# Formative Assessment and Effective Teaching and Learning*: Consolidating Gains from Singapore, Brunei and Hong Kong

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## Abstract

Several extensive reviews of the research literature have concluded that formative assessment is the most powerful factor in raising student achievement. This paper explores the questions:

- What is formative assessment?
- How does formative assessment operate in the classroom?
- Under what conditions will it work?

This paper discusses findings from studies of formative assessment and the experience of several English language projects: how classroom discussions, questions, activities and tasks can be used to elicit evidence of student learning, how this feedback can be used to propel students' learning and how to set up conditions for activating students to own their learning.

## INTRODUCTION

The paper draws on the author's 20+ years of experience in large scale professional development projects, working in collaboration with classroom teachers, asking the same questions as those asked by teachers and seeking best fit 'solutions' for the day to day challenges faced by teachers. All these projects aimed at improving children's English language development and their engagement with learning (LLELP, 2006; Ng, 2001; Ng & Sullivan, 2001) and

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engagement they all involved children who were learning English as speakers of other languages (ESOL).　The earliest programme in Singapore (1985-1990) worked at the lower primary levels (Primary 1-3) with the later programmes in Brunei (1989-1994) and Hong Kong (2000-2006) covering Primary 1 to 6. The Hong Kong project had also a simpler version of the programme at the preschool level (1997-1999) and Singapore (where English has become the main language for classroom instruction), has developed an updated version for Primary 1 through to 6 (2006-2011).　Exploration is currently ongoing in Singapore to adapt the basic conceptual framework to the Lower Secondary (from 2010) and Kindergarten levels (from 2012).

The lower primary (Primary 1-3) projects were book-based programmes involving elements of Shared Book and Language Experience Approaches, suitably adapted to the educational systems they were operating in.　The teaching techniques in the upper primary programmes (LLELP, 2006) were expanded to include Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), Guided Reading (GR), Know-Want to Know-Learn (KWL – a reading comprehension technique, Ogle, 1989) and Retelling (Brown & Cambourne, 1987).

There was also a greater emphasis in the upper primary on explicit teaching of text-types and grammar.　All the projects involved mainly students from average income home backgrounds in the three educational systems.　In the recent Singapore adaptations, the goal is to make freely available to all schools the resources of the developed programmes.

These programmes were based on sound pedagogical principles consistent with the findings of research into effective reading and language classrooms (see for example Duffy, 2003; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Hoffman, McCarthey, Elliot, Bayles, Price, Ferree & Abbott, 1998; National Reading Panel, 2000; Pressley, 2006; Pressley, Rankin & Yokoi, 1996).　Features promoted by these programmes include:

- promoting high academic engagement in the classroom through an emphasis on motivating students.
- a combination of whole class and small group teaching that provides scaffolding for students as they read and write.　This allows students to work within their 'zones of proximal development', that is, being challenged without being frustrated.
- a greater proportion of time spent on actual reading and writing than on workbook exercises.

- a range of levels of authentic literature and other texts that allow students to read and experience according to their strengths and needs.

- language skills instruction that provides a balance of holistic reading and writing activities, often in response to the specific needs of the students.

- instruction in comprehension strategies.

- frequent opportunities to write within a plan-draft-revise process that focuses on the coherence of ideas as well as the mechanics of English.

- explicit teaching of word-identification skills and the strategies of using letter-sound associations and word parts to sound out words, knowledge of high frequency words as well as picture, text structure and syntactic cues to make sense of the text.

Learning is facilitated through integration of language features (at the micro and macro levels) to provide reinforcement and practice of target teaching goals.   In the Hong Kong programmes for example, integration at a macro level, was achieved by using similar themes and topics as those used in the Chinese language curriculum.   Learning activities were also integrated through the different lesson components, employing the language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The different parts of any one lesson (e.g. song, book reading, language activities) were also integrated with the language and content of the book for a particular unit of work.   The strategy of integration is a response to the challenge of how to provide adequate coverage of the features and characteristics of the English language.   It seems that in order not to overcrowd the ESOL curriculum, the only way to cope with the multifaceted nature of the English language is through integration in as many ways as possible.   Besides, such integration facilitates understanding for the learner. For ease of reference, the three programmes will be referred to as the Integrated ESOL (IESOL) programmes, underscoring the importance of integration in all three programmes, even though the three programmes have different features. Most of the examples and transcripts of classroom interactions are drawn from the project in Hong Kong.

While these IESOL programmes could be considered successful as shown by the results of internal and external monitoring and testing (e.g. Ng & Sullivan, 2001; Ng, 2001; Martin & Abdullah, 2003), it has to be pointed out that finding appropriate teaching techniques and materials is only a part of effective teaching.   It was unfortunately observed that these IESOL tools and

procedures were used by a few teachers in the manner that has been institutionalised over many years – using traditional drill and rote memory. The search for improving IESOL programmes is a continuing effort and upcoming research has been and is being scoured for other strategies/factors that affect learning.　The following sections of the paper will discuss important guiding principles of the IESOL programmes and their relation to an important aspect of teaching that applies across specific approaches, techniques and content areas, and assessment.

## Assessment, Examinations and Teaching Practice

In the three Asian educational systems I have worked in, examination pressures exert a great influence on classroom practices.　Accountability to parents and administrators is a big challenge and the most common assessment procedures are those measuring outcomes.　Often, there are mid-year and end-of-year examinations and pre-examination preparation and tests.　In many schools at levels where high stakes examinations are placed, there are monthly and sometimes weekly assessments.　The traditional teaching style is to teach for two or three weeks, and at the end of that period, students are assessed. Whatever the results of the assessment, the teacher then goes on to the next topic, because there is a syllabus to be covered for an examination.

Outcome measures such as these yield composite marks or grades. They are useful for the classification and comparison of children, classes and schools, but the teacher needs to know more than just the end points of instruction. Teachers need to know what happens between assessments in order to obtain feedback information for instructional purposes.　Additionally, teacher professional development programmes (whether pre- or in- service) have been shifting attention from teaching to learning – to a focus on what the students are getting out of the process rather than on what teachers are putting into it.　In traditional lessons, teachers are often doing all the work.　Besides managing classroom dynamics, reading set texts, they are often observed to be explaining all the words and concepts that are thought to be difficult for the class, often doing the asking and even answering their own questions!　It's no wonder the teacher gets better at the learning outcomes being promoted – the teacher is doing all the work, not the student.　This paper examines what can be done to involve students more so that they are not mere recipients of teacher initiatives in the classroom but become more active in deciding what goes on in their learning, including the assessment of their learning.

# FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT AND FORMATIVE FEEDBACK

In 1998 Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam of King's College London published their wide-ranging analysis of research into classroom-based assessment across curriculum areas (Black & Wiliam, 1998a; 1998b). Over a period of nine years, they surveyed many books, more than 160 journals and earlier reviews of research. Out of this, they studied 580 articles and chapters and published a review (Black & Wiliam, 1998a) with this main conclusion:

> 'There is a body of firm evidence that formative assessment is essential to classroom work and that it can raise standards. We know of no other way of raising standards for which such a strong prima facie case can be made on the evidence of such large learning gains.'
> (Black & Wiliam, 1998b. p.19)

About the same time, John Hattie from the University of Auckland in New Zealand was studying factors that made a difference in the classroom (Hattie, 1999). He made a synthesis of 337 meta-analyses, including 200,000 effect-sizes from 180,000 studies, covering nearly all methods of innovation. He concluded that the most powerful single factor for raising achievement is feedback based on evaluating students' understandings, a finding similar to that of Black and Wiliam.

Conclusions from earlier reviews and research studies into the effects of feedback in schools, colleges, and workplaces, (see for example, Crooks, 1988; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996) are rather sobering – much of the feedback that students receive has, at best, no impact on learning, and can be counter-productive. There were several other findings that run counter to common classroom wisdom about feedback. Some of these are:

- The incidence of feedback for each student in the typical classroom is very low, usually in seconds per day at best (Hattie, 1999).
- Global grades or simply confirming correct answers have little effect on subsequent performance (Crooks, 1988). When students were given only marks they made no gain from the first to the second lesson (Butler, 1988). Students given only comments scored on average 30% higher. Giving marks alongside comments cancelled the beneficial effects of the comments. This suggests that evaluative feedback including a mark/grade does not help pupils improve as much as descriptive feedback without a mark/grade.

- Repeated explanations that have previously led to failure are less effective than employing alternative strategies (Fuchs, 1993; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1986).

- An over-emphasis on feedback related to conduct or neatness is likely to have a detrimental effect on the intellectual quality of children's work (Dweck, 1986).

- Assessment of pupil performance is often in affective terms. Feedback which draws attention to self results in negative effects on performance (Bennett & Kell, 1989; Hattie, 1999).

These studies showed that while on average feedback did increase achievement, in 40% of the studies feedback often made people's performance worse than it would have been without feedback. This occurred when feedback involved the students' self-esteem, where the feedback focused attention on the person rather than the quality of the work. For example assessing students' work through marking and feeding back grades, marks or other forms of report that encouraged comparison with others is likely to label students and reduce their self-esteem.

These studies show that students' achievement is not enhanced if the teacher separates assessment from teaching (Harlen, 1998). The biggest positive impact of assessment on performance occurred when feedback told not just what to do to improve, but also how to go about it (Black & Wiliam, 1998a; Harlen, 1998; Hattie, 1999; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996, Torrance & Pryor, 1998; Wiliam, 2007).

## Some Formal Formative Assessment Tools

Books for language teachers often contain recommendations for measuring tools (e.g. Calfee & Perfumo, 1996; Johnston, 1992; Glazer & Brown, 1993) to record observations of learners at the beginning of the year with repeated measures to check their progress. In the IESOL programmes (LLELP, 2006; Ng, 1988; Ng, 2001; Ng & Sullivan, 2001; Ng & Sullivan, 2008), teachers were introduced to observational checklists for recording early literacy behaviours (see for example, Jabatan Perkembangan Kurikulum, 1990). These consisted of categories of behaviour such as knowledge of the letters in the alphabet, some concepts about print, colour, numbers and oral responses observed during lessons. The intention of these tools is formative – to find out children's language needs so that teachers can craft instruction to meet those needs.

Other recommended tools include anecdotal records/notes, a "portfolio" or file for each student containing dated samples of his/her work and performance tasks that show what the student can do.   Anecdotal records or notes trace students' progress throughout the year to provide evidence of growth or difficulty.   They are usually kept in a positive tone about a student's progress, a sort of "kidwatching" but recorded on paper.   These records are made as soon as possible after the event and should be kept strictly confidential, especially if they contain sensitive information.   Performance tasks show what students can do rather than what they can memorize or recall.   For example, listening to a student read aloud periodically can indicate progress in word identification strategies.

While most of the above tools can be used for measuring outcome, they can also be used formatively in that the teacher can use the information obtained to monitor the learners' ability to use oral and/or written language and design teaching moves to match students' need.   As defined by Black & Wiliam (1998a, p.2), formative assessment or assessment for learning:

> "... refers to all those activities undertaken by teachers, and by the students in assessing themselves, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Such assessments become formative when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching to meet the needs."

Hattie (1999) argues that if we accept his conclusion that the most powerful single moderator that enhances achievement is feedback, the prescription for improving education must be "dollops of feedback" – providing information about how and why the student understands and misunderstands, and what directions the student must take to improve.   This is not rocket science, as for decades colleges of education have stressed that the teacher needs to find out where the learners are at and what they know in order for effective teaching moves to be made.   What is new is the powerful potential of this seemingly simple principle.   More recent studies have found that students taught by teachers who used 'assessment for learning' concepts approximately doubled their speed of learning – these students achieved in six or seven months what would otherwise have taken a year to learn in other classrooms (Wiliam, Lee, Harrison & Black, 2004).   More significantly, these improvements appeared to be consistent across countries (including Canada, England, Israel, Portugal, and the United States), age levels and content areas.   The researchers also found after working with teachers in England, that these achievement gains

could be sustained over extended periods of time and when measured with external standardized tests (Wiliam, Lee, Harrison & Black, 2004).

The features of formative assessment and assessment for learning (Stiggins, 2005) are consistent with the principles used in development of the IESOL programmes.　The following sections describe these features, which many IESOL teachers have been implementing in their classroom instruction for effective feedback and improved learning.　These features are interconnected and in reality hard to separate one from the other, but for the purposes of discussion it is convenient to consider them separately.

## Having Clear Learning Goals and Intentions

For a start, teachers should be very clear about the learning goals, the expected outcomes of classroom tasks and how the learners can achieve those goals.　These goals and expected outcomes must also be communicated effectively to students.　Prior to implementation of the IESOL programmes, many classrooms were 'teaching the textbook' and it would not be unusual to have students answer 'Page twelve' to a question as to what they were doing. For many students then, the purpose of English lessons was to go through the textbook, and what mattered was that their written work was accurate, neat and of the specified length required by an exam.

The following transcript shows a typical classroom interaction found in those traditional classrooms.

Transcript 1

Teacher:　Where's the pencil? Mary. (Teacher pointed to a pencil placed in a jar)
Mary:　　The pencil on the jar.
Teacher:　Please repeat your answer. The pencil…
Mary:　　The pencil in the jar.
Teacher:　is
Mary:　　is
Teacher:　in or on
Mary:　　in or on (Mary looked puzzled)
Teacher:　in or on? (Teacher pointed to helping words on the chart)
Mary:　　in or on the jar! (Mary with a bright smile)

This scenario is played out in countless classrooms all over the world – the "guess what is in the teacher's head" game. The learner is left in the dark as to the real purpose of the whole lesson.

Because language learning is complex with its multiple levels, the IESOL programmes have various lesson components (see Table 1 for a typical IESOL unit plan) that interweave between whole texts, paragraphs, sentences, phrases, words and word parts (e.g. letters).   Each IESOL unit is built on a cycle of activities, with whole class teaching as well as instruction in small groups and individual work.   Instruction proceeds from an intensive engagement with whole text followed by deconstruction of whole text for a detailed exploration of smaller bits of language (e.g. letters and sounds, words, sentences) and then moves on to the more difficult task of constructing text in writing.   With these many levels in language learning, it is crucial to make transparent to the student the learning intentions for each of those components, and what would count as success.   For example, in an IESOL unit of work that may cover 1-3 weeks, the first component is often the class reading of a piece of text.   In the emergent literacy stages at Primary 1, the targets would initially be to enjoy and understand the text (often a story in the early stages) in a Shared Reading lesson, complemented by follow-up activities aimed at developing basic decoding skills for word identification.   [See Table 1]

A learning goal in English lessons will often be covered over a number of sessions, but teachers should explicitly share the goal with students at each lesson.   Each lesson may have a different focus, with the level and needs of the students determining whether the learning intentions involve, for example, strategies for word identification, working out the meaning of words or other comprehension strategies.   Especially when there is explicit and direct instruction on smaller bits of the language as in Part 2 (see Table 1), the students should be clear about how that study of small bits of language links to the larger pieces, as students can easily get lost in 'seeing the trees and not the forest'.   In the IESOL programmes, when novices are exploring parts of words, they will also be shown how they can apply them to reading and to remembering unfamiliar words.   The note below is extracted from typical lesson guidelines for the IESOL project teachers.

> ✍Note:   This activity helps students understand that some English vocabulary items are organized by and can be divided up into smaller meaningful units. This is a very useful vocabulary-learning technique which the students can employ (1) when they come across difficult and unknown vocabulary and (2) for retrieval and retention.   When you are introducing new vocabulary to the students, get them to break the new words into syllables and look to see if there are small words in the big words.

It is advisable to have learning goals revisited as the lesson progresses and at the conclusion of the lesson.　For example, at the end of a reading lesson, the session is briefly summarised and the learning goal and success criteria established for this lesson are reviewed.　Students are encouraged to articulate and reflect on their own learning and to set goals for the next reading lesson.

IESOL classrooms have been rather successful in conveying the main goals of language learning, as revealed in student interviews conducted at the end of the Hong Kong project.　When the students were asked about what they had learnt in the project lessons, very few mentioned specific items of knowledge (e.g. particular words or poems learnt).　Most of them described the language processes they had learnt (see examples in Transcript 2) and many were able to link what they had learnt to what they would be able to use when they went to secondary school.

Table 1. IESOL Activities in Order of Presentation

| Time-line | (1-3 weeks in total) | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Part/ Component | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| Activity | Shared Reading, Guided Reading, etc. | Language Activities | Language Experience and Class Writing | Group Writing | Individual Writing | Learning Centres for listening, speaking, writing, reading, viewing and presenting |
| Examples of Targeted Skills/ Knowledge | Reading strategies, with opportunities for speaking, listening, writing and visual literacy. | Explicit instruction in word study, grammar and language use at the various levels of language (word part, word, phrase, sentence, text, inter-textual). | Writing, both composing and editing processes with opportunities for speaking, reading, listening & visual literacy. | Writing, both composing and editing processes with opportunities for speaking, reading, listening & visual literacy. | Writing, both composing and editing processes with opportunities for speaking, reading, listening & visual literacy. | Differentiated practice of all language skills, supported and/or independent, at the various levels of language (word part, word phrase, sentence, text, inter-textual, etc). |
| Amount of Teacher Support provided | More ——————————————————————→ Less | | | | | Differentiated support, depending on progress level. |

Transcript 2

Andy:  I have learned phonics in the lessons.   Phonics is very useful, when sometimes we meet some unknown words, we are able to break them into syllables and pronounce it correctly.

Janice:  I like the retelling part most.   First of all, our teacher gives us a text. Then when we are reading the text, we would use the highlighter to highlight the important points.   After reading, we need to use our own words to rewrite the text.   After rewriting, we need to share our work to our group members.   Our group members will give us some comments.   Then I can know which part I can do better.   Sometimes, I will share my work to the whole class.   My classmates will give me some comments.   I can learn from them and also I can build up my confidence.

The learning goals and intentions of formative assessment are not the same as those of the traditional behavioural input/output models.   What is important in formative assessment is an insight into the constructions that students have made from their learning activities. Rather than evaluating in order to reinforce set learning objectives, this insight is used for feeding into instruction (Hattie, 1999).   Another point of difference is that English language learning is not viewed as chiefly a matter of acquiring items of knowledge.   Some teaching conversations may revolve about consonant blends, new words or concepts, sentence structures or the theme of the text, but an equally strong emphasis in formative assessment and IESOL programmes is on the acquisition of processes and strategies.   For example, in writing there are processes of brainstorming, drafting and editing and in reading there are strategies for monitoring comprehension processes and repair strategies when comprehension fails. Here, the learning outcome is not only the comprehension of the specific piece of text used in the lesson but rather the reading strategies of prediction and the skill of seeking evidence to confirm predictions made.

## Using Information from Assessment for Teaching and Learning

Harlen (1999) pointed out that assessing and gathering the information from assessment is only part of the formative assessment strategy.   It is the use of the information gathered that distinguishes it from other purposes, and teachers should adapt their teaching to what has been identified about students' learning needs and strengths.   This is an essential aspect of teaching-learning in formative assessment.

Such use of information is exemplified at one level in IESOL project teachers' regular planning of the curriculum for the coming year using the students' assessment results from the previous year. The yearly plan could be broken down into terms or semesters and could be modified, trimmed or expanded as the year progresses, depending on students' progress. Other forms of planning could take place on a weekly or bi-weekly basis, when teachers of the same grade level get together to reflect on the recent lessons taught in the classroom and the information obtained from students' progress, and use this to plan for the coming lessons. This is similar to practices promoted in other countries such as New Zealand (Bell & Cowie, 2001).

In comparison to these pre-planned (and more formal) uses of formative assessment, an example of daily formative assessment use is found in the powerful teaching procedures of the Reading Recovery lessons developed by Clay, one of the greatest teachers of our time (Clay, 2005). The Reading Recovery programme is an early intervention programme directed towards providing individual help for children having difficulty in reading and writing, to 'recover' them and restore them back into normal classroom teaching. The programme is able to do this through structuring lessons that are different for every child. The various teaching activities allow the teachers to evaluate students' understanding and then match next teaching acts to the present understandings of students. The best Reading Recovery lessons occur when the teacher responds always to what the child is trying to do, using moment-by-moment assessment and teaching decisions. Clay drew a useful analogy between conversation and Reading Recovery teaching in these words:

> "Sensitive and systematic observation of young children's reading and writing behaviours provides teachers with feedback which can shape their next teaching moves. Teaching then can be likened to a conversation in which you listen to the speaker carefully before you reply."
>
> (Clay, 1985, p.6)

An injunction from a Piagetian psychologist, Duckworth (1981) stresses the importance of teachers understanding what and how children understand. While one-to-one tutoring is not the norm in a classroom, the Reading Recovery example demonstrates the power of the basic formative assessment principle: teachers should find out where the learners are at and what they know, before teaching moves can be made to take them from where they are at to somewhere else.

Often teachers are full of what is in their own heads, like the teacher in the next transcript of part of a shared reading discussion (Transcript 3).   The teacher was looking for 'big' as the answer and missed the opportunity to work on the student's contribution 'giant' and perhaps extend it to 'gigantic' – a word that could be within the child's grasp.

Transcript 3

John:       It's giant.
Teacher:   No, not giant, big.   Say it's big!

In Transcript 4, the error made indicates that the child is probably already looking very carefully at the letters because only one letter is incorrect ('h' for 'l' in sleeping).   It is likely that if the child is given feedback to refer to the context and picture clues as well as attention to letters, she will be able to read the word and learn something about the skill of using the various cues to help her read (see Clay, 2001; 2005 for a discussion use of cues in reading strategies).

Transcript 4

Sue (reading):     Mary is sheeping
Teacher:             Aiyah, I keep telling you, look carefully, s-l is sleeping.

IESOL teacher development workshops discuss opportunities for applying formative assessment principles on a daily basis in the classrooms.   Novice teachers have found it rather hard to monitor individual students' understandings on the run, as individual students learn different things as a lesson is being presented.   Gathering responses to assess the understanding of the whole class in real time is obviously a challenge and task sheets have been provided to help teachers gather information about students' learning for feedback into teaching decisions.   This is of some help, but currently an IESOL team is trying to develop strategies to help them learn from other teachers who have found techniques that work for whole class and/or small group teaching.

An effective technique used by those teachers (Leahy, Lyon, Thompson & Wiliam, 2005) is to have all students write their answers on individual dry-erase boards, which they hold up at the teacher's request.   The teacher can then scan responses for novel solutions as well as misconceptions.   Another technique is to give each student a set of cards labeled for multiple-choice question-answer format.   If the question is well designed, the teacher can quickly judge the different levels of understanding in the class and make various teaching decisions.   These could be to move on, to reteach the concept or to review

particular aspects of that topic. Teacher preparation for these techniques should take about the same time as that required for the alternative – developing task sheets or assessment papers to provide feedback about students' thinking and understanding for shaping students' next learning steps (Leahy, Lyon, Thompson & Wiliam, 2005).

Their teachers have discovered that through careful planning and thinking about the questions they ask in class, teachers can check on students' understanding while the students are still in the class rather than after they have left, as is the case with grading (Leahy, Lyon, Thompson & Wiliam, 2005). The time saved from marking can be used in the pre-lesson planning of effective classroom discussions, questions, and learning tasks.

Some teachers apply formative assessment processes more successfully in the writing components of the IESOL unit (Parts 3-5 in Table 1) than in the oral interactions and discussion because the writing activities are slower in real time. Feedback about writing could occur when the class works together with the teacher on a piece of class writing or when done in small groups.  However, teacher feedback operates best in individual writing conferences, when the teacher works with students on their drafts and can provide constructive suggestions for improvement based on diagnostic information from a student's individual writing.  It should be two-way between the teacher and student, where the teacher can discuss the student's writing with the student and get direct feedback about what the student understands or misunderstands.  More discussion of what goes on in individual conferences can be found in the section below.

Another IESOL component that sits well in the formative assessment framework is Learning Centres, in which students are grouped according to progress level.  Through preceding lesson components, the IESOL teacher has gathered information about how the students are achieving the goals of a particular unit.  For example one of the learning outcomes could be that students construct instructions for a simple recipe.  Throughout the unit, students may demonstrate their understanding (or not) of the procedural text-type, its text features and language structures, together with knowledge of the vocabulary of a certain kind of recipe.  In Learning Centres that occur at the end of the unit, the teacher may direct students depending on their learning needs to activities that reinforce what has been learnt, visit any aspect of learning not attained thus far or extend students in areas that they can control independently.  Smooth management of Learning Centres also allows the

teacher to work with a lower progress group to provide better support for their learning, or to stretch a higher progress group to greater challenges.

The critical element in all these varied examples of formative assessment is the gathering of feedback to provide information about the learners' understandings (or misunderstandings), and the use of that information to show what directions the students must take to improve. The next section discusses in greater detail the kind of feedback that is most useful to learners.

## Generating Informative Feedback in Quality Classroom Conversations

Aural-oral skills are important in life. In the classroom, speaking and listening are the most often used skills (Brown, 1994) and out of the classroom, listening is used twice as often as speaking, which in turn is used twice as much as reading and writing (Rivers, 1981). Speaking requires that learners not only know how to produce specific aspects of language such as grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary but also that they understand when, why, and in what ways to produce language. Speech has its own skills, structures, and conventions different from written language (Burns & Joyce, 1997; Carter & McCarthy, 1995; Cohen, 1996). A good speaker integrates this array of skills and knowledge to succeed in a given speech act.

While learning to talk, the young child is also learning through talk (Roskos, Tabors & Lenhart, 2004) and the quality of talk that each child hears and participates in is an important part of that child's education (Cazden, 2001). Marshall and Wiliam (2006) maintain that even for secondary students, talk is an important aid in developing understandings, which are best fostered through interactions with those who already have those capabilities. For all these reasons, there should be abundant opportunities for rich and deep conversations between teachers and students in every classroom.

However, classrooms may not be conducive for such conversations as an individual child engages in a limited amount of conversation during a classroom day, even in preschool centres (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Smith, 1999). With one teacher to many students, formal routines are necessary for managing behaviour. Cazden (2001, p. 82) argues that the teacher's speaking rights are inherent in their institutional role.

"Teachers have the role-given right to speak at any time and to any person; they can fill any silence or interrupt any speaker; they can speak to a student anywhere in the room and in any volume or tone of voice".

Hiebert and Raphael (1998) used the term 'scripts' to identify particular patterns of interaction and socially acceptable modes of communication. Scripts in and of themselves are not inherently good or bad. The problem arises when one script, like the one below, is the only script for classroom talk.

No. Listen. Are you listening? Listen.
We'll put one in each cup... you see like this.
And then we count them.
And then we put them in the oven.

The quality of classroom talk has been the subject of many investigations, especially the quality of questions used in classroom conversations. In a longitudinal study of capable children, top on the list of items that showed positive relationships with children's competencies at age 10 was that staff asked the young children open-ended questions (Wylie & Thompson, 2003). In contrast, there are the 'school questions', often asked where the questioner already knows the answer – questions that are commonly known as closed questions (e.g. What is in this story? How many animals can you see on the page?). These questions are not genuine questions but a means of moving children into playing a game of guessing the approved answer the teacher already has in mind (Commeyras, 2001; Ng, 2006).

Questioning techniques is an early topic for IESOL teacher workshops, discussed in relation to shared reading activities, when the teacher introduces a book to stimulate children to share their feelings and experiences in a group situation (see Transcript 5).

Transcript 5
Teacher: Let's read this book about a boy who was scared.
[Teacher reads.] **_There's A Nightmare In My Closet._**
What do you think is hiding in the closet?
Lottie: It's nightmare. Don't like nightmares.
James: I'm not scared.
Teacher: Aren't you scared of nightmares?
James: I don't... I'm... I don't... I'm not scared.
Teacher: You're not scared of anything?
James: I'm not scared of anything!
Teacher: I'm scared when it thunders, when it's very loud.
Sue: I'm scared of the rain.
James: I love thunder. I love thunder, but I don't like lightning!
Lottie: I'm scared of snakes
Teacher: We are scared of different things. Let's keep that in our heads as
we read what happened to this boy when he feels scared.

This is an example of a teacher's efforts to connect the learners' experience and knowledge with the knowledge about to be presented in the text.   The story is about a child's fears and the conversation links it to the children's own fears – children talk about what they are (and are not) afraid of.   Note that the teacher does not limit the children's responses to yes/no answers and children can talk openly about their fears.

The next transcript shows more clearly the teacher assessing the students' responses and using that information to shape students' understanding of a particular text type.   The teacher had asked her students to research the topic of polar bears, following lessons that examined information reports about such topics as bats and spiders.   The students were offering what they had found from the internet to contribute to a piece of class writing (refer to Table 1).

Transcript 6

Mahn:      They have four large paws.
Teacher    (repeating and typing in what was contributed)
Chai:       They have two layers of white fur covering their black skin.
Teacher    (repeating and typing in what was contributed):    OK, Bess?
Bess:       Their fur is so soft.
Teacher    (repeating and typing in what was contributed):    Any more we have to add to the paragraph?   Yes, Ka Wing?
Wing:       We can use 'and' because there are many 'they have, they have.'
Teacher:    Excellent, can you repeat?
Wing:       They have purple tongues and four large paws.
Teacher:    We delete this and put the connective, 'and'?   Do you all agree?   Does that make it sound better?
Students:  Yes.
Teacher    (typing in what was contributed):    Does this sound better?   OK, any more ideas?   Rex.
Rex:        Add, and we can give them a hug.
Teacher:    OK, where Rex?
Rex:        the last...
Teacher:    The last...?
Ken:        But in information report, we can't use 'we'.
Teacher:    OK, do you know what they are talking about, class?   OK, Rex suggested that we put 'We can give them a hug' because they are so soft and fluffy.   But Ken, you have a point.
Ken:        But in information report, we cannot use 'we' and 'I'.
Teacher:    Yes, because that shows just our personal feelings.   But Rex, good try.   Maybe next time when we write a story about polar bears, then you can write "We like to hug the polar bears', okay?   Good point.   So, any more ideas?

Note that except for the topic and the text type that were specified, the above interaction was relatively spontaneous and unplanned. The teacher did not know ahead of time what the students were going to contribute and she had no prescribed model answers to her questions. She provided a lot of wait time to give students the opportunity to explore their ideas so she could listen to where they were going before providing appropriate support. These behaviours are conducive to generating genuine discussion. Davis (1997) would describe this teacher as one who is listening interpretively rather than evaluatively. Instead of mere rehearsal of existing knowledge, an interpretive teacher listens to children's conversation about something that is important to them and then asks open-ended questions that will encourage more language use and creation of new knowledge.

In IESOL programmes, teachers found that the richer the language task, the better the interactions. This is in contrast to some programmes that purport that texts and tasks for ESOL elementary grades should be kept simple. The following transcript is of two students comparing their written retellings of a piece of text on pollution – a difficult piece that employed language not normally encountered at the primary levels in Hong Kong schools. While the transcript showed a drop in the accuracy of sentence structures in the retellings (in comparison to story retellings), it also showed that the students rose to the challenge, eagerly grappling with the concepts couched in academic language and, among other cognitive skills, employing intense listening and evaluation of each other's language use and interpretation of meaning (cf. Brown & Cambourne, 1987). Both students showed some competence in their development of assessment skills when critiquing their peer's retellings; pointing out specific differences between the retellings and what was good about them.

Transcript 7

Connie: I remember that we need to make a clean environment to let the animals have a good green house. Acid rain is made by producing ah... goods in factories and fires from BBQ. Oil spills are made by the ship or ship accidents. It will make life less. Global warming is made by cars and factories. It will let our temperature be higher and higher. Endangered species that we see them fewer and fewer are they, such as coral effect, wild... It was made by wild hunting and oil spill. We need to protect our earth since today... Pollution in the sea are made by people because we throw or dump the rubbish into the sea every day. It will lead to animals' lives in the sea will die, so we need to protect our earth.

Ngan:    The report talking about some pollution, just like acid rain, oil spills. It tells us acid rain is some dirty thing go into the cloud and mix with the water and the cloud will fall down and the earth will die.   It tells us oil spills, it is come from the boat, when the boat that sailing, it will some oil going into the sea, some thing animals live in sea that will die.

Connie:   I think some...first of us are the same, such as we have talked about the pollution, acid rain and the oil spills, many.   And the difference between us I think is I have talked how to stop the pollution, and how can we do and you have missed this point.   And I think you have, have done the good job because although you are short, but you are clearer than me so I think you have done a good job.

Ngan:    I think you have done a good job because you say that, that some people throw the rubbish in the sea and you say we should protect the earth to clean it.

Connie:   Thank you.

In line with Kluger & DeNisi's finding (1996) of when the biggest impacts on performance occurred, IESOL teachers are encouraged to provide feedback for not only what to improve, but also how to go about it.   The research findings also indicate that it is better to concentrate on giving descriptive feedback rather than mixing it up with the grading aspect.   This can be illustrated by working through a few examples of what teachers should do in their individual conferences with children about their writing.

Example 1:

That's a good piece of writing because it describes polar bears in sections …. Now is there anything else you can find out about the appearance of the polar bears?

The first comment in Example 1 is slightly evaluative and describes what constitutes good writing.   The question that follows can promote real conversation about the next step to take to improve on the student's work. Example 2 is not evaluative and is intended to get at the students' knowledge of text structure (i.e. narrative elements) and to use that knowledge in his/her writing plan.

Example 2

What is going to happen next?   How are you going to get from where the story is now to the next part where a problem develops?

Comments such as "Make your story more interesting." are not very useful, especially for low progress pupils.   They should be followed by examples that

show students what to do, such as:

- What does Pokemon look like?

- If you were Pokemon, what would you have done to the bad wizard?

The idea is to provide specific suggestions for improvement and depending on the progress level, more support and scaffolding in the form of suggesting sentence beginnings may be required, such as:

- Pokemon looked very _____.　He had _____ on his face and his hair was _____.

There is a limit to the amount of time a teacher has to provide such feedback to each student in the class, but a potential lies in the activation of students as learning resources for one another and to move learners to independence as soon as possible in peer and self assessment (see Transcript 8).

Transcript 8:　Extracts from a Conferencing Session between Students

Jen:　Ming, your information text is excellent.　You have written enough... your information is very good and you have written enough information on one sub-heading.　Er, for subheading Life Cycle you might – I think you should put 'Reproduction' instead.

Ming:　*Oh ya, because they have two cubs and they are...*

Ming:　*... then do I need to change this to 'it'?*

Jen:　Maybe, 'they' because polar bears. So, they…What do you mean by greenhouse effect?

Ming:　*As in... Because they say that green house effect warms the Earth, melts the freshest snow and the ice that the polar bears live – it's something like the sun that warms the Earth and that's why... and melts the snow.*

Jen:　OK, so maybe you can write it down.　The greenhouse effect which… Your information report is like... is so wordy...why didn't you add some pictures? You can add some pictures... Where do you get all this information from?

Ming:　*From the internet.*

Jen:　Ya, you can write down in this place.

Ming:　*But I can't really remember the website because they are all from different websites...*

Jen:　Maybe you can go to the history of the computer so you can find what websites did you go to...

## Using Assessment to Influence Students' Motivation and Self-esteem

Few educators would argue with the premise that student motivation has an important influence on learning.   Learner confidence, motivation and self-esteem have been regarded by many educators to be requisites for successful learning (Dweck, 1986; Dweck, 2000; James & Gipps, 1998). These variables were showcased in a collection of teacher accounts of teaching English to speakers of other languages (Samway & McKeon, 1993) that found common threads of successful practices across 11 countries.   Each of the 11 accounts reveal that great pains were taken by teachers to structure the learning environment so that children could feel good about learning and about themselves.   Then there are surveys that show that high academic engagement in effective schools is due in part to much of teaching being aimed at motivating students (e.g. Pressley, 2006; Pressley, Dolezal, Raphael, Mohan, Bogner & Roehrig, 2003).

Part of the reason for implementing the IESOL projects was to address the lack of students' motivation in English lessons – IESOL students did not have confidence in speaking English and their English learning had been a frustrating and difficult experience (Education Commission, 1999; Ng, 2001, Ng & Sullivan, 2001; SCOLAR, 2003).   To counter the negative impact of disengagement, one main criterion considered in the selection of IESOL curriculum materials, activities, tasks and assessment was their impact on students' motivation and self-esteem.   The IESOL projects aimed at raising student engagement by promoting a positive learning environment through such opportunities as the enjoyable Shared Reading read-alouds in the early grades and the open and animated book discussions in the higher grades.   There was a conscious attempt to promote and celebrate student successes, supporting language learners to grow from where they are, rather than having them frustrated by some standard unattainable for them.   Teachers were admonished to give frequent, early, positive feedback that supports students' beliefs that they can do well and to provide opportunities for students' success by assigning tasks that are neither too easy nor too difficult.

Notes such as the one below appear regularly in the printed guidelines for teachers.

> ✍Note:   Attempt to get every student to participate.   Do not dismiss a student's answer because it is not the one you had in mind.   Try to get some insight into the student's point of view. There may not be only one 'correct' answer, or the student may have the right idea but not be able to express it adequately.
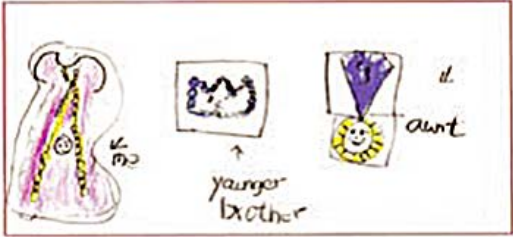
This is the basic principle that underlies all IESOL recommended teaching strategies – to get at students' thinking and to uncover the source of the confusions or differences in interpretation.　To do this the teacher has to look at tasks and texts from the students' point of view, to get alongside them and to talk to them.　While the above injunction relates to encouraging students' responses to teacher questions in shared reading sessions, it could apply equally to other situations such as when students contribute ideas to a piece of class writing.　Resisting the urge to immediately edit students' contributions and instead, transcribing near exact matches, has the pedagogical value of helping students make the link between what he/she has said and what the teacher is writing – links that would strengthen understandings of letter-sound relationships and word identification skills.　An equally important effect of the willingness to accept all students' contributions is that it encourages their willingness to contribute, and makes students feel that they are valued members of a learning community and that they have worthwhile responses and views.

The interaction in Transcript 6 above is a good example of a teacher's genuine interest in what her students have to say.　The observation records noted that the true classroom dialogue occurred in a trusting and warm relationship between the teacher and the students, with even the very quiet ones offering their ideas. The discussion reflects the respect the teacher has for the students' contributions and editing suggestions.　She rarely changed the students' wordings and she always sought the class's opinion before accepting an editing suggestion.　Note at the end of the transcript that she did not put Rex's idea down but suggested that his contribution would be appropriate in a narrative text – thereby affirming his self-esteem but not missing the chance to draw attention to the differences between the two kinds of texts.　Elaborating on Ken's editing of Rex's contribution would add to the students' development in thinking strategies, knowledge of text types and appropriate language use. One can see that such exchanges would be invaluable for fostering the students' verbal and thinking skills in authentic communication and building students' new knowledge.　It shows a teacher skillfully moving between acts aimed at pedagogical and affective outcomes in the lesson.

The motivational principle is also applied to written feedback where the use of the dreaded red ink pen is discouraged.　A recommended method for giving written feedback in IESOL projects in the early grades is shown in Table 2 below.　It is clear from the instructions that the feedback concentrates on showing the way for improvement and giving a grade is not the main focus.

The students themselves are also encouraged when commenting on each others' written work (see next section on peer assessment), not to give grades, but instead to locate positive features of the work and features that require further attention.

Table 2. Recommended Method for Giving Written Feedback in IESOL Projects



Suggestions for marking

1.  Teach your pupils to do their writing on the right-hand pages <u>only</u> of their exercise/jotter books, leaving the left-hand pages free for your comments and editing.
2.  On the left-hand page, write the incorrect word(s)/structure(s) on the same line as the error on the right-hand page. This will provide feedback to the pupils as well as a record for you of their progress and areas that need to be re-taught or reinforced.
3.  Ask the pupils if they know the correct form (often they will, once the error has been pointed out) and write it above the error on the left-hand page.
4.  Teach the pupils to erase their errors in their writing and write in the correct form.

_____

As a result of these measures, annual opinion surveys conducted in IESOL schools consistently found that nearly all school staff reported students' positive attitudes toward English classes and learning (LLELP, 2006; Ng, 2001; Ng & Sullivan, 2001).   Interviews of IESOL students in Hong Kong (LLELP, 2006;) typically yielded responses such as these below.

Transcript 9

Ming (10-year-old girl):

When I was in Primary 1 to Primary 3, I don't want to go to school because I don't like English lesson and I don't want to speak to people in English.　But now, I become not afraid about this, so sometimes I speak to my parents in English.

Transcript 10

Robert (11-year-old boy):

I feel very comfortable in English lesson.　When I answer a question and it is correct, I feel very successful because I think before I think I am stupid, but now, not now… so I feel confident now.

Motivation is of particular importance for those who work with young children as there is research evidence indicating that failure in early literacy can limit school achievement.　Most children start school enthusiastic and expecting to succeed.　If the assessments show that they do not, the scenario is not very pleasant.　By the end of their first year, the message to low progress children is that their initial expectations are not coming true.　The continuing feedback they receive about their performance is damaging and as a result they begin to see school as punishing and degrading.　Sadly, most children who start first year schooling in the bottom progress group stay in the bottom group throughout all of primary school (Clay, 2001; Juel, 1988; McGill-Frazen & Allington, 1991; Slavin, Karweit & Wasik, 1992).　Better methods of teaching, assessment and the provision of informative feedback can change that debilitating cycle.

## Having Students Own Their Learning

While most teachers are aware that students should be actively involved so that they own their learning, they find it difficult to put that maxim into practice. Traditionally it is the teacher who is more active, making decisions about the next steps in learning and then acting on them in the classroom.　Harlen (1998) argues that it is the students who are taking the next steps and the more they are involved in the decision making process, the greater will be their understanding of how to extend their learning.　Rather than being passive recipients of teachers' judgements of their work, he advocates that students take part in deciding next steps for learning including those for assessing that learning. The degree of involvement however, will have to depend on the level the

students are at, with teachers providing more support at the earlier levels and gradually withdrawing support as the students gain competence.   Negotiating a good balance is a rather tricky affair and there should be constant vigilance for the guidance and support not to stifle students' involvement and ownership of their learning.

*Students' Questions*

An effective way of fostering student ownership of learning is to encourage them to ask questions (Commeyras, 2001).   In the more flexible and relaxed IESOL project classrooms, teachers were not the only ones asking questions; the children also asked questions – even the very young beginner.   The following questions were taken from transcripts of Hong Kong Year 1 IESOL children during shared readings of a story:

1.  What does it say when we change the 'c' to 'r' in 'cat'?
2.  If there are no more cats, why is 's' after 'cats' in the sentence 'no more cats'?
3.  'Baby' is not in the story – why is it on our spelling list?

These questions indicate engagement with different aspects of language and learning. The first two questions were connected to the stated lesson objectives; questions seeking clarification about graphophonic relationships and grammatical rules. The last question can be viewed as a challenge to the teacher's set curriculum.   Although these seven-year-old IESOL children were not yet competent in English (only the first question was in English), when given the chance they seemed capable of complex and critical thinking about their English instruction in their dominant language.

In Baker's system of discourse analysis (1997), the last question can be classified as one that rocks the classroom boat.   Such questions may be problematic because they deviate from the teacher set targets and plan for a particular lesson.   The teacher's willingness to follow the children's lead and discuss their questions signals a shift in the balance of power and authority in the classroom with a move to a more democratic, in comparison to the usual autocratic, classroom environment.   Such a radical shift demands changes in the teachers' fundamental beliefs regarding their roles as teachers and their expectations of the children and of the management of learning.   Yet with the shift, the learners become genuinely involved in a process where they try to make sense of the lesson and relate it to their understanding of their worlds.   In

the same way that teacher questions provide an opportunity for feedback on students' understandings, students' questions can also reveal directly to the teachers what is of great concern to the students, what is clear to them and what confuses them.　Therefore using student generated questions to lead discussion could be an important step towards giving students more responsibility for their own learning.

The concept is somewhat similar to 'teachable moments'.　In seizing spontaneous classroom events for instructional purposes, teachers must be ready not only to adjust but to abandon their planned activities, if those pre-planned activities are not as powerful in meeting students' needs.　Making teaching decisions on the run is difficult for the teacher, but for students, knowledge gained this way is owned by them and it becomes part of their understanding – quite different from a collection of isolated facts or principles that have been memorised for an exam.

In view of the potential benefits of students' questions, a reading comprehension technique (Ogle, 1989) was introduced intentionally to stimulate students to ask questions in the upper primary levels of the IESOL projects.　A key component of this technique is to have students generate their own questions for the text they are about to read, and after the reading, to check if their questions have been answered and to review the new information they have learnt from the text.　This has the effect of having them set their own purposes for the reading, monitoring and assessing their own learning.

*The Development of Self Assessment*

When assessing, the teacher must make a judgement about a student's work (or performance) in relation to criteria of what constitutes quality. Self-assessment means that the student must learn what the teacher considers to constitute quality and to use that concept of quality to monitor continuously the quality of what is being produced.

Stated explicitly,

> "The learner has to (a) possess a concept of the standard (or goal/reference level) being aimed for, (b) compare the actual (or current) level of performance with the standard, and (c) engage in appropriate action which leads to some closure of the gap."
>
> (Sadler, 1989, p 121)

Much is still to be learnt about how best to promote self assessment, but self-corrections in oral reading, one type of self-assessment behaviour, have been found in the spontaneous behaviour of young children as they learn to read (Clay, 2001; Ng, 1988) and have been promoted as one of the effective strategies for helping children who have problems with reading (e.g. Clay, 2005; Goodman & Burke, 1973).

For the self assessment of written work, Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall and Wiliam (2004) suggest that teachers provide students with a rubric written in student-friendly language, or develop the rubric with the class.   Early trials found that our IESOL students seemed unable to use the rubrics to improve their work, even after the rubrics had been discussed and put into simple language. IESOL developers then began infusing elements of peer and self assessment in the different lesson components.

Assessment skills are nurtured from the outset in shared reading lessons when the teachers ask children after the reading what they liked about the story. A similar response is required of young readers after the independent reading of books in the Reading Centres (see Table 1).   To show students the standards to aim for, books and stories used in the classroom have been selected to demonstrate concrete exemplars for quality writing.   The discussion about what counts as quality text is carried through to the writing component.   Drafts and completed pieces of writing generated by the whole class, by small groups of students and by individual students are discussed in attempts to discover features of quality writing.   In all these discussions, the teacher models the editing process (assess, feedback and improve) to the whole class and then has students use those assessment steps when they are giving feedback to a peer about their work.   Peer assessment greatly assists the development of self assessment.

*Peer Assessment and Cooperative Learning*

IESOL teachers have found that students, even at the emergent level in Primary 1, are better at spotting errors in other students' work than in their own work.   Teachers who have used this technique with students as young as seven years old have been pleasantly surprised at how appropriate the students' comments are.   The young students often communicate with one another more effectively than the teacher does.   It appears that a child who is at the same level can provide feedback on how to go a little further as they also learn how to make positive comments, ask for clarification of ideas and suggest possible

alternatives for frequently repeated words. Looking at someone else's work is different from looking at your own work; it is less emotionally charged – a situation similar to a common adult practice of asking a colleague to critique one's draft.

Peer assessment can be easier developed in small groups, as talk should prove less daunting there than in a whole class situation, especially for young children. Transcript 11 below is taken from the talk of a group of four students given the task of writing a response to Joy Cowley, one of their favourite authors. The conversation is typical of IESOL small group discussions that can occur in any of the various writing stages: from the pre-writing stages of brainstorming for ideas, to the crafting of the language to express those ideas and into the editing processes.

Transcript 11

| | |
|---|---|
| Bill: | This is too much, too much. |
| Sue: | But we do that in class writing. |
| Bill: | I know, but the class writing is not right... |
| Jill: | Be quick. |
| Bill: | But we say... our class writing is too much. |
| Sue: | But we need to write some... |
| Robert: | We want to write... |
| Sue: | Stop. Don't talk any more. |
| Bill: | We want to write some story... Write: We like her story. |
| Jill: | Should be 'your'... |
| Robert: | Your story. Your story is exciting and lovely. |
| Jill & Sue: | Now, we ask questions… Ask her about New Zealand... the class writing has questions |
| Bill: | OK, we don't write questions. The questions are too many... |
| Robert: | …are too many. |
| Bill: | We write funny things. |
| Jill: | Yes, yes. |
| Bill: | We say, Robert is a robber, ha ha. |
| All 4 students: | Ha ha ha ha. |

This discussion proceeded through the offering of ideas, assessment of the contributions and negotiation of what to write before settling to a compromise of what to write – all part of the group's composing process. It also reveals that the budding writers were not afraid to deviate from the class writing – in fact the following excerpts from Transcript 11 issued open challenges to what the teacher wrote with contributions from the whole class.

| | |
|---|---|
| Jill: | But we do that in class writing. |
| Bill: | I know, but the class writing is not right.. |
| Jill & Sue: | Now, we ask questions.....Ask her about New Zealand... the class writing has questions |
| Bill: | OK, we don't write questions.   The questions are too many... |
| Robert: | ... are too many. |

These children, led by Bill, decided eventually to do something different from the class writing – to inject humour into their writing.   The teacher did not intervene in this particular discussion but IESOL teachers do normally circulate among the small groups to act as an observer, participate and/or assist talk and guide students in the composing task.

The research on collaborative learning, particularly in the work of Robert Slavin (Slavin, Hurley & Chamberlain, 2003), shows the powerful potential of students working together to maximise their own and each other's learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1994), provided two conditions are met.   The first is that the learning situation has at its centre a requirement that all members work together to achieve a common goal, so that students are working as a group, rather than just working in a group (Baines, Blatchford & Kutnick, 2003).   The second is individual accountability – that all in the group have to be 'pulling their weight' and making contributions and there can be no 'cruisers' or 'loafers' (Falloon, 2004).

The benefits of cooperative learning are many, chief of which is that it is particularly appropriate for complex tasks that learners may not be able to achieve on their own.   It is known to facilitate student learning and motivation and to develop good interpersonal skills and relationships.   An approach that encourages active engagement of all individuals and stimulates helping behaviours within groups must be desirable.   In relation to assessment, it provides a scaffold for the development of valuable peer and self-assessment skills.    It is also observed that the students providing the feedback benefit just as much as, and sometimes more than, the recipients, because they are forced to engage in understanding the rubric and to internalize the learning intentions and success criteria in the context of someone else's work.   Using peer techniques also frees up teacher time for planning better instruction or working more intensively with small groups of students.

To work toward developing peer assessment skills, the learning intentions and success criteria must be accessible to the students (see preceding sections

on learning intentions) and the teacher must support the students as they learn how to help each other improve their work.   The assessment should be done sensitively, whether by the teacher or student, so as not to embarrass anyone.   For example, the individual piece of writing held for review could be anonymous.   Students could also be asked to first focus on the positive features before giving a couple of suggestions for improvement.   In line with research (see above), peer assessment should be focused on improvement, not on grading and students should not be asked to give a grade.   Awarding grades involves another set of complex processes and should remain the teachers' domain.

*Self Assessment*

In addition to using peer assessment and feedback to scaffold the development of students' self assessment, there are writing conferences for individual children.   This can be done on a one to one basis, focusing on what to aim for in quality writing.   In these conferences, teachers can assure students that professional writers – those who wrote their stories and texts – ask themselves what they like/dislike about their own writing, what needs to be made clearer, the order of the ideas, and the correctness of their spelling, punctuation and grammar.   A student can choose her/his best pieces and say what she/he likes most and least about those pieces.   The teacher does the same, choosing key criteria, according to the piece of the work.   Differences in the teacher's and the student's perception can be discussed and the student can be asked to generalise the knowledge and skills learnt to other pieces of work. If done on a rotation basis, all students in a class have opportunity for such sessions.

At the same time, students can also be taught how to use a simple set of questions to check themselves before asking a peer or the teacher to read it, whether they be about ideas, content and organisation, distinctiveness of the author's voice, word choice, or technicalities like sentence structure and grammar.

Writing checklist:

- Does this piece of writing make sense? Is it interesting to the reader?   Do I communicate my ideas clearly?
- Are my ideas organised according to the purpose?   Is there a smooth movement from on one idea to the next? Would organising the ideas in a different order make it better?
- Do I write in a way that expresses my ideas strongly and distinctively?

- Have I chosen words that help the reader grasp the main messages I'm trying to convey?
- Are my sentences well formed?   Do I use different kinds of sentences to convey my ideas?
- Have I checked it for spelling, grammar and punctuation? Paragraphing?

The assessment processes modeled by the teacher will be picked up by some children who in turn can use them in peer assessment in small groups. At the beginning stages, the Primary 1 IESOL learners were only be able to offer simple remarks such as "I like this because it is funny/interesting' but those further down the track in Primary 5 were able to assess the appropriate use of language for a specific text type such as "You can't use 'I' in information reports because..." or to offer specific suggestions for using particular language devices to combine sentences for better effect (refer to Transcript 6).   As observed by researchers such as Harlen (1998), through repeatedly using concrete examples in various settings and situations, students are helped to gradually internalise the standards, and assessment becomes a genuine part of their learning process.

## CONCLUSION

While the practices promoted in this paper do not require large-scale interventions or incur as high costs as class size reduction and technologising classrooms, implementation nonetheless, is not easy.   The average teacher has found that the IESOL teaching methods are a radical departure from existing practices (Ng, 2006; Ng, 1996).   In addition to the usual whole class teaching, the IESOL teacher had to learn to manage a variety of groupings, and to generate more meaningful interactions between teachers and children and amongst children themselves.   Instead of the usual closed questions requiring no more than yes/no answers in the classroom, they were to ask a range of questions that demanded greater resources of vocabulary and rich conversations. In place of the traditional ideal of a quiet and well-behaved class, the project teacher had to manage the active and noisy participation of children (sometimes more than 40).   The application of IESOL and formative assessment principles led to a change in the interaction patterns and power relationships in the classroom, where the teacher was no longer seen as the sole purveyor of knowledge, children's voices and opinions were heard, and their contributions were encouraged and valued.

What we were asking teachers to do in these projects was to provide an experience for learning that was markedly and dramatically different from their own recollections of twenty and more years. Asian teachers who are part of bureaucratic systems with traditionally autocratic styles of management have not been nurtured in the liberal humanistic tradition of the West. Other constraints like exam pressures, large classroom sizes and inflexible time-tabling added to the difficulties inherent in developing liberal teaching styles.

Yet, those teachers who have embraced the exploration of formative assessment and feedback embedded in IESOL teaching strategies have reported on the rewards of those trials. The successful IESOL teachers have:

- organised their teaching programmes so that they could briefly but regularly observe their students' verbal and non-verbal responses.

- planned the kinds of tasks, activities and questions that they use with their students specifically to gather evidence of students' learning.

- observed who participated in the activities, how students talked in the classroom, how they interacted with other students and the kind of contributions they made to class projects.

- kept brief but regular records of those observations.

- monitored the progress of the high progress students at regular intervals and the low progress students more frequently.

- used teachable moments during class activities to provide information from their observations to show their students effective next steps for their learning.

Most of the IESOL schools are average schools with students coming from home backgrounds that many would deem unfavorable. The practices of the IESOL teachers discussed in this paper hold hope for the future – that some teachers despite the constraints, were able to make changes in their classrooms. The hope of students lies with the application of these principles. It may be that very few IESOL children will grow up as doctors or university lecturers, but most will leave the programme, at whatever achievement level they have obtained, as independent and engaged learners, enthusiastic to continue learning long after they finish school.

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