

**EFL Learners' Learning and Retention of Phrasal Verbs and Lexical Collocations: Contributions from Formative Assessment**

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**Abstract**

EFL learners' difficulty in effectively learning and using phrasal verbs and lexical collocations might be attributed to the purely product-oriented teaching and assessment techniques used in public schools. This study aimed to investigate the impact of oral questions and written quizzes as two formative assessment (FA) techniques on Iranian learners' learning and retention of phrasal verbs and lexical collocations. The research sample comprised 75 male intermediate EFL high school students, in Marand, East Azarbaijan, Iran, who were selected out of 90 grade four students based on their performance on a Nelson Proficiency test. The three intact classes, each with 25 participants, were randomly assigned as experimental group 1 (EG1) for whom we employed oral questions, experimental group 2 (EG2) who received written quizzes, and the control group (CG) with no process-oriented assessment. After the eight-week treatment, the one-way ANOVA analysis of the three sets of scores obtained from the pre-test, the immediate post-test, and the delayed post-test revealed that EG1 and EG2 outperformed the CG supporting the facilitative role of process-oriented assessment. The findings offer pedagogical implications with regard to FA that will be discussed.

**Keywords:** Formative assessment, written quiz, oral question, phrasal verbs, lexical collocations

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Received: 08/04/2017

Accepted: 20/09/2017

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## 1. Introduction

The fundamental characteristic of learning English as a foreign language (EFL) might be regarded as its heavy reliance on formal instruction that distinguishes it from opportunities for learning in naturalistic contexts. In instructional contexts, according to Black and William (1998b), teaching and learning are reciprocal processes that depend on and affect one another. To promote teaching effectiveness, teachers have to constantly monitor their students' performance to finely tune various aspects of instruction. Such information is normally attained through process-oriented formative assessment (FA) that is concerned with the depth and breadth of students' learning and the effectiveness of teachers' techniques. A widely-consented view in applied linguistics concerns the utility of FA in instructional contexts which can enhance instructional practices by identifying gaps in the curriculum and in learners' understanding, and thereby, promote instructional outcomes for learners.

FA, as defined by Airasin and Russel (2008), represents alternative assessment techniques like portfolio, journal writing, classroom quizzes, or even oral questions that might be employed by the teacher to assess learners' learning while involved in the process of learning. According to Moss and Brookhart (2009), such techniques allow teachers to join forces with their students in the FA process and this partnership enhances the teaching effectiveness, promotes learner engagement and ultimately boosts learning outcomes. Andrade and Cizek (2010) defined FA in terms of the time of administration of assessment techniques and the purposes they serve; FA is administered midstream, in the course of some unit of instruction and serves a range of primary purpose including identification of students' strengths and weaknesses, assisting educators' planning of subsequent instruction, aiding students' control over their learning, revise their work, and develop self-orientation skills which are prerequisites for autonomy. FA is normally accentuated in terms of the consistent and systematic feedback it offers on students' performances which can inform instructional decisions concerning appropriate modifications in the instructional procedures and learning activities' (Black & Wiliam, 1998a).

Brookhart (2010) proposed FA as the assessment *for* learning rather than assessment *of* learning since both teachers and their students actively and intentionally engage in the FA process to improve learning. The active role of both teachers and learners is also stressed in the definition offered by the National Education Association (2003) that regarded FA as an instructional and accountability tool representing "a joint, collaborative, while class, ongoing and need-based process which aids teaching as a process rather than focusing on scores and final product (p. 3)". Effectiveness of FA is partly related to providing feedback to the learners. That is, feedback is one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement, but this impact can be either positive or negative. Hattie and Timperley (2007) provided a conceptual analysis of feedback and reviewed the evidence related to its impact on

learning and achievement. Their research revealed that although feedback is among the major influences, the type of feedback and the way it is given can be differentially effective.

Although the object of FA might be any aspect of learning, it is most frequently focused on the components of the language to be learned and addresses language features like language skills or grammatical structures and lexical elements which are all highlighted in formal instructional contexts. Part of the material high school students learn is vocabulary that is basically presented in the form of reading texts or grammatical constructions. Some experts and applied linguistic researchers like Ager (2007) have regarded vocabulary learning as the bedrock of the learning process (Ager, 2007). Yet, developing lexical knowledge constitutes a huge challenge in the learners' effort to get full mastery over the language. First, it is mandated to stipulate what is meant by knowing a word. In his seminal teacher training book, Doff (1990) proposed vocabulary knowledge as comprising three major dimensions: the physical form of the word, spelling and pronunciation, its meaning or the associative relationship between the word and a concrete or abstract concept, and the use of the word in real communicative contexts for genuine purposes. In instructional contexts, words are usually embedded in meaningful listening or reading texts to elucidate their meanings. Chang (2007) proposed that allowing students to study vocabulary before a reading text could improve their vocabulary knowledge and confidence. Teachers too are recommended to use various audio visual aids to establish the connection between the words and concepts in the target language by activating learners' existing knowledge (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Doff, 1990).

English as a Foreign Language is taught in Iranian high schools for a limited period of time each week. Although students are exposed to abundant words, phrases and grammatical rules, there is no immediate communicative orientation. Iranian English teachers employ different presentation techniques in teaching lexical items including phrasal verbs (PVs) and lexical collocations (LCs); however, observation of classroom practice reveals that owing to different reasons, such as highly restricted instructional time and large number of students attending classes, high school teachers rely heavily on summative evaluation of the students' learning as the dominant assessment technique. This orientation reflects caring for results and outcomes without due attention to the learning process and intentional attempts to cultivate the active role of learners in achieving learning objectives via engaging them in the very process of learning. Effective teaching techniques and methods should be utilized to help students learn and recall and use provided PVs and LCs properly. Recent findings in applied linguistics and in second language acquisition research (SLA) have underscored the close interplay between the process-oriented nature of learning and FA techniques that can reinforce and help learners consolidate their learned knowledge (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2005; Wiliam & Thompson, 2007).

## **2. Literature Review**

Recently, researchers pay more attention to a number of strategies and techniques for assessing students' vocabulary knowledge by applying FA (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Frey & Fisher, 2011; Pourverdi, 2013; Regier, 2012; Tavakoli & Gerami, 2013; Wiliam, 2011). In the same course of studies Yaghoobi and Mashhadi (2013) investigated the effect of FA used by teachers on students' achievement in EFL classes. The results revealed significant differences in the participants' level of achievement. Similarly, Gholami and Moghaddam (2013) investigated the effect of weekly quizzes on Iranian high school students' performance on final achievement tests and reported significant positive effects.

Hashemzadeh (2012) also studied the effect of four exercise types on EFL Learners' vocabulary retention and found that fill-in-the-blank exercises were more effective in helping learners recall words and recognition exercises were more effective than production exercises in EFL vocabulary retention. Comparison of the immediate and delayed post-tests also revealed a decline in the learners' scores from the immediate to the delayed tests in four different exercise types.

Likewise, Torosyan (2011) verified the positive impact of FA on EFL learners' vocabulary enhancement. In an experimental study, Babaie and Nourdad (2014) focused on the effect of quizzes and oral questioning on vocabulary learning and retention of EFL learners and found that oral questioning and quizzes as two types of FA are effective in both learning new vocabulary items and retention of these learned items in mind over time.

According to NG (2008), several extensive reviews of the research literature have concluded that FA is the most powerful factor in raising student achievement. In a paper, she explored the definition of the FA, ways of operating it in the classroom and the necessary conditions for the effectiveness of the FA. She further discussed findings from studies of FA and the experience of several English language projects and highlighted the role of classroom discussions, questions, activities and tasks in eliciting evidence of student learning, the significance of this feedback in propelling students' learning and setting up conditions for activating students to own their learning.

Ravitz (2002) in his paper emphasized the importance of FA in the teaching and learning process and the role technology could play in advancing assessment practices. He described work undertaken by attendees of the CILT workshop, highlighting key issues that were discussed and areas for further development including how to address important equity concerns. Similarly, Wiliam, Lee, Harrison and Black (2004) studied the achievement of secondary school students who worked in classrooms where teachers made time to develop FA strategies. The finding of their research was in favor of the positive role of FA on students' achievement. Wren (2008) summarized recent educational research, which concluded that educators can improve achievement for all of their students through the correct application of FA. He included recommendations for overcoming obstacles and putting effective FA into

practice in the classroom. In another experimental research, Baniabdelrahman (2010) investigated the effect of Jordanian eleventh grade students' self-assessment on their performance in reading in English. The findings of the study revealed that student self-assessment had positive effect on their performance in reading in English.

Qu and Zhang (2013) investigated the effect of summative assessment (SA) and FA on College English assessment system. They pointed out that students' real English level could not only rely on a single evaluation mode. SA and FA have different forms and serve different function. They should be combined together during the teaching and learning process in order to be effective in evaluating learners and improving foreign language teaching.

In their empirical study, Heritage et al. (2009) found that teachers are better at accurately inferring students' level of understanding than they are at amending instruction to meet students' learning needs. They provided insight into the empirical work being done in the field of FA. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) suggested that assessment is seen to exert a profound influence on student learning through focusing their attention on the materials, the amount of learning and how effectively they engage in learning tasks, on the feedback provided and finally on their understanding and future learning. Black and William (2009) extend FA to the classroom practice that helps to elicit evidence about student achievement and the exploitation of the obtained information by the teachers and all other stake holders as the bedrock for planning further stages of instruction. In order to provide a better theoretical grounding for FA, William and Thompson (2007) drew on Ramaprasad's (1983) three key processes in learning and teaching including identification of the learners' present status in their learning, setting objective goals in the form of where they are heading for, and finally, delineating the most adequate procedure conducive to achievement of the goals.

Traditionally, the teacher has been regarded as responsible for each of these three, but it is also necessary to take account of the role that the learners themselves, and their peers, play in them. The teacher is responsible for designing and implementing an effective learning environment, and the learner is responsible for the learning within that environment. By reviewing the related literature, it seems that there is limited or almost no clear-cut research study regarding the effect of oral questions and written quizzes as FA techniques on EFL learners' PV and LC learning and retention. Consequently, this study is going to shed lights on the role of these two FA techniques on EFL learners' learning and retention of PVs and LCs.

In Iranian EFL context, learners are not usually involved in the teaching and learning process actively. It seems that some effective techniques of vocabulary teaching and assessing are needed to help the learners to be able to learn, retain and recall PVs and LCs provided in school text books. Students often have difficulty in learning them in an effective way and they believe that they cannot remember many of the PVs and LCs they have learned. To pay

attention to the importance of PV and LC learning and retention, meet the students' needs for vocabulary learning and consider their interest in using effective techniques for learning, remembering and assessing vocabulary, the present study intended to investigate the impact of oral questions and written quizzes as FA techniques on EFL students' PV and LC learning and retention in EFL context. Consequently, the following four research questions were formulated:

1. Do FA techniques of oral questions and written quizzes influence EFL learners' learning of phrasal verbs?
2. Do FA techniques of Oral questions and written quizzes influence EFL learners' learning of collocations?
3. Do FA techniques of Oral questions and written quizzes influence EFL learners' retention of phrasal verbs?
4. Do FA techniques of Oral questions and written quizzes influence EFL learners' retention of collocations?

The fact that many linguists and experts in the field of language assessment claim that the use of FA can enhance reading and vocabulary knowledge (Frey & Fisher, 2007, 2011; Greenstein, 2010; Irons, 2008; Marshall, 2011), leads us to go with directional hypothesis: It seems that using FA techniques (written quizzes and oral questions) can enhance EFL students' PV and LC learning. On the other hand, written quizzes and oral questioning as FA techniques can affect retention of PVs and LCs in EFL context, but written quizzes appear to be more effective than oral questioning in improving EFL students' learning and retention. Consequently, this study aimed to investigate whether and to what extent FA could influence the EFL learners' learning of PVs and LCs.

### **3. Method**

#### *3.1. Participants*

The research sample comprised 75 intermediate senior high school male students within the age range of 17-19 who were studying in three intact segregated high schools in Marand, East Azarbaijan, Iran. The sample was selected from the total of 90 students based on their performance on a Nelson Proficiency test; those whose scores were below 25 and above 38 out of 40 were excluded from the study. The participants were speaking Azari Turkish as their mother tongue, Persian as a second language and were learning English as a foreign language. The three groups of the study were randomly assigned as experimental group 1 (EG1) for whom we employed oral questions as a regular FA technique, the second experimental group (EG2) whose performance was assessed using written quizzes, and a control group (CG) who received SA at the end with no particular FA technique.

### *3.2 Instruments*

The instruments required for data collection were three tests. They were taken from the question bank with 200 multiple choice vocabulary tests selected by the teacher from the universities entrance examination. These standard tests are valid and reliable because they have been used nationwide to assess students' language knowledge. The Nelson Proficiency Test (NPT) by Morris and Stanton (1998) was used to determine the participants' proficiency level. It comprised 15 grammar tests and 25 vocabulary tests. To test the participants' knowledge of LCs and to check the novelty of the teaching content, we developed a teacher-made pre-test based on the teaching content from the question bank. It consisted of 35 test items focused on the PVs and LCs.

Similarly, the immediate post-test taken from the question bank was a 35-item test focused on PVs and LCs. It was used to test the participants' mastery of the PVs and LCs after the instructing and assessing and practicing in the study. The delayed post-test with 35 test items was used to test retention of the learned PVs and LCs in long-term memory. Additionally, eight sets of PVs along with other eight sets of LCs were intended to be taught to the learners as the instructional and assessment treatment.

### *3.3 Procedure*

Having checked the homogeneity of the groups of participants in general English and in PVs and LCs, the 75 participants participated in the eight-week treatment. The lexical teaching content comprised 80 PVs and LCs which were divided into eight sets with five PVs and five LCs to be introduced and assessed interactively during each session. The treatment extended for eight sessions, one session a week and over four months. The English course book four was employed in all groups. Following the initial pre-tests and checking the initial homogeneity of the groups, the treatment began focusing on the use of oral questions in the EG1, written quizzes in the EG2, and the conventional teaching methodology in the CG with no specific focus on FA.

In the EG1, the teaching started with oral questions which were used by the classroom teacher, and peers while teaching the PV and LC sets and after teaching in the assessment process because FA serves both instruction and assessment. This experimental group practiced the PVs and LCs by applying ongoing FA techniques (oral questions) by the help of the teacher, peer- or self-assessment, provided with feedback and thorough discussion. The teacher asked students to define, describe, give synonyms and antonyms and exemplify the PVs and LCs in each set in every session. They were also encouraged to ask and answer questions orally in cooperation with each other and the teacher. The teacher exploited oral questions both to contextual the meaning of the lexical content and personalize the content and to assess the participants' learning of the lexical expressions. The feedback provided interactively aimed to clarify the correct use of the content.

The same procedure was employed in teaching the lexical content in the EG2; that is, the meaning, form and use of the expressions were presented through contextual presentation techniques like using pictures, examples, and explanations that were relevant to the expression. However, instead of checking the participants' understanding through oral questions, the teacher employed teacher-made written tests comprising multiple choice, fill in the blank, and completion test items right after each teaching session to assess the participants' understanding.

The CG were taught the lexical content based on the same methods of presentation with neither oral questions nor written quizzes. Instead, the participants were engaged in more conventional classroom practices like reading comprehension or doing classroom exercises. The treatment was followed by an immediate post-test, as described in the instruments, that was administered in all three groups to detect the impact of the three interventions on the groups' learning of lexical content, as posed in research questions one and two. To answer research questions three and four, we administered the post-test after a three-week interval.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The first step in data analysis was checking the normality of the data obtained from all sets of instruments. Having verified the normality of the research data through the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test,  $p > .05$ , the groups' PLT and Lexical Pre-test scores were analyzed through a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to check their initial homogeneity. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

*One Way ANOVA for the Groups' Proficiency and Lexical Pre-test Scores*

			<i>Sum of Squares</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	
Proficiency	Between Groups		2.107	2	1.053	.081	.922
	Within Groups		933.440	72	12.964		
	Total		935.547	74			
Lexical Pre-test	Between Groups		.347	2	.173	.007	.993
	Within Groups		1845.600	72	25.633		
	Total		1845.947	74			

As presented in Table 1, there were no significance differences among the groups' Proficiency ( $F(2, 72) = .081, p = .09, p = .92$ ) and their Lexical Pre-test scores ( $F(2, 72) = .007, p = .99$ ) supporting the homogeneity of the groups at the onset of the study.

##### 4.1. FA and Learning of PVs and LCs

A one-way between-groups ANOVA was conducted to investigate the effect of FA techniques of Oral questions and written quizzes on the participants' learning of the PVs and the LCs.

Table 2

*The One-way ANOVA on the Groups' PVs and LCs Immediate Post-test Scores*

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	190.827	2	95.413	7.95	.001
Within Groups	863.484	72	11.998		
Total	1054.667	74			
Between Groups	182.187	2	91.093	7.97	.001
Within Groups	822.400	72	11.422		
Total	1004.587	74			

There was a statistically significant difference at the  $p < .05$  level among the groups in PVs,  $F(2, 72) = 7.95$ ,  $p = .001$ , and LCs,  $F(2, 72) = 7.97$ ,  $p = .001$ . We ran the Tukey Post Hoc test to locate the difference more specifically, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

*Post Hoc Tests on Immediate Post-Tests of Three Groups in Learning Pvs and LCs*

Groups		Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
PVS	EG1	-.960	.979	.592	-3.30	1.38
	EG2	2.800	.979	.015	.455	5.14
CG	EG2	3.760	.979	.001	1.41	6.10
LCs	EG1	.960	.955	.577	-1.32	3.24
	EG2	3.680	.955	.001	1.39	5.96
CG	EG2	2.720	.955	.016	.432	5.00

Post-Hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the PVs mean score for EG1 ( $M = 31.08$ ,  $SD = 3.31$ ) and the EG2 groups, ( $M = 32.04$ ,  $SD = 2.65$ ), were not significantly different, but both differed significantly from the CG ( $M = 28.28$ ,  $SD = 4.23$ ). Likewise, with regard to LCs, EG1 ( $M = 31.04$ ,  $SD = 3.27$ ) and the EG2 groups, ( $M = 32$ ,  $SD = 2.58$ ), were not significantly different while both differed significantly from the CG ( $M =$

28.32,  $SD = 3.68$ ). Therefore, the first and the second research questions are answered positively.

#### 4.2. FA and Retention of PVs and LCs

Another one-way ANOVA was conducted to investigate the effect of FA on the retention of PVs and LCs, as posed in research question 3 and 4. Table 4 and 5 present the results.

Table 4

*A One-way ANOVA for the Groups' PVs and LCs Delayed Post-test Scores*

			<i>Sum of Squares</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
PVs	Between Groups		128.240	2	64.120	4.528	.014
	Within Groups		1019.680	72	14.162		
	Total		1147.920	74			
LCS	Between Groups		182.187	2	91.093	7.975	.001
	Within Groups		822.400	72	11.422		
	Total		1004.587	74			

As displayed in Table 4, significant differences were observed among the groups in terms of their retention of PVs,  $p < .05$ , and LCs,  $p < .05$ . Hence, two more Tukey Post Hoc tests were run to locate the differences, as illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5

*Post Hoc Tests the Groups' PVs and LCs Delayed Post-test Scores*

<i>Groups</i>		<i>Mean Difference</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>95% Confidence Interval</i>	
					<i>Lower Bound</i>	<i>Upper Bound</i>
PVS	EG1	-.960	.955	.577	-3.24	1.32
	EG2	2.720	.955	.016	.432	5.00
	CG	3.680	.955	.001	1.39	5.96
LCS	EG1	.960	.955	.577	-1.32	3.24
	EG2	3.680	.955	.001	1.39	5.96
	EG2	2.720	.955	.016	.432	5.00

According to Table 5, the PVs mean score for EG1 ( $M = 30.64$ ,  $SD = 3.54$ ) and the EG2 groups, ( $M = 30.96$ ,  $SD = 3.39$ ), were not significantly different while both groups significantly outperformed the CG ( $M = 28.04$ ,  $SD = 3.93$ ). Likewise, with regard to LCs, EG1 ( $M = 30.52$ ,  $SD = 3.49$ ) and the EG2 groups, ( $M = 30.44$ ,  $SD = 2.848$ ), were not significantly different while both differed significantly from the CG ( $M = 28.12$ ,  $SD = 3.54$ ). Thus, the third and the fourth research questions are also answered positively.

The findings emerging from the present study substantiated the facilitative effect of oral questions and written quizzes as two FA techniques on the learning and retention of PVs and LCs. The findings of this study seem to be congruent with most studies on the effect of FA on learning and retention of vocabulary and general English language achievement (e.g. Babaie & Nourdad, 2014; Gholami & Moghaddam, 2013; Hashemzadeh, 2012; Torosyan, 2011; Yaghoobi & Mashhadi, 2013).

The findings from the present study lend support to the principles offered by Wei (2011) who operationalized and implemented FA in the context of Chinese English classrooms and described the procedures from need analysis and goal setting to FA plan drafting, communicating, implementing and evaluating and revising. In order for FA to promote learners' subsequent learning, as Wei (2011) explained, researchers should evaluate and revise the plan into a more practical one after implementing it and try to find relevant information about the efficacy of each item through a variety of channels such as observations, face-to-face interviews with students, specially designed questionnaire surveys, students' learning portfolios, and more common formative practices like incorporation of oral questions and written quizzes.

The findings might be explicated in terms of the Schmidt's (1994) view regarding the significance of noticing which, according to him, can trigger interactional adjustments and connect input, selective attention, and output through the opportunities that are offered by FA techniques. FA can serve a number of functions including checking students' learning, drawing learners' attention to both meaning-carrying and formal features of the input that is provided through classroom interactions that originate from asking question in written or oral form, and through the feedback that is ultimately offered to the learner (Long, 1983, 1996, Schmidt, 1994, 2001). This noticing seems to have enhanced the experimental groups' learning and retention, as reflected in their superiority on the immediate and delayed post-tests. Accordingly, we may propose that one way to enhance EFL learners' short-term and long-term learning of PVs and LCs can be relying on FA techniques mingled with comprehensible and interactive input that were provided by the oral questions and written quizzes and the effective feedback offered on the participants' performance.

By linking FA, scaffolding, and learning theory, Shepard (2005) discussed how these concepts overlap and benefit classroom practice. Shepard (2009) argued that relying on principles of FA, teachers can incorporate various FA techniques to highlight the significant features of the teaching content and to assess students' learning outcomes. Although innovations and validity concerns in interim assessments are important, fostering teaching practices through various procedures of FA seems more practical in real classrooms. Marzano (2009) has also argued for the use of standardized continuums of knowledge because they would allow FA systems to provide information to the learner about their learning. He discussed the shortcomings

of 100 point scales and Item Response Theory models of FA because they do not provide information for students.

## 5. Conclusion and Implications

The wide range of FA techniques has made it viable for practicing teachers and researchers to select appropriate techniques to enhance learning outcomes in particular contexts. In case of Iranian learners, the present study substantiated the effectiveness of oral questions and written quizzes that can be designed by teachers to promote learning. Other researchers can explore the effect of other FA techniques on various skills and sub-skills of Iranian EFL learners across gender, cognitive style, proficiency level and other individual and contextual differences. Though restricted in scope, the findings of this study may be of benefit for teachers, materials developers, and educators and might contribute to the ongoing research in the application of oral questions and written quizzes. Teachers may utilize the result of this study to incorporate these techniques in their teaching and offer feedback. Likewise, material developers and educators and policy makers are invited to reconsider the current process of curriculum development based on the acknowledgement of the role of FA to realign the whole procedure in a way to accommodate FA techniques. We should bear in mind that the ultimate goal of English pedagogy is to help learners gain autonomy so that they can pursue their academic goals that are closely tied with our social, economic, educational, and moral growth. Hence, any investment in promoting standards of English educational programs that may initially seem costly and ambitious can prove promising and rewarding in the long run. Even if such fundamental reforms are not viable, the result of this research may help EFL and ESL learners to enhance their command of English language skills and sub-skills by empowering them with various learning and assessing strategies and tools.

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