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Formative Assessment and Feedback in Classroom Practice: From Principles to Everyday Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Formative assessment — using evidence of learning to adapt teaching and to guide learners while learning is still under way — is widely regarded as one of the most promising approaches to improving achievement. This review revisits the foundational work on formative assessment and feedback and translates it into everyday classroom strategies. It explains Sadler's conditions for effective feedback, the influential review by Black and Wiliam, the model of feedback proposed by Hattie and Timperley, and the five key strategies of embedded formative assessment described by Wiliam. It then discusses practical techniques, common pitfalls — such as grading without guidance, feedback that learners cannot act on, and treating formative assessment as frequent testing — and the conditions under which teachers can adopt these practices sustainably. The article concludes that formative assessment is less a set of tools than a way of teaching in which information about learning continuously shapes what teachers and learners do next.

Keywords: formative assessment; assessment for learning; feedback; classroom practice; teacher development

1. Introduction

Assessment is often associated with tests and grades at the end of a unit or course — summative assessment. Formative assessment has a different purpose: to gather evidence of learning during the learning process and to use that evidence to decide what to do next. The idea is simple, but its implementation in everyday teaching is demanding.

This review summarises key contributions to the theory of formative assessment and feedback and translates them into practical strategies for teachers in schools and in further and higher education.

2. Foundations

2.1 Sadler's conditions

Sadler (1989) argued that for feedback to improve learning, learners must (a) understand the standard or goal they are aiming for, (b) be able to compare their current performance with that standard, and (c) take action to close the gap. Feedback that tells learners only that they are below the standard, without helping them understand the standard or how to improve, does not meet these conditions.

2.2 Black and Wiliam's review

In a widely cited review, Black and Wiliam (1998a) examined a large body of research on classroom assessment and concluded that strengthening formative assessment can produce substantial learning gains. In an accompanying article for practitioners, "Inside the Black Box" (Black & Wiliam, 1998b), they argued that improvement depends on changes in classroom practice — in questioning, feedback and the involvement of pupils in assessing their own work — rather than on external testing.

2.3 A model of feedback

Hattie and Timperley (2007) proposed that effective feedback answers three questions: *Where am I going?* (goals), *How am I going?* (progress) and *Where to next?* (next steps). They distinguished feedback directed at the task, the process, self-regulation and the self, and argued that feedback about the person ("good student") is generally least effective, while feedback about processes and self-regulation is most powerful for deep learning.

2.4 Five key strategies

Wiliam (2011) summarised formative assessment in five key strategies:

1. Clarifying, sharing and understanding learning intentions and criteria for success.
2. Engineering effective classroom discussions, questions and tasks that elicit evidence of learning.
3. Providing feedback that moves learning forward.
4. Activating learners as instructional resources for one another.
5. Activating learners as the owners of their own learning.

3. Everyday strategies

3.1 Making goals clear

- Sharing learning intentions in plain language at the start of a lesson.
- Showing examples of strong and weak work and discussing what makes the difference.
- Co-constructing success criteria with learners.

3.2 Eliciting evidence

- Asking questions that require thinking rather than recall, and allowing wait time.
- Using techniques in which every learner responds — mini-whiteboards, response cards or short digital polls — rather than only volunteers.
- Ending lessons with a short "exit ticket" question that shows what learners have understood.
- Using hinge questions at key points to decide whether to move on or revisit a concept.

3.3 Feedback that moves learning forward

- Focusing comments on what to do next rather than on what was wrong.
- Giving comments without grades, or delaying grades, so that learners attend to the guidance.
- Building time into lessons for learners to act on feedback.

3.4 Peer and self-assessment

- Using success criteria for structured peer review of drafts.

- Teaching learners to evaluate their own work and to plan improvements.
- Encouraging learners to identify what they find difficult and to ask for specific help.

4. Common pitfalls

- **Testing instead of assessing formatively.** Frequent quizzes are formative only if the results change teaching or learning.
- **Feedback that cannot be used.** Comments that are vague ("try harder"), too many, or given after the topic has ended have little effect.
- **Grades that overshadow comments.** When grades and comments are given together, learners often attend mainly to the grade.
- **Superficial adoption.** Techniques adopted without understanding the underlying purpose become routines rather than responses to evidence.

5. Conditions for sustainable practice

Teachers adopt formative assessment more successfully when they have time to plan questions and tasks, opportunities to learn with colleagues — for example in teacher learning communities — and school policies that do not require excessive marking. Professional development that is ongoing, practical and collaborative is more effective than single workshops.

6. Implications

For teachers, the main implication is to plan for evidence: to decide in advance how they will find out whether learners have understood and what they will do if they have not. For school and college leaders, it is to support this work with time, collaborative professional learning and assessment policies that value feedback over marking volume. For teacher education, it is to treat formative assessment as a core professional competence.

7. Conclusion

Formative assessment rests on a simple principle: information about learning should shape what happens next. Its foundations — clear goals, good evidence, usable feedback and active learners — are well established. The challenge is to embed them in everyday practice, which requires both practical strategies and supportive conditions for teachers.

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