

9 Assessment for Learning

Sybille Paar and Ulla Fürstenberg

English Language Teaching in Austria: From theory to the classroom and beyond, ed. by Schumm Fauster and Fürstenberg, 2022, pp. 116-129
<https://doi.org/10.25364/978-3-903374-05-8.010>

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, except for images, screenshots and logos.

Sybille Paar, Bischöfliches Gymnasium Augustinum, sybille.paar@bildung.gv.at

Ulla Fürstenberg, University of Graz, ulla.fuerstenberg@uni-graz.at, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5551-3204>

Key words

Assessment for Learning (AFL)

Summative and formative assessment

Core principles of AFL

In this chapter, we ask the following questions:

What is Assessment for Learning (AFL)?

How is AFL reflected in the Austrian Curriculum and the *Leistungsbeurteilungsverordnung (LBVO)*?

What are possible ways of putting AFL into practice in the English classroom?

What should teachers consider when introducing and using AFL in their teaching?

Theoretical perspectives and the Austrian context

In their discussion of classroom-based assessment, Brown and Lee (2015) describe the fact that learners often perceive testing and assessment as “dark clouds hanging over their heads” and suggest that this negative experience could be avoided if teachers understood “the benefits of tests and their place within the larger domain of assessment” (p. 513). Assessment should be understood primarily as a source of information for the teacher. As Ashman (2018) points out, Hattie (2009) found that “one of the most powerful effects of feedback is when feedback is provided *to the teacher*” (p. 127, emphasis in the original). Likewise, Green (2014) insists that language assessment needs to be “put in its place” in the learning process and seen primarily as a source of information for teachers:

To be really effective as teachers, we need to find effective ways of assessing learners. We need to use what we learn from assessment to decide on actions to take that will help learners to improve their knowledge of the language or their skill in using it (p. 10).

Putting this Assessment for Learning (AFL) approach into practice is often a challenge for teachers.

In Austria, the *Leistungsbeurteilungsverordnung (LBVO)*, see RIS, 2022) is the main document that regulates assessment and grading in Austrian schools. It distinguishes between the so-called *Informationsfeststellung* (§ 1, Abs. 2 LBVO) and the

Leistungsfeststellung (§ 3 LBVO). While *Informationsfeststellungen* should help teachers determine whether specific teaching goals have been reached and if there are still aspects or areas that need further attention and instruction, *Leistungsfeststellungen* mainly serve a summative purpose. According to the LBVO, *Informationsfeststellungen* are not to be used for the assessment of learners' performance. In the National Report on Education from 2015, Schmidinger et al. (2016) point out that teachers in Austria thus have to take on two contradicting roles that are at times hard to reconcile. On the one hand, they are supposed to act as facilitators who support learning through the use of formative assessment and on the other hand, they are meant to measure learners' attainment by awarding grades, hence also inevitably fulfilling a gate-keeping function. This conflict between teachers' roles as 'coaches' and 'judges' has also been noted by Brown and Lee (2015).

In the current version of the LBVO from 1974, there are no recommendations or documents to guide these two different types of assessment. When we take a closer look at the Austrian curricula, however, we do not only find some suggestions for teaching methods and strategies that are consistent with AFL, such as learning journals, portfolios, project work and open learning. The curricula also clearly emphasize the importance of developing individualised feedback methods that focus on the strengths and weaknesses of each student (see chapter 8 in this volume). Detailed feedback on learners' performance should render the assessment (i.e., grading) process more transparent and comprehensible. In the curriculum for lower secondary school, one of the didactic principles is to even include learners' individual learning progress and their effort to improve their language output when assessing their performance. However, once again it is not stated how exactly this should be done.

Teachers are also required to make learners understand that learning is a process and to give them opportunities to assess themselves against clearly defined criteria. As stated in the curriculum, this should help raise learners' motivation, perseverance and self-confidence. Learners should also be actively involved in planning and designing their learning processes and in controlling and analyzing their respective output.

Even if the term AFL is not explicitly referred to anywhere, the aforementioned guidelines seem to imply the importance and necessity of an ongoing assessment approach that is in line with the principles of AFL. However, when comparing the LBVO with the curricula, the gap between instruction and assessment becomes clearly apparent and teachers are left to decide for themselves how they reconcile the contradicting requirements of these documents that form the basis of their

teaching. The shortcomings of the current LBVO with regard to the practical implementation of the existing legal regulations were already outlined by Eder et al. (2009) in the National Education Report from 2009. Since 2011, a task group of the Ministry of Education has been working on an updated version of the LBVO. As the National Education Report from 2015 again includes a chapter on assessment in which the formative function of the *Informationsfeststellungen* is in the focus, it can be assumed (and hoped) that AFL will find its way into the new LBVO whose publication date has not yet been set at the time of writing.

In the meantime, teachers can only try to comply as best they can with the legal basis they are provided with and to incorporate assessment for learning wherever possible in order to better support learners in their language learning process. Even if AFL has not yet been acknowledged by school law, its positive effects on learners' attainment cannot be refuted, as Wiliam (2011) points out:

We know that teachers make a difference, but we know much less about what makes the difference in teachers. However, there is a body of literature that shows a large impact on student achievement across different subjects, across different age groups, and across different countries, and that is the research on formative assessment (p. 33).

Thus, there is a strong case to be made for AFL in the English language classroom. This chapter aims to explore how some of the research findings can be put into practice by suggesting a variety of examples and possible ways of implementation.

Reconceptualizing assessment

To start with, Wiliam's (2011) statement that "no test can capture all that is important for future progress" should challenge our traditional view of testing and assessment (p. 18). In other words, we cannot test everything that is essential to developing language proficiency and by implication, not everything that we test is necessarily a good indicator to judge learners' language proficiency and even less so to help them develop their skills further. For example, Newbold (2017) cautions against testing language features that are not critical for learners' progress simply because they are (over)represented in coursebooks, visible and easily explained.

Swaffield (2011) transforms the idea we have of assessment by taking a closer look at the roots of the word 'assessment', which is derived from the Latin verb *assidere*, 'to sit beside'. Considering this translation, we no longer picture a learner being tested and examined, but rather a teacher sitting beside a learner, giving support and watching over them. Accordingly, assessment is seen as a process in which

teachers observe and accompany their learners in their learning and use the evidence and knowledge thus gained to the benefit of learners (Wiliam, 2011). This is exactly what assessment for learning involves: “adjusting teaching as needed while the learning is still taking place” (Leahy et al., 2005, p. 19). In this respect, AFL is considered to be a quality assurance rather than a quality control process. Instruction and assessment are no longer two separate entities; on the contrary, everything that is part of the process of instruction and learning (such as learners’ questions and answers, their engagement in activities, work done silently, homework) is observed, analysed and evaluated by the teacher in order to guide instruction.

In other words, the data that are continuously gathered throughout the lessons serve as the evidence on the basis of which the teacher decides how to plan the next (instructional) steps in order to address learners’ needs (Leahy et al., 2005; Wiliam, 2011). Teachers try to interpret what learners have understood, i.e. where learning and teaching has already been effective and where there is still room for improvement. This should be communicated via individual feedback which does not only include what needs to be improved, but also gives advice on how this could be achieved and what has already been successfully mastered. Such feedback, which lies at the heart of AFL, should give learners the opportunity to reflect on their own learning and to ideally develop an understanding of their performance, which will enable them to readjust their learning process (Swaffield, 2011).

The wealth of information on learners’ achievements generated by AFL might at first sight seem overwhelming and unmanageable to teachers. However, the improvements thus achieved speak for themselves and make it worth investing time and effort in finding methods and strategies that turn a traditional classroom where performance is solely reflected in grades into an AFL classroom. Black and Wiliam (2010), in their influential review of literature on assessment for learning in the classroom, discovered that learners whose teachers made use of AFL attained in six or seven months what would have cost them a year if they had been taught and assessed in a traditional way. Another study, which was conducted in 2004, shows that these improvements in learning could even be upheld over longer periods and were also confirmed in standardized tests (Black et al., 2004; Leahy et al., 2005).

Of course, AFL is not a panacea for any and all kinds of educational problems. However, based on the research findings so far it can be said with certainty that AFL works, that it raises standards of achievement and is beneficial for learners, especially so for low achievers who tend to benefit from AFL even more than other learners (Black & Wiliam, 2010). The question now remains how AFL is best put into practice. While the general principles of AFL are relevant for all subject areas,

the way that they are applied with regard to methods, tasks and activities can vary widely depending on which subject is taught (Black et al., 2004).

AFL Strategies

The following paragraphs will therefore outline five AFL strategies (Leahy et al., 2005; Swaffield, 2011) that are accepted as the core ingredients of AFL and that work for teachers of different subjects and at different levels. A sixth strategy, which we deem to be of particular importance within the Austrian context, will be introduced in the next section. Specific examples accompanying these strategies will demonstrate how they can be applied in a language learning environment.

1. To start with, the most important component of AFL is **feedback** that supports learners in making progress. However well-intentioned some teacher feedback might be, it is often not conducive to learning when students fail to successfully incorporate it and act upon it. This can justifiably lead to frustration on both sides. The reasons might be that the feedback is either not informative enough because it does not address the areas where learners need to improve or it is not related to success criteria that inform learners what is expected of them. If learners do not know or understand what they are supposed to achieve, they cannot adjust their performance accordingly. Thus, comments such as ‘Well done!’, ‘You’ve made an effort!’, ‘Try harder next time!’, are not effective because they neither identify learners’ strengths nor do they make any suggestions for improvement. Instead, teachers’ feedback comments should be specific (e.g., ‘The example you used in paragraph three of your essay really supports your argument very effectively’; ‘Remember to avoid contractions in a formal text type such as an opinion essay’) and forward-looking (‘In your next essay, try to avoid generalizations and provide specific examples instead’).

2. From the very start of the learning process, the **criteria for success and the learning objectives** need to be clearly communicated. For instance, by providing students with strong and weak work samples that they have to analyse, their critical thinking skills are trained. To start with, samples should be chosen where the good and weak points are easily discernible for learners. Once they have developed their analytical skills, samples of similar quality can be selected (Leahy et al., 2005). When learners know and comprehend the desired learning outcomes, they are prepared for their teacher’s feedback. The feedback should be given continuously throughout the whole learning process and not just at the end. By doing so, it serves as scaffolding, which learners climb on their way to achieving the agreed-upon standards. In order to bring about all the desired outcomes of AFL, learners need to

understand where they are in relation to their aims, where they are heading to and what they can do to bridge this gap. Only if all three of these aspects are fulfilled will they be able to successfully work on and improve their performance (Black & Wiliam, 2010; Stiggins, 2005).

3. It is important to note, however, that in AFL classrooms, the teacher is not the only source of feedback. The introduction of **peer-assessment** is another important step in helping learners to become actively involved in the learning process. Learners need to engage with the learning content and understand the set criteria in order to be able to evaluate their peers' work. Thus, both parties, i.e. the recipients and the providers of feedback, benefit from peer-assessment tasks. According to Leahy et al. (2005), learners up to the end of secondary education are also more likely to find mistakes in someone else's work than in their own, and it is easier for them to work on feedback given by peers rather than by the teacher, which is often just passively received. In order to prevent learners from giving grades on their peers' work, it is helpful to introduce peer-feedback templates/tasks that guide learners in the process of giving valuable and constructive feedback. For lower secondary school learners 'Two Stars and a Wish' has proven to be successful in reinforcing motivation and self-confidence by not only giving a suggestion for improvement (one wish) but by also spotting and emphasising the positive aspects (two stars) of the work. A similar task for upper secondary school learners is the so-called 'Tickled Pink and Green for Growth' highlighting method where learners underline in pink two examples that meet the requirements of success and then find an aspect which offers room for improvement which is highlighted in green. In a discussion, learners work through the passages marked in pink and explain to each other what they liked about them and suggest how the part in green could be improved (Stern, 2001).

4. The fourth principle of AFL requires learners to **take responsibility for their own learning** or, more accurately, to share this responsibility with their teachers. As it is the case with peer-feedback, self-assessment can only be successful if learners know and understand the learning objectives. A quick and easy self-assessment activity that prepares the ground for more challenging self-assessment tasks are 'traffic light cards'. Learners are asked to label either their written work or their understanding of a concept green, yellow or red. The colours indicate their level of understanding (good, partial, little) or their assessment of their written work (good, ok, room for improvement). In a next step, learners can be asked to give reasons for their evaluation. In a more challenging task, learners are provided with a list of success criteria (see peer-assessment above) against which they compare and evaluate their own work. In this way, they train their metacognitive skills and develop

a much clearer idea about what is expected from them (Black et al., 2004; Leahy et al., 2005).

5. Another way of checking learners' understanding and guiding their process of learning is the use of **classroom discussions and effective questions** (see chapter 3 in this volume). In AFL questions can be used to find out where learners are in their learning, if they have grasped a recently taught concept or where instruction should start. The important thing, according to Leahy et al. (2005), is not to "listen for the 'correct' answer", but to listen "for what we can learn about the students' thinking" (p. 21). Using the answers we elicit from our students to inform our instruction as well as to guide or even change the course of our lesson might be daunting at first, but will prove to be successful in the long term.

Formative use of summative tests

Already in 1998, Black and Wiliam (2010) criticized that "the problems of the relationship between teachers' formative and summative roles have received no attention" (p. 84). More than 20 years later, this is still the case in Austria. That is why we discuss **the formative use of summative tests** as the sixth principle of AFL in this chapter. In this respect, tests should not be treated as separate entities which mark the end of a teaching cycle after which a new 'content block' starts, but should be used to direct the next steps in teaching and help modify instruction accordingly. It should not be the grade alone that informs learners of their performance, but feedback that learners can and should work with. The formative use of summative assessment starts already with the learners' preparation for the test. Instead of passively reading through their learning materials, learners should become more active in their learning.

A way to stimulate this active engagement is to rewrite the subject matter by turning it into learning objectives, which clearly describe what students are expected to know/be able to do (can-do statements). Learners can then apply the traffic-light method described earlier by marking the statements green, yellow or red (Black et al., 2004). Students can use this information to guide their review process. Handing out their last written test and asking learners to go through the areas they had difficulties with is another way of linking assessment to learning. In pairs, learners might question each other on 'red' areas to find out if they have closed this gap in the meantime. In order to help learners develop an overview and a clearer understanding of the subject matter, they could be asked to develop some test questions/tasks together, one or two of which might be used in the actual test.

When preparing the test, it is important to ensure that it actually tests what it is meant to test; in other words, it should be in accordance with the learning objectives and linked to the learning activities carried out in class. The feedback that learners receive on their test performance should go beyond the giving of a mere grade or percentage. The above-mentioned methods ‘Two Stars and a Wish’ or ‘Tickled Pink and Green for Growth’ also work for feedback on tests and give learners more information on their performance than a grade. Learners also engage more actively with teachers’ feedback when they are expected to rewrite their own or even one of their peers’ texts.

This section suggests that the two forms of assessment (summative and formative) do not necessarily have to occupy opposite points on the spectrum of assessment, but can be used to inform and benefit each other.

Conclusion

Research has shown that AFL has the potential to have a positive impact on learners in a number of areas: “[learners’] engagement with learning, their attainment as measured by tests, and most importantly their growth in becoming more self-regulating, autonomous learners” (Swaffield, 2011, p. 447). Teachers benefit as well, and the culture of the classroom is transformed (Swaffield, 2011). However, the sheer number of methods associated with AFL might be overwhelming at first sight and even discourage teachers from attempting to implement it. Still, even though it is true that making AFL work in your own class setting requires time, perseverance and effort, it is worth taking “risks in the belief that such investment of time will yield rewards in the future, while “delivery” and “coverage” with poor understanding are pointless and can even be harmful” (Black & Wiliam, 2010, p. 87).

Practical Applications

Example 1

Goal: learners will identify characteristic features of the target text type in their own and their peers’ work; learners will give and receive peer feedback; learners will revise their written work based on peer and teacher feedback

Activity: learning from assessment (genre writing)

Rationale: to allow learners to experience assessment for learning

Pre-knowledge: characteristics of the target text type

Level: CEFR B1+ and above

Procedure

1. The characteristics of a text type learners are working on (e.g., blog / article / essay...) are revised in class. For example, this can be done by providing successful examples of the target text type to analyze. If necessary, learners can put together a checklist of things to watch out for when writing this particular text type.
2. For homework, learners individually write a text on a topic set by the teacher (first draft).
3. In the next lesson, learners form groups of three and compare their texts. Together, they find the best arguments, introductions, topic sentences, conclusions etc., referring to their class notes or checklist as needed. Finally, they produce a new text using the most successful bits and pieces of their individual homework texts (second draft).
4. These new texts (second drafts) are discussed in class. The groups have to argue why they think their introductions, paragraphs, conclusions etc. are effective. The teacher guides the discussion and highlights examples of successful writing.
5. The groups revise their texts again based on the feedback received from their peers and the teacher in the class discussion (third draft). The third drafts are submitted to the teacher for marking.
6. The teacher evaluates and assesses the texts and gives feedback, focusing on both successful elements of the text and areas that need improvement.

Alternative version:

It is sometimes useful to focus specifically on the logic of the arguments in a learner text. In such cases, the group phase (steps 3 to 5 above) can be replaced by a pair correction phase in which learners are told to identify the main arguments in each paragraph of their partner's text and to summarize the main content points of the text, essentially 'reverse-engineering' their partner's line of argumentation. This allows the writer of the text to see if they have communicated their ideas successfully before they submit their texts to the teacher for marking.

Example 2

Goal: learners will revise their work after some time has passed; learners will practise peer reviewing (first alternative version); learners will incorporate their teacher's feedback into their revisions (second alternative version)

Activity: Two-Phase Assessment (based on Stern's (2011) concept of '*Zwei-Phasen-Arbeit*')

Rationale: to allow learners to experience assessment as part of the learning process

Pre-knowledge: depends on the content of the test

Level: CEFR A2 and above

Procedure

1. Learners complete a test set by the teacher. The teacher collects the tests, but does not grade them.
2. In the next lesson, learners get the opportunity to revise their tests without consulting other sources or their class notes. The teacher sets a time limit for this revision phase.
3. The teacher grades the revised version of the test.

Alternative versions:

The version of two-phase assessment described above can be seen as the 'classic' version. It can be adapted in various ways to suit different levels and needs:

1. The teacher annotates the test before returning it to learners for revision; peer reviewing is also possible at this stage.
2. The teacher grades the first version; if a learner's corrections show that they have improved, this can positively affect their grade in the area of active participation (*Mitarbeit*). The second alternative version is useful if teachers feel that this approach to grading might be challenged by parents or the school authorities.

Activities and questions for reflection

1. How can AFL change teachers' understanding of assessment?
2. What elements of the Austrian curriculum are compatible with AFL?
3. Pick one of the core AFL strategies and think about how you could apply it in a class you are currently teaching.

References

- Ashman, G. (2018). *The truth about teaching: An evidence-informed guide for new teachers*. Sage.
- Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (2010). Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 92(1), 81-90. [originally published in 1998]
- Black, P., Harrison, C., Lee, C., Marshall, B., & Wiliam, D. (2004). Working Inside the Black Box: Assessment for Learning in the Classroom. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 86(1), 8-21.
- Brown, H. D., & Lee, H. (2015). *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*. Pearson.
- Eder, F., Neuweg, G. H., & Thonhauser, J. (2009). Leistungsfeststellung und Leistungsbeurteilung. In W. Specht (Ed.), *Nationaler Bildungsbericht Österreich 2009, Band 2: Fokussierte Analysen bildungspolitischer Schwerpunktthemen* (pp. 247-267). Leykam.
- Green, A. (2014). *Exploring Language Assessment and Testing: Language in Action*. Routledge.
- Hattie, J. A. C. (2009). *Visible learning: a synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. Routledge.
- Leahy, S., Lyon, C., Thompson, M., & Wiliam, D. (2005). Classroom assessment: Minute-by-minute and day-by-day. *Educational Leadership*, 63(3), 18-24.
- Newbold, D. (2017). Towards a (Painful?) Paradigm Shift: Language Teachers and the Notion of "Error". *Altre Modernità*, 04, 118-132. <https://doi.org/10.13130/2035-7680/8306>
- RIS – Rechtsinformationssystem des Bundes. (2022). *Gesamte Rechtsvorschrift für Leistungsbeurteilungsverordnung*. <https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/GeltendeFassung.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Gesetzesnummer=10009375> [27 May 2022]
- Schmidinger, E., Hofmann, F., & Stern, T. (2016). Leistungsbeurteilung unter Berücksichtigung ihrer formativen Funktion. In M. Bruneorth, F. Eder, K. Krainer, C. Schreiner, A. Seel, & C. Spiel (Eds.), *Nationaler Bildungsbericht Österreich 2015, Band 2: Fokussierte Analysen bildungspolitischer Schwerpunktthemen* (pp. 59-94). Leykam.
- Stern, T. (2010). *Förderliche Leistungsbewertung*. ÖZEPS.
- Stiggins, R. J. (2005). From formative assessment to assessment FOR learning: A path to success in standards-based schools. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 87(4), 324-328.
- Swaffield, S. (2011). Getting to the heart of authentic Assessment for Learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 18(4), 433-449.
- Wiliam, D. (2011). What is Assessment for Learning? *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 37, 3-14.

Suggestions for further reading:

Black, P., Harrison, C., & Lee, C. (2003). *Assessment for learning: Putting it into practice*. Open University Press.

Based on a cooperation with schools, this book aims to connect research and practice in Assessment for Learning.

Green, A. (2014). *Exploring Language Assessment and Testing: Language in Action*. Routledge.

This is a good overview of current theories and recent research that is relevant for common assessment issues.

Sigott, G. (Ed.). (2018). *Language Testing in Austria: Taking Stock / Sprachtesten in Österreich: eine Bestandsaufnahme*. Peter Lang.

This book represents ten years of language test development and language testing research in Austria, both for German as a first language and modern foreign languages including English.

Stern, T. (2010). *Förderliche Leistungsbewertung*. ÖZEPS.

This book addresses innovative forms of assessment in an Austrian context. It can be downloaded free of charge from oezeps.at: https://www.oezeps.at/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Leistungsbewertung_Onlineversion_Neu.pdf

A solid, concise introduction to the principles of AFL (“Assessment for Learning: 10 Principles. Research-based principles to guide classroom practice of Assessment for Learning”) by the Assessment Reform Group can be found at: http://www.hkeaa.edu.hk/DocLibrary/SBA/HKDSE/Eng_DVD/doc/Afl_principles.pdf

Practical guidelines for AFL can be found at: http://ccea.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/curriculum/assessment/assessment_for_learning/afl_practical_guide.pdf and <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/assessment-learning-activities-0>

Commentary on reflection questions

1. Assessment and instruction are not seen as separate; rather, assessment supports learners in the learning process and guides teachers’ decisions as to what needs to be addressed in their teaching.

2. The process character of learning is emphasized; learners should be given opportunities to assess themselves; some suggestions for teaching methods and strategies are consistent with AFL (e.g., learning journals, portfolios, project work...);

the importance of individualized feedback methods that focus on the strengths and weaknesses of each student is emphasized; the assessment process should be transparent and comprehensible for the learner – however, it is not explained how exactly all of this should be done.

3. Your answer to this reflection question will depend on your personal teaching experience and context. The point of this question is to encourage reflection on AFL strategies and how they can be applied.