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Accelerate English Learner Success

Students Take Ownership Over Their Learning With Formative Assessment

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This brief is part of a series that highlights key features of high-quality instruction for English learners[1] 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.

This brief highlights that quality instruction for English learners supports students to develop a sense of agency, confidence, and determination. Quality instruction also promotes asset-based teaching, learning, and assessment.

Quality instruction for English learners supports students to develop a sense of agency, confidence, and determination.

Introduction

Schooling can support all students, including English learners, to develop a sense of agency so they can approach their learning in thoughtful, self-regulated ways. Student agency is the capacity and propensity to take purposeful initiative; individuals with high levels of agency "do not respond passively to their circumstances but rather act with purpose to achieve the conditions they desire in their own and others' lives."[2] Indicators of student agency in school include a sense of efficacy, a growth mindset, a goal orientation to learning, and higher future aspirations. Student agency embraces the construct of self-regulated learning.

Self-regulation capabilities involve students having the ability to direct their efforts towards specific goals. Self-regulating students set short and long-term goals, monitor progress towards those goals, manage their time, and develop positive learning strategies.

Language is a key resource for learning **self-regulation**, including developing **metacognitive** skills. As Bailey and Heritage state, "Because language skills and learning regulation are closely interrelated, efforts that support both these abilities in tandem may be especially helpful to students who are acquiring English alongside another language."[3] For instance, students may

verbalize their actions and inner thoughts– in English or their home language– when tackling difficult problems or ideas.[4] When engaging in conversations, students develop their language while improving their attention control by listening to others and deciding when and how to contribute to the ongoing discourse, an important element of self-regulation.[5]

In classrooms where teachers promote self-regulation, students' reading and writing abilities also improve.[6] When students are motivated (an aspect of self-regulation), their learning tends to accelerate, including their language development; they are more prone to make plans to advance their learning, flexibly employ strategies for language learning, and monitor their progress.[7]

To support English learners to develop English and self-regulation simultaneously, a teacher might intentionally design and sequence instruction in a way that builds up the complexity of language *and* includes frequent opportunities for students to reflect on their progress toward their goals. Students can begin by formulating and reflecting on their progress toward a fairly simple goal, e.g., I understand how to add time order words to my writing. Then, over time, they can define personal learning goals to include a greater variety of language, e.g., I understand how to add cause and effect and order of importance transition words to my writing. Lesson structures can include cycles of writing, reflecting, and revising. As English learners engage in this type of goal setting and reflection, it is helpful to provide structures for them to reflect independently– perhaps through a quick write and pair-share or reflection note-taker. As a scaffold, students can utilize sentence frames, such as "*When I first wrote the text, I thought…*" "*Now I think…*".

Metacognition is the ability to think about one's own thinking and understand oneself as a thinker and learner. Metacognitive students engage with evidence to reflect on their current learning status, consider a range of learning approaches, understand different ways that they learn best, and make conscious decisions to manage next steps in their learning.[8]

Beginning to integrate opportunities to support students to develop self-regulation and a sense of agency more broadly is complex work. Students and teachers need time, support, learning opportunities, and grace as they do so.

To enact this feature of quality instruction for English learners, teachers

- support students to build a sense of agency by encouraging them to value the strengths and experiences they bring to the learning community,
- design instruction that fosters students' autonomy by equipping them with the strategies necessary to regulate their learning—and the language they will need to do so,

- encourage initiative by supporting students to engage in collaborative goal setting with their teachers and peers, along with regular reflection opportunities around progress toward goals,
- reinforce a growth mindset by highlighting students who are overcoming challenges as a result of perseverance and hard work, and
- model learning approaches—including one's own metacognition– so students can begin to develop their own metacognitive capabilities.

Formative Assessment Support for This Feature: Self-Assessment

A formative assessment practice that supports students to act as self-regulated agents over their learning is self-assessment. Self-assessment involves interpreting evidence of one's learning and making informed decisions about next steps. Students need to have a clear understanding of the learning goals and success criteria when self-assessing so that *they,* as learners, can engage in determining their learning status. Supports teachers can provide students to self-assess and then act on those assessments include

- co-construct success criteria,
- provide protocols to interpret evidence and document self-assessments,
- offer different options to demonstrate learning, and
- curate classroom resources for students to use independently.

When students co-construct success criteria with their teacher and peers, they think through what meeting the learning goal could look and sound like for themselves. This internalization of learning expectations informs students' decision-making.

When students are also active participants in determining how they demonstrate their learning, leveraging diverse modes of representation, they are more equitably supported to share what they know and can do (e.g., visually, dramatically, orally). Having this range of possibility and choice is helpful for English learners who may struggle to convey the complexity of their thoughts or understanding through traditional spoken or written formats in English.

Teachers can also provide students with protocols for self-assessing. These protocols support interpreting evidence, documenting the status of learning, and setting goals. Some example protocols include identifying a star and a step (i.e., where the work meets the success criteria and where it does not) or identifying where one's learning is on a rubric with examples provided for each level.

Teachers can support students to act on these self-assessment decisions by providing resources in the classroom that students can access and utilize independently to enhance their own learning (with the caveat that students may need teacher support initially, particularly when

they are in the early stages of developing English language proficiency).[9] Classroom resources may include anchor charts, informational text, artifacts, videos, manipulatives, and stories. When teachers structure learning environments with language-rich resources that students can use independently, they are well supported to respond to assessment of their own learning.[10]

To build student capacity to self-assess, teachers can also rely on a series of intentional instructional routines,[11] including

- **Explicit instruction**: This entails providing clear, direct guidance on self-assessment. It is an important early-stage strategy in introducing self-assessment practices. It supports success for English learners by giving them insights into their own role in the learning process.
- **Modeling**: This entails demonstrating self-assessment to students. Students benefit from knowing what self-assessment looks like before trying it out independently. Modeling is powerful when it provides a process students can emulate and includes think-alouds that give students insight into the standards for quality work. Students benefit from models showing exemplary practices and also models demonstrating less optimal practices that they can give feedback on with suggestions for improvement. Models can also come from other sources, for example, videos of other students using success criteria in their self-assessment.
- **Practice opportunities**: While learning self-assessment practices, teachers and students benefit from keeping a growth mindset, understanding that they are emergent learners and will improve with regular and repeated practice in low-stakes settings. Providing students with step-by-step structured opportunities to practice self-assessment sets up the conditions for success.
- **Feedback**: When students are learning to review their work against success criteria and set goals, it is helpful for them to get feedback on their self-assessment, for example, in the form of probing questions.

The following middle school vignette provides an example of self-assessment integrated into a lesson to enhance student learning. It demonstrates ways that students can utilize self-regulation skills and get support from peers as they develop and work toward their own personal writing goals. The lesson provides different entry points for students to engage in the learning in a way that allows all students, regardless of language proficiency level, to participate meaningfully in the lesson.

Vignette: Middle School Lesson Example[12]

In this middle school lesson, English learners and native English-speaking students are learning how to show relationships between ideas in their writing by combining sentences with transition words (the learning goal). The success criterion for this lesson is: *I can show the relationship between ideas using transition words that* communicate*:*

- time order
- place
- compare and contrast
- cause and effect
- importance

The teacher designed this lesson after reviewing students' writing drafts from a previous day. These drafts demonstrated that students need support creating coherence and fluidity in their writing. Knowing that English learners benefit from an explicit focus on meaningful sentence analysis, she decided to focus on combining sentences as a way to support coherence in student writing.

The lesson starts with the teacher and student reviewing the learning goal and success criterion together. The teacher models combining a few sentences with transition words and asks the class for feedback. Then, as a whole group, they work together to analyze a passage from the book *Mismatch* by Lensey Namioka, which serves as a mentor text. The students discuss how the author used transition words to establish relationships between ideas. For students needing additional language support, they are seated with a peer who can offer first language translations and explanations.

This activity serves as a model for students to conduct revisions to their own writing drafts. To help focus their revision efforts, students first write down a personal learning goal based on the success criterion. An example might be *I can* communicate *cause and effect and importance with transition words.* For students with emergent English language abilities, they may formulate a goal such as, *I can use the words first, next, and last to tell something that happened in the story*. In general, students can choose to incorporate as many of the different categories of transition words as they would like in their own writing. This provides students with different entry points depending on where they are in their learning.

Students then work to revise their writing. In a previous lesson, students had the option to use sentence stems to start and organize their first draft. In this lesson, students have the option to work with a partner and brainstorm together where to add transition words. For the students who choose this, they begin by reading aloud their writing, answering questions, and then generating ideas for combining sentences.

When students finish, they review one another's writing in pairs and provide feedback. Pairs of students who worked together before find different partners to work with on this activity. The feedback session starts with one student sharing their personal writing goal that they want feedback on. After a partner reads their peer's writing, they give feedback aligned to the success criteria and their peer's personal learning goal. Students make comments such as, "I understand your goal is to add words that show time order. Your first paragraph is much clearer after you added the words "during" and "until." In the next paragraph, maybe add different time order words, like "first" and "second" to make the paragraph more organized."

After both pairs of students in each group get feedback, students assess their own writing based on the success criterion and their personal learning goal, using the feedback to inform their assessment. Students rate themselves using a rubric on their use of transition words. Then, they set a new personal learning goal, which they will use when they continue revising their essay during the next lesson. The new goal may include a different or additional type of transition word to build their language repertoire. The teacher also plans to review students' self-assessments and personal goals to inform lesson planning.

Overall, the lesson is designed to be inclusive and supportive, with multiple opportunities for English learners to engage with the language of the discipline in meaningful ways while receiving the support and feedback necessary to develop their writing and language skills.

Quality instruction for English learners promotes asset-based teaching, learning, and assessment.

Introduction

The knowledge, experience, and sensibilities that students bring to school serve as critical assets for gaining new knowledge and skills. Moll et al. (2005) refer to these assets as students' funds of knowledge. Other scholars have expanded this idea to include the concept of funds of identity, which relates to how students see themselves against this backdrop.[13] Effective

instruction builds on these funds of knowledge and identity to create an environment where student assets are invited, acknowledged, and valued. Students are treated in accordance with their immense potential, focusing on and being responsive to who students are, how they see themselves, and how their learning is progressing day-by-day in the classroom. Lessons

leverage students' rich experiences as a catalyst for developing learning[14]—for English learners and their non-English learner peers.

Asset-based instruction is based on a mindset that prioritizes what students can do rather than what they can't yet do. It is rooted in understanding students' funds of knowledge and identity. When teachers get to know their students and build instruction around their strengths, they are able to make learning experiences meaningful and relatable for students. Teachers can learn about students' funds of knowledge and identity by focusing on funds that are: 1) student-specific, i.e., related to their interests, talents, and passions, and 2) their community funds of knowledge, i.e., their collective histories, contemporary activities, norms, and values.

Funds of knowledge refers to a collection of abilities-passed down historically through generations- that includes bodies of knowledge, assets, cultural ways of interacting, and skills essential for individual, household, and community well-being.[15] Examples include the ability to garden, to manage money, or to care for others.

An **asset orientation** is a strengths-based perspective that views cultural and linguistic differences as beneficial. Asset-based pedagogies center students' strengths, interests, and cultural differences and help educators design meaningful and culturally responsive learning opportunities.

To enact this feature of quality instruction for English learners, teachers

- develop an understanding of their students' families, communities, cultures, and interests in ways that establish and sustain relationships;
- consistently acknowledge and build on the cultural and linguistic knowledge and prior experiences of English learners and leverage them as assets for learning; and
- recognize that multilingualism and multiculturalism are assets and ensure these are acknowledged, respected, and valued in a safe, affirming, and inclusive climate.

Formative Assessment Support for This Feature: Interpreting and Responding to Evidence

Providing instruction at the edge of student understanding and connected to their funds of knowledge and identity requires a formative assessment approach to elicit information about what students care about and already know. In addition to gathering evidence through listening, observing, and asking probing questions, teachers can ask students to journal and write stories about their families in their first language and in English, bring in collections of significant items, make videos, take photographs, and draw self-portraits.[16] Teachers can engage in curriculum planning conversations with students,[17] particularly after they have had the opportunity to reflect on their knowledge and identity through the creative processes described above. It is also helpful for teachers to spend time in students' communities to build relationships with community members. This sociocultural focus is particularly important for

learners from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (e.g., students who do not come from monolingual English-speaking families), as these students may otherwise experience a sociocultural disconnect from classroom activities and settings.[18]

Once teachers have gathered this information, they can align teaching, learning, and assessment with students' funds of knowledge and identity by incorporating principles from Universal Design for Learning as they plan.[19] For example, when designing learning goals and tasks, teachers can ask themselves

- Whose stories are told?
- Whose cultures are reflected?
- Whose perspectives and interests are centered?

When it comes to interpreting and responding to evidence produced from these inclusive learning experiences, teachers can honor student assets by holding a *divergent perspective*. This is a perspective oriented toward curiosity and openness toward students' sensemaking.[20] It means listening *to* student responses versus listening *for how* students are responding. It differs from having preconceived ideas of how students should answer questions, problem-solve, and what cultural knowledge they bring to school. Scholar Bronwen Cowie states, "Equitable assessment practices are those that maximize opportunities for diverse students to demonstrate the breadth of their knowledge and abilities in ways that are compatible with their backgrounds." She continues to say that when planning and engaging in formative assessment, "teachers need to manage the dynamic between the divergent opportunities that unfold through classroom interactions and the opportunities they design to support student learning of predetermined goals."[21]

For example, when learning English, students may produce explanations that use words, phrases, and grammatical constructions that are approximations of more precise vocabulary and syntax.[22] In situations such as these, students may be able to communicate their intended meaning and also show emergent capabilities to navigate the use of new words, sentences, and connected text and speech. Teachers' interpretations and feedback can privilege students' meaning-making and existing language resources while balancing considerations of language

A **divergent perspective of assessment** is based on events occurring in real time and oriented toward curiosity and openness toward students' sensemaking. It supports uncovering both assets and prior knowledge. It requires listening *to* student responses versus listening *for how* students are responding.

A **convergent perspective of assessment** is focuses on how closely student thinking corresponds with pre-determined learning expectations. This is frequently grounded in the longer-term goals that define where students are headed in their learning, e.g., standards learned by the end of the school year or at the culmination of multiple years.

accuracy and fluency.[23] Future instruction can build on students' emerging capabilities, for example, by designing opportunities to paraphrase student speech during conversations to provide a model of more canonical grammatical structures for students, e.g., to establish clear relationships between ideas and incorporate more precise vocabulary into their explanations.[24]

A study by Pryor & Crossouard found that when teachers took a divergent perspective, their "feedback was exploratory, provisional or provocative, prompting further engagement rather than correcting mistakes."[25]

Overall, actionable and descriptive feedback to students is a powerful response that research has shown to move student learning forward.[26] This feedback should relate to the intended learning as expressed in the success criteria and also honor individual students' sensemaking. Table 1 describes the qualities of what effective feedback is and is not.

Table 1. Effective and Less-effective Feedback

Effective Feedback	Less-effective Feedback
Focuses on qualities of student work or thinking	Focuses on attributes of the student
Occurs right after, or soon after, learning	Occurs after a significant time delay
References the success criteria	Relates to learning outcomes not related to the learning goal
Provides hints or clues but lets the student make the decisions about their learning	Tells students what their next steps are
Is of a manageable grain size for students to take action on	Is of a too-large grain size (e.g., referring to an end-of-year learning expectation)
Uses student's funds of knowledge to make the feedback accessible	Is disconnected from student's experience
Asks questions to support students' sensemaking	Focuses on what students don't know or can't do

The example below highlights the role of feedback in student learning and describes a lesson that draws on students' community assets.

Snapshot: Middle School Lesson[27]

In a middle school science classroom, English learners at various levels of English proficiency work alongside their non-English learner peers as they learn how to apply principles of biotechnology to real-world situations. The lesson's series of small group tasks involves researching the types of fermented drinks made by students' family members and neighbors, creating one from an existing family recipe, and then developing an original drink that is also intended for a local target audience. The community has a long tradition of making fermented drinks, particularly ginger beer, so to kick off the lesson, one of the student's aunts

comes to the classroom to share her experience and expertise. This helps students see that biotechnologists can look like people they know from their community.

Each subsequent task in the lesson builds on the prior one to move students toward the learning goal. At each stage of the multi-day lesson, students are engaged in discussions and presentations, e.g., through posting their work on a classroom wall for others to review and use, to providing more formal presentations at the end of the lesson in which community members come to celebrate with students. These aspects of the task make the learning visible to the teacher and fellow students and provide actionable evidence for formulating next steps. The students also take ownership of their learning experience, drawing from their extensive experience with project work. This supports students to begin and sustain work efficiently.

While students are working, the teacher checks in with each group, reviewing their work, asking questions to gather evidence, and providing feedback. In one instance, after a group of students has decided to target three different audiences with their drink, the teacher asks them, "What will you do if you get discrepant results in your taste survey and they want different flavors?" The taste survey is conducted with family and community members, many of whom are experts at making fermented drinks and have strong opinions about what they like and don't like. After reviewing the taste preferences from their survey results, students tell the teacher they would like to switch their flavor choice to reflect only one target audience but are concerned about what those ingredients will do to the yeast performance (fizziness). She asks them, "How can you find out?" Students decide to draw on their peers' knowledge. Since students have access to each other's research displayed around the room, they have plentiful resources to answer their own questions. This supports both individual and group agency. Additionally, the teacher's feedback in the form of open-ended questions, prompts student thinking and helps them to make the decision to shift the focus of their project.

The structure of this lesson, the classroom environment, and the teacher's "moves" demonstrate that the teacher and students invite and value the assets of the local community in their classroom, including their expertise. The work is pitched at the edge of students' current capabilities and supported through strength-based scaffolding practices– in this case, the funds of knowledge they bring with them to school and the resources generated by other students. Additionally, the teacher engages with students with a divergent perspective,

listening and prompting students' thinking without a fixed idea of how they should respond. This allows them to find their own solutions with the support of their peers.

Related Briefs in This Series

- Accelerating Success for English Learners With Formative Assessment
- Formative Assessment Support for Integrated and Meaningful Language Learning
- Students Work Beyond the Edge of Their Current Abilities With Formative Assessment
- Students Participate in Collaborative Discussions

Endnotes

[1] Over time, terms that we use to refer to students who speak multiple languages have evolved with many using the term "multilingual learner" in order to focus on the strengths these students bring to school. In many organizations, the term "multilingual learner" is used as an umbrella term for all students who use or are learning multiple languages, regardless of whether they are formally classified as English learners. In this document, we use the term "English learner" to describe the specific group of students who constitute a protected class, are entitled to specific supports and services by law, and whose achievements must be tracked and reported for federal accountability.

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