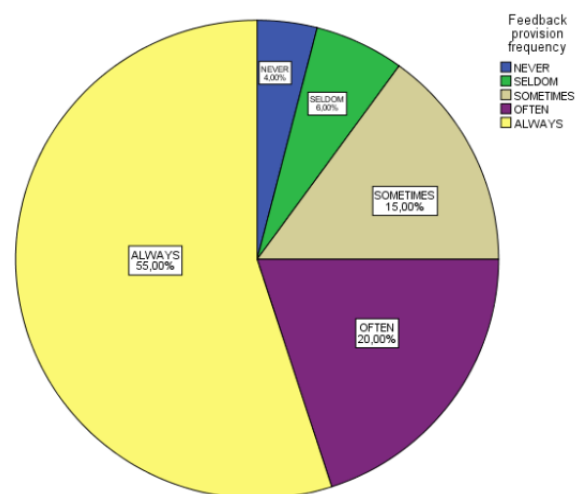
RQ1: To what extent do Moroccan EFL secondary school teachers use different types of feedback as a form of formative assessment?

The data analysis has shown that the majority of participants (55 teachers) have reported that they *always* provide feedback. 20 teachers *often* opt for feedback as a means of continuous assessment. Further, 15 of the participants revealed that they *sometimes* use feedback. Besides, 6 teachers reported that they *seldom* provide feedback. However, only 4 participants reported that they never provided feedback. This means that the vast majority of Moroccan EFL secondary teachers frequently provide feedback to their students. Table and Figure 1 below clearly state that.

Table 1: Gender feedback provision Cross-tabulation

		Feedback provision					Total
		Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always	
Male	F	3	2	10	15	28	53
	%	3 %	2 %	10 %	15 %	28 %	53 %
Female	F	1	4	5	10	27	47
	%	1 %	4 %	5 %	10 %	27 %	47 %
Total		4	6	15	20	55	100
Total %		100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	

Figure 1 Feedback provision frequency



Concerning the frequency of offering specific and clear feedback, the analysis of the findings has demonstrated that almost all Moroccan EFL teachers are committed to offering clear and specific feedback. In other words, they provide purposeful feedback to both assist and assess students in their learning. The majority of participants reported that their feedback practices were

characterized by clarity and specification. Observing Table 2, one can clearly notice that **75%** of teachers *always* provide specific feedback to their learners, and **77%** of them always offer clear feedback. Whereas only **2%** never give specific feedback, and **5%** never or rarely provide their students with clear feedback. *Table 2* below confirms this.

Table 2 *The teachers' specific and clear feedback provision statistics*

The provision of specific feedback

	Frequency	Percentage
Never	2	2%
Sometimes	15	15%
Often	4	4%
Always	75	75%
Total	100	100%

The provision of clear feedback

Never	5	5%
Sometimes	6	6%
Often	15	15%
Always	77	77%
Total	100	100%

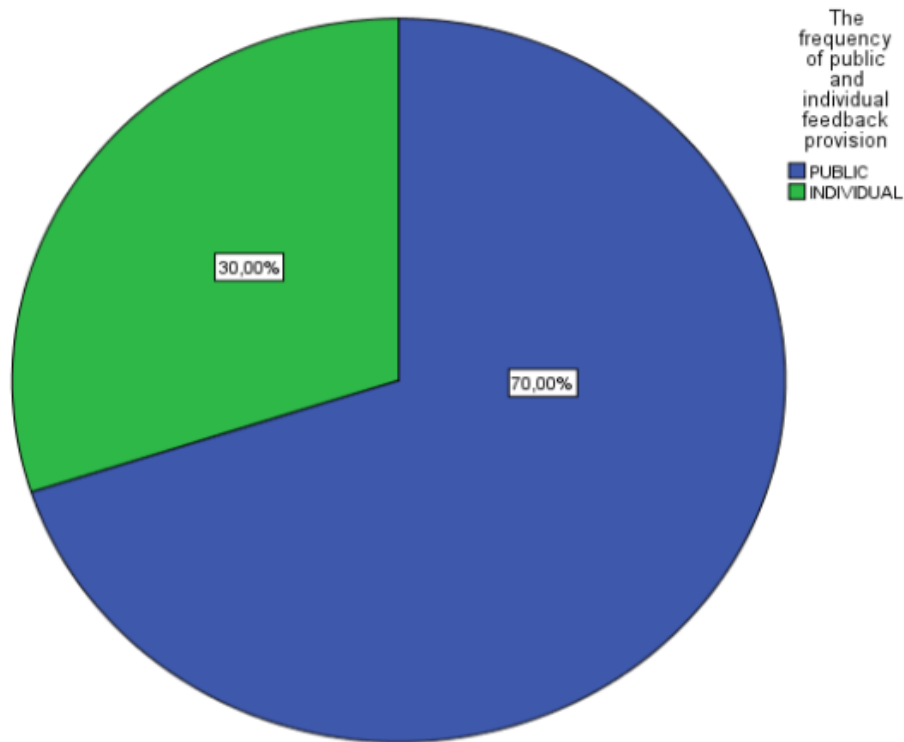
With respect to the timing of feedback, the findings have shown a clear disinclination of teachers to offer immediate feedback to their students while being formatively assessed. According to *Table 3* below, one can clearly see that only **30%** of teachers reported to *often* give timely feedback, and Just **15%** are *always* committed to providing synchronous or immediate feedback. Moreover, the majority of the study participants (about **45 %**) reported that they *sometimes* opt for timely feedback as a means of formative assessment. This obviously indicates that Moroccan EFL secondary teachers use formative feedback in their daily classroom assessment practices but not as immediately as supposed to be.

Table 3: *The frequency of the timely feedback provision*

The provision of timely feedback

Never	10	10%
Sometimes	45	45%
Often	30	30%
Always	15	15%
Total	100	100%

As far as the way feedback is being offered (publicly or individually), another surprising finding is that the vast majority of teachers (approximately **70%**) give feedback to their students publicly, while only **30%** of them provide individual feedback when assessing students formatively. **Figure 2** below clearly shows the way teachers prefer to offer feedback. One can notice the dominance of publicity over privacy and individuality in the Moroccan EFL teachers' formative feedback practices.

Figure 2: The frequency of public and individual feedback provision

With respect to the second research question, which investigates the main challenges that render formative feedback practices difficult.

RQ2: What are the major obstacles that render teachers' feedback as one form of formative assessment practices difficult to be implemented in EFL Moroccan classrooms?

Table 3 summarizes the main criteria that humper the teachers' feedback as one form of formative assessment.

Table 3: Frequencies and percentages of the main obstacles that hinder teachers' implementation of feedback as one form of formative assessment

Challenges	Frequency	Percentage
Lack of time	88	88%
Number of students	70	70%
Students' different learning styles	30	30%
School administration constraints	90	90%
Limited teacher training on formative feedback	45	45%
Students' low level	15	15%
Teacher workload	85	85%
All of the above	30	30%

The findings revealed that there are several obstacles that hinder the implementation of teacher feedback on the way students do formative assessments. According to them, workload, lack of time, and school regulations are the main obstacles which render these practices challenging. The surprising result is that **90%** of teachers admitted that school administration constraints are the dominant challenge that undermines formative feedback assessment tool implementation. **88%** of teachers considered lack of time as another important challenge to formative feedback provision. In addition to that, **85%** of participants stated that teacher

workload is also among the criteria that discourage them from using teacher feedback to assess their students in a formative way. Students' low levels also were included in the questionnaire as an obstacle, but only **15%** of teachers think that it is a large barrier that limits their implementation of feedback as one feature of formative assessment practices.

The study results revealed that the majority of Moroccan EFL teachers are using feedback as one means of formative assessment, but it is not as timely as supposed to be. This can be due to several factors, such as lack of time, teacher workload, and school regulations constraints.

5. Limitation of the study

In spite of the fact that this study is crucially important and relevant, the sample was limited to 100 Moroccan EFL teachers, which might be a hinder to the generalization of the findings. Besides, the researchers should have used both quantitative and qualitative research methods to have an in-depth understanding of the real challenges that practitioners face while trying to implement feedback as one way of formative assessment. Qualitative data like interviewing teachers and students to get their reflections on their experiences would be a plus. Finally, peer feedback should be included in this paper because it is important in terms of time saving when formatively assessing crowded classes.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper was an attempt to explore Moroccan EFL secondary teachers' feedback practices as one form of formative assessment. It also aimed at identifying the main challenges that render such practices difficult. Results revealed that the majority of teachers implement feedback as a formative tool to assess their students. Additionally, the findings showed that the explored feedback was not as timely as required. Approximately all participants admitted that implementing formative feedback is not easy due to many factors. Moroccan EFL secondary school teachers reported that workload, lack of time, and school regulations are the main obstacles which render formative feedback practices challenging. The current research findings will benefit policy makers, practitioners, researchers, and teacher trainers as well. Further, it bridges the gap between research recommendations and formative feedback practices.

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