

## DOCTORAL THESIS

# An Investigation of University English Instructors' Formative Assessment Literacy in China

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## ABSTRACT

Formative assessment (FA) is regarded as a powerful approach to inform and direct teaching and learning. In order to apply FA in classroom settings effectively, teachers are expected to be assessment-capable. The extent of teachers' assessment literacy in FA implementation determines to what degree students could benefit from FA for their learning enhancement. However, few studies have explored whether teachers are literate in FA applications and their levels of literacy, especially in the Chinese higher education context. This case study examined university English instructors' FA literacy by investigating how three university instructors knew, thought about FA, and applied FA in their classrooms. These three instructors were purposefully selected as three cases for obtaining insightful data. They varied in their ages, educational backgrounds, work experiences, main English courses taught in university, etc. Documents (e.g., teacher course schedules, PowerPoint slides, reflective journals, and student quizzes/assignments), individual interviews, and classroom observations were adopted as research resources for data collection.

After iterative data analysis procedures, five salient themes were identified, namely FA and Grades, FA Instruments, Assessment Criteria, Feedback Literacy, and Teaching Reflections and Adjustments. Each theme showed the three informants' relevant knowledge, conceptions, and practices about FA, facilitating a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of English instructors' literacy in FA implementation in the Chinese tertiary context. Specifically, the research findings revealed that notwithstanding some variations, all three instructors possessed basic knowledge about FA and were willing to design and conduct different types of FA activities for students' learning improvement. However, they somewhat

still hold a product-oriented rather than process-oriented mindset when designing and applying FA. Furthermore, they lacked sufficient professional knowledge and strategies to effectively engage students in their self-regulated learning through systematic success criteria and process-oriented feedback. They also needed more practical skills or willingness for evidence-based teaching adjustments. Their inadequate FA capacities, to varying degrees, restricted student learning engagement behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively. Key facilitators and constraints regarding their FA literacy were concluded, and implications were proposed for further developing instructors' FA literacy. This study sought to provide theoretical, practical, and methodological insights and evidence on teacher assessment literacy respecting FA applications in the Chinese tertiary context and beyond.

*Keywords:* English language assessment, formative assessment, assessment literacy, Chinese higher education