WIDA FOCUS ON
Formative Assessment

In This Issue

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Introduction

Assessment is an integral part of instruction and an important source of reflection for students and their educators. It can be the compass to guide students towards learning and academic achievement. For English language learners (ELLs), accessing academic achievement means not only having declarative and procedural knowledge, but also the social, instructional, and academic language associated with it. Therefore, instruction and assessment of ELLs should be crafted with two goals in mind: the acquisition of knowledge and skills as well as the development of academic language.

The focus of this bulletin is the formative assessment of academic language for ELLs. Within the context of a balanced assessment system, we will explore what it means to assess for language, what formative assessment looks like in the classroom, and how you can begin to create formative assessments that focus on academic language. Although the focus is on ELLs, academic language development is for all students, because after all, we are all growing as learners of academic language.

Assessment is about more than just tests

Educators constantly sample student behavior to make inferences about their students' learning. These inferences help shape, guide, and modify curriculum, instruction, and assessment in the classroom. While it is important to assess students, there are dangers associated with "testing" too much. It is important to distinguish between tests and assessment. In order to have a good picture of students' progress, schools and educators should work together to create a balanced assessment system that includes a variety of assessment tools that encompass, but also go beyond, tests.

> "TO MANY OF TODAY'S TEACHERS, ASSESSMENT IS SYNONYMOUS WITH HIGH–STAKES STANDARDIZED TESTS. BUT THERE IS AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT KIND OF ASSESSMENT THAT CAN ACTUALLY TRANSFORM TEACHING AND LEARNING."
>
> —MARGARET HERITAGE (2007)

A Balanced Assessment System

A balanced assessment system incorporates formative, interim, and summative assessments based on standards and learning targets. Balanced assessment systems, as shown in the graphic below, include:

Occasional, District, State-based

Summative Assessment

Ongoing, Classroom-based

Formative Assessment

Standards & Learning Targets

Interim Assessment

Periodic, School and/or District-Based
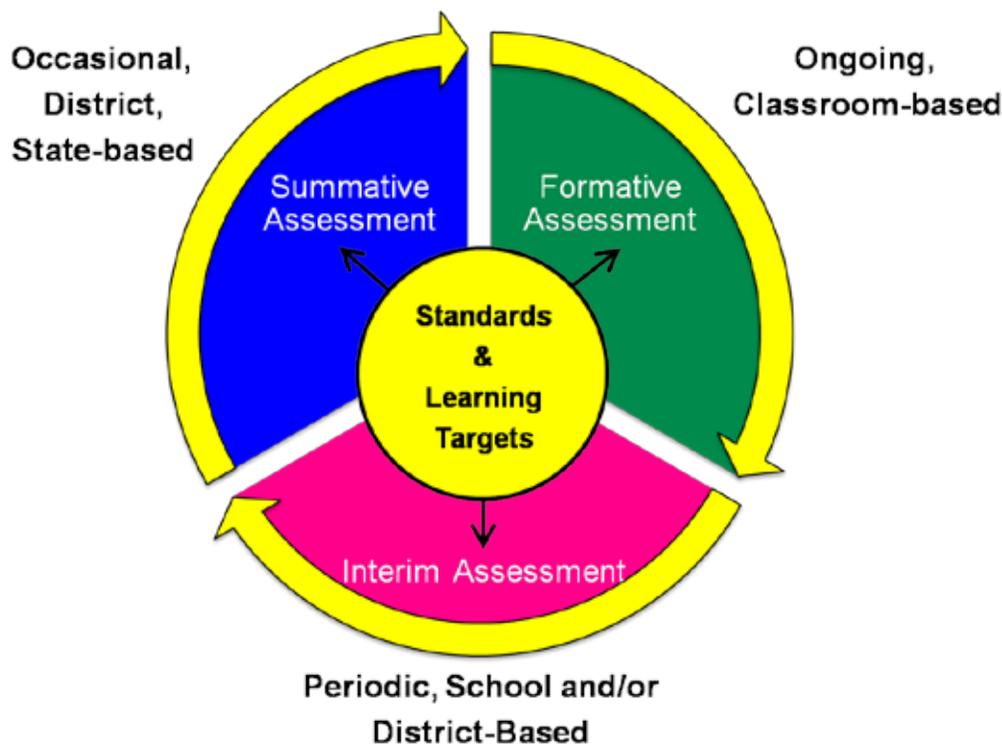
• **Formative assessment**—an ongoing assessment process that provides students and teachers with feedback on progress toward instructional goals. Ongoing assessments could involve observation, student self-assessment, or projects rated using a rubric, just to name a few examples;

• **Interim asssessments**—periodic assessments that provide students, parents, and educators with information on unit attainment or progress across units; and

• **Summative assessments**—occasional (often annual) assessments that provide parents, educators, and policymakers with information on students' progress with regard to a course and/or standard. For English language proficiency, ACCESS for ELLs® is one summative assessment.

At the heart of a well balanced assessment system are the same standards that drive instruction. These standards, for ELLs, include learning targets for both language and content.

Focusing Assessment on Academic Language

In the past, educators have focused on making assessment linguistically accessible for ELLs and limited attention has been paid to the assessment of academic language. Differentiating the language on assessments is important because it allows students to show what they know and it provides educators guidance for instruction. However, without ongoing assessment of the language progress of students, differentiation becomes a guessing game. How can educators know the appropriate language supports for their students when asking them to read a social studies textbook? How can students know what to improve in their academic writing as they write a lab report for biology? To provide guidance in both of these scenarios, students and their educators must engage in assessment of the academic language proficiency of students across different academic contexts.

Just like when assessing content, students and educators can benefit from balancing their assessment system for language proficiency. However, the criteria assessed is different when examining language. While content assessment centers around students' declarative (facts) and procedural (skills) knowledge in a content area, language assessment concentrates on the discourse used to make meaning of the declarative and procedural knowledge.

Dutro and Moran (2003) define academic language proficiency as the ability to construct meaning from oral and written language, to relate complex ideas and information, to recognize features of different genres, and to use various linguistic strategies to communicate.

This means that knowing words is not enough for ELLs to navigate academic language and have access to academic achievement. In addition to knowing the specificity of words for a given context (vocabulary usage), students need to be able to combine this knowledge with other instructional language, following the

Focusing Assessment on Academic Language (continued)

rules and conventions of the specific academic and sociocultural context to ensure the comprehensibility of the communication (language control). The amount and quality of this speech or writing (linguistic complexity) also needs to be matched to the specific context for students to be able to think and write as scientists, historians or mathematicians, which is what academic language theorists see as the ultimate function of academic language (Gee, 2000; Halliday, 1993; Schleppegrell, 2004). Therefore, as we attempt to critically examine students' academic language, it is important to keep in mind the context in which students are using language (for example, a 9th grade Algebra class) and the function of the communication (to explain how the value of a variable is calculated from two mathematical expressions). Based on this information, we need to examine the specific criteria of the communication, such as vocabulary usage (variable, constant, algebraic expression, etc.), language control (use of passive voice, subject/verb agreement, etc.) and linguistic complexity (multiple connected paragraphs supported by illustrations and models). Notice how the example criteria do not include content knowledge at any point; that is, students are not evaluated on the procedure of how to solve the problem or whether or not they have the correct answer. Rather, the focus is placed on the use of language to express their mathematical thinking and understanding of the concept.

FAQs on Formative Assessment

WHAT IS FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT?

Formative assessment is a PROCESS used by teachers and students DURING instruction that provides FEEDBACK TO ADJUST ongoing teaching and learning to IMPROVE students' ACHIEVEMENT of intended instructional outcomes (Popham, 2008).

Observing a student following the procedures for a chemistry experiment... A student's journal entry describing how she met the objectives for the math unit that just ended... A research project on the impact of the state budget on law enforcement... All of these have one thing in common: they are opportunities to assess student performance for formative purposes! Educators use formative assessments to find out how students are meeting their learning targets, and most importantly, to decide what new goals might be set for them.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

Some formative assessments are **spontaneous**, that is, immediate and unplanned. While giving directions on how to perform the chemistry experiment, the teacher may recognize that one of his students does not understand that a reaction will occur when mixing the two chemicals. This recognition may result in the decision to review with the students what a chemical reaction is. Other examples of spontaneous formative assessments include a question and answer session during a lesson, observing students during an activity, listening to students' impromptu conversations, or asking students to provide examples.

Other formative assessments are **planned**, or purposely developed prior to a lesson to get feedback on students' achievement of learning targets. The journal entry assignment for a student to self-assess her performance in mathematics is an example of a planned formative assessment. Short tests, quizzes, homework exercises, observation protocols, in-class assignments or activities, in- or out-of-class projects, simulation or role-play activities, checklists, student conferences, and peer assessments all fall into this category of formative assessment as well.

WHAT ARE THE STEPS INVOLVED?

Regardless of whether it is spontaneous or planned, the goal of a formative assessment is to provide feedback to adjust learning, but NOT to assign a grade. The formative assessment cycle has four parts, as illustrated in the diagram at the right. First are instructional **goals** which are based on relevant language learning targets, objectives, or standards. The formative assessments are designed based on shared teacher and student instructional goals. The next part of the cycle is **instruction** based on the pre-set learning goals and objectives. **Measuring** is the third part of the assessment cycle and refers to the collection of information about student learning, asking "are students meeting instructional goals or language learning targets and are the instruments that are used to measure student language proficiency sufficient?" The last part of the assessment cycle is **feedback**. This is a very important part of the cycle and is often overlooked. The goal of providing feedback to students is to promote action to set new goals or to re-teach or re-instruct students to make sure they meet these goals.

Formative Assessment Cycle

Goals → Instruction → Measuring → Feedback
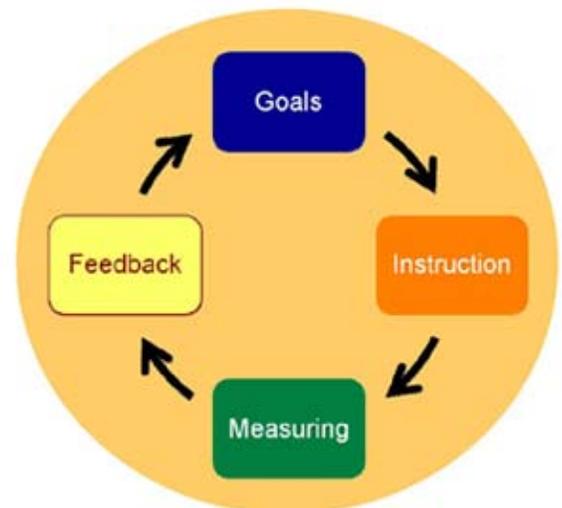
Formative Assessments Guide Language Instruction

The formative assessment process requires an assessment **task** (during instruction) and an assessment **tool**, which will help keep a record of the feedback. It is this tool that makes formative assessment formal instead of informal. Examples of assessment tasks include:

- Students individually creating a poster on the water cycle
- Students creating, as a team, a timeline of events during World War II
- Students drafting an essay about female authors in the 1800s
- Students presenting on their problem-solving strategies for an algebra assignment

It is clear that all of these examples are instructional events: they occur during instruction and are an opportunity to gather data about the academic language of students. Each individual task is not the assessment itself, just an opportunity for students to engage in the use of academic language.

For these tasks to be part of the formative assessment process, we need to include an assessment tool to sample students' language. Examples of assessment tools include:

- Checklists
- Rating scales
- Rubrics
- Anecdotal records
- Surveys/interviews
- Paper/pencil tests
- Observations

These tools can be used by the teacher or the student to assess or self-assess their language performance on a task. For example, a teacher could use a checklist to assess the poster on the water cycle; a student could use a rating scale to self-assess her group's timeline of World War events.

The same combination of tasks and tools could be used to assess content or language. The difference will be the standards and learning targets that the tool focuses on. Therefore, if the checklist for the poster lists items such as "includes the evaporation process," then, the formative assessment is on content. On the other hand, if the checklist lists items such as "uses present tense consistently," or "uses words 'evaporates' and 'condensates' appropriately," then the formative assessment is on language.

Finally, notice that what both teacher and student will gain is specific feedback on the use of academic language that can be immediately used to plan instruction or to set new goals, but not to assign a grade to determine achievement. This is what makes the formative assessment dynamic and useful.

QUALITY FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS

What makes a formative assessment powerful is using it to guide instruction. Here are some **IDEAL** characteristics of quality formative assessments:

Integrated
Formative assessments should be in line with other assessments in your school or district. They should be part of a balanced assessment system so that different data can provide a more accurate picture of your students' language development. For this to happen, formative assessments should be connected to the same language standards and learning targets as your summative assessment for language and other language assessments in your district or school.

Dynamic
Instruction is dynamic and formative assessment should be embedded in the instruction. Therefore, it should be just as dynamic, follow the same standards and language targets of instruction, and be student-centered. Since students' language develops and content evolves, formative assessments for language should also evolve.

Enlightening
The nature of formative assessment is to provide feedback to guide instruction. For this to happen, measuring what we are hoping to measure is important or the feedback will not be useful. If the focus is academic language, we should make sure that we are truly measuring language and not content. The feedback from it should provide information on language that guides the paths of instruction and reflection on the instruction for both students and teachers. It is also important that the assessment be reliable and consistent in the information that it provides.

Attainable
If formative assessment is difficult to fit in, then it may not be formative assessment.

Formative assessment should fit into the reality of classrooms and instruction. There should be a seamless transition between instruction and formative assessment. If its feedback truly shapes instruction, formative assessments do not need to be forced or complex to administer, but instead are a natural check for understanding that will be useful for planning the next lesson.

LINKED

All adults who interact with an ELL student in the school setting should be aware of expectations for formative language assessment. Ideally, this process will be accompanied by a school or district's commitment to provide time and space for teachers to engage in professional development activities related to formative assessment, as well as the opportunity to exchange information about the results of assessments given to each student. For results to be meaningfully compared, a common series of rubrics, checklists, and rating scales should be in place. Once all stakeholders have adequate information about students' linguistic strengths and weaknesses, consistent program support and instructional strategies can illuminate the path to academic success for each student.

USING THIS BULLETIN

You may want to begin by completing the IDEAL Formative Assessments Rating Tool (see below). Which items are you most successful at? Did you answer "no" to any of the items? Do you have any plans in place to make any changes? If so, what are they? What resources would help you to incorporate these best practices?

IDEAL Formative Assessments Rating Tool

INTEGRATED				
Are my assessments...				
Associated with other assessments in the school, district, or state?	No	Somewhat	Mostly	Yes
Connected to meaningful learning targets and standards?	No	Somewhat	Mostly	Yes
Aligned to instructional goals?	No	Somewhat	Mostly	Yes
DYNAMIC				
Are my assessments...				
Part of the fluid instructional process, not distinct from it?	No	Somewhat	Mostly	Yes
Connected to lesson plans and focused on student learning?	No	Somewhat	Mostly	Yes
Appropriate for measuring students' current language goals?	No	Somewhat	Mostly	Yes
ENLIGHTENING				
Do my assessments...				
Truly measure language and not content?	No	Somewhat	Mostly	Yes
Identify with clarity students' current abilities and skills related to linguistic complexity, vocabulary usage, and language control?	No	Somewhat	Mostly	Yes
Highlight the next steps for students?	No	Somewhat	Mostly	Yes
ATTAINABLE				
Do my assessments...				
Fit well into classroom realities (e.g., scheduling, timing)?	No	Somewhat	Mostly	Yes
Remain easy to administer and score?	No	Somewhat	Mostly	Yes
Provide results that inform your lesson planning?	No	Somewhat	Mostly	Yes
LINKED				
Are my assessments...				
Improving as a result of my school or district's commitment to professional development or collegial interaction related to formative assessment?	No	Somewhat	Mostly	Yes
Using the same rubrics, checklists, and rating scales as those of my colleagues?	No	Somewhat	Mostly	Yes

FLARE™

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About Formative Language Assessment Records for English Language Learners (FLARE)™

The FLARE project, a division of WIDA, is developing and validating a formative assessment system for teachers serving English language learners (ELLs) at the secondary level. These classroom assessments will function as an integral component of WIDA's overall system of standards and assessments for ELLs. FLARE is funded by a three year grant (2009-2011) from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

FLARE cannot be developed without the full commitment and support of participating districts and schools. The three FLARE partner districts are Charlotte-Mecklenburg, NC; Chicago, IL, and Garden Grove, CA. The most important benefit that districts will receive as a result of participating in the FLARE program is trained and effective teachers who are able to implement and sustain institutional change through the use of the FLARE formative assessments. Through the systematic change that will occur, it is expected that ELLs will demonstrate improved performance on local and large-scale assessments. For more information about FLARE, please visit:

www.flareassessment.org

World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) is a consortium of twenty states dedicated to the design and implementation of high standards and equitable educational opportunities for ELLs. Originally established through a federal enhanced assessment grant in 2002, WIDA partners with the Center for Applied Linguistics and MetriTech, Inc. Research and professional development activities importantly complement WIDA's English Language Proficiency Standards and assessment products.

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