

6. Engaging Learners in the Assessment Process

A key understanding of assessment *for learning* is that learning is enhanced when students are engaged in their own learning and that of their peers. Research shows that

1. The most effective learners are self-monitoring, using their understanding of goals to monitor their own progress (Sadler, 1989; Wiliam, 2011).
2. Training learners in metacognition (their knowledge related to their own cognitive processes or products) raises their performance and helps them to transfer what they have learned to new situations (Wiliam, 2011, p. 148).

In this chapter, we first discuss how you can set up your class to facilitate learner engagement, and then explore three assessment *for learning* strategies that, put into practice, can provide practical steps for getting learners involved.

What Classroom Conditions Support Learner Engagement?

Three conditions will influence how willing and able learners are to engage in their own learning and that of their peers.

LEARNERS NEED TO UNDERSTAND THE LEARNING INTENTS

For learners to act as resources, they must first develop an understanding of learning intents; in Sadler's words, they must "understand quality in a manner roughly similar to the teacher" (Sadler, 1989, p. 121). As their understandings deepen, they become better equipped to act as resources for their own and their peers' learning. Responsibility for learning in such a context is broadened, shared between instructors and learners, and between learners and learners (Wiliam, 2011).

LEARNERS NEED TO VIEW PROGRESS AS INCREMENTAL

Additionally, if learners are to monitor their own progress effectively, they need to understand that progress towards a learning goal is achieved through incremental steps rather than in large leaps (Boekaerts, 1993). Learners need to understand these small steps; you can support learning by articulating them clearly for use in self-monitoring, peer feedback, and instructor assessments.



PRACTICE-BASED CONCERNS....

"My learners are reluctant to provide anything but general comments on their classmates' work. How can I help them to provide more meaningful feedback?"

"How do I get my learners involved in self-assessment? They think that assessment is the teacher's job."

THE CLASSROOM CULTURE MUST BE SUPPORTIVE

Finally, if learners are to be effective as resources for their own and their peers' learning, the classroom culture must be supportive, discouraging the comparison of progress (Boekaerts, 1993). Feedback given to each other should be linked to incremental progress, and be observational in nature rather than expressed in scores or grades.

How can I Encourage Learners to Become Involved in the Assessment Process?

Three of the assessment *for learning* strategies discussed in Chapter 1 are key to engaging your learners in the assessment process: *Clarify Learning Intents and Criteria for Success*, *Activate Learners to Become Instructional Resources for One Another*, and *Activate Learners to Become Owners of their Own Learning*.

Clarify Learning Intents and Criteria for Success

As the first step then, how can you ensure learners understand what they are aiming for as they develop their language abilities? As is evident in Classrooms 1 and 2, instructors use a variety of strategies. At the unit level, they will help learners understand the purpose or learning intents for the unit of study and what they should be able to do in English when they complete the unit. At the task level, they will share what learners are expected to do, along with the assessment criteria and the criteria for task success. The formal assessment tasks in [Classroom 1](#) and [Classroom 2](#) all meet these expectations.

Developing this shared awareness of goals often becomes an integral part of classroom work, with instructors using specific strategies to make learners aware of what quality work looks like. The following two examples show how instructors can help learners understand and interpret learning expectations, in a CLB context:

Using Rating Scales to Assess Anonymous Samples: In a CLB 6 writing class, learners might work in partners to brainstorm criteria for a good summary of a reading passage. They share criteria as a class and develop a common list of the five most important criteria. In partners they use the criteria and a rating scale to evaluate two anonymous sample summaries before writing their own summary passages.

Using Yes/No Cards to Apply Criteria: In a CLB 2 class, the teacher might write on the board the criteria for a role-play task: *Greet a Neighbor and have a Short Conversation*. She plays two short video role plays and learners are asked to use YES/NO cards to show if they think the speakers have met each of the criteria.

Activate Learners to Become Instructional Resources for One Another

Many teachers find that using peer support is the most challenging of the five strategies to implement in their adult ESL classroom. However, if we understand this strategy as using peers

as instructional resources, rather than as evaluative resources, a broad range of options open up.

PEERS PROVIDING EXPLANATIONS

Wiliam suggests that if peers are involved in helping their classmates by providing explanations and not just answers, there is compelling evidence that this benefits both those who give and receive the help (Wiliam, 2011, p. 142). He suggests a number of classroom strategies that could be adapted for use in the ESL classroom (pp. 137-144), three of which are described below.

C3B4Me: Learners are asked to get help from classmates (“see three before me”) before asking the instructor. This strategy could be used when learners are asked to correct their errors on assignments.

Error Classification: Learners are asked to classify the errors they have made (for example, on a writing assignment, this classification might sort errors related to tense, punctuation, use of prepositions, etc.). After deciding which categories of errors are common in their writing and which are rare, learners partner with a classmate with complementary strengths and help each other correct their work.

If you’ve learned it, help someone who hasn’t: Sometimes learners are able to explain or demonstrate something they have learned to a classmate in a way that makes more sense than the explanations an instructor can provide, and this can be used to advantage in the classroom. After a reading assignment has been returned, for example, learners might meet in small groups to discuss where they found the answers, helping those who were not successful gain some insight into how the answer was found.

PEERS ACTING AS INFORMED OBSERVERS

If learners are going to be involved in peer assessment, their roles should be more observational than evaluative: they shouldn’t be asked to assign scores or grades to their classmates’ performances, or to comment on areas outside their expertise. Above all, they should not see peer assessment as an opportunity to compare their own progress to that of their peers. Nonetheless, there are many ways in which learners can provide helpful observations on their classmates’ performance (Wiliam, 2011, pp. 137-144), two of which are described below.

Pre-flight Checklist: Before learners submit an assignment, each learner works with a partner who checks that the required features are present, and then signs it off as complete. In an academic preparation class, for example, the instructor might work with the class to establish a checklist for an essay, providing examples of useful feedback. Before submitting the essay to the instructor, learners will work in pairs to review each other’s essays and sign off when they both agree the essays are complete.

Two Strengths and One Improvement: Learners can often provide helpful descriptive feedback to their classmates on tasks such as presentations or role plays. One common approach is to ask them to describe two or three strengths and one area for improvement.

When learners share an understanding of the expectations for a task, they are able to provide feedback on a range of criteria, for example, whether their classmate made eye contact, spoke clearly, provided an introduction, or gave reasons to support their opinion. If the instructor also spends some time suggesting the kinds of comments that are helpful, learners will be better prepared to provide feedback that is respectful, specific, and focused on growth.

In [Classroom 1](#), Cathy incorporated a variation of this technique, first brainstorming expressions related to performance expectations (ensuring a shared understanding of expectations and appropriate ways to provide feedback), and then providing opportunity for learners to comment on what peers did well using these expressions, ensuring respectful, focused feedback.

Activate Learners to Become Owners of their own Learning

Because we know that learning is enhanced when learners take responsibility for their own learning, many instructors regularly integrate activities to promote learning reflection.

Some instructors use tools such as **Exit Tickets** or **One-Minute Papers** at the end of a class, asking learners to reflect on an aspect of their learning, using prompts such as, “Today I learned... but I still have questions about....” Learners may also complete short learning logs or reflections at the end of a unit.

In other contexts, at a range of skill levels, learners might use a rating scale or assessment tool to assess their own performance before submitting it, allowing the instructor to use the same tool to add feedback and discuss areas where the two assessments differ. One feedback form in the *CLB Support Kit* (CCLB, 2012, p. 36), for example, ends with three self-assessment questions. Learners are asked to listen to a message they have recorded, and then use the form to respond to three self-assessment questions: 1) Did you remember to speak clearly? 2) Did you stress important words? 3) Did you leave all necessary information, including the reason for your absence? Once learners complete the questions, they submit the form to the instructor for feedback.

Other teachers use a variety of self-assessment checklists, and tools specific to the task. The resource [Learner Self-Assessment Toolkit: ELSA levels literacy to 7](#) (Kilner & Drew, 2012) provides a range of learner self-assessment and learning reflection activities.

Reflections on Your Practice

1. Think of an assessment task you are planning to use in your classroom. How will you share the criteria for the task so that learners understand the expectations? How could you activate learners as owners of their learning through reflection or self-assessment activities?
2. Think of an assessment task you have recently used in your classroom. If you were using this task again, what are two ways you could use learners as instructional supports for one another?

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