

回归教育本质：连接测评与教学

——记 2017 年首届英语教学与测评学术研讨会

2017 年 4 月 14 日 – 15 日，首届英语教学与测评学术研讨会暨“中国基础教育外语测评研究基金”启动仪式在北京西苑饭店隆重举行。本次会议由北京师范大学和外语教学与研究出版社联合举办，以“回归教育本质：连接测评与教学”为主题，围绕中国英语能力等级量表的建设与应用、诊断测评的研究与实践、课堂评价与教师评价素养以及高中英语教学改革与评价等议题展开。会议邀请了 10 余位国内外测评与教学方向的专家学者、教研员和教师做主旨发言、专题研讨和经验分享，共有来自全国各地的 400 余名研究人员、教研员、一线教师和英语教育从业者出席了此次会议。

测试评价是教学的重要环节，测试与评价的方式也对教学有着深远的影响。近年来，国家对外语教育领域的测试与评价越来越重视，无论是中国英语能力等级量表的开发、中国外语测评体系的建设、国家英语能力等级考试的研制，还是高考外语科目的持续深化改革，以及课程标准的修订，都反映出教育界对外语测评理论研究与实践探索的日益重视和大力投入。与此同时，如何优化测评体系、提高教师测评素养、提升教学效果成为大家关注的焦点。

本刊精选了国内外专家学者、资深教研员和一线英语教师的发言内容，期望为读者带来启发和借鉴。刊发的内容不仅仅涵盖了英语测评与教学理论研究，也包含了深耕一线的英语教师对诊断模式的探索和实践。我们在此分享会议成果，传播会议精神，希望广大教育同仁能够借此平台加深交流，推动学术成果与教学实践的深层互动。

Formative assessment of language learning strategies

Abstract: This article attempts to integrate language learning strategies into the theory and practice of formative assessment. It is argued that learners' current language problems might have been a result of their strategic learning problems. As such, diagnosing the potential problems in language learning strategies and providing support in strategic learning (the 'how' of learning) will not only help locate the possible causes of language deficiencies but also help learners close the linguistic gap (the 'what' of learning). The article also illustrates how language learning strategies can be assessed formatively. Next, two implementation issues, the teacher's pedagogical content knowledge and student engagement after assessment feedback, are highlighted for discussion.

Key words: formative assessment; language learning strategies

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A missing link: Formative assessment of language learning strategies

Language assessment research has so

far focused on the assessment of language competence or language achievement.

Although formative assessment focuses on the process of learning and the growth of

the learner, it attempts to elicit information about the linguistic gap between the current state and the target state of learning. It also tries to provide informative feedback as to

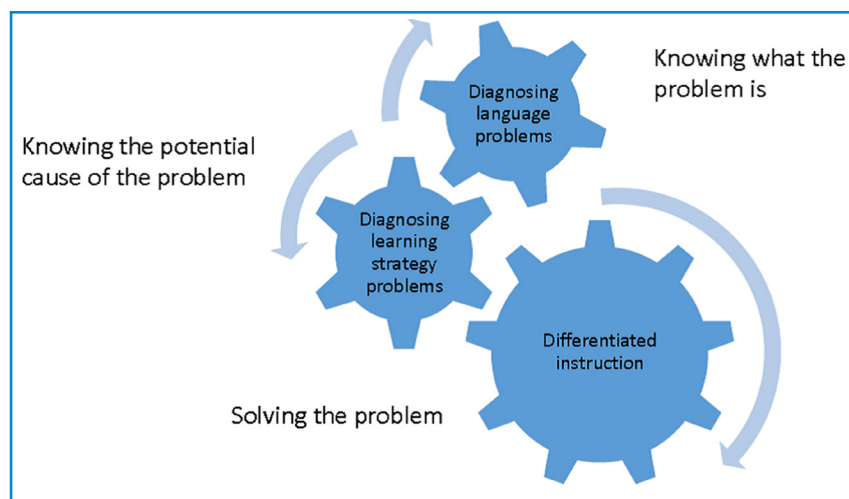


Figure 1. The missing link: Formative assessment of learning strategies

where the language deficiency is and what should be done next to close the gap.

In this paper, I argue that learners' current language problems might have been a result of their strategic learning problems (Figure 1). Without diagnosing these learning problems and providing the right feedback on what could have gone wrong in the learning behaviors, feedback on language deficiency only, no matter how informative, would not be sufficient for the student to activate the right kind of formative actions. I propose to follow up each worthwhile discovery in formative language assessment with an elicitation of learning strategies. If, indeed, learning strategy problems are caught and are found to be associated with the language problem, there is a high chance that the linguistic gap will be closed with both targeted language tasks and targeted strategic learning intervention.

1. Formative assessment

Let's begin by looking at what formative assessment is and whether it is useful for learning. Strictly speaking, formative assessment is not 'assessment'

as we traditionally understand it. It is as simple as 'informed action' (Andrade, 2010, p. 345). The 'informing' comes from the assessment of a learning task or learning event; while the 'action', or 'forming' (Davison & Leung, 2009) is the follow-up action we take after getting the information about the learner's current state of learning. Similarly, Black and Wiliam (2009) defined formative assessment as classroom practice fulfilling a formative function:

Practice in a classroom is formative to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers, to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have taken in the absence of the evidence that was elicited (p. 9).

It is therefore useful to view formative assessments not as static 'tests' but as teaching and learning events that are used formatively. Or to use Heritage's (2007) words, 'to be valuable for instructional planning, assessment needs to be a moving picture—a video stream rather than a

periodic snapshot' (p. 141).

Not every classroom event aimed at teaching and learning is formative assessment, of course. The informing episode of an assessment event will have to be based on assessment, i.e., judgement about student learning elicited through an assessment tool against criteria for success. There has to be also a forming episode which involves teaching or learning tasks that are based on the feedback information obtained from the informing episode of the assessment event. Without this latter episode, feedback ignored is feedback wasted.

The following key ingredients of a formative assessment event can be summarized from the discussion so far:

- Assessment purpose—The event has to be triggered by an intentional and formative purpose.
- Assessment focus—The assessor has to know exactly what is being assessed and what the criteria of success is. In other words, the target of assessment must be very clear.
- Assessment method—An appropriate assessment tool is used to elicit evidence of student learning; and it has to provide enough information to inform the assessor.
- Assessment use—Outcomes of the assessment will need to be interpreted in terms of how far away the student is from the target of learning, and what the next steps should be in order to close the gap. The information is relayed back to the learner and the teacher as formative feedback.
- Assessment consequence—Opportunities in various forms (e.g., classroom tasks, extra exercises, or follow-up lessons) will have to be provided for learners to

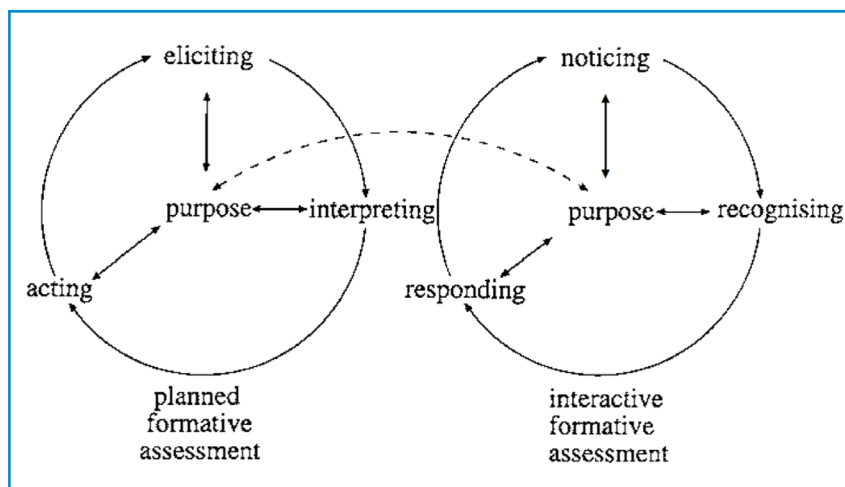


Figure 2: Two types of formative assessment (Cowie & Bell, 1999, p. 113)

act on the feedback so as to close the gap between their current and the target state of learning.

A question often asked is the format of formative assessment tools. My quick answer is that there is no specific form or shape, because formative assessment refers to the formative function of assessment. Another way of looking at it is that all possible tools for eliciting evidence of student learning can be used formatively, although some will provide more information than others. The closest to a format of assessment might be a distinction between planned and interactive formative assessment (Cowie & Bell, 1999), as shown in the above chart (Figure 2).

Both planned and interactive formative assessments start with a purpose. Planned formative assessment tends to use more formal tools of assessment to elicit student learning, followed by interpretation of the result, providing feedback, and acting on the feedback to close the gap. Interactive formative assessment, on the other hand, is basically unplanned, although the formative purpose of obtaining evidence of learning is at the back of the assessor's mind all

the time. Interactive formative assessment often takes place during the teaching and learning process when the teacher notices some misunderstanding or other forms of deviation from the learning target. This triggers a quick judgment in terms of recognizing the type of problem which can best be fixed in a certain way. The teacher then gives the student quick feedback and creates on the spot opportunities to close the gap, which may or may not be successful. This closes the loop of one formative assessment event, but further evidences are collected from then on, starting another loop in spiraling cycles.

Depending on the task of learning being assessed, 'the length of the cycle from evidence to action' (Wiliam & Thompson, 2007, p. 76) can range from seconds and days (short-cycle) to weeks (medium-cycle) or months or longer (long-cycle). If it's an individual student's pronunciation mistake noticed and given a chance to change, the correct pronunciation might be produced immediately afterwards. If, on the other hand, the evidence suggests that the whole class has problems in pronouncing a certain sound, the teacher might decide to analyze

the problem further before designing a specific remedy session the next day or week.

Informed action is of course better than any action or no action. In fact, there is enough evidence suggesting the effectiveness of formative assessment on learning. Five reviews (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Crooks, 1988; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Natriello, 1987; Nyquist, 2003) summarized more than 4,000 empirical studies conducted over a span of forty years, and led Wiliam (2007) to conclude that 'when implemented well, formative assessment can effectively double the speed of student learning' (pp. 36-37).

How should formative assessment be implemented inside the classroom? Black and Wiliam (2009) combined three questions we ask for formative assessment (Where the learner is going; where the learner is right now; and how to get there) with the three parties involved in enacting formative assessment (the teacher, the peer, and the individual learner) and derived five strategies or guiding principles for implementation (Table 1).

As highlighted in Table 1, learners are not just on the receiving end of assessment and feedback, they are also actively engaged in assessing themselves and their peers. In addition, they have to act on the feedback, adjust their learning process, and become responsible for their own learning. In this sense, formative assessment theories see learner agency and self-regulated learning as an integral part of formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 2009). Nevertheless, it is assumed that learners know how to assess their peers and themselves, and that when given feedback, they will know what to do to act on the feedback and improve their

Table 1. Five strategies for formative assessment (Black & William, 2009, p. 8)

| | Where the learner is going | Where the learner is right now | How to get there |
|---------|--|---|---|
| Teacher | 1. Clarifying learning intentions and criteria for success | 2. Engineering effective classroom discussions and other learning tasks that elicit evidence of student understanding | 3. Providing feedback that moves learners forward |
| Peer | Understanding and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success | 4. Activating students as instructional resources for one another | |
| Learner | Understanding learning intentions and criteria for success | 5. Activating students as the owners of their own learning | |

learning. This is, of course, not always true, which is why we need to examine the role of learning strategies in this whole process.

2. Language learning strategies

Broadly speaking, learning strategies are what learners deliberately do in order to achieve their learning purposes. Learners can proactively manage their own learning; or they can reactively solve learning problems when these problems come under their attention. A basic assumption under the scholarly focus on learning strategies is very straightforward, that learners themselves could play a much more active and proactive role in managing and controlling the learning process, and thereby maximizing the outcomes of learning (Oxford, 2017).

The strategic learning process itself is dynamic and iterative. When a difficult or new task is noticed, strategic learners analyze the task demands, their own resources for learning, and the contextual factors that may boost or hinder the completion of the task. This analysis may be very quick and incomplete, but it serves as a basis upon which an action plan is formed and activated. As the plan is executed, strategic learners monitor the smoothness

of the execution and the effectiveness of the plan in completing the learning task. Adjustments are made until the completion of the task. In addition to online monitoring of task completion, strategic learners also evaluate the whole process and decide if the new or difficult learning task is satisfactorily completed and if the strategies they used have been effective. This information will help decide if future tasks that are similar can be dealt with similarly or with a slightly adjusted strategy. Strategic learning, therefore, also happens in cycles with the identification and completion of each novel or difficult task. Initial deployment and execution of a new strategy can be intentional and slow. But strategic learners quickly amass a large strategy toolbox that can be quickly transferred to the completion of similar tasks. At the expert stage, a strategic learner may deliberately deploy a strategy, but the execution of the whole strategy can become automatic with or without the learner's awareness.

Are learning strategies useful in language learning? The quick answer is yes. Starting from Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975), forty years of active research on language learning

strategies have produced abundant evidence suggesting that successful language learners use a large repertoire of learning strategies and that they use strategies more often than their less successful counterparts. That being said, we also know today that the picture is more complex than the quantitative description above. For example, we now know that people may use the same strategy in different ways, and that qualitative differences in strategy use may also lead to success or failure in task completion. We also know that the choice, deployment, and effectiveness of a strategy are dependent on who the learner is, what task demands are, and whether the context of learning is conducive to the use of the strategy.

What's important is that strategic learning is better than non-strategic learning, and yet not every learner is equally skilled in learning strategically. Many times, the language learning problems we see in our learners could well be a result of their choice of the wrong strategies or their lack of the right strategies in dealing with the learning task. In order to fix the language problems we find using an assessment tool, it is also necessary to see if our students have problems with their choice and use of language learning strategies.

3. Assessing learning strategies for formative purposes

Scholars working on formative assessment have not examined the assessment of learning strategies. Learning strategy researchers, on the other hand, are only beginning to pay attention to the formative assessment of learning strategies (Chamot, Forthcoming; Oxford & Gkonou, Forthcoming). What I propose in this article is that we need to assess the 'how' of learning in addition to assessing the 'what'

of learning (Figure 3).

The formative purpose of assessment will be achieved only when both the content of learning and the strategies for learning are assessed, reflected upon, and adjusted based on the information we obtain through the assessment process.

How do I formatively assess language learning strategies?

1. Framework for implementation

Like formative assessment in general, formative assessment of learning strategies also includes all the ingredients of formative assessment. The only difference lies in what is being assessed. Instead of the ‘what’ of learning, formative assessment of learning strategies assesses the ‘how’ of learning. This means that in the formative assessment of learning strategies, assessors need to know:

- 1) Ideal targets of strategic language learning
- 2) Tools for assessing strategic learning
 - a. Types of tools
 - b. Choosing tools
 - c. Designing tools
- 3) How to interpret assessment results
- 4) How to provide feedback
- 5) How to differentiate instruction based on assessment results

Formative assessment of both learning content and learning strategies, especially the unplanned type, happen hand in hand. Assessment of learning strategies do not have to wait until the assessment of content finishes. For example, if we find at the end of an assessment task that a student knows a lot of words but can’t use the words he ‘knows’, part of the interpretation of the result involves the discovery of a gap between his current

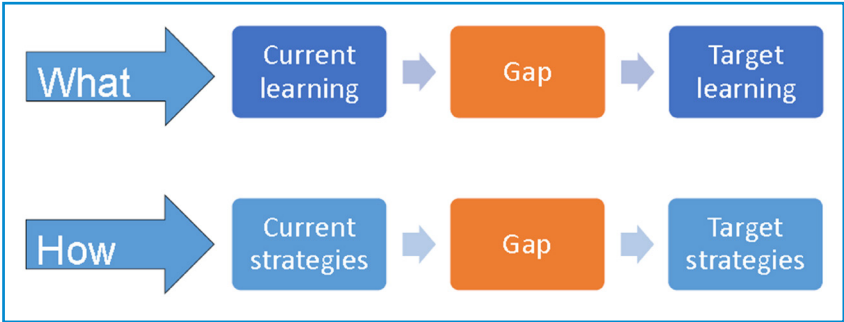


Figure 3. Assessing both the “what” and the “how” of learning

Table 2. Types of tools in assessing strategic learning

| Type | Selected-Response | Constructed-Response | Personal-Response |
|---------|---|--|---|
| | Fixed format | Guided format | Open-ended format |
| Example | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• True-False• Matching• Multiple choice• Pick from a list• Likert-scale• questionnaire• Checklist | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fill-in blanks• Short answers• Performance• Guided interviews | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Think-aloud• Observation• Free interviews• Diary entries• Recollective narratives of learning histories |

knowledge of vocabulary and the target of learning (breadth, depth, automaticity, and appropriateness of vocabulary knowledge). At the same time, we might be making a quick assessment of the strategies the student uses. Depending on how serious and how prevalent the problem is, we might follow it up with a planned assessment task for the assessment of strategic learning.

A prerequisite for successful formative assessment of learning strategies is that the teacher must have a clear idea of not just the target of learning (what needs to be taught, learned, and assessed), but also how this target is best learned. In the above example, it is not enough for the teacher to know the different dimensions

of vocabulary knowledge and what each dimension means, the teacher should also know, for instance, that the strategies for the acquisition of vocabulary depth are different from those for a large vocabulary size. This knowledge enables the teacher to choose the appropriate assessment tools, interpret the assessment outcomes, provide the relevant feedback, and create the most useful follow-up opportunities for growth.

Learning strategies have so far been assessed mainly for research purposes. The most often used tools for the elicitation of learning strategies have been questionnaires for pattern finding and think-aloud tasks for task-specific strategies. For the formative assessment of learning strategies, there is

a large array of tools available (Table 2), ranging from fixed to guided to completely open-ended format. An assessment tool in itself is not formative or summative, it is the information we can elicit with the tool, and how we make use of the information that make the tool formative. In choosing a tool to use, teachers need to be aware of their purposes, available resources, and the kind and amount of information each tool can provide. If a teacher needs to have a quick assessment of the reading strategy patterns of her class, a questionnaire might be a good option. If she needs to find whether and exactly how a student in her class guesses unknown words during reading, it will be more useful to sit in front of the student and ask him to think aloud as he reads. In order to ensure accurate assessment of a student's strategic learning ability, sometimes we need to give the student multiple opportunities to perform varied learning tasks.

2. Example: Formatively assessing reading strategies

Experienced readers make use of a range of strategies to understand a text and interact with it and its author. In any reading, we do not decode the text word by word and string the decoded words together to make sense of the text. Instead, we scan topic sentences and keywords in a text to quickly form a mental hypothesis about the content. This hypothesis is very much derived from our own knowledge of the topic and generic world knowledge. We then read on to test our hypotheses about the text and make adjustments as we go along. There may be words we don't know, but there is usually enough information in the text for us to guess what the word means. We might be moved by the story, convinced by the argument; or we may appreciate the clarity

of argumentation, or often disagree with the author. We do all these automatically and often forget that these are learned skills, and that our students do not necessarily know how to read.

Let's say we discover that a substantial proportion of our students haven't done well in their reading assessment tasks, and we suspect that these students probably don't have the necessary reading strategies. We can talk to the students, search our own repertoire of reading strategies, read up on reading strategies research, and come up with an observation sheet (Figure 4) that can be used for a month or two for every student that shows reading problems. What we are doing with this assessment tool is creating a reading strategy profile for each of these

learners, diagnosing their reading strategy problems, and customizing the treatment. Each reading task we observe can be a task the students are asked to do in class; or it can be a separate reading task only for this learner. In class, for example, when pairs of students are asked to read a text together and share each other's interpretations, we can simply focus our attention on a particular student for a few minutes, and observe if the student knows how to guess unknown words, and if he is predicting upcoming information in the text. If out of three observations, this student shows his problems twice in guessing unknown words in text, we can assume that this student needs help in learning how to guess. We can then either design specific guessing

Student name: _____

Tasks:

☐ Student-Student shared reading

☐ Teacher-Student joint reading

☐ Teacher questioning, etc.

Date of observation:

☐ Observation 1 _____ ☐ Observation 2 _____ ☐ Observation 3 _____

| Reading strategies | Not using it | Developing it | Expert user |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Guessing unknown word during reading | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Guessing author's hidden meaning | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Predicting what author will say in unread text | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Relating text info with own experience | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Monitoring own understanding | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Diagnosis: _____

Suggestions: _____

Figure 4. An observation checklist for reading strategies

exercises for this student, or design group exercises or even a training session for the whole class, depending on how wide-spread the problem is. From the time we discover reading problems and brainstorm potential reading strategies that should be used in performing the reading tasks, to the design of the strategy observation sheet, and to the interpretation of the outcomes, and finally to the exercises and training sessions, the formative assessment loop is complete.

3. Implementation issues

Formative assessment is no longer a new concept, and it's now not at all difficult to convince stakeholders about the usefulness of formative assessment as a teaching and learning tool. However, a number of issues prevent it from being implemented successfully inside the classroom. One issue results from the teacher's lack of understanding of the nature of formative assessment. Many teachers keep seeing formative assessment as a type of testing, and therefore keep looking for 'the' right format of formative assessment. This is a relatively easy problem to solve, once teachers realize that formativeness does not reside within the assessment tool; rather, any assessment tool can be used formatively. Another issue lies in the teacher's frustration in balancing formative assessment with the ubiquitous high-stakes needs of students in an examination culture. This frustration is also not too difficult to overcome, when teachers start to understand that most of what they already do in normal teaching that involve informed actions based on some sort of judgment of student learning may well be formative assessment. I highlight two other issues in this section that do need some attention: teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (PCK)

and the follow-up actions after assessment which engage students' learning.

(1) Pedagogical content knowledge

The success of formative assessment, of content or learning strategies, hinges on the assessor's understanding of the nature of the learning task and how the task is best learned. This is what Shulman (1986) calls the 'pedagogical content knowledge'. It is not an overstatement to say that formative assessment is as good as the PCK of the assessor. I'll next use two fictitious teachers' teaching and assessment of vocabulary to illustrate the point.

Two teachers are teaching the same level of students using the same textbook. Both teachers see vocabulary learning as a major difficulty among their students, and both want to focus on improving the vocabulary knowledge of their classes. At the end of each week, Teacher A gives her class a quiz of 50 random words from the vocabulary list in the textbook unit being taught. The students are asked to provide the Chinese equivalent of every word on the list. She then collects the quiz and tells the class which words had the most problems. The class is then told to write each missed word 10 times so that they can be remembered. To help the class remember the most difficult words, these words will be included in the next quiz in the following week. Teacher A notices a few students who consistently do a bad job on these quizzes. She attributes the low quiz marks to either a bad memory or lack of effort on the part of the students. She talks to these students after class, tells them to work harder, and shows them how to make use of vocabulary cards to remember the word forms and their meanings. Teacher B also makes use of a weekly exercise to check her students' vocabulary learning. She

asks her students to examine the vocabulary list in the textbook, and use any 50 words in the list to make up a story as interesting as possible. Before the next lesson, the class will read all the anonymous stories and vote for a 'story of the week'. The teacher may also ask the class to discuss whether they see any wrong uses of the words and how they could correct them. Each student receives their own writing with some peer comments as to which word might be wrongly used. They then check dictionaries or other resources and write up a revised version to be handed in to the teacher for further comments. Teacher B notices that a student consistently uses the wrong part of speech for many of these words, and yet the meanings of these words are roughly correct. She then asks the student after class about how he learns vocabulary. The student says that he tries to write each new word repeatedly to remember its spelling, and tries to remember the Chinese meaning of each word he writes. When asked if he remembers the part of speech of the words, the student says no. Teacher B tells the student that each word has a grammatical role to play in a sentence, and that in learning each word, he should not only remember the form and its meaning, but also its part of speech and how the word is used.

If we analyze both episodes, we see all the ingredients of formative assessment, for both vocabulary and learning strategies: having a clear target of learning, eliciting evidence of learning and potential problems, providing constructive feedback, and follow-up activities to close the learning gap. However, these two teachers' formative assessment activities achieve totally different purposes. The two

approaches result from the teachers' PCK differences. Teacher A sees vocabulary as individual words and vocabulary learning as the addition and memory of as many words as possible. The formative use of weekly quizzes will be useful in helping her students remember more words. The suggested strategy of more effort in repeating form-meaning pairs may help, but only to the extent that more form-meaning pairs might be memorized. Teacher B, on the other hand, probably believes that words don't exist in isolation, and that vocabulary learning goes far beyond memorizing one meaning of each word. She uses the story writing task not only as a teaching and learning task, but also an assessment task to catch her students' problems in vocabulary learning. The students in this class are involved in assessing their peers' vocabulary and in providing feedback to their peers. They are also asked to act on the feedback to improve their vocabulary knowledge. Teacher B's assessment of vocabulary learning strategies of the problem student is also used formatively. The suggested strategy of paying attention to part of speech together with the regular tasks of vocabulary use may well help the student grow a healthier vocabulary which may eventually lead to his ability to use the target language for real life purposes, as opposed to remembering a large number of isolated words.

(2) Closing the gap by engaging students

The first three crucial strategies for the implementation of formative assessment (Table 1) involve the teacher asking three important questions: 1) where the learner is going (PCK), 2) where the learner is right now (interpreting assessment outcome), and 3) how to get there (providing feedback). If


we stop here, we have only walked half-way through the formative assessment cycle, simply because we don't even know whether our students will act on our feedback. As Sadler (2010) said, 'feedback is capable of making a difference to learning, but the mere provision of feedback does not necessarily lead to improvement' (p. 536). And yet, it is in the student's engagement of the feedback that adjustment in learning takes place which may or may not be enough to significantly improve learning. This is why Black and Wiliam (2009) emphasized the importance of engaging students in the next two implementation strategies, i.e., peer- and self-assessment.

Unfortunately, the formative assessment literature offers very few insights into the actions that can be taken to help students close the gap between where they are going and where they currently are (Andrade, 2010). This is partly due to the fact that these follow-up actions of formative assessment blur into teaching and learning, and that these exact actions of teaching and learning are largely subject-specific. That said, recent years have seen efforts on 'feedback engagement' (Price, Handley, & Millar, 2011; Winstone, Nash, Parker, & Rowntree, 2017). There are a few generic suggestions for what to do. For example, the whole area of differentiated instruction (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013) focuses on the recognition, articulation, and commitment to plan for students' differing needs based on an initial assessment of students. In addition, Sadler (2010) proposes to 'make intensive use of purposeful peer assessment as a pedagogical strategy' (p. 548). Involving students in self-assessment (McMillan & Hearn, 2008) is another way of engaging students deeply in their own

learning process. Of course, the formative assessment of learning strategies in addition to the formative assessment of content is an explicit way of focusing students' attention on how they learn and how they can improve their own learning through the improvement of strategic learning.

Concluding remarks

This article stresses the need to formatively assess language learning strategies in addition to the formative assessment of language learning outcomes. It has been contented that much of the language problems we find in assessment could be a result of strategic learning problems. In this sense, diagnosing and improving on strategic learning will provide the learner and the teacher with concrete steps towards closing the language gaps revealed through language assessment tasks.

If we understand the usefulness of 'informed action', we understand what formative assessment is and why it is effective. It's as simple as that. Paradoxically, however, formative assessment is also as difficult as the vast all-inclusiveness of PCK. If PCK takes a life time to develop, the same must be true of formative assessment. This is true for both the formative assessment of language and the formative assessment of language learning strategies. 

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