

## Formative and summative assessment

By [Learning Curve](#) | Aug 26, 2013

In recent years there has been a growing concern in improving the quality of education and there is a shift towards considering assessment as a means of improving learning. Assessment is an effective tool for a teacher to know about her/his children. Properly developed and interpreted, assessment brings clarity on several aspects of the course such as: help in giving correct feedback about a child's learning or achievement. It clears the path to improved learning by providing information about the learning gap and gives information on the teaching learning process. The more information we collect about a child the more clarity it brings about his/her learning and learning difficulties.

In schools summative assessment has more visibility. It checks the learning outcomes at the end of a grade or unit or a term. It helps in knowing, to what extent the instructional and learning goals have been met. Kellough and Kellough view teaching and learning as reciprocal processes which depend on and affect one another. The assessment component informs how well a child learns and how well a teacher teaches. As we all know, the evaluation practices in the schools mainly focus on measuring knowledge and facts, neglecting other aspects of the process which can help in improving learning. This process needs to be frequent, interactive, and effective enough to help identify the learning difficulties and inform the teaching instruction. More clearly, these classroom assessments which we call formative assessments, inform both teacher and student. Hence there is a need to align assessment with the teaching process.

Formative assessment is the assessment that takes place in the classroom. The information that provided by this assessment informs child's learning as well as the teacher's instruction. It also provides feedback to the child about his/her learning and teacher about her/his instruction. To a teacher it tells whether a child has learnt the concept well, if the teaching caters to the need of the classroom or if the teaching strategy needs any modification. Though formative assessments appear in variety of ways, one of the strategies can be a group activity. For instance, Seeta, a primary class teacher, provides few objects like ball, boxes, pyramid, discs, triangles and squares. She then asks children in each group to choose any two objects and spot the similarities and differences between them. Each group discusses the similarities and differences of the objects they have chosen and write them down. Seeta walks around the classroom as the groups discuss and observe each group record their conceptual understanding. Seeta uses this observation to record other activities, like the way they have distributed work in the group, the way they work in the group, their discussions in the group about the concept etc. Later she collects the write-ups. Next day, she makes copies of each groups' write up and hands them to each group to analyze the concepts, handwriting and neatness. Each group, then presents its views to the entire class. From the record she gets the information about the learning difficulties of that topic in the classroom and plans her next class to address these difficulties. She also interacts with the child who has not done the activity and finds out the reason for his poor performance and takes the remedial class. Seeta has highlighted the value of assessment as learning through this activity.

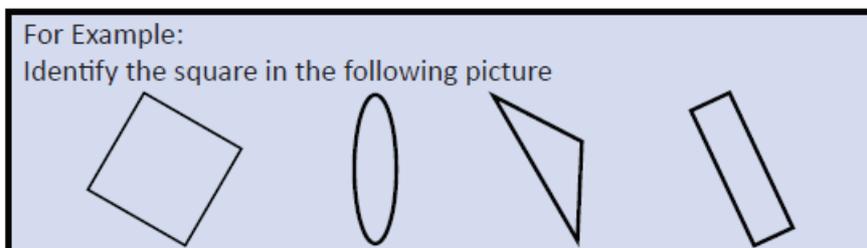
In this type of process, through observation, teacher records each child's understanding level of the concept and also identifies the ones who have difficulties and needs her support. After getting the child-wise information she gives her feedback and plan her instruction to address these learning difficulties. Seeta understands that moving to the next topic without addressing this learning gap will not help in building up the concepts. She conducts the remedial class with the child who faces difficulties in learning the topic. Understanding the importance of peer assessment is another great step that Seeta has taken through this formative assessment. This example was one of the ways that formative assessments could be carried out in the classroom. There are several other ways to conduct this. Each child learns in a different way, therefore assessing him/her would be more effective if a teacher could assess them using different modes such as

**Student interviews:** Children are expected to answer series of questions orally. These series of questions are linked to each other to gauge the breadth and depth of their understanding.

**Observations:** Teacher observes children as they are engaged in an activity, walking around the classroom helping and guiding them in their activities. This helps the teacher to understand the overall performance of an individual or of a group.

**Questioning:** This is the method commonly used in the classroom. Teacher gets information about child's knowledge by asking questions during the teaching process. It gives instant feedback to both teacher and the child and provides scope for change in instruction.

**Discussions:** Teacher can initiate discussion by posing open-ended questions in the class and children discuss on it. The goal is to develop critical and creative thinking skills. If teachers could use formative assessment as the framework for teaching, then there will be a change in the way they interact with children. This assessment facilitates learning, provides feedback to the teacher for adjusting his/her instructions that cater to the needs of children, provide feedback to children about their learning and diagnose the difficulties that are faced by the child in the topic. In short we can say that formative assessment is 'of' learning. It is important for children, teachers, parents and school authorities to know how much the children have learnt during the course of study. The assessment that takes place at the end of the course or a unit or term and the information from which is used for grading or promotion is a summative assessment. It happens when teacher assess the final product of children's work. It concerns mainly with the learning outcomes rather than the programme of instruction and it is the assessment 'of' learning. We can consider a question like.



This question helps a teacher to know whether a child knows the properties of a rectangle which was the learning outcome for the topic and also reflects the formative assessment that has been done in the class previously. Summative assessment has to include what the teacher has taught and reflects on the formative assessment. So the main purpose of summative assessment is to gauge children's knowledge, skills and understanding with respect to meet the learning curriculum of the course. Summative assessment is done further down the learning path to know that the child has achieved the standards that the curriculum defines. By conducting a variety of summative assessments, the teacher will get a grip on his/her children's learning. There are many forms of summative assessments such as Paper pencil test: students are asked to write a test at the end of a unit or term or course.

*Written task:* students are asked to write about a topic or an activity or an incident and a rubric is provided with this task.

*Oral task:* teacher asks students to narrate a story or an incident or a topic and s/he checks the skills and competencies that child has achieved.

*Standardized tests:* students write a test that is standardized in terms of content to fulfill conditions that they have to be met, for example, board examinations and entrance examinations. In summative assessment it is important that the information that is obtained from all of the above type of assessments is used for recording students' achievement or grading or promotion purposes. We all know the primary purpose of assessment is not to grade or rank children, but to provide feedback that informs decisions about their learning. Both summative and formative assessments have vital roles to play in children's learning process. Though the palette is different for each of them, the right balance between them have a great impact in one's learning. Formative and summative assessments support each other and should be viewed simultaneously. They may appear the same in some circumstances but the purpose and timing determines its label. The book 'Balanced Assessment Model' by Kay Burk compares both assessments like this: formative assessments are like training wheels that allow children to practice and gain confidence to ride their bikes in the school parking lot. Once the training wheels are taken off they have to face their summative assessment to be able to ride off towards the sunset only on two wheels. Lee Shulman called assessment the "union of insufficiencies" because he believed it is not possible to assess one's capabilities by using one or two tools. It should be a combination of several assessment strategies from formative and summative assessments that provide information about a child's strengths, weakness, interests, skills and motivation. The positive impact of formative assessments has been widely accepted by educators and curriculum designers. There could be several barriers for actual implementation of good formative assessment as we all know that this kind of assessment is a very intensive and continuous classroom process, carrying out this assessment has more challenges. Moreover, the main purpose of formative assessment is how the information obtained through it is used to further learning. A teacher uses various assessment strategies to gather the information about the child. In developing such child centered activities teacher faces the difficulties to plan each step and assess across the predefined criteria, it may be due to the unpredictability of students' responses to the particular activity. We all know that each child learns differently and assessment should align with the way he/she learns. Big size of the classroom and extensive curriculum requirement is an obstacle for doing such intensive, interactive and individual assessment. In our context we have different sections for each grade and different teachers handle the same subject. In this situation the chances of interpreting and applying same criteria of an assessment can be different. This may lead to us to question the credibility of assessment. All of us can understand that formative assessment is continuous and elaborate process which consumes a lot of time. In adapting the intensive and interactive way of formative assessments teachers need to have collaborative abilities in analysing the assessment information, interpretation and providing the feedback to children for improving learning. Reducing the size of the class at the primary levels will help the teacher to spend more time to understand and respond to the learning needs of children.

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Sindhu Sreedevi

Sindhu is currently working as an Associate at the Institute for Assessment and Accreditation of Azim Premji Foundation. This stint, of two years so far, has given her a wider perspective of the field of learning and assessment process. She was a Mathematics teacher for 5 years at Lawrence High School, Bangalore. These 5 years gave her opportunities to learn the practical aspects of teaching, learning and assessment process. She also coordinated several external assessments in the school. She can be contacted at [sindhu.sreedevi@azimpremjifoundation.org](mailto:sindhu.sreedevi@azimpremjifoundation.org)

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