Assessment for learning (AfL), also known as formative assessment, refers to any assessment activity that guides learning. Unlike summative assessment which evaluates pupil knowledge and achievement after a period of learning is complete, assessment for learning involves evaluating small content areas as part of the ongoing learning process. This guide explores the key features of AfL and how it can be developed and applied effectively in the classroom.

Characteristics of effective classroom assessment

We note the recent work by Black and Wiliam (2018) which uses the term ‘classroom assessment’ to encompass both assessment of and assessment for learning, when the decision-making around the assessment (the why, how and what) lies with the teacher. This wider definition is useful when considering all the opportunities there are to use assessment to improve teaching and learning.
Underlying the AfL approach is the recognition that every teaching and learning task or activity offers assessment opportunities, and that AfL should be embedded in day-to-day classroom practice as a means of continuously assessing knowledge, informing teaching and providing feedback to improve pupil learning.

Strategies include effective questioning techniques, quality feedback, self-assessment and peer assessment, and using summative tests for formative purposes.

### Learning objectives and success criteria

For AfL to be effective, it is important that the focus is on improvement – that pupils understand what they need to learn or the skills they need to develop. Teachers should therefore provide pupils with opportunities to discuss learning objectives and success criteria and to reflect and talk about their learning, progress and next steps. When setting learning objectives and success criteria, here are some things to bear in mind:

- Be aware of the potential for confusion between learning objectives and the context or activity in which the learning is taking place. Objectives should be skills based – linked to the skills being developed in the lesson – not a description of the activity.
- Pupils should understand not only the learning objectives (often expressed as ‘I can...’ statements) but also how they are going to get there. Success criteria should be broken down into a series of small, clearly defined, steps to enable pupils to demonstrate progress.
Providing feedback

Remember that marking should be in line with the school policy, with its prime focus to support learning. This means that the nature of marking will vary according to the task set and the learning objectives, and it may be superseded by verbal feedback. Often verbal feedback can be more effective than written feedback. Response partners can also work extremely well, with pupils working in pairs to generate or test out ideas, clarify their understanding, create a joint response, or assess and evaluate work. Importantly, formative assessment outcomes do not need to be recorded unless there is a reason which benefits learning.

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