

## FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND VIETNAMESE

## EXPLORING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN PRIMARY ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

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**ABSTRACT:** The growing emphasis on formative assessment in primary education has led to shifts in classroom assessment practices. This mixed-methods study investigates how pre-service primary English teachers perceive and implement formative assessment during their 8-week practicum in local schools. While participants showed a fundamental conceptual understanding of formative assessment, they encountered difficulties in applying it consistently in real classroom settings. Their assessment practices frequently failed to align with key formative principles, particularly in using assessment data to inform instruction and promote student learning.

**KEY WORDS:** formative assessment; teaching practicum; pre-service English teachers; primary education; in-classroom assessment practice.

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years, Vietnam has undergone a comprehensive educational reform, with significant changes initiated by the introduction of the new general education curriculum in 2018, which has been implemented since 2020. One of the most notable shifts has been the introduction of English as a compulsory subject from grade 3 onwards, marking the change from a 7-year English program to a 10-year English program in the general education system. This curricular change has been accompanied by a broader transformation in language teaching approaches and assessment methods, particularly at the primary level.

Central to this reform is a heightened emphasis on formative assessment (FA), a pedagogical strategy that has been widely recognized for its potential to enhance student learning outcomes (Black & Wiliam, 1998). The Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) has formally acknowledged this shift through the issuance of Circular No27/2020/TT-BGDDT on assessing primary students. This document, which began implementation for grade 1 in the 2020-2021 academic year and is set to roll out progressively to grade 5 over the subsequent four years, presents a new vision for assessment practices at the primary level. The circular articulates the purpose of assessment as follows:

"The aim of assessment is to provide accurate and timely information to identify academic achievements and personal development in accordance with the required outcomes of the general education program at the primary level, and to track student progress in order to guide learning activities and adjust teaching practices to improve educational quality" (MoET, 2020).

This statement shows a paradigm shift from summative to formative assessment, emphasizing the role of assessment not merely as a tool for evaluation, but as an integral component of the teaching and learning process. In this context, pre-service teachers specializing in primary English education are at the forefront of this transition. During their practicum, these teachers often encounter classrooms with large student numbers, varying levels of English proficiency, and limited resources for formative assessment methods. For instance, a pre-service teacher might struggle to provide individualized feedback in a class of 35-40 students or find it challenging to integrate FA strategies without adequate mentor support.

The primary purpose of this study is to examine how pre-service primary English teachers

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understand and implement formative assessment during their practicum in the period of changes. Specifically, the study aims to (1) assess the extent of pre-service teachers' knowledge and comprehension of FA principles and strategies and (2) examine how they apply formative assessment techniques in real classroom settings during their practicum. By addressing these objectives, the study seeks to reveal the current state of FA understanding and practice among pre-service teachers, thereby filling a critical gap in the literature. It contributes valuable insights into the alignment between formative assessment theory and practice in primary English education in Vietnam. Furthermore, this research provides evidence-based recommendations for improving teacher training programs, ensuring that pre-service teachers are well-equipped to navigate and implement the demands of on-going educational reforms effectively.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Formative assessment (FA)**

FA is an essential part of the teaching-learning process, designed to be continuous, interactive, and focused on improving student outcomes. It involves collecting and interpreting evidence of student learning to make informed instructional adjustments, ensuring that learning goals are effectively met (Chappuis, 2015; Moss & Brookhart, 2019). This process is collaborative, engaging both teachers and students, and is systematically planned to provide actionable feedback that directly influences learning (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Heritage, 2021).

Also referred to as alternative assessment or assessment for learning (Leung, 2005), FA includes various practices that offer meaningful feedback or feedforward to support student learning. In language education, Brown (2004) identifies several common practices of alternative assessment:

(1) Portfolios: Portfolios are a widely recognized form of alternative assessment, especially in communicative language teaching. They consist of a collection of student work, such as essays, reports, project outlines, and recordings, reflecting their progress. For younger learners, portfolios might include artwork or written assignments, allowing them to take ownership of their learning.

(2) Journals: Journals serve as a personal record where students reflect on their learning. These can take the form of language-learning logs or grammar journals, providing students with a space for self-evaluation, while giving teachers insights into their thought processes.

(3) Conferences and interviews: Conferences are one-on-one discussions between a teacher and student about a specific piece of work. These interactions help tailor feedback to the student's needs. Interviews, in contrast, are formal assessments with pre-prepared questions designed to evaluate student performance in a targeted manner.

(4) Observations: Observations involve real-time monitoring of student behaviour, both verbal and non-verbal. Teachers plan these observations carefully, using tools such as checklists or rating scales to capture student performance data, which can guide future instruction.

(5) Self and peer assessment: These strategies encourage students to take part in evaluating their own or their peers' work, fostering self-regulation, and active participation in their learning.

### **2.2. Strategies of FA implementation**

Effective FA incorporates multiple strategies to support student learning (Andrade & Heritage, 2017; Black & Wiliam, 2009). Key strategies include clear communication of learning expectations, structured classroom interactions, descriptive feedback, and facilitating self and peer assessment. These strategies align with three critical questions for FA: Where am I going? Where am I now? How can I close the gap? (Chappuis et al., 2020).

In summary, FA is not a one-time activity but an ongoing process that fosters collaboration between teachers and students. In this study, the cycle of FA typically involves the following steps:

(1) Communicating clear learning objectives: Teachers start by clearly defining and communicating learning objectives, which guide both instruction and assessment.

(2) Gathering evidence of student performance: Using the objectives as a basis, teachers select appropriate methods-such as informal questioning, communicative activities, portfolios, and observations-to collect evidence of student understanding.

(3) Providing descriptive feedback: After analysing the evidence, teachers provide specific, timely feedback that focuses on learning goals. This feedback encourages students to take action toward improvement and promotes self-regulation.

(4) Making instructional adjustments: Based on the feedback and assessment data, teachers make necessary adjustments to instruction, such as re-teaching concepts or offering differentiated support, ensuring all students progress toward their learning goals.

This structured, cyclical process of FA helps teachers respond to student needs and facilitates ongoing learning improvement.

### ***2.3. Challenges of implementing FA***

Although FA has gained recognition as a powerful tool for enhancing student learning through ongoing feedback and instructional adjustments (Black & Wiliam, 2009), its implementation varies significantly across educational contexts, particularly in primary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings.

While teachers generally acknowledge the value of FA, research indicates a substantial gap between theoretical understanding and practical application. This discrepancy stems from various individual and contextual factors. For example, Saito and Inoi (2017) observed significant variations in FA practices among Japanese teachers, particularly in feedback methods and intentions. This diversity highlights the influence of individual teacher beliefs and local educational cultures on FA implementation. In Hong Kong, Lee and Coniam (2013) noted that the effectiveness of FA in EFL contexts is heavily influenced by cultural factors, such as traditional exam-oriented systems and teacher-centred pedagogies. These cultural norms can create resistance to the learner-centered approaches inherent in FA.

At primary level, Ai et al. (2019) reported that Vietnamese teachers struggled to adapt to a new curriculum that emphasized FA, citing inadequate training, insufficient resources, and time constraints. Phạm (2013) emphasized the importance of integrating FA into daily lessons at the primary level but also identified similar obstacles such as insufficient support and misalignment between curriculum and assessment methods. Davison and Leung (2009) pointed out that in EFL contexts, teachers' own language proficiency can impact their ability to provide effective formative feedback, particularly in oral communication tasks.

In summary, factors such as teacher beliefs, local educational cultures, insufficient resources, and time constraints often hinder the alignment between FA principles and actual classroom practices. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive training, adequate resources, and ongoing support to help teachers bridge the gap between theory and practice, ultimately enabling more effective use of FA in diverse classrooms.

### **3. Methodology**

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to explore pre-service teachers' perceptions and practices of FA during their practicum. Participants included 18 pre-service primary English teachers at a university. Among the 18 participants, two volunteered for more in-depth involvement, including classroom observations and interviews. To maintain confidentiality, these two pre-service teachers are referred to as Teacher 1 and Teacher 2.

Data collection methods comprised:

- Questionnaires: A structured questionnaire was administered to all 18 participants during the final week of their practicum to capture their experiences while still fresh. The questionnaire aimed to quantify the pre-service teachers' perceptions and self-reported practices regarding FA, providing a broad overview of the group's experiences.

- Classroom observations: Five classroom observations were conducted—three with Teacher 1 and two with Teacher 2, who both volunteered for the study. The observations focused on the teachers' use of formative assessment (FA) strategies, their interactions with students, the types of feedback provided, and opportunities for student self-assessment and reflection. During these sessions, Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 provided their lesson plans for reference. While not subjected to formal analysis, these lesson plans offered contextual understanding of the intended instructional activities and objectives, helping the researcher determine whether the implementation of FA strategies was planned or spontaneous.

- Semi-structured interviews: After observation, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with Teacher 1 and Teacher 2. The interviews sought to explore the teachers' thought processes behind their instructional choices and to understand the reasoning for their use (or non-use) of certain FA strategies observed.

Questionnaire data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while observation and interview data underwent thematic analysis. The mixed-methods design allowed for data triangulation, which enriched the findings and enhanced their comprehensiveness.

#### **4. Findings and discussion**

##### ***4.1. How do pre-service primary English teachers perceive FA?***

The questionnaire results provide insightful revelations into pre-service primary English teachers' perceptions of formative assessment (FA), highlighting both their foundational understanding and areas requiring deeper engagement. While there is a general positive inclination toward FA, the depth and nuance of this understanding vary.

A significant majority of respondents (88.9%) correctly identified FA as "a continuous process of gathering and using evidence to improve student learning." This alignment with the core definition of FA, as articulated by Black and Wiliam (2009), indicates that these pre-service teachers recognize the essential role of ongoing assessment in enhancing student learning outcomes. This foundational understanding is crucial, as FA is instrumental in informing both teaching practices and student learning strategies. However, 11.1% of respondents misunderstood it as "a method for comparing students' performance against set standards." This confusion suggests that while most participants grasp the formative nature of FA, a small group still confuses it with summative assessment, which focuses on end-of-unit evaluation and comparison. This misinterpretation is noteworthy because it highlights a common challenge in educational contexts where summative assessments traditionally dominate the assessment. The conflation of formative and summative purposes can lead to practices that do not fully leverage the potential of FA to support individualized learning.

In terms of its importance, 66.7% of respondents rated FA as "important," with only 11.1% considering it "very important." Although most student teachers recognize its value, the relatively low percentage of respondents rating it as "very important" indicates that they may have limited exposure to effective formative practices or a lack of firsthand experience witnessing its impact on student learning. This limitation can affect their willingness to implement FA strategies that require a deep commitment to continuous assessment and responsive teaching.

When asked about the purposes of FA, 66.7% selected "to monitor student progress," highlighting its role in tracking learning, which aligns with research on FA as a tool for monitoring student achievement (Chappuis et al., 2020). Additionally, 55.6% identified "to provide feedback," which reflects an understanding of one of FA's key functions: delivering feedback that helps guide students toward their learning goals. However, fewer respondents (33.3%) chose "to guide instructional adjustments," indicating a potential gap in understanding FA's cyclical nature, where teachers not only assess students but also modify their instruction based on the evidence gathered (Heritage, 2021). The ability to adjust instruction based on assessment evidence is a core aspect of effective formative practice and is essential for meeting diverse learner needs. Interestingly, 38.9% of respondents selected "comparing students' performance against others" as a purpose of FA. This

response reflects a significant misconception, as FA is primarily concerned with improving individual learning, not comparing students to one another (Black & Wiliam, 1998). This misconception might stem from the prevalence of summative, exam-oriented assessment systems in many educational contexts (Lee & Coniam, 2013). It highlights the need for teacher training programs to emphasize the individualized and growth-oriented nature of FA, shifting focus from performance comparison to student development.

The findings suggest that experiential learning opportunities, such as practicum experiences, could enhance pre-service teachers' understanding of FA. By engaging directly with FA in classroom settings, pre-service teachers can observe the tangible benefits of formative practices, such as increased student engagement and improved learning outcomes. Mentorship from experienced teachers who model effective FA strategies can also reinforce the practical application of theoretical concepts learned during teacher preparation. However, by the end of the practicum, these gaps still existed, suggesting that explicit training on how to apply FA in practice is necessary. Mentor teachers at local schools should be advised to involve student teachers in assessment during their practicum so they can experience the relationship between teaching and assessment in a more comprehensive way.

#### ***4.2. How do they implement these practices in their classrooms?***

##### ***Forms and strategies of FA***

In terms of assessment forms (as shown in the figure 1), the overwhelming reliance on "observations" (88.9%) as the primary FA method reflects a practical, real-time approach to assessment. Classroom observations also showed that both Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 observed students during group activities, noting who participated actively and prompting less engaged students to become involved. However, they did not record these observations or reflect on them later, leading to missed opportunities for targeted support. While observations are valuable, Brown (2004) suggests that more structured forms-such as portfolios, journals, conferences, or interviews-offer richer opportunities for reflection and feedback. Yet, none of the respondents reported using such tools, indicating a gap in their familiarity with methods that could provide deeper insights into student learning. Had they utilized portfolios, for example, students could collect their work over time, allowing both the teacher and student to reflect on progress.

It is noteworthy that in Teacher 2's class, during a writing activity, she attempted to engage students in peer assessment. Two students were asked to write their work on the board, and two other students were asked to correct these writings. However, this approach was more focused on correction rather than providing constructive feedback. Although the teacher believed she was engaging students in self-assessment, the activity did not facilitate meaningful reflection or promote self-regulation skills.

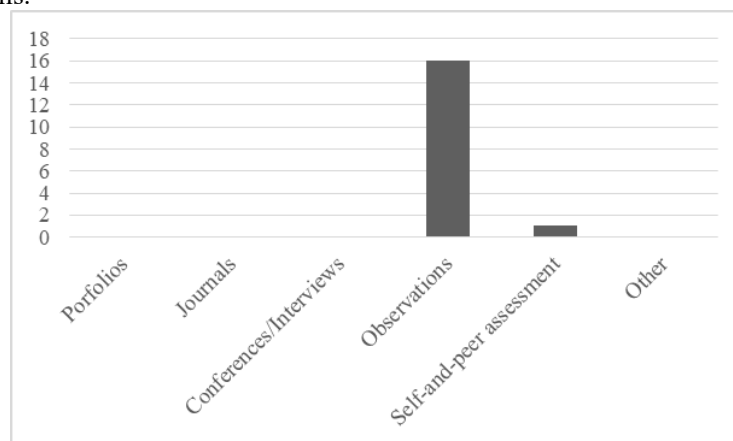


***Figure 1. Forms of FA***

The inconsistent application of FA strategies is further highlighted by the fact that 77.8% of respondents reported using FA "sometimes," 16.7% used it "often," and 5.6% said they "rarely" use FA. In interviews, Teacher 2 mentioned, "When planning my lessons, I list the activities but don't include specific assessment points," indicating a lack of intentionality in integrating FA into teaching. Similarly, the lesson plans of both Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 detailed steps for reviewing vocabulary through flashcards or games but failed to mention strategies for assessing students' understanding during these activities. In class, they tended to provide corrections rather than engaging students in the assessment process. Despite literature emphasizing the need for deliberate integration of FA into lesson structures rather than ad-hoc decision-making during lessons (Moss & Brookhart, 2019), both teachers confessed that "there is no such assessment plan," leading to an overreliance on spontaneous and informal assessment methods. This aligns with findings by Ai et al. (2019), who reported that teachers often struggle to plan for FA due to time constraints and a lack of guidance.

Regarding to FA strategies (as shown in the figure 2), common strategies employed by pre-service teachers, such as "informal questioning" (100%) and "interactive activities" (100%), align with communicative teaching practices but often focus on accuracy rather than fostering deeper student reflection. This accuracy-focused approach was evident in classroom observations, where games and questioning emphasized correct answers without promoting metacognition or self-assessment. Most of the games and activities were controlled; for example, teachers showed pictures and asked students to name the items they saw. While games are recognized as interactive activities in the literature, the interaction in these classrooms followed a similar pattern: teachers asked display questions or conducted structured drilling exercises (often using visuals), and students provided answers. If correct, they were praised; if incorrect, other students would offer responses until the correct answer was given. Chappuis et al. (2020) argue that effective FA should encourage students to reflect on their learning process and understand where they are in relation to learning goals. By focusing primarily on correctness, pre-service teachers may miss opportunities to help students develop self-regulation skills, as noted by Andrade and Heritage (2017). The emphasis on correct answers over reflective thinking suggests a need for teacher education programs to better prepare pre-service teachers in implementing FA strategies that promote deeper learning and student autonomy.

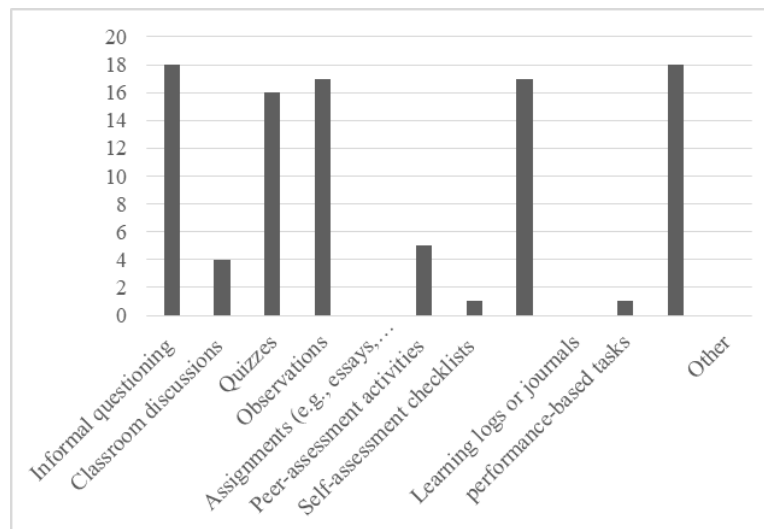


**Figure 2.** Strategies of FA

*Feedback practices*

While 66.7% of respondents said they "often" provide feedback, the interview data revealed that much of this feedback was focused on simple correctness rather than deeper insights into student performance. For example, during a classroom exchange observed with Teacher 1:

Teacher: "*When is Children's Day?*"

Student: "*It's...*"

Teacher (showing a screen): "*It's on the first of June.*"

This type of feedback, while immediate, fails to prompt students to reflect on their learning gaps or understand the targeted outcome, limiting its formative impact. This approach aligns with findings from Saito and Inoi (2017), who observed that feedback in many EFL contexts tends to be judgmental rather than developmental. To fully utilize FA, feedback should not only confirm correctness but also guide students in how to improve and close their learning gaps (Chappuis, 2015). The lack of reflective or actionable feedback observed in this study indicates that pre-service teachers may need more support in understanding how to provide formative feedback that directly influences learning.

*Challenges in implementing FA*

The challenges identified in this study—time constraints (72.2%), difficulty providing timely feedback (88.9%), and lack of resources (66.7%)—are consistent with existing research on the barriers to effective FA. Teacher 1 admitted: "I did not have time and intention to think further on the responses of my students except for judging its correctness." She noted that she was fortunate to have a mentor teacher who gave her the opportunity to practice the lesson twice. She taught the same lesson in two different classes and received assessment on the second class. However, she stated, "It did not mean that the pressure lessened. I was quite stressed because I knew that my teaching was being evaluated, and this anxiety sometimes occupied my mind rather than engaging with the students' performance in real time." According to Jonglai et al. (2021), practical limitations, such as insufficient time and resources, often prevent teachers from implementing FA to its fullest extent. The interview responses further highlight that pre-service teachers feel overwhelmed by the need for quick, real-time feedback, which often results in surface-level comments rather than thoughtful guidance.

Additionally, the low usage of self-assessment and peer-assessment (88.9% reported not using either) reflects a broader challenge in promoting student autonomy and reflection, key components of FA as outlined by Brown (2004) and Moss and Brookhart (2019). Observations confirmed this, showing that while the teacher introduced self-assessment checklists, such activities were isolated and not integrated into a broader feedback loop. For instance, after completing a writing task, students in Teacher 2's class wrote their work on the board immediately, without being prompted to review their own writing against a checklist of success criteria. Similarly, in Teacher 1's class, it was noted that she distributed a checklist for students to mark what they were able to do at the end of the lesson as a self-assessment activity, but she did not synthesize the results or adjust future lessons based on their feedback. These findings suggest that pre-service teachers may not yet be comfortable with handing over part of the assessment process to students, possibly due to their own lack of experience with these practices or insufficient training.

**5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, while pre-service primary English teachers generally have a foundational understanding of FA, there are clear areas where misconceptions persist, particularly regarding its deeper purposes and overall importance in shaping learning outcomes. Teacher education programs need to address these gaps by offering more comprehensive training, ensuring that future educators can fully leverage the power of FA to improve student learning.

The findings of this study echo much of the existing literature, particularly regarding the challenges pre-service teachers face in implementing FA effectively. Although they recognize FA's

value for monitoring student progress, the lack of structured planning for assessment and the reliance on spontaneous, unplanned decisions highlight a disconnect between FA theory and its application in practice. This gap can be attributed to inadequate training and unclear expectations set by supervising teachers, who often deprioritize assessment in favour of teaching content. Furthermore, the preference for accuracy-focused feedback, especially during interactive activities, limits the formative potential of these strategies. As Chappuis et al. (2020) and others suggest, effective FA goes beyond judging correctness; it involves guiding students toward deeper understanding and self-regulation, a dimension often missing in the participants' current practices.

To bridge these gaps, it is recommended that teacher education programs place greater emphasis on training pre-service teachers in the effective use of FA. This includes incorporating more explicit instruction on how to use FA data not only to monitor student progress but also to guide instructional adjustments and provide developmental feedback that encourages student growth. The cyclical nature of FA-where evidence collected informs future teaching-should be central to this training. Additionally, pre-service teachers should be equipped with practical tools and strategies to plan for and implement FA consistently. This includes training on reflective forms of assessment, such as portfolios, journals, and conferences, as well as encouraging the use of self-assessment and peer-assessment to promote student autonomy. These strategies can help pre-service teachers move beyond surface-level feedback and create a more engaging, student-centred learning environment.

Furthermore, enhancing mentorship during practicum experiences is essential. Mentor teachers should be trained to model effective FA practices and to set clear expectations regarding assessment integration within teaching. Collaborative reflection sessions between pre-service teachers and their mentors can provide valuable opportunities to discuss challenges, share successful strategies, and refine assessment practices. This collaborative approach not only reinforces theoretical knowledge but also facilitates the practical application of FA strategies in real classroom settings.

In addition to programmatic changes, there are broader policy implications. Educational policies should recognize and reward the use of FA in classrooms, incorporating it into teacher evaluations and school assessment frameworks. Professional development opportunities for in-service teachers should also be expanded to ensure that effective FA practices are consistently applied across different educational contexts. Promoting a cultural shift from an overemphasis on summative assessments to a balanced approach that values ongoing, formative processes is crucial for creating supportive and effective learning environments.

One key limitation of this study is the small sample size, with only 18 participants. While the findings provide valuable insights into pre-service primary English teachers' perceptions and practices of FA, the low number of participants may limit the generalizability of the results.

For future research, it would be beneficial to explore FA practices in other subject areas beyond English, such as mathematics, science, or social Studies. Comparing the use and understanding of FA across different subjects could offer valuable insights into how FA is applied in various disciplines in primary schools. This comparative research could also highlight subject-specific challenges and practices, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of how FA can be effectively implemented across the curriculum.

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#### **Tìm hiểu nhận thức và thực hành đánh giá thường xuyên của thực tập sinh sư phạm trong lớp học tiếng Anh cấp tiểu học**

**Tóm tắt:** Việc đánh giá thường xuyên ngày càng được nhấn mạnh ở cấp tiểu học đòi hỏi thực hành đánh giá ở lớp học phải thay đổi. Nghiên cứu hỗn hợp này được thực hiện nhằm khám phá nhận thức và thực hành đánh giá thường xuyên của thực tập sinh sư phạm tiếng Anh ở cấp tiểu học trong quá trình thực tập 8 tuần tại các trường địa phương. Nghiên cứu chỉ ra rằng mặc dù thực tập sinh có hiểu biết nền tảng về khái niệm đánh giá thường xuyên nhưng họ gặp khó khăn trong việc thực hiện nó hiệu quả. Sự thực hành trên lớp của thực tập sinh không phản ánh được các nguyên tắc quan trọng của đánh giá thường xuyên, đó là sử dụng dữ liệu đánh giá để điều chỉnh việc giảng dạy và nâng cao việc học của học sinh.

**Từ khoá:** đánh giá thường xuyên; thực tập sư phạm; thực tập sinh; giáo dục tiểu học; đánh giá trong lớp học.