

Learning-Oriented Assessment: An Introduction

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Traditionally, second or foreign (L2) language assessment has been mainly viewed as the product of large-scale proficiency exams or end-of-term summative tests intended to provide external measures of L2 ability (Turner & Purpura, 2015). To anyone who has taken an L2 test, it often appears that summative assessments “serve to catch learners out and to emphasize their weaknesses, rather than to ensure that every learner has the best set of opportunities to demonstrate their abilities” (Lyons & Tavares, 2011, p. 32). It is no wonder then that stemming in part from the social constructivist theories popularized in the 1970s, the notion of formative assessment (FA) has steadily gained traction for L2 testers, teachers, and researchers who recognize that assessment can and should play a role in learning so that every learner will be able to best demonstrate their abilities.

In their seminal review on science and math learning in mainstream American classrooms, Black and William (1998) described FA as “all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged” (pp.7-8). FA holds that the focus of assessment should be *for* learning, rather than *of* learning. Furthermore, as Daro, Mosher and Corcoran (2011) have noted, FA “is not a new idea; it is what coaches in music, drama, and sports have always done” precisely because those subjects are performance-based (p.17).

Importantly, much of the research on FA shows that it is not the assessment instrument itself that determines the title of formative or summative assessment, but rather what is done with the information gleaned from the instrument (Black & William, 1998; Turner & Purpura, 2015). Most L2 teachers in that sense have employed FA at one time or another to close learning gaps, whether through the use of summative assessment tools or not. FA therefore recognizes that language learning is not simply about content and formulas that can be memorized, but is also predicated on properly applied feedback that can guide learners toward further learning and promote learner autonomy.

A growing body of research into FA has explored the link between L2 language assessment and instruction to provide a more learning-oriented approach to assessment that not only attempts to measure progress, but simultaneously promote learning. This shift away from the previous focus on large-scale, external tests that measured only learning outcomes (Rea-Dickins, 2004) has taken root in a form of FA known as Classroom-based Assessment (CBA), a unique form of assessment concerned with the nature of the classroom itself and all its agents in the development of learning.

As Colby-Kelly and Turner (2007, as cited in Turner & Purpura, 2015) have claimed that assessment may be the “bridge” between teaching and learning, CBA promotes the attainment of data for the explicit benefit of developing learning by “making adjustments in the instruction and practice of both teachers and learners” (Turner & Purpura, 2015, p. 1). Described by Turner (2012) as “strategies by teachers to plan and carry out the collection of multiple types of information concerning student language use, to analyze and interpret it, to provide feedback, and to use this information to help make decisions to enhance teaching and learning” (p. 65), CBA is far more dynamic than external, summative assessments.

Additionally, as CBA is distinctly tied to context, it “cannot be separated from the meaning-driven and dynamic social interaction in the classroom” (Leung, 2004, p. 29). Therefore, CBA includes the teacher as a key partner for both the learning and learner. This approach to assessment recognizes that the classroom is a wholly unique learning environment with its own set of circumstances that provide a myriad of assessable moments in addition to traditional tests.

In spite of its welcome focus on promoting learning rather than just delivering a summative assessment score, CBA and its derivatives (e.g., alternative assessment, authentic assessment, dynamic assessment, portfolio assessment) have been characterized by Turner (2012) and others as essentially teacher-centered and therefore focus on teaching, rather than on learners and learning. This ties in with an unproven assumption that all learning occurs through a sociocultural lens such as Vygotsky’s (1987) Zone of Proximal Development, while simultaneously neglecting to consider the centrality of the learner in the learning process (Turner & Purpura, 2015).

Purpura’s (2004) expansion of CBA into Learning-Oriented Assessment (LOA) challenges the singularity of the sociocultural context to make the learner and her learning processes and outcomes within the classroom central through a “community of practice,” (Wenger, 1998, as cited in Turner & Purpura, 2015, p. 3). In addition to the sociocultural context, LOA takes the cognitive and socio-cognitive contexts into consideration to triangulate learning progressions and ensure student engagement and autonomy. LOA contends that any information gathered by this process “should potentially be used to the benefit of further learning by making adjustments in the instruction and practice of both teachers and learners” (Turner & Purpura, 2015, p. 1).

Turner and Purpura (2015) have recently developed a framework for LOA that includes seven distinct yet closely-related dimensions: contextual, elicitation, proficiency, learning, instructional, interactional, and affective. These dimensions correspond to the notion that L2 learning is both “a highly individual cognitive process,” as well as a social one when considered in the classroom context that makes it “also a highly intricate socio-cognitive and sociocultural process” (Turner & Purpura, 2015, p. 6). Moreover, these dimensions build upon the contentions of Harlen (2012, as cited in Turner & Purpura, 2015) and others that for too long, formative and summative assessments have been relegated to opposite poles in a false dichotomy.

Moreover, with the recognition that learning should be observed longitudinally rather than during a single assessable moment as in traditional summative assessment, LOA is grounded in a theory of learning where ongoing assessment is a central component to informing and modifying the work of both L2 teachers and learners to promote greater learning (Turner & Purpura, 2015). This plays out in the use of feedback and its effect on instruction to provide “mediated assistance” to learners (Poehner & Lantolf, 2005). In this sense, feedback is never to be viewed as a mere grade for the student, devoid of any qualitative information. In fact, “an assessment cannot really be considered ‘learning oriented’ until evidence is available to demonstrate that feedback or other assistance to a learning goal has led in some way to L2 system change” (Turner & Purpura, 2015, p. 6). In LOA, then, assessment is seamlessly embedded into classroom activities not only for the learner to receive continuous feedback, but to be able to digest it, apply it, and gain autonomy over her own learning.

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