

# Formative assessment in English

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As is evident from chapter 17 in the book, assessment is a central aspect of the learning process. In this chapter, Tony Burner takes a closer look at formative assessment and how it can be incorporated in daily classroom routines. After discussing the concept of formative assessment and self-assessment, he explains the importance of formative feedback. Then he explores three forms of formative assessment, namely process writing, peer assessment and portfolio assessment.

## What is formative assessment?

As mentioned in chapter 17 in the book, formative assessment should be an integral part of teaching and learning in the Norwegian school system. In fact, for the first time assessment has become part of the curriculum (LK20). Up until Year 10, formative assessment is explained in the curriculum, providing teachers with guidelines on what matters when assessing students' products. In Year 10, there is a section on summative assessment.

There are several definitions of formative assessment, but a short one could be all assessments with the aim of improving students' learning processes and/or the teacher's teaching procedures. The aim of forma-

tive assessment is thus more and better learning for both the student and the teacher. Hence, assessment becomes a tool to promote learning. The expressions *assessment for learning* and *assessment as learning* reflect the aim of formative assessment, as is also evident in the national assessment regulations (“Vurderingsforskriften”) (Ministry of Education and Research, 2009), which have a judicial status in Norway.

However, it is important to point out that an assessment situation is not formative merely because it occurs *during* a teaching session. The Norwegian term *underveisvurdering* is often used for formative assessment, as in the curriculum and in the national assessment regulations (Ministry of Education and Research, 2009, §3-11). The term itself may be misleading in Norwegian, because it is the *purpose* that defines whether an assessment is formative or not, rather than *when* it occurs. The question is whether the assessment has the purpose to promote learning or not. A summative assessment, occurring at the end of a teaching session, may include formative purposes. A mock exam (“tentamen”) may be used formatively if the students are given the chance to reflect on the feedback provided by the teacher, revise what they have written and learn something from their mistakes. In fact, a competence aim in LK20 specifically concerns the ability to edit one’s texts (written and oral texts) according to feedback and knowledge about the English language.

A formative assessment has always an element of summative assessment, in that students’ products are assessed according to certain criteria or standards in order to be able to provide formative feedback that can help them improve their products (see Bennett, 2011). Thus, formative assessment presupposes an interaction among the students and between the students and the teacher (see Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 16). On the one hand, the students are challenged to take more responsibility for their own learning and learning processes; on the other hand, the teacher is challenged to provide the best learning conditions for the students, based on feedback from them, so they *can* be more active and take more responsibility for their learning.

In the following, self-assessment and its formative potentials for English language teaching (ELT) will be discussed. Examples will be given of how English teachers can provide their students with opportunities to

assess their own products and learning processes. Furthermore, the topic of assessing student products will be discussed, and what it means to provide formative feedback will be explained. Process writing will be used as an example. It is not always the teacher that should provide feedback on student products. Thus, peer assessment will also be mentioned in this chapter. Finally, the use of portfolio assessment in ELT will be explained. A portfolio may contain self-assessment and peer assessment, and provides opportunities for students to be involved in their own learning processes. It is an assessment tool that can be used to differentiate teaching and learning in ELT classes.

## Self-assessment

It is a myth that children or young adults are immature when it comes to self-assessment. Large-scale review studies show that students at all ages are capable of conducting self-assessment (see Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie, 2009). In fact, they have a fairly precise understanding of their school achievements. When a teacher claims that students are too young or immature to self-assess, then those students are being underestimated and deprived of an important opportunity for learning. According to the national assessment regulations, students have the right to actively assess their own competence and development in all subjects (Ministry of Education and Research, 2009, § 3-12).

Why is self-assessment important? Self-assessment can make you aware of your strengths and weaknesses by reflecting on how you learn. You can become more responsible for your learning process when you have the chance to reflect on it. The quality of reflections will evidently vary from student to student, thus the teacher needs to continuously stimulate and challenge students' reflections.

Stephen Krashen's *monitor hypothesis* claims that second language learners use a language monitor to constantly edit their utterances (see Krashen, 1982). This is something many of us have experienced when we have learned new languages as adults. We learn explicit grammar rules, but when we want to speak in a natural setting, we sometimes experience that the grammar rules make us think longer and are sometimes in the

way of spontaneous speech. Krashen's hypothesis illustrates the distinction between language acquisition and language learning, where the monitor (language learning) may sometimes interfere with spontaneous language acquisition. This could be compared to the monitoring that takes place when students reflect on their learning. During self-assessment, students monitor their learning output, learning strategies and learning processes. However, research evidence points out that self-assessment is useful. In order for the language monitor not to interfere with spontaneous language acquisition, self-assessment should be conducted as a post-classroom activity. If students are asked to conduct self-assessment, which means they reflect on their learning while learning English through an activity, the language monitor may interfere negatively. Teachers may experience that students are afraid of making mistakes or are too stressed to trial-and-error with the English language. The teacher has to balance between students acquiring English spontaneously and students reflecting on their language learning.

As mentioned in chapter 2 in the book, the *European language portfolio* (ELP) can be used as a useful tool to document students' language learning and reflections (Little, 1999). The ELP consists of three components: a language passport, a language biography, and a dossier. The students make their own profile in the language passport. Their proficiency in different languages is an important part of the language passport, including a self-assessment grid describing the students' proficiency in listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production and writing activities. The language biography is used to plan, reflect on and assess one's own language learning and process, something that will aid in developing greater language awareness. The biography includes information about what the students can do with different languages both in and outside of school. Finally, the dossier is where the students collect evidence of their learning and development over time. However, each component of the ELP has to be adapted to the context where it is used. Teachers can use any part of the ELP. If they would like the students to self-assess their listening skills, it is possible to print the self-assessment sheet and copy it for the students. There are rubrics for each of the levels in the *Common European framework of reference for languages* (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001): A1 and A2 (basic user), B1

and B2 (independent user), and C1 and C2 (proficient user). The CEFR has had great impact on the development of the current curricula in foreign languages and English in Norway.

It is not only by using self-assessment grids that students can and should assess their own learning processes and products. When teachers provide feedback on a text, it can be a good idea to mark the most severe mistakes before the text is returned to the student, so that he or she is asked to reflect on and correct the mistakes (see Table 21.1). If grades are involved, it can be an advantage to let the student guess the grade before actually revealing it. It is often the case that students are stricter with themselves than the teacher. Grading one's own work may enhance metacognitive skills, in addition to the fact that fewer students will be dissatisfied with their grades and thus there will be fewer complaints to handle for the teacher.

**Table 21.1** *Can do* descriptors for listening at B1 level.

Language:	Date for goal setting	Date for "I know this a little bit"	Date for "I know this pretty well"	Date for "I know this very well"	Date for documentation in the portfolio
Can follow a lecture or talk within his/her own field, provided the subject matter is familiar and the presentation straightforward and clearly structured.					
Can follow in outline straightforward short talks on familiar topics provided these are delivered in clearly articulated standard speech.					
Can understand simple technical information, such as operating instructions for everyday equipment. Can follow detailed directions.					
Can understand the information content of the majority of recorded or broadcast audio material on topics of personal interest delivered in clear standard speech.					
Can understand the main points of radio news bulletins and simpler recorded material about familiar subjects delivered relatively slowly and clearly					

In Figure 21.1 below, the teacher could have marked many more mistakes in the student text provided, but limits herself to pointing out repetitive mistakes (for example *their* instead of *the* and wrong use of verb tense) and expressions that can break down communication (for example the first sentence). When the student struggles with elementary knowledge of grammar, it may be counterproductive to pick on punctuation mistakes in addition to grammar mistakes.

The purpose of self-assessment and teacher assessment of student texts is not to provide students with the correct answers, but to let them go back to their texts, reflect on them and try to understand what is wrong and how to proceed with corrections. Students will have to do this on their own first, before they are guided by a more capable peer, in accordance with Vygotsky's theory on the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

When Mr. Clumpy below shows students their shouts and screams he's  
always to the children. He never speaks in a low voice or talking quietly. He  
 is also not something good with their students and he does not listen to  
 what they say, and he cannot be bothered to help them if they need help  
 with a task. They other teachers have many times spoken to the principal  
 about Mr. Clumpy, because they will give him fired. But the principal does  
 not dare to kick him, because the principal is afraid that he will be very angry  
 and do something dangerous. So that's why they have not kicked him out.  
 He always said to the students that they didn't do a good job on a task. To  
 the teachers he said a lot of ugly things, that they are not working well and  
 that they are very ugly. When he walked in the hallways and was going to  
 the classrooms, then he trampled and was always very heavily. So when he  
 came to the classrooms, you could feel the floor shaking and the lookers  
 were shaking.

**Figure 21.1** A teacher's marking of the most severe mistakes on a student text in 8th grade.

## Formative feedback

One of the most important things English teachers do, is providing formative feedback to students. Teachers want them to learn something from the feedback, and they should be given the opportunity and guidance needed to change their product according to the feedback. The way teachers provide feedback and the way the feedback is formulated can have positive, zero or negative effect on their students' learning, motivation and self-esteem. Thus, the quality of the feedback and how it is provided to the student can make a difference (see for example Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Take a look at the following scene from *Alice in Wonderland*:

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

“I don't much care where,” said Alice.

“Then it doesn't matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

This short dialogue could serve as a metaphor for formative assessment. Students have to know the next step in their learning processes. If the next step, how to improve, is unclear to them, feedback is of little help.

The task for the student text in Figure 21.1 was *Describe a fantasy teacher*. The class had prepared for the task by reading *Matilda* by Roald Dahl. In her feedback to the student who had written the text in Figure 21.1, the teacher wrote *You have used several adjectives to describe Mr. Clumpy (angry, ugly), which is good. Check if you can use even more adjectives. How does he dress?* The teacher's feedback contains information about what the student has done, in addition to pointing forward to what the student has to do next. Furthermore, the teacher focuses on just a few areas, both when it comes to language and content. The feedback is concrete, understandable and achievable.

Formative feedback is essential to formative assessment, since the whole point of feedback is learning. Teachers want the students to learn more from the feedback. Language teachers often ask themselves *How much should I correct?* They spend hours on correcting, but experience that students often make the same mistakes again. Taking into account that teach-

ers experience the students making the same types of mistakes again, it is questionable to what extent all the teacher correcting is effective (see Lee, 2009). English teachers should be supervisors for students, not editors. Teachers should ask themselves how they can guide their students to learn more and in better ways. Based on research, we know quite a lot about what types of feedback and which modes of delivering the feedback have the most positive effect on students' learning (see for example Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Black et al., 2003; Burner, 2016; Ferris, 2003; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Saliu-Abdulahi et al., 2017; Lee, 2011; Shute, 2008; Vattøy & Gamlem, 2020). The following advice can be given to ELT teachers:

- Think of your comments on student texts (both written and oral) as supervision or guidance.
- Make your expectations clear for the students. Your feedback should reflect your expectations.
- Provide feedback that is clear, concrete, understandable and achievable. Focus on the areas you have said you are going to focus on. “Kill your darlings” when it comes to all the other areas you have *not* said you are going to focus on.
- Point out words, expressions and sentences that may break down communication, and mistakes that reoccur, that is errors.
- Write comments both in the margin and at the end of a text, telling the student what he or she has succeeded with in the text, what needs to be improved, and, not least, how he or she can go about improving the text.
- Be sure it is clear for your students how the process of assessment works in your classes. How do you assess, why, how and when will the feedback be provided (ask them whether they prefer oral and/or written feedback), and how will they have the chance to follow up the feedback?
- Set aside time in class for responding to questions regarding the feedback and following up the feedback (for example time for revision of texts). Make sure your students understand the feedback. This is valuable investment of your time!



## Process writing

The process of writing and the final product, and the relations between them, are significant in formative assessment. Process writing is one way of highlighting these relations. In process writing, students draft, receive feedback, rewrite, revise and edit, before publishing their final products. It is not unusual that language teachers “correct” too much on local textual levels concerning orthography, morphology and syntax, and less on global textual levels like text grammar, structure and content (see Burner, 2016). Process writing requires adapted and differentiated feedback in various phases of writing. It goes without saying that the teacher should not be picky on local errors in the first draft, since this would risk killing the student’s motivation to revise or to write more.

The idea behind process writing stems from the USA and reached Norway in the 1980s. This was a period when teachers used process writing a lot with their students. The current process writing practices and perceptions in Norwegian schools have been described by Frøydis Hertzberg and Olga Dysthe (2012). Some teachers say “this was something we did in the past”, and several claim that “process writing is time-consuming”.

However, there is a high learning potential in process writing. Dysthe, one of the pioneers behind process writing in Norway, refers to international studies indicating that students at all ages revise their texts under conditions that allow them to revise. Undoubtedly, students need to practice revising their texts. Trude Kvithyld and Trygve Aasen (2012) use the term *revision competence* and underline that teachers need to instruct, supervise and model for their students how they should revise their texts. Life outside school is not any different. In fact, life outside school tends to be more authentic in that whenever you submit a text, whether it is to a publisher, newspaper editorial, poster for a campaign, post on social media, you always have the chance – and you are often required – to revise and improve it. Dysthe (1999) claims that “there is little reason to believe that feedback on finished products has any value when it comes to learning” (p. 215, author’s translation). The same is confirmed by Kvithyld and Aasen (2012): “To correct a text which is not going to be revised is ineffective response to writing” (p. 28, author’s translation). Moreover, acknowledg-

ing that a text is not finished after a first phase of writing, implies that it is unreasonable to give it a grade on a scale of 1 to 6.

There are few areas that are as conclusive as research on the impact of grades on children and young adults. Grades stimulate extrinsic motivation and competition between students rather than with oneself, particularly when it comes to low performing students (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Butler & Nisan, 1986). On the other hand, intrinsic motivation and competing with oneself have formative potential. As one lower secondary English teacher, who systematically tried out assessment without grades, said: “I have stopped giving grades together with feedback. Students work more productively if they do not receive the grades”. Research supports her claim, indicating that when students are handed back their product with a grade and feedback, they tend to overlook the feedback. The only grades the teacher *has to* give his or her students in Norway, according to the national assessment regulations, are the mid-year and final grades starting in Year 8, which is to say two times per school year. More and more schools are downplaying grades and working with improving the quality of feedback. In fact, there are some schools, particularly at the lower secondary level, that are so-called “grade free”, merely providing the two grades that have to be provided according to the regulations.

However, there is always the issue of the time aspect when it comes to feedback on student texts. It is time-consuming for teachers to provide feedback on texts and set aside time at school for the students to improve their texts, and then preferably assess the texts by giving the students a sense of the level they are at (for example “low/medium/high” or a grade). However, three points need to be mentioned. First, the teacher should express a cyclic understanding of writing through process writing, which is to say that editing and revising are a result of developing one’s ideas throughout the writing process (Hoel, 2007). Secondly, the teacher could let the students work formatively with *fewer* texts rather than not doing this with *many* texts. In that way, process writing needs not be more time-consuming than other writing activities. Instead of six-seven longer texts during a school year, a solution could be to reduce this to three-four texts which the students can work formatively with. A student who has experienced a process writing practice says:

I feel much of what I've learned in English this year comes from writing essays, working with them. I've improved my essays as much as I could. Also after having them back with comments. Actually, I've learned a lot, especially from writing many drafts.

(Korsvold, 2000, p. 113)

Thirdly, it is not always the teacher who should provide feedback on student texts. Peers can do that as well. Research from ELT classes in Norway indicates that peer assessment can actually save time for the teacher (Burner, 2015).

## Peer assessment

There are several cognitive advantages related to peer assessment, where students assess each other's products. One advantage is that students feel less intimidated receiving feedback from peers (see for example Race, 2001). This could partly be due to the fact that they are at the same age level, but also that they have somewhat similar experiences as second or foreign language learners. Norwegian teachers teaching English have been through the same processes of language learning, but in contrast to the students, those experiences go back several years in time, whereas peers often have similar questions and can help each other. It is a good idea to put students in heterogeneous groups, so that they can provide varied feedback to each other. The high performing students, too, may learn something useful by listening to other students providing and receiving feedback, and by analyzing other students' texts in order to provide feedback on them.

As already mentioned, another advantage with peer assessment is teachers saving time (see Topping, 2003). If students provide feedback on each other's products on two to five texts during a school year, it will give the teacher more time to provide feedback on all the other texts. If peer assessment is conducted regularly, systematically and professionally, teachers will experience that students often provide high-quality feedback (see Burner, 2015).

Dysthe (1999) also mentions a better learning environment, something which is essential for language learning, as one of the positive effects of a

collaborative activity like peer assessment. In a safe learning environment, students dare experiment more with the target language. Moreover, peer assessment can stimulate metacognitive learning strategies, as students learn to articulate their thinking related to learning and assessment. Peer assessment could in fact demystify the writing process for those students who avoid writing in other languages than their mother tongue, and for those students who believe writing is an ability you either have or do not have.

Learning to provide and receive feedback on language, content and structure is useful. Students reflect on their language learning strategies when conducting peer assessment. This is a transversal skill, which means that they can make use of it when conducting self-assessment at school and outside of school. In other words, there is a mutual relationship between peer assessment and self-assessment.

There are several ways of working with peer assessment at school. However, the most important thing is that students know why they take part in peer assessment, and that they are given clear guidelines on how to conduct it. If the guidelines are not clear enough, the teacher will experience that students uncritically praise each other's products without much reasoning. Here are some guidelines to the teacher regarding peer assessment, inspired by Dysthe (1999):

- After your students have written a draft, put them into groups of 3-4. Everybody in the group reads everybody's draft. The reading can take place as homework.
- Explain what the purpose of peer assessment is.
- Go through the guidelines for how to provide and how to receive feedback. Preferably, you should model a sequence of peer assessment for the class, together with a couple of the students.
- It is wise to have a set of written guidelines for the person providing feedback and for the person receiving feedback. Everybody comments on everybody's text.
- The person providing feedback has to point at some of the strengths in the text, and explain why these particular aspects of the text are positive. The examples have to be beyond the detailed local text level and

point at text grammar, structure and content. Furthermore, feedback has to be provided on a couple of aspects that are in need of improvement, and suggestions must be given on how to proceed in order to improve the text.

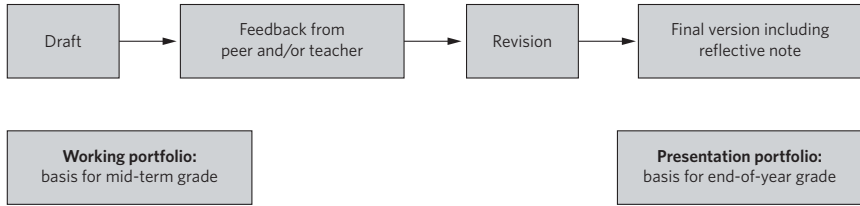
- The person receiving feedback needs to listen and take notes. It is important not to comment or try to defend oneself. He or she should be quiet until the person providing feedback is done; however, clarifying questions may be asked in order to better understand the feedback.

An MA thesis on peer assessment in English confirms the need for clear guidelines (Malešević, 2011). The students who took part in the study were in favor of peer assessment, but continued to trust the teacher as the main provider of feedback. This also underlines the importance of practicing peer assessment. Students need to become proficient in giving feedback and to see the learning potential in peer assessment. Portfolio assessment is a system of assessment that relates the formative elements of assessment together, while at the same time preparing students for summative assessment.

## Portfolio assessment

Portfolio assessment can be regarded as an integrated approach to formative assessment where process writing is the foundation (see Klenowski, 2002). It is an assessment tool used mostly in lower and upper secondary school, and to some extent in higher education, particularly in subjects such as Norwegian and Arts and Crafts. Portfolio assessment has documented formative potentials in second and foreign language learning (Burner, 2014).

A portfolio can be defined as a systematic collection of texts that students collect, select and reflect on during an extended period. Texts do not need to be written only, but could be oral as well. The success of portfolio assessment depends on the quality of feedback, student involvement, self-assessment and peer assessment, and a focus on the process as well as the product. It is common to distinguish between a working portfolio and a presentation portfolio (see Figure 21.2).



**Figure 21.2** An illustration of how the system of portfolio assessment may look.

The former is, as the name indicates, a portfolio where students continuously document their products throughout the school year. They save drafts, receive feedback from the teacher and/or peers and revise their products. The working portfolio forms the basis for the mid-term grade, telling the students what level they are at in English. It is important to be aware that the students should also have the opportunity to revise their texts after the first term of the school year. The presentation portfolio is the final portfolio submitted for final assessment and grading. This is when the end-of-year grade is given to the students, and they will not have any more opportunities to revise or edit. Selection is an important part of the whole process, meaning that the students need to select some of the works from their working portfolio to include in the presentation portfolio, based on certain criteria from the teacher. The selected texts will be assessed according to the competence aims for the subject and/or criteria and descriptors derived from these. In order to stimulate self-assessment and reflection, students are asked to include a reflective note and attach it to the presentation portfolio. In this reflective note, students are asked to justify their selection of texts and reflect on their learning processes (see Table 21.2).

**Table 21.2** Example of criteria for the presentation portfolio.

1 non-fiction
1 fiction
1 self-chosen
1 mock exam

*Reflect on the texts you have selected for your presentation portfolio. Why have you included these texts? What are you most satisfied with? Write about the writing process. What did you learn when you worked with the texts? What did you change from first to second draft? What have you learned about writing and yourself as a writer? There are no right or wrong answers to these questions; the aim is that you reflect on and formulate your learning processes.*

No matter how English teachers conduct process writing, students need to know when the various activities take place, the deadlines for drafts and final submissions, how the teacher and the peers will assess the texts (assessment criteria), how the feedback will be provided (why not ask the students what they prefer?) and when/how they should follow up the feedback. A combination of portfolio assessment and an oral test can be useful. The teacher will have the possibility to ask questions related to the written product, in addition to the control function where you will be certain that the texts are written by the student and not by others. It could be time efficient for the teacher and systematic for both the teacher and the students to digitalize the portfolios using the school's Learning Management System. The tasks and the deadlines should be available for the students as early as possible. Feedback can also be given digitally, using MS Word's "track changes" and suitable multimedia to record oral feedback.

In ELT, it is important to reflect on one's own language learning. Elements from the *European language portfolio* can be used to form the portfolio. "I learned that I'm very good at structuring sentences, but I learned also that I could have had more content in my text", wrote one of the students in her reflective note in a research study on portfolios (Burner, 2012). The teacher had in this case provided feedback on sentence structure and given advice on what to improve when it came to the content. Another student wrote: "I learned that it is possible to improve", which summarizes well the whole idea behind a process approach to assessment (Burner, 2012).

## Concluding remarks

Research shows that feedback is more effective for students' learning than grades. Furthermore, it shows that classrooms which encourage self- and peer assessment are more effective for students' learning than those which do not, and that involving students in the assessment processes and procedures is more positive for students' motivation and learning strategies than classrooms which do not encourage and involve students in such activities (see Black et al., 2003). Research also indicates that formative assessment is useful for differentiation of teaching for every student (see Black & Wiliam, 1998). There are various ways of working with formative

assessment as an English teacher, and this chapter has given you some examples. The most important advice is not to underestimate the students and what they can achieve, but to listen to their feedback and adapt the teaching and assessing strategies accordingly and keep updated on the topic of assessment. Furthermore, it is essential to understand that formative assessment is not a certain type of activity you perform in addition to other things, but is an integrated approach within a holistic assessment culture where the value of feedback, revision, self- and peer assessment are appreciated. Assessment must never become instrumental, for example by the overuse of various assessment sheets that students feel they have to fill out but really do not understand why they have to do it or what they actually learn by it. Assessment should instead be a natural and integrated part of teaching and learning situations at school. That is when we can state that assessment promotes learning.

### Reflection questions

1. What are the most important benefits of formative assessment in English?
2. As a student, what experiences did you have with formative assessment in English?
3. What are the relations between formative assessment and transversal skills?
4. Imagine you are the student you are going to teach. How would you prefer formative assessment to be conducted in English classes?
5. What are the most important challenges of formative assessment in English, and how would you solve those challenges?

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