

# Strategies of Assessment for Learning in the L2 Classroom

Icy Lee

icylee@cuhk.edu.hk

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

## Abstract

In second language education, assessment for learning (AFL) is a relatively recent concept. Although the term first came into use in the UK in the late 1980's and early 1990's, AFL has received increasing attention only in the last decade or so. This article attempts to unpack the notion of AFL by presenting seven strategies of AFL (Chappuis, 2009) that teachers can use in the L2 classroom, illustrating them with examples drawn from L2 reading and writing.

**Keywords:** Assessment, Language assessment, Assessment for learning, EFL

## Introduction

Second language assessment has witnessed a major paradigm shift from a focus on traditional forms of assessment (often referred to as assessment of learning - AOL) to a greater focus on assessment for learning (AFL). The term AFL originated from the Assessment Reform Group (ARG) in the United Kingdom and began to come into use in the late 1980's and early 1990's. In recent years, AFL has been embraced by more and more educational systems around the world, as evidenced by increasing attention to AFL in curriculum policy statements in countries such as the UK, Australia, and Hong Kong (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003; Gardner, 2006; Leung, 2004). While AOL focuses on using assessment to provide judgment of student learning and utilizing the assessment information for administrative and reporting purposes (Wiliam, 2001), AFL aims primarily to promote student learning. Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & Wiliam (2004) provide a useful definition of AFL as follows:

Assessment for learning is any assessment for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting pupils' learning. It thus differs from assessment designed primarily to serve the purposes of accountability, or of ranking, or of certifying competence. An assessment activity can help learning if it provides information to be used as feedback, by teachers and by their pupils in assessing themselves and each other, to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Such assessment becomes "formative assessment" when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching work to meet learning needs.

(Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & Wiliam, 2004, pp. 2-3)

It is evident from the definition above that the top priority in AFL lies in using assessment to promote student learning through involving students actively in the assessment process (Black & Wiliam, 1998). In AFL-focused classrooms, students are

fully aware of their learning objectives and expected learning outcomes and play an important role in managing their own learning. They are provided with plenty of practice opportunities to work towards the learning goals. Teachers promote learning through delivering formative feedback, during which teachers identify students' strengths and weaknesses and show them what they can do to close the gap between their current performance and desired performance – i.e., the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

The student role in AFL is underlined by Jones (2010), who highlights four major principles of AFL. First, there is a need to “meet learners at their level of knowledge and to revisit prior learning” (p.176). Second, students have to be actively involved in their learning. Third, students must be clear of the learning goals they are working towards, so that they know the criteria they are evaluated against and how to improve on their work. Finally, students need to engage in self- and peer assessment to develop critical awareness of what is required of them and to improve their work<sup>1</sup>.

The implementation of AFL, however, is likely to present a steep learning curve for teachers, especially those working in examination-oriented contexts dominated by the AOL culture. In this article, I draw upon the AFL framework (comprised of seven AFL strategies) developed by Chappuis (2009) and attempt to unpack the notion of AFL. I illustrate the seven AFL strategies proposed by Chappuis (2009) with examples from the reading and writing classrooms.

### **Seven AFL strategies proposed by Chappuis (2009)**

Chappuis (2009) approaches AFL by addressing three important questions from the learner's vantage point (see Figure 1) – namely, (1) Where am I going?; (2) Where am I now?; and (3) How can I close the gap?

**Figure 1: Seven strategies of AFL proposed by Chappuis (2009, p.12)**

<b>Where Am I Going?</b>
Strategy 1: Provide students with a clear and understandable vision of the learning target.
Strategy 2: Use examples and models of strong and weak work.
<b>Where Am I Now?</b>
Strategy 3: Offer regular descriptive feedback.
Strategy 4: Teach students to self-assess and set goals.
<b>How Can I Close the Gap?</b>
Strategy 5: Design lessons to focus on one learning target or aspect of quality at a time.
Strategy 6: Teach students focused revision.
Strategy 7: Engage students in self-reflection, and let them keep track of and share their learning.

<sup>1</sup> More recently, the term *assessment as learning* has been used to emphasize the active role of the learner as the critical connector between assessment and learning (Earl, 2003; Earl & Katz, 2006), and *assessment as a process of metacognition* for students (Berry, 2008).

In the rest of this article, I am going to expound the seven AFL strategies and exemplify them with reference to reading and writing in the L2 classroom.

### **AFL Strategy 1: Provide students with a clear and understandable vision of the learning target**

In the first AFL strategy, teachers work on familiarizing students with the learning targets, making them understand the expected learning outcomes and helping them understand the goals they are working towards. To illustrate AFL strategy 1 with reference to reading, teachers can share the learning targets outlined in Figure 2 with students.

**Figure 2: Learning targets for reading**

#### **Before I read, I**

pay attention to the title and predict what the text is going to be about  
think about the topic and what I know about it  
set a purpose for my reading

#### **While I am reading, I**

imagine what the places, people and/or events mentioned in the text may look like  
connect my personal experience to what I am reading  
check if my prior predictions were correct  
look for the main idea  
vary my reading speed according to the importance of the information in the text  
have a dialogue with the writer by asking questions  
read between the lines – i.e. make inferences from textual clues  
distinguish between fact and opinion  
predict what will happen next, and read on to confirm or reject my predictions  
re-read difficult parts of the text  
guess meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary

#### **After reading, I**

determine if my initial impressions were correct  
review and summarize what I have read  
attempt to answer the questions I have raised during reading  
ask new questions about the text  
reflect on what I have read  
discuss what I have read with others  
consider the writer's intention  
evaluate what I have read and supported it with reference to the text

Take classroom writing as another example. Supposing students are asked to write a story, they have to know what makes a good story. Figure 3 contains a list of learning targets for story writing (Lee, 2007).

**Figure 3: Learning targets for story writing**

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

In order that students have an absolutely clear understanding of the targets outlined in Figures 2 and 3, teachers have to engage in explicit instruction to make sure students know what these targets mean. Teachers can design learning activities on each of the learning targets to show students how these can be realized in reading and writing. In doing so, teachers teach what they assess. AFL, therefore, is not only about assessment, but it is also about teaching.

### **AFL strategy 2: Use examples and models of strong and weak work**

Using story writing as an example, students can better understand how to work towards their goals and develop a clearer sense of direction (Where am I going?) by looking at texts that illustrate strong and weak stories. In using models of strong and weak work, teachers can show students the entire story, specific parts of the story (e.g. beginning and ending), or use strong and weak sentences to illustrate language use. Figure 4 shows two short student texts (A and B) that illustrate a stronger and a weaker opening of a story.

**Figure 4: Examples of strong and weak story opening**

(A) Johnny was not Thomas Edison, of course, but he could well be compared to him. Both were men of vast curiosity and utter intelligence, born with a natural talent and ability to analyze things. One day, Johnny put his hand into the vast, towering, bookshelf and stifled another yawn. He was supposed to clear out all the volumes from the shelf, and to re-order them. It might've been interesting at first, but after working for two hours, this task became extremely dreary. Suddenly his fingers stroked something strange. When he reached and touched it, he felt a growing sense of stimulation. The wrinkled piece of paper was yellow, and anybody could speculate that this paper was old.

(B) Johnny was very bored. He was tidying the books on the book shelf. He did not think that his job was fun. He put his hand inside the shelf and found a paper. He took it out and it was old and yellow.

Teachers can get students to read and analyze Texts (A) and (B) and discuss which one is a better story opening – e.g. which is more attention-grabbing, which

contains juicy words and showing sentences, and which is more interesting overall. Through the discussion, students can come to a better understanding of how they can write a good story opening. (It is useful to note that Texts A and B are students' work, and the so-called stronger text is not perfect and has room for improvement. Students can engage in an extended activity to revise and improve the texts.)

### **AFL strategy 3: Offer regular descriptive feedback**

In AFL, students have to be provided with clear, descriptive feedback to enhance their learning. Such feedback has to be specific and given with reference to the expected learning outcomes, so that students can make use of teacher feedback to improve learning. In particular, students have to be told what they did well and what areas they need to improve on. They also need to be provided with opportunities to act on teacher feedback and given explicit guidance to make improvement to their work.

To illustrate this AFL strategy with reference to writing, apart from annotating student texts with commentary, teachers can use a feedback form to deliver feedback, focusing on the areas that they highlight when they present their vision of the learning target (i.e. AFL strategy 1). Figure 5 contains a feedback form that enables teachers to deliver descriptive feedback for the recount genre.

**Figure 5: A feedback form for offering descriptive feedback**

<b>Recount - Evaluation Criteria</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Structure and organization</b>	
Provides an orientation, establishing who was involved, where, and when the events happened	
Sequences past events in a clear order	
Provides a sequence of events in chronological order	
Ends the essay appropriately – e.g. with a feeling, a thought or a comment	
<b>Language features</b>	
Uses the past tense accurately	
Uses time words appropriately	
Uses a range of appropriate words to describe the events	

It is important to remember that feedback is effective only when it is manageable for students. Teachers should therefore vary their feedback according to student needs and avoid overwhelming students with a large amount of feedback. Thus, Figure 5 could be adapted for different learning situations – e.g. it could be shortened, simplified or made more concise. Teachers could focus on selected items according to student needs.

As for feedback on language use in student writing, detailed written corrective feedback may not be productive since such unfocused feedback could easily confuse and frustrate students. In responding to written errors, it is advisable for teachers to focus on the most critical areas that warrant attention rather than fill student texts with the red ink by underlining and/or correcting every single error.

**AFL Strategy 4: Teach students to self-assess and set goals**

While teachers offer ongoing formative feedback to students, it is equally important for teachers to engage students in self-assessment so that they understand their own strengths and weaknesses in learning, come up with strategies to help themselves improve learning, and take responsibility for their own learning. In AFL, active student involvement is crucial – as students have to learn for themselves. Through assessing their own learning, students will be able to set goals to further their learning.

Figure 6 provides an example of a self-assessment form for reading. The form lists a number of reading strategies which teachers have taught explicitly (in AFL strategy 1). In conducting self-assessment, students evaluate how well they perform in reading with regard to (some of) the reading strategies teachers have established and set goals to improve their reading. For example, if they find guessing unfamiliar vocabulary difficult, the action plan could be to read the sentences before and after the difficult vocabulary item and pay attention to contextual clues.

**Figure 6: Self-assessment and goal setting for reading**

Reading strategies	Often	Sometimes	Almost never	What I plan to do
I make predictions about the topic before reading.				
I ask questions while I am reading.				
I look for the main idea.				
I attempt to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words.				
I don't pay much attention to unimportant details while reading.				
I think of the intention of the author.				
I relate the reading to my personal experience.				
I discuss what I read with others.				

**AFL Strategy 5: Design lessons to focus on one learning target or aspect of quality at a time**

To help students close the gaps in their learning, short practice tasks or assignments on specific skills or concepts can be designed. The major principle of this strategy is “one at a time”. That is, a big learning task is broken down into smaller and manageable components for students.

Reading, which is comprised of multiple reading skills, is difficult for L2 students to master. Teachers can design short practice tasks to help students focus on one learning target at a time. For instance, if students find inferencing in reading comprehension difficult, teachers can design focused inferencing tasks to help them understand how they can infer meaning while reading. Other times teachers may design a skimming task, a scanning task, or a vocabulary guessing task to help students work on the skill they are weak in – one at a time. The following vocabulary guessing task in Figure 7, for instance, can be used with students to help them understand how they can work out the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary in context.

**Figure 7: Focused vocabulary guessing task**

- (1) Mrs Wong went to the cupboard to get her dog some meat. When she opened the cupboard, however, it was bare. As a result, the poor dog did not have anything to eat.
- (2) Are IT products always reliable? I doubt. For teachers, IT can sometimes arouse students' interest in learning. However, electronic gadgets can break or go wrong any time.

Teachers can help students guess meaning of unknown vocabulary as follows: (1) get students to identify the part of speech of the target word; (2) draw their attention to the contextual clues (i.e. the surrounding text); (3) encourage students to guess the meaning of the target word and explain their inference; (4) students can compare their inference to the target word and put it into the original context to see if their guess works or not; (5) finally students can confirm their guess by looking up the dictionary. If students make wrong inferences, teachers can draw students' attention to the contextual clues and get them to re-evaluate their inference so that students can learn from their mistakes.

For writing, if students do not do well in organizing ideas in writing, teachers can design a planning task with graphic organizers to help students look at the links between ideas in writing and how best they can arrange them so that their ideas can be sequenced logically and coherently. To give other examples, students may find writing an attention-grabbing story opening difficult, they may have difficulty using dialogues in story writing, or their writing may lack descriptive details. Teachers can teach these specific dimensions of story writing and give students focused practice tasks – one at a time. The following focused task in Figure 8 shows how students can be helped to improve their story writing by enriching the descriptive details in their writing.

**Figure 8: Focused sentence-level story writing task**

- In each of the following, add more descriptive details to (A). Write your new sentences in (B).
- (1A) One night, I was walking back home.
- (1B) One dark rainy night, I was walking back home all by myself. (suggested answer)

- (2A) The woman has long hair.  
 (2B) The old woman has long, dark, unkempt hair. (suggested answer)
- (3A) A vampire appeared.  
 (3B) A fearsome and blood thirsty vampire appeared. (suggested answer)
- (4A) A vampire appeared in the air.  
 (4B) A fearsome and blood thirsty vampire appeared in the thin misty air. (suggested answer)
- (5A) They entered the castle.  
 (5B) Fearfully they entered the creepy old castle. (suggested answer)

### **AFL Strategy 6: Teach students focused revision**

AFL strategy 6 complements Strategy 5 and thus it is best to look at the two strategies together. When teachers find that a certain skill is difficult for students, they design focused tasks (i.e. AFL strategy 5) to help students work on the specific area they are weak in. They also give feedback to students on the selected area and make them revise their work accordingly (AFL strategy 6). For example, if teachers identify providing rich descriptive details in story writing as a specific focus for Strategy 5, they design short focused tasks for students on this area. In implementing AFL strategy 6, teachers respond to students' own stories by providing feedback on the descriptive details in students' stories and suggest ways to improve them. They also ask students to revise their stories by enriching the descriptive details.

To give another example, teachers may find that in reading students are often unable to make correct inferences. Apart from giving students focused tasks on inferencing (AFL strategy 5), teachers can work on focused revision by drawing students' attention to the process of inferencing in reading. In multiple-choice inferencing items that students fail to do well in their reading comprehension task, for example, instead of simply telling them the correct answers, teachers can ask students to re-read the text and the inferencing questions, examine every option provided for each question and explain why the options are right or wrong, using evidence drawn from the text. Figure 9 provides an example of a focused revision task on inferencing, using the short text in Figure 4.

### **Figure 9: Focused revision task on inferencing**

Johnny was not Thomas Edison, of course, but he could well be compared to him. Both were men of vast curiosity and utter intelligence, born with a natural talent and ability to analyze things. One day, Johnny put his hand into the vast, towering, bookshelf and stifled another yawn. He was supposed to clear out all the volumes from the shelf, and to re-order them. It might've been interesting at first, but after working for two hours, this task became extremely dreary. Suddenly his fingers stroked something strange. When he reached and touched it, he felt a growing sense of stimulation. The wrinkled piece of paper was yellow, and anybody could speculate that this paper was old.



Question: How would you describe Johnny's attitude towards the piece of paper he found from the bookshelf?

- A. uninterested
- B. curious
- C. tired
- D. shocked

'A' is right / wrong because ....

'B' is right / wrong because ...

'C' is right / wrong because ...

'D' is right / wrong because ...

## 9. AFL Strategy 7: Engage students in self-reflection, and let them keep track of and share their learning

When students are clear about their learning targets and aware of the progress they have towards their goals, they are likely to become more motivated in their learning. To the end, it is important that teachers encourage self-reflection and enable students to keep track of their own learning. One useful way to help students self-reflect and track their own learning and progress is to ask them to keep a portfolio. Figure 10 provides an example of a reading-writing portfolio that requires students to compile their work in relation to reading and writing.

**Figure 10: A reading-writing portfolio**

### **A Reading-Writing Portfolio**

#### **A timed essay done in class**

What parts of the essay do you particularly like? Why?  
What areas do you like least? Why?

#### **A project report (include all notes, drafts, and materials leading to the final paper)**

What did you learn from writing the project report?  
Which was the most enjoyable part of the project work? Why?  
Which was the least enjoyable part of the project work? Why?  
What difficulties did you encounter writing this report?  
What did you do to overcome the difficulties?

#### **An assignment based on a book you have read (e.g. a reading report)**

Why did you select this book?  
Which areas of the assignment did you like most? Why?  
Which areas did you like least? Why?

If you were to recommend the book to a friend, what would you say?

**A writer's choice (any text that has been important to the student – e.g. a poem, a blog entry, a creative story)**

Why did you choose this item?

What does it say about you (e.g. as a person and as a writer)?

**An overall reflection of the portfolio**

What were your goals in learning reading and writing?

In what way was each of the portfolio items above important in helping you achieve these goals

Having compiled their portfolios, students can showcase their learning and learning progress and share with others, such as their peers, teachers and parents. Students can also celebrate their learning through their sharing, which can reinforce the value of their efforts and boost their motivation.

## Conclusion

The above examples about the seven strategies of AFL have demonstrated that through AFL, teachers can foster a stronger link between assessment, learning and teaching. They also focus on student learning, work on maximizing student involvement in learning, and enhance learner motivation. Together these seven AFL strategies can make learning more focused, engaging, and productive, and teaching more goal-oriented, learner-centred, and effective.

## References

- Berry, R. (2008). *Assessment for learning*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Black, P., Harrison, C., Lee, , Marshall, C., & Wiliam, D. (2003). *Assessment for learning*. New York: Open University Press.
- Black, P., Harrison, C., Lee, C., Marshall, B., & Wiliam, D. (2004). *The nature and value of formative assessment for learning*. Unpublished manuscript, Educational Testing Service. Princeton, NJ. Retrieved from <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/content/1/c4/73/57/formative.pdf>
- Black, P., & Wiliam. D. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education*, 5(1), 7-74.
- Chappuis, J. (2009). *Seven strategies of assessment for learning*. Boston: Pearson.
- Gardner, J. (2006). *Assessment and learning*. London: Sage.
- Earl, L. M. (2003). *Assessment as learning: Using classroom assessment to maximize learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Earl, L.M., & Katz, S. (2006). *Rethinking classroom assessment with purpose in mind*. Retrieved from [http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/assess/wncp/rethinking\\_assess\\_mb.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/assess/wncp/rethinking_assess_mb.pdf)
- Jones, J. (2010). The role of assessment for learning in the management of primary to secondary transition: Implications for language teachers. *Language Learning Journal*, 35(2). 175-191.

- Lee, I. (2007). Assessment for learning: Integrating assessment, teaching and learning in the ESL/EFL writing classroom. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 64(1), 199-214.
- Leung, C. (2004). Developing formative teacher assessment: Knowledge, practice, and change. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 1(1), 19–41.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- William, D. (2001). An overview of the relationship between assessment and the curriculum. In D. Scott (Ed.), *Curriculum and assessment* (pp.165–181). Westport, CT: Ablex Publishing.