Assessment *For* Learning: The Role of Feedback

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Formative assessment (FA) and learning-oriented assessment (LOA) focus on the learning process. These ongoing assessments *for* learning can be an integral part of instruction and may add a new dimension to the learning mandate inherent in the classroom. Assessment *for* learning is founded on the notion that learners can raise their consciousness of their learning aims through the process of assessment and work towards improvement (Luoma & Tarnanen, 2003). That is, FA or LOA enables the students to gather "positive evidence" about what they know, and "negative evidence" about what is still not being incorporated into their interlanguage correctly (Purpura, 2004). Such assessment practices not only provide students with critical information about what they know but also enable teachers to assess their students' ongoing progress at various stages of the learning process. Leung (2004) defines classroom-based FA as "the noticing and gathering of information about student language use in ordinary (noncontrived) classroom activities, and the use of that information to make decisions about teaching (to promote learning) without necessarily quantifying it or using it for reporting purposes" (p. 20). Indeed, FA or LOA serves both the teacher in terms of planning future curricula as well as the students in giving them feedback so that they become aware of their strengths, weaknesses, and what needs to be implemented to make improvement. This discussion will focus on the important role of feedback in FA or LOA.

In one of the studies cited in Black *et al.*, (2003), the type and role of feedback in classroom-based assessments was examined. In specific, an experiment was conducted in which written feedback was given as grades, written comments, or a combination of the two. The study showed that the students who made the most improvement were those in the "comment-only" group. Teachers participating in this study and other similar studies (see Black *et al.*, 2003) supported these findings from their own experience by commenting on, for example, how students rarely read comments (which tended to be vague and brief) when grades were present but simply chose just to compare grades with their peers. One of the conclusions was that feedback in the form of written comments need to explicitly inform students about what they are to do to improve their work, and this type of feedback focuses on "mastery of learning rather than on the grading of performance" (Black *et al.*, 2003, p. 48).

According to Harlan and Winter (2004), learners need to be well-informed about the learning goals to better understand feedback and apply it to their work. They state that teachers need to "share learning intentions with pupils and make explicit how work will be [graded], thus making what is valued clear to learners. These are vital factors in making learners more responsible for their own learning; itself an important aim of learning" (p. 403). Harlan and Winter (2004) suggest that this can be accomplished, for instance, by class discussion of the quality criteria by using concrete samples.

Regarding classroom-based L2 assessment, the way in which scores are reported is a vital part of LOA. Purpura (2004) writes that while a single score represents "level of mastery" of the material, it does not give the learner feedback on what needs further improvement; however, "individual scores for each task, linked to construct-related criteria for correctness and expressed

in the language of the rubric … would provide much more meaningful and constructive guidance on what to notice and how to improve, especially if [the] feedback were followed by a plan for further learning" (p. 226). When feasible, Purpura (2004) contends that an analytic rubric is more useful as it gives more detailed feedback on the criteria of the construct being measured. Purpura (2004) suggests varying the scoring method by having students score their own or their peers' performances, or teacher evaluation by only giving written comments. He further explains that feedback of this nature can enable learners to "compare or notice the differences between their interlanguage utterances and the target-language utterances" (p.225).

While there is still work that needs to be done in the area of FA and LOA, assessment *for* learning seems to hold great promise. Assessments *for* learning "take us, as teachers, closer to the learning of learners and make us think more clearly about the purposes of classroom assessment and how it can be made the 'partner' of learning rather than, as we can sometimes feel, the driver of what we do" (Harlan & Winter, 2004, p. 406).

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