

# Classroom-based Assessment Practices for Learning

SWETA GUPTA\*

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## Abstract

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*The present paper recognises the importance of Assessment for Learning (AfL) in enhancing students' learning. Attempts have been made to translate the theory of AfL to actual classroom practices. Such assessment, when used with classroom instructions, provides the scope to improve students' learning. Herein, feedback, one of the significant components of AfL is used to find the learning gap; thereby, helpful information is provided to students, which scaffolds their present performance to reach the desired level. Many such practices have been elaborated on in this paper to help the teachers better understand AfL. The paper attempts to highlight the potential power of formative assessment which, when used with summative assessment, contributes to improving the students' learning, raising the quality of education.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The process of teaching is intended to bring learning and what the students have learned or where they are in their learning is gauged by assessment. Therefore, assessment forms an integral part of the teaching and learning process. Over the years, assessment has answered many questions: What do students focus on? How do students learn? What is the quality of engagement with the particular task? How does the teacher

understand what students have learned? What motivates and drives a student to learn? Assessment is seen as a tool to answer these crucial questions. It is also considered as a process to enhance the learning and achievement of the students. However, the kind of assessment most visible at school is pen and paper tests, or examinations under the controlled condition that takes place at the end of a term or year. This is commonly known as a summative assessment.

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It measures students' performance at a time, which takes the form of grading and certifying students' achievements. This kind of data is used to draw inferences about what students know and measure the success of teaching and learning.

It is of crucial importance to school administrators to make a judgment on teaching standards. Policy makers use such inferences on a broader scale to reach decisions.

Parents look for grades as their interest is in knowing how their children are doing at school, particularly in comparison to other students. They assume that the only way to find out this is through grades; hence, they strongly support grading.

Administrators do realise the limited effect of grading students. In the word of Paul Dressel, "A grade can be regarded as an inadequate report of an inaccurate judgment by a biased and judge of the extent to which a student has attained an undefined level of mastery of an unknown proportion of an indefinite material" (Dressel, 1957). Such an impact of grading has a detrimental effect on students' learning. Their attention is drawn more towards achieving scores and comparison with fellow students. These further encourages surface learning while the urge for deep understanding finds a secondary place. Students are more concerned about consequences than the process of learning, often creating stress among them. Having assessed at a point in time, teachers

are left with limited information about students' understanding. With this bit of information, the teachers, too feel short of knowledge to design intervention strategies. All that meant here is not to negate summative assessment but to reduce an overemphasis on it. Encouraging practitioners to use these results formatively will support students' learning and achievement. The term formative, when used in the assessment context, broadly means an assessment that goes on along with classroom instructions purposefully to improve the learning and attainment of students.

Learners in the classroom come from backgrounds with diverse cultures and expressions. This way, each learner has unique experiences. Catering to the variety of needs of students, the teacher requires creating a classroom culture characterised by acceptance and appreciation. It further necessitates a classroom where learners feel confident without fear of being judged. Learning becomes joyful when mistakes turn into opportunities for learning. Learners look for teachers who respond positively and constructively to them. They need an environment where they can engage with multiple tasks, activities, and resources and where there is encouragement for meaningful engagement with peers. A classroom with all these characteristics promotes Assessment for Learning (AfL). This kind of assessment encompasses

two things. One is the role of teachers in assessing the student's progress through frequently interacting with them, continuously identifying their learning needs, and adjusting the instructional process accordingly during teaching (Looney, 2005).

The identification of learning needs and enhancement of students' progress is made by way of feedback. Secondly, the active engagement of students is encouraged in self and peer assessment. AfL is a relatively new term that was first used by Harry Black in 1986 and brought to the light of the audience by Marry James in 1992. Initially, the term AfL was known as Formative Evaluation, an outcome of the research of Michael Scriven (1967), often used to describe the role of evaluation in the 'improvement of the curriculum'. Later the term was refined to Formative Assessment as information from the students is used as feedback to adapt teaching and respond to students learning (Black and William, 1998) during learning (Cowie and Bell, 1999).

This way of assessing the students meaningfully was proposed in the Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation Policy implemented through enacted Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009. The rationale behind adopting Formative Assessment was the overemphasis on Summative Assessment, that produces enormous stress and anxiety among learners (CBSE 2010: 14). But the larger

population of school teachers over the country couldn't understand and implement it in the absence of adequate training. As a result, CCE became an isolated reform in measurement techniques unaccompanied by concomitant changes in classroom culture where teachers are no longer deliverers of textbooks (Nawani, 2013). Later in 2017–18, CCE was replaced by Uniform Assessment System. Recently, the New Education Policy 2020 has focused on assessing students formatively (NEP, 4.34). In such a context, the understanding and effective implementation of Formative Assessment gains relevancy.

### **DEFINING ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING**

Black and William (1998) define assessment for learning (AfL) as "All those activities undertaken by teachers (and by the students in assessing themselves) which provides feedback to shape and develop the teaching and learning activities in which both teachers and students are engaged. This becomes formative assessment when the evidence is used to adapt the teaching to meet the needs or by students themselves to change how they work at their learning."

Formative Assessment or Assessment for Learning, with whatever term we call them, what matters, is the kind of process involved therein to the larger goal of teaching and learning. Five essential functions

are involved in the assessment for learning:

1. Questioning—which helps to know where students are in their learning.
2. Creating effective feedback for every student.
3. Ensuring active participation of the students in the learning process.
4. Develop students' abilities to direct their learning by participating in peer assessment and self assessment.
5. Acknowledging assessment is crucial to enhancing the motivation and self esteem of the students.

#### **IMPLICATION OF ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING IN THE CLASSROOM**

There are various ways in which Assessment for Learning can guide classroom processes. The following is a discussion of some aspects of the teaching-learning process that can be nurtured by a deeper understanding of Assessment for Learning. The debate places feedback at the centre of the teaching-learning process because Assessment for Learning intends to further aid student learning, and continuous feedback about their learning ensures that the learning process never stops. Many of the classroom practices discussed in this paper resulted from the strategies owed by the teachers in several schools in North and West Delhi who support formative assessment

to improve students' learning in the period 2018–20. They practice these strategies at the primary, elementary, and secondary levels.

#### **FEEDBACK**

Assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning process as it serves the purpose of knowing where students stand in their learning. This learning is enhanced through a formative assessment which includes all those activities, processes, and tasks which a teacher uses in the teaching process to create feedback. Constructive feedback is, in turn, any information, process, or activities that shape and accelerate the students' learning. Its critical role in students' learning makes it the key component of assessment for learning. Both powerful tools create student learning opportunities when provided in a supportive and constructive environment. The formative feedback process begins with collecting all information from various sources that manifest in the student's present state of learning concerning learning outcomes, where they need to go, and how they will be able to reach their goal. It is where the role of the teacher as a mentor is of critical importance in planning a sequence of steps that would motivate the student to reach the expected level. These sequential steps must be worded to encourage the students to take action to address the learning issue between their present performance and the goal. These goals need to be understood

well by the students with their valuable and achievable beliefs.

Students learn from the feedback that the teacher provides. Students must have the opportunity to express and communicate their understanding of the feedback, else feedback is likely to have limited effect. Therefore, within the classroom, the environment of open discussions and discourse on the process of learning needs to be cultured. Herein the process, students must acknowledge taking ownership of their learning. In addition, the teacher needs to understand the motivation and drives of the students' learning and master the skill of giving feedback as a part of effective teaching.

### **PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK**

Black (1999) suggested four basic principles of formative feedback.

1. Students must have clarity about the learning goal (learning objective).
2. Feedback should assess the students' current learning state.
3. Feedback should be used to close the gap between students' learning state and learning goals.
4. Feedback must be of high quality and should be effective.

### **CLARIFYING LEARNING GOALS**

The students must be aware of learning goals from the beginning of the academic year. The specific learning outcomes for each of the content and activities need to be clarified

to the students. This way, students know where they are going in their learning. It also helps the teacher to shift away from an assessment which is based on the comparison of learners towards an assessment based on individual growth. In a way, it creates confidence in learners to believe in their abilities.

Let us take one illustrative example from a textbook published by the NCERT, New Delhi. 'Beehive' is an English textbook of Class IX. In a classroom observation at a school in the year 2019, a teacher shared the learning goals she expects her students to achieve while introducing the book to the students.

Students will be able to—

- read aloud the text with proper pause and modulation.
- summarise the story,
- comprehend the meaning of the story,
- able to write short answers in short paragraphs with appropriate vocabulary and grammar,
- appreciate the character and themes, and
- organise and structure thoughts while presenting the information in oral and written form.

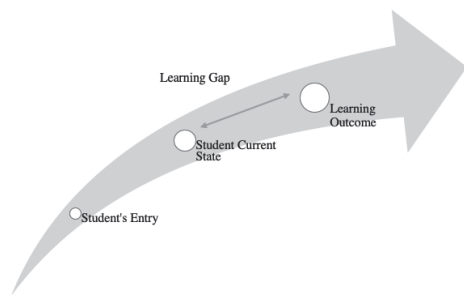
She had a good deal of dialogue on learning outcomes. Students too appreciated the teachers' effort in the clarification of expectations.

### **GIVING EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK**

The critical function of feedback is to enhance the learning of the students. To bring it into practice, the teacher

needs to understand the following four aspects—

- Students should be clarified about learning outcomes.
- The student's current learning state is assessed through the feedback.
- Feedback mechanisms bridge the gap between student's current learning state and learning outcomes.
- The relevancy of the feedback to the individual need of the student is crucial.



*Fig.1: Learning gap between student's current state and learning outcome*

Providing effective feedback is indeed very difficult. This difficulty is because the information given to the students is unhelpful.

A teacher wrote on an assignment submitted by the student, "You need to be more systematic". The information is accurate, but it is unhelpful to the student. It focuses on what is deficient in the work submitted. But feedback to function formatively, the information given as feedback to the student is used in improving the learning and thereby, the performance. Hence, designing

a sequence of small steps would be helpful in this particular case.

Sankalp is a four-year kid in Grade KGI. He is struggling with writing small alphabets a, b, c, d, ..., z. His desirable goal is writing three-letter words with phonics sounds 'at', 'an', 'ag' words like cat, mat, pat, sat, etc. Telling him to 'practice more' won't work. Define the sequence of steps which he would follow in reaching the goal as—

- Read and identify English alphabet letters once every day.
- In a four line notebook, you must write within 2 and 3 lines as required.
- Once you learn to form alphabets correctly in the required line, join two letters as 'at', 'ag', 'an'. Practice it for several days.
- Then add letters like s, p, n, r, and c, to make sat, pat, fan, ran, and can.
- Practice writing these words without lifting the pencil until the word is complete.

Since Sankalp is a young student, the teacher shared this individual plan with his parents to help them practice.

The feedback is helpful if the teacher has the skill of being able to define the journey of the student in between the present state and his desired goal. Only when the learner uses the information given as feedback in improving his performance, then only feedback works as feedforward. The teacher's



job is to design the steps between the learner's present state and desired performance.

### **SCAFFOLDED FEEDBACK**

Another form of feedback that can be helpful to students in enhancing their learning is scaffolding. Sometimes giving clues to the students would embark them to think to evoke their learned response. Learning done in this way is retained for a longer time.

Example of scaffolded feedback:

Teacher: Which part of the problem did you not understand?

Student: I just didn't get it.

Teacher: Ok! Solve the first part as the previous problem, then multiply this variable. See if you can get the answer this way. I will come back in a few minutes.

Here the student's response, "I didn't understand, I can't do it." is the anxiety about the changing nature of the task. An immediate clue can help the student. The teacher may begin solving like the previous one and then add a new variable. I will come back in a few minutes. This allows the student to actively engage with the problem, make sense of it, and reach the solution. The teacher may verify its correctness later.

In another example, an art teacher sketched a face beautifully before a group of students. She

then clearly shared the principle of drawing a well-aligned face. He said, "draw the eyes half down the face. Keep the distance between two eyes nearly the width of an eye". Such feedback will communicate to the student what is to be given attention and still a lot to be done by them. Well! scaffolding becomes essential at the primary level, where kids cannot take the task independently.

### **Verbal and Written Feedback**

A question that often perturbed teachers is whether verbal or written feedback is more effective. Boulet, Simard and Melo (1990), in their classroom experiment, found that students given time to incorporate the feedback and make improvements in the works were more effective in their learning than merely giving them feedback in verbal or written form.

### **Quantity of Feedback**

Students expect a certain amount of feedback. It is disheartening for them when they experience that they put so much effort into the assigned task and, in turn, could have to satisfy with marks or a vague statement of 'good' or 'can do better'. Lunsford (1997) suggested that a teacher must give feedback in three carefully thought comments per assignment. In addition, this feedback should express how the teacher has experienced the write-up rather than offering judgmental comments.

## **TIMELINESS**

Cowan (2003) strongly refers that feedback—oral or written, must be provided immediately to be the most effective. Keeping this in consideration, the sooner the student gets feedback, the better it is. That is why they should get it while the topic is still fresh in their minds. Therefore, the teacher must take care to—

- return the assignment the next day
- prepare a regular oral and written response to the student report

## **DESCRIPTION**

Feedback given by the teacher must be in a clear affirmative sentence rather than using ambiguous or sarcastic comments. Often teachers provide feedback that is accurate but ambiguous. For example, ‘confused’, ‘adequate’, ‘excellent’, ‘poor’, ‘be careful on how you began the sentence’. They are accurate but unhelpful. These remarks, which teachers often think to be feedback, are accurate but unhelpful because they don’t state what is causing confusion or why something is good. Similarly, being too sarcastic undermines the students’ confidence as, “Did you make an effort to find all these?” and “It seems to be copied from the book”. Other unhelpful issues are spelling and grammar while ignoring essential aspects such as conceptual understanding and critical analysis.

## **PEER ASSESSMENT**

When students are encouraged to assess each other’s work, it becomes easier for the teacher to engage in formative activities with the student. Evaluating each other’s work helps the students understand the assessment criteria and develop self assessment skills. A successful peer session involves the learner thinking like a teacher; then, the learner will explain to the other how to improve their work. In doing so, students improve their work. Peer assessment is also an effective strategy to encourage dialogue by asking for jurisdiction and proposing alternative solutions. It enhances classroom culture and social skills among students. A description of peer assessment and its impact was made as follows—

Suppose ‘X’ teaches mathematics to students of the secondary level. He wanted to reduce the time on checking assignments by involving students more and more in this task. So, ‘X’ adopted a strategy. The student did not know how the assignment would be checked and was graded weekly during the evaluation period. Sometimes ‘X’ gives a rubric and asks students to grade themselves. Sometimes students are asked to swap the notebook and grade each other’s work.

Interestingly, those who didn’t do the assignment were not allowed to participate in the evaluation process. Instead, they were supposed to complete tasks in class that they should have done at home; within



one month of implementation of this approach, more and more students were always ready with their homework. The penalty they paid for not doing homework was excluded from the evaluation. Secondly, students seemed to communicate with each other than speak to the teacher.

In another case, a Grade VI teacher chose project work to create a model on several of the given options. On completion of the task, the students were divided into groups of four each. The groups were supposed to assess the poster among each other. Abhishek, who chose the topic of pollution for himself, prepared a model on it. His work was assessed by three of his group members. They gave the feedback to Abhishek as follows—

Khushboo: The model shows gas coming out of factories, garbage on land, and traffic

on the road. It has a visual impact.

Suraj: It would be better to see some animals in polluted water.

Jaya: It is attractive. It should have more vehicles on the road.

Later Abhishek expressed the feedback. “I am thankful to my friends for their valuable feedback. They helped me add to my work and make it better... I am getting clarity... I am feeling confident.”

### GRADING

Kohn (1994) gave a principle in his work—The question is not how but why. “Don’t grade students while they are learning.” As soon as they are graded, learning stops. This is the nature of the human mind. To deal with this, an assessment system may be designed according to this principle. The practice of grading students has to be kept

Student's Name	1st attempt	2nd Attempt	3rd Attempt	4th Attempt	Arm	Leg	Breathing	Timing
Aditya	0	1	1	2	fine	fine	fine	Timing needs to be improved as soon as the bell rings to start

Fig. 2: Swimming grid

infrequently. A high school student may have to mark once a year. At an elementary level, the grading system is unjustified, knowing that they create an environment of comparison. Instead, there is a need for a supportive classroom environment that promotes learning and provides data that is helpful to teachers and students.

A swimming teacher drew a grid. The name of the students was written in the first column. The next column was a column for marking on each of the four attempts. (William, 2011)

He scored in the first four columns for a student as 4 out of 8. In this case, knowing 4 or 8 is useless for any teacher to plan intervention. Instead, if one knows that hand, arms, legs, are in coordination, the improvement is required in timing at the point when the bell rings for a start. Such information would be useful even if another coach takes over this group.

### **Techniques of Assessment for Learning**

There are various techniques that a teacher can use for the assessment for learning. Some of them are listed below, and some can be added by the teachers themselves.

#### ***Alternative to Questioning***

There is no doubt that questioning is an excellent way to engage students in the classroom. But sometimes, it may not attract a vibrant discussion. For example, a teacher asked his students, "Which country is to be blamed for the outbreak of World

War I?" The students replied in a single word, "Russia". Instead, if a statement was made by the teacher, "Russia is to be blamed the most for the happening of World War I", would invite students to respond thoughtfully. It would be clear that they not only have to agree but to reason as well. This way, when students are allowed to discuss, the quality of classroom discussion is enriched.

### ***Portfolio Assessment***

Portfolio assessment is an innovative pedagogic practice promoting quality learning in a subject domain. It is an excellent formative assessment approach to equip students with reflective skills such as metacognitive thinking and self regulating learning capacity. A portfolio, in a general sense, means carrying loose papers, artefacts, and documents in portable cases. Pedagogically portfolio assessment equates to showcasing students' best performance over some time. They can be used at different education levels in focussing various aspects; for example, in kindergarten, portfolio writing may include key skills that children learn, such as vocabulary building and simple sentence construction with the pictorial presentation. At the secondary level, the portfolio may include reports and snapshots of models in science exhibitions, creative poetry written in school literary fest, the experience of the educational visit etc. Students may be

encouraged to keep notes, feedback, corrections, and assignments for review and reflection throughout the study period.

The procedure for portfolio assessment follows collection, selection, self assessment, reflection, and delayed evaluation, looped by feedback from multiple sources, as shown in the following diagram.

found her students had generally better spoken English than written English. She planned to take a portfolio assessment. She assigned students to write four compositions of 300 words over two months. She also instructed to prepare two drafts for each composition, first and final, after incorporating feedback. Before completing for final review,

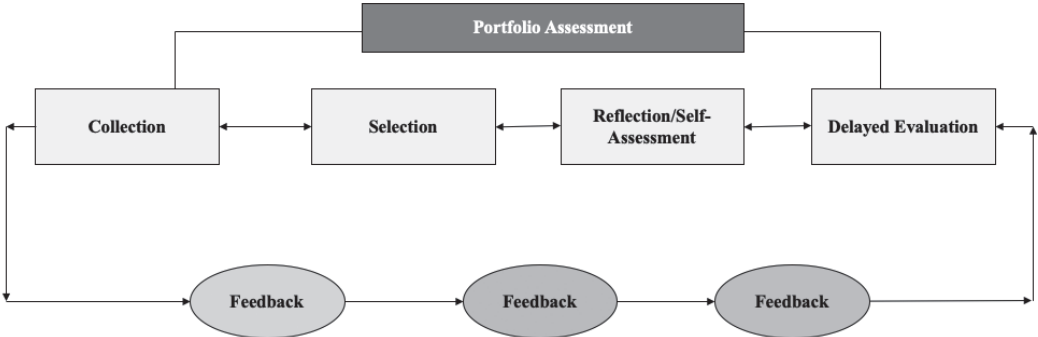


Fig. 3: Portfolio assessment procedure. Source: Lam, R. (2017, pp.6)

The teacher may ask the students to list those works that need to be reviewed and revised. From the reviewed work, selections are made to be put in their dossier. Self assessment purposes of focusing on evaluating microscopically every draft and incorporating the feedback from multiple sources. In the diagram, three feedback loops represent feedback by self, peers, and teachers in the portfolio assessment process. Delayed evaluation is summative grading of the assignment in the final draft.

Example: Mrs Shalini is an English Teacher in Grade IX. Analysing the semester result, she

students are encouraged to get their work reviewed by a self, a peer, and by a teacher. She asked them to incorporate this feedback while refining the final draft. After two months, students were supposed to reflect on their writing progress over the period. They identified the strength as well as weaknesses in their writings. In response to their portfolio assessment process, the students expressed that they liked the idea of completing portfolios. They got the opportunity to look into their work critically, which was indeed a good learning experience.

### **Encouraging Reflection and Self Assessment**

Reflection and self assessment of one's work is a productive way to engage formatively. Both of these ways can be explained here in writing a portfolio assessment. Students can reflect introspectively on the problems they went through in writing their composition and plan to work on their weaknesses. Thus, reflection is an act taken up privately wherein students think of their ways of writing. Such monitoring promotes the development of a critical stance and self regulation. This is crucial for raising the intrinsic motivation of the students. But reflection may not lead to measurable outcomes, and therefore, need for self assessment arises. Students can self assess themselves by grading, marking, commentaries, and their standard of writing concerning criteria. It allows learners to become

more active in learning and think like a teacher about where they are now, where they are going and how to get there. This aligns with the findings of Darrow et al. (2016), who supported that students can assess themselves quite accurately but only when the stakes are low.

"Students need to learn for themselves how to move to the next Level".

Students can use a checklist to self assess to evaluate their piece of writing, usually suggested at secondary and primary levels, which guides students to think in a structured way. But to enhance metacognitive skills and composing skills blend of close-ended and open-ended guided questions should be encouraged.

One such example is a portfolio checklist.

**Please check '✓' in the boxes appropriate to you.**

Items	Well Done	Good	Improvement Needed
I take pride in compiling portfolios.			
I manage to keep a portfolio sheet systematically.			
After each entry, I reflect on my strength.			
After each entry, I reflect upon my weakness.			
I have incorporated my teacher feedback.			
I have assimilated feedback from my peers.			
I approached my teacher to understand my writing capability.			
I have picked up two works from my portfolio as a dossier of writing ability.			
I feel I can monitor my writing reflectively and confidently.			

*Fig. 4: A checklist for writing portfolios*

## Putting Assessment for Learning in Practise

### ***Ice-cream Sticks***

The classroom in which student engagement appears to be high has been found to significantly impact student achievement (William, 2011). So, if more and more students participate in questioning and discussing, students tend to get smarter. It improves their mental readiness, academic enthusiasm, better speaking, thinking, and organisation of content, which in turn enhances their learning. At the same time, those avoiding engagement actually play negatively on enhancing their learning. Hence, more and more engagements are an essential condition of a classroom following formative strategies. (Leahy, Lyon, Thompson, and William, 2005).

One such effective practice of encouraging students' participation is using ice cream sticks. In this practice, teachers write the names of each student on ice-cream sticks. Before asking a question, the teacher randomly picks a Popsicle, reads the name, and calls the student to answer. Once a student has responded, this selected stick is kept out of the beaker so that others may get a chance to respond.

Some cautions are required here in this practice. Selecting a student randomly may not be welcomed by those who are accustomed to answering most of the time. Thus, the students who participate

regularly may get discouraged. One way to overcome this is by randomly asking a student and then asking the remainder of the class "if anyone would like to add to it". It is very important that a question is asked first, and then an ice-cream stick is used to choose a student. If the teacher does it the other way round, then only the picked student is supposed to pay attention to the question.

### ***Mini Whiteboard***

William (2011) regards Mini Whiteboard as the latest incarnation of slates of the present time. This is a powerful tool in a way that as soon as the teacher asks a question, s/he can get the answer from the whole class, whether it is asking students: if the point  $(x, y)$  is equidistant from the point  $(6, 2)$  and  $(4, 5)$ , what is the relation between  $x$  and  $y$  or what is the role of media in democracy?

The use of a mini-whiteboard allows every student to engage. The teacher receives instant responses and a state of every student's understanding of the content. One may also keep the pre-printed question in sheets to be distributed in the classroom. This is more flexible, so while teaching history, s/he may use a map of the country and while teaching geography, an unlabelled diagram.

## **CONCLUSION**

Teaching is contingent; we cannot accurately predict what learners

have learned from a sequence of teaching instructions. Assessment for learning involves getting the best possible pieces of evidence of what the students have learned from the instructions. This high quality information is further used to create feedback that moves learning forward. If we want the feedback to be effective, it must focus on both the cognitive and emotional aspects.

In teaching-learning, the teacher plays a crucial role in creating a situation where learning can take place. But it is the learner who has to learn. Therefore, every learner must take responsibility for their learning. Learners' agency gets highlighted in both peer assessment and self

assessment, which can prove to be contributory factors here.

This present paper highlighted many techniques of assessment. It is suggested here that a teacher should pick one or two techniques at a time and practice until it becomes a normal process and then try a new one. In the end, the teacher is the most influential person to influence learners; they can significantly contribute to their careers. Hence, if all the teachers accept the need to improve the practice of teaching-learning, then they can prepare students who will be equipped enough to meet the complexities and unexpected situations of the twenty-first century.

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