

## Assessment for Learning for Writing

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A classroom assessment is a double-edged sword. It can damage as well as do good work. A high-quality classroom assessment nurtures teaching and learning. It enables teachers to check if their instruction maximizes students' success, to know what to do next and see if they have achieved their instructional goals aligned with high quality standards. When appropriate classroom assessments become an integral part of teachers' instructional process and a main ingredient in their efforts to help students learn, teachers succeed. A productive formative assessment also helps students accurately identify their learning strengths and weaknesses, correctly set new learning goals and clearly know how to close the gap between the weaknesses and the new learning goals. When they know what, why and how to learn, they become more motivated and engaged learners. However, an inept formative assessment fails students and teachers. It makes students confused, frustrated and give up learning hopelessly. It also harms their confidence, motivation and learning. Such an assessment provides teachers with misinformation that leads to their wrong decision and decreases teachers' efficacy. Students' success is teachers' success.

This article introduces Rick Stiggins' Assessment for Learning program for writing. Writing is a complex combination of skills, such as analytical skill, organization skill, expression skill, revising and editing skill, etc. It is not easy for students to master them. The majority of them suffer from the experience of going through a long writing process, like prewriting, drafting, editing, revising and publishing. How can they build up self-confidence, intrinsic learning motivation, independent study and writing skills in this process? Assessment for learning can do it. Assessment for learning is an effective, formative, classroom assessment that promotes accountability for all students in learning. It involves teachers and students working as a team. It does not only provide norm-referenced interpretation of test scores, but also criterion-referenced interpretation of results. It helps students keep in track of their progression towards the great improvement of writing performance. It also increases independent study and cultivates student self-esteem. It makes all students believe that they can be successful in learning. In the United States, students have gained profound achievements in learning through this daily-based formative assessment. They understand and monitor their own learning effectively by asking themselves "Where am I going?" "Where am I Now?" and "How can I close the Gap?"

### **"Where am I Going?" (The Learning Target)**

In English writing class, teachers share the learning targets with their students before teaching the lesson. First of all, the learning goals should be written in student-friendly language, such as "I will be able to keep my voice honest and convincing." Then, teachers use their classroom projector to demonstrate two anonymous student writing work - weak and strong work and ask students which one is better than the other and why it is better. For example, based on six traits of writing rubric (Idea/Content, Organization, Word Choice, Sentence Fluency, Voice and Conventions) that they are familiar with, students analyze the two writing samples and find out Sample B explicitly states and

strongly supports the writer's position with convincing reasons, concrete examples/facts (Idea/Content) and also demonstrates a sense of audience and uses a language appropriate to purpose, topic and audience (Voice) while Sample A displays broad, simplistic and ineffective ideas (Idea/Content) and also lacks the awareness of audience and relies on clichés and overused words that are not connected with the reader (Voice). Students have a clear picture of what a quality writing looks like and clearly know where they are going – the writing targets. Then they determine where they are now.

### **“Where am I Now?” (The Current Writing Level)**

Recognizing formative assessment does not always mean giving students a grade. Sometimes, it is better to offer descriptive and concrete comments on student writing work because teachers' constructive feedback should reflect what students have already improved and what they still need to improve. Such ungraded comments should focus on the task rather than the student. For instance, teachers should say “You used synonyms and antonyms to avoid overusing common words in the second paragraph like using ‘obsolete’ instead of ‘outdated’ and ‘criticize’ instead of ‘praise’. I hope you will do the same thing in the other paragraphs instead of just simply saying, ‘You did a good job’.” Thus, they do not only narrow down their comments to specific knowledge and skills such as word choice and conventions, but also break down overwhelming elaboration into manageable chunks like spelling, punctuations and capitalization. When students receive and review the feedback on their work, it is easy for them to accurately identify their strengths and weaknesses by themselves and to successfully act on their issues at one time as well. They are not frustrated with identifying every possible revision that they might make, especially English language learners and special education students. They concentrate on a few common and major revisions, such as organization and transitions, which are a little challenging, but under control. By comparing and analyzing their own writings and the excellent writing model, they discover the gap between their current writing level and the expectations so that they can set practical writing goals for further writing with their teachers' guide. Next, how can they close the gap to achieve their goals?

### **“How can I Close the Gap?” (The Specific Improvement Plan)**

High-quality self-assessment enables students to manage and control learning on their own and also to believe that each of them can succeed in learning. If the gap is too wide to be able to be closed, students may think that they will never succeed and then give up learning. Teachers should be very careful about setting the learning targets for their students. They need to discuss with the students about them, such as writing criteria. These goals are understandable, guidable and reachable. Teachers help their students make a workable action plan towards them. For example, teachers organize the class to brainstorm advice for an anonymous student on how to improve the work. A student says, “there is a fragment sentence in Line 3 in the second paragraph like ‘Some of the students working in Professor Smith's writing lab last semester’.” She advised that “working” should be changed into “worked” due to last semester. After a couple of correct advice, teachers ask them, in pairs, to revise the rest of the work using their own advice. These activities will prepare them to analyze their work for quality and to make suggestions for improvement in order to plan the implementation of their writing goals. The plan contains what to improve, how to improve it, when to improve it and how to prove improvement. First

of all, students list their weaknesses: 20 repetitions of common words, five spelling errors and three punctuation errors. Then they write down how to improve them. In order to avoid the overuse of common words, they can enrich their vocabulary, especially descriptive words and action verbs and use pronouns, synonyms or antonyms to replace common words; they can learn the difference between homonym and homophone to correct spelling errors and exercise punctuations like comma, period, colon, semi-colon, quotation mark, parenthesis, etc. The timeline indicates how many periods they need to complete each goal, like one period for word repetitions, one period for spelling and one period for punctuations. Finally, the teacher's feedback on the next writing work is the evidence that proves how much progress they make. Therefore, students develop the ability to manage their learning and to control their success by implementing the action plan they make by themselves.

In conclusion, Assessment for Learning by Rick Stiggins requires students to ask and answer three questions "Where am I going?", "Where am I now?" and "How can I close the gap?" to engage themselves in self-reflection on what they are learning, to keep in track of their progression and to share their progress with their peers. It is the new shift from the score-referenced summative assessment to the criteria-referenced formative assessment. It emphasizes the balance between assessment for learning and assessment of learning and the significant impact of the frequent application of the guided self-assessment on student success. It helps teachers identify students who are struggling with particular tasks and adjust their instructions and fosters student self-confidence, self-control, self-motivation and self-awareness as well.

## References:

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