

# Development and Rehearsal of Leadership Practices Through Engagement in Formative Assessments

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## ABSTRACT

Inculcation of leadership practices has gained increased attention among Malaysian higher education institutions following its emphasis on workplace skills, benchmarking of MQF domains, and more recently the heightened interest in university ranking exercises. In fact, the Chartered Management Institute (CMI) raised concerns to have leadership modules integrated into all degree courses to increase chances of employability and promote the advancement of global graduates. However, integration of leadership domains does not come easy with all disciplines, and this has been a constant struggle with curriculum developers and key stakeholders. It is not uncommon to have academicians puzzled when assessing the MQF leadership domain during programme review and revamp exercises. A strategic alternative to this challenge was to endorse the inculcation of leadership skills through engagement in formative assessments. This study explored how English language learners develop and rehearse leadership practices through engagement in formative assessments. Based on the phenomenology research design, feedback was solicited through a series of questions developed based on the framework analysis of the Student Leadership Practices Inventory (S-LPI). Findings of in-depth interviews with 15 students indicate three primary types of formative assessments and several critical domains to how the students were able to develop and rehearse leadership competency by interacting with assigned formative assessments. This study also addressed implications pertinent to the design of formative assessments, especially in the teaching and learning of English language courses.

**Keywords:** Leadership; Formative Assessments; English language; Qualitative; In-depth interviews

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## INTRODUCTION

Leadership skills are widely discussed and emphasized in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century scholarship of teaching and learning. It is an essential skill for everyone who intends to be professional in their specific field. The Chartered Management Institute (CMI), in their recent research on 21st Century Leaders, found out that seven out of ten employers want management, enterprise and leadership modules to be integrated into all degree subjects in order to boost employability (Chartered Management Institute, 2018). The need for such skills is essential in order to apply and secure a job. Therefore, there is a need for universities to equip their graduates well with these skills. This study aims to explore the leadership skills that can be developed through active engagement in formative assessment, particularly in English language classrooms at a local institution, UCSI University.

Leadership skills are pertinent in influencing individuals to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2010) and this is essential in both the learning process and at the workplace. According to Karagianni and Montgomery (2018), leadership skills should be developed even during schooling years since students would already have the ability To demonstrate leadership through engagement in formative assessments. They further called on schools to review and readdress their role in encouraging leadership practice more critically.

There are several ways to equip students with leadership skills through teaching and learning in class; one of which is to examine the assessment domain. The primary purpose of assessment is to evaluate students' understanding of what they have learned rather than noticing what they have not learned (Clarke, 2011; Jabbarifar, 2009). Specifically, through engagement in formative assessments, educators are able to observe how and to what extent students are able to demonstrate leadership skills.

## BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

One of the most commonly cited definitions of formative assessments is that it “encompass[es] all exercises that teachers implemented for their students, that seeks to provide information for it is used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities” (Black & Wiliam, 1998. p2). Formative assessment is also commonly known as ‘assessment for learning’ and is mostly implemented by teachers to determine strategies for individual and whole-class learning (Earl, 2003).

In fact, the primary purpose of formative assessments is to provide ‘real-time’ information to support teaching and learning (Gerzon & Jones, 2020; Clarke, 2011). The information acquired from this assessment will provide instructors with a measure of the progress or existence of skills and values in students. Formative assessment, commonly known as ‘assessment for learning’, is mostly used by instructors to determine strategies for individuals and for whole class learning in implementing the development and rehearsal of leadership skills and values (Earl, 2003). Further, Black, Harrison and Lee (2003) assert that instructors who rehearse formative assessment would experience change from typically having to cover the syllabus and curriculum to meaningful deliberation of inventive ways to sustain and improve the teaching and learning process.

This study focused on the use of formative assessment in classroom assessments in investigating the development and rehearsal of leadership skills among English language learners. Jabbarifar (2009) underlines that classroom assessments are typically designed to assess students' understanding of what they have learned, rather than focusing on what they have not. Through assessments, educators are able to collect information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities that students and instructors are involved in (Black & William, 1998).

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to investigate how engagements in formative assessments were able to encourage students to demonstrate leadership skills in the context of the English language classroom. The specific objectives of the study were to:

- (i) Identify the types of formative assessment used in English language teaching
- (ii) Explore how engagement with formative assessments contributes towards the development and rehearsal of leadership practices among English language learners

## METHOD

The qualitative approach was deemed most suitable for this study as it allowed the researchers to elicit personalized feedback for meaningful interpretation of the findings. The study specifically employed the phenomenology research design (Creswell, 2012) to encourage the participants to share their lived experiences in developing and rehearsing leadership practices through engagement in formative assessments. Moreover, the adoption of this research design permits sharing of rich in-depth information on the attributes of leadership and formative assessment practices in the context of English language teaching and learning.

The participants were undergraduate students enrolled in a three-year English Language and Communications programme from the Faculty of Social Science and Liberal Arts (FOSSLA), UCSI University. A total of five participants were purposefully selected from each year, giving a total of 15 participants.

The selection process was based on a set of criteria, as follows:

- (i) The participants need to be fluent users of the English language for a duration of five years. This measure was to ensure language competency was not a biased factor in the interpretation of the findings.
- (ii) The purposefully identified participants were users of English language as a Second Language (ESL) to ensure frequency and consistency of the language used in everyday life.

- (iii) Participants identified were those who actively worked on their assignments. This was to ensure their sharing of experiences on the development and rehearsal of leadership practices stemmed from working on the various attributes of formative assessments, such as peer collaboration, peer feedback, etc.

Questions asked during the interview sessions were trial-and-tested during the pilot study phase. This process consisted of two phases. In the first phase, three expert instructors were approached to provide feedback on the content and construct validity of the interview questions. In the second stage, feedback was solicited from three students purposefully identified from the target population. This feedback focused more on the clarity and comprehensibility of the interview questions. For instance, in cases where students were not aware of the labelling 'formative assessment', the concept was rephrased and simplified to fit the participants' understanding of continuous assessment. Finally, relevant amendments were done according to the feedback provided by both the students and expert instructors.

The series of interview questions consisted of three sections. The first section focused on soliciting the participants' demographic information. The second section focused on fundamental information on the participants' perception of leadership practices and formative assessments. The third section focused on discovering how engagement in formative assessments leads to the development and rehearsal of leadership practices.

Interview questions in the third section were developed based on the Student Leadership Practices Inventory (S-LPI). The five domains of leadership skills from the S-LPI were used to guide the development of the interview questions in order to obtain effective responses in accordance with the research objective. The S-LPI identifies specific behaviours and actions that students report using when they are at their "personal best as leaders." These behaviours were categorized into five leadership practices:

- (i) 'Model the Way' requires a person to justify their views and established beliefs while being a role model to others.
- (ii) 'Inspire a Shared Vision' is to create a vision that is aligned with what most people are appealing to and share aspirations.
- (iii) 'Challenge the Process' where risk-taking is a fun way of learning from mistakes while seeking opportunities to improve from it.
- (iv) 'Enable Others to Act' is to seek teamwork in creating a strong bond among members to build each other up in their leadership skills.
- (v) 'Encourage the Heart' highlights the appreciation when someone achieves a reward, as well as promotes the importance of recognising the contribution made by someone.

The S-LPI is another version of the Leadership Practice Inventory (LPI), which aims to specifically investigate the leadership potential and behaviour of higher education students in accordance with practices by exemplary leaders (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Posner & Brodsky, 1992).

Subsequent to obtaining permission from the relevant stakeholders, the identified participants were subjected to a series of in-depth interviews over a period of three weeks. These interviews were conducted in both face-to-face and focus group discussions. This manner of data collection targeted a range of participants who were either vocal or shy to voice out their comments and feedback comfortably (Creswell, 2012). The participants were also subjected to follow-up interviews for further clarification.

Simultaneous with the data collection phase, the transcribed interview data were subjected to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. In this method of qualitative analysis, the interview findings were described and studied in the absence of theoretical and real-life assumptions. This gives attention to specific expressions of the participants' individual cognitive and emotional encounters experienced in developing and rehearsing leadership practices through engagement with formative assessments. This method of data analysis also mitigates the potential bias that might occur during the interpretation of the interview findings; typically, the inadvertent insertion of researchers' personal depiction of investigated phenomenon.

The interview findings were then presented as emerging themes according to the stipulated objectives of this study. In a further attempt to establish the richness and integrity of the interview findings, the following measures were dutifully established:

- (i) Credibility: Participants were asked to legitimately confirm the interpretation of the interview findings
- (ii) Transferability: The interpretation of the interview findings was thoughtfully done leading to a suitable judgment of the interpretation. This allows for the judicious transferability of the findings to other contexts with similar parameters.
- (iii) Dependability: In the interpretation of findings, the researchers ensured to account for the possible deviations in interpretations. This was warranted by highlighting the similarities and differences in interpretations by both the researchers and rechecking with the participants.
- (iv) Confirmability: In the process of analysing the data, an audit trail was established in documenting the measures in checking and rechecking the interpretation of the transcribed interview data. Each researcher also played the role of the devil's advocate to ascertain the interpretation was properly justified and corroborated by the participants. This measure was imperative to affirm that the interpretation of the findings was not biased by the researchers' own views of the studied phenomenon.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The ensuing discussion presents the cumulative interpretation of the findings corroborated with selected interview excerpts. The participants were generally cooperative in providing their feedback and in confirming the interpretation of the transcribed interview data. During the interview process, the participants were first enquired about fundamental information to ascertain whether the participating students satisfy the selection criteria. The participants were further engaged in the preliminary discussion to ease them into the intended purpose of the interview sessions.

Subsequently, the participants were enquired about their understanding of formative assessments. In cases where the participants were not fully comfortable in answering, the concept of formative assessment and relevant examples were given. In this process, the researchers were careful not to be biased in implying the benefits of formative assessments, nor suggesting its relevance to instilling leadership practices. The participants were also given ample time to reflect on the assignment of formative assessments in their courses. The following excerpts were some of the feedback provided by the participants:

*"Formative is more towards participation in class, and it's an ongoing process which is different from exam-based."* [Danny]

*"I understand it to be assessments that are task-based, not so traditional handwritten Examinations".* [Goh]

To some of the participants, the idea of formative assessment is portrayed as an ongoing process and how it helps to keep track of student progress while the lecturer can provide useful feedback to students. This was clearly exemplified by Shu Ern using examples such as pop quizzes to further support her idea on formative assessments.

*"Formative assessment is when the lecturer or the teacher assesses you on the spot. So, I don't think you're graded for it, but let's say we're given class activity to do, or maybe pop quizzes, just for the lecturer to know how much knowledge we have, or how well we're doing at that current point of time".* [Shu Ern]

Gerzon and Jones (2020) argue that in the context where instructors and students share accountability for teaching and learning, students evolve into becoming active agents in creating and responding to feedback. They further assert that this process of learning encourages students to adopt and adapt learning strategies that best improve their learning curve.

The Year 1 participants further shared that there were differences in formative assessment utilized in high school and university. According to Terry, there were many homework (formative assessments) assigned in high school, but there were only the occasional online and/or blended learning tasks assigned in university. Teng Yee also shared the same, highlighting the different outcomes of the formative assessments

*"From uni, our formative assessment usually prompts us to be more critical thinking, relate it to our own experience, to our own knowledge... most of the time you can't look for the answers in the textbook itself..."* [Teng Yee]

In general, the participants demonstrated a clear understanding of formative assessments, including types, means of implementation and intended outcome of formative assessments. The ensuing discussion highlights the findings of the first research objective.

**Findings of RQ1: Types of Formative Assessment Used in English Language Classroom**

In this perspective, the participants were asked to provide some examples of courses that they have undertaken in their English Language and Communications programme. Based on the feedback, the types of formative assessments were categorically divided into interaction-based, corpus-based and information-seeking. This was an important measure to understand to appreciate the means of implementing and intended outcome of formative assessments, and how these lead to engaging in the development and rehearsal of leadership practices. Table 1 lists these types of formative assessments.

**Table 1: Types of Formative Assessment**

<b>Interaction-based</b>	<b>Corpus-based</b>	<b>Information-seeking</b>
Role play	Term paper	Lesson planning
Group discussion	Chapter presentation	Mind-map drawing
Workshop planning	Article critique	Blended learning activities
Debate	Reading summary	Brainstorm activities
Impromptu feedback	Individual assignment	Group and individual assignments
Group assignment		

Role play, group discussion and impromptu feedback were among the common interaction-based formative assessments implemented in English language teaching and learning. The interaction-based formative assessments necessitate students to partake actively in interacting with peers. This type of formative assessment also heightens students’ participation in engaging not only in communication but in ethics and respect as well. This type of assessment typically aims to elicit maximum interaction from students in facilitating the teaching-learning process. All the students were in consensus that they were not particularly attentive towards the interaction-based type of formative assessment due to the lack of exposure during secondary school. They found it rather intimidating to voice out their opinion due to unsolicited mockery from peers and/or lack of confidence. While some of the students were still uncomfortable with this type of formative assessment, the majority have grown pleased to see their personal and professional improvement.

Term papers, chapter presentations and article critiques were among the common corpus-based formative assessments implemented in the courses. The corpus-based formative assessments necessitate students to engage actively in research into collections of written, structured texts (corpora), either in the form of textbooks, reports, journal articles and/or lecture notes. This type of formative assessment mainly aims to assess student’s written skills which also involve, among others, means of critical thinking, English language competency, communication skills and ethical practices. According to the participants, corpus-based formative assessment was mostly used in the courses since written reports were part of the required assessments by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA). Due to this requirement, the corpus-based formative assessments usually cover a range of 20% to 50% of the entire assessment components.

Lesson planning, mind-mapping and blended learning activities were among the frequent information-seeking type of formative assessments commonly implemented in English language teaching and learning. Students who engaged with this type of formative assessment were typically assigned both brief and lengthy tasks that require them to piece together information to satisfy the intended purpose of the said tasks. This process of information-seeking obliges students to obtain information from the library and/or online in an organized manner which required engagement of skills such as communication, leadership and collaborative work (Vighnarajah et al., 2016).

**Findings of RQ2: Development and Rehearsal of Leadership Practices through Engagement in Formative Assessments**

To reiterate, the analysis and presentation of the discussion were acted based on the framework analysis underlining the five domains of the Student Leadership Practices Inventory (S-LPI), as follows:

- (i) Model the Way
- (ii) Inspire a Shared Vision
- (iii) Challenge the Process
- (iv) Enable Others to Act
- (v) Encourage the Heart

Adoption of these five domains in the framework analysis was crucial to objectively elicit and interpret the transcribed interview data. This process also included the fundamental administration of validity and ethical practices. The ensuing discussion highlights findings for the second research objective in accordance with the framework analysis. However, the presentation of the findings does not align specifically with these five domains in the hope to establish flexibility in understanding how engagement in formative assessments promotes the development and rehearsal of leadership practice.

The foremost reaction to the enquired second research question was the evident need to ensure proper delegation of work. Leadership practice in this regard necessitates each participant to consciously take on the responsibilities of a leader in planning, organizing and completing their assigned formative assessments.

*“First vision should always be meeting the deadline, because we don’t want to exceed the deadline... So, the first thing that we always do is separate [delegate] the group work”.* [Madhavi]

*“I would say when we have to do these kinds of things, like presentations, group work, and pop quizzes, if you’re in a group, one or two people out of the group has to step up... so I think this kind of formative assessment pushes us to step up to lead the group.”* [Shu Ern]

In this process, the participants were placed in a position to voice his/her opinion in the completion of the formative assessments. Another participant Lakshimi, concurs, emphasizing that voicing her opinion was critical in contributing her ideas and comments into the completion of the assignment (formative assessment). This feedback was shared by the other participants since this is an imperative aspect of groupwork contribution and in most cases, this solicits a certain allocation of marks.

*“If it’s in a group discussion then usually I try to organize how the discussion is flowing, also I tend to divide the work for the team, and I try to get other people’s opinions as well; I try not to insert my own opinion too much, I’ll say things like “So what do you guys think about this?” or “How can we divide the work?” or “What can we do about this?” that kind of thing.”* [Shu Ern]

*“I think it’s really important to support them because... of course it’s important to support my own Ideas to show that I know what I’m talking about... but I think it’s equally important to support your group members, because I think when you are someone who is prone to being vocal, the way I am, I think it’s easy to create a bad impression on your group mates, and I want to show my group mates that “Look I’m not here to compete with you, I’m here to work with you.”* [Goh]

The participants also shared that such actions measure up to the development and rehearsal of communication skills.

*“You will share something that they might not know. They would share something that you might not know. So. this communication is the biggest key you can’t get in exams.”* [Danny]

*“We will voice out to help one another, so in that case we will bring up the leadership skills in us.”* [Latasha]

Further, this process warranted the participants to work together to achieve a common goal i.e. to successfully complete and submit their assigned formative assessments. A common goal delivers appreciation for a shared vision. This practice looks at the way a leader is capable of conceptualising their vision and empowering others with the shared vision. For instance, Ru Yee’s vision is to have the team stay bonded and not do things individually.

*“...team project, my vision in a team project will most likely to be able to do the work successfully but also, to make sure that the team stays bonded, not just breakup over a petty thing”.* [Ru Yee]

*“For example, we are discussing on let’s say a chapter presentation in the middle of the semester. So, I will usually.. of course.. ask everyone for their opinions and so on.” [Ning Ying]*

*“So when we work towards the same course, it’s very important that we are all going towards the same direction... Vision is something that gives us that direction. So, when we have the shared vision, then we will all be working towards (the goal) ... we may all be doing different roles in the discussion, but at the end of the day we are going towards the same direction”. [Lakshimi]*

Another participant Ida sees the importance of sharing the vision because ‘it is difficult to reach the aim or purpose if everyone has their own vision.’ The progress of the work will not go well if everyone is sitting on a different direction and in the end, the project will still be at the starting line. Moreover, Lakshimi finds the various formative assessments assigned provided her with plenty of opportunities to take on the role of a leader. She strongly believed in motivating her team to work together especially when the groupwork concerns working with students with different personalities.

In addition, Lakshimi calls the importance for self-reflection in a leader’s role. She argues that it is critical for a leader to practise reflection and reflexivity while engaging with formative assessments:

*“Lecturer can only guide them, but leadership skills start within the group”. [Danny]*

*“What I do is that, I have this habit of reflecting. So, when something goes right, or when something goes wrong, I always reflect on it, “Okay, what did I do?”, “What did my teammates do?”, “What was the good stuff and what was the bad stuff.” And if it’s bad, what made it bad and how it can be rectified. So, to me, reflection is how I improve my learning curve. I learn through the lessons.”*

[Lakshimi]

In fact, the participants were clear on the idea to include team members’ feedback and comments in completing the work, especially group-based formative assessments. They also emphasized that the leader should not dictate the team but focus on shared vision and values associated to group work. It is important to have values or ideals when one shares his or her voice in the community they are in.

*“So, I usually do it by encouraging by motivating. Usually because some people they tend to be maybe introvert, so they’re not comfortable interacting with people that they’re not so close with, so all it takes is just a bit of encouragement, just a little bit of push.” [Lakshimi]*

*“Make sure everyone has a role to play. If the assessment requires research, then everyone researches on a different part. If it’s a role-play, then everyone acts a character. No one should be standing by. I think that’s important, whether you’re doing a smaller part of the research, or a bigger part of the research, that’s okay, as long as you contribute to the team.” [Shu Ern]*

A leader has to be capable of affirming their value while putting them into action to empower others (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Commitment and responsibility are what Ida values in the role of a leader. Lakshimi values motivation and interaction. Meanwhile, Wei Hao values solidarity and accuracy of the information in group-based formative assessments. He believes that it is imperative to objectively convince others with proper evidence; where the lack of usually leads to leader dictatorship and non-performing team members. Other participants strongly concur:

*“For me, my own personal value is that I don’t think one person should dictate over the team, you know, or should say “This is how we’re going to do it” or things like that; it should be a team discussion so I think, if I were to say in terms of values, I would have to say teamwork is very important.” [Shu Ern]*

*“Yes, I do (support own ideas and others). When it’s my own ideas right, what I do is, I open it for criticism. In a sense that I want to know how debatable is that idea. Because when someone debates and says that, “No it should be like this.”, right, that kind of opens a new window for discussion... I think it’s important, because formative assessment regardless of whether it’s individual or group work, for everyone to be equally involved. So, teamwork is very important. The quality of the*

*assessment comes from the teamwork and also the leader's ability to lead effectively.*” [Lakshimi]

Effective deliberation on formative assessments assists students in developing and improving metacognition – this helps them to develop their identities as learners, as well as to be more aware and make conscious decisions about their learning (Shepard et al., 2018; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011; Zimmerman, 2002). These are clear dimensions of formative assessments that lead to proper honing and employment of leadership competency. To this, Swaffield (2016) calls for the importance of ensuring proper conditions for formative assessments to be properly implemented in the teaching and learning process.

In this extension, Fullan and Langworthy (2014) argue that it is critical for students to engage in the complete spectrum of knowledge, skills and values associated with the development and rehearsal of leadership practices. In fact, students would typically highlight this leadership competency when dealing with obfuscated, or uncertain, situations as found in formative assessments (Gerzon & Jones, 2020; Fullan & Langworthy, 2014). Moreover, such learning situations bring about a holistic approach to the university experience - in which the absence would instigate possibilities of academic, social and emotional isolation (Lim & Vighnarajah, 2018; Vighnarajah & Jolene, 2018).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study has drawn attention to how engagement in formative assessment promotes the development and rehearsal of leadership practices. The types of formative assessments shared during the in-depth interview sessions were interaction-based, corpus-based, and information-seeking. In these various types of formative assessments assigned in the selected English Language and Communication programme, the participants had plenty of opportunities to practise a wide spectrum of leadership domains ranging from voicing opinions to self-reflection.

This study also addressed implications pertinent to the design of formative assessments, especially in the teaching and learning of English language courses. First, formative assessments can be designed to deliberately inculcate leadership practices. This can be done to target a specific or a multitude of leadership practices. Second, the study evinced that the participants were able to comprehend the conception of how formative assessments lead to the development and rehearsal of leadership practices. This suggests that students should be informed of the intended leadership outcome from engaging in the assigned formative assessment. This will allow the students to be more deliberate and conscious in rehearsing leadership practices, or at least a specific aspect of it. Future studies can explore whether the same approach used in this study is applicable to younger students in primary and secondary schools and whether similar results would be obtained in other subject domains.

## DECLARATION STATEMENT

The lead author\* affirms that this manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study being reported; that no important aspects of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned (and, if relevant, registered) have been explained.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no self-interest in the study conducted.

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