

Classroom Talk as (In)Formative Assessment

When we think about changes to curriculum, and in turn, assessment in recent years, we are struck not so much by what has changed, but by what has not, especially when it comes to testing and accountability. Educational settings continue to be data driven—as they should be—but too often, the type of data used to inform instruction is far removed from day-to-day interactions between teachers and students.

Although measures such as mandated state assessments and benchmark tests can provide comparative data about students' achievement relative to their peers, rarely do such assessments help teachers or students understand and productively respond to students' routine performances in the classroom. With the widespread rollout of the Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSSO, 2010), teachers and students will be held accountable to a new set of measures, such as the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC, 2015). Even though these assessments improve upon earlier assessments in many ways (e.g., longer passages, greater emphasis on critical thinking and writing), these, too, lack the trustworthiness of curriculum-embedded assessments.

What is often left out of conversations about assessment and accountability is the role of classroom-based, formative assessment—informal measures of whether students learn each

day what the teacher has taught. Deliberate collection of such data can (and we argue, should) play an essential role in the rhythm of classroom instruction and the cycle of curriculum-instruction-assessment, as they offer teachers essential feedback to gauge students' progress toward acquisition of content and achievement of grade-level benchmarks (Valencia, 2011) and, in turn, to plan the next instructional moves.

When considering the range of classroom-based assessment tools available to teachers, one of richest sources is also one of the most accessible: teacher and student talk. These dialogic exchanges often provide the first, and perhaps most spontaneous and telling glimpses into students' developing understandings (Auckerman, 2007). In the sections that follow, we argue for a renewed focus on assessment that is grounded in teacher and student talk as essential evidentiary sources that, when combined with large-scale or benchmark assessments, will offer a more complete picture of students' literacy knowledge.

Dynamic, Interactive Talk as Assessment

In 2004, Johnston described the language of the classroom this way:

Teachers play a critical role in arranging the discursive histories from which children speak. Talk is the central tool of their trade. With it they mediate children's activity and experience, and help them make sense of learning, literacy, life, and themselves (p. 4).

As Johnston explained, this understanding emerged from the work of many others—cognitive theorists (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978), linguists (e.g., Cazden, 2001; Halliday 1993), learning

theorists (e.g., Dewey, 1985) and a vast array of classroom teachers—whose work has come together to teach us not only that as teachers, our language use serves as an exemplar for the ways we hope our students will use language; but also that the language choices we make serve to effectively broaden (or narrow) equality and inequality of students' educational opportunities (Cazden, 2001).

Time and again in our work with teachers in clinic and classroom settings, we observe how especially skillful teachers make use of dialogic exchanges with students to both monitor understanding and initiate instructional moves to engage students in deeper explorations of content. Teachers who learn to attend and respond to the talk of the classroom typically do so seamlessly, making in-the-moment decisions to shape and refine their instruction and strengthen the learning experience for students. The dynamic and interactive nature of these instructional exchanges allows teachers and students to forge collaborative partnerships in the learning process as they work together to construct a trustworthy understanding of what students know and can do.

An example illustrates what this looks like in action. Ms. Feldman* is working with a small group of eighth-grade students who have just finished reading an article about the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing, a pivotal moment in the Civil Rights Movement. She's interested in determining what students understood from the article, so she briefly engages them in conversation to summarize what they gleaned from the reading.

TEACHER: *So we've been reading about the Civil Rights Movement, and in particular, the tragedy of a 16th Street church bombing in September 1963, where four girls around your age died. What do we now know about this event?*

JOSÉ*: The bombing was the result of a dynamite blast explosion that the KKK was responsible for. The girls had just been minding their own business, talking in

the basement in the ladies room when the bomb went off. And this was such a tragedy because they were so young and because their lives ended too soon.

MICHAEL: Yeah, and the article said that 100 packed in the school, went to the funeral. Martin Luther King was there. Even White strangers were there.

TEACHER: *Why were White people there if it was a Black tragedy?*

MICHAEL: Because it was the KKK that did that, that killed them girls.

TEACHER: *So were these people for the KKK or against the KKK? Were they segregationists or desegregationists?*

LAURA: Um, desegregationists.

T: *So these were White people who wanted to . . .*

LAURA: (overlapping) They didn't want to separate with them, they wanted to be together. They didn't want to be separated anymore.

T: *So these White strangers supported the movement?*

MICHAEL: Yes. Maybe they were activists or just good people.

T: *Okay, so you're saying they came to show their support?*

MICHAEL: Yeah, so White strangers were there, but no officers, no one was there from the city—nobody representing the government or police or nothing. That was a big tragedy, too. MLK went instead of the mayor from the city.

T: *Why do you think the mayor . . .*

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*All teacher and student names are pseudonyms.

LAURA: I think he might have been part of the KKK or at least somebody who didn't support the movement.

In only a minute, Ms. Feldman gathered important information about these students' understandings of the text; she elicited students' recall of important details about the event, and she assessed students' understanding of the motives and intent underlying the characters' actions. She also built connections between the reading and some of the key vocabulary (e.g., *desegregationists*, *segregationists*) and concepts that the class had been constructing since the start of the unit. In addition, before reading, she had introduced the word *tragedy* and had used it to acquaint students with the topic and prepare them to read the text. During the conversation, she heard José correctly use the word in his remarks, an indication that he grasped the serious and senseless nature of this event and could use the word appropriately to convey his understanding and his point of view. Through this rapid exchange, Ms. Feldman appraised the quality and depth of her students' comprehension of the reading; and through her focused questions and revoicing of student comments, she encouraged students to contextualize this particular event against the backdrop of the larger Civil Rights Movement. In addition, during this brief classroom exchange, students had

access to their classmates' ideas, which could then serve to either prompt reflection or to extend their own thinking. In this instance, the talk informed both the teacher and her students.

When teachers use instructional talk in this way, the talk, itself, becomes a form of intervention assessment (Paratore & Indrisano, 1987). That is, students' initial comments or responses are viewed as evidence of what they know, teachers then use their talk to mediate or improve upon what students know, and students' subsequent responses provide evidence of the "uptake" of the teaching move or mediation. Thus, as teachers engage students in conversations about content, they gather information about students' current levels of understanding. Through careful responses, they provide additional information and/or feedback about students' ideas and performance that can strengthen students' understanding of content and further their knowledge of learning strategies within the context of the learning event. The assessment that occurs in these dialogic exchanges becomes formative because "the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching work to meet the learning needs" (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & William, 2004, p. 10). This ability to assess student learning during instruction is a hallmark of good teaching and often distinguishes more effective teachers from their less effective colleagues (Athanasios & Achinstein, 2003).

Across classroom grouping contexts—e.g., whole class, small group, and individual confer-

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CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

In this resource from ReadWriteThink.org, students are introduced to consensus decision making through a critical discussion of a text's central ideas. Students first read and discuss issue statements related to the text. They respond to the list of issue statements individually, providing rationale for their positions. Students then discuss their positions in small groups and as a whole class, focusing on the areas that prompted the biggest disagreements among students.

<http://bit.ly/1qEoCuf>

Lisa Storm Fink
www.ReadWriteThink.org

ences—skillfully-crafted conversations permit a unique and advantaged view of student learning and offer insight into students’ thinking by revealing their “online processing” and emerging awareness. Students’ talk can also illuminate knowledge gaps or misconceptions that alert teachers can quickly address. When skillful teachers monitor this “continuous flow of information” (Gottheiner & Siegel, 2012, p. 533) they respond with instructional moves that support students’ developing understandings and strengthen the learning environment for their students.

Using Talk to Monitor Students’ Emerging Conceptual Knowledge

In another example, Ms. Jenner, a sixth-grade math teacher, uses the context of whole-class discussion to explore students’ understanding of the word *prerequisite*, a term used in the curriculum for the day’s math problem. She knows the concept of prerequisite is necessary for students to understand the problem’s central focus on the use of grade-point averages to determine eligibility to play school sports. Ms. Jenner suspects that many of her students—most of whom are second language learners—will be unfamiliar with the word. Her suspicion turns out to be true, so she engages students in a series of exchanges through which she gradually builds their understanding of the concept of *prerequisite* by connecting the word to contexts that students will find familiar.

MS. JENNER: So we go on all of these trips. We call them incentives. But what do we base them on? Aaron?

AARON: They are based on your scholar level [i.e., each student’s grade-point-average].

MS. JENNER: Oh, your scholar level. So could I say that your scholar level was a *prerequisite* to whether or not you get to go on the trip?

(silence)

MS. JENNER: So what’s a prerequisite? Manny?

MANNY: A requirement?

MS. JENNER: A requirement. So a prerequisite is a requirement. So having a certain scholar level is a prerequisite, or requirement, for going on the trip. There are other types of prerequisites. For example, typically a prerequisite to be a great basketball player is that you should probably be what? (holds hand in the air) . . . that I’m not.

SUSAN: Taller.

MS. JENNER: Taller. However, there are some very great, short basketball players. But that’s usually a prerequisite. What’s a prerequisite to pass sixth grade? In order for me to put my stamp of approval on you . . . and absolutely endorse you going on to seventh grade, what kind of prerequisite must you meet?

TAYLOR: You need to do your homework every day, have good grades, do all your work in class, pay attention.

MS. JENNER: Okay.

SHAKERIAH: Be respectful.

MS. JENNER: Be respectful. What would happen if we just gave you second-grade work?

MANNY: That would be cool.

MS. JENNER: It would be cool in the short term, but what would happen? How would that affect your learning and your ability to do well in grade seven? Amber?

AMBER: Because, like, we’re doing second-grade work and, like, we’re moving up, moving up grades, but we’re learning lower-grade stuff.

MS. JENNER: Okay. So what would happen when you got to grade seven? I mean, you’d have straight A’s. You’d meet the grade requirement. Yes, Joel?

JOEL: I think what would happen is when you got to seventh grade you wouldn’t know what they were talking about. Either things like vocab words, math problems, or either completing the whole lesson.

MS. JENNER: So in this case, it's not the grade that is a prerequisite or requirement but the knowledge or information necessary to actually do the work of a seventh grader.

Throughout this series of instructional exchanges, Ms. Jenner meets students at the point of their emerging awareness. She recognizes that students' contributions provide clues to their understandings about the concept of *prerequisites*, and she uses this insight to structure the discussion. She uses questions to initiate each exchange, and then by revoicing students' contributions, Ms. Jenner "checks back" to confirm students' intended meaning; this move allows students space to modify or further explain their ideas. In addition, through her recursive process of soliciting students' ideas, incorporating them into the stream of discussion, and then following up with a new question, Ms. Jenner gauges students' developing conceptual awareness. When they fail to answer or give answers that demonstrate incomplete understanding, she knows she needs to offer additional explanation or ask a more specific follow-up question. In response, students volunteer more information or modify their responses; and if they do not respond, Ms. Jenner opens the floor to others' contributions. In this way, she keeps the class moving forward together, and through her insistence on widespread participation, she is able to determine when the class is ready to move on in the discussion. In this class, students' growing knowledge can be seen through the relevance and quantity of their contributions as they collaboratively build the concept of *prerequisite*, and this information helps Ms. Jenner structure the instructional episode.

Keeping track of students' developing knowledge

To keep track of students' developing understandings of key vocabulary and its relationships to the content, Ms. Jenner employs an adapted version of an interactive class organizer, or Generative Vocabulary Matrix (Larson, 2014), to record content-related words and to tie them to important content. As she introduces and dis-

cusses important vocabulary with her students, she records their ideas on sticky notes displayed on anchor charts. During this initial conversation, she also draws students' attention to relationships *between* words and concepts, in this case, between *prerequisites* and *eligibility* for privileges and/or participation in additional activities and events (Figure 1). The term *eligibility* will be used later in her lesson with a word problem about students' participation in middle-school sports. It is also a term frequently used as part of their school's positive behavior program through which students earn privileges based on school-wide behavioral norms. Students' ability to contribute to this discussion gives Ms. Jenner a quick assessment of their developing understanding and helps her determine next steps for her lesson.

Over time, as words are used in the context of math reading and problem-solving, the concepts are further developed and words can be categorized according to their relationships to one another and to important ideas. Ms. Jenner also asks students to connect words and ideas on the matrix to other content areas and to their knowledge outside of class, thus raising word consciousness and developing their knowledge of the multiple meanings that many words carry.

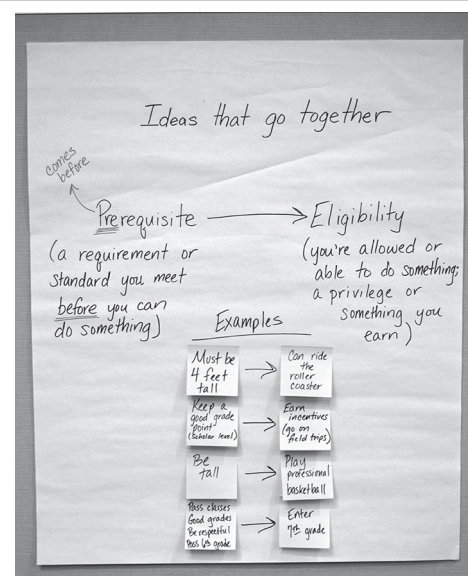


Figure 1. Adapted Generative Vocabulary Matrix

Their ability to contribute to this process gives Ms. Jenner a window into their understanding, allows her to address misconceptions, and helps her continue shaping their developing conceptual knowledge.

Integrating talk with other forms of classroom assessment

Ms. Jenner also expects students to use the matrix as a resource when writing explanations and procedures for solving math problems, and she looks for evidence of this use in their homework and written assignments. In this way, this collaboratively constructed classroom resource becomes an extension of the curriculum, serves as a resource for students' reference, and scaffolds students' ability to accomplish academic tasks. In combination with quizzes and unit assessments, it also offers a reference point for Ms. Jenner to use when determining how far students have come in their learning and whether they are meeting their benchmarks.

Ms. Jenner's anecdotal records (Figure 2) keep track of students' developing knowledge of important words and concepts. She notes students' contributions during whole-class discussion and looks for evidence in their homework and written assignments by recording students' use of words, determining whether their examples accurately capture words' meanings and relationships to content, and noting any misconceptions and confusions. By using anecdotal records to monitor students' oral and written interactions with content, Ms. Jenner can readily see who needs additional support and what concepts or ideas require further exploration.

The Formative Nature of Talk

Through questions and elicitations, teachers set the discussion's course; and through careful attention to students' responses, skillful teachers gauge and probe students' emerging understandings and determine next steps. Although not a new understanding about assessment, these dialogic exchanges provide teachers the opportunity to attend to students' evolving understandings,

unveiling confusions and creating space for students to interpret or apply content in new ways, while extending students' learning opportunities through the natural give-and-take of these dynamic instructional interactions, and they should not be overlooked as important data.

The dynamic quality of these exchanges is further strengthened as teachers respond to students' reasoning and strategies with specific, contingent feedback that deepens and extends student thinking. Students can use this information to gauge and adjust their own performance, a critical characteristic of productive assessment (Frey & Fisher, 2011). At the same time, teachers model and explain the reasoning they hope students will notice and develop, in essence, modeling for students the language of thinking. As teachers collaboratively engage with students in explorations of content, they open the door to shared thinking and make the problem-solving strategies of others available as a cognitive re-

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Accurately Defined the Word <i>Bridget, Taylor, Erik</i> <i>Manny - partial - 'requirement'</i>	Provided Clear Examples <i>Alexia</i> <i>Bridget</i> <i>Nelson</i> <i>Mariana</i>
Used the Word Correctly in Context <i>Aaron, Joel, Amber, Susan</i> <i>Taylor - context during discussion</i> <i>Mitsuko, Mariana, Erik - context in discussion and writing</i>	Students Who Need Additional Support <i>Manny - partial definition but no application</i> <i>Shakeriah, Yi - missed definition 'be respectful'</i> <i>Colette, Keenan, Xavier, Catherine, Kanbra, Edjardo</i> <i>Jakesa - silent / not focused</i>

Figure 2. Anecdotal Record

source for all (Johnston, 2012). The formative assessment that results from this dynamic and interactive process simultaneously feeds and shapes instruction and ultimately determines the quality of the learning experience for students.

So What Does This Mean?

Formative assessment comprises an essential component of effective instruction, and by making strategic use of their own and their students'

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talk, teachers integrate assessment throughout the school day, making it a vibrant contributor to the instructional cycle. The knowledge gained through students' participation in dialogic exchanges with their teachers provides a view of students' evolving understandings and acquisition of content, which, in turn, influences teachers' instructional decisions and next steps. Assessment becomes "in-formative" when the teacher turns the observations and insights gathered during these interactions into more fo-

ocused teaching actions and responses that address students' immediate learning needs.

In an era of high-stakes testing and very public conversations about value-added instruction and teacher accountability, it is important for educators to not overlook the forms of assessment that are likeliest to have actual influence on student learning day in and day out. In fact, it is the assessment that accompanies instruction that offers the most trustworthy information about what students know and can do; and within the instructional cycle of teaching and learning that structures the school day, talk creates the currency through which knowledge is exchanged. Through dynamic and interactive teacher-student talk, routine exchanges become a valuable

source of information to strengthen learning and form the heart of the teaching and learning cycle.

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Evelyn Ford-Connors, NCTE member since 2013, is senior lecturer in Language and Literacy Education, and associate director of the Donald D. Durrell Reading and Writing Clinic, Boston University School of Education. **Dana A. Robertson**, NCTE member since 2013, is assistant professor, Elementary and Early Childhood Education, University of Wyoming. **Jeanne R. Paratore**, NCTE member since 2015, is professor and cluster director in Language and Literacy Education, Boston University School of Education.