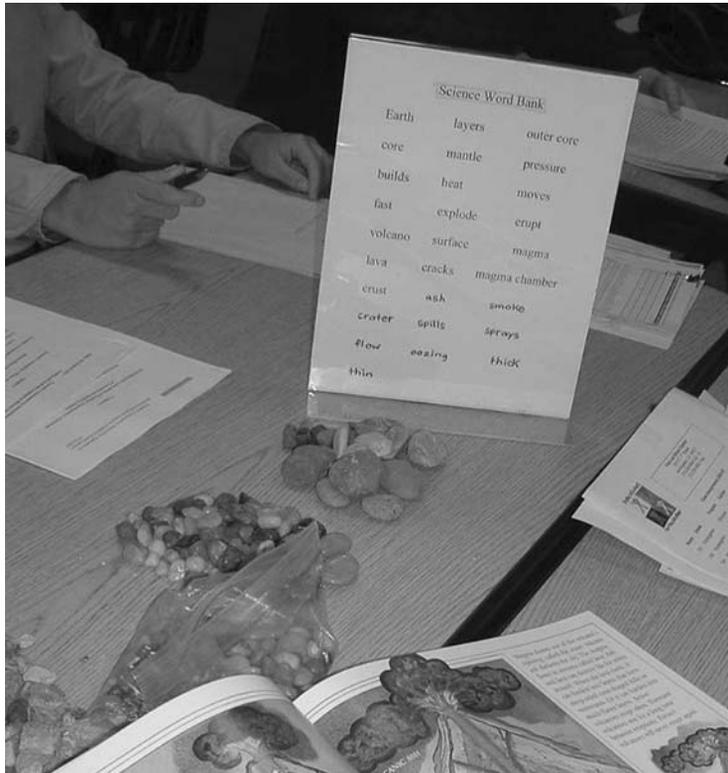


# 1

## Formative Assessment

*Stories of Language  
and Literacy Learning*



Craft knowledge is the collection of wisdom and insights one accumulates by showing up on the job. If ways can be found to unlock, celebrate, and exchange craft knowledge, how much better each of us can perform our work. Storytelling is one way.

—Roland Barth (2003, p. 2)

This is a book of storytelling—stories from and about teachers using work-a-day assessments for effective teaching. We take to heart Roland Barth’s suggestion that storytelling can be a vital instrument in the professional development toolkit (Barth, 2003). Storytelling has both cognitive and cultural appeal to us as authors and as educators. The purposeful recounting of events in our lives may be a basic human trait—a way to make meaning out of the apparent mayhem and chaos of day-to-day happenings (Bruner, 1990). And storytelling, while favoring different norms for style and content in different cultures, is a form of interaction found in most, if not all, human societies (Pinker, 2002).

In a series of real-life stories, this book reveals how to successfully implement an integrated model of language and literacy with assessment for instruction. Specifically, the formative assessments we describe in the chapters of this book provide teachers with the kind of information they need for effective language and literacy instruction. By formative assessment we mean the types of tasks, tests, activities, and observations that give teachers a steady stream of information and feedback on their teaching and their students’ learning. In short, the stories this book contains are stories of how teachers have made order out of the chaos of teaching and assessment so that they might share their “craft knowledge” with other teachers.

The chapters devoted to practice describe the use of assessment for instruction in the oral language skills of the classroom context (academic language) and in literacy, primarily reading. Each chapter contains stories of formative assessment used by real classroom teachers. Many of these teachers teach at the Para Los Niños (PLN) Charter Elementary School in Los Angeles, California. Implementation of the model of reading and academic language assessment for instruction with ELL students is at the very core of teaching at PLN Charter Elementary School. The fact that the book includes an emphasis on this population of students is a decision which deserves some attention.

The English language learner population is large and growing. By the last official count, there are 5.1 million English language learners enrolled in U.S. public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2005a). These large numbers alone should warrant the attention of educational researchers and teachers alike; however, ELL students are also not doing well in our schools. Among these children, reading performance on the National

Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) at fourth and eighth grade levels is alarming; 73 percent of fourth graders and 71 percent of eighth graders who are ELL students cannot read at or above the basic level (U.S. Department of Education, 2005b). As Diane August, the principal investigator of the recent Report of the National Literacy Panel urges us:

Rapid increases in the numbers of language-minority children and youth, as well as their low levels of literacy attainment and its consequences—high dropout rates, poor job prospects, and poverty—create an imperative to attend to the literacy development of these students. (August & Shanahan, 2006, p. xiii)

The narration of events unfolding in these teachers' and other teachers' classrooms illuminates how teachers can focus on both the language skills and the reading development that has to take place for school success. Knowledge of both domains by teachers is incomplete without the wherewithal to assess and interpret the results of assessment for instruction. This is where we propose an integrated model of formative reading and academic language assessment for instruction. The model is described in Chapters 2 and 3 and can be viewed in two halves. The first half is made up of the knowledge that teachers will need in order to make any kind of judgment of a student's progress or development in reading or academic language. This knowledge includes the domain knowledge of reading and academic language, as well as pedagogical content knowledge of instructional and formative assessment strategies. The second half of the model includes the skills that teachers will need to competently implement different kinds of formative assessment (e.g., observations, analysis of student responses, planned-for interactions, and so on) and interpret the evidence of learning (or not learning) that formative assessments generate.

As we capture in Chapter 7, the implementation of the formative assessment model is best done with the help of peers, instructional leaders, and principals so that a culture of support and positive attitude is built up around the use of formative assessment. Some of our own recent research findings and those of our colleagues have shown that these three components—*knowledge*, *skills*, and *attitude*—are important teacher characteristics and thus need to be central to professional development:

First, teacher knowledge is emphasized for an effective understanding of content-area concepts, processes (big ideas and connections between and among them), and facts and their organization, as well as an understanding of how formative assessment is conducted. Then, teacher skills are stressed for the competent execution of learning activities and the proficient interpretation and translation

of assessment information into instructional action. Finally, teacher attitude is acknowledged . . . as the appreciation for the pivotal role of formative assessment in instruction; namely the understanding that formative assessment is worthwhile, that it yields sound information about student learning, and could have value in a comprehensive accountability system. . . . (Heritage & Bailey, 2006, p. 147)

## **ROOTED IN PRACTICE—RESPONSIVE TO RESEARCH**

The book is rooted in practice. It is also responsive to research. While teachers write about their practice, they also make links to a variety of studies that have, for example, investigated the effectiveness of certain instructional techniques, or researched certain language and reading measures for their abilities to predict later reading success. Throughout the book, we report on the details of studies in separate “What the Experts Say” text boxes for ease of reference. The two chapters that review language and literacy development and formative assessment are also informed by research. In these foundational chapters, we explain findings from research studies to provide the rationale for the integration of a wide array of academic language and reading skills in assessment and instructional practices. We also provide definitions and further examples of “Key Terminology” in separate text boxes that are meant to function primarily as refresher material rather than be in-depth descriptions of new concepts or knowledge.

## **LEARNING TO “SEE” THE RIGHT STUDENT NEEDS**

The Literacy Development Checklist (LDC) was developed at the University Elementary School (UES) between 1999–2002. The research and development team of teachers and researchers collated and field tested a wide range of available and newly created assessments and interventions in the classrooms of UES and local school district teachers. The checklist was then further refined during a Governor’s Reading Professional Development Institute for teachers in California, which was held at UES. The UES laboratory setting allowed for a unique component: the institute participants spent time working one-on-one with students whom they had identified as at-risk for reading difficulties using assessment and interventions provided by the LDC.

In 2000, the National Science Foundation provided a grant to study teacher use of the LDC (University Elementary School, 2001). This small-scale study found that the students who were identified as struggling readers were, as a group, below the norm on many standardized measures

of literacy—suggesting that the teachers, using their formative assessments, were indeed focusing on the “right” group of students. We concluded that teachers had readily learned to “see” the strengths and weaknesses of their students through a research-based lens (Bailey & Drummond, 2006; Bailey & Gallimore, 2001/2). By research-based lens, we mean making judgments of student performance in the language and literacy domains proven related to successful reading outcomes by research studies. What this and other work demonstrated to us is that classroom-based assessments of reading, by providing ongoing information to guide instruction in response to students’ specific needs, appear key to improving students’ reading success.

## A VISION FOR A READING ASSESSMENT SYSTEM

In *Knowing What Students Know (KWSK)*, a committee of the National Research Council (NRC) described an ambitious vision for a coordinated system of assessment that includes assessments to give teachers the day-to-day information they need to guide instruction and assessments to provide evidence of student achievement needed by the public and policy makers (NRC, 2001).

The committee outlined three characteristics of such a system:

1. **Comprehensiveness.** A system that includes a range of ways to assess students to provide the evidence needed for educational decision making
2. **Coherence.** A system that combines large-scale and classroom-based assessments built on the same underlying models of student progression in learning with assessments providing information that maps back to the progression
3. **Continuity.** A system that includes measures of students’ progress over time (more like a video than a snapshot) to provide a continuous stream of evidence about performance

Although we remain at quite a distance from the *KWSK* vision, there are a number of ways in which teachers can move toward realizing at least part of this vision to benefit their students’ reading development (NRC, 2001).

First, while most existing standards emphasize what levels of performance students should reach at specific points, in the main, they do not set out a clear progression in learning. To better support teaching and assessment, teachers can use their reading content knowledge to create collectively a detailed progression of learning to read, or in other words,

a road map to reading proficiency. Many teachers in schools and districts have already begun this work and have a clearly defined progression in reading skills along the sequence in which they typically develop. A similar progression of academic language skills would help teachers know what the sequence in syntactic development, for example, might look like. Moreover, if the academic language pathway were linked to the reading pathway, teachers would have information about both academic language and reading skills that they could profitably use in instruction. We will examine in more detail in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 how teachers can establish academic language demands in conjunction with a learning progression of reading development.

The benefits of such learning progressions are that, in addition to enabling systematic planning, they also permit teachers to connect a range of formative assessment opportunities to a continuum of learning along which students are expected to progress. The information from the assessments maps back onto the progression and assists teachers to identify where students are in their learning and, additionally, to pinpoint what they need to do next with each child.

These practices all relate to the three Cs in the *KWSK* vision (NRC, 2001). Employing a range of formative assessment strategies provides teachers with a *comprehensive* system of assessing their students. Assessments connected to a progression of proficiency in reading present a *coherent* view of student achievement, and also provide teachers with *continuous* evidence about performance in reading.

Where do summative, interim benchmark, and diagnostic assessments fit into this picture? Although these assessments are not constructed from a progression of learning like the one described above, they directly reflect (or should reflect) the standards that students are expected to reach. Learning progressions should articulate, in terms of a pathway, how to meet state and other desired standards. For example, one of Wisconsin's English language arts–reading standards at fourth grade is expressed as:

1. Use effective reading strategies to achieve their purposes in reading

A component of the standard is described as:

- Uses a variety of strategies and word recognition skills, including rereading, finding context clues, applying knowledge of letter-sound relationships, and analyzing word structures (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2005).

**Figure 1.1** Fourth Grade English Language Arts–Reading Standard from Wisconsin

To effectively plan instruction, teachers will need to build a learning progression that outlines the enabling skills required to “use a variety of strategies and word recognition skills” expressed in this standard. The learning progression will serve to focus formative assessments so that instruction can be targeted to students’ needs as they are developing the necessary enabling skills. Thus, there will be clear links between formative assessments and summative and benchmark assessments.

## NEXT STEPS

Essentially, this book is an outgrowth of the LDC and our own continued study of assessment, language, and literacy. The book aims to assist teachers, through a range of formative assessment strategies, to collect evidence of their students’ strengths and weaknesses in critical aspects of language and reading development. From the outset, our work on the development of the LDC was framed by theory and grounded in classroom practice. We have adopted a similar approach in writing this book. Together with the vision of assessment we have outlined and a theoretical framework to be described in Chapters 2 and 3, we can point to what teachers should look for as evidence of aspects of academic language and reading development. The stories of classroom practice at UES, PLN Charter Elementary School, and many other schools will serve as guides for using this evidence to plan instruction. As we move to the next chapter, we are reminded of Roland Barth’s words at the beginning of this chapter—the stories told in this book are a form of exchange of knowledge from which all teachers can benefit.

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