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From Feedback to Fluency: Enhancing Primary Students' Speaking through Formative Assessment Feedback

Nuraeni[1], Nida Husna[2], Ummi Kulstum[3], Muhammad Farkhan[4]

aeninur2282@gmail.com

1,2,3,4 Nuraeni, Magister of English Education, UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, Jakarta

aeninur2282@gmail.com

Abstract/Abstrak

This qualitative study examines the role of formative assessment in developing speaking skills among fourth-grade English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in an Indonesian public primary school. Data were collected through classroom observations, a semi-structured teacher interview, and focus group discussions with students. Findings indicate that formative assessment was actively integrated into speaking lessons through timely, specific teacher feedback, as well as peer and self-assessment practices. Despite challenges such as large class sizes and student shyness, the teacher effectively employed formative strategies that enhanced student participation, confidence, and oral fluency. Students reported positive experiences with feedback, recognizing their gradual improvement. Classroom observations confirmed the consistent application of formative assessment components, validating the qualitative findings. This study underscores the significance of formative assessment as a valuable tool for supporting young EFL learners' speaking development motivation.

Keywords/Kata Kunci: *formative assessment, speaking fluency, feedback.*

Introduction/Pendahuluan

Speaking is a core component of language competence and particularly vital for young learners, as it lays the foundation for effective communication and overall language proficiency (Cameron, 2001; Goh & Burns, 2012). Yet, in many EFL contexts such as Indonesia, speaking remains challenging due to limited authentic practice, anxiety, and insufficient feedback (Brown, 2007). Classroom activities often emphasize scripted dialogue or written tasks, providing little opportunity for spontaneous oral expression.

To address these challenges, formative assessment has been increasingly recognized as a powerful tool in language classrooms. Unlike summative assessment, which evaluates learning outcomes at the end of instruction, formative assessment focuses on continuous feedback that guides students' progress during learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Wiliam, 2011). Its emphasis on timely, specific, and constructive feedback

supports learners' confidence, autonomy, and gradual improvement in speaking (Sadler, 1989; Brookhart, 2008). Research further confirms its impact: studies in Saudi Arabia and Ukraine revealed that formative feedback enhanced speaking accuracy, coherence, and learner motivation (Alahmadi et al., 2019; Dmitrenko et al., 2021), while evidence from Indonesia also highlights its potential in developing students' oral competence (Nurkamto et al., 2019; Mardella & Efendi, 2025).

Despite these findings, the application of formative assessment in Indonesian primary schools remains limited. Teachers often prioritize summative tests and written exercises over oral practice (Yulia, 2020), while practical barriers such as large class sizes, limited time, and insufficient training reduce opportunities for meaningful feedback. Consequently, young learners may miss critical chances to build confidence, fluency, and communicative competence through spoken interaction.

Addressing this gap, the present study explores how formative assessment is implemented in speaking instruction for grade 4 students at an Indonesian primary school. Specifically, it investigates teachers' practices and perceptions of formative assessment, as well as students' experiences and responses to feedback, to provide insights into how this approach can better support speaking development in early EFL learning. The study is guided by the following research questions, namely how formative assessment is applied to develop speaking skills in the classroom, what teachers perceive regarding its use and impact on students' speaking development, and how students themselves perceive formative assessment and its effect on their speaking skills.

Method/Metode

Study Design

This study adopts a qualitative design conducted in an actual classroom setting to explore the role of formative assessment in developing students' speaking skills in English as a foreign language (EFL). Grounded in constructivist theory, which emphasizes that knowledge is socially constructed through interaction and feedback (Vygotsky, 1978; Richards, 2003), this approach is well suited to capturing dynamic learning processes in authentic contexts. As Creswell and Poth (2018) note, qualitative inquiry allows researchers to examine educational phenomena in depth through close engagement with participants in their natural environment.

Sample Population

The participants consisted of an English teacher and approximately 20–30 fourth-grade students aged 9 to 10 from a public primary school in Indonesia. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select a classroom where formative assessment was actively practiced in speaking tasks, in line with Patton's (2015) recommendation that purposive sampling is appropriate for identifying information-rich cases. Fourth-grade students were chosen because they are at a transitional stage in language development: they have acquired basic speaking skills but still require structured support to develop fluency.

Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

Data were collected using three primary instruments: (1) an observation

checklist and field notes to document the forms and delivery of formative assessment during speaking lessons, including teacher feedback, peer and self-assessment, student participation, and interaction; (2) a semi-structured interview guide designed to explore the teacher's understanding, implementation strategies, and perceptions of benefits and challenges; and (3) a student reflection guide provided to groups before their presentations to encourage reflection on feedback received and its effect on their speaking development. All instruments were pilot-tested for clarity and age appropriateness.

Data collection employed three techniques. First, classroom observations were conducted across three to four speaking-focused lessons, using observation checklists and field notes to capture feedback practices and student engagement. When possible, samples of students' speaking tasks were also collected as supplementary evidence of progress (McMillan, 2014). Second, a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 45 minutes was held with the English teacher, balancing structure with flexibility to probe deeply into perceptions and practices (Gill et al., 2008). Third, student focus group presentations were organized: learners were divided into four small groups of five to six students, and each group presented their shared reflections on formative feedback. This method was adapted to suit students' developmental levels and encourage comfort in expressing ideas, while still capturing group perspectives (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed thematically using an inductive approach, allowing categories and patterns to emerge directly from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Observation notes and speaking samples were examined to identify how formative assessment was implemented, focusing on types, timing, and frequency of feedback, as well as student engagement. Interview transcripts and student group presentations were analyzed to capture teacher and student perceptions of formative feedback, including both cognitive and affective impacts. The analysis was guided by Black and Wiliam's (2009) framework on effective formative assessment and Brookhart's (2008) and Shute's (2008) emphasis on feedback quality. An open and axial coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was applied to generate and connect themes across data sources. To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, triangulation and member checking were employed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data were managed manually and, when appropriate, with the support of qualitative analysis software.

Results/Hasil

This chapter presents the findings of the study based on three sources of data: a semi-structured interview with the English teacher, classroom observations, and focus group discussions (FGDs) with three groups of students. Thematic analysis was conducted using an inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing key patterns and themes to emerge directly from the data. The findings are categorized into major themes relating to the implementation and impact of formative assessment in the development of students' speaking skills.

The data from the semi-structured interview were analyzed thematically using an inductive approach, allowing patterns and themes to emerge directly from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Six major themes were identified from the teacher's responses:

understanding of formative assessment, classroom integration, feedback strategies, challenges, observed impact, and student reactions.

1. Regarding her understanding of formative assessment, when asked

What is your understanding of formative assessment?

The teacher defined it as a process for monitoring student learning while it is ongoing. She explained

Formative assessment is a way for me to check how students are doing while they're still learning. It helps me see what they understand and what they still need help with, so I can adjust my teaching.

This perspective aligns with Black and Wiliam (2009), who emphasize the centrality of formative assessment in informing teaching and promoting learning in real time.

2. Regarding integration into speaking activities, when asked

How do you integrate formative assessment into speaking activities?

The teacher shared that formative assessment is embedded naturally into speaking tasks such as group discussions or student presentations. She described her approach as observation-based.

I usually listen to them while they're speaking in class, like during group work or presentations. I take notes and sometimes ask questions to see how well they can express themselves.

This illustrates the informal, real-time application of formative assessment during instructional activities, consistent with Shute's (2008) view of formative assessment as timely, embedded feedback.

3. On feedback strategies, when asked

What strategies do you usually use to provide feedback to students?

The teacher emphasized the importance of clear, specific feedback delivered immediately after speaking.

I give simple, clear feedback right after they speak. I tell them what they did well and one or two things they can improve. Sometimes I let them assess themselves or give feedback to friends, too.

This approach reflects Brookhart's (2008) principles of effective feedback, timely, focused, and actionable, and suggests an effort to promote self-regulated learning through peer and self-assessment.

4. Regarding challenges when asked

What challenges do you face in providing formative assessment?

The teacher identified three key difficulties: large class sizes, student shyness, and students' limited ability to apply feedback. She stated,

Sometimes it's hard to give feedback to everyone, especially in a big class, and some students are shy, so it's not easy to assess their speaking. Also, not all students know how to use the feedback right away.

These findings resonate with previous studies (e.g., Lee, 2017), which highlight logistical and emotional barriers to formative assessment in EFL contexts.

5. Despite these challenges, when asked

Have you observed any improvement in students' speaking abilities after receiving feedback?

The teacher confirmed that consistent feedback contributed to measurable progress in fluency, confidence, and accuracy. She said

Yes, definitely. When they get feedback regularly, they slowly get better, more confident, more fluent, and they make fewer mistakes.

These findings support Hattie and Timperley's (2007) assertion that formative feedback significantly contributes to learner achievement when delivered effectively and consistently.

6. Finally, regarding student reactions when asked

How do students respond to feedback from the teacher or peers?

The teacher reported that most students responded positively to feedback, especially when it was presented kindly and constructively. She stated,

Most students take it well, especially if it's kind and helpful. They like knowing what they did right and how to improve. Some are shy at first, but they get used to it.

This reflects Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's (2006) argument that well-framed formative feedback not only promotes learning but also builds learner confidence and motivation.

To further explore how formative assessment is experienced by learners, focus group discussions were conducted with three small student groups. The students shared their collective experiences, feelings, and reflections related to the feedback they received during speaking activities. From these discussions, three main themes were identified.

1. Regarding the role of feedback in improving speaking, students expressed that feedback, especially when given right after speaking, helped them understand their strengths and what to improve. They reported trying to remember teacher suggestions for future tasks and felt that peer feedback sometimes offered useful reminders.

2. On emotional responses to feedback, students generally responded positively to feedback that was delivered kindly and clearly. They mentioned feeling nervous at first, but also motivated and proud when receiving praise. Some admitted that feedback helped them feel seen and supported.

3. Concerning recognition of progress and confidence, students were able to reflect on how their speaking improved over time, such as better pronunciation, using more vocabulary, and speaking more fluently. They attributed this improvement to the repeated feedback they received and applied.

These findings reinforce the teacher's observations and support formative assessment as both a cognitive and affective support system in language development. Although the group format limited individual probing, the student perspectives still offered valuable insight into the impact of feedback on learning.

To support and triangulate the interview and FGD findings, their speaking lessons were observed using a structured checklist and field notes. The following key indicators were used to confirm the presence of formative assessment:

Table 1.1

No	Observed Aspect	Indicators	Observed
1	The teacher gives feedback	Feedback is given during or after students speak	✔ Present
2	Active student	Students actively participate in speaking activities	✔ Present
3	Peer feedback	Students give feedback to their peers	✔ Present
4	Student learning reflection	Students mention what they have learned and need to improve	✔ Present
5	Teacher-student interaction	Teacher and students engage in dialogue about performance and improvement	✔ Present

These observations confirm that formative assessment strategies were actively practiced in the classroom. The teacher provided oral feedback, encouraged peer interactions, and engaged students in reflection and discussion about their performance, all of which aligned with the students' and teacher's interview responses. The findings indicate that formative assessment feedback significantly contributes to the improvement of students' speaking fluency. Through supportive and timely feedback,

students gained greater confidence, improved their language use, and became more reflective learners. The triangulation of interview, FGD, and observation data confirms that formative feedback was both implemented and valued by participants, making it a key factor in enhancing primary students' oral English proficiency.

Findings from teacher interviews, student focus groups, and classroom observations collectively demonstrate that formative assessment was integrated effectively into speaking instruction. The teacher applied formative strategies consistently, and students showed receptiveness and progress in their speaking skills. While practical challenges were noted, formative assessment played a clear role in shaping learning and motivation. The triangulated data confirm the value of feedback as both a developmental and affective tool in EFL speaking classrooms.

Discussion/Pembahasan

This study found that formative assessment played a central role in supporting the development of speaking skills among fourth-grade EFL learners in an Indonesian public school. The teacher implemented formative assessment through continuous classroom observation, immediate feedback, and structured opportunities for self- and peer-assessment. Her understanding of formative assessment as an ongoing process for monitoring and adjusting instruction aligns with Black and Wiliam's (2009) view that formative assessment enhances learning when embedded in classroom practice. The teacher's strategies, such as giving concise, specific feedback during or after student speaking, and encouraging peer and self-reflection, reflect Brookhart's (2008) emphasis on timely, focused, and actionable feedback. Despite challenges like large class sizes and student shyness, the teacher consistently engaged learners in formative feedback processes that supported their participation and confidence.

Students, in turn, expressed positive views during focus group discussions, noting that feedback helped them improve their fluency and pronunciation, and made them feel more motivated and supported. These responses affirm Hattie and Timperley's (2007) findings that effective feedback contributes to learner progress both cognitively and affectively. Classroom observations validated these findings, showing that teacher-student interaction, peer feedback, and reflective dialogue were actively taking place. All five indicators of formative assessment were present, confirming that formative practices were not only understood but also applied consistently in the classroom. This triangulation of data from teachers, students, and classroom observation strengthens the credibility of the findings and reinforces Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's (2006) view that formative assessment fosters both self-regulated learning and learner motivation. Although the focus group used a simplified format due to age considerations, the insights gained still reflected meaningful collective experiences. Overall, this study adds to the body of knowledge by showing that when appropriately guided, young EFL learners are capable of engaging with and benefiting from formative assessment. It suggests that even within typical classroom constraints, formative feedback can significantly enhance speaking instruction and learner confidence when integrated thoughtfully and consistently.

Conclusion/Simpulan

This study investigated the implementation and impact of formative assessment in supporting the development of speaking skills among fourth-grade EFL learners in an Indonesian primary school. The findings revealed that formative assessment was integrated into classroom practice through teacher observation, immediate oral feedback, and structured opportunities for peer and self-assessment. These strategies were found to enhance students' fluency, confidence, and motivation, showing that even young learners are capable of benefiting from continuous and supportive feedback when applied consistently. Triangulation of data from interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations confirmed that formative assessment was not only understood by the teacher but also valued and internalized by students, contributing to their oral language growth.

Despite these positive outcomes, the study also identified practical challenges, such as large class sizes, limited time, and student shyness, which at times hindered the effective delivery of feedback. These limitations suggest that while formative assessment has strong potential to enhance speaking instruction, its impact depends on adequate classroom conditions and teacher support. The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on formative assessment by demonstrating its applicability and benefits in young EFL contexts, particularly in Indonesia, where research on primary-level speaking instruction remains limited.

Suggestions

Future research could expand this study by including multiple schools and grade levels to provide a broader perspective on formative assessment in diverse contexts. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to explore how sustained use of formative assessment shapes language development over time. In addition, further investigation into the role of technology-mediated feedback could offer new insights into overcoming practical classroom constraints. For practitioners, it is recommended that teachers receive professional development in formative assessment strategies, particularly in managing feedback in large classes and fostering student autonomy in using feedback effectively.

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