

Chapter 14

Formative Assessment on Writing: Affordances and Challenges in Elementary Settings

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to address formative assessment in writing in the elementary grades, K to 5. The chapter will include the following sections: (a) An introduction that will present and explain assessment purposes with a clear description and explanation of formative assessment and its difference from summative assessment; (b) Common formative assessments used in writing and research that supports their effectiveness; (c) Principles of formative assessment and how those can be used with specific examples from classroom settings; (d) Recommendations for practice, and (e) Future research directions.

INTRODUCTION

In 2003 the National Commission of Writing report presented writing as the neglected R and addressed four specific challenges that awaited educators, researchers, and policy makers in the nation's educational future. Those challenges consisted of the following: the need to devote more time to writing instruction, the use of assessments, the integration of technology, and teachers' professional development (PD). After a decade, these challenges still remain despite efforts to call attention to them and address them. Unfortunately, time for writing PD (Cutler & Graham, 2008; McKeown, Bridle, Harris, Graham, Collins, & Brown, 2016) and effective PD models (Kennedy, 2018; McCarthy & Geoghegan, 2016), the integration of technology and digital literacy in classrooms, and writing assessment all remain challenging in the field of writing research.

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Formative Assessment on Writing

This chapter will focus on the use of one specific kind of writing assessment, formative assessment. Formative assessment has often taken a backseat to summative assessment in writing. That is, the use of assessments at the school/district/state-level is often limited to the end-task of instruction. For example, assessments conducted by the state at the end of the year have a summative use and are a common state practice. However, the heart of instructional reform and change is based on formative assessments. Formative assessments provide ongoing data that can help constituent members of a school system identify goals and work toward achieving their larger academic goals.

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the use of formative assessments in writing and describe specific approaches that can be used in classroom settings. In the following section we explain assessment purposes in general and formative assessment in particular. Further, we comment on the use of the latter in writing, elaborate on specific assessments, and provide examples of their application in classroom settings. The chapter concludes with recommendations for research and practice.

THE ROLE OF ASSESSMENT IN INSTRUCTION

In 2010, the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI, 2010) revived a focus on writing instruction and a view of literacy as both a reading and writing activity. Until then, perhaps due to the influences of policies and initiatives (e.g., No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), 2001; Race to the Top, 2009), writing was not emphasized a great deal. Consequently, students completed writing tasks separately from reading, and instructionally there was a focus on reading and mathematics leaving writing on the periphery. A close review of the CCSS shows the need for targeted and systematic instruction as the writing tasks that students are expected to complete are cognitively challenging. Students need to pay close attention to the writing purpose, task, and audience in order to develop, organize, compose, evaluate revise, edit and share their work. In order to effectively communicate ideas to readers, students should also be able to set goals, monitor their progress, manage their time, and purposely reflect to redefine their goals as they complete writing tasks.

In order to best support students' writing needs, instruction and assessment should communicate, flawlessly. Effective instruction helps students meet the increasing writing demands at each grade level (Juel, 1988). For instance, it should target the foundational skills of handwriting, typing, spelling, and sentence construction. Handwriting and keyboarding challenges can make the writing task tedious and students may devote significant time to letter formation or keyboarding, draining their cognitive energy that should have been devoted to ideation. If foundational skills (e.g., spelling and segmenting to spell) are not addressed early, then, as in an avalanche, students will struggle to correctly spell patterns, multisyllabic words, and convey meaning to readers (Torgesen & Burgess, 1998). Additionally, this lack of accuracy in spelling will affect production and may eventually negatively affect motivation. Instruction should also target more global aspects of writing such as the writing process, reading processes, and genre knowledge (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). Difficulty with organizing ideas, ideation, and reading comprehension, as well as orthographic and grammatical challenges, can affect the clarity of sentences, their cohesion, and completion of responses (Hayes, 1996). Teachers' ability to identify challenges using timely and informative assessments is essential to effective intervention.

In order to use assessments to better understand students' development and plan instruction to meet students' needs, teachers first need to have a clear understanding of the function and purpose of the multiple types of writing assessments available to them. Screening tests allow teachers to identify students

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