Formasumma – Summaforma: Merging Formative and Summative Assessment in the Classroom

Laura Loder Buechel

Assessment is like taking multiple snapshots from multiple angles as no one snapshot tells the whole story. This article provides food for thought about how assessment - *formative*, *summative*, *of*, *for*, or *as* - can be used wisely, with an eye on the standard, celebrating progress and seamlessly integrated with teaching.

A frequent question pre-service public school teachers (PSTs) bring to workshops on assessment is "Can I use formative assessments summatively?" or "Does summative assessment have to be formal and formative assessment informal?" I fundamentally disagree with the notion that summative and formative assessment should be separate in the public-school classroom. It is a teacher's ethical responsibility to understand what constitutes good representation of A1 or A2 proficiency levels (or whatever power standards are being used) and to recognize when learners demonstrate having reached these levels. For instance, if a learner performs poorly on a past-tense test but the next day naturally uses correct past tense forms in conversation (e.g., "I had lunch...and then I ate...I also drank..."), this informal measure clearly demonstrates mastery of a SMART aim (the past tense) and indicates CEFR level achievement (interaction about daily life) fairly well. Such observations should be documented. Here are some reflections on this question with impulses to help pursue this thought further.

- **Take snapshots!** Assessment is like taking numerous photographs. You have standards. You do not base your judgement on ONE SINGLE time a student did something, you base your judgement on the multiple times that make a full, clear, picture. These snapshots include formal and informal, summative and formative measures. Your focus as a teacher is on learners' learning. One tiny snapshot (e.g. a test) is only part of the picture, thus it should not be counted as the entire picture or even the majority of the picture. The whole separation of summative and formative has gone too far (Lau, 2016).
- **Use the force wisely!** The critical factor isn't the measure itself (be it an observation, worksheet, portfolio entry, quiz, or test), but rather how that measure is utilized. Since we use summative measures formatively, it follows that we can use formative measures summatively. Teachers don't simply return a test (if they use tests at all) with a failing grade; they provide opportunities for revision and improvement (Figure 1). Many platforms like "Teachers Pay Teachers" offer test redo forms, and with the movement toward standards-based or competence-oriented grading, teachers gather various forms of evidence (observations, quizzes, authentic performances, classwork, tests, presentations) to evaluate standards individually rather than subjects as a whole and allow measures to be repeated. The more evidence collected on a learner's ability to meet a standard, particularly from recent assessments, the more valid the final grade becomes. This works both ways: if a learner

does well on a piece of written work such as a quiz, and then you see them NOT master something you saw on this same measure, you have to MERGE these observations, of course taking time into consideration (if everything was good for a long time and then all of a sudden the last measure (quiz or observation) was not so good, this is just perhaps a flukey). Of course ethically and humanely, look for moments of "shining", not moments of "failing". Thus, all roads lead to…...a good performance at a target level!

- Use end-of-unit tests at the start of a unit and then set up stations or open instructional settings based on the results;
- Give tests, but not with grades on them;
- Correct tests with written feedback and no points / scores / grades;
- Correct tests with written feedback; provide a grade at another point in time (a week later) after the feedback has been uptaken;
- Set the highest grade on a test as a "5" and let a "6" in a report card be for the combination of many different measures;
- Let learners re-take the test or part of the test after having completed a plan of action;
- Let learners take the test alone, the same test, again with a partner, and then at a later date alone again and compare the three instances – record progress;
- Let learners create test questions themselves and compile these for a class test;
- Allow learners to say when they are ready for a test (within a given time frame);
- Use exam wrappers;
- Allow learners 5 minutes at the start of a test to discuss anything in small groups;
- Add a blank page on a test for "anything else learned that was not on this test".

Figure 1: Using tests for learning (adapted from Buechel, 2024, p. 123).

- **Get testy about tests!** If we stick to the dichotomy, a summative measure does NOT have to be a test. Do tests even make sense? In the real world, when do we use English in real life in a "test" situation? Never! Only in school! We use more authentic measures, e.g. a dialogue, a presentation, a poster, etc…. These measures have many elements to them (formative moments) that go beyond the final product and that need to be taken into consideration (if you see a learner doing really well in practicing their presentation and then during the presentation they are so nervous they don't perform so well, you merge these two moments by, for example, having a single point rubric where the process is part of the grade, not just the product). Culminating projects are useful, but it is not only the end product that has to be graded. And tests, or small quizzes on a regular basis might be useful and could potentially teach learners to self-test, but they have to be carefully used and analyzed as they are only a tiny piece of a complex picture.
- **Learn from Mathematics classrooms!** As Math is often a subject measured on standardized tests, perhaps the research on formative assessment from Math classroom can be applied or suggested to English classrooms. For example, good formative practices have been shown to increase performance on standardized measures, especially with low-achieving learners (e.g. Gezer, et. al., 2021). Thus, if the focus is on formative, everyday, classroom practices, then perhaps we can assume that performance on standardized

measures such as a Cambridge exam, will be good. Or if we do a diagnostic / placement test (e.g. Oxford Placement Test) with our class at the beginning of the year, then focus on our formative practices, in the middle of the year if learners repeat the diagnostic/placement test they can hopefully see progress.

- **Embrace standards-based!** The shift in grading in many countries has moved to “standards based” (see Schimmer et al, 2018). In Switzerland report cards and grading practices might rather be considered “domain based” (we assess the four skills in hopefully respect to the standard). Consider this 6th-grade speaking standard from the local curriculum: "Students can exchange and obtain information in everyday situations using simple words (e.g., through role-play, group work)." If we really were to embrace “Kompetenzorientierung” or “standards-based grading” or “power standards”, then this type of competency cannot be accurately assessed through a single measurement. True standards-based grading requires multiple observations over time. This means either:
    - We must use more than just summative assessments, or
    - We need so many summative assessments that they effectively become formative assessments

  And then when tracking progress from January to August, we shouldn't average all scores. Instead, we should look at the most recent assessments broken down by standard to determine if the student has mastered a particular standard or all of the standards recommended for that time period and level.

- **Learn from countries that love standardized testing!** A huge trend in the US and now even more so due to COVID (but it started before) was to correlate high school learners’ grades on the standardized ACTs or SATs (standardized entrance exams to the university) with their report card grades in schools. When looking at “in school” (not socioeconomic) differences, then one finds that learners who do well on these standardized tests were NOT NECESSARILY coming from schools with a focus on testing and summative practices. Rather, learners coming from schools with standards-based grading practices and focused on multiple measures and formative assessment show indication of meeting standards and outperforming learners coming from “traditional” schools (see Kelly, 2018 or Kramer, et al, 2021).
- **Assess openly!** Occasionally, pre-service teachers say that the learners should know when they are being assessed. In the opinion of this author, that’s more nonsense. If you have a good relationship with your class, then even openly noting on a clipboard will not disrupt the learners’ willingness to participate and take risks. There is positive research on motivation to learn when the learners KNOW you are assessing them, e.g. Bui and Nguyen (2022) or much of the Dörnyei research. Using google scholar to search for “teacher assessment practices and learner achievement” will also lead to many articles that support the argument that learners should be aware that every teaching moment can also be an assessment moment! Knowledge-in-

Use models that connect teaching and assessment, dynamic assessment methods where interactions are noted, for instance, create an environment where assessment is seen as part of the learning process rather than something punctual. This does not mean teachers ALWAYS have to take note with a clipboard or correct EVERYTHING learners do (probably even correcting much less would be better). Learners can also be made aware of great moments noted, which count, too. Learners appreciate knowing their successes are noted and being held in their favor.

- **Use DUMB goals!** Whilst SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-Bound) goals might be useful on a small quiz or a test, teachers need to promote DUMB (dream-driven, uplifting, method-friendly, behavior-driven, as coined by Brendon Burchard 2011) which reflect the larger purpose of education and allow for giving more vision and learning-driven feedback. Instead of assessing learners and saying “Watch your past tense”, you might not even note that, you might note the idea that the learner continued speaking, got their message across and pursued the conversation which will get them further in life than mastering a specific tense. To this end, using a list or table of “higher” aims (so you keep in mind the VISION of where you want your learners to be at the end) to note observations for the whole class, you can record evidence of learner work, be it an observation, a product, a worksheet or whatever and see the tendency. This is also called a “logic rule” for each standard. Be it in a riddle or in chit chat or a test, being able to get one’s message across and improvement in doing so with more or less of the local language, more or less body language, more or less hesitation, more or less accuracy is the aim of public-school English.

Since Swiss public schools don't require high-stakes standardized testing for English or end-of-year exams, they avoid the need for artificial "summative" assessment moments that many other educational systems use to prepare students for standardized tests. In conclusion, leave the standardized testing to the experts, to Cambridge, Oxford, Pearson, the ETS. These larger testing services have the resources and the responsibility to know how to test well, to analyze tests for validity and reliability. Let the classroom teacher teach well, which includes assessing broadly and giving meaningful feedback about learning, not testing discrete items of language that someone has deemed important and that others test better.

References

Buechel, L. (2024). Disrupting assumptions in English language teaching (ELT) assessment. In A. S. Fuad & C. Kocaman (eds.), *International perspectives on critical English language teacher education: Theory and practice*. Bloomsbury.

Bui, H. & Nguyen, T. (2024). Classroom assessment and learning motivation: insights from secondary school EFL classrooms. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, *62*(2), 275-300. https://doi.org/10.1515/iral-2022-0020

D-EDK (Deutschschweizer Erziehungsdirektoren-Konferenz). (2015). *Lehrplan 21*. D-EDK, Luzern. Retrieved from lehrplan21.ch.

Gezer, T., Wang, C., Polly, A., Martin, C., Pugalee, D., & Lambert, R. (2021). The Relationship between Formative Assessment and Summative Assessment in

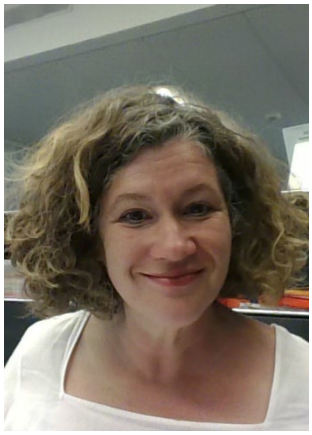
Primary Grade Mathematics Classrooms. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, *13*(5), 673–685. Retrieved from https://www.iejee.com/index.php/IEJEE/article/view/1508

Kelly, D. (2018). *The relationship between standards-based grading and student achievement in secondary math and English language arts, and other annual performance measures including attendance, drop-out, and act scores* [Doctoral dissertation, Evangel University].

Kramer, S., Posner, M., Browman, A., Lawrence, N., Roem, J., & Krier, K. (2024). The Impacts of a Standards-Based Grading System Emphasizing Formative Assessment, Feedback, and Re-Assessment: A Mixed Methods, Cluster Randomized Control Trial in Ninth Grade Mathematics Classrooms. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 1–32. https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2023.2287594

Lau, A. (2015). 'Formative good, summative bad?' – A review of the dichotomy in assessment literature. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *40*(4), 509–525. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2014.984600

Schimmer, T., Hillman, G., & Stalets, M. (2018). *Standards-based learning in action: Moving from theory to practice*. Solution Tree.



Laura Loder Buechel has been a teacher trainer at the Zurich University of Teacher Education in Switzerland for over 20 years. She received her BA in Geology and French from La Salle University in Pennsylvania, her M.Ed. in Bilingual Education from Northern Arizona University and her PhD from the University of Fribourg, Switzerland.

Laura Loder Buechel

Zurich University of Teacher Education

Lagerstrasse 2

8090 Zurich