

## Activities for Alternative Assessment – Contents

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## 0 Introduction

This book is about assessment carried out by teachers themselves in the classroom. After all, who is in a better position to assess the students' performance than those who interact with students on a weekly, or even daily, basis? This kind of assessment is known by many overlapping and at times confusing terms: formative assessment, continuous assessment, authentic assessment, performance assessment, assessment for learning, to name but a few. In order to provide some clarity, this introductory unit will try to make sense of the often confusing terminology that abounds in the literature on assessment and outline the principles behind this book.

“Important decisions should not rest on simple test scores.”  
Kathleen M. Bailey (1998)

### 1. The changing role of assessment

How students should be assessed is a question that has interested educators and students (as well as their parents) for decades. As constructivist approaches to education began to gain ground, conventional testing practices – usually in the form of one-off discrete-point multiple-choice tests – have come under criticism (see Shepard, 2000 for overview). At the same time various alternatives to such tests began to gain popularity. An increased interest in these alternatives was also underpinned by a growing understanding of the limitations of traditional testing techniques, particularly the kind of information they gather. Traditional tests cannot always capture all the areas of a learner's strength. Contrariwise, individuals who are good at standardized tests often cannot demonstrate their skills or apply their knowledge in the real world. Specifically in the case of language teaching, we are all too familiar with students who do well on tests covering grammar, but who then cannot use *grammatical* correctly in real-life situations.

Apart from these deficiencies of standardized tests, the shift towards alternative forms of assessment has also been driven by an increasing realization that assessment is not only a means of establishing whether learning goals have been reached but also a learning tool. These two uses of assessment are known, respectively, as **summative** and **formative**. Are they incompatible with each other or can they be reconciled?

### 2. Assessment purposes

Ever since Scriven (1967) introduced the terms they have become a staple of literature on assessment but the way alternative assessment – and this book – relates to these is not straightforward. In simplest terms, **summative** assessment is used to judge whether learners have met a certain standard or reached a learning goal, such as mastering course content, while **formative** assessment is used to measure where learners are on the way to achieving this standard or goal. In summative assessment, learners are evaluated at the end of a module, course or a learning programme. The result is a record in the form of a grade or a score, which is often used for administrative purposes, such as reporting to parents or superiors, awarding a certificate (e.g. IELTS or TOEFL) or deciding if students are ready to move to a higher level. The focus, therefore, is on the **product** of the past learning.

In contrast, the purpose of formative assessment is to gather ongoing evidence in order to monitor students' progress while learning is still **in process**. Monitoring students' progress on a regular basis gives the teacher an insight into particular areas of difficulty and aids the teacher in planning the teaching process.

Ongoing assessment which takes place during learning is also known as **continuous assessment**, but a distinction needs to be drawn here. Summative and formative refer to the purposes of assessment (i.e. why learners are assessed), while continuous – to how evidence of learning is gathered – in this case, over a period of time. The result of continuous assessment, however, can be used formatively as well summatively as we shall see below.

Formative	Summative
in-process → during the instructional process	product → after the instructional process
monitoring progress usually <b>continuous</b>	measuring attainment at the end

Formative and summative assessment were later reconceptualized, respectively, as Assessment for Learning (AFL) and Assessment of Learning (AoL) – two further terms you may have come across. The concept of Assessment for Learning is particularly associated with the work of the Assessment Reform Group (ARG) in the UK. Although some distinctions can be made (see, for example, Stiggins, 2002), and at the conscious risk of oversimplification, we will say that these are essentially the same.

Assessment for Learning – AFL	Assessment of Learning – AoL
<b>Formative</b>	<b>Summative</b>

Admittedly “for learning” is an apt term because it emphasizes the role formative assessment plays in motivating students towards achieving learning goals. The excerpt here captures the essence of AFL.

This implies that formative assessment or AFL is not just provision of frequent in-class quizzes and assignments, but a powerful vehicle of directing teaching and learning activities in order to shape learning. A crucial role in AFL is played by feedback which shows learners how they can develop their learning. Feedback becomes formative, i.e. it promotes learning, when learners are given specific guidance, which relates to strengths and weaknesses of their performance, “not clouded by overtones about ability, competition, and comparison with others”, claim Black & Wiliam (1998: 6).

“...the term ‘assessment’ refers to all those activities undertaken by teachers, and by their students in assessing themselves, which provide information to be used as feedback 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 the needs.”  
Black & Wiliam (1998: 2)

Assessment for Learning – AFL	Assessment of Learning – AoL
<b>Formative</b>	<b>Summative</b>
descriptive feedback	numerical grade

In a follow up to Black and Wiliam's foundational publication, a pamphlet published by the ARG (1999) laid out the following five principles at the heart of AFL. Note as the work of the ARG mainly concerns younger learners the original document refers to pupils, which I have replaced with students: