

Testing Tips

Practical Applications for Formative Assessment

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This month's topic for Testing Tips is brought to us by a question from a high school Spanish teacher: "How can I integrate informal, formative assessment into my daily classroom routine?" This is an important question – there is a big difference between knowing what to do and actually doing it!

The first step toward integrating formative assessment into your lesson plans begins with broad, classroom-level planning and decision-making on how to create a responsive, student-centered learning environment while also keeping in mind requirements that have to be met, such as state and national standards. What will you do to support each student's language growth toward the standards and objectives in use in your classroom? There are many different ways to answer this question, and it is important to answer it realistically.

Once you have made these larger scale decisions, each activity can be placed into the established classroom context and culture surrounding the use of formative assessment:

- What are the overall standards and objectives for language learning in your classroom?
- How is this activity helping students to work toward meeting those objectives?
- What is the overall goal and purpose of this activity?
- What is some demonstrable evidence that can be used to track each student's learning process?
- How will this evidence be evaluated to see whether the goal/purpose of the activity was met?
- How will feedback be given?

Distinguishing between what constitutes formative assessment and what is really summative assessment can be tricky. In an interview, Grant Wiggins (author of *Understanding by Design*) offers an analogy to help alleviate this confusion: "...in sports every non-conference game is formative and every other game consist[s] of endless formative assessments that prepare the athletes for the championship game. Summative means there is no opportunity to "re-do"; it is for real, like the championship game" (Johnson, 2013). Formative assessment is the practice (activities, quizzes, projects) leading up to the final, summative assessment of what students have learned.

Let's take a look at how formative assessment can function in a high school Spanish class to give both students and teachers an accurate picture of the classroom learning process. Your class is learning how to give directions. What sorts of activities can you include in your lessons that will allow students to demonstrate their knowledge of how to both give and ask for directions?

Examples of some activities might be:

- A pre-test/brainstorming activity to see what students already know (for this lesson: left, right, street and building vocabulary, imperative verb forms, etc.);
- A short writing assignment asking students to give written directions to a friend via email;
- Goal-setting activities to determine what students want to either learn or work to improve. Revisit these goals at the end of the unit to see if they have been met and, if not, what can be done to meet them.
- Immediate written or oral feedback that is constructive to student learning;
- Periodic self-assessments completed by students, gauging their confidence in their own knowledge (for this lesson: after a presentation or activity, ask students to say/write down one thing that went well and another that can be improved upon).
- Guided, purposeful reflection at the end of the unit to see what skills and knowledge have been gained.

We hope these ideas help you find ways to integrate formative assessment in a painless yet useful way. As always, if you have a question about language assessment, please send it to opat@cal.org with the subject line Ask A Tester to see it addressed in a future Ask A Tester column.

Reference:

Johnson, B. (2013, November 19). An interview with Grant Wiggins: The power of backwards design. *Edutopia*. Retrieved April 15, 2014, from <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/interview-grant-wiggins-power-backwards-design-ben-johnson>