Accelerate Success for English Learners With Formative Assessment

Introduction

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This brief is the first in a series that highlights key features of high-quality instruction for English learners, and the role formative assessment plays in their success. Formative assessment supports teachers to enact these features by providing them with tools to gauge and react to student learning in real-time. These practices also support students to assess their own learning which enhances their sense of agency. Overall, the series illustrates how instructional methods and assessment practices work together to improve English learner outcomes.

Introduction

Research, theory, and legal and legislative history all converge in showing that a quality education for English learners requires attention to their position as language learners, their promise as learners of academic content, and their inclusion as valued members of the larger academic community.[1]

In practice, this means that providing English learner students with a high-quality education requires developing their English proficiency while simultaneously ensuring that they do not miss out or fall behind on learning the same academic content and analytic practices as other students while doing so.

"Feelings of self-efficacy, belonging, and purpose—are completely entwined with cognitive development…thus, creat[ing] an imperative to deeply know each student—academically, emotionally, socially, and culturally."

(Shepard, 2021, p. 30)

To achieve this educational goal for English learners, teachers must design and facilitate instruction positioned between their current and future abilities and support them to engage meaningfully with rigorous content. This means centering the design of high-quality learning opportunities and ensuring that all students are supported to participate in them. An umbrella concept for this approach is "**ambitious teaching and learning**," which is grounded in a sociocultural theory[2].

Ambitious teaching requires educators to deeply understand who their students are and how their lived experiences and knowledge can contribute to learning, expression, and knowledge development. For English learners, specifically, ambitious teaching means, among other things, that educators must understand English learners as students with promise and value rather than as students defined by needs, risks, and challenges[3]. This occurs within a sociocultural

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context in which educators understand that knowledge develops through social activity and thereby design learning opportunities for students to co-construct and deepen knowledge alongside peers as they negotiate, collaborate, and problem-solve.[4]

Seven features for ambitious teaching for English learners are:

1. Integrate learning of concepts, analytic practices, and language simultaneously.

2. Intentionally draw attention to how language works to make meaning in the academic discipline through rich, authentic tasks.

3. Support students to work beyond the edge of their current knowledge and skills with scaffolds that build on their strengths.

4. Support students to develop a sense of agency, confidence, and determination.

5. Provide students with structured opportunities for collaborative discussion in which they develop ideas and make meaning with peers.

6. Promote asset-based teaching, learning, and assessment.

7. Nurture a learning culture in which all students (English learners and non-English learners) participate together to support each other's learning.

Formative assessment undergirds ambitious teaching and learning as a process through which teachers can effectively elicit and respond to evidence of student learning as it unfolds. Teachers engaged in formative assessment uncover the knowledge and skills students already have, their preferred communication styles, and the existing connections they may have to the content of instruction. This information, in turn, allows teachers to design highly challenging and supportive learning opportunities that build off what students already know and can do and respond to evidence of emergent learning. See the Appendix for formative assessment details.

> **Student agency** is the set of skills, mindsets, and opportunities that enable learners to set purposeful goals for themselves, to take action in their learning to move toward those goals, and to reflect and adjust learning behaviors as they monitor their progress.

When students engage in the formative assessment process themselves, they are better able to develop **agency**[5]—the ability to actively advance their knowledge and skills. By monitoring their own learning and using that information in subsequent learning tasks, students become better positioned to succeed in the classroom—where success involves simultaneously developing key disciplinary conceptual understandings, engaging in analytic practices, and developing the language needed to understand and express them. To successfully engage in formative assessment practices themselves, students need a clear understanding of learning goals and success criteria, collaboration with peers, explicit instruction in new routines, and opportunities for practice.

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Implementing formative assessment practices often involves a tremendous shift for teachers and students. It requires a learning culture that supports risk-taking, honesty, and community support. Students and teachers alike need to feel that they can try out new practices, share what they do not yet understand, and continue to be considered capable individuals who are able to learn and improve. English learners have not always been granted this type of leeway—and, therefore, stand to benefit most from a classroom environment with this orientation.

Teacher Knowledge and Support

Implementing the features of high-quality English learner instruction in tandem with the formative assessment practices described in this series is complex work for teachers. This is compounded by the fact that most new or continuing teachers have little access or requirements to engage in coursework or professional learning around formative assessment, language development, or culturally and linguistically sustaining teaching practices. Taken together, these trends mean many teachers have not yet had the chance to develop their skills and strengths in implementing high-quality instructional practices for English learner students or formatively assessing them. Many teachers may need support to do this.

To do this work well, teachers require the following types of knowledge.

- content and language knowledge,
- pedagogical content knowledge (how students learn in a domain),
- knowledge of students and their community, and
- knowledge of formative assessment (both the teacher and student roles).

Supports

For teachers to develop the knowledge outlined above requires substantial support. Though individuals can forge ahead on their own, most teachers benefit from a team effort and leadership support to build their knowledge and skills, improve their practice, and sustain the work, much like students benefit from work in community. The following list includes various types of support teachers benefit from when enacting formative assessment for English learners in the context of ambitious teaching.

- **Professional development** in formative assessment, asset-based instruction, and language development, including systemic pre-service, induction, and in-service learning opportunities.

- **Opportunities to learn alongside peers** (e.g., colleagues, coaches, English learner specialists, leaders) to analyze examples of high-quality instructional practice (written, video, etc.), observe peers, reflect on one's own developing formative assessment

practice, and give and receive feedback, e.g., through observations, lesson review, and video study groups.

- **Collaborative planning time with peers** (e.g., grade level or content area teams, EL/ESL/ELD teachers, and special education teachers) to collectively engage in lesson planning, analyzing student work, building student capacity to monitor and advance learning, planning next steps based on evidence, and developing high-quality instructional materials that are culturally relevant.

- **Flexibility with other program mandates**, e.g., flexibility with pacing guides and requirements to implement lessons exactly as presented, expectations for teachers to grade all student work products (versus grading at the end of a learning unit), and other progress monitoring requirements.

As teachers work to gain knowledge and skills and participate in the learning experiences described above, they also benefit from regularly reflecting on their own professional practice and can use key elements of formative assessment to do so. They do this by setting their own learning goals, determining what success will look like for themselves, attending to evidence as it unfolds during teaching, reflecting on that evidence, and then adjusting their practice accordingly.

When teachers engage in self-reflection, they ask themselves questions such as, How did the lesson go? How did student learning advance? What worked well, and what needs to be adjusted in my instruction?

Accountability in the context of formative assessment can be considered a personal and collective commitment to one's ongoing learning and to supporting the learning of others. During this process, it is often helpful for teachers to work collaboratively with one another as they try out new formative assessment practices, such as giving descriptive feedback. When teachers reflect with peers in their learning community, they ask others questions such as, "I was trying to do X. Can you give me feedback based on this classroom video, lesson planning document, student work, or your direct observation?"

Below are more details of this reflection cycle for teachers.

Getting Started

1. Ask, "What am I interested in working on or understanding?" Choose a formative assessment practice.

2. Learn about the formative assessment practice through professional reading, viewing videos of expert implementation, or observing a peer.

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3. Set an instructional learning goal for oneself, e.g., I understand how to give actionable feedback to students.

4. Develop success criteria, e.g., Students indicate through their words and actions that my feedback supports them to take next steps in their learning.

5. Share the learning goal and success criteria with students to get their feedback (this models this process for them and becomes a source of evidence of impact)

6. Try out the formative assessment practice.

7. Look at evidence collectively and individually to determine how it went. Questions to review evidence can include:

    • Did students reach the learning goals? If not, why not?

    • Did I get the evidence I needed? If not, why not?

    • Did it lead to the outcomes I expected? If not, why not?

This process of reflection includes anticipatory, interactive, and retrospective elements. It becomes a virtuous cycle of improvement that is teacher-centered and directed. From the start, teachers have the end in mind.

Conclusion

There is no universal English learner student profile and no one-size-fits-all approach. Teachers work to respond to the different strengths, needs, and identities of all English learners, including those with special needs. By responding to their three primary areas of academic growth, that is, their conceptual, analytic, and linguistic development, as well as their ability to monitor these learning progressions themselves through formative assessment practices, English learners can accelerate their learning and develop intellectual independence.

To do this, English learners benefit from first-hand experience formulating, trying out, and reflecting on ideas independently and with others.[67] Sociocultural views of learning also acknowledge that learning, assessment, and the exercise of agency cannot be separated from how the classroom learning environment is framed and resourced. The goal is that it contains "knowledgeable people, material and conceptual tools, norms and routines, and evolving information about learning"[8] (p. 254). It should also promote a learning culture based on acceptance, promotion of trust and academic risk-taking, accountability for one's own and other's learning, and appreciation of each person's unique gifts and perspectives. These classroom attributes are foundational to English learner success.

Teachers also need support in developing these types of classroom practices and environments. This takes substantial leadership support, collaboration opportunities with peers, time for self-reflection, ongoing training and coaching, and the removal of barriers (e.g., pacing or

curriculum requirements) that prohibit the flexibility that formative assessment practices require. This is a tall order, but one that is well worth the time and effort.

Related Briefs in This Series

- Formative Assessment Support for Integrated and Meaningful Language Learning
- Students Work Beyond the Edge of Their Current Abilities With Formative Assessment
- Students Take Ownership Over Their Learning With Formative Assessment
- Students Participate in Collaborative Discussions

Appendix: A Primer in Formative Assessment

Formative assessment is a planned ongoing process of inquiry that teachers and students participate in together to understand the current status of learning, what is emerging in their understanding, and how to move it forward.[9] It is not a set of stand-alone tools, strategies, or tests that teachers use. Instead, it is a sensemaking process based on disciplined noticing and responding to material artifacts and other expressions of learning that occur while learning is underway, namely what students say, do, make, or write.[10] Teacher feedback, a key practice of the formative assessment process, has been shown by multiple studies to effectively move student learning forward.[11] Cowie and Bell (1999) defined formative assessment as "the process used by teachers and students to recognize and respond to student learning and to enhance that learning, during the learning".[12] In 2018, the Formative Assessment State Collaborative of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) provided an expanded definition to say that "Formative assessment is a planned, ongoing process used by all students and teachers during learning and teaching to elicit and use evidence of student learning to improve student understanding of intended disciplinary learning outcomes and support students to become self-directed learners.

Effective use of the formative assessment process requires students and teachers to integrate and embed the following practices in a collaborative and respectful classroom environment:

- clarifying learning goals and success criteria within a broader progression of learning,
- eliciting and analyzing evidence of student thinking,
- engaging in self-assessment and peer feedback,
- providing actionable feedback, and
- using evidence and feedback to move learning forward by adjusting learning strategies, goals, or next instructional steps."13

Formative assessment is powerful in two ways. It helps teachers effectively target instructional next steps and provide feedback that expands student learning.[14] It also shifts the student role towards greater agency and ownership.[15] Through formative assessment, students gain

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knowledge and skills to better understand how to advance their learning to reach the next level. In many classrooms, this involves a dramatic shift for both teachers and students.[16]

When students use this process themselves—analyzing evidence, engaging their metacognition, and giving and getting feedback from peers—they are well poised to guide their own learning through these self-regulatory processes.[17]

Formative Assessment Elements

Formative assessment is a feedback loop (Figure 1) that supports cycles of information gathering, interpretation, and action by teachers and students to move learning forward.[18] The heart of this process is the intersection of the intended curriculum with daily evidence of learning.[19] The feedback loop includes several interrelated stages, correlated with the formative assessment definition above, that teachers and students engage in.

Figure 1. Formative Assessment Feedback Loop for Teachers and Students[20]

Setting learning goals and success criteria. The first step in this process is the teacher (and, at times, students) determining lesson-learning goals and success criteria. Learning goals are of a grain size that students can achieve in a single lesson or a short series of lessons. They are informed by longer-term goals, e.g., content and language standards. The lesson goals articulate what students are expected to learn during a lesson (e.g., 1-5 class periods),

specifically, what they should know and be able to do by the end. This differs from goals that define activity procedures that students are expected to carry out (e.g., participate in an expert group jigsaw).[21] When defining learning goals, teachers draw on their understanding of the language demands associated with the target disciplinary content and analytic skills students are expected to learn. Articulating these language expectations as additional learning goals is helpful for all students, particularly English learners.

Success criteria outline how students will demonstrate that they have met the learning goal and should indicate an observable action, e.g., students explain, write, solve, etc.[22] They are used as a framework to make sense of evidence, guiding teachers and students to direct their attention during lessons. They can be thought of as "look-fors" or "listen-fors." Considering the success criteria, "I can use linking words like "because" and "then" to explain how the parts of a plant work together to keep it healthy," teachers and students would attend to students' use of linking words in their explanations of how the plant parts work together. While this may seem obvious, it is often challenging for teachers to maintain this focus and not diverge to attend to other learning goals, language, or management issues.[23] For example, research shows that teachers' attention easily gets diverted to attend to English learners' grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation even when they are not associated with the day's learning goal.[24] The success criteria support teachers and students to instead stay focused on the target learning when interpreting and responding to evidence of learning.

Planning learning experiences that embed evidence-gathering opportunities. The next step in the formative assessment process is to plan lessons that provide opportunities for students to engage in learning experiences that support them in reaching the learning goals and success criteria. These learning experiences also provide opportunities for students to make their learning visible and audible so that they themselves, their peers, and their teachers can attend to the evidence of their learning. These learning experiences need to be sufficiently rigorous, supporting deep learning to elicit meaningful evidence for teachers and students. For English learners, in particular, these experiences should include opportunities to engage in carefully designed and supported communicative activities requiring language, enabling them to participate in ways that are beyond their current ability to do so independently.

Attending to and making sense of evidence of learning. During lessons, teachers and students intentionally attend to student dialogue and other demonstrations of learning through the lens of the success criteria.[25] Teachers and students interpret this evidence to guide decisions about next steps.[26] Students do this through engaging in meaningful self-assessment and peer feedback. Teachers plan evidence-gathering opportunities to make this possible. Teachers' interpretations of evidence are also informed by an understanding of how learning typically progresses in a discipline, including how expectations are defined and built through language and content-area standards from one level to the next.[27]

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It is important to note that the noticing skills used to ascertain where students are in their learning can be learned *and* that responding to noticed evidence can require practice. Research shows that just because teachers are able to identify a stage in student learning, they are not necessarily able to identify the next instructional steps.[28]

Responding to evidence to advance learning. To complete the formative assessment feedback loop, teachers and students take action based on evidence. For example, they ask, "Are students (or am I) on track to meet the learning goals? Does the evidence indicate that changes are needed to ensure students are (or I am) on target?" Responding to evidence can include providing feedback, revising learning tactics, adjusting instructional plans, designing appropriate scaffolds, setting new learning goals, or staying the course as warranted. Key to this practice is students having the opportunity to respond to the feedback they receive.[29]

Quality feedback focuses on the work or the thinking, not the traits of the person receiving feedback. For example, feedback focused on the work might sound like, "Your argument may have missed a step."; "I didn't understand how you reached that conclusion."[30]

Feedback that promotes learning at the edge of one's competencies or understanding should also be clear about perceived areas for growth without providing a complete solution for improvement. Instead, feedback can include clues or suggestions. This preserves the agency of the person receiving feedback without doing all the work for them.[31] Student-requested feedback from teachers and peers also invites follow-up conversations.

When teachers and students focus on student sensemaking when formulating feedback, they can more easily respond with an open mind. Displaying curiosity toward work, language, and thinking instead of only looking for right or wrong answers makes a positive difference for students

Endnotes

[1] These ideas are based on seven large-scale reviews of research on English learner education listed below. The reviews all summarize and synthesize studies from across several decades, such that there is considerable overlap from one synthesis to another in terms of which studies are used to support various conclusions. Notably, however, each synthesis has a particular unique focus and purpose; no two are attempting to summarize the research-base for the same purpose.

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