Formative for whom?

How formative assessment is used in the English Classroom of an upper secondary school in Sweden.

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Abstract
This study looks deeper into the concept of formative assessment. Formative assessment is described by Black and Wiliam (Developing the Theory of Formative Assessment, 2009) as being a process using tools. The mindset of formative assessment can be difficult to grasp. Therefore, this study takes up the question if and how an understanding of the formative assessment mindset is reflected in the teaching practice of teachers in the English Language Acquisition classroom. Five lectures were observed of different teachers and groups of students, in an upper secondary school in Sweden. An additional questionnaire gave insight into the mindset of the participating teachers concerning the meaning of the term formative assessment as well as their teaching practice. The definitions the teachers gave varied in complexity and this was also reflected in their teaching. Only one teacher embedded the process of formative assessment with all the 5 key strategies of formative assessment in her lecture. By comparing classroom practice and the understanding of the teachers of what formative assessment entails, I found that the more inclusive of the 5 key strategies the understanding of the teachers was, the more their teaching practice was formed by it. Furthermore, to be able to use the 5 key strategies of formative assessment needs skill and practice, and therefore training of teachers is necessary.

Keywords: formative assessment, learner autonomy, feedback, metacognition, English Language Acquisition.
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1. Introduction
I first understood the value of formative assessment during a course I took on the subject. For an assignment I had to create a hinge-point question (a diagnostic question you use to check if all your students have understood so you know if you can continue or have to repeat something which was not clear). What happened during the process was that I understood that the main point with Formative Assessment was not to learn a set of fun exercises to do in the classroom. Rather it involved a different perspective on teaching, a different teaching approach. It made me reflect on (a) what I was going to teach, (b) what crucial knowledge/understanding students needed to obtain, (c) the likely wrong answer or misunderstanding a student might have, (d) how I would address the information I would obtain from the hinge-point question. The different perspective and approach to teaching I was required to take surprised me. Students appreciated the question as it showed them where they were in their process of understanding, and I was prepared in which way to go with the information. It proved beneficial to both parties. I also found that what I initially thought students understood did not always match with reality. As a novice in formative assessment I wanted to learn more.

If the value of formative assessment lies with a different teaching mindset, then activities like hinge-point questions, exit notes\(^1\), etc. are tools. The key to formative assessment then is the mindset of assessment for learning. Skolverket, the Swedish Government agency for education, states in a number of their publications the need for formative assessment in Swedish schools today. One such a publication takes up the importance of Learner Autonomy which goes hand in hand with Formative Assessments key strategy 5 (Skolverket, 2014a). Another publication, Kunskapsbedömning i skolan, explains formative assessment in depth, and besides giving different practical examples of how to use formative assessment, shows how formative assessment and summative assessment can complement each other to improve “rättvis och likvärdig bedömning [fair and equal assessment]” (Skolverket, 2011, p. 3).

Furthermore, to help teachers in their teaching practice, Skolverket has set up a website bedömningsportalen [assessment gateway] where teachers can find all kind of information on assessment of both course content and students. What is expected of the teachers, when it comes to teaching language acquisition, is that they use two forms of assessment: formative

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\(^1\) An exit- note can exist out of one or more questions used to check understanding of students about the topics the lesson has been about. Students give a brief answer and hand in the note when leaving the class. The teacher then reviews students’ answers, reflects on them and uses the information to prepare the next lesson.
assessment and summative assessment. Formative assessment is often called by its former name “assessment for learning”. However, what formative assessment comprises of is not always clear.

When it comes to the practice of formative assessment in the classroom, research has mainly been done in primary and secondary schools. Internationally, only a few studies have been centred on how to use formative assessment in the Modern Language Acquisition (MFL) classroom. Although lots can be learned from these studies, what is lacking is a clear focus on how formative assessment is used in the English Language Acquisition classroom. Research in the Modern Language Acquisition field, focusses on the teaching of German, Spanish and French in an English speaking nation. As English is a language spoken internationally, the need to learn another language for a native English speaker in an English speaking country is often difficult to grasp and brings a host of specific issues not found in English as a Second Language Acquisition (ESL) classrooms. The need for further study focussing specifically on the use of formative assessment in the upper secondary ESL classroom is apparent. This study’s purpose is to do just that, by focusing on how formative assessment is practiced in the ESL classroom of a school in Sweden.
2. Aim and Research Questions
My aim with this study is to ascertain how formative assessment is used in the English classroom of an upper secondary school in Sweden. I am particularly interested in finding out if there is a link between an understanding of the concept of formative assessment and classroom practice. Therefore the following questions have been posed:

1. What is the teachers’ understanding of Formative Assessment, what definition do they give?
2. Is their understanding of Formative Assessment reflected in the way they teach?
3. How does their definition of Formative Assessment compare to the definition given by Black and Wiliam?
3. Background and Literature Review
In this section I will describe the history and definition of formative assessment as well as its 5 key strategies, in order to define a clear framework to measure the outcome of my research questions against. Previous research will be the last point taken up.

3.1 History and Definition
To give a definition of formative assessment is not an easy task. Formative assessment seems to be the umbrella term under which different teaching and learning techniques find their place. The definition which we are using today is not the final one, as it is difficult to summarise what formative assessment entails. “The term formative assessment has been around for almost fifty years, but as of yet, there is little consensus as to what it means” states Wiliam in his latest work (Wiliam & Leahy, 2015, p. 5). The definition of formative assessment he still stands with today is:

*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 (Black & Wiliam, 2009, p. 9).*

This definition will be the basis for my research. The term formative assessment is often misunderstood as it is seen as a tool rather than a process. Wiliam emphasises the importance of process with the use of right tools. In my words I would say the journey is more important than the goal.

In previous definitions, regulation of the learning process, as well as feedback was named (Black & Wiliam, 1998, 2009). Formative assessment is better understood when we focus on the 5 key strategies which find their place under the umbrella term of formative assessment.

3.2 The 5 key strategies
The theory of formative assessment builds itself on research done in different fields. Each of the 5 keys of formative assessment can be traced back to different assessment techniques applied over the years. The strength of formative assessment lies however in the combination of all 5 key strategies. Applying one is said to be effective, but true formative assessment applies the whole concept (Wiliam & Leahy, 2015). What they entail and how they work
together is shown in figure 1. Teacher, learner and peer work together so that all know where the learning is going, where the learner is right now and how to get there. The 5 key strategies are explained in further detail below.

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*Figure 1. Aspects of formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 2009, p. 8)*

### 3.2.1 Key Strategy 1 - Clarifying, sharing, and understanding learning intentions for success

Research studies under this heading focus on the importance of students’ understanding of what they are supposed to learn. Wiliam (2011) gives numerous examples of studies showing that when students reflect on what the learning criteria are, they achieve higher scores. In other words, reflection on learning is a criterion for success. Although these studies give a reason for the importance of understanding of learning intentions, they do not focus on the mindset the teacher needs to have to apply this key strategy successfully. However, Wiliam does point out that it is important for teachers to know the difference between the learning intention and context of the learning we have in mind when preparing an assignment. As teachers we do not want to stifle the student in their learning or hinder their learning by putting a limit on their creativity. A clear example given by Clarke (2005) is that of product success criterion and process success criteria in communicating learning intention. Although product success can be defined in just one sentence, the process is explained by naming in more detail what is expected. Here the mindset of the teacher goes beyond the summative assessment rubric understanding. The teacher focusses mainly on the process. This helps the students to check if they are on track, but does not stifle the student in their creative process. The teachers’ purpose of using process success criteria is to bring about that success.
3.2.2 Key strategy 2 – Engineering effective classroom discussions, activities, and learning tasks that elicit evidence of learning
We cannot always be certain that what we as teachers intend students to learn, is what they actually learn. Students are “active in the construction of their own learning” (Wiliam, 2011, p. 74). Therefore, within formative assessment, we need to have feedback from the students often so we can adjust our teaching accordingly. This can be done in a variety of ways and Wiliam lists tools like: exit passes, mini whiteboards, letter corners, Popsicle sticks, and ABCD cards. All of these tools are used in combination with questioning. The type of questions asked should be cognitive rather than affective. The art of asking good questions is what is asked of the teachers here, but also the ability to listen interpretively. If a student answers incorrectly, the focus should be “What can I learn about the student’s thinking by attending carefully to what they say?” (Wiliam, 2011, p. 85). Ultimately, the focus is on receiving information and acting on it.

3.2.3 Key strategy 3 – Provide feedback that moves learning forward
In formative assessment it is important that we do not only receive feedback from the students as in how to adapt our teaching, but that we give feedback that is moving the learning forward. Here Wiliam builds on, among others, an extensive study done by John Hattie and Helen Timperley. In their article “The Power of Feedback”, Hattie and Timperley (2007) claimed that effective feedback must answer three major questions asked by either the student or the teacher: “Where am I going (What are the goals?), How am I going? (What progress is being made toward the goal?) and Where to next? (What activities need to be undertaken to make better progress?)” (p. 86). These three questions are also known under the terms feed up, feed back, and feed forward.

To give feedback that answers these 3 questions, Hattie and Timperley (2007) have divided feedback into 4 different focus categories: focus on task (FT), focus on process (FP), focus on self-regulation (FR) and focus on the personal or self (FS). Timing in when to use each particular form of feedback is critical for success. They found that FR and FP are more powerful when students are deep processing and mastering a task and that FT is most powerful when students need to improve their strategy processing. FS is advised to be used sporadically, as it does not promote learning.

When giving feedback it is important to remember that feedback should point to the positive more than to the negative. A teacher might say in a grammar lesson: “You have understood how to build questions. Now apply your knowledge by reading through your work
and see if you can use that knowledge to rewrite some of the sentences”. In the language classroom, especially during fluency building it is preferred not to correct the students all the time, as this can detract from learning automaticity (FP) (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Whether the feedback is given orally or in writing, a teacher should always have the learning goals in mind, with the aim of helping the student to achieve them.

Considerable evidence supports Hattie and Timperley’s claim, that written comments have more effect than grades. D. Royce Sadler (1989), in his article “Formative Assessment and the Design of Instructional Systems” came to the conclusion that setting a grade may actually “be counterproductive for formative purposes”, as it diverts attention “away from fundamental judgements and the criteria for making them” (p. 121). When receiving a grade, it signals to the student that the task is finalized and he or she can move on. Written comments, focusses the students’ attention to what still needs to be worked on. Both Hattie and Timperley (2007) and Wiliam (2011) point out the importance of setting aside lecture time for students to work on the feedback received. What is more, William (2011) goes as far as to say that written feedback should not be provided if time is not set aside for this purpose.

Three of the feedback types, FT, FP, FR work together. The feedback type FR is complex and used to enhance the capacity of self-assessment and to create internal feedback. Here it is important that we teach students to ask for instrumental help rather than the answer. Instrumental help could be translated as a hint given to students to help them on their way, whereas a straight answer helps them to avoid putting time and effort into the exercise to find the answer themselves. The latter does not help their metacognitive thinking. The final type of feedback, FS, is often not a helpful one as it focusses praise on the person and not on the task. The receiver often cannot distinguish between reinforcement and praise, and will therefore take no action to improve. If this type of feedback is given then it needs to be accompanied by stating specifics of task and process (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 97).

Besides Hattie and Timperley, Valerie J. Shute (2008) presented a study on formative feedback, focussing mainly on task-level-feedback. She gave a list of different feedback types in order of complexity and found that researchers are not in agreement on whether the effect of feedback complexity can replace re-teaching (pp. 159-160).

3.2.4 Key strategy 4 – Activating students as instructional resources for one another
In education, the focus of a student is often on his or her own achieving of a good grade – a performance-based mindset instead of a knowledge-based mindset. In formative assessment
however, the aim is to cultivate a classroom culture where the focus is on collaborative and cooperative learning. This means that it becomes second nature for students to want to help each other achieve their best potential. In this kind of setting students are motivated to help each other as it is in their best interest to do so; when students embark on teaching each other, they themselves have to gain a deeper understanding to be able to explain it to one another. To achieve this mindset of helping each other in the classroom the teacher needs to set clear group goals so all will work together. Secondly, to prevent individual students to be carried along by the work of the others in the group, there needs to be individual accountability of each student, something the teacher needs to insist upon (Wiliam, 2011, pp. 133-135).

Furthermore Black et. al. (2004) found a further benefit of peer assessment – as this student interaction is named – to be that “students may accept criticisms of their work from one another that they would not take seriously if the remarks were offered by a teacher” (p. 14). Activating students as instructional resources for one another has a natural connection with key strategy 5, as peer assessment can be helpful in seeing students taking ownership of their own learning.

3.2.5 Key strategy 5 – Activating learners as owners of their own learning
Self-regulated learning (SRL) refers to learning that is guided by metacognition, strategic action and motivation, and is the main point under this heading. SRL is also known under the term Learner Autonomy (Holec, 2011). For students to become self-regulated learners they need guidance. Motivation of students is something we as teachers cannot do for them, but we can help students by modelling a knowledge-based mindset instead of a performance-based mindset.

Metacognition is defined by Zimmerman (2002), in his article “Becoming a Self-Regulated Learner: An Overview”, as “the awareness of and knowledge about one's own thinking” (p. 65). This needs to be modelled by teachers and taught as “self-regulation is not a mental ability or an academic performance skill; rather it is the self-directive process by which learners transform their mental abilities into academic skills” (p. 65). Teachers need to model metacognition by being creative in “‘inventing’ new ways of dealing with the learning problems some of his or her learners are experiencing, such as devising discovery activities that will help his or her learners to understand the ins and outs of self-evaluation” (Holec, 2011, p. 112). What is the most important is that students feel empowered by becoming self-aware of their strengths and limitations in the learning progress. If they are aware then this
self-awareness and strategic knowledge will direct them into taking corrective action (Zimmerman, 2002, p. 65). Hopefully being motivated is the next step.

Two forms of motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, are of interest for formative assessment. Intrinsic motivation can be described as doing an activity “simply for the enjoyment of the activity itself” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 60). On the other hand, extrinsic motivation happens when we want to earn a reward or avoid punishment. Ryan and Deci found that “The more one internalizes the reasons for an action and assimilates them to the self, the more one’s extrinsically motivated actions become self-determined” (p. 62). It is important that a person feels to be in control of his or her learning, being driven not by fear, but by an understanding of the use of the skill or learning-objective to be obtained.

3.3 Previous research
How to use formative assessment within the language acquisition classroom has not been studied extensively. In 2008 Jane Jones and Dylan Wiliam published a booklet in the Inside the Black Box series named Modern Foreign Languages Inside the Black Box which focussed on teaching modern foreign languages. The booklet is aimed at teachers of German, French and Spanish within the United Kingdom, and gives some helpful tips and hints. After her initial work together with Wiliam, Jane Jones (2014) focussed her research on the effect of making formative assessment part of teacher training by letting student teachers observe how formative assessment was taught in the modern foreign language classroom. Ketabi and Ketabi (2014) focussed their research into the different types of classroom assessment within an ESL setting, with an emphasis on grading. Formative Assessment, however, was seen by them as important but the need for more research was mentioned (p. 437). None of the aforementioned material focuses on the link between understanding of the mindset of formative assessment and how this is reflected in the way teachers teach in the ESL classroom.

Internationally not all research takes a positive outlook on formative assessment. A common denominator is the criticism that there is no clear definition of what formative assessment entails. As the current definition is too wide, it is open for different interpretations (Bennett, 2011; Dunn & Mulvenon, 2009). Secondly, another criticism is that for formative assessment to be used it needs training, of both teachers and students alike (Hirsh & Lindberg, 2015; Vetenskapsrådet, 2015). Thirdly, as the definition is not clear it is difficult to measure
the outcome of the effect formative assessment has on student achievement (Dunn & Mulvenon, 2009; Hirsh & Lindberg, 2015; Bennett, 2011; Vetenskapsrådet, 2015).

A recent study by Andersson and Palm (2017) highlighted the need for teacher training in formative assessment, where “a unified practice of integrated strategies” is essential (p. 94). They found that training is necessary not only in the different aspects of formative assessment, but also into how the 5 key strategies work together. Andersson and Palm conducted their study in a Swedish municipality. One group of teachers in mathematics enrolled into a professional development program (PDP), and spent during one term 144 hours in being taught about formative assessment, as well as 72 hours reading literature, planning and reflecting. The control group did not receive any training. Andersson and Palm found the student results of the PDP group to be significantly higher than of those of the control group. The training provided the teachers with usable classroom activities, ample opportunity to practice with positive outcomes, understanding the connection between theory and practice, expert support, plentiful time to learn, and was process-orientated. Andersson and Palms study proves the complexity of formative assessment and shows that training is crucial. In doing so it aligns itself with the criticism voiced by Hirsh and Lindberg (2015) and Vetenskapsrådet (2015).

Even though formative assessment receives criticism, Skolverket has chosen to advise Swedish teachers to use formative assessment in their teaching. Moreover, Skolverket even strongly advises English language teachers to incorporate formative assessment in their teaching practice. They point at the fact that assessment for learning and its didactic function is more and more seen as an obvious part of learning and education (Skolverket, 2014b).
4. Method
In this section I will give an account of my choice of the research method used. Focus will be on selection and narrowing of the study, data collection method, analysis method, and finally ethical research practice.

4.1 Selection and narrowing of the study
The data selection method used is that of purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990). The teachers partaking in this study are making up the English Language department of the school where the study was conducted.

To obtain an answer to the research questions, a qualitative study containing classroom observations as well as a questionnaire with open questions was chosen. Five lectures were observed. These lectures were given by different teachers and the classes themselves were such that different levels of English were taught. Although all classes were taught at an upper secondary school, the English lessons ranged from teaching English level 4 (lower secondary school) to English level 7. This meant that how English is taught at a basic level to immigrants, who are attending a special program which is called Språkintroduktion [Introduction to Language], was also observed. In this program Swedish is the main subject, but the aim is to give opportunity to obtain the 12 lower secondary school credits – of which English is one – necessary to enter into upper secondary school.

The 5 different lectures observed - taught by different teachers - revealed 5 different teaching styles, personalities and their understanding of formative assessment. This gave a variety of input of how formative assessment can be applied within English Language Acquisition.

The use of a questionnaire was chosen to obtain an insight in the thought process of the teachers which is not always visible in classroom practice. The questionnaire (Appendix A) was aimed at the teachers’ understanding of formative assessment, their use of it, as well as their view on how students learn the most effective. As the questionnaire was formed using an online application, the teachers were not limited in the number of words they were using to answer the questions.

A weakness of this study is the limitation of 5 lessons. A larger study, following each teacher for a number of lessons could have given a clearer picture of how each teacher works
with the 5 key strategies of formative assessment. However, due to time constraints, as students were starting their internships, this was not possible.

A further limitation with this study is the use of a questionnaire with open questions contra to an interview study. Early on in this study it was ascertained that classroom observations by itself did not give enough information to answer the research questions, therefore the questionnaire was formed. Had this been realised from the beginning an interview study would have been a more suitable option, as participating teachers could have explained their definitions and understanding more fully which would have helped in drawing conclusions. As only one lecture per teacher was observed, this could have affected the result of this study in as why and how teachers used just a particular key strategy.

Finally, as shown in section 3, the term formative assessment and its definition is open to different interpretations. I am aware that my understanding of formative assessment cannot be ruled out in this study, even though Black and Wiliam’s definition as well as the 5 key strategies were used as a guideline.

4.2 Data collection method
The lessons were observed, recorded and transcribed. During classroom observation a chart was used to document how formative assessment was used; Whether or not all the 5 key strategies - as defined by Black and Wiliam (2009) and explained under Chapter 3.2 - were used and how was noted, as well as well as if the mindset of formative assessment showed, that is, if teachers recognisably used the information they elicited from the students to adapt their teaching (Appendix B).

The questionnaire was sent to the teachers by email after classroom observation and included the following questions:

- In your own words, give a definition of what formative assessment is?
- According to the definition given in question one, do you use formative assessment?
- If yes, could you give some examples of how you use formative assessment?
- If you are not using formative assessment, what is the reason?
- What is your opinion on how students learn most effectively?
- What is your approach in preparing lessons for all different needs in the particular class you are preparing for?
Thus, the data collected comprised a questionnaire giving insight into the mindset and teaching approach of the teachers as well as classroom observations.

### 4.3 Analyses method

All the recorded lectures were transcribed. The first stage of analyses contained checking the charts with the transcription of each of the lessons to make sure nothing was missed, or if something might have been misinterpreted. Evidence of the 5 key strategies was looked for and recognised. To be able to interpret if teaching practice contained evidence of understanding of the mindset of formative assessment, any mention and action from eliciting information from students was noted. As an example,

> Anna explained to her students that all had passed their grammar test, but that she noticed that everyone in the class had scored low, or even had left questions blank, when it came to working with the do-construction\(^2\). As the aim was understanding and not passing a test, she had compiled an exercise were students had to translate sentences into English, as well as stating why they had translated the way they did by formulating rules.

In this example Anna stated where the students were in their understanding and told the students where she wanted them to be. She had elicited information and acted upon it. This was interpreted as evidence of the mindset of formative assessment.

The second stage of analyses took the results of the questionnaire and compared this with the definition of formative assessment given by Black and Wiliam (2009). Descriptions which included eliciting information and acting upon it, were noted, as well as descriptions of how they had worked with formative assessment in lectures in the past.

The third stage of analyses compared the teachers’ understanding of formative assessment with their classroom practice. For example Rosie mentioned that formative assessment is

> “feedback from students used to promote learning, but also a method of giving students a clear picture of what they need to achieve in order to reach their goals in learning...motivation”.

\(^2\) The ‘do-construction’ is a grammatical term. In Swedish, when asking a question, the subject and verb just swap places. When asking a question in English however, we have to use a help verb, ‘to do’. When using modal verbs like can, could, will, might etc. to ask a question the help verb ‘to do’ is not used. This grammatical construction proves difficult for native Swedish speakers to grasp.
Aspects of this feedback were looked for in the lesson. Furthermore, as motivation was also a key in this teachers’ understanding, evidence of elements of learner autonomy were looked for.

A final stage of analyses focussed on the effect of the teachers’ understanding of formative assessment on classroom practice.

4.4 Ethical research practice
The ethical research practice as set out by The Swedish Research Council's Expert Group on Ethics (2011) has been followed. The focus of this study has been on teachers and their classroom practice. Therefore, before observing a lesson, pupils were informed that only when what they said was necessary in the context of the teacher answering a student’s question, this information would be used. As the pupils were 16 years old or older, parental consent was not obtained. The teachers in the department were asked to volunteer and were informed about their rights, and all gladly took part in the study. To ensure anonymity, the teachers have been given pseudonyms, which in certain cases, also obscures their sex. As the school is a small school with a limited amount of teaching personnel an extra effort was made to obscure teacher profiles.
5. Result and Analysis
As formative assessment is a process involving both a mindset and appropriate tools, it was important to not only observe lessons, but also gain insight into the thoughts of teachers about formative assessment.

Of the 5 teachers observed, only one teacher’s entire classroom practice was formative. The process of formative assessment was clearly recognised, as it included acting on the information elicited from the students, clear instruction, an exercise which was structured to promote metacognitive thinking, working in groups, and different types of feedback given. In short, the big idea of formative assessment, that is, the mindset of eliciting information from students to adapt teaching practice, as well as all the 5 key strategies were used, and they overlapped. In the other classrooms this process was not observed, yet some of the key strategies were recognised.

By observation alone it was not possible to ascertain what understanding each individual teacher had of formative assessment. The mindset of formative assessment is one where the teachers need to elicit information from the students and use it to amend their teaching (Black & Wiliam, 2009). This eliciting of information is something that can be difficult to observe, as this might have been done the previous lecture, and therefore a questionnaire was formed. The questionnaire gave an insight into teachers’ understanding of formative assessment, their use of it, as well as their view on how students learn the most effective.

By asking the teachers to give a definition of formative assessment it became apparent that they were all at different stages of understanding of what formative assessment entails. Two teachers gave a description which included all the 5 key strategies. They not only commented on the practice but also the mindset of formative assessment. The other 3 teachers formulated their description in a more general way, sometimes touching on only one of the key strategies, and by doing so a description of the process of formative assessment was lacking.

Asking the teachers for examples of how they use formative assessment, helped to see if they had grasped the mindset of formative assessment. Here it became clear that, the step from having some understanding of what formative assessment is to actually using it, are two different things. However it proved very helpful to get an insight into the teachers thinking to help understand what was taking place in the classroom. Furthermore, this insight into the
teachers thinking explained why all of the 5 key strategies were not apparent in most of the classroom sessions observed.

5.1 Teachers’ understanding of formative assessment
The current definition of formative assessment is open to a wide span of interpretations. When asked to give a definition of formative assessment the teachers in this study formulated their understanding of formative assessment emphasising what in their opinion was the most important. Their understanding focussed on feedback and learner autonomy.

Feedback was mentioned in 3 definitions. However, it was never mentioned on its own. In one instance feedback on what students produce was part of the definition, accompanied by the notion that time should be given during lectures for students to work with the feedback so they can improve. The emphasis here was on students working with received feedback so that they could reflect on their work.

Another instance where feedback was mentioned, reminded of Black and Wiliam’s (2009) definition, as the teacher stated that formative assessment is feedback from students used to promote learning, but also a method of giving students a clear picture of what they need to achieve in order to reach their goals in learning. Here feedback is first elicited from the students and then feedback is given to the students, a two-way process.

Thirdly, feedback was mentioned with teaching practice in mind. Emphasis was on the importance for the teacher to identify current knowledge of students and modifying teaching accordingly. This identifying could be done in and outside of the classroom. Tools like eliciting instant feedback in the moment by discussing and voting as well as collecting exit notes were suggested to be good classroom practice.

As a second common denominator, aspects of learner autonomy were mentioned in 3 of the definitions. Peer activities were named and seen as a tool, where students learned by explaining material to each other. The emphasis here was on student learning whilst explaining material and not on just letting students correct each other's essays for the sole purpose of marking right or wrong answers.

Motivation, another aspect of learner autonomy, was emphasised from a teaching perspective. For the learning process to be meaningful, a teacher has to adapt the lessons to their students’ needs. Learning a language has to do with getting a lot of language practice, both input and output, and making this as meaningful and involving for each student
personally as possible. Here the focus lies with the motivation of the student, and for the teacher to be active in motivating not only on a class level, but also on a personal level.

A further aspect of learner autonomy which was named in the teachers’ definitions was that of students being in control of their own learning. This being in control ranged from having influence into what an assignment could look like to the giving of metacognitive tools, so students could become independent learners.

Finally, as the term formative assessment includes the word *assessment*, it was no surprise that the word *marking* was mentioned in one of the teacher’s definitions. However, it was mentioned together with student development, where marking with words was the focus.

Of the 2 definitions which encompassed the 5 key strategies, the following teacher’s definition stands out, where formative assessment is described as

> Helping students in their learning process by identifying where they are in terms of current level of understanding and knowledge compared to desired learning outcome, i.e. "to fill the gap", to revise and modify your teaching methods accordingly and to give the students metacognitive tools to help them become efficient independent learners, i.e. "learner training".

In this definition some of the terminology of figure 1 as well as well as Black and Wiliam’s (2009) definition can be recognised: (1) It speaks of identifying where the learner is right now and where the learner is heading. (2) It includes eliciting information, revising and modifying teaching method. (3) It speaks about the giving of tools to become independent learners. Although this teacher’s definition does not use the word feedback, it is implied, as giving feedback is one of the helps given them to become independent learners. Furthermore, this teacher was observed to use the process of formative assessment in her lecture.

### 5.2 Reflected understanding of formative assessment

How the teacher’s understanding of formative assessment was reflected in their teaching was ascertained by comparing classroom practice and the results recorded under point 5.1.

When asked if teachers used formative assessment in the classroom, 4 of the 5 teachers stated that they did. Yet, classroom practice and the teacher’s understanding of what formative assessment entails did not always align. Of course observing only one lecture per teacher can only give a glimpse of classroom practice. What became apparent however was that the more inclusive of the 5 key strategies the understanding of the teachers was, the more their teaching practice was formed by it.
When formative assessment is understood as marking with words, it seems to restrict a teacher to exploring further how to use formative assessment in aiding student development. In one of the lessons no aspects of formative assessment were observed at all although the teacher indicated that she used formative assessment. In the questionnaire it was mentioned that not using formative assessment was sometimes preferred as students needed to feel that they could relax at times, doing something just for fun. The process of interaction, eliciting feedback and acting on it, as described in Black and Wiliam’s (2009) definition, had been missed which therefore had no effect on the teaching practice of the teacher.

On the other end of the spectrum a teacher who reported not to use formative assessment at all, did use several key strategies. The reason for answering that she did not use formative assessment was that she had recently started to look into formative assessment and understood that her previous understanding needed to be changed.

Of the 3 different kinds of feedback which were named in the definitions, only 2 were observed in 3 of the classroom practices. Formative feedback was observed when a new assignment was introduced by one of the teachers. Simple instructions were given as students began their assignment. The feedback given was task orientated feedback (FT) and focussed on helping students to start the assignment.

Furthermore, eliciting information from the students to adjust teaching practice was observed in 2 lectures on several occasions. In the moment eliciting of information and acting upon it was observed, as well as eliciting of information to be used in a following lesson. For the latter, information was obtained by using an exit-note or by using a previous test’s outcome to form the lecture of the day.

Time being allocated to work with feedback given on written work was not observed. However what was observed was the giving of oral feedback, which students could work with. Instances of FP where feedback was focussed on process were observed in 2 lectures. There was a great difference in the complexity and skill of how guidance was given to the students.

Some of the aspects of learner autonomy such as peer activities, motivation and metacognition were observed in 3 lectures. Peer activities took the form of group discussions and working in groups to find answers to a grammar question. The teachers were present and active in the peer activities. They were there to answer questions the students might have and to guide students on their way. To be able to do this the teachers were eliciting information whilst listening in on the discussions, and processed this information so as to know the right timing of their giving input.
Motivation was used to guide, but also to create a relaxed atmosphere where learning could take place. As an example, during one of the lessons a clear objective was given why the students were working with the Welsh language and culture, trying to pronounce a Welsh word. The result of trying to pronounce a new word by both teacher and students resulted in much laughter. When the students tried the speaking exercise after that, they were very motivated and willing to try their English. Making mistakes was normal and therefore a learning atmosphere was created in the classroom.

Another example of motivation being used was observed when a teacher led a group discussion to round up a peer activity. The peer activity itself consisted out of a list of thought provoking questions which the students could choose from to discuss in their groups. The teacher led the class discussion which followed using rich questions, which made for a lively discussion where students dared to reveal even personal experiences. “Good language teaching has always been underpinned by effective questioning techniques” (Jones & Wiliam, 2008, p. 6). Being able to ask questions, especially rich questions, is of vital importance being an English Teacher, not only to elicit information from students, but also to motivate students to work with the language themselves.

A final aspect of learner autonomy, metacognition, was observed whilst students grappled with an exercise where they had to translate sentences and explain which grammar rule they applied to translate correctly.

All of the above reflections of teacher understanding show that, although there was some understanding of formative assessment in most cases, it was limited or did not align with the definition of Black and Wiliam (2009), where formative assessment centres around the eliciting of information from students to adjust teaching practice to aid student achievement. Therefore the use of individual key strategies like motivation or feedback became teaching tools, rather than incorporating them in the mindset and process of formative assessment. What became apparent however was that the more inclusive of the 5 key strategies the understanding of the teachers was, the more their teaching practice was formed by it. To clarify, on the one hand of the spectrum an understanding of formative assessment was found which was limited and restricted the teacher to explore further how to use formative assessment in aiding student development. On the other end of the spectrum an understanding was found which fully aligned with the definition given by Black and Wiliam (2009) and resulted into a total embedding of formative assessment practice. Furthermore, the teacher who was observed having embedded the process of formative assessment in her teaching had received hands-on training some years ago, which together with classroom
practice and further research had formed her understanding of the process and mindset of formative assessment. This hands-on training enabled her to put formative assessment into practice. Andersson and Palm’s (2017) study confirms the findings of this present research. Their study showed that for formative assessment to be used it is essential that training is given in the different aspects of formative assessment, including the 5 key strategies with an emphasis on process. When modelled what formative assessment can look like in the classroom, teachers gain a better understanding then by reading alone (Andersson & Palm, 2017). Starting with the mindset of eliciting information of students to adapt teaching practice, the 5 key strategies can be used to facilitate the adapting of teaching practice. When understood, the process of interaction, eliciting feedback and acting on information received has an effect on the teaching practice of a teacher.

The problem with definitions of an umbrella term such as formative assessment is that it is often difficult to sum up in a few words what it encompasses. From the above definitions it can be construed that although different aspects of formative assessment are named, it is difficult to describe all that formative assessment entails in a single sentence, and what is more how all the 5 keys of formative assessment are part of the process. The mindset of formative assessment though comprises of these 5 keys of formative assessment working together, and learning to work with them is a process (Wiliam, 2015).

To summarise, my findings show that the teachers’ understanding of formative assessment was reflected in their teaching. This meant however that their understanding of formative assessment not always aligned with the definition given by Black and Wiliam (2009). Of the two teachers who included the 5 key strategies in their definition, only one teacher, Anna, was using the process of formative assessment in her observed lesson. This showed that understanding what formative assessment entails and putting it into practice are not always the same thing.

Furthermore, by using only part of formative assessment, it can be construed that formative assessment becomes a tool, something to be used by the teacher together with whatever other teaching practice. This approach misses the mindset of formative assessment, the fact that it is a process using tools. To understand the mindset of formative assessment it is important to have practical examples and guidance whilst practicing. In my opinion, the criticism that research results vary, when it comes to the effect of formative assessment on student achievement, is grounded when we bring teacher experience with formative assessment into the equation. One of the teachers, Anna’s, understanding of formative
assessment is rooted in the hands-on teaching and training she received some years ago, as well as her own research and classroom practice.
6. Discussion
In this study, I have focussed on how formative assessment is used in the English Language Acquisition classroom of an upper secondary school in Sweden. The definition of formative assessment can be formulated in different ways. I therefore hoped, with the help of my research questions, to gain a clearer understanding of how a group of teachers define formative assessment, whether or not this understanding would show in their teaching practice, and how their understanding aligns with Black and Wiliam’s (2009) definition of the term. The definitions the teachers gave varied in complexity and this was also reflected in their teaching. Of the 5 teachers I observed, only one teacher’s entire classroom practice was formative, 3 teachers conducted several separate activities, and 1 teacher did not use formative assessment at all. I found that the more a teacher understood how the 5 keys of formative assessment worked together to support the main idea of formative assessment - that is, eliciting information from students to adapt teaching practice - the more this became visible in their teaching, shaping the teacher’s teaching practice.

As Skolverket strongly advises Swedish teachers to use formative assessment I was surprised by this result. However, looking deeper into formative assessment has made me realise, that to fully understand what formative assessment entails and to learn how to practice it is not an easy task. The recent study by Andersson and Palm (2017) mentioned in the literature review, confirms my findings, that understanding of what formative assessment involves is crucial in implementing it in the classroom. Formative assessment starts with understanding the mindset of eliciting information from the students to adapt teaching practice. The 5 key strategies become techniques used to support the mindset and a third category, tools - like for instance exit-notes - elicit the information. Furthermore, to fully understand how formative assessment is used in the classroom, it needs practice with guidance to understand the connection between theory and practice. This understanding is applicable for all subjects taught in school today, and therefore I am of the opinion that further research is necessary when it comes to the use of formative assessment in the English Language Acquisition classroom. To learn a language needs skills like reading, listening, writing, speaking, memorization and understanding grammar. These skills can be acquired in different ways. For teachers to understand more of the process of formative assessment, it could be possible that English language teachers would benefit from a similar set up as the professional development program used in the Andersson and Palm study, where during the
implementation of formative assessment teachers were trained as well as given time to read and reflect on their teaching.

Internationally, a strong research base into how to guide teachers in the implementing of formative assessment is lacking (Andersson & Palm, 2017; Hirsh & Lindberg, 2015). If formative assessment wants to oppose its critics, I see the need for more research which focusses on how the 5 key strategies work together and when applied to teaching what for effect this gives to student learning outcome. Furthermore, in view of the fact that international research shows that too few people in teacher education programs have the in-depth knowledge required to educate students in assessment questions, studies of Swedish teacher education programs is another necessity (Hirsh & Lindberg, 2015). Guidance is needed for teachers, teachers in training as well as educators of teachers in training.

For formative assessment to be able to give the wished for effects, it can be construed that application with support and training is the way forward. Collegial learning plays a significant part in this as teachers can model how to use formative assessment and exchange ideas (Wiliam & Leahy, 2015). Furthermore, they state that it is not advised to try to change all teaching practice into formative assessment straight away as it will prove too overwhelming, and see the way forward in whole schools being trained in formative assessment (Wiliam & Leahy, 2015). In Sweden however, as Skolverket does not stipulate a curriculum but gives teachers freedom to form their teaching following guidelines, I cannot see that formative assessment would become compulsory. However, if an understanding could be reached of formative assessment internationally and therefore, more research would give reliable results, this might change.

More research is needed in the different subjects taught, the age of the students and how to use formative assessment for just that category of students. Skolverket refers in their publications to Wiliam and Sadler, but it would be helpful if they would be more precise in what they expect from teachers when it comes to the use of formative assessment. How can we use formative assessment if no practical training is given?

Over the years formative assessment has changed its name from firstly formative evaluation to secondly assessment for learning to the present formative assessment. All these names have summarized the understanding of formative assessment at the time. As of yet, another name is necessary which encapsulates all that formative assessment stands for. When we hear assessment, we think grades, finding out if a student has understood us, if a student is able to deliver on a set task. We do not define our teaching practice with the word assessment. This is however what formative assessment stands for in my opinion. It is a teaching practice.
In itself, formative assessment is a combination of several teaching practices which have been used for years. But, pausing to look at your teaching practice and being willing to try a method you have not tried before, with a focus on desired outcome is not new. However, to not stop there but think through what possible answers students might give, the common mistakes they make and being prepared to work with these misconceptions before entering the classroom forms the teacher as well as the student. Preparation time allocated to teachers in upper secondary school is however not sufficient to be able to have this approach for every lesson taught. It therefore needs collegial learning, working together to share lesson plans.

Whilst obtaining a clearer result where teachers are in their understanding of what formative assessment entails, it has become clear that the mindset behind formative assessment is a pre-requisite. The more a teacher has an understanding, the more a teacher can be creative in implementing the key strategies using whatever material is at hand. It takes time to acquire this mindset and it needs practice to increase. Here collegial learning is in my understanding the way forward.
References


Skolverket. (2014b). Bedömningsportalen. Hämtat från https://bp.skolverket.se/documents/18117410/0/Digital+l%C3%A4sning_%C3%A5rs+7-9.pdf/52be00da-b92a-48de-98d6-e0f6cd1b75c0


Appendices

Appendix A: Questionnaire

Formative Assessment
This questionnaire is part of a research project about Formative Assessment

*Obligatorisk

1. E-postaddress *

2. 1. In your own words, give a definition of what formative assessment is. *

3. 2. According to the definition given in question one, do you use formative assessment? *
   Mark an answer in oval.
   ○ Yes
   ○ No

4. 3. If yes, could you give some examples in how you use formative assessment?

5. 4. If you are not using formative assessment, what is the reason?
6. What is your opinion on how students learn most effectively?


7. What is your approach in preparing lessons for all different needs in the particular class you are preparing for?


8. Please use this space if you ran out whilst answering the above questions.


Tillhandhâlla av GoogleForms
# Appendix B: Observation Chart

Lecture observed: _________________________________

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<td>Engineering effective classroom discussions and other learning tasks that elicit evidence of student understanding</td>
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