

Integrating Assessment with Grammar-for-Writing Instruction

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Because assessment should always mirror instruction, we recommend procedures based on the integration of reading, writing, and grammar reflecting an overall course goal of helping students learn and practice strategies for improving the expression and accuracy of their writing. Our approach includes asking students to self-assess, providing meaningful discourse contexts, and focusing on the development of students' own personalized systems for editing, including creating their own reference materials. Because students are often unfamiliar with this view of assessment, we recommend that teachers explicitly demonstrate how the procedures described here¹ can contribute directly to learning.

Diagnostic Assessment

Diagnostic assessment at the beginning of and throughout the semester helps both teachers and students discover strengths and problems areas, as well as helps motivate students who feel they have “studied it all before” yet are still not accurately using the forms in their writing. An in-class writing sample is a common diagnostic measure, and we suggest using a prompt that will generate a short expository piece of writing with some tense variety. In order to “bias for the best” (Brown, 2004), i.e., to design the assessment so that students can perform as well as possible, the prompt should be based on a short reading that students have had time to discuss and think about before they write, and students should have time for editing (15 to 30 minutes) during the next class session. In feedback to the students, we recommend minimal marking of the papers in two possible ways: 1) highlight or underline selected errors and give students another chance to correct them, or 2) mark each student's three most serious problem areas and list these at the end of the paper. In either case, the feedback should also focus on content by giving the student a short list of major problems (e.g., giving background information

¹ Most of the procedures and forms described here can be found in Porter & vanDommelen (2005) or on the instructor's website that accompanies the textbook.

about the reading, making connections using the writer's ideas, and tying ideas together in the end).

To diagnose students' grasp of grammar metalanguage (especially important with a mixed class of recent immigrants, generation 1.5 learners, and visa students), we give students a short paragraph with selected words underlined along with a list of terms for matching (e.g., noncount noun, action verb, and infinitive) and/or ask them to circle subjects and underline main verbs. To diagnose editing skills, we recommend giving a paragraph with relevant errors to edit, asking students to mark up the text in ways helpful to them so that we can see their editing strategies. Another means of diagnosis is a dictation or dictocomp based on a short paragraph which has particular grammar features embedded in it. Students can correct their own work (in a different color ink) and then analyze their "mis-hearings" and missing words and endings. Teacher feedback and the students' analysis of diagnostic writing and other measures help convince students that grammar accuracy is important and provide a basis for the next assessment step — self assessment and goal setting.

General Self-Assessment and Goal Setting

One major benefit of self-assessment and goal setting activities is that students have a direct hand in determining what they want to get out of the course and thus become more directly involved and responsible for their own learning. Additionally, such activities make goals and skills explicit in language that students can understand and can provide ongoing assessment, with students coming back to earlier goals to review and reformulate them.

At the beginning of the course, students can look over the content of the course textbook and/or the syllabus to identify grammar and writing features they can confidently use and those that they have trouble with or are unfamiliar with. Using this information and feedback from

their diagnostic writing and activities, they can then write out explicit goals for the course (or a unit), including naming the goal, giving examples, and noting material in the textbook for their reference. Another more interactive way to help students develop their goals is through a whole class activity in which students brainstorm grammar and writing skills they want to work on. Students note particular areas they individually need to work on, and then, working together, brainstorm ways to improve their skills and check their progress. As the facilitator, the teacher can help them make links between writing skills and grammar skills (e.g., using correct verb tense when writing about readings; using subordinators to make clear statements of main ideas).

In addition to course and unit goal setting, students can do self-assessment throughout the semester. For example, they can keep a Log of Feedback on Papers, in which they record strengths, skills they need to keep working on, and relevant reference materials they can use. At the midterm and end of the semester, we recommend use of a Midterm/Final Self-Assessment Form on which they provide evaluative information about their performance on papers, homework, quizzes, exams, participation, and other features of the course (such as developing and using grammar reference materials). They then list their strengths in the course, goals they previously met, and accomplishments in meeting their goals. At midterm time, they can state future goals, and at the end of the course, they can give themselves a grade. We find these self-assessment forms not only give students a hand in evaluating, but also encourage them to take a realistic view of their performance; in addition, this information helps the teacher to catch problems and plan individualized assistance.

Self- and Peer-Assessment of Writing

One way to promote students' self-assessment of their writing is to provide them with editing guides for explicit grammar features. These editing guides should focus the students on

rules and include ways to interact with the text, rather than simply answering yes/no questions. For example, an editing guide on verb tense consistency would guide students to underline verbs, mark instances of tense shifts, and come up with a reason for each tense shift. Students are most successful with editing guides that have a consistent system for marking and clear references to relevant grammar information in the textbook.

Often thought of as a controversial activity, peer assessment of grammar, in our view, can be effective when done in the context of a class editing workshop. On the day of the peer review, students bring in a paper, revised for content and edited for specific grammar features, with questions in the margins where they are uncertain. They can then work in pairs or groups focusing on those questions, ideally with class time provided for putting examples from the papers on the board to discuss. The goal of the self-assessment with editing guides and the peer-assessment in workshops is to help students develop strategies for interacting with their own and others' texts and to develop a "toolbox" of techniques for taking responsibility for their own editing work.

Another productive procedure is the preparation of a self-assessment cover sheet to go with a paper (whether a draft for discussion in conference or a final draft) on which students respond to various prompts about their paper (e.g., what I like, what I did well in content and grammar, what I had difficulty with and how I overcame it, and what part I would most like to improve). Such self-assessment provides the teacher with a deeper context for evaluating the paper and students with a sense of ownership of their work.

Teacher Feedback on Grammar and Writing

For teacher assessment of students' compositions, the goal should be clarity and guidance for future writing. We recommend minimal marking of errors with a focus on the student's

major problems, using simple labels familiar to the students (e.g., VT, art, and WF), along with end comments about the content, focusing on progress. We recommend accompanying this with a multi-trait (not analytic) grading rubric that includes components for +, ✓, or – grading: 1) a short list of content descriptions, some directly related to the tasks in the writing prompt (e.g., “Your discussion of the article is clear and presents information that is relevant to your experience”) and some more global (e.g., “You successfully tie your ideas together in the introduction and conclusion”); 2) statements about grammar and editing that specify the features in focus and evaluation of the student’s editing/proofreading draft; and 3) a statement about mechanics. The teacher can then include a summative comment and a grade. We have found that such a system simplifies the assessment and grading procedure for us, helping us avoid excessive comments and questions that our students are often unable to process. This feedback serves for future work for the students, for example, writing out selected corrections of errors that have been marked, listing the feedback in their Log of Feedback on Papers, and setting new goals for the next paper.

Other Formal Assessments

In addition to out-of-class compositions, a grammar-for-writing class will undoubtedly include other formal graded assessments such as quizzes, selected homework activities, and in-class tests. For the latter, we recommend including a brief objective component (e.g., a dictation, a quiz, an editing exercise comparable to those done in class) and a writing-editing task. In line with the principle of “bias for the best,” the writing prompt needs to allow for both student interest in the topic and accessibility — students need to have plenty to say — and of course the prompt should elicit writing in the genre of papers they have previously written. Ideally some class time can be spent preparing for the topic of the prompt —without actually revealing the

topic— using tasks such as brainstorming, listing, mapping, and freewriting. In format, the prompt should include: necessary background, the clearly stated topic, a list of bulleted points of what to include in the essay, and a list of grammar features for editing. We allow students to bring their textbooks, editing guides, and any personal reference materials to use during the test (though no freewrites, previous papers, lists, etc.) and allow time for editing (30 minutes or more), preferably in a subsequent class session. Again, feedback should be characterized by minimal marking, positive comments, and the use of a rubric to indicate specific strengths and weaknesses.

In conclusion, assessment, of which “testing” is only a part, needs to be closely integrated with instruction and with student learning. In addition, assessment should mirror salient features of a communicative language classroom such as a focus on meaningful communication, the building of student autonomy within a community of learners, and teacher-student collaboration.

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