

Using Formative Assessment in a Blended EFL Listening Course: Student Perceptions of Effectiveness and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how a formative assessment-based blended English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) listening course affects students' perceptions of their listening performance and what difficulties they may encounter during the course. The study was carried out at the Hue University of Foreign Languages in Vietnam. Sixty students majoring in English took part in this study. A 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. The results show that the students positively perceived the use of online formative assessment in blended language classrooms. The findings suggest that the online learning platform supported learners in experiencing rich online learning resources, actively engaging a flexible, personalised learning environment and effectively practicing their listening skills. Regarding difficulties, the lack of technical skills, and anxiety related to social communication strategies were perceived as common challenges that limit learner engagement in the peer-feedback activity and in the collaborative learning community.

KEYWORDS

Blended Learning, Formative Assessment, Online Learning Management System

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, online and blended learning have been increasingly popular in higher education, expediting the development of online learning and distance programmes (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Online formative assessment in this study is defined as a wide range of non-graded assessment methods that are used by teachers to focus on the details of student performance, learning efforts and academic achievement during a lesson, unit or course, such as qualitative feedback, portfolios and non-graded quizzes or tests (Huyta, 2010). Much recent research has investigated the transformation from in-class to online formative assessment in a number of subject fields, including science (Baleni, 2015), Media Arts (McCarthy, 2017), and various technology-related subjects (Nguyen, 2017), but little attention has been paid to the field of language. In addition, technology advance has popularised blended learning, a mixed mode of online and face-to-face learning, in language courses. This

DOI: 10.4018/IJCALLT.2021070102

study aims to explore the way EFL learners perceive the impact of online formative assessment in a blended listening course. Given the difficulty and complex skills involved in developing students' listening, this study may shed light on how learner listening skills could be effectively improved with the assistance of formative assessment, as well as provide practical guidance to help teachers plan and deliver their blended listening course more efficiently. This exploratory study is guided by the following two research questions:

1. What are the learners' perceptions of the impact of online formative assessment on their listening practice in an EFL blended course?
2. What are the difficulties that students may encounter during the implementation of a formative assessment-based blended listening course?

BACKGROUND

Effective Learning Environments

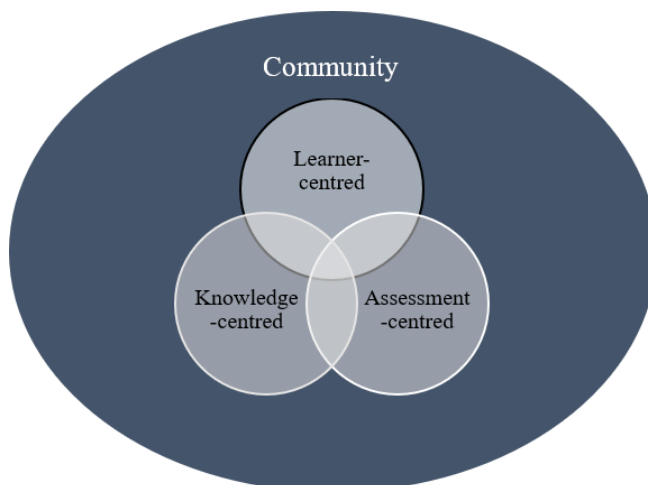
Bransford et al. (2000) argued that an effective learning environment should be learner-, knowledge-, assessment-, and community-centred (Figure 1).

A *learner-centred learning environment* views learners as individuals, scaffolding them by their different initial levels to intended learning goals and taking into consideration their initial knowledge, attitudes, culture and language proficiency. This environment is also relevant to the term 'diagnostic teaching': "attempt[ing] to discover what students think in relation to the problems on hand, discuss[ing] their misconceptions sensitively and giv[ing] them situations to go on thinking about which will enable them to readjust their ideas" (Bransford et al., 2000, pp. 133–134).

In a *knowledge-centred environment*, knowledge is viewed not merely as a collection of ideas, facts and skills but also as a rich, interconnected structure that "helps students become metacognitive by expecting new information to make sense and asking for clarification when it doesn't" (Bransford et al., 2000, p. 137).

A *community-centred environment* treats students as members of communities of co-learners at the levels of course, program, institution and society and enhances constructive interaction among them to advance learning. Therefore, Bransford et al. (2000) concluded, "At the level of classrooms

Figure 1. Perspectives on learning environments (Bransford et al., 2000)



and schools, learning seems to be enhanced by social norms that value the search for understanding and allow students (and teachers) the freedom to make mistakes in order to learn” (p. 145).

An *assessment-centred environment* treats assessment and feedback as continuous and detailed to scaffold learning and teaching. Bransford et al. (2000) noted that “[t]eachers have limited time to assess students’ performance and provide feedback, but new advances in technology can help solve this problem” (p. 142). The development of technologically supportive learning tools can provide learners and educators with a facility for in-process evaluations of student comprehension, learning needs and academic progress during the learning process, especially in blended courses where online qualitative peer-/instructor feedback or comments, online non-graded quizzes, and e-portfolios can be indicative of student learning progress and achievement.

Formative assessment is viewed as an important and fundamental perspective of the design of effective learning environments because it supports learners to revise and develop their quality of thinking and learning (Bransford et al., 2000). The above four characteristics need to be aligned in ways that overlap, mutually affect and support one another in creating a desirable learning environment (face-to-face or online) for learners. This alignment plays an important role in accelerating the learning process both inside and beyond the classroom. Without the alignment, learners can acquire valuable knowledge; however, it cannot guarantee that they fully understand the alignment or the connection between what they are learning and what they are being assessed for.

Blended Learning

The rise of the Internet has led to pedagogical innovation, such as integrating online learning into higher education. ‘Blended learning’ has attracted many definitions, but it is broadly defined as integrating instructional teaching methods (Driscoll, 2003) and is narrowly defined as a mix of online learning spaces, such as online learning platforms and web-based training and face-to-face communication or traditional teaching approaches (Rovai & Jordan, 2004). It involves not only a mixture of teaching methods or methodologies but also the incorporation of technologies or computer-mediated learning and teaching tools (Sharma, 2010).

Evidence for the benefits of blended learning for teachers and learners is accumulating. First, the blended learning model not only allows teachers to more effectively manage students as groups and individuals and create active, flexible learning environments (Tayebinik & Puteh, 2012) but also offers learners extra learning opportunities thanks to a larger variety of delivery modes (Owston et al., 2013). Studies have also explored the benefits of blended learning for learners’ satisfaction, which connects to positive changes in learners’ experiences and learning outcomes (Deperlioglu & Kose, 2013). In short, blended instruction has been encouraged in contemporary higher education because it aims for a coherent harmony between online learning spaces and face-to-face interaction (Neumeier, 2005).

Formative Assessment – From In-Class to Online

Assessment is considered a core activity in formal higher education (Bransford et al., 2000) and is basically separated into two main types, namely formative and summative assessment (Strijbos & Sluijsmans, 2010). While summative assessment is conducted as a personal evaluation at the end of a course, formative assessment is viewed as a student’s full academic progress and is linked to the learning process through various kinds of activities such as qualitative feedback from peers or instructors, online formative quizzes or assignments, and online learning reflections (Meyen et al., 2002). Many studies have shown that in-class formative assessment brings numerous benefits to learning, such as enhancing learner performance (Nicol et al., 2014), learner autonomy (Gould & Day, 2013), self-regulation (Xiao & Yang, 2019), and social relationships among learners or between learners and teacher with high-quality feedback (Crook et al., 2012).

With the boom of technology, many researchers and educators have moved their research interest from in-class to online formative assessment. Research has shown that online formative assessment

promotes learning and teaching in many aspects, such as providing ongoing, immediate feedback and engaging learners in authentic learning tasks and critical learning processes. First, timely feedback supports learners in deep, self-regulated, transferable learning by fostering learner engagement and motivation (Caruso et al., 2019; Oganje et al., 2018). It also helps them to identify their strengths and weaknesses and to continuously self-evaluate their performance (Wolsey, 2008). Second, high-quality peer/teacher feedback fosters interactive, collaborative online learning communities by providing students with diverse learning tasks involving interactions with peers and meaningful dialogues between teachers and learners (Baleni, 2015; Sorensen & Takle, 2005; Vonderwell et al., 2007). Online formative assessment also improves students' summative assessment performance with self-test quizzes (Angus & Watson, 2009). Authentic, engaging learning tasks broaden learners' responsibilities and autonomy and promote their capacity to transfer knowledge to real-life situations (Crisp & Ward, 2008).

A number of key features and design principles or approaches has been suggested to create effective online formative assessment (Gikandi et al., 2011). Firstly, instructors are required to provide learners with necessary ongoing documentation of their progress and efforts as learning evidence. Secondly, the design of formative assessment tasks should foster shared responsibilities and shared goals among course members to facilitate effective collaboration. Finally, teachers should reconsider the course objectives and ensure the diverse use of a variety of online tasks such as asynchronous discussion, quizzes, web-based tools, and e-portfolios to effectively obtain information about learners' understanding and allow educators to meet their goals as well as learners' needs. The technology platform chosen to support formative assessment must be well aligned with teaching objectives because certain technological tools are more suitable than others depending on the nature of the learning tasks (García et al., 2016).

In language-teaching classrooms, technology also positively influences formative assessment. For example, Vasquez et al. (2017) emphasised the important role of technology, such as primary school learners using tablets and interpersonal computers when adopting self-paced formative-assessment strategies in learning to spell. The results showed that tablets helped to develop a formative assessment strategy for meeting learners' specific needs and fostering collaborative work, as well as bringing a more positive impact on the learning process. Online formative assessment is also a crucial learning instrument in reading (Peyghambarian et al., 2015) and TOEIC class (Joyce, 2018). The findings showed that online formative assessment supported EFL learners to improve their reading comprehension (Peyghambarian et al., 2015) and achieve better performance in summative reading tests (Joyce, 2018; Peyghambarian et al., 2015). In addition, Tang and Wu's study (2017) examined how automated writing evaluation (AWE) assisted EFL writing instruction. The results revealed that the formative use of AWE tool mediated writing instruction by providing immediate and objective evaluation, aligning learning and assessment goals, as well as enhancing social interactions and learner autonomy.

In foreign-language learning, listening is considered a crucial, difficult skill. It is a complex activity that requires the greatest processing demands because "learners must store information in short-term memory at the same time as they are working to understand the information" (Rubbin, 1995, p. 8). Second, designing classroom listening activities is an ongoing challenge for many language teachers because listening is an active and interactive meaning-negotiation process in which the learner should be an active rather than passive receiver of aural input (Rost, 1991). In the past, the main barrier to developing learners' listening skills was limited authentic aural materials. Nowadays, technology development in language education offers an abundant collection of free online learning resources to language learners and educators (Romeo & Hubbard, 2011). Without denying the ability of traditional listening classrooms to provide learners with valuable aural input, it would be meaningful to investigate how the integration and adaptation of online learning in a listening course can engage students in listening tasks. In this respect, formative assessment in blended environments is claimed to respond well to learners' needs (Vasquez et al., 2017), facilitate listening practice by rich online

listening resources and flexible learning spaces or opportunities (Romeo & Hubbard, 2011), foster a self-regulated and collaborative learning environment (Xiao & Yang, 2019), and improve learners' performance in summative assessment (Joyce, 2018; Peyghambarian et al., 2015). However, how online formative assessment impacts language students' learning attitudes and performance receives little attention; this research attempts to shed some light from this perspective.

Formative Assessment in a Blended-Learning Course

Blended learning involves the integration of learning content and instructional teaching methods in various learning modes to maximise the strengths of each mode and optimise education effectiveness. Therefore, integrating online formative assessment tasks into a blended-learning course assists the learning process in multiple ways. First, the varied nature of formative assessment provides learners with opportunities to closely interact with peers and instructors via information sharing or online discussions in both offline and online learning spaces (Gikandi et al., 2011). The effective design of formative assessment in blended courses encourages ongoing collaboration among learners and teachers, which nurtures effective learning communities through scaffolding, such as ongoing observation or immediate feedback (Baleni, 2015; Sorensen & Takle, 2005). Second, the diversified application of formative assessment helps teachers set more learning objectives in blended courses, which improves learners' engagement and interest in both classes and helps teachers evaluate more student skills and knowledge (Nguyen, 2017; Young, 2002). Finally, formative assessment in blended platforms offers teachers more ongoing opportunities to evaluate student performance and to identify their learning gaps by feedback and appropriate scaffolding, even beyond the classroom (McCarthy, 2017). This can help learners achieve their learning objectives and meet their identified learning needs more effectively.

In summary, many studies have evaluated the impact of technology integration on language learning in higher education. Online formative assessment is a significant task in the learning process; along with identifying the aforementioned benefits of formative assessment, most blended-learning studies have followed the trend of analysing course design or the impact of framework implementation in various non-language education majors, such as technology, science and general education.

However, only a few studies have examined the efficacy of online formative assessment in blended courses in language learning majors and, further, to our knowledge, no research has been conducted on listening skills. Therefore, the current study investigates learners' perceptions of the impact of online formative assessment on listening practice in a blended course. Learner-initiated perceptions must be studied as the first step because they can provide convincing evidence to extend the formative assessment-centred blended-learning framework from basic levels, such as activities and courses, to higher levels, such as programmes and institutions. The investigation of learners' voices is especially needed in local educational contexts where students have little-to-no experience in formative assessment and blended learning at the tertiary level. A much more detailed picture of students' learning experiences in the new learning environments would increase student acceptance and, eventually, institutional policy and adoption.

METHODOLOGY

Background and Participant Information

The current study took place over 15 weeks in the Department of English at the University of Foreign Languages, Hue University in Vietnam. The subjects were 60 first-year English major students who took a blended listening course comprising two classes. Both classes were taught by the same Vietnamese teacher, and each lesson lasted 100 minutes per week. The teacher briefed the students on the research purpose in the two listening classes she taught and recruited the participants with their consent on behalf of the authors.

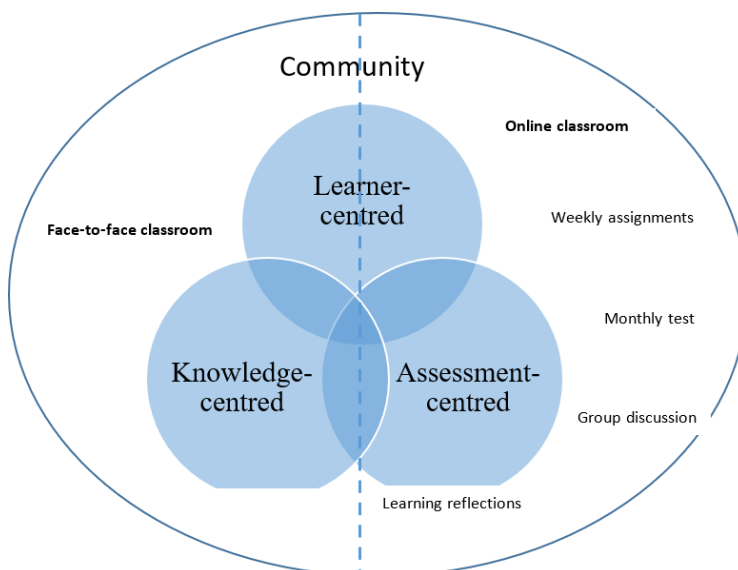
The Blended-Learning Framework and Course Materials

A blended-learning framework that combined a variety of learning activities was introduced to assess learners and evaluate the benefits of online formative assessment in the blended course. The blended course was designed to reflect the essence of blended learning, that is, “the optimum mix of course delivery in order to provide the most effective language learning experience” (Sharma, 2010, p. 457). Based on Bransford et al.’s (2000) work, an assessment-based blended-learning framework (see Figure 2 for details) was created to guide the design of the learning and assessment tasks. This framework highlighted the importance of four learning characteristics: *learner-centred*, *knowledge-centred*, *assessment-centred* and *community-centred* learning.

The blended course, which was hosted on an LMS platform (Schoology), was designed to help students practise their listening skills over 15 weeks and consisted of three formative assessment tasks: (A) online group discussion, (B) weekly/monthly listening tests and (C) online self-reflections. As seen in Figure 2, the blended course design, including face-to-face and an online classroom, aimed not only to extend the learning space for listening practice but also to create effective learning environments by designing numerous online formative-assessment tasks. While the online group discussion aimed to enhance community- and learner-centred characteristics, the online formative assignments fostered assessment- and knowledge-centred characteristics. Finally, the online learning reflections highlighted the learner-centred characteristic (see Figure 2 for details).

- (A) **Online group discussion:** The students were required to choose peers and form groups of five at the beginning of the semester. During the course, group members took turns uploading at least one audio file per week to the learning platform, and the other group members participated in discussing the content of the file. A list of suggested questions and supportive guidance were shared by the teacher as initial assistance.
- (B) **Online weekly/monthly assignments:** After each face-to-face class, the teacher uploaded weekly/monthly listening exercises aligned to the in-class listening themes and skills as extended learning opportunities beyond the classroom. One reference folder of diverse online learning

Figure 2. Assessment-based blended learning framework



materials was also shared to help learners extend their practice and familiarise themselves with the formative test format.

- (C) **Online learning reflections:** First, each group member was guided to reflect on their learning progress and their learning experience and to evaluate their peers' contributions. Second, the students were encouraged to share their opinions on what difficulties they encountered during the course and how the tasks should be improved. A list of guiding questions was recommended to facilitate the students' sharing.

Although all three aforementioned learning activities supported learners to practise their listening skill, they differed from in-class listening practice tasks, and summative assessment listening tests from three perspectives. Firstly, students' performance was not graded but performance-oriented to reflect the process that students follow to accomplish a task with the focus on students' learning efforts over time. Secondly, the listening formative tasks highlighted the self-paced, flexible, and personalised aspects of the learning environment without limits on learning time, learning space and level of language proficiency. Thirdly, the listening tasks emphasised the active role of learners such as goal setting, time management, self-evaluation, and recognising learning gaps.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data analysis focused on three data sources: a paper-based questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and student self-reflections. The questionnaire served to identify students' reflections on the impact of online listening formative activities in the blended course (*R.Q.1*) and on the difficulties or challenges they may have encountered during the course (*R.Q.2*). The semi-structured interviews elicited further clarification of their responses to some questions in the questionnaire (*R.Q.1*) and mainly explored the learners' difficulties during the implementation of the course (*R.Q.2*)

First, each participant was invited to complete a questionnaire immediately after the completion of the course. The questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese and re-examined by two experienced translation and interpretation teachers in the English Department. The 27-item questionnaire designed by the researchers was divided into two parts: a Likert-scale part and an open-ended part under four main sections: (1) Personal information (Open-ended questions), (2) Student reflections on the impact of Group discussion (13 Likert-scale items), (3) Student reflections on Weekly/Monthly assignments (13 Likert-scale items), and (4) Student reflections on Learners' difficulties (Open-ended question). The first section of the questionnaire elicited the participants' demographic information, which was used to contact them at the interview stage. The purposes of the second and third sections were to collect information on how group discussions and weekly/monthly assignments impacted learners' language practice, respectively. These sections solicited participant opinions on five key factors summarised from the review of past studies: (a) self-regulation of listening with reference to Xiao and Yang (2019) (6 items), (b) learning resources with reference to Crisp and Ward (2008) (2 items), (c) peer/instructor feedback with reference to Wolsey (2008) (1 item), (d) learning environment with reference to Sorensen and Takle (2005) and Vonderwell et al. (2007) (3 items), and (e) language skill practice with reference to Angus and Watson (2009) (2 items). In the Likert-type questionnaire, the responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The open-ended section, in contrast, simply asked participants about the difficulties they encountered during the course. The questionnaire was reviewed by an experienced researcher with expertise on questionnaire design as well as two language teachers who had more than 10 years of language teaching and research experience. They thoroughly examined the content validity of the items to confirm that all questionnaire items were clear and expressed all facets of each perspective to be measured. Moreover, one of the researchers carried out a pilot test of the questionnaire with 20 students who had similar characteristics to the target sample to check the clarity of instructions and the time needed to complete the instrument.

The questionnaire was followed by a semi-structured interview in which the participants were asked to elaborate on their responses to some questions in the questionnaire. Each interview lasted

approximately 40–60 minutes. The interview questions were designed based on the invited participants' questionnaire responses and focused more on the difficulties the participants faced in the formative-assessment activities in the blended-listening course. During the interview, respondents were asked to talk about their experience of being a learner in a formative assessment-based blended listening course and how they responded to the challenges during the course. The participants were also asked to write online self-reflections on their learning experiences by identifying both how the formative assessment assisted their listening skill practice and how the tasks could be improved in the future to minimise learner difficulties.

Regarding the quantitative analysis, simple descriptive statistics, such as the means (M) and standard deviations (SD) of participants' quantitative responses to the questionnaire, were calculated to analyse the Likert-scale responses in three aspects: students' attitudes towards the usefulness of (1) online group discussion, (2) weekly/monthly assignments and (3) learning difficulties. To obtain more specific data on students' reflections on the course efficacy, the participants were asked to write online self-reflections, respond to four open-ended questions in the questionnaire and further open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews. Content analysis and categorisation were performed to analyse all qualitative data collected, following the guidance provided by Creswell and Guetterman (2019). All qualitative data collected from these sources were coded and analysed by two coders: the researcher and a trained research assistant. Two coders coded the data, conducted content and keyword analysis and generated categories from the participants' responses. Then, all coding and categories were confirmed by the researcher and an inter-encoder agreement of 85% was achieved. Categories were then grouped and illustrated in a table.

RESULTS

RQ 1: Students' Perceptions of the Impact of Online Formative Assessment

To answer Research Question One, the mean scores and standard deviations of the students' responses to the Likert-scale questionnaire were computed. The students' responses are presented based on two main online formative assessment tasks, i.e., online group discussion and weekly/monthly assignments, each being measured under five key perspectives: (1) self-regulation of listening; (2) learning resources; (3) peer/instructor feedback; (4) learning environment and (5) language skill practice. Note that pseudonyms have been given to participants quoted in the following sections.

Online Group Discussion and Weekly/Monthly Assignments

Self-Regulation of Listening

The descriptive statistics results described in Table 1 show that the learners' responses were slightly more positive for the weekly/monthly assignments, most finding that it helped them practise critical thinking, deep learning ($M = 3.90$; $SD = 0.78$) and recognising their current strengths and weaknesses in listening ($M = 3.8$; $SD = 0.78$). The lowest mean scores were on self-regulating learning processes ($M = 3.3$; $SD = 0.77$) and activating learners' ownership and responsibility ($M = 3.4$; $SD = 0.93$).

However, most participants appreciated the weekly/monthly assignments for equipping them with the necessary listening strategies to become engaged, autonomous learners ($M = 4.1$; $SD = 0.67$), followed by helping them monitor their learning progress ($M = 4.1$; $SD = 0.76$), and activating a sense of ownership and responsibility ($M = 3.7$; $SD = 0.82$). In contrast, practising critical thinking and deep learning had the lowest mean score ($M = 3.3$; $SD = 0.70$).

The participants positively perceived online group discussion as a useful platform that activated critical thinking, promoted deep learning and helped them identify their learning gaps. To a lesser degree, the online weekly/monthly formative tests also equipped learners with listening strategies to become engaged, self-regulated, responsible learners.

Table 1. Reflections on the factor of self-regulated learner characteristics

Items 5-point Likert-scale questions (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree) N=60, response rate=100%	Online Group Discussion		Weekly/Monthly Assignments	
	Mean (Max=5; Min=1)	SD	Mean (Max=5; Min=1)	SD
1. Helps me be equipped with the necessary listening strategies to become an engaged learner.	3.4	0.93	4.1	0.67
5. Helps me increase a sense of student ownership and responsibility.	3.3	0.80	3.7	0.82
6. Helps me self-regulate my learning progress.	3.3	0.77	4.1	0.76
7. Helps me recognise the strengths and weaknesses in my current listening skill.	3.8	0.78	3.5	0.90
10. Helps me practise critical thinking and deep learning.	3.9	0.78	3.3	0.70

Learning Resources

As shown in Table 2, participants perceived online group discussion ($M = 4.0$; $SD = 0.74$) and weekly/monthly assignments ($M = 4.2$; $SD = 0.70$) as effective in providing rich, authentic learning resources to practise their listening skills. The learners also appreciated collecting, storing and managing their listening references, such as listening to files and watching videos electronically for online group discussion ($M = 4.1$; $SD = 0.61$) and weekly/monthly assignments ($M = 3.9$; $SD = 0.77$), respectively.

Regarding online group discussion, one interviewee highlighted the variety of learning resources shared by his peers in forums, such as the variety of listening genres, topics and English accents across the world:

I was really motivated because of a lot of listening resources shared by my friends, firstly for knowledge, such as news and pronunciation tips and for entertainment, such as songs, stories and travelling tips. (Jimmy, Interview 5)

Turning to online formative assignments, the interviewees praised the reliable, instant, automatic grading system, the variety of question types and the flexibility of learning time and venue that created an effective learning environment beyond the classroom, as indicated in one self-reflection:

Table 2. Reflections on the learning resources factor

Items 5-point Likert-scale questions (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree) N=60, response rate=100%	Online Group Discussion		Weekly/Monthly Assignments	
	Mean (Max=5; Min=1)	SD	Mean (Max=5; Min=1)	SD
3. Helps me collect, store and manage my listening references such as listening to files and watching videos electronically.	3.9	0.77	4.1	0.61
4. Provides me with rich, authentic learning resources needed to practise my listening skill.	4.0	0.74	4.2	0.70

Weekly/monthly exercises help me imagine what the final test looks like, and then I can prepare appropriate strategies before sitting for the final examination, and the automatic marking system helps me observe my listening progress over time. (Oyla, Self-reflection 15)

Peer/Instructor Feedback

As seen in Table 3, students felt that online group discussion ($M = 3.3$; $SD = 1.06$) and weekly/monthly assignments ($M = 3.5$; $SD = 0.85$) had fairly good effects on peer/instructor feedback; they were satisfied with the feedback from peers and instructors in two types of activities. However, they assigned widely varying scores ($SD = 1.06$) to online group discussion. This suggests that the students had diverse views regarding whether online group discussion provided constructive feedback or not.

The qualitative data collected from individual interviews produced mixed results regarding the online group discussion. On the one hand, online feedback allowed learners to develop critical-thinking skills and create more supportive learning spaces than face-to-face classroom, as stated below:

Giving comments online to my friends allows me more time to think than in-class comments. Therefore, I felt less stressed and gave feedback more regularly and critically. I also learned many good listening strategies from my friends and felt easier to tackle difficulties in listening skill by the other peers' help. (Jimmy, Interview 10)

On the other hand, providing and receiving peer feedback was considered not effective due to students' conventional learning culture and concerns about negative comments, as Archie and Oyla mentioned:

I'm worried that my negative comments are not correct and break our friendship. (Archie, Self-reflection 3)

Some outstanding students dominate the group discussion, so some students were not confident enough to share their opinions in fear of losing face. (Oyla, Interview 2)

Learning Environment

Feedback from the participants about the learning environment factor in Table 4 showed that most felt that online group discussion and formative assignments reduced stress and anxiety ($M = 3.8$; $SD = 0.98$) compared to in-class listening ($M = 4.2$; $SD = 0.69$), followed by positive evaluations of the accessibility factor ($M = 4.1$; $SD = 0.66$) compared to the in-class environment ($M = 4.0$; $SD = 0.84$). However, the participants gave lower scores to the function of enhancing learner–learner interactions ($M = 3.4$; $SD = 0.83$) and learner–instructor interactions ($M = 3.0$; $SD = 0.59$).

The interview data supported formative assignments reducing learning stress, as one participant reported:

Table 3. Reflections on the peer/instructor feedback factor

Items 5-point Likert-scale questions (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree) N=60, response rate=100%	Online Group Discussion		Weekly/Monthly Assignments	
	Mean (Max=5; Min=1)	SD	Mean (Max=5; Min=1)	SD
12. Facilitates constructive feedback from peers and instructors	3.3	1.06	3.5	0.85

Table 4. Reflections on the learning environment factor

Items 5-point Likert-scale questions (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree) N=60, response rate=100%	Online Group Discussion		Weekly/Monthly Assignments	
	Mean (Max=5; Min=1)	SD	Mean (Max=5; Min=1)	SD
9. Reduces stress and anxiety in listening compared to in-class listening.	3.8	0.98	4.2	0.69
11. Is easy to navigate.	4.0	0.84	4.1	0.66
13. Enhances learner–learner and learner–instructor communication and interactions.	3.4	0.83	3.0	0.59

I can do the listening exercises many times, so I felt less stressed than in-class listening. The repeating function allows me to practise my skill according to my own learning pace. (Oyla, Interview 17)

These activities [the weekly/monthly assignments] allow me to engage in higher quality of learning, such as personal audio equipment, quiet room compared to in-class listening. (Lisa, Interview 12)

The participants also perceived that online group discussion supported social interactions and collaborative learning by creating open, flexible, learner-friendly learning spaces beyond the classroom. However, the lack of communicative skills and differences in language-proficiency levels among students were the main barriers limiting learners’ interactions, as noted by Mimi:

Working in groups, I felt it was not easy to communicate with the other members. Sometimes I cannot understand the others’ ideas [in English], and it’s hard to keep the conversation going on. I thought this was caused by the different language proficienc[ies] among group members. (Mimi, Interview 7)

The Practice of Listening Skill

Most learners agreed that online discussion not only helped them practise their listening skills more effectively ($M = 4.0$; $SD = 0.75$) but also motivated them to listen more often ($M = 4.0$; $SD = 0.81$). The learners’ reflections showed that they believed in the effectiveness of the assessment-based blended-learning model in their practice of listening because of the extended learning opportunities and spaces beyond the traditional classroom:

In the online group discussion, the listening files with diverse and interesting topics are shared each week, and they motivate me to listen more often at home. (Mimi, Self-reflection 32)

Similarly, the participants agreed that online formative activities allowed them to practise their listening skills more effectively ($M = 4.3$; $SD = 0.65$) and more often ($M = 4.2$; $SD = 0.63$) (Table 5). The learners’ responses showed that they perceived the assessment-based blended-learning model was effective in aiding their listening skills in multiple dimensions, as mentioned in the comments:

The weekly/monthly tests help me get acquainted with the format of summative tests. (Mimi, Self-reflection 35)

The duration of in-class listening is so limited, which is not enough to practise language skills. (Oyla, Interview 29)

Table 5. Reflections on the language skill practice factor

Items 5-point Likert-scale questions (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree) N=60, response rate=100%	Online Group Discussion		Weekly/Monthly Assignment	
	Mean (Max=5; Min=1)	SD	Mean (Max=5; Min=1)	SD
2. Helps me practise my listening skill more effectively.	4.0	0.75	4.3	0.65
8. Motivates me to listen more often.	4.0	0.81	4.2	0.63

To summarise, the answer to Research Question One, therefore, is that the students positively perceived formative assessment activities in the online learning environment as a flexible, personalised and learner-friendly learning platform in which they could activate their critical thinking and deep learning, recognise their learning gaps, and effectively practise their listening skill with rich online learning materials and resources. However, the participants were not so keen about receiving and providing peer feedback nor about interacting with each other in the collaborative learning community.

RQ 2: The Students' Learning Difficulties

Another purpose of the current study was to explore the difficulties experienced by students during the course. The participants' responses to the open-ended questions were categorised based on key ideas. A total of 82 responses related to challenges was collected from the 60 participants; some students listed more than one problem, and a few responses were collected via individual interviews. To answer Research Question 2, data from interviews and reflective statements were analysed and coded using pseudonyms. Six major categories of challenges emerged from the qualitative analysis (see Table 6).

Problems related to peer feedback were mentioned as a primary concern. Many reported lacking confidence to produce and receive peer feedback in online group discussions due to a lack of communicative strategies and social interaction skills when working in groups, as pointed out by Lisa:

It's difficult to produce constructive feedback which encourages and supports our peers, so I often provide some general feedback and avoid the negative feedback because of the fear of losing face, breaking the social relationships or making inappropriate comments. (Lisa, Interview 25)

Many participants also remarked that they could not successfully deal with technical difficulties, such as unstable internet connections, when submitting their assignments due to a lack of technical skills and learning experience. One student explained:

Table 6. Challenges encountered during the course

No.	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
1	Peer feedback/comments	25	30%
2	Technical problems	21	26%
3	Anxiety	18	22%
4	Self-regulation	9	11%
5	Layout and readability	7	8%
6	Clarity of instructions	2	3%
	Total	82	100%

I still prefer the summative assessment via paper-based tests in the classroom under the teachers' supervision because I'm not confident enough to tackle the problems related to technologies, blended courses and online formative assessment. (Archie, Interview 21)

Many students also expressed anxiety related to social pressure and level of language proficiency. Although online formative assessment created a less stressful learning environment than in-class assessment due to the flexible learning time and space, many participants expressed being nervous uploading their listening files for group discussions because they lacked confidence in their selections, such as the content and difficulty level of the file, and they were afraid to be criticised for sharing unsuitable listening resources. One student put it this way:

I am afraid that the content of the listening file I share is boring and not suitable for the current level of proficiency of the other peers. So it's kind of embarrassing. (Oyla, Interview data 16)

Regarding the problem of self-regulation skills, a few participants claimed that they had difficulty managing their learning schedules on their own, especially in the online learning platform without an instructor's supervision. One student even reported that she could not successfully complete her monthly online formative-assessment tasks because she missed their due dates (Mimi, Interview 25).

To sum up, regarding the answer to Research Question Two, the students mainly expressed a lack of confidence in receiving and producing peer feedback, followed by difficulties related to digital literacy and anxiety related to the differences in levels of language proficiency.

DISCUSSION

Using Formative Assessment to Develop Listening Strategies to Foster Self-Regulated, Life-Long Learners

Regarding self-regulation, the findings show that formative assessment tasks can equip learners with necessary self-regulation skills to become active, life-long learners to improve their listening.

During the course, integrating formative assessment supported learners to develop the characteristics of self-regulated learners, including increasing a sense of student ownership, activating critical thinking and deep learning, self-monitoring their listening learning progress, and recognising gaps in current listening skills. Specifically, the forum activities allowed learners to practise listening in a collaborative online learning community by sharing their understanding of learning objectives, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and then revising their work based on multi-directional dialogues among learners and teachers. This fostered group working strategies, critical thinking, and deep learning. Formative assignments as individual activities also helped learners become engaged and autonomous by helping them acquire a sense of responsibility (working individually), self-manage their learning schedules (logical learning and planner-making), and self-monitor their learning progress (comparing learning progress over time).

However, a few participants encountered challenges related to self-regulation, time management, and schedule-planning. Perhaps the long-period dominance of summative tests and student dependence on teachers' supervision in local exam-oriented learning culture can explain these issues. These learning habits sometimes limit the active roles and self-regulation capacities of some language students. Therefore, teachers should promote formative assessment tasks in language courses and gradually reduce teacher scaffolding over time to minimise the dominance of in-class tests and end-of-semester examinations and effectively activate learners' self-regulation strategies.

These findings support previous studies' conclusions that formative assessment can foster student self-regulated language learning by helping learners become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses, equipping them with necessary strategies to tackle learning activities for future learning

(Xiao, 2017), and developing their deep understanding of and capability for self-regulated learning (Xiao & Yang, 2019). The present research also extends Lam's (2014) results on formative assessment, promoting learners' understanding of assessment criteria and increasing learning motivation.

Facilitating Positive Learning Experience by Formative Assessment

Online group discussions showed promise as formative-assessment activities that successfully provided authentic online learning resources and created a flexible learning environment. The participants positively evaluated the effectiveness of the variety of genres, content, and authentic English accents in regard to practising listening skills. This finding is consistent with earlier results that authentic learning tasks and materials relevant to real-life situations can develop learners' capacities to transfer knowledge to new situations (Mackey, 2009), create deep, collaborative, reflective learning environments (Crisp & Ward, 2008), and support students in becoming self-regulated, life-long learners (Herrington et al., 2006).

Regarding the weekly/monthly formative assignments, the quantitative and qualitative results demonstrated that they provided learners with more opportunities and learning tools to improve their listening skills. They familiarised participants not only with the summative assessment format but also with other formats of listening tasks, producing a learner-friendly environment for continuously practising language skills according to learners' personal learning paces with the assistance of online learning tools and receiving instant feedback and accurate grading. The learners' reflections agree with the results of Smith (2007) and Angus and Watson (2009): immediate feedback from self-test quizzes allows students to self-evaluate, monitor, and revise their performance (Smith, 2007) and helps them achieve higher levels of performance in summative assessment (Angus & Watson, 2009).

Building an Interactive Online Community of Practice for Learners With Formative Assessment

Regarding interaction, online group discussion was not successful in enhancing interactions among peers beyond the classroom. Although the students positively perceived the forum as a collaborative learning community in which they "can learn from each other, share the common interest, and build up friendship" (Lisa, Interview 20), many reported not feeling confident when working in groups. This finding differs from Vonderwell et al.'s (2007) and Sorensen's (2005) results, who found online collaborative learning communities provide dynamic opportunities for social interactions among group members. The students' anxiety about social communication and collaborative learning was possibly rooted in their lack of social interaction skills, communication strategies, and cultural knowledge. Another possible explanation is the dominance of strong students and discrimination against learners with lower levels of language proficiency or contribution. Therefore, teachers should increase learners' confidence and engagement by encouraging comments from less active students, balancing comments among group members and equipping students with necessary social skills in online community learning in parallel with the main learning tasks. Moreover, teachers should increase participants' interactions in groups by involving guiding questions and aligning the forum topics with textbook themes.

Second, for a similar reason, online group discussion was found not to be an ideal platform for eliciting peer feedback. Although the activity was originally designed to support peer feedback, the participants did not actively engage in providing feedback to each other. Since online peer feedback as a form of formative assessment is still a new activity in language teaching, learners possibly encountered problems related to cultural learning or social pressure, such as losing face, breaking social relations, and lacking relevant strategies to generate and respond to feedback effectively among learners. Another possible explanation is that learners sometimes faced difficulties expressing or clarifying ideas clearly in written English without the assistance of verbal and non-verbal language forms, as in face-to-face classrooms. This result is consistent with the findings of McCarthy (2017)

in that the participants highly valued feedback from their instructors as experts in education who provided more in-depth analysis than they received from general peer feedback. Therefore, future implementation should consider a systematic utilisation of various online tools such as online chats, SNSs and email to overcome the absence of informal communication channels, such as body expression and oral questions common in in-class interactions, in analysing learner understanding (Wolsey, 2008). Scaffolding may offer alternative topics to continue the thread of discussion (Vonderwell et al., 2007).

Solutions to Difficulties Arising From the Formative Assessment–Based Blended EFL Listening Course

In the formative assessment in the EFL blended listening course, many participants encountered certain learning difficulties. For these problems to be minimised for more effective future use, the following pedagogical suggestions are made:

- Language learners should be regularly trained to develop strategies to work in online learning communities, such as techniques for providing/responding to peer feedback, critical thinking, and collaborative learning strategies. These soft skills should be practised and improved both in face-to-face and online classrooms through a variety of learning activities.
- Language learners should be orientated and initially motivated by sufficient provision of information about the alignment of the course’s objectives, knowledge, formative assessment, and sense of community in online contexts.
- Teachers should provide learners with more opportunities to become acquainted with online learning resources, help handle technical problems encountered by the learners by giving concrete guidance or including frequently asked questions (FAQ) sections, and organise co-learner groups to encourage collaborative learning. Although online or blended learning models encourage active learner roles, instructors should provide learners with appropriate assistance, especially during the early stages of the new learning environment and help them gain more experience using online learning tools, such as giving encouraging comments and offering personal tutorials.
- Teachers should critically reconsider the teaching goals to choose appropriate and varied online teaching platforms to support formative assessment because some types of technology are more effective than others depending on the nature of the tasks. In addition, the use of diverse online tools would help teachers minimise the lack of physical interaction which is one of the main challenges of the online learning environment compared to face-to-face contexts.
- At the administrative level, the faculty should promote online/blended learning courses, construct a blended learning system which focuses on formative assessment, and increase student engagement by providing appropriate equipment, such as learning spaces, stable internet connections, and library computers.

CONCLUSION

The study examined student perceptions of the effectiveness and challenges of online formative assessment in a blended EFL listening course and yielded positive results from multiple perspectives. The results show that the course created a flexible, active learning environment that promoted self-regulated learning and encouraged learners’ continuous knowledge consolidation. It also contributed to the development of soft skills and language-learning autonomy. However, the findings also point out three main challenges to students: lacking technical skills, lacking communicative strategies and anxiety about social pressure. Accordingly, a number of pedagogical implications can be drawn to empower assessment-centred blended learning courses, including learner training, support from instructors, and support from administrators at the programme and institution levels.

This study has several limitations. First, the research data were collected based on students' perceptions through a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews; therefore, their generalisation may be limited. Future research should examine the efficacy of such courses through exploratory and quasi-experimental studies on larger scales. Second, the questionnaire was handed out immediately after the course ended, so it only captured immediately perceived effects and challenges from the learners' responses. Future studies should investigate long-term effects.

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APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE

For Students

This questionnaire is designed to obtain your reflections towards the use of assessment-based blended listening course. Please rest assured that all the information provided by you will be kept confidential and will be used for research purposes only. Your name will NOT be disclosed anywhere in the research report.

Please take some time to read and answer the following questions.

A. Please check the appropriate answers or write an answer in the space provided

1. Your name:.....
2. Your email address:.....
3. Your phone number:.....
4. Have you had any experience in online learning or technology-mediated language learning in the previous semesters, or in the other language courses?
 A. Yes B. Not yet

If Yes, please identify in detail (what language skills?).....

B. The following questions concern the impact of online group discussion (Forums).

For each question, make your choice based on your learning experience during the course.

Table 7.

Items	Strongly disagree Strongly agree				
GD1. Online group discussion helps me be equipped with the necessary listening strategies needed to become autonomous and engaged learners.	1	2	3	4	5
GD2. Online group discussion helps me practise my listening skill more effectively.	1	2	3	4	5
GD3. Online group discussion helps me collect, store, and manage my listening references such as listening files and videos electronically.	1	2	3	4	5
GD4. Online group discussion provide me with rich and authentic learning resources needed to practise listening skill.	1	2	3	4	5
GD5. Online group discussion helps me increase a sense of student ownership and responsibility.	1	2	3	4	5
GD6. Online group discussion helps me self-regulate my learning progress.	1	2	3	4	5
GD7. Online group discussion helps me recognise the strength and weakness in my current listening skill.	1	2	3	4	5
GD8. Online group discussion motivate me to listen more often.	1	2	3	4	5
GD9. Online group discussion reduces stress and anxiety in listening compared to in-class listening.	1	2	3	4	5
GD10. Online group discussion helps me practise critical thinking and deep learning.	1	2	3	4	5
GD11. Online group discussion is easy to navigate.	1	2	3	4	5
GD12. Online group discussion facilitates constructive feedback from peers and instructors.	1	2	3	4	5
GD13. Online group discussion enhances social communication and interactions between learners-learners, and learners-instructor.	1	2	3	4	5

C. The following questions concern the impact of online weekly/ monthly assignments.

For each question, make your choice based on your learning experience during the course.

Table 8.

Items	Strongly disagree Strongly agree				
A1. Online weekly/ monthly assignments help me be equipped with the necessary listening strategies needed to become autonomous and engaged learners.	1	2	3	4	5
A2. Online weekly/ monthly assignments help me practise my listening skill more effectively.	1	2	3	4	5
A3. Online weekly/ monthly assignments help me collect, store, and manage my listening references such as listening files and videos electronically.	1	2	3	4	5
A4. Online weekly/ monthly assignments provide me with rich and authentic learning resources needed to practise listening skill.	1	2	3	4	5
A5. Online weekly/ monthly assignments help me increase a sense of student ownership and responsibility.	1	2	3	4	5
A6. Online weekly/ monthly assignments help me self-regulate my learning progress.	1	2	3	4	5
A7. Online weekly/ monthly assignments help me recognise the strength and weakness in my current listening skill.	1	2	3	4	5
A8. Online weekly/ monthly assignments motivate me to listen more often.	1	2	3	4	5
A9. Online weekly/ monthly assignments reduce stress and anxiety in listening compared to in-class listening.	1	2	3	4	5
A10. Online weekly/ monthly assignments help me practise critical thinking and deep learning.	1	2	3	4	5
A11. Online weekly/ monthly assignments are easy to navigate.	1	2	3	4	5
A12. Online weekly/ monthly assignments facilitate constructive feedback from peers and instructors.	1	2	3	4	5
A13. Online weekly/ monthly assignments enhance social communication and interactions between learners-learners, and learners-instructor.	1	2	3	4	5

D. The following questions concern the challenges students encountered during the course.

For each question, make your choice based on your learning experience during the course.

Questions: What are the challenges you encountered during the implementation of assessment-based blended learning course?

Thanks for your contribution!

APPENDIX B: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEME

For Students

Dear participants,

Thanks for your participation in the research as well as your comments on the questionnaire. After analysing your choices in the questionnaire, I would like to ask some following open-ended questions in order to verify your choices and your comments in the questionnaires. Please rest assured that all the information provided by you will be kept confidential and will be used for research purposes only.

Please take time to read and answer the following questions.

1. Can you share your general reflections towards the impact of online formative assessment activities implemented in the course on your learning process?
2. How do you evaluate the efficacy of the two main formative assessment activities (forums/ formative assignments) in suggested factor such as learning environment/ learning resources/ peer- or instructor- feedback/ platform layout/ your listening practice?
3. Apart from the impact related to your listening practice, how do reflect the impact of online formative assessment activities on the practice and development of soft skills, or needed strategies to become an autonomous and engaged learner?
4. According to your own learning experience, do you encounter any challenges or difficulties during the implementation of online formative assessment in the listening course?
5. In the activity of online group discussion, have you engaged in producing and receiving peer-feedback? Do you encounter any challenges or difficulties?
6. In the activity of online formative assignments, do you encountered any difficulties related to technical issues or time management/ schedule planner?
7. Do you have any suggestions to improve the implementation of the assessment-based blended listening course in the future?

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