

Section B: Embedding Formative Assessment  
 Unit 1: So what are the pupils doing?  
 Session 3: The evolution of good teaching  
 Activity 3: Exploring formative assessment

## Exploring formative assessment

Some approaches and techniques to reflect on

An important general principle in using any of the approaches or techniques described below with pupils is to talk to them about what you're going to do and why you're doing it before you start.

### 1 Being explicit about learning: learning intentions and success criteria

*WALT, WILF and OLI*

These are acronyms used by teachers to focus pupils' attention on what they will learn and how they will recognise when they are making progress. WALT stands for "We are learning to...", WILF for "What I'm looking for..." and OLI for "Our learning intention...". Teachers use them in different way to help them make sure that pupils know what they are going to learn (the learning intention) and how they will recognise progress (the success criteria).

*Think, Pair, Share*

This can be used in any group situation where ideas or views need to be clarified or developed. First, pupils are asked to gather their own thoughts on the topic under discussion. Then, two pupils should discuss their individual thoughts with one another to develop them further. Finally, the products of these discussions can be shared and developed further by the full group. (While particularly useful in getting pupils to suggest success criteria relevant to a specific learning intention, this strategy is also widely used for other kinds of classroom discussions.)

### 2 Gathering evidence of learning: questions and dialogue

*Wait (think) time*

Research suggests that teachers often leave much too little time after asking a question before they either look for an answer from a pupil or offer one themselves. Leaving more time can lead to answers from more pupils, can produce better answers and, generally, improve classroom discussions. Leaving more wait time or think time is often linked to another simple but useful technique, No Hands Up, so called because the teacher tells pupils to keep their hands down and s/he will pick pupils to answer. This helps to bring in pupils other than those who usually answer.

*Thinking partners*

Thinking partners can provide an effective way of giving every pupil the opportunity and the responsibility to tackle a thought provoking question. Thinking partners are pre-established pairs of pupils who get together whenever the teacher wants pupils to discuss what they think about a specific question. It is an approach that works particularly well with the Think, Pair, Share technique described above. If using thinking partners, it's probably a good idea to change the grouping around fairly frequently. This can help to avoid staleness or mischief and encourage the development of pupils' interpersonal skills.

*Clever questions*

Many questions used by teachers tend to be either closed (they have one right answer) or lower order (they look for simple recall and not much else). On the other hand, open (inviting different possible answers) and higher order (looking for analysis, synthesis, evaluation etc) questions can be much more useful in exploring pupils' mis/understandings and therefore revealing valuable information about their learning. Primary teachers often talk about thin and fat questions to help pupils distinguish between different kinds of questions. Bloom's Taxonomy provides a variety of question stems which cover the full range of question types.

*Question round the class*

This can be used for different reasons: to extend discussion, to address a misunderstanding, to explore the range of views or ideas in a group. Instead of responding to a pupil's answer 'ping pong' style, the teacher passes the answer to others in the group 'basketball' style and invites their comments. Finally, the teacher takes these responses back to the original pupil to draw the discussion to a conclusion.

**3 Focusing feedback on improvement: oral and written feedback***Two stars and a wish*

If feedback is to be helpful, it needs to be understandable, encouraging, specific and focused on how to improve. Two stars and a wish is a structured way of trying to make sure of this. If the comment includes two stars (two good things about the piece of work) and a wish (one area where an improvement can be made) then a pupil can work on one manageable area of weakness at a time. For maximum impact, the stars and wishes should relate to the original learning intention and success criteria and be written in language the pupil can understand.

*Comment only marking*

Research tells us that comment only marking encourages greater improvement than either grade only or grade and comment marking. The reason seems to be that when marks are included in some way, pupils don't look any further. With a good mark, they think they don't need to try harder while a poor mark discourages them from greater effort. No mark focuses attention on comments which, if well constructed, can point the way forward.

**4 Handing on responsibility for learning: peer and self-assessment***Developing a nose for quality*

Peer and self-assessment works best where teachers have helped pupils to develop a nose for quality, or a sense of what a good piece of work looks like. Armed with this, pupils can then make informed judgements about how well their own or their partner's work matches up to the "standard".

It takes time for this to develop and one good way of encouraging it is to discuss with pupils examples of others' work. Early examples should emphasise the qualities that distinguish a piece as good. These can be followed by others demonstrating areas that could be improved in some way.

Modelling work in this way provides concrete examples that pupils can refer to when working by themselves or in assessing work by someone else through peer assessment exercises.

*Traffic lighting and Thumbs*

This is a simple but very powerful device for finding out what pupils think about the present state of their own learning. Marking something green means that they feel in total command of the topic; amber means they are not yet fully confident; red indicates that they are struggling. Teachers working with pupils at all stages have found many different ways of using traffic lighting and its near neighbour, Thumbs.

Traffic lighting is most effective when used in a climate of trust where pupils know it's OK to say they aren't clear about something. They should also be confident that, if they use red, they'll get help. Also, greens can benefit by being used to help ambers and reds because the opportunity to use their knowledge/skill to help someone else both consolidates it for them and allows the teacher to check that it really is secure. Thumbs is a variation on the traffic lighting theme. It requires no resources and can be used in any context. Thumbs up means I'm happy with this, thumbs across I'm getting there, thumbs down I'm lost.

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## Being explicit about learning

Gathering evidence of learning

Focusing feedback on improvement

Handing on responsibility for learning

### Why is it important?

There is now a lot of evidence to suggest that learning takes place when students are clear about what they are being asked to learn and how they can recognise progress. Telling a student what they're going to do isn't enough. The learning purpose underpinning the activity must be understood and learners need to work out for themselves criteria to use in deciding how well they have achieved it.

Also, if learners have an opportunity to engage with learning purposes, objectives or intentions and are able to set their own criteria for judging progress, they will have established a meaningful framework within which they can begin to take more responsibility for their own learning.

Clearly understood learning objectives and criteria for successful learning also have an important role to play in managing the learning process. They guide learners in identifying evidence of success in learning and appropriate success criteria provide the basis for well focused feedback.

### How can I do it?

If learners need some understanding of their desired learning goal before they can take any action to reach it, then teachers need a way of framing such a goal and of sharing it with their pupils. By far the most popular is WALT (We Are Learning To/day) and WILF (What I'm Looking For), two acronyms which can be used to identify learning intentions and success criteria at the start of lessons. Arguments have sometimes broken out about how these acronyms can be made attractive to learners, about the merits of WALT and WILF over, for example, OLI (Our Learning Intentions) and TIB (This Is Because) and about whether WALTs and WILFs are suitable for older learners.

These arguments are *tactical*, not strategic and shouldn't distract attention from the more important need to provide learners with information that will help them engage successfully with a new piece of learning.

The real issue is less about finding ways of displaying learning intentions and success criteria and more about their value in engaging pupils with information and ideas about what's coming next in their learning. Many people now agree that pupils need to discuss and devise their own success criteria before they begin. As Royce Sadler pointed out: "a student who automatically follows the diagnostic prescription of a teacher without understanding of its purpose or orientation will not learn".

This is an important thing to think about because, if the learning purpose of a piece of work has been understood and if there has been an opportunity to identify specific success criteria to look for in pursuing that purpose, then the pupil is much better equipped for the task and for providing evidence in due course that it has been met. These capacities make it easier for the teacher and pupil to focus feedback on improvement and will also play an important role in developing the skills associated with personal learning planning.

From the teacher's point of view, the identification of learning intentions should become an important part of their own planning and can be greatly helped by reference to current curriculum guidelines where, for example 5-14 strands can be a good starting point in formulating learning intentions and targets offer some ideas about appropriate success criteria for different levels.

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### Why is it important?

When developing assessment to support learning, teachers need to be able to evaluate how well their pupils are doing while there's still time to influence the outcome. The evidence from tests and other kinds of summative assessment usually appears when it's too late to do much about making improvements. The only ways of exploring understandings and, more importantly, misunderstandings are by observing how pupils are learning and gathering evidence of this through skilful questioning.

Asking better questions and improving how we use them in the classroom help to ensure that the evidence of learning we gather can then be used to enhance the quality of the feedback we give.

It's also important to recognise the role of clearly defined and shared learning intentions and success criteria in setting out an agenda that teachers and pupils can share when engaged in some kind of classroom dialogue.

### How can I do it?

Teachers can improve the quality of interaction in classrooms by developing their questioning and discussion skills. Many tactics can help teachers in asking better questions and asking questions better: asking more open or higher order questions, leaving more wait time, using no hands up and think, pair, share are a few of the better known.

If the quality of pupils' thinking is to be stimulated, then using open, higher order questions is more likely to achieve that. Research into the time we tend to wait after asking a question before looking for an answer tends to be less than what we should allow for a thoughtful answer. Research suggests that at least three seconds should be left between asking a question and looking for an answer. No hands up (the teacher chooses a pupil to answer) and think, pair, share (Pupils think about the question by themselves, then with a partner, then share their thoughts with the rest of the class) are practical ways of making sure that as many pupils as possible have opportunities to think before offering an answer.

The aim of asking better questions and asking questions better is to create opportunities for teachers and pupils to work together to explore mis/understandings.

Learners who engage and contribute to discussions like this provide teachers with valuable feedback on the quality of the learning that's taking place.

Genuine discussion involving thoughtful interaction between teachers and learners encourages more pupils to think for themselves more of the time, and through that learn how to assess their own progress by asking themselves the right kind of questions.

It takes time and collaboration between teachers and pupils to become competent in gathering and using evidence as feedback. The beginning may be relatively simple but patience, persistence and reflection are needed to build the expertise that improves thinking and learning for pupils and teachers.

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### Why is it important?

The aim of good classroom assessment is to set appropriate priorities for learning, that pupils can use to manage their own progress. In seeking to achieve this, a teacher's feedback should be designed to focus a pupil's attention on a specific improvement.

To begin with, feedback on learning can be gathered from pupils through classroom observation and the answers pupils provide. Using this and other evidence drawn from the work in hand, the teacher can build a picture of a pupil's learning that will identify a priority for further improvement.

When giving feedback to pupils, the teacher needs to be clear about this: feedback that lacks focus because it covers too much or is too general isn't particularly helpful. If feedback is based on clear learning intentions and shared success criteria, it is much more likely to provide a focus for meaningful improvement.

### How can I do it?

One of the most common ways of focusing on improvement is by using a feedback formula like 'two stars and a wish' to make sure that the essential ingredients are included in a good feedback comment. The two stars offer encouragement by identifying specific successes in a piece of work and the wish gives a clear indication of what most needs to be done to make it better.

Research into the kinds of comments most likely to prompt improvement found that general ones like "Well done. Try to keep it up." had little effect. Good comments are encouraging, specific and focused on improvement. Hence the emergence of a tactic like two stars and a wish.

The specific formula doesn't seem to matter. So long as a feedback comment encourages by highlighting strengths in a piece of work, and directs progress, by suggesting a specific improvement, it will have served the purpose, whether it's called two stars and a wish or something else.

Two other things seem to be important about good feedback: it should be timely (a week later is probably too late) and an opportunity should be provided for the recipient to do something about making the improvement. Both help to emphasise that learning involves personal engagement and a desire to improve. Applying the feedback appears to consolidate the learning.

A feedback formula like two stars and a wish can also be a good way of giving even quite mature pupils a framework within which they can practise peer and then self-assessment. Being simple and easily remembered, it has proved effective in ensuring that pupils' comments to one another maintain a good balance between being encouraging and prompting improvement.

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### Why is it important?

In developing how formative assessment is used in the classroom, a teacher's principal aim should be to improve the quality of pupils' learning experiences. Being explicit about learning, gathering evidence of learning and focusing feedback on improvement all have a contribution to make but the real success criterion for a reflective professional is whether or not pupils have learned through these experiences how to take responsibility for their own learning. This won't happen without training in the skills involved.

Black and Wiliam described self-assessment as no luxury but "an essential component of formative assessment". So, to develop self-assessment skills that will help them take responsibility for their own learning, pupils need opportunities to practise being explicit about their learning, gathering evidence of that learning and then giving themselves focused feedback based on a fair interpretation of the evidence gathered.

Peer assessment provides the training ground for developing these skills. If, from their experience of the teaching process, pupils learn about the value of being explicit about learning through setting clear learning intentions and agreeing appropriate success criteria, of gathering evidence by the effective use of appropriate questions, of giving feedback for improvement based on that evidence, they can then explore this model of good working in their own peer assessment activities.

### How can I do it?

Since much of formative assessment is about correcting misunderstandings before they go too far, it needs to be carried out in an environment which accepts mistakes as a opportunity to learn something new. For peer assessment to work, pupils should understand that assessment comments offered by their peers are intended to be helpful. So in setting up assessment partner schemes etc, ground rules should be established so that everyone knows the role they should be playing. A feedback formula like two stars and a wish can also help to set a framework for appropriate feedback.

A coherent approach to peer assessment will take time to establish: handing on responsibility for learning from the teacher to pupils in this way involves a significant shift for everyone and some curriculum areas will be more used to it than others.

One way of making a start is to introduce it as a way of assessing some specific aspect of class-room activity which normally operates within a fairly clear framework, for example the marking of homework, where it could add a new learning opportunity. As pupils become more comfortable with the process, it can be extended into other areas.

Peer assessment offers a practical way of guiding pupils on the road to self-assessment. There are other, direct ways in which self-assessment can help a teacher gather evidence of learning. Using traffic lights to elicit how confident pupils are about their understanding (green to indicate a firm grasp, amber a less secure one and red little or none) has been widely adopted and offers a good starting point. Traffic lighting has been very popular and teachers have found many uses for it. It is important to remember that, first and foremost, it is a self-assessment tool: using it otherwise, for example, by teachers to mark pupils' work, may introduce confusion about its purpose which could affect its value in self-assessment.

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