FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Simply, No Additives

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In the complex and sometimes cantankerous world of reading assessment, formative assessment is often taken for granted. It has been around for a long time, and it is part and parcel of good teaching. Described as assessment conducted in the flow of the instructional process (Shepard, Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, & Rust, 2005), it has to do with the frequent, interactive checks of student understandings and skills to identify learning needs and to adjust instruction (e.g., re-teaching) (Office of Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2005). The humble quiz is a prime example of formative assessment used by teachers across the ages. When push comes to shove in reading assessment, formative assessment is a powerful engine. Used effectively, it can provide teachers and students with the information they need to drive reading achievement forward.

What makes formative assessment formative (or not)? What is involved in carrying it out during the instructional process? What do teachers of reading (simply) need to know and do to use formative assessment successfully? Let’s follow the gist of these questions for some answers that can put formative assessment to work in your classroom.

Formative Assessment Defined

Under the umbrella term of assessment, formative assessment refers to the appraisals of student performance as distinguished from formative evaluation, which refers to judgments of program effectiveness (OECD, 2005, p. 25). It involves making judgments about the quality of student responses (performances; student work) and using those judgments immediately (midstream in instruction) to guide and improve students’ understandings and skills (Sadler, 1989). The intent, as Sadler observed, is to short-circuit (or create a “workaround” for) the “randomness and inefficiency of trial-and-error learning” (p. 120).

In this respect, the teacher takes an active role to deliberately scaffold learning from a lower level to a higher level of performance (Vygotsky’s [1978] theoretical zone of proximal development) to achieve a desired end (e.g., a common core English language arts Standard). Formative assessment is all about forming judgments frequently in the flow of instruction, whereas summative assessment focuses on making judgments at some point in time after instruction.

That’s a mouthful about a concept that clearly requires further elaboration. So…let’s go there to describe in some detail several key features of formative assessment. The Figure may also help to illustrate the concept.

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You may be familiar with the warning to train passengers around the world to “mind the gap” between the platform and the train door. The stock phrase fits nicely with the formative assessment process in which the central purpose is to identify the gap between where students are and where they need to go in their reading development. The gap, of course, varies from student to student, with very real consequences for differentiating instruction.

When gaps are large, teachers face problems of having enough instructional time, support, and proper resources to address learning needs, not to mention maintaining students’ motivation to learn. When gaps are small, teachers tend to overlook, lessen, or put off instruction, and students perceive that some important skills are not so necessary after all and do not practice them enough. Paraphrasing text accurately and meaningfully in one’s own words, from our experience, is one such example.

Formative assessment is a gap-minder because it helps the teacher to stay alert to gaps in individual students’ reading development and to adjust instruction as needed before moving on (to the train, which, as we know, is leaving the station). There are some easy-to-use tools for finding gaps in the day-to-day rush of reading instruction. Wiggins and McTighe (2006), for example, proposed a continuum of assessments ranging from informal checks for understanding to quizzes to open-ended/discussion prompts to performance tasks or projects (p. 152). Using a range of assessments allows teachers to gather lots of evidence along the way to create a “scrapbook” of student learning, not just a single snapshot at some predetermined benchmark (e.g., fall, winter, spring).

Feedback Loops
Feedback loops provide teachers and students with information about changes in the gap, (i.e., how well the student is doing vis-à-vis an expectation and how well the instruction is working to alter the gap). This is a subtler process than it sounds for two reasons. One, the teacher must hold a clear concept of quality in relation to a task (e.g., fluent reading) and effectively communicate it to students, as in you are here. Two, students must come to hold an approximation of a quality task and self-regulate what they are doing while they are doing it for quality, as in I am or am not there yet.

In short, both teacher and student have to have a clear concept of the goal, compare what is with what should be, and engage in productive action to narrow the gap between actual and desired performance. What? Say again? Put simply, the teacher creates a feedback loop that models, instructs, and pulls the learner forward to achieving a specific goal (e.g., determining the main idea of a text). Formative assessment is the mechanism that facilitates this process of recognizing and internalizing the specific knowledge and skill that is the “stuff” of the learning goal and in turn pushes reading development to a more mature level.

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Self-Assessment
In the end—if learning is to take hold—the teacher has to hand over the cognitive work to the student who, in turn, needs to assume responsibility for getting it right. The student, in other words, has to go meta and monitor his or her own strategies and performance against a set of criteria. This requires involving students in self-assessment that is meaningful and productive—and goes beyond superficial ratings of performance, as in my effort on reading homework needs to improve. It should ask students to appreciate hard goals—that is, specific, difficult, at-the-edge-of-capacity goals such as quality summary writing (Sadler, 1989, p. 129), to compare their work with success criteria, and to make honest judgments of their performance.

Students need to learn how to think like an assessor and ask: What’s the evidence that my work meets the specific criteria of success? For this to happen, teachers of reading need to include self-assessment activity routinely in reading instruction by asking students to set goals, peer review, self-evaluate, and hold themselves accountable. When Jerome, a third grader, reports that he remembers to look back (in the text) to verify his answers for accuracy, we glimpse this feature of formative assessment at work.

Learning Hierarchies
Here’s a feature of formative assessment that has been around for a long time but remains terribly complex. Gagné (1968) used the term learning hierarchies to describe a set of intellectual abilities that are in an ordered relationship with one another or a progression—sort of what standards aspire to do, but not all that well, because they simply lack the specificity to describe what it takes cognitively to get from here to there.

Moreover, pathways for getting from here to there vary among learners; the route is neither singular nor straight nor necessarily easy (Fischer, Rose, & Rose, 2007). This said, what the teacher must do is chart the way from point A to point B and formatively assess student progress in order to shape, mold, and form reading development in the desired direction. Here routine, everyday instruction matters because it is in day-to-day learning activities and tasks where the learning goals and insights are embedded that challenge and change students’ reading achievements and improve the flow of instruction.

Formative Assessment in Real Time
Hard to admit, but true, teachers rarely have time to go back and reteach items missed on periodic benchmark assessments; the school year relentlessly marches on, as does the curriculum to be covered. One of the beauties of formative assessment, however, is that it can occur in real time during the natural course of instruction and therefore inform teaching and learning as it goes. Here are steps to get started.

1. Put basic learning activities at the center of the formative assessment process. In effective reading instruction, a basic activity has clear goals, appropriate materials, and social interaction (Cole & Griffin, 1986). It is routine yet adaptable to the learning needs of a particular group of students in a particular classroom. A story retelling in its various formats is an example of a basic activity because it has a clear goal, accommodates students at varying levels, and involves text–reader as well as teacher–student interactions.

2. Embed key concepts and skills in the content of the activity. Key concepts are ideas or principles that are central to mastery; key skills are procedures or strategies essential to performance. What these look like at
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varying ages and how they connect and influence one another describe the learning hierarchy needed for mastery. Retelling, for example, involves knowledge of text structure and strategies of remembering, sequencing, and summarizing content. For very young children, relating beginning, middle, and end is enough, whereas for middle graders, identifying the theme and explaining details of the plot are required.

3. Determine success criteria for each basic activity included in formative assessment (i.e., the expected level of performance). This is the tough part, because it requires thoughtful consideration of students’ current capabilities, the reading program, and (of course) grade-level standards. There is no magic formula. Success criteria of a retelling, for example, may involve the amount of key ideas directly recalled and/or deeper understandings of a text, such as implicit meanings about characters or events. Bottom line: success criteria depend on teacher judgment. And now the r word: judgments the teacher explains and specifies in rubrics.

4. Plan for assessment during instruction by doing the following:
   (a) Focusing on a few children at any one time. This is a form of sampling and makes a lot of sense in a busy classroom. Ask yourself, Which children are puzzling me most right now? Which do I need to learn more about? Which seem to be having difficulty? (Chen & McNamee, 2007).
   (b) Establishing the time-frame (in your own mind) when assessment will occur; weekly often seems doable.
   (c) Deciding on the arrangements for assessment. Some prefer assessing on-the-fly during general instruction. Others conduct assessments in the small group setting, whereas others choose to conduct end-of-week three- to five-minute one-on-one conferences. The important point is that teachers plan ahead for formative assessment.

5. Implement a set of basic reading activities that constitutes formative assessment in your classroom. Your set will likely vary from that of the teacher next door, which is just fine. But all sets everywhere need to reflect what students need to know and do to make progress in reading. Implementation of an assessment process, as we know, is thick with organizing, documenting, interpreting, using, and storing assessment information and, in this respect, is demanding in already crowded classroom schedules. But careful, consistent implementation is well worth the considerable effort it takes. Linking reading teaching and assessment creates a stronger, richer, "Determining success criteria for an expected level of performance requires thoughtful consideration of students’ current capabilities, the reading program, and grade-level standards.”

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more ambitious instructional system for students’ reading development.

Formative Assessment in a Learning Culture

Now, we could say all well and good. With some thinking, planning and energy I could do this. But…wait. There is one more thing. For formative assessment to be effective, it needs to occur in a culture that cultivates a learning orientation; that is, a belief that ability is not fixed, but rather can be increased by effort (Shepard, 2005). To foster this belief in students’ hearts and minds, the formative assessment process needs to focus feedback on student effort, evidence of thinking strategies, and the salient features of quality work products. The ubiquitous “Good job!” is not enough; feedback must communicate what constitutes quality and do so in a way that not only bolsters effort, but also develops knowledge for self-assessment. So Mr. T instead says, “Your story map of Little Red Riding Hood is coming along; it shows the forest and Grandma’s house, but I don’t see how the wolf got to Grandma’s house. That’s important because…. And there are no people on this map…so who might you add? How would you check for that?”

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Providing the kind of descriptive feedback that identifies, points out, explains, and models exemplary achievement, however, is not necessarily intuitive. Teachers (of reading and otherwise) need to be deeply knowledgeable about:

- The domain to be taught, especially if they are to map a good learning route to the intended learning goal
- Differentiating instruction to help individual learners make progress
- Students’ prior learning
- Formative assessment strategies, such as questioning, feeding-back critical information, sharing success criteria and supporting self-assessment skills (e.g., goal-setting)

For most of us, achieving this level of professional teaching does not happen overnight or even after a stellar capstone experience—an internship or student teaching. It develops over time, with lots of practice, persistence, patience, and purpose, which reminds us (practically) that literacy education is not for the fainthearted (Gee, 1988).

Problem of Practice

Enough said—to keep it simple, with no additives for now. Formative assessment is one of those topics with a long history, a significant body of research, and no small measure of professional commentary. It is relevant to teaching and learning in a wide variety of subjects, including the teaching of reading, which is our passion.

Let’s step back a bit and consider its role in effective reading instruction. Recall our previous columns in which we discussed classroom environment design and management as key elements of a productive literacy environment. Formative assessment is a third vital element that creates opportunities in the environment for teacher and students to work together to improve learning—to read, write, and think with texts, books, and digital media.

As always, we are interested in what you have to say about this topic. Please join the discussion on The Reading Teacher’s community blog on IRA Engage: engage.reading.org/directory/journals/thereadingteacher/. Share your ideas, concerns, and experiences with formative assessment in your teaching of reading. Often it is in the social exchange where those “aha” moments occur.

REFERENCES


