7. Making Professional Judgements and Providing Feedback

In Chapters 3 and 4 we discussed how to use assessment tasks to elicit evidence of learning, and how to capture this evidence for use in assessment. In this chapter, we address what to do next: how to interpret learners' work in light of learning goals, and how to communicate professional judgements to learners in ways that can help them move forward in their learning.

How can I make Sound Assessment Decisions about Student Work?

Research has shown that instructors make sound judgements about learners' work, especially when they have developed a deep understanding of learning intents (Harlen, 2004; Black, Harrison, Hodgen, Marshall, & Serret, 2010, and 2011). The process described in Chapters 3 and 4 (developing productive and receptive assessment tasks) ensures that you have done this work: your learning goals are defined by real world concerns, your assessment tasks reflect these learning goals, and you have checked that the task aligns to the CLB level(s) of the learners in your classroom. This work has prepared you to make sound judgements about learner work.

Instructors follow two steps when assessing student work, both when assessing work informally, in the midst of learning activities, and when conducting more formal assessments.

STEP 1: IDENTIFY ANY GAPS BETWEEN THE ASSESSMENT CRITERIA AND LEARNER WORK.
As you review student work in preparation for feedback, you will want to keep the assessment criteria front of mind. If you focus on these, you will be able to control the urge to comment on every error in a performance. Find the gaps between the assessment criteria and learner performance, and use this understanding to formulate your feedback.

STEP 2: DECIDE ON THE STEPS NEEDED TO CLOSE THIS GAP
Learning is incremental, seldom proceeding in great leaps. When you have identified a gap, move on to consider the small steps a learner might be able to take towards the learning goal. In Classroom 1, for example, where the goal was to successfully return an item of clothing to a store, Cathy provides feedback on key words that were used correctly but with unclear pronunciation.

Her suggestions for pronunciation practice are small, concrete steps that will help learners move forward.

The professional judgement exercised in these two steps is the foundation for your feedback to learners.

What Sort of Feedback Helps Learners Progress?

Feedback involves informing learners of how they are doing in their work to reach their goals (Wiggins, 2012). We know that when done well, it can have a profound effect on learning (Hattie, 2012).

So, what constitutes quality feedback? Wiliam (2011) presents three key conditions: the feedback should be related to learning goals, it should be focused, and it should require the learner to think and act.

EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK IS CLOSELY RELATED TO ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

Your classroom activities are planned with learning intents in mind, and if you have begun to integrate assessment *for* learning principles in your teaching practice, you have likely shared these learning intents and the related assessment criteria with learners. Effective feedback provides the opportunity to remind learners of these assessment criteria and to comment on how they are doing, noting where expectations are being met and where gaps still exist.

Many of the assessment tools profiled in the classroom examples are structured around assessment criteria that would be familiar to learners. In Classroom 2, for example, Kathy and Carly use a number of tools that include both the assessment criteria and the criteria for task success. In Classroom 1, Cathy includes the assessment criteria on her assessment tools, and reviews these criteria and the criteria for task success with learners before the task.

To focus your feedback you might ask: "How are learners doing in relation to the criteria?"

EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK IS CAREFULLY FOCUSED

If assessment is to promote learning, learners need feedback that is action-oriented, providing specific steps learners might take to move forward. Such feedback is often presented in two stages, indicating the area needing improvement, and the steps needed to improve. If the suggested steps are concrete and specific, learners will understand that while there is still a gap between their goals and their performance, the goal is nonetheless achievable. In this discussion of gaps, the word *yet* can be powerful, indicating confidence in the attainability of goals.

When feedback is corrective in nature, many instructors begin by describing a strength before moving on to areas needing improvement.   This positive feedback should also be specific and concrete, demonstrating areas of success, and lowering resistance to advice on improvement.

In Classroom 1, for example, Cathy began her feedback with a positive, yet specific comment. "Your request to exchange the item was clear." She then followed with one concrete suggestion for improvement, pointing out that the learner should use the phrase "too big" to indicate a size problem more precisely.

To focus your feedback you might ask: "What is the error/problem and what steps might be taken to address it?"

EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK REQUIRES THE LEARNER TO THINK AND ACT

Many instructors spend considerable energy marking/correcting student work, particularly when responding to written work, at least in part because learners ask for detailed mark-ups. There is no indication that detailed and time-consuming mark-ups of work promote learning, however. A more efficient feedback cycle involves the instructor carefully selecting a limited number of errors, providing timely and action-oriented feedback, and then engaging learners in the corrective work.

This is to say that, once you have identified possible improvements, you can promote learning by building in opportunities where the learner can interpret and apply your suggestions, in carefully structured, classroom-based learning activities. In fact, if learning is to advance, learners need to do this application work.

These activities provide rich opportunities to observe how easily learners adopt your feedback, and to ask them directly if they understand and are able to apply your feedback. What you learn from these conversations will help you both plan further support, and refine your feedback skills (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Wiggins, 2012). Two suggestions on how you might do this follow:

> For writing tasks, learners can work independently or with a partner to apply feedback to their work while you circulate to provide support as needed. Or if learners are working independently, you might have them check their corrections with a peer before showing you.

> For pronunciation concerns, you could dictate the words into learners' smart phones, and learners could practise alone and then with a peer for feedback.

To focus your feedback, you might ask: "What one or two important errors should I give feedback on, and when will learners do the work to apply my advice?"

What Types of Comments can Interfere with the Feedback Cycle?

Not all comments will engage learners in the feedback cycle, where learners consider suggestions and use them to improve their performance. When instructors replace content-

and action-based feedback with ego-based comments, grade-focused responses, or simple corrections, this cycle can be undermined.

Ego-based comments: These comments might be praise-oriented ("I enjoyed your performance") or evaluative ("Good work", "Needs improvement"), eliciting emotional reactions but limited cognitive engagement. Such comments, even when given with positive intentions, generally do not promote learning – and in some cases shut it down (Hattie, 2012). Praise may have a role in your interaction with learners, but it helps to think of it as separate from feedback. However, positive feedback that focuses on specific things that learners are doing well and that you want them to continue doing can be helpful. Instructors sometimes use sentence stems such as "Continue . . ." or "Keep doing . . ." to focus learners' attention.

Grades-focused responses: Additionally, research suggests that the assignment of grades can interfere with the application of feedback to improve learning. Grades are evaluative in nature, and can elicit emotional reactions that undermine learning; used alone, they also provide very little information that can help learners move forward. Even when comments-based feedback is included with the grade, learners will often be drawn to the grade as the primary feedback (Hattie, 2012; Wiliam 2012). When the purpose of the assessment is formative, that is, assessment *for* learning, consider giving comments-only feedback, if you have the choice. When grades or scores are required for summative purposes, consider strategies to focus the learners on your comments. For example, you might have them do something with the feedback so they cannot simply ignore it.

Error correction: While you might model how an error could be fixed (perhaps individually or to the large group), you should resist the temptation to correct errors. Error correction removes opportunities for the second half of the feedback cycle, using feedback to move forward. Learners need to work at fixing errors if learning is to advance – and opportunities to do the work must be planned for (Wiliam, 2011).

How does Feedback Fit into my Planning?

Feedback, the basis of assessment *for* learning, happens on an ongoing basis throughout a unit of instruction, and across units of instruction. If you plan for feedback opportunities and keep track of what you have noted, this sort of record can provide excellent guidance as you prepare learning activities throughout the term.

The suggestions below apply to feedback provided to individual learners but can also apply to feedback to the whole class, based on patterns of errors you notice as you observe learners or review their written work.

PLAN FOR FEEDBACK THROUGHOUT THE UNIT
Research suggests that comments-only feedback and time to incorporate the feedback during the development of skills enhances performance and achievement (Wiliam 2011, 2012). To

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ensure that this happens, you might spend some time planning 1) how you will fit feedback and application opportunities into learning activities, and 2) what types of feedback you will use.

If your task is a skill-using activity or introducing a skill for the first time, you might consider giving comments-only feedback on a few select criteria. As learners absorb and apply your feedback they will be better prepared to incorporate it in the next related task.

If it is an assessment *of* learning task, then you will evaluate the learner's performance based on the assessment criteria, using an assessment tool like those demonstrated in Chapter 3, *Developing Productive Skills Assessment Tasks*. Recognizing that even assessment *of* learning can be assessment *for* learning, you will also provide feedback that will help the learner move forward.

PLAN FOR FEEDBACK ACROSS UNITS, OVER THE COURSE OF THE TERM

If you have planned for feedback throughout learning activities, you will need a way to track student success in terms of the feedback you have provided, both formal and informal. Your observations will provide valuable information that can help focus ongoing feedback and guide instructional planning.

Over the course of a term, you might use a tracking form with key criteria listed across the top to help identify patterns in errors within a unit of instruction and across units. When reviewing assessment tasks, you might also use a notebook or a checklist to note errors related to assessment criteria, or outside of the assessment criteria, so that you can determine how you will them address them later.

Which Errors should I Attend to When there are Several?

You will not be able to comment on every error you see or hear, and even if you could, doing so would overwhelm learners and produce a heavy marking burden for you. You will have to make decisions about which errors to take note of, and which to bypass, or put aside for later.

The best place to start when making decisions about feedback is always with the assessment criteria and the criteria for task success, as discussed above. Let these guide your decisions around feedback. Occasionally, however, you may feel the need to prioritize comments further, perhaps because of multiple errors related to the assessment criteria, or because you would like to provide feedback outside of the assessment criteria (with advanced learners, for example). In these cases, the following three questions can help.

WHAT IMPACT IS THE ERROR HAVING ON COMMUNICATION?

If you need additional guidance in making decisions about what to comment on and what to bypass, research suggests that you first consider the impact of an error on communication (Hendrickson, 1980; Ferris, 2002). We discuss writing and speaking errors at two levels: those with an effect on intelligibility (global errors), and those without (local errors).

Global errors interfere with a speaker's or writer's message, and can cause communication breakdowns. In writing and speaking, these errors may be related to lexical, syntactical, or sociolinguistic choices made by the learner.

Local errors may well be noticeable to the reader or listener, but do not compromise understanding. In speaking, these may be pronunciation or word form errors, in writing, simple grammatical or word form errors.

As a general rule, provide feedback first on global errors, especially when a local error is not related to current learning intents, or occurs infrequently.

HOW OFTEN IS THE ERROR OCCURRING?

If an error is a one-off, or occurs infrequently, you might consider letting it go, even in cases when it affects communication. In other cases, when an error occurs repeatedly, you might address it with learners (individually or as a group), even if it seems relatively minor and not related to key learning intents.

Similarly, if a concern is a mistake, reflecting inattention or carelessness, rather than an error, related to lack of competence, you can let it go (Touchie, 1989).

HOW OPEN ARE LEARNERS TO FEEDBACK?

At times, learners may be resistant to instructor comments, even when an error is closely linked to learning intents. Many instructors work hard to increase openness to feedback, but in cases when resistance is high, you might delay your response, focus on other issues, or alter the form of feedback. When learners are resistant to feedback on an aspect of written work, for example, you might provide summary feedback to the larger group rather specific feedback to individuals. If learners are sensitive to feedback on a presentation made in front of a group, you could choose to comment only on carefully selected aspects of the presentation, or to provide feedback privately.

How can Portfolios Support Professional Judgement and Feedback?

Adult ESL programs across the country are beginning to use Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA). For detailed information about PBLA practice and protocols refer to *Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA): Guide for Teachers and Programs* (Pettis, 2014).

Whether or not your program is implementing PBLA, portfolios are an ideal support for classroom-based assessment processes. Grade books alone cannot capture the descriptive assessments and feedback instructors provide when assessing *for* learning. Many instructors find that language learning portfolios that contain samples of learners' work over time provide more in-depth evidence of learner progress and achievement, evidence that can help you both assign benchmarks accurately, and engage in productive discussions with learners.

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ASSIGNING BENCHMARKS ON THE BASIS OF PORTFOLIO ENTRIES

In the classroom scenarios at the end of this resource package, all tasks used are representative of those that might be included in a learning portfolio. Portfolios will include a sampling of language tasks that address the four CLB competency areas, across all four skill areas: copies of writing, reading, or listening tasks, and video or audio clips of speaking tasks. If the portfolio will be used to determine learner achievement of benchmark outcomes, the amount of support that was provided for a task will also be indicated on the task or assessment tool, but the majority of tasks should demonstrate what the learner can do independently, without support. You will need to develop a process for portfolio evaluation based on a number of considerations:

- How many items will be included in the portfolio?
- Have individual tasks in the portfolio already been evaluated in relation to benchmark expectations?
- Will the overall portfolio be evaluated holistically or will you require that a certain number of tasks demonstrate benchmark level proficiency?
- How will the portfolios also show learner growth, reflecting the reality that earlier entries will not show the same strengths as more recent ones?
- How will you encourage learner self-assessment and reflection of the whole portfolio?

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF LEARNER CONFERENCES

One of the most valuable aspects of using portfolios is the opportunity to meet with learners to discuss the language growth evidenced in the portfolios in relation to their own personal goals. As anyone who has organized these portfolio conferences can attest to, learners find them an extremely useful way to understand their progress and plan for next steps. Instructors also find them useful, but often acknowledge the need to focus conversations carefully, to keep them within a reasonable 10 – 15 minute limit. Additionally, programs need to allot time for the conferences within the course or program schedule: some programs schedule conferences both in the middle and at the end of the term.

Reflections on your Practice

1. Review the feedback you have given a learner on a piece of writing. What kind of comments are you providing? Are they related to the identified criteria? Are they focussed and specific? If you feel they could be improved, how can you reframe them so that learners know what to do?
2. If one of the goals of feedback is to have learners think and then act, what activities do you use in your class to make this happen?
3. Think about your assessment plan for your most recent unit of instruction. How much assessment *for* learning vs *of* learning did you plan for? When you use this plan again, where would you add additional assessment *for* learning opportunities?

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