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# Using Assessments to Follow the Child

“For assessment to function, the results have to be used to adjust teaching and learning.”

—Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, 1998

In a classroom of 25 or 30 students, we can expect variation in students’ use of reading strategies and skills, their prior knowledge for the texts they read, their motivation and engagement, and their self-efficacy as readers. Students will vary in their degree of independence when reading. These individual differences contribute to students’ achievement in reading. Thus, we need assessments that accurately describe our diverse student readers and their range of strengths, behaviors, and needs. If we are equipped with an array of assessments, we will be able to use the information they provide to design and adjust our instruction.

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## Becoming Clear on Learning Goals and Success Criteria

Teacher clarity is a prominent feature in successful learning, and it is closely tied to effective assessment. If teachers want a clear picture of what a learner has understood, they need to start with a clear picture of the learning goal at the outset of instruction. Readers, too, need and deserve this transparency. When teachers operate with clearly defined goals, communicate those expectations to students, explicitly teach pertinent learning strategies, and provide feedback toward those goals, then assessment can be finely focused, and fully supportive of student learning (William & Hattie, cited in Killian, 2017). For example, if a lesson goal is “Students will learn the “ch-” consonant blend, assessment should clearly reflect this important learning. Similarly, if a lesson or unit goal is for students to learn to summarize text, then we can complement teaching and learning with assessments that “get to the heart of the matter”—in this case, students summarizing texts.



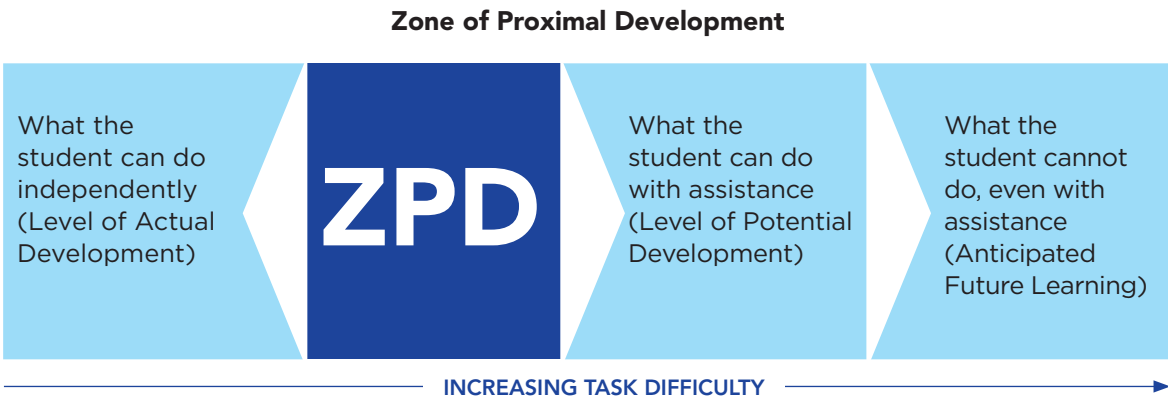
Readers benefit from clear learning goals and teachers who support and help them name new goals throughout the year.

Clear learning goals help us describe success criteria. In the examples just mentioned, we can confidently state that success criteria for the “ch-” consonant blend will be that a student can pronounce the blend when encountering printed words that contain it, and that they can do so when learning materials present “ch-” in isolation. When assessing students’ summarization strategies, we can design and use assessment that focuses on students identifying important information in text, and determining key ideas.

## Finding the Zone of Proximal Development

Effective teaching results from identifying what our students can already do, and what they are capable of learning to do next. The researcher Lev Vygotsky describes the Zone of Proximal Development (1978) as the place in which students can learn new things with support, coaching, and guidance from their teacher. In other words, it the ‘sweet spot’ of learning, right between what students can already do independently, and what students can’t do yet.

Successful teaching and learning depend, in part, on figuring out which strategies and related tasks are situated in each student’s **Zone of Proximal Development**. In order for this to happen, the teacher must first use assessments to identify each student’s baseline, or current level of performance.



## What is Scaffolding?

Scaffolding is temporary assistance provided to a student by a teacher, another adult, or a more capable peer, enabling the student to perform a task that the student otherwise would not be able to complete alone, with the goal of fostering the student’s capacity to perform the task alone eventually. Ideally, this assistance is given right in that “sweet spot” of the learner’s ZPD, when the child can do enough of the task or isn’t frustrated or overwhelmed, and yet needs the scaffold to persevere. Like a gymnastics instructor might “spot” a gymnast while he first practices a backflip before encouraging the gymnast to do the flip on his own, a teacher provides instructional scaffolds and then removes them when the student is closer to independence. Peers can also provide planned and impromptu scaffolding, during partner work or in informal conversations about a process, a book, or one’s thinking about a topic. On an assessment, if a student successfully answers a question or completes a task, we assume that student has already learned related strategies and skills.

... a teacher provides instructional scaffolds and then removes them when the student is closer to independence.

We can’t teach skills—we teach strategies because they are tangible and presentable for teachers and students. Skills are automatic, invisible and effortless (Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008)—and it’s not possible to “teach” them although we hope that students move from effortful strategy use to increasingly fluent and automatic skill use.

From there, we can approximate which more advanced strategies and tasks might be in the student’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), meaning the student might be ready to tackle them if they have instruction, guidance, and support from the teacher.

Understanding what students can already do on their own, and determining their ZPD is how we use formative assessment to create teachable moments for each student. Formative assessment defines the space between what is, and what is possible in terms of student reading growth. It also ensures we do not push students too far, too fast, or ask them to spend their time on strategies and tasks that are too easy.

Keep in mind that as a student gains new knowledge, strategies and skills, their ZPD will shift. Therefore, we must frequently assess over the course of a lesson, unit, or school year so we can capture students’ development and adjust our instruction accordingly. To meet students in their ZPD, we must regularly assess and evaluate what tasks students can do independently, and what tasks still require support and guidance.

Much of our reading instruction already works on this premise if we are regularly scaffolding our teaching during small-group and whole-group reading instruction. If we begin with what students can already do, and then guide them towards higher attainment, we are using their ZPDs to create meaningful lessons. However, formative assessment can help us identify the extent of our instructional scaffolding for each lesson, and for each student. As students’ strategies develop, we move the scaffolding up, encouraging them toward tasks and strategies that were previously beyond their reach. Without this strategic formative assessment, students would make haphazard progress towards daily, weekly, and annual reading goals.

### Successive ZPDs

A high-quality English/Language Arts curriculum:

- **Allows for ample opportunities** to assess and adjust instruction.
- **Provides flexible instructional resources** that meet the needs of students at various levels.
- **Builds in formative assessment materials** so teachers can identify students’ ZPDs
- **Moves students through successive ZPDs** as they strive to meet and surpass grade-level standards.



Formative assessments help teachers determine if their instruction “stuck.”

## Connecting Formative and Summative Assessment

Formative assessment and summative assessment are often posed as opposites, or competitors. A more productive perspective is one that seeks their intersection, and views both types of assessments as working together. If we want students to master increasingly complex reading tasks by the end of the year, we must analyze those tasks, determine their component parts, and assess progress on each one separately.

Consider this example of a Grade 2 reading standard:

Grade 2: Identify and use nonfiction text features including table of contents, subheadings, bolded words, glossaries, and digital menus to find information.

This standard is demanding. It requires students to recognize and identify text features. Then, students must use text features to locate and comprehend the ideas in an informational text. At the end of the year, students’ attainment of this standard will be measured with a summative assessment—a high-stakes test. However, it is fairly certain that many students will not be able to meet this standard as they begin second grade. So how can we use assessment to help guide our developing readers to meet the considerable challenge outlined in this standard?



Formatively assessing students’ writing about reading is a powerful way to see what they understand.

Formative assessment is the key because it helps us address student learning as steps towards attainment of the standard. Throughout the school year, and prior to the end-of-year standards-driven tests, formative assessment should be used to monitor students’ progress so that their performance on the summative assessment is not the only measure. Formative assessment guides our instruction that is aimed at helping students develop towards attainment of the standard.

Let’s consider all the distinct strategies that we would need to teach, and use progress-monitoring assessments, in order to help students meet a standard or a goal.

### Goal

**Identify and use nonfiction text features including table of contents, subheadings, bolded words, glossaries, and digital menus to find information.**

Let’s now examine the teaching involved in helping students use subheadings in informational texts. The teacher defines the skill, models various ways of applying it, and formatively assesses each stage of a student’s increasingly independent control of it. Along the way, the learner is also self-assessing.

Goal is modeled by teacher.	Student is aware of, finds, and connects subheadings across a chapter or short book.	Student uses subheadings to help support reading and comprehension of a text.	Student connects subheadings across two or more chapters or texts.	Student understands concept and applies use of subheadings as informational text feature independently.	Goal is assessed formally.
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Experienced teachers will recognize that each text feature in a standard is likely its own lesson—or series of lessons. Each strategy related to the text feature must be taught, practiced, and assessed separately. Trying to assess (and teach) all of these skills at the same time would be overwhelming for the students and for us. Therefore, each one will need its own formative assessments.

Along the way, the learner is also self-assessing.

# IN ACTION

An important aim for our formative assessments is that they are streamlined, and that they do not require extensive amounts of time to administer. Let’s look at how a Ms. Chan, a second-grade teacher, weaves formative assessment into her small-group reading lesson on using text features, and identifies students’ ZPDs, all while keeping the grade-level standard in mind:

**LESSON OUTLINE**  
**DATE:** 3/22  
**TEXT:** ARE YOU A MAMMAL?  
  
**STANDARD:** *Identify and use various features of a nonfiction text (e.g., subheadings, bolded words, glossaries, table of contents, digital menus, and links) to find information in a text*  
  
**LESSON OBJECTIVES:** *Locate subheadings and the table of contents; identify the purpose of subheadings and the table of contents*  
  
**ASSESSMENT:** *Formative checklist*  
  
**GROUP A MEMBERS:** *Jamie, Alejandro, Lisa*

Ms. Chan knows that her students must be able to meet the complex literacy standard listed above by the end of the year. So, this week, she has chosen to teach a strategy involved in the standard.

Today, Ms. Chan has selected a new informational text for small-group reading that has many subheadings. Yesterday, she introduced subheadings to her class and had them complete a scavenger hunt in her class library to find books with those features. Now she is using small-group reading time to assess how some of her students are progressing with strategies for using the Table of Contents (TOC).

To formatively assess her students, she uses a simple checklist that she keeps on her clipboard. (See the appendix for a blank version of this resource.) This checklist helps her the determine appropriate strategy instruction in relation to each student’s Zone of Proximal Development.

✓ CHECKLIST

STUDENT	FINDS TABLE OF CONTENTS	EXPLAINS PURPOSE OF TOC	HAS STRATEGIES FOR USING TOC	OTHER NOTES

She starts her assessment with a simple request.

This book is called, *Are You a Mammal?* Everyone, please open up their book to the Table of Contents. Remember, we talked about where to find the Table of Contents yesterday?

Ms. Chan watches each student carefully. Jamie flips to the very back of his book, rather than to the front. Alejandro opens his book immediately to the Table of Contents. Lisa waits to see what the other students are doing and then flips her book open to the Table of Contents. Ms. Chan gives Jamie some redirection.

Jamie, remember that we find the Table of Contents at the front of our book. Can you help us find it?

He flips to the very first page, which is the author information, not the Table of Contents. So she helps him find the TOC before moving on. From this brief interaction, Ms. Chan knows that Alejandro can do this task independently, that Lisa needs a little



help from her peers (meaning it is a teachable strategy in her ZPD), and that the task is currently too difficult for Jamie, even with teacher prompting. Without the students even knowing they are being assessed, Ms. Chan records her assessment notes on her checklist.

Then Ms. Chan moves to the next strategy. She asks her students a few probing questions to see who understands the purpose of the Table of Contents. Other lessons for that week can be observed using this same checklist or there can be separate notes for each day.

✓ CHECKLIST

STUDENT	FINDS TOC	OBSERVATION NOTES	EXPLAINS PURPOSE OF TOC	OBSERVATION NOTES
Jamie	<div><input type="checkbox"/> Independently</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Indicated student need</div> <div><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Not appropriate</div>	Jamie needs reteaching scaffold to understand TOC use and then learn purpose.	<div><input type="checkbox"/> Independently</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Indicated student need</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Not appropriate</div>	
Alejandro	<div><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Independently</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Indicated student need</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Not appropriate</div>	Alejandro turned quickly to TOC and used it to identify correct page for reading. Already understands purpose.	<div><input type="checkbox"/> Independently</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Indicated student need</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Not appropriate</div>	
Lisa	<div><input type="checkbox"/> Independently</div> <div><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Indicated student need</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Not appropriate</div>	Lisa appears confused between TOC and glossary. Need to focus instruction on how these two text features are different and how to use them.	<div><input type="checkbox"/> Independently</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Indicated student need</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Not appropriate</div>	

**Ms. Chan:** Lisa, do you remember what kind of information we can find in the Table of Contents?

**Lisa:** It's like a list of what's in the book.

**Ms. Chan:** Right. It's a preview of all the sections of the book. Alejandro, look at the Table of Contents. Do you think this book will tell us what mammals eat or drink?

**Alejandro:** No.

**Ms. Chan:** Can you read the title of the second chapter?

**Alejandro:** Drinking Mom's Milk. Oh! That's something they drink.

**Ms. Chan:** Right. We will learn about what they drink. And Jamie, do you remember what these numbers tell us?

**Jamie:** Pages in the book.

**Ms. Chan:** So what page could we flip to if we want to read about what mammals drink?

**Jamie:** Six.

**Ms. Chan:** And Lisa, can you tell me one other thing you think we will read about?

**Lisa:** Things that are covered in hair.

With just a few simple questions, and in relation to the checklist, Ms. Chan is able to determine if this lesson on informational text features is in each student's Zone of Proximal Development.

None of the students was able to do both tasks independently, meaning this lesson is a rich learning opportunity for all three students. In addition, this lesson is also not too difficult for any of the students in the group. If any of the students had really struggled, Ms. Chan may have needed to shift her instruction or reteach a previous lesson. She can reuse this same checklist at a later point to determine if students are making progress with these skills.

“Teachers must evaluate individual students’ needs and respond to them... observations... **about how and why children behave in particular ways form the basis of instructional decisions** far more than do test scores.  
—Johnston, 1987

Assessment During Reading Conferences

Reading conferences provide an opportunity for discussion about the reading the student is doing and also allow a teacher to observe a student’s reading behaviors more closely. Conferences can be a part of small-group or independent reading time, but can occur across the school day. To confer simply means a side-by-side partnership between the teacher and student and is most often brief, under five minutes, and regular, as often as once a week in the primary grades and almost as frequent at the upper grades.

Essentially, conferring is a purposeful conversation the teacher has with students to assess current skills and provide immediate and targeted instruction. The main goal is to observe a reader’s thinking, understandings or reflections, in order to teach to their current needs, and move them toward independence.

The targeted instruction in a conference can take several forms. It might take the form of feedback about the reader’s process that the teacher has noticed, with the intention of simply naming a specific strength that the reader can continue to apply as an independent reader.



Reading conferences allow teachers time to briefly check in with readers each week.

Or, the teacher may observe that the student needs explicit modeling of a strategy (either one the reader is “shaky” on or is ready to try). The teacher uses a text to demonstrate the steps, talking them through so the reader is clear on how to do the strategy. Usually the teacher then asks the student to try the strategy with his book so she can guide and prompt the reader on what to do.

Conferences are a genuine conversation about what the student is reading as well as interested in. The teacher might ask:

- “What are you working on as a reader?”
- “What are you thinking about this book?”
- “Show me a place that is .... (exciting, confusing, funny, etc.)”

The teacher can also simply listen in on the student’s reading and then comment, “I noticed you....” This isn’t a test; it is more informative to ask a student to reread a page they just finished so that both the literacy processing and fluency can be observed. This is when an informal running record or anecdotal notes could be taken.

Conferences are a genuine conversation about what the student is reading.

Once the teacher has established a routine for conferences, they become effortless, and are a natural part of the instructional day. The hardest part is setting up a system for notetaking. Conference notes need to be user-friendly, not unnecessarily complicated. They should allow for recording and reflection over time. Notes also serve as a way to keep track of who to confer with and how many times the teacher has met with the student.



Some teachers like to use sticky notes to keep notes for each student and find that their small size is truly enough space for recording the key information. Often, the teacher will take notes and the student may also record a note, goal, or reflection. Each of these instances of data-gathering supports teachers’ work with students in the Zone of Proximal Development.

The teacher creates a plan for conferring. It is useful to identify a time to confer, choose a record-keeping tool, teach the students the protocol, and select a start date and pattern of conferring. One of the easiest types of forms to use is a simple table such as the one below.

✓ CHECKLIST

CLASS PICTURE BY MONTH

Name/Date	Name/Date	Name/Date	Name/Date	Name/Date
Name/Date	Name/Date	Name/Date	Name/Date	Name/Date
Name/Date	Name/Date	Name/Date	Name/Date	Name/Date
Name/Date	Name/Date	Name/Date	Name/Date	Name/Date
Name/Date	Name/Date	Name/Date	Name/Date	Name/Date

Supporting English Language Learners (ELs)

Conferring with ELs provides multiple opportunities to support both language and literacy. Often the student has strong background knowledge about a topic, but doesn’t have the English vocabulary needed to demonstrate that knowledge as a multilingual learner. Think about conferring around:

- Content vocabulary knowledge, particularly for terms with pictures or diagrams
- Labeling objects or processes in diagrams using sticky notes when the terms are in the text, but not on the diagram
- Developing academic instructional terms in English expected at grade level by reviewing key terms discussed in whole group or small group lessons for further support and practice.

Look for ways students can demonstrate what they know by pointing to text, gesturing, or sharing their native language word or word phrase, for the instructional vocabulary term.

Concluding Thoughts

Formative and summative assessments work in concert to provide students and teachers with a rich source of information on teaching and learning. Summative assessments are most often associated with longer-term learning outcomes. We can analyze summative assessments and work backwards to determine what formative assessments will help describe student progress towards the summative assessment, and to determine the learning that must occur on students’ developmental paths. This allows us to use formative assessment as a tool to identify students’ Zones of Proximal Development, teach in those zones, and certify student progress. Thus, doing formative assessment well ensures that students eventually achieve success on the summative assessment.