Assessment for Learning: Integrating Assessment, Teaching, and Learning in the ESL/EFL Writing Classroom

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Abstract: Assessment for learning (AfL) is a relatively new concept in ESL/EFL writing. In AfL, learning is a goal in its own right, and assessment is the means to achieving the goal. Despite an emphasis on assessment the concept AfL appears to suggest, in implementing AfL teachers need to integrate teaching, learning and assessment rather than focus exclusively on how to assess student writing per se. This article aims to discuss the key concepts of AfL with reference to writing and provide practical suggestions to help ESL/EFL writing teachers implement AfL in their own classroom.

Keywords: assessment for learning; writing assessment; writing; ESL/EFL

Résumé : L’évaluation pour l’apprentissage (EPA) est de plus en plus considérée comme plus souhaitable sur le plan éducatif que les tests formels. Au cours des dernières années elle a retenu de plus en plus l’attention dans les énoncés de politiques relatives aux programmes d’études dans diverses régions du monde, dont le Royaume-Uni, l’Australie et Hong Kong. Cet article vise à approfondir notre compréhension de l’EPA, examine cette notion du point de vue de l’expression écrite et fournit quelques suggestions pratiques pour aider les enseignants à mettre en application l’EPA dans leur propre classe à l’écrit. Les exemples cités dans cet article sont conçus pour le contexte de l’école secondaire à Hong Kong, mais ils sont susceptibles de s’appliquer dans des contextes similaires d’apprentissage de l’anglais comme langue seconde ou étrangère.

Mots clés : l’évaluation pour l’apprentissage; évaluation de l’expression écrite; expression écrite; ALS/ALE

Introduction

English language teaching has experienced a major paradigm shift in assessment and evaluation in the last decade or so, with a greater focus on outcomes-based and standards-referenced assessment.
(Davison & Cummins, 2006) in favour of traditional forms of assessment. Such a shift has resulted in an increased and increasing attention to teachers, learners, and the classroom, and in particular the relationship between teaching, learning, and assessment. This inter-relationship is encapsulated in the notion of ‘assessment for learning’ (AfL), which came into use in the late 1980s and early 1990s, originating from the Assessment Reform Group (ARG) in the United Kingdom. AfL underlines the pivotal role assessment plays in reinforcing and extending learning. Taking AfL as its point of departure, this article attempts to clarify major issues in AfL with reference to writing in second and foreign language contexts and to provide practical suggestions to help writing teachers implement AfL in their own classroom. A key premise is that the implementation of AfL starts with awareness of the connection between teaching and learning and specifically how assessment can be used to inform teaching and learning. Therefore, the thrust of the paper is on how writing teachers can integrate teaching, learning, and assessment to reap the greatest benefits for learners, rather than on how teachers should go about assessing writing per se. The examples cited derive from secondary school contexts in Hong Kong, where English is increasingly considered more a foreign than second language.

Defining AfL

The term AfL, which is often used interchangeably with formative assessment, contrasts with assessment of learning (AoL), which mainly involves summative assessment. The AfL-AoL distinction, therefore, is parallel to the longstanding division between formative and summative purposes of assessment. Summative assessment is done for administrative and reporting purposes (Genesee & Upshur, 1996), whereas formative assessment contributes to students’ learning ‘through provision of information about performance’ (Yorke, 2003, p. 478). Scriven (1967) distinguished between formative and summative assessment on the basis of the time when the assessment is conducted: summative assessment usually happens at the end of a course, whereas formative assessment takes place continuously during the course. Formative assessment also describes multiple assessments that take place throughout a course to provide a summative assessment of learning. These are in essence micro-summative assessments that do not necessarily contribute to learning. Hence, there are overlapping functions associated with summative and formative assessment. In this article, my use of AfL emphasizes learning
function in the classroom, defined as ‘the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where learners are in their learning, where they need to go, and how best to get there’ (Assessment Reform Group, 2002).

Practices of AfL in the United Kingdom, Australia, Hong Kong, and United States

AfL has been increasingly regarded as educationally more desirable than formal testing and has, in recent years, received growing attention in curriculum policy statements in the United Kingdom, Australia, and Hong Kong (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003; Gardner, 2006; Leung, 2004). In the United Kingdom, where the notion of AfL originated, an influential analysis of the research literature conducted by Black and Wiliam (1998) revealed that AfL can lead to substantial gains in students’ learning. The Assessment Reform Group, with which the notion of AfL is closely affiliated, has since played a pivotal role in bringing about positive change to assessment practice, policy, and research in the United Kingdom. Through a collaborative project involving secondary teachers – the King’s-Medway-Oxfordshire Formative Assessment Project (KMOFAP), funded by the United Kingdom’s Nuffield Foundation (and later the United States) – AfL research has begun to make a direct impact on assessment practices at the classroom level (see Black & Wiliam, 2003).

In Australia, AfL is a central plank of curriculum reform. The national curriculum framework has put the improvement of learning and teaching as the primary function of assessment. In a recent curriculum renewal document Every Chance to Learn (Australian Capital Territory, 2005), for example, ‘assessment for essential learning’ is laid down as an important priority in curriculum renewal: ‘Assessment is a continuous process of gathering evidence to determine what each student knows, understands, values and can do. It is used at the beginning, during and end of learning sequences to determine where each student is “at” initially, their progress, and final judgements about the extent to which they have achieved the Essential Learning Achievements’ (p. 29). In the principles published by the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA, 2005), similarly, assessment is considered an integral part of teaching and learning. Recent research conducted on AfL in Queensland schools has demonstrated the beneficial outcomes of AfL practices in Australian secondary education (Sebba, 2006; Sebba & Maxwell, 2005).

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In Hong Kong, AfL has been identified as one of the most important items on the English language education reform agenda (Curriculum Development Council, 2004, 2007; Curriculum Development Institute, 2004). The oral assessment innovation in school-based assessment at Secondary 4 and 5 (Grades 10 and 11) is a recent initiative to promote AfL in English (Davison, 2007). In other areas of the English curriculum, a number of initiatives have been proposed to support AfL, such as portfolios, feedback sheets or checklists, and conferencing (Curriculum Development Council, 2002, 2006). Research on AfL is beginning to develop in English language teaching in Hong Kong – such as Carless (2002, 2005) on AfL in primary schools and Davison (2004, 2007) on classroom-based assessment in secondary schools.

In the United States, with its emphasis on reliability and objectivity in assessment within a culture of accountability, AfL seems to have a lower profile (Wiliam, 2006). Nevertheless, areas of assessment practices do commonly contribute to students’ learning, such as is the widespread focus on process writing and realistic genres (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Horowitz, 1986). Instead of only subjecting students’ terminal written products to assessment, process writing involves the teacher in helping learners develop strategies, through multiple drafting, to improve their final products during the writing. As teachers respond to intermediate drafts, they assess students’ writing to promote their learning, which is essentially what AfL is about. Moreover, as peers and learners themselves are involved in the assessment (as in peer and self-assessment), the focus on students’ learning is also in line with the spirit of AfL (e.g., Liu & Hensen, 2002; Stiggins, 2001). As we look further to work in feedback (e.g., Ferris, 2003), written commentary (e.g., Goldstein, 2005), conferences (e.g., Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997), and writing portfolios (e.g., Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000), we can see that principles of AfL are operating through a focus on the learners, learning process, and writing classroom. More than a decade ago, Hamp-Lyons (1994) had already underlined the importance of interweaving assessment and instruction to enrich the teaching and learning of ESL writing, though without using the term AfL.

Why AfL in writing?

So, if AfL is already happening in second and foreign language writing instruction – through process writing, self- and peer feedback, student-teacher conferences, portfolios, etc. – why do we need to advocate AfL in the writing classroom? I have at least three reasons.
why AfL should be given prominence, especially for the ESL/EFL writing contexts. First, the above-mentioned AfL strategies like peer feedback and conferences are not being widely adopted outside North American educational contexts where process pedagogy permeates. In Hong Kong, for example, writing is treated primarily as a product within an ethos where the exam culture dominates the learning culture (Hamp-Lyons, 2006), in spite of the espoused aim to promote AfL. Second, AfL in writing is not just about using strategies like process pedagogy, delivery of effective feedback, or conferences haphazardly and/or unsystematically in the classroom. Instead AfL in the writing classroom entails and integrates the whole array of interrelated concepts, including pedagogy, assessment processes, student learning, teacher-student interaction, motivation, etc., which have seldom been addressed holistically in the ESL/EFL writing classroom. The third reason why AfL in writing warrants attention is that writing assessment still tends to draw teachers’ and learners’ attention to its summative functions more than its formative potential in enhancing the teaching and learning of writing (or other knowledge or abilities). This is particularly true in school contexts, where teachers may have little choice but to be immersed in a culture of standardized assessment and accountability (Casanave, 2004). As a result, assessment is seen primarily as a means for gate-keeping, teaching as a coaching process, and learning as a matter of achieving better grades and standards (Huot, 2002). For teachers, assessment often means testing and grading, referred to as ‘the dirty thing’ teachers have to do (Belanof, 1991, p. 61). For students, assessment tends to be equated with grades. This orientation can easily shatter confidence and diminish motivation. Therefore, it is necessary, through an emphasis on AfL, to recast the role of assessment and harness its power for enhancing teaching and learning in the ESL/EFL writing classroom.

**Principles of AfL in writing**

To implement AfL in writing, it is crucial to identify and understand the principles that underlie effective AfL practices. To this end, I describe five principles for AfL in the writing classroom, drawing upon the key principles proposed by the Assessment Reform Group.

*Sharing learning goals with students*

AfL has more to do with learning and teaching than assessment per se. AfL practice starts with planning for teaching, and teachers sharing
their learning goals with students. In the example of teaching, learning, and assessment of story writing, teachers can start by establishing the goals of story writing and then help students understand the goals by involving them in learning activities that realize the goals (e.g., help students understand the story structure and apply it to their own writing, and enable students to use the simple past tense in story writing).

Helping students understand the standards they are working towards

Learning goals can be translated into a list of criteria for assessing student writing. It is important to help students understand the standards that teachers and curricula have set for them. This can be done by giving students sample texts, mini-text analysis tasks, and text improvement tasks where they attempt to apply the criteria to evaluate the quality of the texts. In so doing, students can familiarize themselves with the assessment criteria that will be used by their teachers to assess their writing while also preparing themselves for self- and peer assessment, which is described in the next principle.

Involving students in assessment

AfL develops students’ abilities to self-assess so that they can become independent and reflective in learning. It is therefore important to let students engage in assessment that contains different focuses, such as self- or peer evaluation of overall quality of writing, and self- or peer editing. The teacher needs to provide guidance and training and vary the demands of self- and peer assessment according to students’ abilities, such as by giving students checklists (see Appendix 1 for an example of a self-evaluation checklist on story writing) that reflect the learning goals established for specific writing tasks. Student assessment should focus on not only weaknesses but also strengths in their writing. Self-evaluation of writing can take different forms, such as self-editing, self-assessment (based on the assessment criteria articulated), and self-inquiry where students not only reflect on their strengths and weaknesses in writing, but also formulate their own goals and take initiatives to improve their own writing. Examples of students’ self-inquiry are the adoption of error logs that chart the development of written accuracy over time, and keeping of reflective diaries in which students analyze their own writing needs in communication with the teacher.

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Teachers providing feedback that helps

It is crucial that teachers provide quality feedback so that students learn about their strengths and weaknesses in writing, and more importantly, how to set goals for further development. This is one of the most challenging tasks for teachers, especially because feedback research has cast serious doubt on the effectiveness of teacher feedback (Ferris, 2003; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). According to Williams (2005), effective feedback is focused, stimulates thinking, consists of comments only (rather than marks), refers explicitly to success criteria, and provides concrete guidance on how to improve (rather than giving complete solutions). Such advice sheds important light on how prevalent feedback practices – particularly in L2 writing classrooms – can be improved. For instance, instead of giving vague comments like ‘under-developed ideas,’ feedback will be more effective if concrete suggestions are made to help students revise their writing – such as, ‘Give one or two examples to illustrate why smoking is harmful.’ Instead of writing correct answers for students’ grammatical errors, feedback may be more effective when students are asked to correct their own errors – if these are errors amenable to self-correction (Ferris, 2003). Since it is important to give students opportunities to act upon teacher feedback, single-draft classrooms where students do not have to respond to feedback are not conducive to learning. Feedback can also be delivered through teacher-student conferences, during which students are helped to think of ways to close the gaps in their writing.

Creating a classroom culture where mistakes are a natural part of learning and where everyone can improve

AfL places emphasis on learners’ motivation. Current writing assessment practices, however, tend to have deleterious effects on student motivation (Huot, 2002). AfL focuses on fostering motivation and emphasizing progress and achievement. In an AfL writing classroom, the learning atmosphere is secure, as students feel that making mistakes is natural. This is particularly important in the L2 writing classroom. Given that L2 learners are eager to obtain feedback on their errors (Leki, 1991), de-emphasizing errors by giving selective error feedback is a good way for teachers to create a culture where errors are not a large issue in writing. This does not mean that teachers turn a blind eye to students’ written errors and do nothing about them. Instead, using information gathered from assessments, teachers
should devise strategies and design materials that help students work on relevant aspects of their grammar. For example, if assessment has indicated that students have difficulty using certain grammatical items, teachers can fine-tune their teaching by designing learning activities or exercises on these specific items. To establish a positive learning atmosphere to help L2 students overcome apprehensions about writing, assessment criteria can be phrased positively; for example, in the form of ‘can-do’ statements, emphasizing what students can achieve instead of what they fail to do (see example in Appendix 2).

**Integrating teaching, learning, and assessment in writing**

When putting AfL principles into practice, educators should integrate teaching, learning, and assessment in the classroom. As such, the practice of AfL does not begin or end with a focus on assessment. Rather, teachers should start by thinking about planning for the teaching, learning, and assessment of writing (see Figure 1). Assessments are continuous because teachers should continually use information from assessment to fine-tune their teaching, improve learning, and facilitate planning for the next instructional cycle. Thus, through AfL, teaching, learning, and assessment form a symbiotic relationship, with assessment being integral to teaching and learning.

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These AfL principles can be illustrated through the following instructional unit developed for a Hong Kong Secondary 1 (Grade 7) classroom focused on story writing:

### Plan
- Decide on writing topic/assignment/genre, e.g., story writing.
- Identify learning goals.
- Develop assessment criteria.
- Design pedagogical materials that realize the learning goals.

### Teach
- Teach according to the learning goals -- e.g., story structure, grammatical patterns, and vocabulary specific to story writing.
- Provide sample texts.
- Engage students in mini-text analysis to heighten awareness of genre and language features.
- Provide grammar instruction focusing on grammatical patterns in story genre.
- Familiarize students with assessment criteria.
- Give students text improvement tasks where students apply assessment criteria (providing peer assessment practice).

### Write draft 1
- Students write with an understanding that their writing is not final.

### Assess draft 1 (by students)
- Engage students in self- and peer evaluation according to established criteria (e.g., in a feedback form).

### Write draft 2
- Students revise their drafts taking into consideration comments from peers, with a clear understanding that they can be critical of the comments and need not adhere to every single comment.

### Assess draft 2 (by teacher/students)
- Teacher assesses revised drafts according to assessment criteria. (Students can continue with self and peer evaluation, depending on the number of drafts required)
- Teacher provides written and oral feedback to the whole class or individual students at conferences.
- Teacher identifies students' strengths and weaknesses and suggests ways to improve.

### Assess draft 2 (by teacher/students)
- Teacher assesses revised drafts according to assessment criteria. (Students can continue with self and peer evaluation, depending on the number of drafts required)
- Teacher provides written and oral feedback to the whole class or individual students at conferences.
- Teacher identifies students' strengths and weaknesses and suggests ways to improve.

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Write draft 3
- Students revise drafts by acting upon teacher feedback.

Assess draft 3 (by teacher)
- Teacher assesses the final draft.
- Students reflect upon teacher feedback and set goals for further development – e.g., in their reflective diaries.

Plan again
- On the basis of information gathered from the assessment, teacher plans and teaches another unit of work, addressing areas where students need help.

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Issues in AfL in writing

However straightforward this teaching-learning-assessment procedure appears to be, when put into practice, AfL may not be easy. Below I highlight a few issues that are pertinent to the successful implementation of AfL in writing.

A variety of writing tasks

The teaching-learning-assessment procedure illustrated above may seem a bit daunting if teachers and learners are to go through the steps for all writing tasks, especially in ESL/EFL contexts dominated by a product-oriented approach to writing. In reality, not all writing tasks need to be formal and assessed. It is important to give students a variety of writing tasks, some of which can consist of single drafts, some informal, and some non-assessed (e.g., journal writing).

Empowering students

AfL has a lot to do with enhancing learners’ motivation and developing their autonomy. Students can play an active role in the writing classroom by doing some of the following:

- Using self- and peer evaluation
- Writing journals in pairs or groups
- Compiling their own portfolios
- Keeping error logs
- Writing reflective journals or progress logs on how they can improve their future compositions
- Suggesting areas of error feedback for the teacher
- Participating in the development of feedback forms or checklists

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Treatment of errors

This issue is particularly relevant to language learners. To ensure that assessment truly serves the purpose of enhancing learning rather than simply evaluating writing, teachers have to work out a consistent error feedback policy. This policy should be selective, tie in directly with the content and activities of grammar instruction, encourage self- and peer editing, and use error codes or other forms of commentary consistently and sparingly.

Scoring or not scoring student writing

Research has shown that when students get a grade and teachers’ comments, they tend to ignore the comments (Black & Wiliam, 1998). In some educational contexts, students’ writing may serve primarily summative purposes, so dispensing with scores or grades may not be easy or even feasible. To develop students’ confidence and promote their motivation, teachers can consider withholding scores temporarily, for example, by giving them scores or marks only after revisions have been submitted.

AFL and teacher professional development

AFL cannot be achieved by individual teachers working in isolation. Instead, it is important that teachers work collaboratively to review their writing instruction practices and plan a comprehensive program that takes into account the interrelationships between teaching, learning, and assessment. They can then develop strategies to teach writing and formulate a clear feedback policy in the light of their writing program. To implement AFL, teachers need to define and communicate goals and expectations clearly to students, provide them with opportunities to engage in learning rather than reduce them to passive testees, and prompt them to take responsibility for learning and to exercise control in the assessment. What’s more, teachers need to secure the support of school leaders, inform parents about these matters, and develop a concrete action plan, try it out, monitor it, and evaluate the process of change. AFL should be considered a key professional skill for teachers, who need support through continuing professional development. There are significant implications for teacher education in helping teachers come to grips with AFL in writing.
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**References**


### Appendix 1: Story writing self-evaluation checklist

Go through the checklist below, putting a tick next to the item you have included in the story.

**Beginning**

Check to make sure you have included the following background information about the story:

- The time of the story – i.e., when it happened
- The place of the story – i.e., where it happened
- The characters of the story – i.e., who were there
- Other facts important to the story – i.e., what happened to the characters

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Story development

Check to make sure you have developed the story by including the following:

- A problem or problems that happened to the main character(s)
- A solution or some solutions to the problem(s)
- Well-sequenced events that describe the problem(s) and the solution(s)

Ending

Check to make sure you have ended the story by including the following:

- An evaluation of the solution(s) – e.g., how the characters responded to the solution(s)

Language

Check to make sure you have used the following correctly:

- Dialogues (e.g., use of contractions)
- Simple past tense
- Spelling
- Punctuation

Appendix 2: Assessment criteria for story genre

| I can give clear information about the setting of the story. | 😊😊😊 |
| I can provide interesting details about the main characters. | 😊😊 |
| I can use suitable vocabulary to describe the setting and characters. | 😊 |
| I can create a problem that arouses interest. | 😊 |
| I can develop ideas in the story. | 😊 |
| I can describe the events in a logical sequence. | 😊 |
| I can provide an interesting ending. | 😊 |
| I can write simple dialogues. | 😊 |
| I can use the simple past tense to narrate past events. | 😊 |
| I can write in neat paragraphs. | 😊 |

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