

Practices and strategies of informal assessments on grammar rules among second language learners

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ABSTRACT

While informal assessment offers authentic insights into second language (L2) grammar acquisition, the specific strategies and implementation challenges remain underexplored. This study investigated the practices employed by L2 educators in conducting informal grammar assessments and the obstacles they encounter. Using a qualitative exploratory design, 20 purposively selected language educators from diverse linguistic regions in the Philippines participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings revealed a pedagogical shift from static testing to stealth monitoring, characterized by contextualized micro-checks, gamified strategies to lower affective filters, and peer-scaffolded evaluation. However, significant challenges emerged, specifically the tension between assessment validity and reliability, as well as cognitive overload due to the dual burden of instruction and real-time data recording. The study concluded that while educators prioritize the authenticity of low-stakes assessment, effective implementation requires enhanced assessment literacy and structural support to mitigate subjectivity and operational fatigue.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Grammar plays a fundamental role in the acquisition of a second language (L2), as it provides learners with the structural framework needed to communicate effectively and accurately [1], [2]. In classroom settings, assessments of grammar proficiency are essential in monitoring student progress and guiding instructional decisions [3], [4]. Traditionally, grammar assessment has relied heavily on formal testing methods, such as written quizzes and standardized examinations. However, these methods often fail to capture learners' real-time use and understanding of grammar in communicative contexts [5], [6]. As a result, informal assessments, those integrated into daily instructional practices without rigid structures, have gained

attention for their potential to provide more authentic, responsive, and learner-centered insights into grammar acquisition [2], [7]–[9]. Unlike formal assessments, informal assessments are embedded within classroom interactions and focus on ongoing monitoring rather than summative evaluation [10], [11].

This study is grounded in two theoretical frameworks: formative assessment theory and sociocultural theory. Through the lens of formative assessment, informal strategies support learning processes by providing timely feedback and promoting learner autonomy [12]–[14]. Effective informal assessment helps educators identify developmental stages and tailor instruction accordingly [15], allowing for the reinforcement of rules and real-time error correction [16]. This approach aligns with communicative language teaching methodologies, which emphasize meaningful interaction over mechanical drills [17]. Complementing this is sociocultural theory, which posits that learning is context-dependent. Research highlights that grammar remains relevant when viewed through social learning lenses [18] and that informal avenue, such as campus journalism or bilingual narratives, enhance grammar consciousness [19]. Furthermore, recognizing socio-cultural factors, including the influence of parents and dominant languages, is crucial for effective engagement and retention [20].

In practice, educators employ a variety of informal assessment techniques, such as observation, spontaneous questioning, and peer assessment [21]–[24]. These practices provide immediate insights into learners' grasp of grammar without the anxiety often associated with formal tests [25]. However, despite these benefits, implementation presents significant challenges. Educators often struggle with reliability and consistency as informal assessments rely heavily on teacher judgment [21], [26]. Time constraints and large class sizes limit opportunities for individualized feedback [27], while the dual role of instructor and assessor can affect objectivity [28]. Moreover, learner diversity requires adaptive strategies that can be difficult to implement uniformly [10], and a lack of formal training often hinders educators' confidence [29], [30].

Despite the shift in focus, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding how language educators actually implement these assessments and the specific obstacles they encounter [2], [31]. Without a clear understanding of these practices and challenges, efforts to improve informal assessment strategies remain limited [32], [33]. This study intends to address this gap by exploring the practices and strategies employed by L2 educators and identifying the challenges that hinder effective implementation.

Therefore, the specific objectives of this study are: i) to explore the practices educators use in conducting informal assessments of grammar; and ii) to identify the challenges educators face in implementing informal assessments of grammar rules among L2 learners. By analyzing qualitative data from 20 language educators, this study utilizes reflexive thematic analysis to uncover recurring themes regarding informal assessment practices, implementation challenges, and strategic adjustments. The expected outcome is a nuanced understanding of how informal assessment practices are integrated into language classrooms, contributing to the development of more effective, learner-centered grammar assessment strategies in L2 education.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory research design to investigate the practices and strategies used by educators in conducting informal assessments of grammar among L2 learners. An exploratory design is appropriate for gaining in-depth understanding of under-researched or nuanced phenomena, such as informal assessment techniques within language classrooms. The design allowed the researcher to collect rich, detailed insights into educators' real-life experiences, assessment strategies, and the challenges they face.

2.2. Population and sampling

The study utilized purposive sampling to select 20 language educators who have substantial experience in teaching L2 learners and conducting informal assessments of grammar. Participants were drawn from three distinct regions in the Philippines: Zamboanga Peninsula, Benguet, and Isabela Province. These locations were strategically selected to represent diverse L2 learning contexts: Zamboanga Peninsula provides a unique Chavacano-speaking and multilingual environment; Benguet represents the Cordillera administrative context with specific indigenous language influences; and Isabela Province reflects the Northern Luzon Ilocano-Tagalog linguistic landscape. This regional triangulation ensured that the findings on assessment practices were not limited to a single cultural or linguistic demographic but rather reflected a broader spectrum of L2 instructional realities.

The sample size of 20 was determined based on the principle of data saturation. During the data collection process, the researchers noted that by the 17th and 18th interviews, recurring patterns in “time constraints” and “game-based strategies” were repeating without yielding new distinct codes. Two additional

interviews were conducted to confirm this saturation, bringing the total to 20. Inclusion criteria included having at least one year of experience in L2 instruction and familiarity with informal grammar assessment techniques.

2.3. Instrument

The primary research instrument for this study was a semi-structured interview guide, carefully developed to align with the study's two main objectives: exploring educators' practices in conducting informal grammar assessments and identifying the challenges they encounter. The guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit both descriptive and reflective responses from participants, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of their classroom practices and pedagogical reasoning. Sample questions included: "what informal assessment practices do you use to evaluate learners' grammar?", "what challenges do you experience when applying informal assessments of grammar?", and "what adjustments do you take to address the challenges in your assessment practices?" These questions were intended to prompt participants to share detailed insights into their experiences, strategies, and perspectives related to informal grammar assessment in L2 classrooms. Table 1 presents the list of guide questions used by this research study.

Table 1. Interview guide questions

Objectives	Interview questions
To explore the practices educators use in conducting informal assessments of grammar among L2 learners.	1. What informal assessment practices do you use to evaluate learners' grammar? 2. How do you implement informal assessment practices in your classroom? 3. What factors influence your choice of informal assessment practices?
To identify the challenges educators, face in implementing informal assessments of grammar rules among L2 learners	1. What challenges do you experience when applying informal assessments of grammar? 2. How do challenges on informal assessment application affect your ability to evaluate learners' grammar effectively? 3. What adjustments do you take to address the challenges in your assessment practices?

2.4. Data gathering procedure

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. To accommodate the participants' locations and preferences, interviews were conducted either face-to-face in private school settings or via secure online video conferencing platforms. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The interviews were conducted in English, though participants were encouraged to use their local language if necessary to express complex ideas, which were later translated. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy.

2.5. Data analysis

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, as proposed by Braun and Clarke [34]. This method involves a six-phase process. First, in the familiarization phase, researchers read the transcripts multiple times to obtain a holistic view. Second, during initial coding, an inductive approach was used where raw data segments were assigned descriptive labels ("using hand signals," and "student anxiety"). Third, in generating themes, similar codes were grouped; for instance, codes related to "bingo" and "charades" were clustered under tentative themes. Fourth, in reviewing themes, the researchers refined the map; disparate codes regarding "teacher fatigue" and "large class size" were collapsed and merged into the broader theme of "resource and environmental constraints," while themes lacking sufficient data were rejected. Finally, the themes were defined, named, and written into the final report to ensure a coherent narrative.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Research objectives 1

3.1.1. Contextualized observation and micro-checks

A prevalent practice among participants is the embedding of assessment within authentic communication tasks, intentionally avoiding standalone grammar quizzes to capture real-world grammar use rather than test-taking skills. This strategy is heavily influenced by the need for authenticity; educators prioritize observing how students employ grammar during role-plays, journal writing, or spontaneous speaking tasks to discern if they have truly internalized the rules. To operationalize this without disrupting the communicative flow, educators employ micro-checks, low-stakes, spontaneous interactions designed to gauge internalization immediately. These mechanisms include pop-up questions during lessons, asking students to reformulate sentences on the spot, or conducting quick polls. This approach is often driven by the necessity for rapid feedback turnaround, allowing teachers to modify their instruction in real-time based on the data they collect. Furthermore, the implementation of this strategy is characterized by subtle, non-

intrusive monitoring. While students engage in tasks, educators circulate with checklists or anecdotal records, noting recurring strengths or errors rather than grading every mistake. This method ensures that assessment remains supportive rather than punitive.

“I rarely give standalone grammar quizzes. Instead, I watch how students use grammar naturally in speaking and writing activities.”

“I consider feedback turnaround a big factor. If I need to adjust my teaching the next day, I choose informal tasks that give me immediate data like thumbs up/down checks, but when time is tight, I rely on instant checks so I can see exactly where students are struggling.”

“During group activities I circulate with a small checklist where I note who’s using target structures well and who’s still hesitant... While the students are working I give quiet, micro-feedback like a quick thumbs-up or a whispered correction so it stays supportive.”

3.1.2. Gamified assessment as an affective strategy

Educators frequently utilized gamified tasks, such as sentence scrambles, board races, and team competitions, as a strategic assessment tool specifically designed to mitigate student anxiety. Participants noted that traditional testing often causes learners to shut down, whereas the competitive yet relaxed nature of games reveals a more authentic picture of a learner’s grammatical competence. By shifting the focus from testing to playing, educators can observe who applies rules accurately under time pressure without the affective filter blocking their performance.

To ensure these activities function as valid assessments rather than mere recreation, educators implement them with targeted constraints. Before the activity, specific skills are isolated, such as past-tense verbs or pronunciation, to serve as the assessment focal point. While students engage in the task, the educator circulates with a checklist or mental rubric to track performance gaps. Crucially, the feedback mechanism during these tasks is designed to be unobtrusive to maintain the playful dynamic.

“Student comfort and anxiety levels guide me. I avoid anything that feels like a formal test so they don’t shut down or get nervous... The game format lowers anxiety, but I still get to see who can apply grammar rules accurately and quickly.”

“I often run games like vocabulary bingo, charades, or short role-plays... I give quiet, positive feedback during the activity, a quick ‘Great use of the past tense!’ or a whispered pronunciation tip so it doesn’t interrupt play.”

3.1.3. Peer-scaffolded evaluation

To address the challenges of monitoring large classes and to foster learner autonomy, educators distribute the assessment burden through peer feedback circles. This practice moves away from the traditional teacher-centric model, involving students in the evaluation process using simplified, low-stakes criteria. By having students assess one another, educators aim to build metalinguistic awareness while maintaining a supportive classroom climate. The implementation of this strategy relies on accessibility; tools are kept simple to ensure students focus on the language rather than the assessment mechanics.

This collaborative approach is particularly influenced by the need to support introverted or anxious learners. By engaging in think-pair-share or small group feedback before facing the whole class, shy students are given a safe space to test their language use. The educator’s role shifts from direct assessor to facilitator, circulating to identify class-wide trends rather than critiquing individual performance. Finally, this strategy often culminates in self-reflection. After receiving peer feedback, students are encouraged to take ownership of their learning trajectory by setting immediate, actionable goals.

“I set up short speaking tasks where students give each other constructive feedback using a checklist in simple language. Like smiley faces, ticks, or one-word prompts to give each other feedback on just one or two criteria at a time.”

“This way peer feedback feels safe, focused, and constructive... While they’re doing this, I circulate and jot down recurring strengths or errors across the whole class.”

“At the end, students quickly note one thing they’ll improve next time based on the feedback they got.”

3.2. Research objectives 2

3.2.1. The tension between authenticity and accuracy

A significant pedagogical paradox emerged from the data: while informal strategies successfully lower anxiety, their relaxed nature often compromises the validity of the assessment data. Participants

reported that when students perceive activities as play rather than work, their engagement often prioritizes fun over linguistic accuracy. This ambiguity makes it difficult for educators to discern whether an error stems from a genuine gap in grammatical knowledge or simply from a lack of focus.

This lack of seriousness creates a validity gap, particularly in mixed-ability groups where stronger students may dominate the interaction while weaker students coast through unnoticed. Consequently, without the structure of a formal test, teachers expressed concern that their evaluations become impressionistic rather than evidence-based. The reliance on memory rather than written records leads to a sense of subjectivity, where a student's grade might be influenced by a single memorable moment rather than their overall performance. To mitigate this, educators found it necessary to reintroduce accountability measures into informal tasks such as requiring a quick written reflection after a game, to signal that while the method is playful, the learning objective remains serious.

“Some students treat informal activities like play, so they don’t take them seriously. It can be hard to know if their mistakes come from misunderstanding the grammar point or just from lack of focus.”

“Without concrete evidence, my evaluations can feel subjective. I may overestimate a student’s grammar because I recall their good performance on one activity, or underestimate them because of one bad day.”

3.2.2. Operational constraints and cognitive overload

The most pervasive barrier to effective informal assessment is the logistical conflict between instruction and evaluation. Educators described a dual burden where they must simultaneously facilitate complex activities, manage classroom behavior, and document individual learner progress. This split focus often exceeds the teacher’s mental bandwidth, making it nearly impossible to capture detailed, granular data on every student in real time, particularly in large classes.

This operational constraint directly impacts the quality of assessment data. Because teachers cannot pause the lesson to write detailed notes, much of the data becomes ephemeral, noticed in the moment but forgotten by the time the lesson ends. Consequently, the feedback loop is often broken or delayed; teachers struggle to turn their fleeting observations into actionable, individualized support because the sheer volume of interactions is too high to process manually. To survive this constraint, educators report abandoning long, complex assessment tasks in favor of micro-checks, rapid, one-minute drills or exit tickets, that provide manageable data without derailing the lesson flow.

“Time is my biggest challenge. Informal assessments like quick speaking tasks or games give me rich data, but recording or remembering each student’s errors in real time can be overwhelming, especially with large classes.”

“I’m also managing time, materials, and behavior, which eats into the mental bandwidth needed for accurate observation... Because informal assessments are quick and embedded in activities, I often don’t have enough time to record everything I notice.”

3.2.3. The pedagogical dilemma of immediate feedback

The final challenge identified is the delicate negotiation between the need for accuracy and the preservation of learner confidence. Because informal assessment relies on a relaxed, low-stakes atmosphere, educators reported significant difficulty in delivering corrective feedback without disrupting the communicative flow or raising the affective filter. Teachers described a constant split-second decision-making process: deciding whether an error is significant enough to warrant an interruption or if correction would cause the student to withdraw.

This reluctance to interrupt often leads to the use of implicit feedback strategies, such as recasts or subtle hints. However, educators noted that while this protects student ego, it often compromises the clarity of the assessment. When feedback is too softened, students may not realize they are being corrected, leaving the teacher unsure if the grammar rule was actually processed. To resolve this dilemma, educators have developed stealth feedback mechanisms. Rather than stopping the activity, they utilize non-verbal cues, such as hand signals or passing a physical cue card, to signal an error without breaking the verbal flow. Alternatively, many choose to decouple the assessment from the correction entirely, recording errors during the task and addressing them anonymously with the whole class afterwards.

“I find it tricky to give immediate corrective feedback without discouraging learners. Because the atmosphere is supposed to be relaxed, I have to balance between pointing out errors and keeping their confidence up.”

“Using hints or recasts instead of explicit feedback also makes it harder for me to tell whether learners actually noticed and processed the grammar point.”

“Instead of interrupting the activity, I use discreet hand signals or jot notes to give feedback afterwards... In some activities, I quietly hand a student a cue card with a quick reminder, such as ‘Check verb tense,’ so they can self-correct.”

To present the results more clearly, the various informal grammar assessment strategies, influencing factors, challenges, and corresponding adjustments identified in the study are summarized in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Results summary diagram

3.3. Discussion

3.3.1. Reframing assessment to invisible monitoring

The findings indicate a pedagogical shift where informal grammar assessment is moving from a supplementary check to a primary strategy for capturing authentic language use. While traditional frameworks often bifurcate instruction and evaluation [10], the educators in this study utilize an integrated approach, characterized by micro-checks and gamified observation, to monitor grammatical development in real-time. This supports Black and Wiliam [7] foundational assertion that assessment is most effective when indistinguishable from the learning process itself.

However, this study extends existing literature by highlighting the role of affective regulation as a validity tool. Previous research has established that informal assessment enhances engagement [22]. Yet, the current findings suggest that educators employ gamification and stealth observation not merely to motivate, but as a deliberate mechanism to bypass the affective filter. By removing the explicit pressure of evaluation, teachers argue they access a truer representation of learner competence than formal testing permits. This operationalizes the principles of learner autonomy, where peer-scaffolded evaluation moves beyond simple error correction to foster the self-regulated learning cycles [12].

3.3.2. The reliability-validity paradox in L2 classrooms

A critical tension emerged in this study between the authenticity of data and the consistency of evaluation. Participants reported that while invisible assessment captures real-world grammar use, the lack of standardized documentation leads to impressionistic grading. This confirms Aryadoust and Riazi [21] warning that non-standardized assessments often suffer from rater inconsistency and subjectivity.

However, the findings suggest that educators are consciously prioritizing validity over reliability. Unlike formal psychometric models that demand statistical precision, such as the Rasch scale model which filters out items compromising validity [11], teachers in this context appear willing to accept a degree of

subjectivity in exchange for the rich, contextual data that informal methods provide. This challenges the dominant testing culture by suggesting that in the L2 classroom, messy real-time data may be more pedagogically valuable than clean but artificial test scores. Nevertheless, the cognitive load reported by participants, echoing Brookhart [27] concerns about the dual role of assessor and instructor, indicates that without better tools or training, this trade-off may lead to teacher burnout and uneven feedback quality, necessitating periodic rater training to mitigate these inherent inconsistencies [30].

3.3.3. Pedagogical implications with assessment literacy and artificial intelligence

The challenges identified in this study, specifically the struggle with subjectivity and the cognitive overload of real-time monitoring, underscore a critical need for enhanced assessment literacy. While teachers effectively utilize informal strategies intuitively, the reported lack of consistency suggests that professional development must move beyond instructional techniques to include specific training on informal data collection. As noted by Popham [29], the absence of such training undermines the validity of formative assessment. Consequently, institutional support should focus on equipping educators with quick-scan rubrics and standardized observation protocols to reduce the burden of memory-based evaluation [26].

Furthermore, the time constraint barrier identified as the primary obstacle in this study presents a clear use case for the integration of artificial intelligence (AI). While traditional peer assessment training is effective [23], it is time-intensive. Emerging literature suggests that AI tools can alleviate the operational burden by automating the generation of the micro-checks and diagnostic items that this study's participants found most effective [13], [14]. However, this introduces a new layer of responsibility: educators must possess the critical skills to evaluate AI-generated content for validity before classroom application [24]. Therefore, the future of informal grammar assessment likely lies in a hybrid model, where AI manages the logistics of item generation, allowing educators to focus their limited mental bandwidth on the interpersonal and affective aspects of student feedback.

4. CONCLUSION

This study advances the understanding of L2 pedagogy by characterizing informal grammar assessment not merely as a supplementary teaching technique, but as a critical mechanism for bridging the gap between mechanical accuracy and communicative fluency. The findings contribute to the existing body of knowledge by highlighting a deliberate pedagogical trade-off: educators are prioritizing the validity of authentic, low-anxiety data over the reliability of standardized testing. By utilizing stealth assessment strategies, such as gamification and micro-checks, teachers successfully lower the affective filter, allowing for a more genuine evaluation of internalized grammar rules than high-stakes exams permit.

From a practical standpoint, the study underscores that while informal assessment is pedagogically superior for fostering learner autonomy, it is operationally fragile. The identified challenges, specifically cognitive overload and the difficulty of recording real-time data, suggest that current instructional policies regarding class size and teacher workload are incompatible with effective formative assessment. Therefore, educational policy must move beyond simply mandating learner-centered approaches and instead provide the structural support necessary to sustain them. This includes integrating assessment literacy into professional development to help teachers design standardized observation protocols, thereby reducing subjectivity without sacrificing authenticity.

This research opens several critical paths for future inquiry. First, given the reported struggle with mental bandwidth, future studies should investigate the integration of AI tools in automating the generation and tracking of informal assessment data. Second, while this study explored practices, longitudinal research is needed to measure the impact of these informal strategies on long-term grammatical retention compared to traditional testing. Finally, further investigation is required to develop and validate standardized rubrics for game-based assessment, helping to resolve the tension between the playful nature of these activities and the need for rigorous academic evaluation.

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C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

D : Data Curation

O : Writing - Original Draft

E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [JVC], upon reasonable request.




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