Teachers and Students at Work: Formative Assessments

BY PAMELA A. MASON Ed.D.

INTRODUCTION

"If they want numbers, give them numbers!" a school leader exclaimed, in frustration, when the leadership team was asked for more student assessment data. We are knee deep, or deeper, in data in this era of accountability. The essential questions are *who is using this data* and *how are they using it to promote high academic outcomes for all students?* Teachers are urged to plan and deliver data-driven instruction, which is differentiated to meet the various learning needs of their students—that is, students for whom English is a new language, students who have an identified special need, and students who need accelerated instruction. Teachers at the classroom level can use formative assessments to address the learning needs of all students. In this paper, we will explore what formative assessments are and how they can inform the literacy strategies that teachers choose to implement with their students.

DEFINING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS

Marie Clay (1993) described formative assessments as follows:

> Effective teaching calls for a third kind of assessment designed to record how the child works on tasks and to inform teaching as it occurs. To use the metaphor of a football game, you do not improve the play of a team by looking at the outcome score. The coach must look closely at how the team is playing the game and help them to change the moves or strategies that produce a better final score. (p. 4)

In using the metaphor of a football game, the teacher is the coach who watches his or her students as they do their work. Formative assessments capture the students' needs and alerts teachers to immediate teaching and learning opportunities (Afflerbach, 2018 p. 216). As such, formative assessments can take the form of observational notes, checklists, rubrics, and student artifacts as part of literacy centers or written work. Formative assessments can also look like tests, such as spelling or reading comprehension tests. What makes these types of assessment formative is the content and the purpose for which they are used. Formative assessments provide immediate feedback to teachers

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on the progress that is being made by their students toward attaining lesson learning targets and literacy standards.

Formative assessments have certain characteristics (Mansell and the Assessment Reform Group, 2009, in Afflerbach, 2018). They are part of effective planning for literacy instruction by considering learning and assessment as a cycle. They focus teacher attention on not only what students learn but how they learn. They address students' prior knowledge and their strategy and skill development, as well as their motivation and engagement. They engage students in self-assessment by building the connection between effort and accomplishments, designating attainable challenges for students, because teachers provide feedback in relation to the learning targets. Therefore, formative assessments are "assessment for learning rather than of learning," because they impact the teaching and learning interactions. (Valencia, 2011, p. 388)

Because formative assessments are learning focused, students become actively engaged in the process of analyzing their progress. The learning targets are more visible and clearly stated so that students gain a clear understanding of the standards of good performance. No longer are they guessing what is in the teacher's head. Making the learning targets visible and accessible to students helps them to monitor their work, set appropriate goals, develop effective strategies and skills, improve learning outcomes, and develop a sense of self-efficacy and increased motivation. (Valencia, 2011, p. 389)

DESIGNING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS

In designing formative assessments, teachers decide the literacy learning targets for their classes or for groups within their classes, based on the literacy standards for which they are accountable. As they plan their instruction, teachers incorporate class discussions, small-group learning activities, and individual work. Teachers use the students' outcomes across these instructional activities to judge whether the students are making progress toward meeting the literacy learning targets. Thus, they are designing ongoing, focused formative assessments to inform their instruction.

Incorporating the tenets of universal design for learning, formative assessments should offer students multiple means of representation, multiple means of action and expression, and multiple means of engagement

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(CAST, 2018; National Center on Universal Design for Learning). By designing and using formative assessments that incorporate the UDL principles, teachers can plan instruction that incorporates them as well, providing a rich and effective learning environment for all students. Teachers, however, must be mindful of the cultural implications of designing formative assessments. Students' social capital and multiple ways of knowing and demonstrating knowledge must be appreciated and considered in instructional and assessment decisions. For example, English learners may comprehend the cause-and-effect relationships presented in informational texts, but they may struggle with the oral language to explain them. Thus, it is important for teachers to provide English learners and dialect speakers with multiple means of representation of their knowledge. Students should be viewed from a strengths-based position when designing formative assessments as well as when interpreting them, taking into account students' social capital.

Teachers have many options for designing formative assessments. To improve literacy learning, teachers should observe children's responses during instruction for the following:

• For competencies and confusions

• For strengths and weaknesses

• For the processes and strategies used

• For evidence of what the child already understands (Clay, 1993, p. 5)

These observations should be consistent and frequent within and across days. In order to ensure that teachers

are collecting formative assessment data equitably across students, designing a form or checklist can be helpful. When designing such a form for literacy instruction, teachers may find it helpful to use the categories that align closely to the five pillars of effective literacy instruction, i.e., phonemic awareness, phonics,

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vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborne, 2001). Spelling tasks, such as word sorts or spelling tests, and writing tasks can provide formative assessment data on spontaneous and authentic use of word patterns and indicate areas of skill or confusion. In order to make this data collection more manageable, teachers might consider organizing their observations and evaluations of student work in these literacy areas:

- Code-based tasks: evidence of phonemic awareness, phonics, and spelling

- Meaning-based tasks: evidence of vocabulary knowledge and development, oral reading fluency, and text comprehension (across genres)

- Writing: evidence of both code and meaning skill development as well as the organization of ideas and representations of oral language

In addition to structured observations, formative assessments can be conducted using student read alouds or student writing samples. Unit tests are also designed to provide teachers with data on student progress, so that reteaching is provided "just in time," to jump-start student progress.

Teachers can use clipboards or tablets to record their formative data. The most important aspect of formative assessments is that they must be used to plan further instruction. This data should be used by classroom teachers (and literacy coaches) to differentiate future literacy instruction in order to plan good first teaching, to provide targeted reteaching, and to design appropriate extension activities.

INTERPRETING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS

Teachers should collect formative assessment data from all of their students regularly. The challenge then becomes how to interpret all of this data. Beginning with the end in mind, teachers should interpret the formative assessment data based on the literacy learning targets at hand. Examining student work and other formative assessment artifacts and test results, teachers should look for what progress individual students and subgroups of students have made, remembering that formative assessment is part of the teaching-learning process. Are there trends in the skills that were mastered or that proved to be challenging? Are the skills mastered representative of foundational literacy strategies? What learning opportunities will meet student needs either to continue to acquire the learning targets or to rehearse and refine them? Rather than being overwhelmed by numbers, teachers have their students' work, which indicates areas of strength and challenge.

SUMMARY

Formative assessments are part of the teaching-learning process; they are not just numbers. They inform both teachers and students about their progress in meeting literacy learning targets through the examination of student work, student discussion, and authentic literacy tasks. Formative assessments represent a shift from grading to growing (Calfee, Wilson, Flannery, & Kapinus, 2014, p. 3). They provide answers to the questions of what students know well and what they need to continue to learn. Formative assessments indicate each student's zone of proximal development, the sweet spot where the most learning occurs. With appropriate teacher scaffolding, students not only learn more literacy skills, they learn how to learn and how to transfer their literacy strategies to multiple texts and in multiple contexts.

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