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EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK:
THE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

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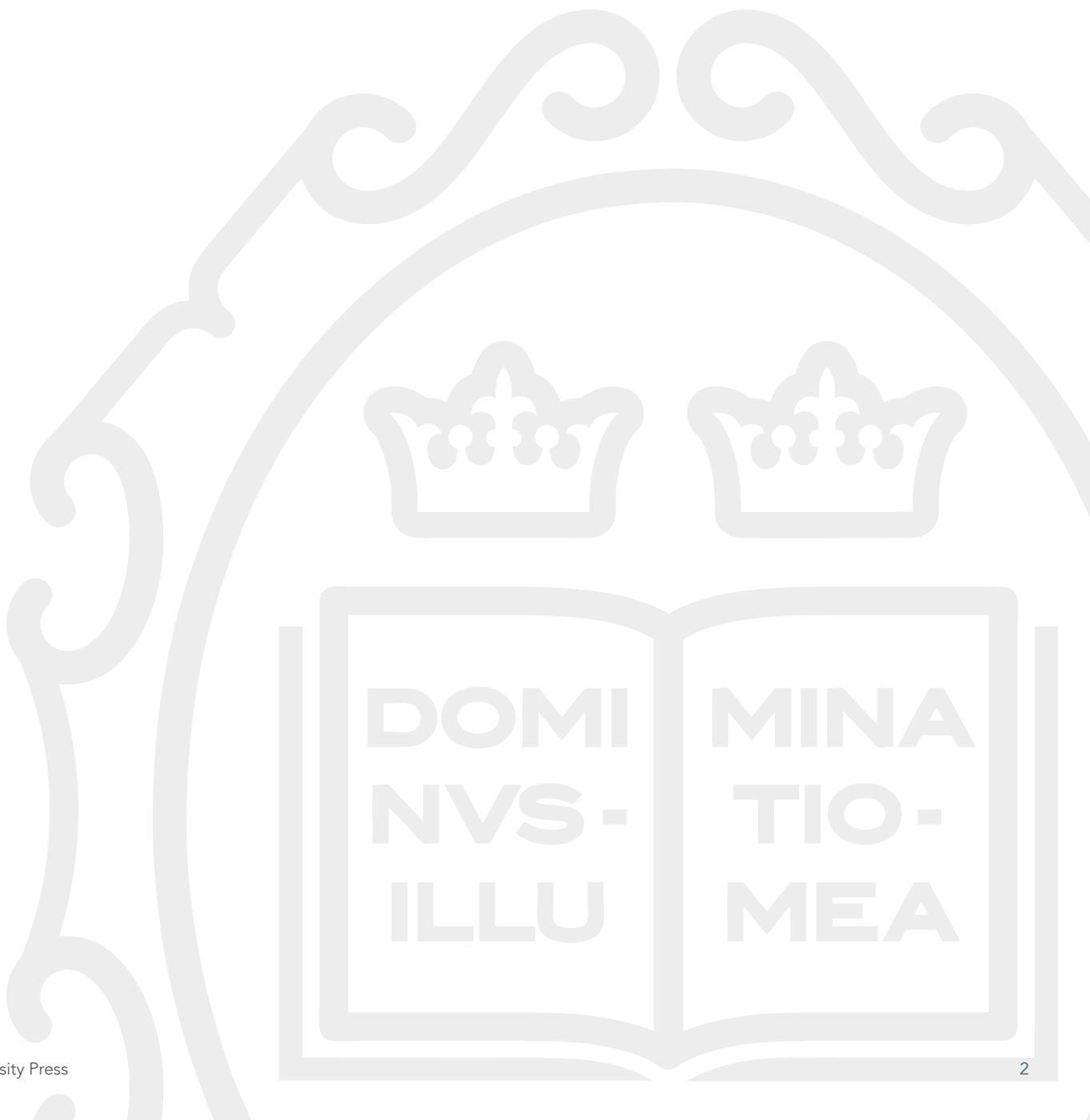
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Assessment for learning has attracted global interest by promising to improve teaching and learning. With this promise in mind, many of us would like more detail about what is involved, the thinking behind it, and how best to implement it. Assessment for learning involves informally monitoring progress in order to help learners understand where they have been successful in their learning and what they need to work towards in achieving their goals. This makes assessment *for* learning an ideal classroom tool and distinguishes it from assessment *of* learning, which sums up where a learner is at a given moment in time.

In assessment for learning, better teaching and learning rely on the quality of the feedback that teachers and learners engage in, making feedback a key aspect of successful assessment for learning. Effective feedback is underpinned by three key practices:

- diagnostics: finding out where learners are in their learning
- learning intentions: making clear what is being learned and why
- success criteria: clarifying what performance will look like as a result of this learning.

Providing feedback is a multifaceted skill. Research demonstrates that feedback is most effective when it offers specific information in a timely and constructive manner. Importantly, this needs to be a two-way process between teacher and student. Classrooms provide a constant flow of information to the teacher about what is being learned, understood, and engaged with. Skilled teachers will be attuned to this flow of information and use it to make adjustments to their teaching which, in turn, will be beneficial to learners by responding directly to their needs. Equally, in the process of managing, understanding, and acting on the feedback they receive, learners develop a more questioning and reflective attitude to learning, increasing motivation and resilience, and ensuring deeper learning.

This paper focuses on the quality, process, and management of feedback, and how it can be used constructively to move learning forward. It begins by defining and explaining the essence of assessment for learning, and considers the benefits and challenges it brings. This is followed by a discussion of the key classroom practices which encourage students to engage with feedback and inspire deeper learning. Finally, seven key elements of effective feedback are identified which teachers can apply in their classrooms. Throughout this paper, the practical challenges facing institutions and teachers are addressed, with recommendations to suit the age and ability of the learner.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

There is increasing recognition that assessment involves more than formal testing and that informal classroom assessments are a valuable way of helping teachers understand what learning is taking place. Using insights from assessment for learning, this paper discusses how both informal and more formal assessment practices can have a beneficial impact on both learners and teachers. The main emphasis is on feedback and how to use it constructively to move learning forward. When it is effective, feedback has been shown to be one of the most powerful contributors to learning. A number of research-based recommendations for implementing assessment for learning and delivering effective feedback are provided.

A great deal of assessment in ELT involves formal tests and marking. This kind of assessment looks back at how much has been learned and sums up where the learner is at a given moment. This paper takes a broader view and defines assessment as *gathering information in order to make judgements which provide the basis for action*. While this certainly includes formal tests and marking, it also incorporates other, more informal forms of evidence gathering, such as using classroom dialogue to find out if students have misunderstood something or if they are unclear about what is required to complete a task. It is interactive practices such as these, in which both teachers and students are actively involved, which can most directly impact on the processes of teaching and learning. They can lead to deeper learning in which students develop not only a personal understanding of what they are learning, but also their own ideas about their learning.

There is strong research evidence showing that assessment for learning incorporates teaching and learning practices which can significantly improve learning. The practices explored in this paper have been shown to be particularly effective in achieving this. The evidence indicates that assessment for learning also encourages students to develop approaches and attitudes to learning which help them to become more independent and thoughtful learners.

An implication of this emphasis on skilled, informal classroom assessment is that assessment for learning does not need to add to teachers' preparation, teaching, marking, or assessment burdens. It is a pedagogical approach which calls on the teachers' expertise to be used to benefit their students' learning.

In Section 1 assessment for learning is defined and the learning theories associated with it are considered. Some of the benefits and challenges educators face in implementing assessment for learning are discussed. We recommend a flexible approach to implementing assessment for learning which offers learners the benefits highlighted whilst also satisfying local traditions and expectations.

In Section 2 the classroom and institutional practices involved in implementing assessment for learning are examined. How do we improve classroom dialogue and encourage students to interact more in classroom discussion and questioning? How do we encourage them to 'make sense' of what they are learning? How do we help them understand what successful achievement involves?

In Section 3 feedback is explored in detail. Feedback is one of the most powerful ways of moving learning forward, yet research suggests it is often not used productively. What goes into effective feedback and what should be avoided? We consider seven key elements that will help to equip teachers to give effective feedback in the classroom.

Some common difficulties teachers have with assessment for learning and feedback are also discussed, and solutions that can be used or adapted for different contexts are provided.

The paper concludes by affirming the view that feedback is a two-way process, requiring active engagement and reflection from teachers and students to make learning more effective.

01

ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING: WHAT AND WHY?

Most teachers and educators will have heard of **assessment for learning**, but they may be uncertain about what is involved, the thinking behind it, and how best to implement it. The term 'assessment for learning' signals the use of assessment to directly encourage learning. When an assessment is used for certification purposes, it may be thought of as **assessment *of* learning**, which sums up where the learner is at a given moment (**summative assessment**). These are not completely separate processes: a summative assessment can be a tool for modifying teaching and learning when it is used to establish what has been understood, what is lacking, and how improvements can be made. Such improvements largely depend on the quality of **feedback** that learners receive, making it a key aspect of assessment for learning.

WHAT IS 'ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING'?

The term 'assessment for learning' has been in use since the late 1990s, often used interchangeably with **formative assessment**, which has a longer history. The adoption of the term 'assessment for learning' largely came about because 'formative assessment' was becoming so widely used that almost any assessment was being claimed to be formative. 'Assessment for learning' sends a much clearer signal about the intended use of an assessment, and that assessment involves more than just tests and grades. The Assessment Reform Group, which pioneered much of the early work on assessment for learning,[1] recognized that using the word 'assessment' risked the misunderstanding that this was all about testing, but they continued using the term in order to send the message that assessment is a part of good pedagogy, not just something that happens at the end of a course or school year.

ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING ⊙   ⊙ ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING

formative	summative
informal	formal
learning process	learning outcome

Figure 1. Assessment for learning and assessment of learning

There have been many definitions of assessment for learning, and they have evolved over time. One of the earliest definitions, provided by the Assessment Reform Group, is that assessment for learning is:

> the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there.[2]

This definition focuses on finding out what learners know and can do, making clear the learning to be achieved, and providing feedback on how to reach the required standard. The emphasis on assessment for learning as an informal and everyday part of classroom activity is captured by this more recent definition provided by Val Klenowski:

> Assessment for Learning is part of everyday practice by students, teachers and peers that seeks, reflects upon and responds to information from dialogue, demonstration and observation in ways that enhance ongoing learning.[3]

What is common to these definitions is the emphasis on the informal gathering of evidence to determine the next steps in teaching and learning.

LEARNING THEORY AND ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

Assessment for learning does not have its own theory of learning or language acquisition; rather, it draws on three main theories of learning: **behaviourist theory**, **constructivist theory**, and **sociocultural theory**.

Where the emphasis is on testing and using the results to re-teach what was not known, it is influenced by behaviourist theory. This assumes a teacher-led process in which test-based assessment information is primarily for the teacher and is used to focus their classroom instruction. For example, the teacher might give students a unit test from the coursebook to identify areas of difficulty and follow up with remedial lessons, where necessary.

This approach has generally been superseded by a desire to help learners make sense of what they are learning (constructivist theory), with an emphasis on the importance of classroom interaction which encourages learners to take more responsibility for their learning (sociocultural theory). For example, the teacher might use follow-up questions during a lesson to check how well students can apply what they have learned. This process can also help teachers to identify errors and the causes of errors, enabling them to discover what students have not yet mastered, or encourage them to self-correct by providing hints and prompts.

Context and history will shape the particular emphases teachers may place on different theoretical elements. In Norway, for example, where the student's right to assessment for learning practices is embedded in law,[4] teachers may expect to negotiate a 'learning contract' with their students—a sociocultural approach. In other countries, where the historical tradition emphasizes the didactic role of the teacher, the approach may be closer to behaviourist thinking and the pedagogical task may be to encourage more active participation and understanding.

The progressive broadening of the concept of assessment for learning has been summarized in four stages, in which the assessment provides information about:

1 the learning process

2 the learning process *that teachers can use for instructional decisions*

3 the learning process that teachers can use for instructional decisions *and students can use to improve performance*

4 the learning process that teachers can use for instructional decisions and students can use to improve performance *which motivates students.*[5]

These stages broadly align with the emphases of the different learning theories summarized above. The first two stages represent the behaviourist origins of assessment for learning. The third summarizes the more constructivist contribution, while the fourth incorporates both constructivist and sociocultural approaches.

The treatment of assessment for learning in this paper draws mainly on constructivist and sociocultural accounts of learning, which place the emphasis on teachers working in partnership with their students in ways which encourage students to take more responsibility for their learning and to develop more powers of **self-assessment** and **self-regulation** so that they can monitor and reflect on their own performance.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

A wide variety of both short- and long-term benefits that result from implementing assessment for learning have been identified in evidence from extensive research conducted by academics and teachers, and from policy evaluations. This research also recognizes some challenges which teachers, students, and schools can face in implementing assessment for learning successfully.

Benefits

There is wide agreement that assessment for learning has a positive impact on both learning and teaching.

For learners

- higher attainment
- a deeper understanding of what is being learned
- greater motivation and commitment to learning
- a clear understanding of how and why they are being assessed
- autonomy and the possibility of becoming self-regulated and lifelong learners.

For teachers

- opportunities to share and discuss learning goals with learners
- a better understanding of how to adapt their teaching to learners' needs
- supporting two-way communication with learners
- more creative and flexible approaches to teaching
- appreciation for reflective practices
- sustained professional development
- improved collaboration between colleagues and stakeholders.

For the school

- a collaborative classroom dynamic in which students play a more active role and teachers are clear about what is being learned and more flexible in their teaching practices
- better results including test scores and other external measures
- narrowing of the gap between higher- and lower-achieving students.

In addition, a synthesis of the findings of over 50,000 research studies has estimated the contributions to learning of individual elements of classroom teaching, and ranked the impact on achievement of 150 different factors. Classroom discussion, teacher clarity, and feedback—all central elements of assessment for learning—come within the top ten rankings.[6] While the impressive positive effects highlight the importance of these three practices, we need to look at smaller-scale qualitative studies to draw out what defines each of them. This is discussed in more detail in Sections 2 and 3.

Challenges

Evaluations of policies and projects have identified four main challenges that learners, teachers, and schools may encounter with assessment for learning.

Lack of clarity

In some cases, both teachers and schools may not fully understand what assessment for learning involves and the rationale behind it. Schools may believe they are implementing assessment for learning when closer scrutiny suggests this is not always the case. For example, there may be confusion that regular testing is formative, when, in fact, the test results are only used summatively: marks are simply recorded and test performances are not analysed formatively to diagnose areas of weakness or to better understand the thinking underlying students' performance.

However, research has demonstrated that where teachers and schools understood the purpose of assessment for learning, they were more effective than teachers and schools who used assessment for learning practices without a clear sense of why they were being introduced.[7]

Classroom practices

Effective assessment for learning entails building on everyday practices that focus on the learning process. This means encouraging teachers and students to be open to trying out new practices and processes. However, there may be some reluctance on the part of both teachers and students to change their classroom practices.

At first, I didn't trust other students' feedback because I thought they might give me wrong advice, but now I like it because it gives me the chance to work more on my assignment before it's marked and I can get a better grade. I really found looking at other students' work helped me because I learned a lot from seeing what they did better than me, and I can help them, too.*

*This is a representative comment informed by our experts' experiences with students in the course of their work.

Requiring students to be more active in the classroom may also present a challenge. In some contexts, for example, students may be less willing to ask and answer questions, or they may place more value on feedback from the teacher than on self- and peer-assessment.

One way to approach this challenge is to introduce new practices and processes gradually, taking time to highlight the benefits, especially where students are shown how they can be involved in their own progression. This will help teachers to implement assessment for learning successfully and learners to understand and act upon it.

Focus on examination results

Educators recognize the importance of broader learning, yet often their teaching is constrained by pressures on them and their institutions to deliver good examination results. This is often accompanied by an emphasis on practice tests and drilling students on how to respond to exam questions, which may lead teachers to regard assessment for learning as a luxury, distinct from the 'real work' of exam preparation and formal assessment.

In fact, assessment for learning has been shown to make a positive contribution to exam preparation. Research has shown how highly successful teachers whose students received top examination results did not focus on drilling and cramming. Instead they used both whole-class and group discussion, and made cognitive demands which gave their students a deeper understanding of what they were learning, including, for example, not giving handouts but expecting students to make their own notes, having first shown them how to do this.[8]

Assessment for learning is as relevant to examination preparation as it is to everyday teaching and learning.

GORDON STOBART

This reflects the emphasis in assessment for learning on both teachers and students understanding what is being learned and why, which is also a central part of any exam preparation: What needs to be known, and what does a successful response look like? Similarly, providing helpful feedback is central to any preparatory work: What has been done well, and what are the next steps to improving performance? Assessment for learning can clearly be seen as something that is as relevant to examination preparation as it is to everyday classroom teaching and learning.

Teachers' beliefs about language learning

Teachers will need to contextualize feedback in terms of their own beliefs about language learning and what they would consider as evidence of improvement and progress. Language learning involves both functional aspects (using language to communicate in context) and formal aspects (learning how grammatical features can be manipulated to express meanings). Different approaches to language pedagogy balance these aspects in different ways.

Assessment for learning is compatible with both more grammar-based teaching approaches and more communicative approaches, but learning will be sequenced in different ways according to the preferred approach.

Teachers adopting a grammar-based approach will have different ideas about what the 'next steps' in a learning sequence will be to a teacher with a communicative perspective. In a grammar-based approach, feedback is likely to focus on the accurate use of grammatical rules and on concepts such as tense, aspect, and mood. In a communicative classroom, the priority is likely to be on helping learners to understand or convey meaning in given social situations. A grammar-oriented teacher will be more likely to see progress in terms of increasingly complex language with fewer errors, while a teacher following a communicative approach might prioritize growing confidence and willingness to experiment.

SUMMARY

Institutions and teachers want to help their students to be effective learners, both in relation to external assessments and in becoming reflective lifelong learners. The appeal of assessment for learning is that it encourages both by focusing on classroom practices that have been shown to promote learning. Drawing on theories of learning that focus on students 'making sense' of their learning and on active participation in the classroom, assessment for learning encourages teachers to develop and extend the practices which encourage deeper learning. There are challenges, particularly where there is uncertainty about the benefits of assessment for learning, or where there is resistance to change. However, there are also significant benefits. Most importantly, assessment for learning seeks and can achieve improved outcomes for teachers and students.

Assessment for learning should give learners confidence in what they can do and help them understand where they need to improve.

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02

PUTTING ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING INTO ACTION

In order for feedback to be effective, other elements of classroom teaching and learning need to support it. There are three key classroom practices which encourage students to engage with the feedback they receive:

- **diagnostics:** finding out where learners are in their learning
- **learning intentions:** making clear what is being learned and why
- **success criteria:** clarifying what performance will look like as a result of this learning.

Teachers may already be familiar with some of the classroom practices regularly used in assessment for learning. However, it is worth exploring them further in order to understand the rationale behind their use in assessment for learning, and how they can be developed in ways that make teaching and learning more effective.

While the focus is on classroom practice, we strongly believe that any modifications will be easier to implement where there is both understanding and encouragement from external stakeholders, including parents and school managers. Schools with a culture of assessment for learning offer a consistency of practice which both supports individual teachers and helps students know what is expected within the school.
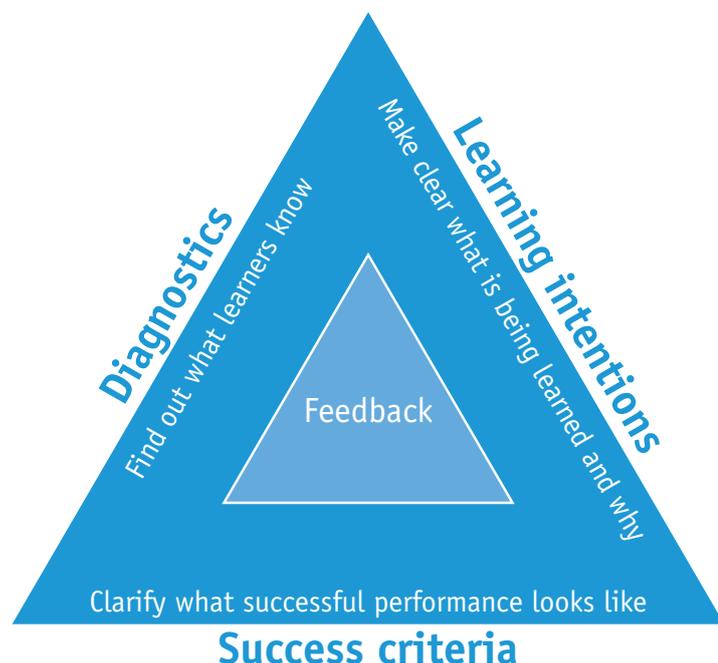

Figure 2. Putting assessment for learning into action

DIAGNOSTICS

In order to pitch feedback at the right level, teachers need to have a clear understanding of what their students already know. Child psychologist David Ausubel has observed that 'the most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach [the learner] accordingly.'[9] Teachers can establish what learners know in multiple ways. It may be through classwork, where students show what they have mastered and where they might be struggling. It may also be through tests, where the feedback is largely for the teacher and provides information about what learners have understood or misunderstood.

Classroom dialogue

A powerful form of eliciting what is known or not known is through **classroom dialogue**. Through listening to their comments or discussions, teachers can discover the level of understanding among their students, which allows them to pitch their responses and questions at the right level.

A parallel is the skilled use of information in medical diagnosis. In *Every Patient Tells a Story* (2009), Lisa Sanders maintains that 'as a diagnostic tool, what a patient says is often more important than high-tech tests and even the physical exam in providing crucial information'. Yet, she continues, 'the odds are overwhelming that the patient won't have much of an opportunity to tell that story'.[10] This is because doctors will interrupt the story within a few seconds and only a handful of patients will then complete their story. This is a hazard for teachers and students, too. Teachers may be in a hurry to move to the correct answer, which means that wrong answers may be glossed over, perhaps in a well-intentioned attempt to save embarrassment, and time is not taken to find out what was behind a student's error.

We explore four aspects of classroom dialogue that help teachers to find out what their learners already know:

• dealing with wrong answers
• asking questions to elicit deeper understanding
• wait time
• encouraging learners to ask questions.

Dealing with wrong answers

Understanding why mistakes are made is an important part of the teaching and learning process. But do teachers simply correct mistakes or do they delve deeper into what was behind the student's mistake? In his internationally influential book on dynamic assessment, Reuven Feuerstein makes the point that:

> Error cannot be viewed solely as failure: rather, its source must be sought. In doing so the teacher demonstrates their respect for the student as a thinking being who has arrived at a response through reasons that may not correspond to the task, but which, nonetheless, exist and must be explored.[11]

Finding out what lies behind errors may provide useful insights, while simply correcting them is likely to generate much less diagnostic information.

Asking questions to elicit deeper understanding

To find out what students understand or misunderstand, it is important for teachers to ask the kind of questions which can elicit evidence of their level of understanding. Research suggests that 60 percent of teachers' questions simply require recall ('What is a noun?'), with a further 20 percent being procedural ('Where's your book?'). Perhaps it is no surprise therefore that research has found that the average student answer was around three words long and took less than five seconds to give.[12]

Questions which probe a deeper level of understanding will help teachers to learn more about their students' understanding and processing of language. This involves moving from simple recall questions to **higher-order questions** which ask students, for example, to give and justify opinions, make comparisons, speculate, and hypothesize. This does not mean that every question has to be open-ended; there needs to be a balance, with the rule of thumb being that higher-order questions should increase to over 50 percent as learner proficiency develops. We recognize that for students with basic proficiency in English, this kind of deeper questioning may be difficult to achieve, and that forms of recall (of vocabulary, for example) are important at the novice stage. However, even at this stage, it is useful for teachers to investigate the possible sources of error.

Wait time

Mary Rowe has researched classroom questioning in high school science lessons, asking 'How long does a teacher wait after asking a question?' Her surprising finding was that teachers paused for *less than a second* before doing something—continuing talking, re-phrasing the question, or selecting someone to answer it.[13] This raises a further question: What kind of question takes less than a second of brain work to answer? The finding suggests a dominance of recall questions.

In assessment for learning the recognition that most classroom questions only require recall, for which students are expected to provide instant answers, has led to an emphasis on asking questions which probe a deeper level of understanding and allow students more time to develop their answers. A classroom practice introduced to encourage this is known as **wait time** (or 'thinking time'), which involves deliberately pausing in order to give students time to think. This, in turn, encourages the use of higher-order questions and moves from recall to students actively thinking about an answer. Rowe found that waiting for just three seconds for recall questions and ten seconds for higher-order questions significantly improved the quality of students' responses, while pausing *after* an answer allowed them time to revise their answers or for others to contribute.

Implementing wait time may require a process of change in classroom practices. Here is a teacher reflecting on how he introduced this change into his own questioning practices:

> Increasing waiting time after asking questions proved difficult to start with—due to my habitual desire to 'add' something almost immediately after asking the original question. The pause after asking the question was sometimes 'painful'. It felt unnatural to have such a seemingly 'dead' period, but I persevered … Now, after many months of changing my style of questioning, I have noticed that most students will give an answer and an explanation (where necessary) without additional prompting.[14]

A useful classroom practice to improve wait time involves getting students to work in pairs (sometimes called 'pair and share' or 'time out') before asking for a response. Students do not need to put up their hands to answer, and any student in the class can be asked since everyone has discussed the answer. Some teachers will randomize this selection by having students' names on lollipop sticks and pulling them out of a jar without looking at the names. In this way students recognize that being chosen is the luck of the draw rather than any kind of teacher bias.

Encouraging learners to ask questions

It is important that questions are asked by both teachers *and* students in the classroom to clarify understanding. Many of them, particularly adolescents, may need extra support to encourage them to ask questions. They may, for example, be afraid of looking foolish or unwilling to speak in front of their peers. In some cultural contexts, it may be less common or less acceptable for students to ask the teacher questions in front of the class.

How can students be encouraged to ask more questions? One approach is for students to learn how to work in small groups to frame questions about what they have just studied. Each group asks other groups their questions. The group which has framed the questions will be expected to have their own ideas of the answers, which could then lead to a class discussion of possible answers. Such a process also provides useful feedback to teachers about where students are in their learning.

The same process can be valuable for exam preparation, as a teacher who used this approach commented:

> … pupils' setting of their own questions has proved to be a stimulating and productive means of rounding off topics and revising their work. Answering other people's questions and discussing solutions with the whole class is a very effective way of concentrating on topics that need to be revised rather than spending time on what is already known. Students have had to think about what makes a good question for a test and in doing so need to have a clear understanding of the subject material.[15]

In a language class there will be students who are reluctant to speak in a second language. To encourage them to ask questions, it may be necessary to let the students write down their questions anonymously, perhaps by posting questions in a box or pinning them to a noticeboard. Some teachers use 'exit questions', where students must write a question about something they have not understood before they leave at the end of a lesson. This provides feedback to the teacher on what students have found difficult, which can then be addressed in subsequent lessons.

For classes with a lower level of English, these and other activities could be carried out in their own language, as the focus is on the learning process rather than on language development. However, while it may be necessary to use the learners' first language initially, these activities also offer a good opportunity for students to learn some useful expressions and discussion skills in the target language and to build their confidence.

> Some of the most useful feedback in the language classroom is the feedback given by students to the teacher. The best teachers seek and act on feedback from students on the quality of their teaching and how to improve it.
>
> ANTHONY GREEN

LEARNING INTENTIONS

Research suggests that being clear about what is being learned and communicating this to the students is one of the most powerful elements in classroom learning. This is often discussed in terms of the **learning intention**. This is not simply telling students what they will be doing in a lesson but being clear about *what* is being learned and *why*. The aim is to help students make sense of what they are doing and to see the value of it. Experience suggests that this should not be a routine procedure at the start of each lesson; other approaches are likely to be more stimulating and effective. For example, teachers may decide to engage students in a task and then get them to infer the learning that is intended with questions such as 'Why do you think we are doing this?'

Some learning intentions will be for teachers; others will be for students. The teacher needs to be clear about the purpose of a lesson—how it fits into the curriculum aims and the specific aims of the lesson—and then translate it into terms and concepts the students can understand and engage with. Table 1 shows an example of this in the context of introducing the use of paragraphs in writing.[16]

If effective learning depends on building on what is known already, an important teacher practice around learning intentions is to remind learners what they already know and how this links to what they are about to learn. This will help learners to understand more clearly what they are being asked to do and will provide a context for it. It is also important that the teacher gives clear instructions and explains any key terms.

Below are two representative comments of the kind we have come across in the course of our work with students and teachers which indicate what can be achieved when learning intentions are clearly expressed:

> Our teacher tells us why we're doing something. In this week's lesson she told us we were practising reading for gist so I know that I have to focus on the overall message and not worry about words I don't know. It really helps to know what to do and how to do it.

> If I tell my students exactly what they are going to learn and why, when I give them feedback they can connect it to the learning intention. For instance, in a listening skills class, I might want them to learn that it is important to keep listening and not panic if there are some words they don't understand. To give them confidence, I'll remind them they already know how to do this in their own language, so in English they're learning how to predict and which parts of an utterance to focus on. Then when we talk about the task afterwards, I can use guided questions that refer back to the learning intention, such as 'Did you try to listen to every word?' This means they can usually see for themselves where they might have gone wrong and what to do next time.

Learning intentions: Using paragraphs in writing

	Teacher	Students
Broad curriculum aim	By engaging with text-based activities, learners become increasingly skilled speakers and writers	We are learning to write a convincing argument.
Curriculum aim	To show a developing understanding of how to shape (written) texts for different audiences and purposes	We are learning to sequence an argument.
Lesson aim	To learn how paragraphs help to sequence an argument	We are learning what a paragraph is and when to start a new one.

Table 1. Layers of learning intentions (adapted from Absolum, 2006)

SUCCESS CRITERIA

As well as finding out where they are in their learning and making the learning intentions clear, teachers also need to ensure that students understand the success criteria, or what they will be able to do when the learning is achieved. If students do not understand the standard they are trying to reach, it can be difficult for them to make use of any feedback they are given and understand how it will help them progress. Two useful approaches to helping students understand what they are aiming towards in their learning are negotiating the success criteria and using **exemplars** and **modelling**.

Negotiating success criteria

Negotiating what success looks like with students is one way of helping them understand where they are going in their learning. A four-step model provides a useful approach to how this might be done.[17] For example, in the context of preparing a successful oral presentation, the teacher engages students in understanding what an effective presentation might look like. Firstly, the teacher and students brainstorm and write down a list of ideas about what makes a successful presentation. This involves students in classroom dialogue, allows them to express their own ideas, and to think about the elements of a good presentation before they prepare one. At this stage, the teacher, who is more knowledgeable about the range of success criteria associated with the task, contributes any ideas which might be missing. Secondly, the teacher and students choose a few major categories and put each idea into the appropriate category. This makes the task more manageable and focuses on the important skills, while at the same time allowing students to develop the skill of self-assessment. Thirdly, the class makes and displays a poster of the negotiated criteria, which provides a record of the discussion and will form the basis of any judgements about the presentations. Finally, students reflect on the criteria and decide if they need to add or revise anything. This example is provided in more detail in Appendix 1.

Exemplars and modelling

Providing exemplars of successful work can be a powerful tool to help students understand the criteria for success. One effective way to help students develop a sense of the required standard is to ask them to compare two pieces of work, one at the standard and one which falls short. Using success criteria, students compare the pieces of work and judge which meets the standard and why. The purpose of this is to get a feel for the quality of the work. This is a vital part of learning self-assessment skills. If students can begin to recognize quality in the work of others, they can start to look at their own work in the same way.

Teachers may be concerned that providing examples in this way may lead to students simply copying the good examples. Providing a series of examples which meet the success criteria in different ways can help to reduce the likelihood of this.

It can also help students if they understand that they already have a model in their own language of how communication normally develops or progresses, and the appropriate language for it. Encourage them to think about how everyday communication normally happens, for example when planning to go shopping or deciding on a film, and to use this knowledge and understanding to inform their communication in English.

SUMMARY

Diagnostics, learning intentions, and success criteria are vital preconditions for effective feedback. Feedback is based on what is known already and builds from there, so good diagnostics are essential. Feedback is more likely to be effective when teachers and students are clear about what is being learned—the learning intentions—and how they fit into the bigger picture. Learners also need a sense of what success looks like—the success criteria—to help them understand how feedback relates to their learning. Together, diagnostics, learning intentions, and success criteria help to encourage and motivate learners to engage with the feedback they receive.

When my students complete written assignments, I give them a checklist to complete with points we have discussed in class, like 'my essay has an introduction, main body and conclusion' and 'I developed my ideas by giving examples'. I ask them to complete the checklist before they submit the work. If they check a point on the list, I sometimes ask them to explain it for me. For example, if a student has checked 'I developed my ideas by giving examples', I ask them to show me where they have done this. Since introducing this approach, I have seen a real improvement in the quality of the essays they submit.*

*This is a representative comment informed by our experts' experiences with teachers in the course of their work.

03

GIVING EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

If I had to reduce all of the research on feedback into one simple overarching idea, at least for academic subjects in school, it would be this: feedback should cause thinking.[18]

When it is effective, feedback is one of the most powerful contributors to learning. Research has also shown that the impact of feedback depends on its quality; low-quality feedback can even have a negative effect on learning. It is important to consider what is known about effective classroom feedback in order to ensure that the feedback we give helps to move learning forward.

TWO LEVELS OF FEEDBACK

Feedback can be conveyed at two different levels: a broader, more general level, or a narrower, more specific classroom level. In educational contexts, narrower, more specific feedback is more common, but we think it is important to consider both levels of feedback.

Broader feedback

One useful definition of broader feedback describes it as:

> Any communication that gives some access to other people's opinions, feelings, thoughts or judgements about one's own performance.[19]

This definition focuses attention on how people respond to the way their performance is received, with the implication that their response could be positive or negative. It also suggests that we may unintentionally send signals, both positive and negative, to learners through actions or words that we do not consciously intend as feedback, but which are received as feedback. For example, if students are put in a lower-level group, this sends a signal about how the teacher, or the school, rates those students. Without constructive guidance on why the student has been allocated to that group and the opportunities it brings, it may have a negative impact on their expectations and motivation. Similarly, the teacher assigned to a class, the timetabling for it, and the classroom facilities provided may all send messages to students about how they are valued by the institution, and may impact on how they decide to engage with a course. Where this broader feedback is interpreted positively, students are more likely to actively engage with the course and perform better. Where the broader feedback is interpreted negatively, students may reduce their commitment and motivation in order to protect themselves from feelings of failure.

Specific feedback

There is a generally agreed model of specific feedback related to the classroom. A basic definition of this would be:

> Feedback provides information which allows the learner to close the gap between current and desired performance.[20]

This kind of feedback could be compared to a central heating system: we want the room to be at a certain temperature, but the sensors tell us it is colder than this. This information leads to the boiler boosting the temperature and 'closing the gap'. In the same way, specific feedback helps to move learners from their current performance to the desired performance. However, feedback needs to be more than simply one-way traffic from the teacher to the learner. In his research into the influences on achievement, John Hattie discovered that:

> Feedback was most powerful when it is from the *student to the teacher*…When teachers seek, or are at least open to, feedback from students as to what students know, what they understand, where they make errors, when they have misconceptions, when they are not engaged—then teaching and learning can be synchronized and powerful. Feedback to teachers makes learning visible.[21]

This also underlines the importance in assessment for learning of finding out where learners are as the foundation of effective feedback. Without this first step, feedback can be pitched at an inappropriate level for the learner. However, choosing feedback which 'closes the gap' is far from straightforward and requires the teacher to decide what specific information will effectively move learning forward.

High-quality feedback explains to students what to do next in the learning process, and in language they can make sense of.

THERESE N. HOPFENBECK

SEVEN KEY ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

Giving effective classroom feedback is a professional skill which requires experience, sensitivity, and reflection. While teachers never fully know how a student will respond, it is clear from the research that appropriate feedback can make a powerful contribution to their students' learning. For this reason, we consider seven key elements of effective feedback which teachers can apply to their practice, and provide some examples from the language classroom to illustrate them.

SPECIFIC & CLEAR

ACTIONABLE & ACHIEVABLE

WELL TIMED

KEY ELEMENTS OF 7 EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

STRATEGIES *NOT* SOLUTIONS

LINKED TO LEARNING & SUCCESS CRITERIA

LEARNING CUES

FOCUSES ON THE TASK NOT THE LEARNER

1 Effective feedback is specific and clear

One important skill in providing effective feedback is to select specific advice about what to do next. Feedback is often ineffective when it is not specific enough. Expert sports coaches are good at this. They do not give general advice ('Try harder', 'Improve your play') but select one change that will improve performance. Even top tennis players rely on their coaches to suggest small changes that will improve an aspect of their performance.

One of the main reasons feedback is often ineffective is because it provides little or no information which the learner can use to move forward. General feedback such as 'Try harder' or 'You scored 7 out of 10' gives the learner nothing specific to work on. Even a well-intentioned comment such as 'If you need help, ask me' will not provide enough information for the student to know what to do next. A 14-year-old student's response to their teacher's feedback of 'write more' nicely captures the dilemma for the student:

> If I knew more I would have written it—I don't know what more to write. Teachers should tell me what is missing.[22]

One approach to making feedback specific and clear is to focus on giving a few 'medals and missions'. The 'medal' signals what the learner has done well, while the 'mission' provides a specific task to accomplish. Here are some examples of feedback that illustrate this approach:

> You contributed some good ideas to the discussion, but make sure your partner has finished her sentence before you begin to speak.
> ....
> You've written an interesting review of the film. Can you use a broader range of vocabulary so that you're not repeating the same adjective? What could you use instead of 'exciting'?
> ....
> Your notes summarize the article well and you've identified all the key points. Can you also say which point is most important for the writer? How could you show this in your notes?

Notice how the feedback is clear, focused, and specific: the teacher could have offered more feedback, but it is likely to be more effective to select something which can make a significant improvement to future learning and explain it clearly so that the student knows exactly what to do and how it will help.

To act on feedback, students have to understand it. For example, are they familiar with the language that typically occurs in feedback, such as: 'Can you explain what you mean?', 'Expand on this point with an example', 'This is an interesting idea. Can you develop it further?' They must also be able to read the teacher's writing. In one study, around a quarter of written feedback to secondary school students in the UK was difficult to read because of the teachers' poor handwriting. Students are unlikely to ask teachers to decode the feedback—it is much easier (and less emotionally risky) to simply ignore it.

> # Actions speak louder than words. Comments only truly become feedback when the learner is able to act on them, for example by making another attempt and understanding better how to use the language.
>
> ANTHONY GREEN

2 Effective feedback is well timed

When is the best time to give feedback? The answer may vary according to the proficiency of the learner, the nature of the task, and the type of feedback. If teachers are working with novices on a relatively short, simple task, they may want to offer simple, informative feedback straight away or as soon as the task is finished, by demonstration or verbally, and do some immediate repetition to embed the change. This approach may be especially useful for vocabulary learning or pronunciation. At other times, especially as students become more fluent, teachers may not want to interrupt the flow of an activity such as a speaking task or presentation, but instead wait until the task is completed and then provide feedback. This gives the student a chance to self-correct or think about what has been said or written. Correcting part-way through may be unwelcome and unhelpful.

A Norwegian study has highlighted the importance of allowing students to respond to feedback.[23] The study found that when students are given time to respond and the teacher follows up on the feedback, it is treated as positive. If they are not given time to act on the feedback, they see it as negative and critical, which undermines their self-confidence. The feedback is the same on both occasions, but when the teacher allows time to respond, it becomes a formative learning experience. If the teacher just moves on to something else, the feedback is viewed as a judgement which cannot be questioned.

lovely drawing
big and bold
keep pencil really sharp so
edges are hard and crisp

3 Effective feedback is clearly linked to the learning intention and the learner understands the success criteria

In Section 2 we discussed the importance of learning intentions and success criteria in making clear what is being learned and the standard to be reached. Any feedback given to students is most effective when it is related to learning intentions and success criteria in order to provide consistency or 'constructive alignment' across curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. However, teachers often give feedback about other aspects of a student's work, especially presentational features such as spelling and handwriting, which will distract attention from the learning intentions or success criteria, and may confuse students.

Teachers may also be tempted to give too much feedback when it would be better to focus on one or two key messages. If several success criteria must be considered at the same time, for example content, communicative achievement, organization, and language in a writing task, it is important for teachers to be clear in advance what they are going to give feedback on and ensure that they tailor their feedback accordingly; or they could choose two or three criteria to focus on in a particular task, and then different criteria for the next task. Whichever approach is chosen, it is important that the criteria are discussed and explained, and that students understand what they mean.

4 Effective feedback focuses on the task rather than the learner

Research has found that the most effective feedback focuses on the task, addressing what has been done well and where it could be improved. For example, learners praised for effort when completing a task ('You must have worked hard') tended to persevere longer with a difficult task, enjoyed it more, and did not appear to suffer any loss in confidence when they failed to complete it. Research has also found that feedback which focuses on the learner, for example by praising their intelligence ('You must be very clever'), can have a negative impact. How, for example, does a learner who has been highly praised for one piece of work protect his or her reputation for success in the future? The answer is often by not taking risks and looking for easier options so that he or she never fails.[24]

Even when feedback is focused on the task, it may still have a strong emotional impact. It has been observed that:

> Although the judgement is made about students' work, students themselves can see work as a presentation, or a manifestation of their own amateur knowledge, ideas or behaviours … Even if they tell themselves that feedback is about the task or performance, they can interpret the constructive criticism as an affront to their self or person.[25]

When students receive feedback, they have options of what they can do with it. They can try to implement it in order to improve their performance. However, they are also free to modify it ('I'll just go for a pass, not a top grade') or reject it ('I can't be bothered with this'). These decisions are the result of calculations about the emotional costs and benefits of responding. This can be seen as an issue of self-control in which learners may want to know:

> what skills they need to improve, what kinds of tasks to choose or avoid, and how much effort and preparation to invest in those tasks they choose. At the same time, individuals may be deterred by the emotional costs of negative feedback. These costs involve negative, esteem-related feelings such as shame, dejection, and disappointment.'[26]

Thus, it is important that it is not only *what* feedback teachers give, but also *how* they give it. Any public 'shaming' is likely to encourage future avoidance behaviours.

I want my students to really understand what feedback means and how it can help them. For example, if I want to encourage my students to use a wider range of vocabulary and not keep using the same words again and again, we talk about how they can learn or remember different ways of saying the same thing. Sometimes it helps if I ask them to think about how many different ways they can say something in their own language. I want them to understand that the feedback is not an instruction but a starting point to help them develop and improve their language skills, building on what they already know or can do.*

*This is a representative comment informed by our experts' experiences with teachers in the course of their work.

Using an organized approach to giving feedback can help teachers to keep the focus on the task and ensure that their feedback is clear, fair, and consistent. For example, before each lesson or task, they can specify the type and scope of the feedback they intend to give so that learners know what to expect and can see that everyone will be assessed in the same way. It is also important to ensure that learners understand what they are expected to do with the feedback. For example, if the feedback in a writing class is a general point about sentence construction, teachers can help learners to understand how to respond to it with a comment such as 'So when you do your next piece of writing, remember to check that your sentences are not too long'. For more specific feedback, for example on skim reading, the comment might be: 'When you are reading for the main point, you need to skim through the text quickly. Next time we read a text like this, I want you to time yourself and read it in one minute. You can practise your timing at home.' This organized approach can also be used with written feedback and end-of-term reports. By using clear and consistent descriptions of the students' work and only commenting on the agreed criteria, teachers can keep the focus on the task rather than the learner.

5 Effective feedback gives prompts at the right levels on how to move learning forward

An important skill for the teacher is to pitch feedback at the level which will be most appropriate for the stage the learner has reached. The most important levels of feedback are:

- **Informational feedback:** Ask students to provide further or more accurate information (corrective feedback), e.g. 'Can you add some examples here?'
- **Process feedback:** Ask students to consider an answer or claim, e.g. 'What conclusion does this lead you to?'
- **Self-regulatory feedback:** Encourage students to reflect on their work, e.g. 'Have you used what you know about writing a letter?'

Table 2 shows a useful practical application of this, based on the work of Michael Absolum.[27] It involves five levels of feedback prompts, from pre-empting mistakes (Level 0) to giving feedback to learners who have met the success criteria (Level 4).

6 Effective feedback offers strategies rather than solutions

If students are to become more self-regulating—that is, if they are to learn how to monitor and evaluate their own learning, which is one of the key aims of assessment for learning—they will need feedback which encourages them to reflect on their performance. At the early novice stage, feedback may need to be relatively straightforward and may simply involve a demonstration of the correct way to do something, although even at this stage learners may want to reflect on why something is correct. However, as learning progresses, simply giving learners the correct answer will not help if they do not understand why it is correct. Feedback at this point needs to be at the process and self-regulation levels mentioned previously, using questions such as 'What made you choose this answer?' or 'How could you organize this differently?'

An example from language learning will help to illustrate the benefits of offering strategies rather than solutions. Teachers sometimes spend hours correcting learners' written work, but this can be counterproductive since learners may be overwhelmed or demotivated by the number of errors identified. One study found that even when learners are given time to redraft their work, they may respond mechanically, simply incorporating teachers' suggestions into their writing without understanding why their first attempt was incorrect.[29] More learning is encouraged when learners are asked to take responsibility for finding and correcting their own errors. If the teacher feeds back that 'this paragraph has three subject–verb agreement errors', this will encourage the learner to think more deeply about their work than if the teacher simply adds -*s* wherever it is needed. Tried and tested marking techniques, such as underlining rather than correcting errors and collecting common errors from learners' work for discussion in class, are other ways to encourage the kind of reflection that leads to learning.

Feedback prompts

Level 0	Pre-emptive	Teach rather than wait to give feedback on predictable failure.
Level 1	Example prompt (corrective)	Clarify what the student is attempting to learn by providing concrete examples, such as 'Here are two ways you could organize your report …'.
Level 2	Scaffolding prompt (process)	Give students who are still struggling with concepts or skills more structure: 'What does the speaker want the listener to do? Does she succeed? What makes you think that?'
Level 3	Reminder prompt (process – self-regulation)	When learning is 'almost there' and learners need a reminder to use it, e.g. 'Remember that the conclusion should link back to the topic in the opening paragraph.'
Level 4	Provocative prompt[28] (self-regulation)	When learners have met the success criteria, encourage them to reflect further on their work, e.g. 'What else could you have said to make your argument more persuasive?' or 'How would you argue against this position, rather than for it?'

Table 2. Feedback prompts (adapted from Stobart, 2014; based on Absolum, 2006)

7 Effective feedback challenges, requires action, and is achievable

All feedback, at whatever level, should challenge the learner. To do this it has to avoid generalities and provide specific information about what is needed to close the gap between current and desired performance. This may be best achieved using feedback at the process and self-regulation levels mentioned on page 23, where students reflect on how they are using what they know.

The test of effective feedback is what the learner does as a result: what action is taken? This makes all the more important the need to provide specific information about how performance might be improved. If the teacher spends more time writing feedback comments than the student spends responding to them, the teacher's effort has been wasted. Students will need time and opportunities to act on the feedback. Simply giving feedback and immediately moving on to the next topic undermines its effectiveness if nothing is done about it.

Feedback should stretch learners and move them towards where they need to get to while still giving them a sense of achievement. Figure 3 illustrates this point.[30] A key concept is that of **deliberate practice**[31] in which the teacher identifies the next steps for the learner, who applies this feedback by practising it, rather than just receiving it. This links to the point made earlier about the importance of wait time, and allowing students time to respond to the feedback (see page 14). Skilled feedback seeks to move the learner into the learning zone by offering a manageable challenge to the learner. Sports coaches talk of the 'sweet spot' where the balance of success and failure is about 50/50. Specific feedback and practice can change this to 60/40, and further feedback and practice can make success the norm. At this point the learner is ready for a new challenge. If feedback leaves learners in the comfort zone, there is likely to be little improvement. If the feedback feels unachievable, this may push learners into the panic zone, where behaviour may regress into avoidance and denial.
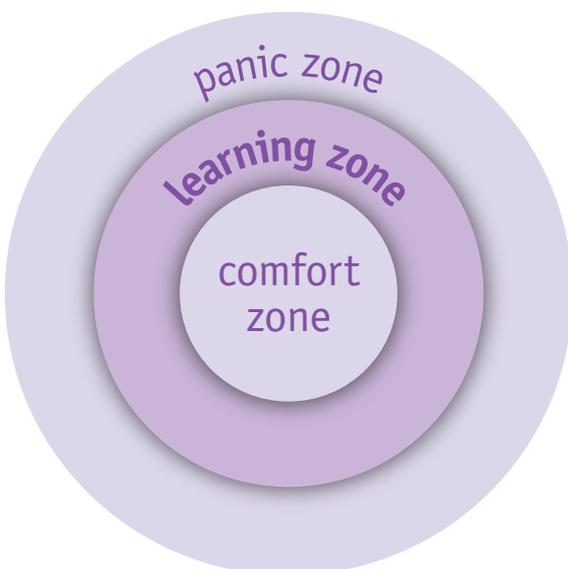

Figure 3. Practice in the learning zone (Stobart, 2014)

SUMMARY

The impact that feedback has on teaching and learning is influenced by its quality and effectiveness. Research suggests that two kinds of feedback are most useful.

Broader, more general feedback which conveys to learners information about ability and performance can have a positive impact on engagement and motivation. Narrower feedback which is focused on learning and is appropriate to the learners' level will help them move from their current performance to the desired performance.

Research has identified a number of different elements of effective feedback: it needs to be clear, specific, and well-timed; it should be linked to the learning intention and pitched at the right level; and the learner needs to understand the criteria for success. It is also important that the feedback focuses on the task and not the learner, so that the learner is not deterred or discouraged from accepting and acting on the feedback. Effective feedback offers strategies rather than solutions, encouraging learners to reflect on and evaluate their own performance. It also challenges learners, requires them to take specific action, and is achievable.

Feedback is a two-way process. It draws on those professional skills which require experience, sensitivity, and reflection on the part of the teacher giving feedback. Equally, feedback from learners to the teacher can play an important role in moving learning forward.

Assessment and feedback are not normally covered in teacher training certificates and diplomas, so teachers often don't get much help with this. I suggest ways they can work together and help each other to learn more about and implement assessment for learning. They can, for example, share any assessment tasks and ask others what they think of them—or even practise them on each other. Or, if they teach the same level or year group, they can take turns to create assessments for the classes so they share the burden. It's also a good idea if they can agree how they expect the students to deal with feedback so all the students get a consistent message. Collaboration is very important for their own development as teachers, as well as for the quality of the assessments they will use.*

*This is a representative comment informed by our experts' experiences with teacher educators in the course of their work.

CONCLUSIONS

Assessment for learning is internationally recognized for its role in focusing on classroom assessment in order to improve learning and teaching. It seeks to gather the kinds of evidence which help teachers and learners move learning forward. It draws on modern learning theory with its emphasis on learners 'making meaning' and actively engaging in the learning process. Assessment for learning operationalizes this thinking in classroom practices such as finding out where learners are in their learning (diagnostics), providing clarity about what is to be learned (learning intentions), clarifying what performance will look like as a result of this learning (success criteria), and providing feedback which moves learning forward.

Feedback does not operate in a vacuum. It is most effective when it is related to what learners already know and when learners understand the standard they are expected to reach. A key element in successful diagnostics is the use of dialogue in the classroom to establish what students know and what is not known or has been misunderstood. Being clear about what is being learned and what success looks like helps learners recognize the value of feedback in helping them move towards their learning goals.

Research shows that feedback is one of our most powerful learning tools. Studies of feedback have highlighted the importance of focusing on the learning intention and the task (rather than the learner), and on giving feedback that is specific, clear, timely, and achievable. These practices are familiar to most teachers. What assessment for learning does is bring them into sharper relief and encourage teachers to make them central to their everyday classroom practice. Teachers may view this as part of their own 'deliberate practice' in developing their teaching expertise. This will be more easily achieved with the support of all stakeholders, including parents and school managers, collaborating to recognize and value the benefits of assessment for learning.

> An ever-changing world needs learners who can think for themselves and cope with the unfamiliar. By helping students engage with learning, evaluate their progress, and respond to feedback, assessment for learning encourages this kind of active, flexible learning.
>
> **GORDON STOBART**

The research evidence is convincing: assessment for learning, when thoughtfully embedded by teachers in their everyday classroom practice, offers an approach to teaching and learning which leads to more interactive classrooms, more engaged students, and attitudes to learning which see it as a lifelong process.

KEY MESSAGES

- Successful assessment for learning is underpinned by skilful diagnostics, clear learning intentions, and success criteria, which, in turn, inform effective feedback.
- Assessment for learning can be used flexibly to benefit learners of all ages and levels, and in a variety of contexts.
- Effective feedback 'closes the gap' between current and desired performance.
- Assessment for learning provides some of the most powerful methods for helping students to become successful and motivated learners.
- Effective assessment for learning helps to nurture positive attitudes to independent, lifelong learning.

# APPENDIX 1:
NEGOTIATING SUCCESS CRITERIA

STEP 1 Brainstorm

Through class discussion, brainstorm and write down a list of ideas about what makes a successful presentation (the teacher's contributions are in red).

Look up and look at your audience

We have to be able to hear you

Speak clearly

Stand up straight

Keep it short

Look interested

Use small cards for notes

Make it interesting by using pictures or diagrams

Say what your topic is at the beginning

Use specific examples to get your point across

Make sure you have a conclusion

STEP 2: Sort and categorize

Through class discussion, choose a few major categories. Put each into the appropriate category.

SPEECH AND MANNER

INTERESTING TO THE AUDIENCE

EASY TO FOLLOW
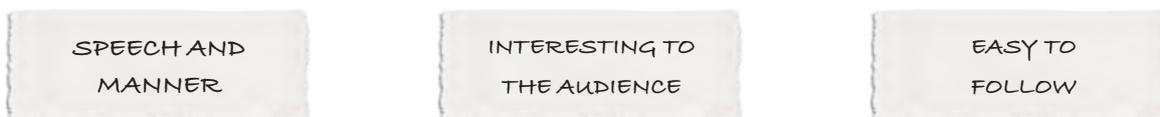
STEP 3: Make and display a chart

Using the results of the discussion, make and display a chart. These negotiated criteria will form the basis of any judgements about the oral presentations.

SPEECH AND MANNER

Look up and look at your audience

We have to be able to hear you

Speak clearly

Stand up straight

INTERESTING TO THE AUDIENCE

Look interested

Make it interesting by using pictures or diagrams

EASY TO FOLLOW

Keep it short

Use small cards for notes

Say what your topic is at the beginning

Use specific examples to get your point across

Make sure you have a conclusion

STEP 4: Add, revise, refine

Ask students to reflect on the criteria: Do they work? Are more criteria needed? Do we need to edit or change anything?

APPENDIX 2:
COMMON DIFFICULTIES AND SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

Here are some common difficulties that teachers may have with assessment for learning and feedback. The suggested solutions can be used or adapted for different teaching contexts.

LARGE CLASSES

'I have 30 children in my class. I don't have time or I don't know all the children well enough to give each one personalized feedback.'

This is a very common situation. Here are some possible solutions:

Give your students feedback that applies to the whole class. For example, after a speaking activity, you could ask the whole class to try to give longer answers next time. Specifically, they could do this by adding reasons or examples to their answers. Alternatively, to encourage reflection and self-regulation, first ask students themselves to suggest ways in which they could extend their answers.

Choose a skill area or one or two language points to focus on. Choose six students each week and give them feedback during the lesson on the target areas. Set the rest of the class a writing task that they can do on their own while you give individual feedback to each student in the small group. The following week, choose a different group of students to receive feedback. After five weeks, every student will have received feedback on the target areas. Explain to the class what you are doing and make it clear that each student will get their turn in the feedback group. Alternatively, put students into small groups and give the whole group feedback on the target areas. This does not need to take a long time—even a few minutes of targeted feedback will be valuable. This also gives students the opportunity to ask you questions, which they may be more prepared to do in a small group than in front of the whole class.

Delegate more responsibility to students by providing checklists of common errors so that they can check their own work or work by other students. You could also have students obtain feedback from each other before submitting their work to you. Ask students to highlight points they found difficult or are unsure about and would like feedback on.

YOUNG LEARNERS

'I teach in a primary school. I'm really keen to use assessment for learning with my students, but young learners don't seem to understand what to do.'

You can help young learners to understand assessment for learning by giving them small, simple, and specific strategies. For example, in a listening task where students have to write one-word answers, some will spend too long writing answers to the questions. If you ask, 'Why didn't you write the answer to question 3?' they can usually recognize that they were still writing the answer to question 2. If you ask them what they can change, even young learners will probably answer 'Write faster!' You can then practise ways of doing this. This kind of approach will help them to build confidence in their own assessment of a problem and their own solutions, and to understand better what is involved in assessment for learning.

PARENTS

'The parents of the children I teach don't understand the value of the qualitative feedback I give their children. They just want to see a mark or grade.'

It is easier to persuade parents of the benefits of feedback when the school as a whole values feedback and the approach is explained to parents. Encouraging them to support their child at home with their learning will also help parents to understand and become more involved in the process. Even where this is not the case, parents may be convinced when they see evidence that their children are better motivated and getting better results.

Providing parents with a record of their children's progress can also help them to understand the value of assessment for learning. The record can include learning objectives and feedback on the learner's successes and achievements in class, indicating in which areas and how they have improved. This will encourage parents to think about progress and development, not just test results. It also provides them with an opportunity to support their children at home. To avoid creating extra work for teachers, schools can provide their own standard record sheets or other logs that are quick and easy to use, and agree on the extent of feedback to be provided.

TIME PRESSURE

'Doing assessment for learning takes time. I still have to complete the syllabus and prepare students for the end-of-term test. It puts a lot of pressure on me and the students.'

Assessment for learning may seem like a challenge, but it does not need to create extra pressure for you and your students, and evidence shows that it has a positive impact on learning. This includes performance on tests: students will perform better on tests if they learn more effectively and efficiently, and research suggests that appropriate, task-focused feedback can be one of the most powerful tools for achieving this. Using diagnostics in the classroom to find out where learners are in their learning will also help you to work more efficiently by focusing attention on what your learners do not know. (See Section 2, pages 13–14, for more on diagnostics.)

One way to fit assessment for learning into your schedule is to re-use coursebook material as the basis for assessment or tests. For example, you could take a reading text from the coursebook and set a different task, or tasks, from those in the book. In this way you can assess whether they have understood the content and purpose of the text, remembered new vocabulary or grammatical structures, etc., and take remedial action, if necessary. For example, if students have answered comprehension questions on a reading text in the book, you could ask them to write a short summary of it, or work in pairs to prepare an oral summary; or they could write their own sentences using the new vocabulary to show they have understood it.

It is also worth remembering that assessment for learning does not require wholescale change to your teaching practice. It is essentially an approach which calls on your existing classroom, observation, and subject skills and builds on everyday practice to focus more clearly on the learning.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

'It's difficult to persuade my students to take responsibility for their learning. They haven't really taken to self-assessment.'

Students may find self-assessment difficult if the tasks they are asked to do are too vague or unclear. They may not understand what to do or how to go about it. To help students engage with self-assessment, ensure that the task is closely linked to the learning intentions. For example, if the learning intention in a writing class is to 'write extended sentences', ask students to consider some or all of these specific questions about their own writing:

• Are your sentences long or short?
• Can you find one sentence which could be longer?
• Can you add any adjectives or adverbs to the sentence to make it longer?
• Can you add another clause to a sentence to make it longer?

Take every opportunity to encourage students to reflect on their own work, even if only briefly. For example, when they have completed a task, either in class or for homework, ask them to reflect on it as soon as they have finished or as they hand it in, with questions such as 'How did you find that?' 'What was the most challenging/interesting part for you?'

With guidance, focused prompts, and practice, students will begin to understand what to do.

TEENAGERS

'I'm not sure about the best way to approach peer assessment with my teenage students.'

Getting students accustomed to peer assessment takes time and is best approached in small steps. Teenage students, in particular, may feel concerned about expressing or receiving criticism in their peer groups. It is generally better to start by getting students to comment on examples of work by people they do not know, such as models from the coursebook or anonymous examples of students' work from previous years.

You could also ask students to work in small groups to comment on each other's work, using success criteria you have agreed on; or you could ask each student to focus on one aspect of the success criteria, e.g. content, accuracy, organization, or vocabulary, before the group discussions take place. Examples of stronger and weaker performances by students of a similar age and background can also be used to help learners build understanding of success criteria. Once they understand how to do this, you could ask students to produce their own criteria for success. Learners generally understand their own criteria better than ones handed down by a teacher.

These approaches will help students to build the confidence to assess their own and each other's work and will demonstrate the process in a way that should engage and motivate them.

MIXED ABILITY

'The students in my class are mixed ability. Some of them are quick to learn and don't need much help; others need a lot of support and make slow progress. How do I provide the right kind of feedback for all of them?'

In this situation, you can vary the kind of feedback you give to students and make it appropriate to their level. For example, give slower learners specific feedback on how to improve in each task, such as 'You are getting word order mixed up. Check your writing and compare what you write to the example to make sure you have the same word order.' Give faster learners feedback which will challenge them, such as 'You need to use a wider range of vocabulary. Try to use different words or expressions when you are talking about this topic next time.' Giving different kinds of feedback in this way means you can provide the right level of feedback for all your students. For more on providing different levels of feedback, see Table 2 on page 23.

Peer feedback can be useful in mixed-ability classes. Learners can make improvements in their own work by explaining their thinking to each other. Once interactive feedback of this kind becomes established in a classroom, learners will feel more comfortable talking about aspects of the work that they find difficult. Their discussions can also provide valuable feedback to the teacher on how well they have understood something.

Research studies have demonstrated that students can struggle to interpret and act upon teachers' feedback and peer-feedback activities can be useful. For example, students can work in groups to share their understanding of feedback they receive. You can also motivate students to share solutions for how to act upon feedback when revising their work. This will offer students of different abilities support in understanding what to do next, and is also a good solution for large classes. You can end such sessions by allowing one student in each group to summarize the main points for future actions and share them with the whole class. This can be done both in traditional ways on flipcharts and electronically on shared platforms.

Students need to learn *how* to provide good peer support for each other, so you may need to spend some time teaching them how to ask questions and how to behave in a peer-feedback activity of this kind. You will need to repeat the sessions over a period of time so that students get used to what is expected of them. At the beginning, some teachers find it helpful to guide students with questions on small cards which they can read to each other or by providing a list of questions on a whiteboard or PowerPoint slide.

TESTS

'In my school, we think we can get all the information we need from the regular tests that we give. This is enough for us, the students, and their parents to know about the progress of the students.'

Tests can give a picture of what learners know, but they reveal very little about why they get certain questions wrong, make errors in performance, or how they might improve. Used formatively, test scores can help teachers and learners establish what was understood and where there were misunderstandings. This involves reviewing *why* students gave particular answers. Students are likely to learn more from tests if they are given the chance to reflect on their answers and identify strengths and weaknesses. Allow them to look back at their test answers. Which ones do they think were correct or successful? Which ones are they less confident about? Allow them to discuss the answers with other students. Can they explain why they gave the answers they did? Review the common problems and errors made by most of the class. Finally, give the class another test based on these common problems. Can they now give correct or better answers to questions like the ones they got wrong on the first test?

SPECIFIC LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

'I have students in my classes with specific learning difficulties, including some students with dyslexia. How should I approach assessment for learning with these students?'

Assessment for learning provides valuable opportunities for the teacher to explore and learn what makes classroom tasks easy or difficult for all learners, and the kinds of support and accommodations that can best help them to succeed.

Students with specific learning difficulties do not need a different system of assessment for learning, but they may need different types of assessment tasks/approaches that are suited to their needs, and reflect the teacher's usual practice with these students. Assessment for learning means reflecting normal classroom practice in assessment for learning tasks, and this is no less true for students with learning difficulties. The same task could be used but modified and adjusted, for example by giving more wait time when asking the student a question or using visual rather than verbal stimuli. Self-reflection is beneficial for all students, so it is important to explore any opportunity to encourage it.

GLOSSARY

assessment for learning
Assessment that focuses on informally monitoring learners' progress as a way to support their learning. It is used to inform and modify approaches to teaching and learning. It allows teachers and learners to identify strengths and weaknesses and to focus on areas for improvement. Also called *formative assessment*.

assessment of learning
Assessment that is usually carried out at the end of a unit, course, or school year to provide information about what learners have achieved. It is often used to give a grade or score and may not be related to the learner's development. Also called *summative assessment*.

behaviourist theory
A theory that all learning involves habit formation. According to this view, habits are formed when learners respond to specific, external stimuli and subsequently have their responses reinforced, positively or negatively, so that they remember them. Behaviourist learning theory emphasizes environmental factors rather than internal, mental factors.

classroom dialogue
Interaction between teachers and students in the classroom which promotes learning. It might involve discussion, questioning, and collaborative student activities.

constructivist theory
A theory of learning which rejects the view of learners as receptacles of the teacher's knowledge in favour of one where learners are actively involved in constructing their own knowledge through experience and problem-solving.

deliberate practice
Repeated, purposeful practice; the teacher identifies what the learner needs to do to improve learning; the learner applies this information to their work in order to help improve performance.

diagnostics
Finding out and understanding what learners already know and don't know. Teachers can establish this in multiple ways: through classwork, tests, or *classroom dialogue*. Skilled diagnostics, along with the *learning intention* and *success criteria* are essential preconditions for effective *feedback*.

exemplar
A sample of work which illustrates levels of achievement. It is used to help learners develop an understanding of the required standard and quality of work expected of them.

feedback
Information from teachers to learners, or from learners to teachers, which can help both understand how to close the gap between the learners' current and desired performance.

formative assessment
See *assessment for learning*.

higher-order questions
Questions which require answers that go beyond simple recall of facts and information; higher-order questions require more complex language and thinking and may ask learners to give and justify opinions, make comparisons, interpret, evaluate, speculate, or hypothesize.

learning intention
The purpose of a lesson or series of lessons. Communicating the learning intention clearly to learners allows them to understand what is being learned and why.

modelling
Demonstration of a required standard in order to help learners understand how to achieve it.

peer assessment
The assessment by learners of each other's work. It can help learners to reflect on and evaluate their own learning and skills development.

self-assessment
The assessment by learners of their own work. It encourages learners to monitor and reflect on their own efforts and take more responsibility for their own learning and progress.

self-regulation
Taking control of and evaluating one's own learning. Self-regulated learners monitor, evaluate, and direct their own learning and develop strategies which help them to improve and progress.

sociocultural theory
An explanation of learning which views it as a process that is socially mediated, i.e. dependent on dialogue in face-to-face interaction. According to this view, during communication learners jointly construct knowledge, which is internalized by the individual.

success criteria
A description of the steps or requirements that learners need to understand in order to achieve the *learning intention*. They help learners to know if they have successfully completed a task or activity.

summative assessment
See *assessment of learning*.

wait time
The amount of time a teacher waits for students to respond after asking a question before intervening in some way; increasing wait time can help to improve the quality of students' responses.

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

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Dylan Wiliam's website: http://www.dylanwiliam.org

Geoff Petty's website: http://geoffpetty.com/for-teachers/feedback-and-questions/

IATEFL Testing, Evaluation and Assessment Special Interest Group: https://tea.iatefl.org/
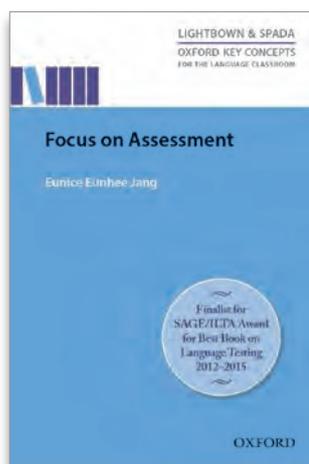
ISBN: 978 0 19 4000833   ISBN: 978 0 19 4218399   ISBN: 978 0 19 8413608   ISBN: 978 0 19 8417927
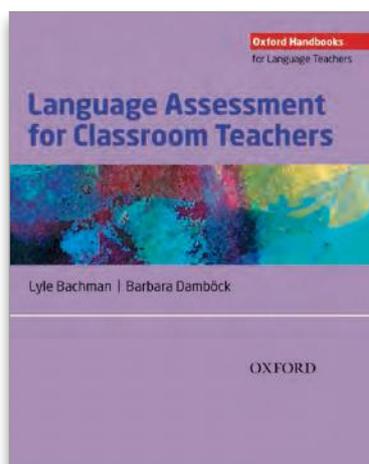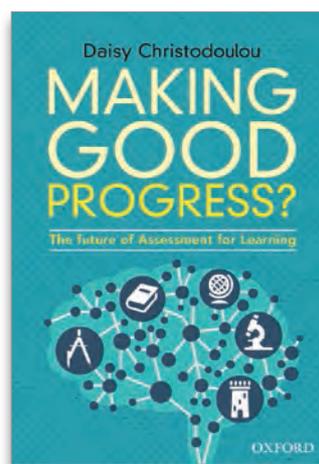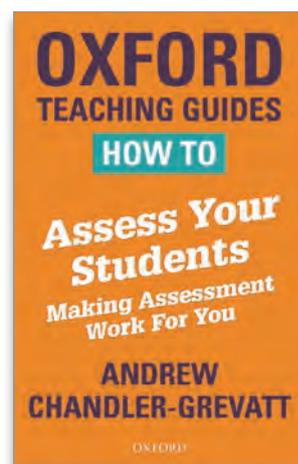
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ENDNOTES

01 ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING: WHAT AND WHY?

1 Nuffield Foundation

2 Assessment Reform Group (2002)

3 Klenowski (2009), p. 264

4 Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (2011)

5 Brookhart (2008), pp. 43–62

6 Hattie (2012), p. 266

7 Marshall & Drummond (2007)

8 Ayres, Sawyer, & Dinham (2004)

02 PUTTING ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING INTO ACTION

9 Ausubel (1968), p. vi

10 Sanders (2009), pp. 108, 117

11 Feuerstein et al. (2006), p. 353

12 Hattie (2009), p. 182

13 Rowe (1986), p. 37

14 Black et al. (2003), p. 72

15 Black et al. (2003), pp. 109–110

16 Adapted from Absolum (2006), p. 85

17 Adapted from Gregory et al. (2011), pp. 14–20

03 GIVING EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

18 Wiliam (2011), p. 127

19 Eraut (2007), p. 6

20 See Sadler (1989); Kluger, & DeNisi (1996); Hattie & Timperley (2007); Shute (2008); Wiliam (2013)

21 Hattie (2009), p. 173

22 Gamlem & Smith (2013), p. 159

23 Gamlem & Smith (2013), p. 160

24 Dweck (2000)

25 Molloy et al. (2013), p. 52

26 Trope et al. (2001), p. 257

27 Adapted from Stobart (2014), p. 132; based on Absolum (2006), pp. 122–25

28 This is a very useful concept from Hargreaves (2017)

29 Hyland (1998)

30 Stobart (2014), p. 51

31 Ericsson (1996; 2016)

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