

of the content,” was named by 43 percent of the students. “Grade I would receive on this draft” was comparatively low at 12 percent.

Disclosure of these survey results jumpstarted discussion at our English department meetings about the way we use feedback, as well as its purpose. We had to ask ourselves if there wasn’t a better way to spend time grading student work. The obvious answer was formative assessments. As Julie Gorlewski noted, “Formative assessments provide an exceptional opportunity for teachers to collect, analyze, and use data in meaningful ways” (97). Richard Stiggins, for example, noted that there is a significant absence of assessment used for learning and that school systems rely on assessed learning. As W. James Popham noted:

- Formative assessment is a *process*, not any particular test.
- It is not used just by teachers but by *both teachers and students*.
- Formative assessment takes place *during instruction*.
- It provides *assessment-based feedback* to teachers and students.
- The function of this feedback is to help teachers and students make *adjustments* that will improve students’ achievement of intended curricular aims. (5; italics in original)

But in many districts, formative assessments are really interim benchmark assessments that provide information about progress toward a set of expectations. These only occur a few times per year and are used only minimally for making instructional decisions. In other words, it is akin to taking your temperature but doing nothing even if the thermometer indicates you have a fever.

Our department decided to prioritize our assessment practices to make them actionable. We committed to making our assessments truly drive instruction by conducting them during writing development, rather than waiting for the final product. Our second commitment was to get better at analyzing students’ writing for errors and misconceptions. Most importantly, we committed to using these analyses such that students could be retaught the information they needed. The second

commitment—error analysis—proved to be the key to developing a responsive formative assessment system for writing in our English classrooms.

Shifting Time and Energy

To create time to dive more deeply into students’ understanding, summative grading needed to be reduced so that more time could be devoted to the analysis of students’ emerging competence. In other words, we began spending more of our time assessing drafts rather than final products. As the survey results pointed out, it is what students expect. For summative assignments that involved writing, speaking, or performing, we provided rubrics with information about students’ current level of performance and their grade. Now we can underline indicators and circle scores. This rapid grading and feedback method is easy

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to accept when students have also had experiences with being retaught content based on their earlier performance. We include a note on our syllabi so that parents understand that we are not editing students’ final work but rather re-teaching based on the patterns we see during earlier attempts:

On most assignments, the teacher does not identify every error found in a student’s work. Students receive feedback about the work, and their performance on competencies, but we do not mark every error that we notice. Instead, we conduct an error analysis and determine areas of instructional need. We look for a pattern of errors, not isolated or anomalous ones. From there, we design additional lessons for students, either whole class or small group, to address the errors that we find.

Alleviating ourselves of the self-imposed responsibility to edit and correct their final writing products created the space we needed to respond to their drafts more completely. Instead of requiring them to submit drafts periodically to measure for compliance, we began providing students more detailed feedback about their progress. The shift to focusing on their drafts created a new problem, as it became apparent that we were seeing emerging

problems between what we thought we were teaching and how our students were interpreting the content. Even at the draft stage of their writing development, more frequent feedback would have prevented some of the errors we were finding.

Purpose-Driven Initial Instruction

We realize now what the experts have been telling us for years: the starting place for any formative assessment system is an established purpose (Black and Wiliam). Sometimes referred to as an objective, learning target, or goal, we use the term *purpose* to remind ourselves that we are responsible for making the content interesting and relevant to students. Without a purpose, students are likely to produce their best work on an entirely different aspect of the learning environment. And without relevance, we might not have the full attention of our learners. For each purpose, there should be an assessment task that teachers can use to determine which students still need instruction. Thus, if the purpose is a content standard, then the assessment will likely be summative rather than formative. If the purpose is established weekly, the assessment will be weekly. We recommend a daily purpose because that allows the teacher to collect information about students based on the learning targets of the day.

For example, when Nancy set the purpose for the day for students to determine the structure of an author's argument, she knew what kind of information she was looking for and could be used to assess their understanding. As she talked with students about the lesson, she noted, "We have to do this all of the time. If we can understand the structure of the argument, we can identify flaws or places of agreement. And we can write better arguments of our own." When Douglas established the purpose to analyze the meter and rhyme pattern of a poem, he knew that he would be able to assess their understanding of this by the end of the period. To ensure that this was relevant, and that students would offer their best thinking, he said, "Sometimes there are hidden clues to the meaning of a poem in the meter and rhyme. It's also how rappers keep our attention. They put words to a meter and then align the instruments. It's pretty important to

be able to analyze meter and rhyme." Our renewed emphasis on establishing each lesson's purpose represented a profound shift in our formative assessment practices, which were now happening almost every day, rather than just when they submitted a draft writing assignment.

Error Analysis

By now we were drowning in formative assessment data. We quickly realized that we could not keep track of the various errors that students were making such that we could align instruction with those errors. When the error was global (at least 75 percent of the students making the same error) the response was easier. We could just reteach the content to the whole class. For example, when Nancy noticed that her students were not including evidence from the text in their writing, she provided them with additional whole-class instruction and collaborative group practice for integrating textual evidence into their writing. But what if that's only a problem in fourth period and not the others? Or if only six students are making that error, and not the others? It is harder to address this when there are targeted errors. It is also harder to remember which students have made which errors, especially when we've already returned their work to them.

In response, we created an error analysis tool in collaboration with all of the members of our team. As part of our collaborative planning time, we now develop error analysis tools. Once developed, we use these tools to alert us to the errors students might make as they learn the content. We include aspects of writing that we are teaching to link assessment and instruction. As a result, we now spend a significant portion of what had once been our grading time focused on cataloging the errors that students make such that we can respond to those errors appropriately. For example, when students were working on an essay that called for them to compare two documents, we used the error analysis tool in Figure 1. Notice that there were many students in Period 1 who needed additional instruction on transitions. Not every class needed this instruction, but Period 1 really did. Also notice that there were smaller groups of students in each period that need additional instruction with

FIGURE 1. Error Analysis Tool

Date: 10/12 Topic: Compare/Contrast Essay		Period 1	Period 2	Period 3	Period 4	Period 5
Introductory paragraph contains summary of similarities and differences that will be addressed	JR	PREP		AT		
Comparison paragraph(s) includes information from both texts	JR, JT, AG, DL, TV	PREP	EC, MV, WK	AT, SK, MG, EM, BA, TS	HH, DP, MR, CH	
Comparison paragraph(s) includes evidence from both texts	JR, DD, AG, SL	PREP	WK, MW	AT, BA	MR	
Contrast paragraph(s) includes information from both texts	JR, JT, DL, MM, SL, ST, ND	PREP	RT, VE, VD, CC	AT, MG, SC, PM, LG	DP, DE	
Contrast paragraph(s) includes evidence from both texts	JR, DS	PREP	SJ, JM	AT, TR, PC	DE	
Transitions between paragraphs lead the reader logically	AA, TA, AC, TC, JC, UC, DD, RD, TE, RE, FE, MF, AG, JJ, SL, JR, JT, DL, AM, PM, MM, JM, HN, AO, CS, TS, ST, TT, ND, AZ, DZ	PREP	WK, RT, AG, SJ	AT, MG, BA, GL, DO, DE, LR	SR, DC, MF	
Mechanics interfere with reading	JR, JT, MM, AZ, DZ	PREP	EC, AG, SJ	AT, DW, DL, KS, IP, SN, MW, JG, KE, JV	DE, MR, DC, AT	

various aspects of the task. Without analyzing and recording the mistakes that students make, it would have been impossible to figure out who needed more attention.

Interestingly, JR in first period and AT in fourth period are both students with disabilities. Use of the error analysis tool has resulted in increased communication and collaboration between general and special educators. In the past, special educators met with students with disabilities and provided supplemental instruction based on the individualized education plan (IEP), while only marginally addressing the content of the English classroom. As error analysis tools became more prevalent in our department, special educators were able to focus more reliably on the content. Now they are able to integrate IEP goals and objectives more meaningfully. In the case of the essay, only two students made errors with their introductory paragraph, and both of them had an IEP. Based on this analysis, the special educator agreed to focus her instruction on

introductions while the general educator focused on other aspects of the students' writing.

The Difference between Mistakes and Errors

Not all of the items we record on the error analysis sheet turn out to be errors. Some of them are mistakes that do not require additional instruction. When a mistake is pointed out, the student knows what to do next; when errors are pointed out, the student does not know what to do next. For example, when Douglas met with three students who used mid-sentence capitalization incorrectly on a draft, he realized that two of the students had just made a mistake. When asked to review his written feedback, one student recognized that the words *read*, *character*, and *positive* should not have been capitalized and noted his mistake. Another student identified on the error analysis sheet had capitalized *fun*, along with several other words. When asked

about it, she said that she was trying to emphasize the word. When told that the correct way to emphasize in formal academic writing is to underline or italicize the word, she was able to apply this correction to the other words that were incorrectly capitalized. However, the remaining student needed additional instruction from the teacher, as he made errors that he failed to recognize even when they were pointed out. When asked why he had capitalized *surprise* in the middle of a sentence, he said, “Yeah, that’s right. It’s a noun, a person, place, or thing, and the kind you capitalize.” Despite the fact that he was in tenth grade, he needed additional instruction on common and proper nouns.

Knowing that the student does not know what to do next—an error—and identifying the type of error the student is making allowed us as teachers to move toward action.

Once it becomes clear that you’re dealing with an error and not a mistake, it is time to interpret. The type of error correlates to the kind of follow-up instruction needed. In general, there are four types of errors:

- *Factual errors* focus on incorrect information. For example, a student incorrectly suggested that an author used personification, when the literary device employed was actually anthropomorphism. The other students had correctly learned that ascribing human traits to animals is anthropomorphism, whereas personification relates to inanimate objects, but he had not.
- *Procedural errors* involve problems with applying routines, rules, or procedures. For example, a student incorrectly used leveled headings throughout her essay, which negatively affected the organization of her arguments.
- *Transformation errors* occur when students are asked to apply what they have been taught to a novel situation. For example, we often have students who fail to cite sources that are less commonly used, especially film and video sources.
- *Misconceptions* are inaccurate beliefs that are clung to despite teaching. For example, when a student wrote that “people were better writers back in Shakespeare’s time,” we knew that he had conflated Elizabethan language structures with scholarship.

In sum, knowing that the student does not know what to do next—an error—and identifying the type of error the student is making allowed us as teachers to move toward action. Paul D. Nichols, Jason L. Meyers, and Kelly S. Burling refer to data interpretation such as this finding the “path through the problem-solving space” (16). And this is the chief goal of formative assessment—to make instructional decisions based on what students know and don’t know. The final aspect, then, of a formative assessment system is the instruction that follows the identification of errors.

Linking Assessment with Instruction

Armed with an error analysis and some idea about the types of errors that students are making, teachers are ready to take action. We learned that in most cases, students don’t need another version of the same lesson that had been taught previously. Rather, they needed time to apply knowledge in the company of a skilled adult who coached them through confusions and partial understanding. This guided instruction uses three key scaffolds: questions to check for understanding, prompts to apply specific cognitive and metacognitive resources, and cues when the learner needs his or her attention shifted in a more overt manner (Fisher and Frey).

We use questions to check for understanding to locate where the difficulty might lie. Factual errors typically reveal themselves rather quickly, as when Nancy asked her student to explain the similarities and differences between anthropomorphism and personification. The key is to contain the urge to re-explain (“Well actually, anthropomorphism is . . .”) and instead to follow it with a prompt that might activate some previously learned information that has been temporarily forgotten. Prompts may focus on procedural knowledge, such as showing the student who was incorrectly using leveled headings in another essay and asking her what she notices. Prompts can also trigger metacognitive thinking, as was the case when Douglas asked his student, “Put yourself in your reader’s shoes. What would a reader do if he had more questions about the film you’ve referred to?”


While questions and prompts are sometimes sufficient for advancing their learning, there are times when the situation calls for more obvious measures. Cues are hints or clues that shift a

learner's attention to something he or she has overlooked. When Douglas discovered that the model essay wasn't sufficient, he began using three colored highlighters to foreground the organizational structure of the headings. This was enough for the student, who immediately started using the highlighters on her own essay and saw that hers did not follow a pattern. The most stubborn errors to correct, however, are the misconceptions, which often require more direct teaching to provide new information. Nancy ended up teaching a short lesson on the relationship between common expressions in Shakespeare's time and the present day to demonstrate everyday language usage in the 17th century.

We have witnessed improved student performance, as measured by summative grades and state achievement tests, since we began using formative assessment systems consistently for the last three years. Importantly, 98 percent of our students passed their English course last year with a C average or better. Our first-time pass rate on the ELA portion of the high school exit exam has improved from 91 percent in 2009 to 97 percent in 2012. Fifty-seven percent of our students scored at the proficient or advanced levels of the state achievement test in 2012, up from 47 percent in 2010. These summative assessment results are telling us that formative assessment is working.

Conclusion

By shifting our focus from grading summative assessments to looking more closely for patterns of

errors that can inform instruction, we discovered we had more time to analyze students' work in progress. But having time to do this is one thing; knowing what to do about the errors is another. Our experiences suggest that teachers should focus on a formative assessment system, rather than on a suite of individual formative assessment tools and tasks. As Grant Wiggins noted, a formative assessment system requires purpose-driven instruction, systems for collecting and analyzing student work, and ways to organize responses to the errors that students make. The key for us has been error analysis, as it has allowed us to use formative assessment data in a truly informed way. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

The article shares how conversations with students showed how important formative assessment is—and what a difference it can make. In this writing lesson draft letters are described. Draft letters are a simple strategy that asks students to think critically about their writing on a specific assignment before submitting their work to a reader. Students write reflective letters to the teacher, identifying their own thoughts on the piece that the teacher is about to read. This lesson explains the strategy and provides models for the project, which can be adapted for any grade level and any writing project. It may be completed only for major assignments or on a more regular basis with all composition that students do. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/draft-letters-improving-student-902.html>