



Supporting language learning through formative assessment

Secondary English

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What this unit is about



I'd like to use different ways of assessing my students' progress in English, but it's difficult with so many students and not enough time! Also, I'm using more speaking and listening activities in my classes and I'm not sure how to assess these skills. How can I assess my students' language learning and support them to learn?

This unit is about supporting your students' language learning through formative assessment. This kind of assessment is continuous and is carried out regularly throughout the school year. Formative assessment means collecting information about each of your students through a variety of activities, which helps you to assess their learning and progress. It will therefore help you to identify the students who are struggling, and to adjust your teaching so that you can support them. Similarly, it allows you to identify the students who are doing well and to plan how to provide them with challenging learning opportunities and use different learning materials so that they can progress. Formative assessment is promoted by the Right to Education Act 2009, as part of a curriculum that ensures the all-round development of the student.

The unit shows how you can carry out assessment of English in the course of your regular classroom teaching. It provides some ideas of how you can assess the different language skills: reading, listening, speaking and writing. It also has some suggestions for managing formative assessment within large classes.

What you can learn in this unit

- How to assess language learning in the course of your regular classroom teaching.
- How to assess your students' reading, writing, listening and speaking skills in English.

Why you should consider formative assessment

Many teachers assess their students' attainment in English through tests and exams given at regular intervals in the annual school calendar, with a final exam at the end of the school year. Tests and exams can be a good way to collect information about what students know, but they are much less useful in informing your teaching.

All teachers are concerned and interested in improving their students' learning and progress in English throughout the year. To do this you need to undertake formative assessment throughout the school year, which is continuous – or ongoing – assessment. This means assessing each student's progress in the course of regular classroom teaching for diagnosis, remedial action and enhancement of learning. It can include:

- observing your students as they carry out routine classroom activities, and making notes from your observations
- grading classroom and/or homework assignments, and keeping records of the grades
- keeping samples of students' work (written, art, projects, etc.) in a portfolio
- giving short informal tests and keeping records of grades.

This type of assessment will help you understand how well each student is doing in many different areas of English. It will also help you to see which problems individual students are having, so that you can plan activities that develop their skills and thinking.

1 Assessing language learning in regular classroom teaching

It is possible to assess students during regular classroom teaching. You can observe them as they carry out routine exercises and activities. Here are some examples of such activities, and how you could use them to collect information that can be used to assess your students. (You can read about many of these activities in other Secondary English units.)

- When students are working in pairs – such as dictating sentences to each other, or carrying out a speaking activity such as a role play or an interview – you can listen, observe and make notes about aspects of the activity (for example, about pronunciation).
- Before reading a lesson or starting a new chapter in the textbook, you can ask students questions about the topic (for example, a wedding they have attended or their favourite sporting heroes).
- Whenever you ask questions of the whole class, or invite students to make suggestions, you can observe who contributes and note the language that they use.
- When students are responding to a lesson (for example, answering comprehension questions) and working individually, in pairs or in groups, you can move around the classroom and note who is struggling to answer the questions.
- After teaching some new vocabulary or grammar, you can give a quick, short test about the words or grammatical structure (for example, asking students to complete gaps in sentences).
- If students are compiling a vocabulary logbook or a literature logbook, you can review the books and possibly grade them.
- You can grade project work completed by students either individually or in groups (for example, designing an advert, writing a class newspaper or writing an episode of a TV show).

- When students are doing a listening activity – such as listening to instructions and drawing a picture, answering questions about a passage that they have heard, or writing a summary of a text – you can walk around the room and observe who is struggling and who is doing well. You can take in completed work to grade.

This list shows that there are many different ways that you can assess your students in the course of your normal teaching – you don't have to include extra exercises and activities in order to assess your students. Using a variety of routine exercises and activities makes sure that you assess all aspects of language learning: listening, reading, speaking and writing, along with vocabulary and grammar.

You may feel that it is difficult to carry out formative assessment with large numbers of students. But it is not necessary to focus on each student in every class – you can alternate who you give feedback to and take in different students' work each time. Students can also assess their own or each other's work. Resource 1 has further suggestions about how you can collect information about each of your students when teaching large classes.

Once the information and evidence have been collected and recorded, it is important to interpret it in order to arrive at an understanding of how each student is learning and progressing. You then need to act on your findings to improve learning, maybe through feedback to students or finding new resources, or rearranging the groups, or repeating a learning point. For example, if you have noted that some of your students are having problems with certain areas of English (such as the use of the past tense), you could then give those students extra practice in using tenses in future lessons.

Formative assessment can help you to provide meaningful learning opportunities to every student by establishing specific and differentiated learning activities, giving attention to the students who need more help and challenging the students who are more advanced. For more information, watch the video below and read Resource 2, 'Assessing progress and performance'.

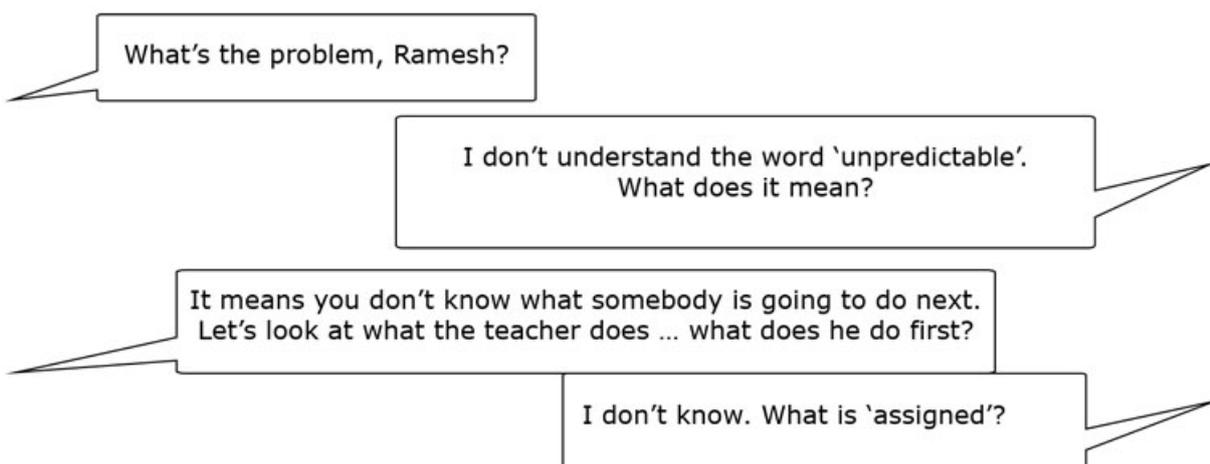


Case Study 1: Mr Sampath assesses his students during regular classroom teaching

Mr Sampath teaches English to Class X at a government secondary school. He attended a training session on assessment at his local DIET and learned about the benefits of formative assessment. He decided to buy a notebook in order to keep records (notes and grades) of his students' progress in English.

After I bought my notebook, I wrote down the names of all my students and started to make notes about each one. At first, I found that my notes were often about the same students. That made me realise that I didn't notice how some of the students in my class were doing, especially the quieter ones at the back of the room. The notebook showed me that I needed to start finding out about all the members of the class.

I started to make more effort to see how everyone in the class was doing. Let me give you an example. Recently, my students were writing the answers to some comprehension questions in pairs [see the activity in Resource 3]. As they began discussing and writing their answers, I moved to a pair and listened to their discussion. They seemed to have a good idea of the answer, so I moved to another pair. This time, it was clear that one of the students, Ramesh, was struggling with this question: 'Anne says teachers are most unpredictable. Is Mr Keesing unpredictable? How?'



I explained the words and sentences that were preventing Ramesh from being able to answer the question. I then went back to my desk, and made a note about him in my notebook and about how I could better support his learning in future [Table 1].

Table 1 Mr Sampath's notes on Ramesh's learning.

Name	Date	Activity	Comment/grade
Ramesh	09.04	Chapter 4 – reading exercise	Seems to be struggling with answering questions about the text – had some problems understanding vocabulary. Need to find some simpler texts for him to read?

Of course, I can't write about every student in every class, but I make notes when I can, and slowly over the term I am starting to get a better understanding of each student. So for example, I can see that Ramesh often has problems with understanding the texts in the book. I am planning to talk to him to see how I can help him to improve his reading skills. For instance, perhaps he can read some simpler texts at home that I can identify for him, or maybe I could pair him with Sita, who is a friend of his and is also better than him at reading, so she could help him.

Since using the notebook, I have found that I am learning more about each student in my class. And sometimes I ask questions of students that I didn't ask before, because I want to find out how they are all doing. I think it's helping students to learn English too. For example, I don't think that I used to help Ramesh very much. To be honest, I didn't know he was struggling with reading. Now I hope that I can help him to improve his reading skills.

Surprisingly, I realised that using the notebook also helped me in other ways like analysing what each student can do or finds difficult, and so on. This in turn helps me to provide

concrete feedback to students and their parents, so that everyone has a better sense of what the students do well and what they need to work on and improve. Finally, collecting and analysing information about my students' learning also provided me with an opportunity to reflect on my own teaching methods and the materials I use, and has forced me to think about how I can teach my students in an easier and better way so that each of them learns.

Activity 1: Try in the classroom – using a diary to keep records

Any teacher can use a notebook or diary to keep records of performance and grades about students. If you don't keep records already, start a diary in which you can write regular notes about students and keep records of their grades. As you keep your records, think about how you can support each student with their learning. If a student is doing well, how can you help encourage them and give them work that allows them to keep learning? If a student is struggling, how can you support them?

Keep your diary for at least a month and answer these questions:

- **After week 1:** How easy is it to use your notebook? If it's difficult, what changes can you make to make the process easier? Consider making fewer notes, observing fewer students in each class, choosing from a simple list of comments or using symbols for notes such as numbers or pictures (for example, J, L)
- **After week 2:** Are there any students that you don't have records of? Which ones? Make an effort to observe these students over the following week, or take in some work from them. Add their notes or grades to your notebook.
- **After week 3:** Look over your notebook. Which are the students that appear to be struggling (according to your notes and grades)? What do they appear to be struggling with? (For example, reading, vocabulary, grammar.) How can you help them? What changes could you make to your teaching that might help them learn better?

Students struggle for many different reasons. It is important to talk to the student to find out what the problems that they face are so that you can think about ways to help. It is equally important that you provide feedback about their work in clear and simple action points so the student knows what corrective measures to take. This will also help you to plan ways that you can help the student. Perhaps you can give them extra exercises to do at home; or different exercises to do in class. Maybe the student can work with another student in the class who can help them.

The key to using a diary for keeping records about your students is finding a way that suits you and your students. If you have a large number of students, it will not be possible to make lots of notes about all of them every week. You will have to be realistic! Try to get notes about all of your students over a period of time – a term, for example. And make sure you communicate to your students and their parents how they are doing, so that they are aware of their strengths and weaknesses and can take steps to improve.

!Warning! ApexSansBookT not supported To learn more about how to do this, read Resource 4, 'Monitoring and giving feedback'.



2 How to assess your students' listening skills in reading and listening to English

It can be difficult to assess reading and listening skills. When students speak or write in English, you can listen to what they say or read what they write. However, when they read or listen to English, it is difficult to know what they understand. Table 2 shows some activities you can do to collect information about what your students have understood when reading or listening to a text. These activities can be carried out in the course of regular classroom teaching, or as informal tests to form part of formative assessment.

Table 2 Assessing what your students understand in English.

Activity	Example
Comprehension questions	Students listen to or read a passage in English, and answer questions about it. You can use questions from the textbook, write your own, or even ask students to write questions. Questions and answers can be in English or your home language. This can be very beneficial for students who can read or listen to texts well, but struggle to write in English. If they can write in their home language, they can say what they have understood. It can be useful for students to review questions before they start reading or writing, so that they know what they need to find or listen out for.
Writing summaries	Students listen to or read a passage in English and write a summary about what they have understood. This can be written in the home language so that you are not assessing the students' writing skills but whether they have understood what they have heard or read. You can encourage students to take notes as they listen or read. They can use these notes to write the summaries.
Discussions	Students can talk or write about what they found interesting or enjoyable in a text. This can be particularly useful with texts from the supplementary reader. They can discuss in English or the home language, as the purpose of doing this is to find out what they have understood.

Some teachers use reading aloud as a way to assess their students' reading skills. There are, however, some problems with using this technique for this purpose as it doesn't really tell you how much students have understood about a passage. In fact, it is more of a test of students' pronunciation skills.

Some teachers use dictation as a way of getting students to practise speaking, listening and writing. Dictations can be easy to mark and grade, and students can mark their own and each other's work. However, in dictations, students don't often focus on the meaning of what is being said, so make sure that you use other activities as well if you want to have a good idea of your students' listening skills.

To get a sense of your students' reading and listening abilities, it is best to use a variety of activities, with as many different texts as you can. These texts can be from the textbook, the supplementary reader or any other text (such as a story or newspaper article). For listening, you could read a short section of any of these. If you have access to a radio or a mobile phone with a speaker, you could play an audio recording. Whenever you do an activity like this, give students plenty of time to read a text, and let students listen to passages more than once.

Activity 2: Try in the classroom – planning to assess your students' listening and reading skills

In the text above, you read about a variety of techniques that you can use in your regular classroom teaching to assess your students' skills at reading and listening (such as writing summaries, dictation, etc.). Make a copy of the table below and fill in how you are going to use the techniques over the next month. You will find a completed table with examples in Resource 5.

Table 3 A form for planning to assess your students' listening and reading skills.

Class and chapter			
Week	Activity	In what ways will I assess the students during this activity?	How will I modify my teaching as a response?
1			
2			
3			
4			

