

Effective Assessment for Reinforcing Student Learning

Aanchal Chomal

Teaching, at all stages of education, is a very purposive and deliberate exercise. There are various strategies that educators adopt to make their teaching purposive. One of the key ones is to integrate various formal and informal ways of assessment while teaching, to check if students can follow them and what they should do differently if students are not learning. This sort of integration of assessment during the teaching-learning process is called the focus of assessment in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2023. One of the phrases used in the NCF-School Education is that '*Assessments should be constructive, developmental, and learning-focussed*'.

This article will try to unpack the meaning of these ideas - *constructive, developmental, and learning-focused* in the context of assessment and how these can be used in reinforcing student learning.

Overview

Assessments have often been associated with various kinds of negative connotations, such as stress, fear, and anxiety. However, in the last few decades, research has revealed convincing evidence that assessments, when used meaningfully during the teaching-learning process, can play a significant role in improving student learning as well as teaching practices. We commonly refer to this as formative assessment or assessment for learning. The NCF-SE 2023 suggests that assessment needs to be visualised as an ongoing process which teachers integrate within the teaching-learning process using various formal and informal ways to elicit reliable evidence about student learning. Collecting such evidence helps teachers understand the effectiveness of their pedagogy in terms of what the students have understood, what needs to be worked on further, which methods of teaching work, what kinds of resources help, and so on.

In such a context, it becomes important to deliberate on what the reliable evidence of student learning is and how a teacher could gather such evidence. Equally important is to discuss what

they do with such evidence to reinforce student learning.

How do we know if students are learning?

Within the school context, there are several ways in which students demonstrate their knowledge, capacities, values, and dispositions. These tangible/explicit (and sometimes intangible/implicit) 'markers' are denoted as evidence. This could be in the form of artefacts, such as worksheets or drawings produced independently or collaboratively by the students; work done in notebooks during classwork or homework, project or survey reports, exam sheets; or these could be in the form of children's behaviours reflected during their participation in the class, group work, school activities, and so on.

Spaces for eliciting such evidence could be both formal and informal; structured and unstructured. These could be inside or outside the classroom; during school processes, such as sports and games period/ assembly/ mid-day meals/ lunch/ snack breaks, etc.

Observation plays a big role in collecting such evidence about student learning. One must be mindful of what to observe and how to use that observation for teaching. For example, while observing students in a geography class, the teacher may give them a worksheet on identifying and plotting the location of towns and cities on a map. There are various approaches that students may take while solving this type of worksheet. For instance, some students may be looking at the latitudes and longitudes to be more precise with their locations; some may be using nearby locations as the reference; some may be using other kinds of estimation for locating.

While observing the students, a teacher needs to be aware of what the various strategies students could possibly adopt and make a mental note of these details. The teacher may also take natural

pauses during the activity and ask students to clarify doubts – the nature of questions the students ask will help them understand what

kind of problems or confusions students may be encountering during map work and help them reinforce learning during the activity itself.

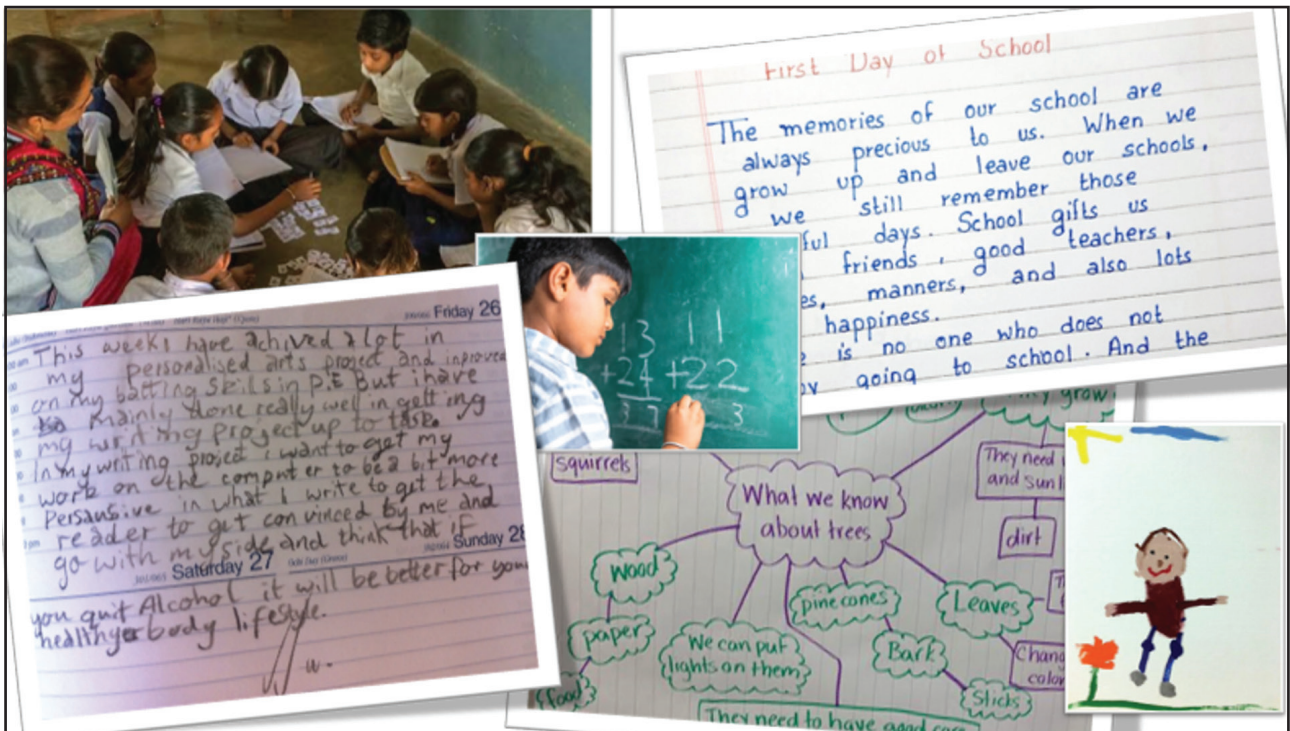


Figure 1. A teacher must look at various types of evidence of student learning to design reinforcement.

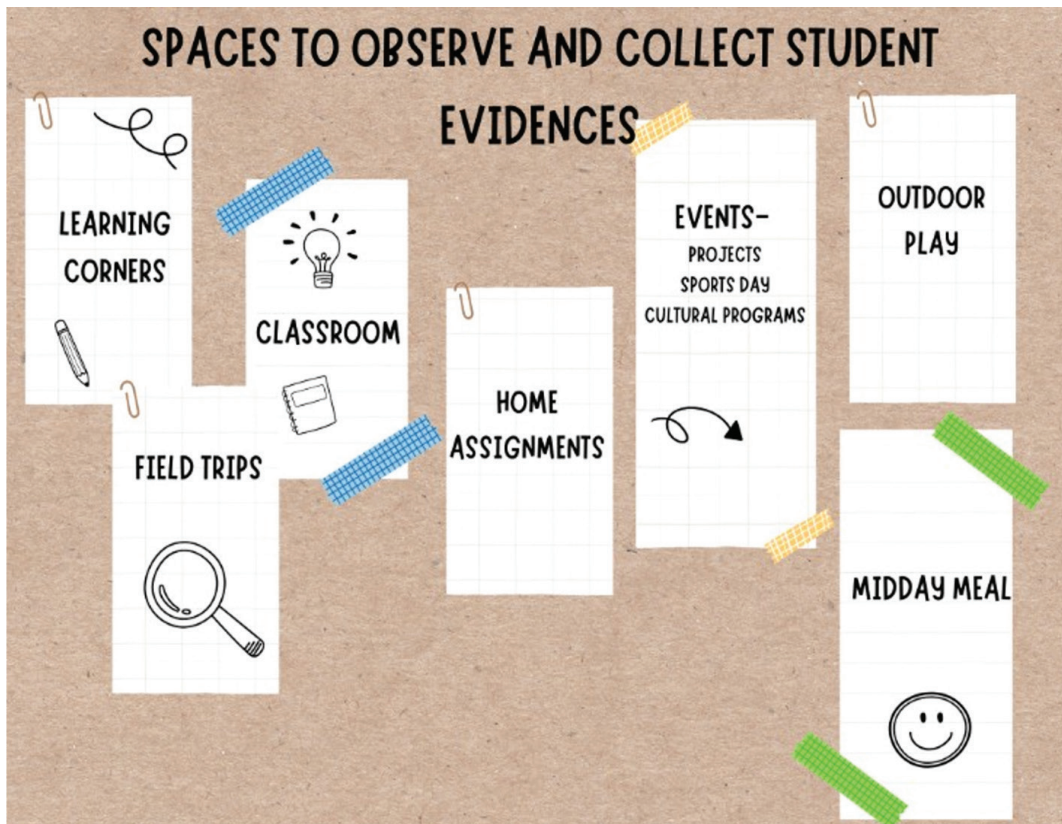


Figure 2. Spaces to observe and collect evidence of student learning.

Features of reliable assessment

Assessment should be constructive

When students do written work in the classroom, they typically demonstrate their learning of concepts, their capacities and sometimes even their interests. For assessment to be constructive, it should help the teacher scaffold the learning of the student.

Let us take an example to understand this better.

Figure 3. A student draws a picture and describes it.

In this task, the student has been instructed to draw any picture and then describe it in sentences. One of the foremost things to do is to analyse the student's work against prescribed outcomes and goals. This task has been analysed against the following outcomes:

LO1: Composes and writes simple, short sentences.

LO2: Uses pronouns related to gender like his/ her/, he/she, it and other pronouns like this/that, here/ there, these/those etc.

What does this evidence tell us about the student?

From this example, it is evident that the child has been able to write coherent, meaningful, and expressive sentences, although there are some mistakes. The sentences have appropriate gaps between words, begin with a capital letter, and end with a full stop. The child has used *I* and *this* appropriately in the sentence but used the

preposition *from* incorrectly in the third sentence. The child has used an invented spelling for season and is unable to distinguish the use of articles *a* and *an*. There can be many more inferences that one can draw from this evidence.

The next logical step will be to work with the child on the basis of this evidence. The teacher can chalk out some simple next steps, such as:

- Look at the student's notebook to evaluate whether the student has a consistent understanding of proper and common nouns and if the student understands the rules of capitalisation of proper and common nouns.
- Use some picture books to encourage the student to express their thoughts in oral form. The teacher can then prompt the student to write it in the notebooks and provide the necessary support wherever needed.
- Discuss specific examples that use articles, *a*, *an* and *the*, to help the student understand the rules of appropriate usage.
- Give some simple feedback to the student about their work based on what the student has done well and what can be improved further.

The above two steps are referred to as *Analysis and Interpretation and Acting Upon Evidence*. Quite understandably, the teacher may not be able to do this for every single activity or task done by each

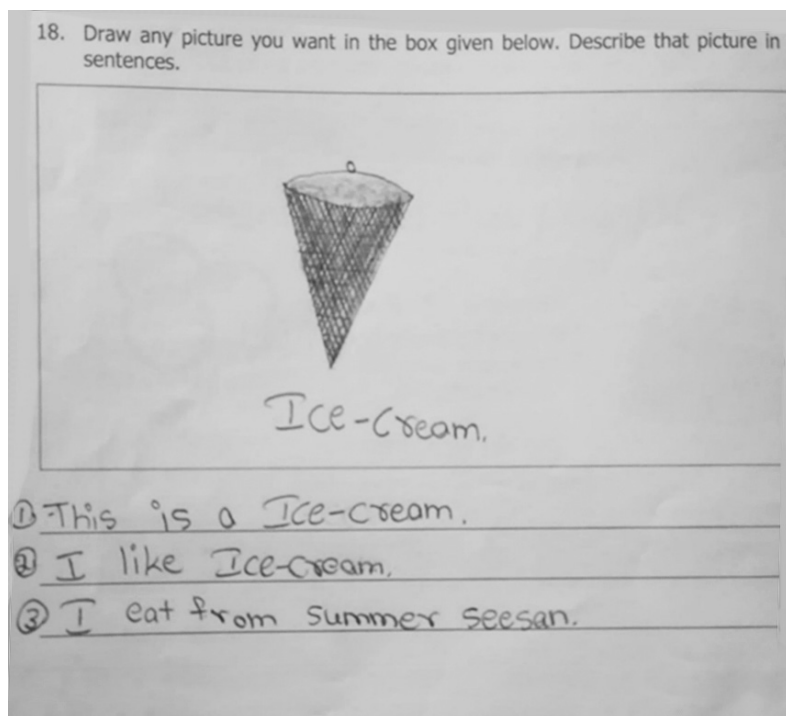


Figure 3. A student draws a picture and describes it.

student. However, if the teacher can do this sort of analysis periodically, she will be able to get a very good sense of individual student's capacities and can then scaffold them better in the teaching-learning process, leading to reinforcing the 'correct' usage of grammar.

A simple checklist for analysis and interpretation and acting upon evidence could be:

- What does this evidence tell me about the extent of learning?
- What does the student know? Are there any misconceptions?
- Is multiple evidence pointing to a similar conclusion?
- What are my next steps of reinforcement going to be?

Assessment should be developmental

While the teacher may try her best to scaffold student learning, we also know that the one-size-fits-all approach may not work. There will be students who are at different levels of learning. There may be some who are unable to write anything at all, and a few who will write incomplete sentences. And then there may be a few who can write more complex sentences, using more sophisticated vocabulary. It becomes important for the teacher to recognise that for the same competency, students may be demonstrating their capacities at different levels. In such cases, assessments should be differentiated to help students demonstrate their abilities on the basis of their respective levels of proficiency.

While this may sound overwhelming to the teacher, for all practical purposes, the two most fundamental competencies that any language teacher aims to develop among her students are reading and writing at age- and stage-appropriate levels. If the teacher is able to design or curate multiple worksheets or tasks that cater to the diverse learners in her classroom, she is well-equipped to do such differentiated assessments, because then, she will be able to gather more reliable evidence of students' learning levels and provide reinforcements more effectively. This also helps the teacher address the diversity of learning in her classroom without leaving any child behind in the process of learning. This perspective of assessments also makes them fairer and more accessible to all learners. Once the teacher is confident that all students in the class are able to write at least a few sentences independently, the

teacher can raise the complexity of the writing tasks for the entire class.

Assessment should be learning-focused

While all the above approaches make assessment learning-focused, in the last decade or so, the approach of *Assessment As Learning* has gained popularity. In this approach, the fundamental point is that the student self-evaluates against their past performance or achievement. There is no comparison with other students – each sets their own milestones and tracks their progress against it. This makes students more self-reliant, as they can judge and reflect on their strengths and weaknesses. Here, assessment becomes synonymous with learning, resulting in self-reflection and self-development.

Assessment As Learning is equally important and relevant for teachers. It helps them evaluate to what extent their strategies have led to student learning. This ongoing diagnosis of student learning and teaching practices helps teachers understand where reinforcements are needed and to what extent.

Conclusion

In all of the above practices, it is important for the teacher to have a comprehensive understanding of learning standards. Any kind of assessment for reinforcing student learning must be rooted in the curricular goals, competencies and learning outcomes of the subject. It is important that the content of the textbooks is used to develop knowledge, capacities, values and dispositions. It is also important to pitch the content as per the level and context of the learners. The teacher needs to introduce and build a concept using examples and anecdotes that are relatable for the students in her class. Very often a teacher may not be fully aware of this at the start of the year, but regular conversations and discussions help the teacher in knowing students better and pitching the content at the level of their abilities and interests.

Reinforcement of student learning is not only dependent on the strategy that the teacher adopts but also on the classroom environment that is built over time. A classroom culture that empowers students to clarify their doubts, ask questions, imbibe confidence and share their thoughts in a stress-free and non-judgmental environment, goes a long way in removing the stress of assessment and nurturing life-long learning.

Acknowledgement

The author gratefully acknowledges the contributions of Pranalee Sharma and Pooja Arya to this article.



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Music has the power to stir our emotions. We often observe children singing or humming songs, rhymes, and sometimes just humming some familiar sounds...Music has rhythm and melody, which helps students to develop fluency in the language and when rhymes are sung with actions and gestures, children are also able to comprehend the meanings of English words and expressions.

Deepika Jhala, Music as a Reinforcer in English Language Learning, page 53