Assessment as Learning in the Language Classroom

Icy Lee
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
Pauline Mak
The Open University of Hong Kong

Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed accelerating change in the global economy with a direct impact on the global marketplace. As a result, employers are seeking out new skills among graduates, such as creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, learning to learn, collaboration and information literacy skills (Binkley et al., 2012). Unfortunately, the 21st century trends are not sufficiently reflected in the classroom, and the fast changing world is not concomitant with the relatively slow pace in education. To equip learners with strategies to cope with the challenges in study, work and life, it is important that new forms of pedagogy and new assessment practices are developed.

Insofar as language assessment is concerned, traditional practice is characterized by a focus on tests and examinations; it is something that teachers do to students, with the former dominating the assessment process, playing the role of judges or assessors. Such assessment practice, which is referred to as assessment of learning (AoL), is unable to develop learners who can meet the demands of the 21st century as AoL reduces learners to passive recipients throughout the assessment process. A paradigm shift is therefore warranted. This paper proposes that the purposes of language assessment should be broadened to incorporate a stronger emphasis on alternative assessment practice such as assessment as learning (AaL), which has a crucial role to play in the language classroom. Before we explore the AaL strategies teachers can use in the language classroom, we first define related terms and examine the conceptual underpinnings of AaL.

The Emergence of Assessment as Learning

Earl (2003) posits that there are three approaches that underlie the current classroom assessment practice: assessment of learning (AoL), assessment for learning (AfL) and assessment as learning (AaL). The purpose of AoL is used primarily to measure learning outcomes and to report the outcomes to students and other stakeholders, thus serving largely administrative or summative purposes. In contrast, AfL is closely related with learning-oriented formative practices and it refers to any assessment with its first priority to serve the purpose of promoting students' learning (Wiliam, 2009). AaL reinforces and extends the role of formative assessment for learning and is "a process through which pupil involvement in assessment can feature as part of learning" (Dann, 2002, p.153), and the student is regarded to be the critical connector between the assessment and learning process.

Though the three assessment approaches have their place in education and in the classroom, the extent to which they contribute to student learning differ markedly. AoL, focusing predominantly on measuring learning, streaming students into different ability levels and reporting judgements about the students' level of competence and achievement to other parties, places the teacher as the key assessor and isolates students from the assessment process. Occurring at the end of the learning process, AoL has relatively less effect on student learning than AfL and AaL, where students are not afforded the opportunity to act on the teacher's feedback. AfL shifts the focus from making judgements to diagnosing the students' strengths and weaknesses as well as monitoring their learning and progress on an ongoing basis. The assessment information gathered can improve the quality of both learning and teaching. Not only does the information provide students with an indication of where they are and how to proceed next, it also informs teaching and enables teachers to adapt their instruction to meet the learning needs of the students. AaL goes beyond AfL and further focuses on the role of the students. In addition to serving as a contributor to the assessment and learning process, the student acts as a link between the two processes. Emphasizing assessment as a process of metacognition (Earl & Katz, 2006), AaL encourages students to monitor and

exert self-regulation over their thinking processes and stresses the importance of fostering students' capacity over time to be their own assessors. Students, taking a proactive role in their learning, use assessment information to self-assess and self-monitor their learning progress, reflect on their learning as well as making adjustments and adaptations in their thinking so as to achieve deeper understanding and to advance their learning.

Traditionally, AoL is the predominant kind of assessment in most classroom activities (Earl, 2003). While AfL has been used at various stages of the teaching and learning process, it tends to be informal and implicit. In many traditional language classrooms, systematic AaL is virtually non-existent. To prepare students to meet the demands of an information and knowledge-based economy which requires students to work towards higher order thinking, autonomy and self-management, the focus of assessment needs to be redefined. As suggested by Earl and Katz (2006), a reconfiguration of the balance among the three approaches of assessment must be put in place, where much more attention should be given to AaL. The reconfigured assessment environment compels teachers to embrace a new vision of assessment, where assessment would constitute a large part of the school day, not in the form of tests and examinations, but rather, "as a seamless part of the learning process" (Earl, 2003, p.28).

In sum, the globalized world in the twenty-first century calls for new skills and it is necessary to develop assessment practices that can equip students with these skills to meet the societal needs. As such, AaL is the way forward.

The AaL Process and Strategies with Reference to Three Stages of Learning

To implement AaL, it is first important to understand its process, which can be conceptualized with reference to three stages of the learning process, namely (1) where the learner is going; (2) where the learner is now; and (3) what the learner needs to get there (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Taking a unit of work as an example, these stages of learning require teachers to think about

teaching, learning and assessment in terms of (1) what they want their learners to achieve at the end of the unit of work – i.e. the learning goals (where the learner is going); (2) finding out where the learners are in terms of their performance when the learning task is administered (where the learner is now); and (3) based on the assessment information how learners can be helped to move forward in their learning (what the learner needs to get there).

The AaL process can be translated into a number of strategies that teachers can adopt in order to implement AaL in the language classroom (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). These include:

- establishing and identifying learning goals and success criteria;
- giving descriptive, diagnostic feedback that helps students understand their own strengths and weaknesses;
- empowering students as learning resources for one another; and
- developing a sense of ownership in students so that they take charge of their own learning.

In the following, we shall examine each of the above four AaL strategies, illustrating them with examples drawn from the language classroom.

Four Main AaL Strategies

AaL Strategy 1: Establishing and identifying learning goals and success criteria

Before classroom assessment, it is crucial that teachers let students know where they are going – i.e. what the goals of learning are, and what criteria are used to evaluate their learning. This can make learning purposeful for students. Through sharing and clarifying learning goals and success criteria with students, teachers can also teach appropriate metalanguage which students can use to enhance their learning. Take writing as an example. If the teacher is going to ask students to write a diary (i.e. a recount genre), it is useful to spend time showing and teaching students what they need to do in order to write an effective diary. A genre approach can be used, where the teacher provides explicit instruction in

the features of a diary in terms of text organization and typical lexico-grammatical features. Through explicit instruction, teachers can identify and clarify the following goals for writing a diary, telling them that they should be able to:

- include relevant background information in the first paragraph
- sequence the events in chronological order
- end the recount with a reflection of some kind
- use the past tense accurately to describe the past events
- use appropriate time markers to signal the sequence of events
- use a range of vocabulary to describe the events

These learning goals can be easily translated into a list of success criteria or rubrics that teachers can use to evaluate students' diaries (see Appendix 1 for a diary writing feedback form). As teachers work on identifying and clarifying the learning goals and success criteria for students, they also use these to strengthen their pre-writing instruction and spend time preparing students for the writing, also enhancing their metacognitive awareness of the writing task. This is an essential AaL strategy, the foundation on which other AaL strategies are built.

AaL strategy 2: Giving descriptive, diagnostic feedback that helps students understand their own strengths and weaknesses

In order that students can be empowered to play an active role in assessment, teachers have to give descriptive, diagnostic feedback to help students understand their strengths and areas for improvement. The feedback has to be clear and specific, given with reference to the expected learning outcomes (i.e. the learning goals and success criteria established earlier). In this connection, rubric-based feedback forms can provide a useful vehicle for delivering specific, descriptive feedback directly linked to the learning goals – e.g. Appendix 1 as mentioned in the above. Appendix 2 provides another example of a feedback form for delivering descriptive feedback on a speaking task (where students are required to give directions in pairs). The listed criteria

are supposedly the learning goals and success criteria for the very speaking task. The remarks column in the form allows the teacher to write descriptive feedback, which could be supplemented with face-to-face conferencing. Teachers should not simply point out the weaknesses, but they should also indicate the strengths in student learning. It is also important that students are given opportunities to act on teacher feedback, as well as explicit guidance to improve their work in their next stage of learning. In the case of writing, this can be best achieved through multiple drafting, where students make use of teacher feedback to revise their draft.

It is noteworthy that feedback is effective only when it is manageable for students. Teachers should therefore vary their feedback according to student needs and avoid overwhelming students with a large amount of feedback. The sample feedback forms provided in Appendices 1 and 2 could be adapted for different learning situations – e.g. they could be shortened, simplified or made more concise. Teachers could focus on selected items according to student needs and need not include all the learning goals in one feedback form.

AaL Strategy 3: Empowering students as learning resources for one another

In an AaL-focused classroom, students should be empowered to act as learning resources for one another within a supportive learning community. In the writing classroom, for example, students can play an active role before, during and after writing. Before writing, they can brainstorm ideas together, review their peers' mind maps, outlines or graphic organizers; they can also review their peers' goals. During writing, students can evaluate their peers' drafts, focusing on specific areas with reference to the learning goals and success criteria as assigned by the teacher. After writing, they can further evaluate their peers' writing, they can also read and comment on their peers' post-writing reflections and help them set further goals to improve their learning. In the speaking classroom, peer evaluation can also be conducted in a similar manner. Before a group discussion task, students can work together to gather ideas and/or develop outlines, and they can evaluate their peers' ideas. During

speaking, students can engage in peer evaluation by completing a peer evaluation form. After speaking, they can share their comments with each other and help their peers improve their speaking.

To facilitate peer feedback, teachers can use task-specific feedback forms based on the learning goals and success criteria identified earlier. Alternatively, they can consider using a general peer feedback protocol as follows to guide students' peer feedback:

Student writer/presenter: I would like to have feedback most on …

Peer reviewer: (1) I think you did well on … (praise); (2) But you need to change these parts because … (point out areas for improvement); (3) Overall, you can improve by … (give constructive suggestions)

Student writer/presenter: (seeking clarification) Could you explain on …?

Peer reviewer: Explain

Figure 1: Peer feedback protocol

Through specifying the roles of the student writer/presenter and peer reviewer in the peer feedback protocol, students will know very clearly what to do and how to go about giving peer feedback.

AaL strategy 4: Developing a sense of ownership in students so that they take charge of their own learning

To help students develop a sense of ownership so that they can take charge of their own learning, teachers should encourage students to set personal goals for their own learning, reflect on and monitor their goals. Students can set specific goals related to the learning tasks and/or generic goals for the entire course or academic term. An example of some task or unit-specific goals (for narrative writing) is provided in Figure 2 below.

I hope that by the end of the unit I will be able to:

- write interesting stories that entertain the readers
- write attention-grabbing story-opening and impressive ending
- use the past tense accurately in story writing
- use a range of suitable vocabulary to describe characters and setting
- use dialogue to make the characters come to life

Figure 2: Specific learning goals for narrative writing

These specific learning goals are directly linked to the learning goals and success criteria established by the teacher at the beginning of the task/unit. The following example in Figure 3 shows the generic learning goals a student has set for reading:

While I am reading, I will:

- connect my personal experience to what I am reading
- check if my prior predictions were correct
- have a dialogue with the writer by asking questions
- read between the lines – i.e. make inferences from textual clues
- predict what will happen next, and read on to confirm or reject my predictions
- re-read difficult parts of the text
- guess meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary

Figure 3: Generic learning goals for reading

To monitor and reflect on their learning, students can be helped to ask metacognitive questions, so that they become aware of what needs to be done and what options are available in order to achieve their learning goals. Take story writing as an example. The metacognitive questions students can ask, which are related to the learning goals established by the teacher before the assessment task, are shown in Figure 4.

Metacognitive questions for story writing

- What is the purpose of a story?
- How does the author begin the story to grab the readers' attention?
- What background information does the story provide?
- What is the setting?
- Who is/are the main character(s)?
- Does the story have a problem? What is it?
- How is the problem solved in the story?
- How does the author bring the characters to life?

Figure 4: Metacognitive questions for story writing

Aside from asking metacognitive questions, students can monitor and reflect on their learning by keeping a learning log or reflective journal, which enables them to engage in ongoing self-monitoring to stay focused on the goals and what needs to be done to achieve them. The learning log can be a general language learning log or one related to a specific language skill, such as reading or writing. In the learning log, students can document their goals, self-evaluation of strengths and weaknesses, the metacognitive questions asked, written reflections, and further goals for improvement. Alternatively, they can keep a reflective journal (e.g. a weekly one) to reflect on their own learning, such as the one below in Figure 5.

Three most important things I have learnt about reading/writing in this unit of work:

1. I should pay attention to the text type and purpose of reading and writing.
2. In writing I should follow the text structure my teacher has taught.
3. When I come across difficult words, I should try to guess the meaning.

One thing that I have achieved: I am able to understand the meaning of a text without having to look up the meaning of all difficult words.

One thing that I want to improve on: I need to organize my information better in my writing.

Figure 5: Reflective journal

Another thing students can do to develop a sense of ownership and take charge of their learning is to engage in self-assessment, through which they can take active steps to modify their learning goals and improve their learning. Appendix 3 provides an example of a self-assessment form to help students improve their reading. Teachers can consider adopting portfolio self-assessment, asking students to (1) compile all their works into a portfolio, arranging them from the most to the least effective; (2) reflect on the best piece of writing (e.g. what makes them the best; what goals they set; what they did well and less well; what they did to solve the problems; and what further goals they set for their future learning).

Through implementing the above, students can showcase their learning and learning progress and share with others, such as their peers, teachers and parents. They can also celebrate their learning through documenting their progress, which can boost their motivation.

Conclusion

To conclude, AaL requires a significant change of the teacher and student roles, change in teacher mindsets, and change in instructional practice. Through AaL, teachers can foster a stronger link between assessment, learning and teaching. They also focus on student learning, work on maximizing student involvement in learning, and enhance learner motivation. Together the above AaL strategies can make learning more focused, engaging, and productive, and teaching more goal-oriented, learner-centred, and effective. Through developing assessment capable students, teachers can help students develop autonomy and self-regulation, which are skills increasingly needed for the globalized world.

Appendix 1: Diary writing feedback form

	Well done	**Satisfactory**	**Room for improvement**	**Remarks**
Included relevant background information in the introduction				
Sequenced the events clearly				
Ended the diary with a thought or reflection				
Used the simple past tense accurately				
Used appropriate time markers to signal the events				
Used a range of vocabulary to describe the events				

Appendix 2: Feedback form on speaking task (giving directions)

	Yes	To some extent	No	Comments
Gave directions that were comprehensible	☐	☐	☐	
Used strategies to check that the person you were talking to understood you	☐	☐	☐	
Used your voice to communicate meaning and interest	☐	☐	☐	
Gave directions grammatically	☐	☐	☐	
Used appropriate vocabulary to give directions	☐	☐	☐	
Spoke fluently	☐	☐	☐	
Had good eye contact	☐	☐	☐	

Appendix 3: Self-assessment for reading

Reading strategies	Often	Sometimes	Almost never	What I plan to do
I make predictions before reading.				
I ask questions when I am reading.				
I look for the main idea.				
I skip unimportant information.				
I guess the meaning of unfamiliar words.				
I think of the intention of the author.				
I relate my experience to what I read.				

References

Binkley, M., Erstad, O., Herman, J., Raizen, S., Ripley, M., Miller-Ricci, M., & Rumble, M. (2012). Defining twenty-first century skills. In P. Griffin, B. McGaw & E. Care (Eds.), *Assessment and teaching of 21st century skills* (pp.17-66). Dordrecht: Springer.

Dann, R. (2002). *Promoting assessment as learning: Improving the learning process.* London: Routledge Falmer.

Earl, L.M. (2003). *Assessment as learning: Using classroom assessment to maximize student learning.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Earl, L.M., & Katz, S. (2006). *Rethinking classroom assessment with purpose in mind.* Retrieved from http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/assess/wncp/full_doc.pdf.

Ontario Ministry of Education (2010). *Growing success: Assessment, evaluation, and reporting in Ontario's schools: First Edition, Covering grades 1 to 12.* Retrieved from http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/growsuccess.pdf.

Wiliam, D. (2009). *Assessment for learning: why, what and how?* London: Institute of Education, University of London.

Authors' e-mail: icylee@cuhk.edu.hk
pwwmak@ouhk.edu.hk