

Do's & Don'ts



ENGLISH
LEARNERS
SUCCESS
FORUM

of EL Instruction

SUBJECT	AREA OF FOCUS	GUIDELINE	SPECIFICATION
MATH	V	14 15	14A 14C 15B

GRADES K-12

Formative Assessment: A Key to Improving Learning for English Learners

Formative assessment is a critical key to improving learning and can be used effectively with English learners who come to the classroom with different strengths and assets.¹ What is formative assessment? How and why does it work?

Formative assessment refers to a range of practices used to obtain evidence of learning to inform ongoing instruction and to provide English learners opportunities to develop language competencies and learn academic content simultaneously. These practices help teachers and students determine the next steps to keep content and language learning moving forward.

Formative assessment works to improve learning for three main reasons: 1) students learn when they are active participants through discussion with others in English or in their primary language; 2) students engage in metacognition through self-assessment; and 3) teachers gain insight into content and language learning so that they can tailor instruction based on what students need to learn next.²

Formative assessment practices involve:

- communicating or co-creating with students clear and realistic learning goals and success criteria aligned to the lesson;
- eliciting evidence through discussions, tasks, and activities in the lesson;
- feedback; and
- self- and peer assessment.³

Based on the research and ELSF guidelines, we suggest the following:	
Communicate learning goal(s) and success criteria clearly to students, in multiple languages when possible. Ensure that they understand the goals and what achieving them entails.	Simply tell students what the lesson objectives are and post them in the classroom without explaining their purpose or modeling.
Assess mathematics content learning and language learning together during the lesson, in English and/or the student's primary language.	Separate assessment of mathematics content learning from assessment of the language through which it is understood and expressed.
Assess throughout the lesson using multiple modalities, such as student discussion in English or their primary language, graphic representations, or use of manipulatives.	Treat formative assessment as a discrete on-demand test at the end of a period of learning.



Featured Authors



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Based on the research and ELSF guidelines, we suggest the following:

 Guide students to make sense of mathematics problems by having them read, stop, visualize, or act out a problem they need to solve.	 Tell students what the problem is asking them to do without engaging them in sense-making. Don't ask students to rely on identifying and memorizing key words in advance of solving problems.
 Intentionally obtain evidence of student learning (mathematical understanding and language) as the lesson evolves, including evidence in the primary language when possible.	 Wait until the end of the lesson to find out what students have understood or what language they have used.
 Use evidence obtained to determine how students are making meaning of mathematics content and using language to express their thinking.	 Focus only on accuracy in language use or mathematics content.
 Use structured collaboration and discussion (e.g., discussing the problem, comparing problem-solving strategies) as a source of evidence of learning.	 Do all the talking in the lesson. Students need opportunities to participate in learning and use language in productive ways with their peers.
 Model and teach how to use self-assessment and peer assessment. Provide opportunities throughout the lesson for students to self-assess and provide peer feedback.	 Assume students know how to and can engage in peer and self-assessment without modeling or practice.

It is recommended that these practices be part of a comprehensive approach to EL instruction and not in isolation as laid out in our [Guidelines for Improving Math Materials for English Learners](#).

Endnotes

- Black, P., Harrison, C., Lee, C., Marshall, B., & William, D. (2003). *Assessment for learning: putting it into practice*. Berkshire, England: Open University Press.
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- García, O., & Ascenzi-Moreno, L. (2016). Assessment in school from a translanguaging angle. *Gegenwärtige Sprachkontakte im Kontext der Migration*. Heidelberg, Germany: Universitätsverlag Winter.
- Ascenzi-Moreno, L. (2018) Translanguaging and Responsive Assessment Adaptations: Emergent Bilingual Readers through the Lens of Possibility. *Language Arts Journal*, 95(6).
- Heritage, M., Walqui, A., & Linqunti, R. (2020). *English language learners and the new standards: Developing language, content knowledge, and analytical practices in the classroom*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Adapted from Zager, T. J. (2017). *Becoming the math teacher you wish you'd had*. Portland ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

In this example from a 3rd grade mathematics class, a teacher incorporates formative assessment practices into a lesson that integrates content and language learning. Take note of the teacher and student actions in each formative assessment.

Lesson Element	How Formative Assessment Works	
<p>Warm Up Activity: Students are presented with 2 images. Image A is a plate with 7 cookie halves, while Image B is a plate with 5 whole cookies. Students choose which option they prefer and justify their reasoning to a partner. (Previously, the teacher has taught the students what providing a justification entails and introduced key vocabulary in context.)</p>	<p>The teacher listens for evidence of learning and asks questions, while partners share their ideas. The teacher gains insight into what students already know and where they might need further scaffolding throughout the lesson.</p>	<p><i>Students consider what they already know and present their justifications.</i></p>
<p>The teacher intentionally invites select students to share their thinking with the class to model the teaching point for the day.</p> <p>Students use provided sentence stems to ask questions and highlight similarities or divergences in thinking with peers.</p>	<p>The teacher records student responses for both choices on a large t-chart. The teacher obtains evidence of students' initial thinking about fractions and language use. The teacher uses the evidence to determine which teaching points to emphasize with individuals or with the entire class.</p>	<p><i>Students share their thinking and compare their ideas to those of others.</i></p>
<p>Learning Goal and Success Criteria</p> <p><i>Learning Goal:</i> As mathematicians, we are learning how to partition a whole into equal parts and explain our solutions.</p> <p><i>Success Criteria:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> I can model and explain how a whole can be partitioned into equal shares <input type="checkbox"/> I can describe the unit form for the equal parts that make up the whole <input type="checkbox"/> I can represent and explain why the unit fraction matches the equal parts 	<p>The teacher refers to the warm-up conversation, (halves versus whole cookies) to introduce the learning goal and success criteria for the lesson. She helps students to understand the connection between the goal and the cookies partitioned in two equal parts as one half (unit form), also written as $\frac{1}{2}$ (unit fraction). The students have been taught what a mathematical explanation entails.</p>	<p><i>Students clearly understand how they can monitor their own progress in learning.</i></p>

Lesson Element	How Formative Assessment Works	
<p>Problem Solving:</p> <p><i>Problem: Ms. Carrasco bought a pack of graham crackers with 5 crackers inside. She wanted to share them equally with her 3 children. How many crackers did each receive?</i></p> <p>Students read and individually record their understanding of the problem. Some draw pictures of graham crackers and stick figures to represent each person in the problem. Others record Ms. Carrasco and her three children with arrows pointing to the words five crackers).</p>	<p>As students work, the teacher intentionally listens to group conversations, observes students' representations, and asks probing questions to gain deeper insights into their thinking about the problem and their ability to explain their thinking. She makes in-the-moment decisions about when to intervene to support language use and mathematics understanding.</p>	<p><i>Students show their thinking in varied ways.</i></p>
<p>Students discuss the problem as a group. Then, they attempt to solve it individually, using their choice of manipulatives, drawings, diagrams, and discussions with others.</p> <p>They share their solution with a partner for peer feedback, and revise their solution, if necessary. Students are given sentence stems and a routine or protocol to help them provide peer feedback.</p>	<p>The teacher uses student responses and her notes to determine next steps including how she will support students individually, in small groups, or through peer partnerships in the next class period.</p>	<p><i>Students articulate their understanding and check if they are on the right track.</i></p>
<p>Lesson Close: Teacher reviews the lesson's learning goals and success criteria</p>	<p>The teacher listens for evidence of learning and asks questions, while partners share their ideas. The teacher gains insight into what students already know and where they might need further scaffolding throughout the lesson.</p>	<p><i>Students self-assess if they have met the goal and criteria by selecting:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I've got it!</i> • <i>I need more practice.</i> • <i>I need more time.</i> • <i>I need to work with a partner to get this right.</i> • <i>I need help from my teacher.⁴</i>