The world we live in today requires middle level students to effectively present their ideas with clarity, purpose, passion, persuasion, and confidence. Not only will they be required to synthesize, draw conclusions, formulate opinions, and find relevancy of information learned, but they will also need to orally communicate their understanding.

The topic of improving students’ presentation skills gives rise to myriad questions. How do teachers use instructional time to effectively teach middle level students oral presentation skills? Can teachers use formative assessment to track the progress middle level students make in learning oral presentation skills? How can teachers help middle level students provide informed and critical comments to help improve their peers’ presentation skills? One teacher chose to use formative assessment in the classroom to track her students’ oral presentation skills. This article will highlight the methods, process, and outcomes of the unit.

Oral Communication and Common Core Standards

Communication refers to the act of sharing and understanding ideas and thoughts. Learning in schools is a social activity in which students are asked to constantly share and listen to ideas among their peers. The act of communicating with others is an important 21st-century skill; in fact, oral reporting skills are a key benchmark to success in any career (find supporting resources at Partnership for 21 Century Learning [http://www.p21.org]). Good communication skills foster self-confidence and help a person have more control over his or her life (Emanuel, 2005). Schools are encouraged to teach students to practice and strengthen communication skills so they can effectively articulate thoughts and ideas, use communication for a variety purposes (inform, instruct, motivate, and persuade), and appropriately utilize multiple media and technologies while sharing ideas (Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

In addition, the importance of oral communication is supported in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Specifically, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL6.4 requires middle level students to present claims and findings in logical sequence with relevant details, descriptions, and facts while using appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation. Furthermore, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL6.5 encourages middle level students to use multimedia components and other visual displays to enhance presentations. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL6.6 requires middle level students to be mindful of the purpose of their presentation and to adapt their tone and terminology accordingly.

Formative Assessment

The definition of formative assessment varies slightly from source to source (Dunn & Mulvennon, 2009). Essentially, it is the process of collecting data to understand student learning, and then using that data to inform effective instruc-
tional decisions that facilitate learning. This process not only helps to monitor student progress (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002), it also should occur continuously during instruction so that both the teachers and students can check for understanding and provide critical feedback to ensure instructional goals will be met (Frey & Fisher, 2011). In other words, formative assessment is a tool that allows teachers and students to make ongoing decisions on future learning activities (Kahl, 2005). In essence, the varied assessments given are “assessments for learning” and not “assessment of learning.” Teachers should systemically administer formative assessments throughout the span of a unit, and the results of each assessment should be used to differentiate future instruction (Reeves, 2005).

Formative assessment can take many forms, such as asking students to answer specific questions, having them informally assess their comfort level about an activity, concept, or skill by using a manual prompt like a thumbs-up or thumbs-down, or having them note their questions before they leave the class (Pinchok & Brandt, 2009). The critical component is that assessments are a planned, ongoing process through which data is collected from classroom activities. When done correctly, formative assessments have the potential to increase student learning. Classrooms that incorporate formative assessment into their regular instructional practice raise student achievement (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Further, students in classes where formative assessments were used made almost twice as much progress in terms of standardized measures (Wiliam, Lee, Harrison, & Black, 2004). In fact, even incorporating one formative assessment in a 15-week period can result in a 13% gain in student achievement (Bangert-Drowns, Kulik, Kulik, & Morgan, 1991). This body of evidence makes a strong case for using formative assessment in the classroom.

Many researchers suggest procedural steps when using formative assessment. Essentially, teachers must ensure that they plan activities in their units that encourage students to accurately answer these key questions: 1) Where am I going? 2) Where am I now? 3) How can I close the gap? (Atkin, Black, & Coffey, 2001). Another way to consider the process of formative assessment is to engage in the following four steps that can continuously cycle back to the beginning, or number 1 (Frey & Fisher, 2011):

1. Feed-up: Establish purpose for learning the skill, concept, or content so that students can clearly articulate what they are learning and how they will be assessed.

2. Check for understanding: Conduct regular monitoring of student growth so that teachers and students can determine student progress and reevaluate goals.

3. Include feedback: Provide students with constructive and descriptive feedback so that they can determine their strengths and needs.

4. Feed-forward: Use performance data and feedback in planning for “next steps” instruction to facilitate student achievement.

CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITEHINK

Purposeful Assessment

Effective differentiation begins with purposeful assessment. In this strategy guide, you’ll learn how to construct an authentic performance-based reading assessment that will give you access to students’ thinking before, during, and after reading.


Lisa Fink

www.readwritethink.org

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When using the process of formative assessment while teaching a unit, teachers should first establish purpose of learning by identifying and defining the goals and objectives of the unit (Laud & Patel, 2012). Clarifying and defining goals and objectives make it possible for the teacher to “begin with the end in mind” (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). That means teachers will know what the final summative assessment will measure, thereby enabling them to clearly articulate the skills and concepts needed to successfully meet the final objectives. This step not only helps teachers make better formative assessments that evaluate the intended goals and objectives but also explicitly signals to students what is required for them to reach mastery.

After clarifying and defining goals and objectives, teachers can plan when they will provide formative assessments and how they will use them to monitor learning. Using the recommendations from researchers on methods to incorporate the process of formative assessment, Laud and Patel (2013) suggest that teachers start the unit with a preassessment to measure initial understanding, and then continuously evaluate for big concepts in the middle of the unit and for specific skills throughout the unit. Most important, teachers must evaluate the formative assessments, make specific instructional decisions based on the data, and track students’ progress. This is the crux of the formative assessment.

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Linking Formative Assessments to Presentation Skills

A sixth-grade English and humanities teacher decided to use the formative assessment framework when teaching her middle level students oral presentation skills. She teaches at an international private school in New York City. Many languages are spoken at the school, though most students are proficient in English. The teacher is responsible for a mixed-ability, general education class with students who are considered high achieving and some who have IEPs or other evaluations. Based on the research, she believed that formative assessment would help her middle level students understand and articulate ways to effectively present their ideas. She also believed that the framework would help students practice their oral presentation skills regularly in class.

The teacher decided to combine English and humanities skills. She planned to evaluate middle level students’ speaking skills on an oral presentation based on a topic studied in humanities class. That summative assessment would come after the students had learned and practiced both their oral presentation skills and the concepts around the humanities curriculum.

The act of giving an oral presentation is multifaceted. The presenter is required to have specific content knowledge, awareness of specific procedural knowledge (i.e., understanding of cultural sensitivity, age group, audience interest, and awareness of prior knowledge of audience members) in terms of presenting to the particular audience, and knowledge of how to present using an appropriate stance so that the audience is engaged (Morita, 2000). Hill and Storey (2003) found that providing their students with a breakdown of oral presentation skills, including criteria for organization of content, awareness of audience, and practice and delivery of presentation, was helpful. With those parameters in mind, the teacher identified the following as key points for
mastery in oral presentation skills:

• Well-rehearsed presentation with minimal, if any, reading from notes
• Consistent eye contact with all audience members
• Loud and clear voice demonstrative of confidence
• Positive body language and gestures
• Consistent and effective reference to visuals
• Adherence to an appropriate time frame

The teacher also identified the following as key points for mastery in organization of content:

• Immediate and clear articulation of topic, purpose, and/or question being answered
• Relevant and detailed facts and information
• Effective wrap-up (end with a synthesis of key information presented, connection to today’s world, call for action, encouraging message, or rhetorical questions)
• A clear personal link/explanation of interest in topic or a modern-day link
• Ability to answer questions from audience confidently

Each of the skills noted was further quantified on a 1–3 scale (see Fig. 1), which students used to formatively assess their skills throughout the unit. A more holistic rubric with descriptions was used to evaluate the middle level student’s mid-unit and summative assessments (see Fig. 2).

Class Instruction

The teacher first administered a preassessment during which each middle level student was asked to give a three- to five-minute prepared presentation on an assigned topic related to his or her humanities studies. Students were required to use PowerPoint slides in their presentations to display images (and only images) to enhance the information they were delivering orally. Every student was provided feedback on each of the skills listed on the holistic rubric shown in Figure 2, though no grade was given. When all students had presented, the teacher modeled a presentation showing mastery in all skills. The teacher then conferred with each student about his or her

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eye Contact</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>Student has consistent eye contact with audience, does not look down or up, and looks at all members of the audience or all around the room throughout entire presentation. You, as the audience member, feel like the student is talking to you in a formal conversation for the entire time.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Student has some eye contact with audience, may look down or up occasionally, and tends to only look at a few people or in one place in the room throughout the entire presentation. You, as the audience member, feel like the student is talking to you for at least half of the presentation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Student has very little eye contact with audience, either reads from notes or looks down/up for the majority of the presentation. You, as the audience member, feel like the student is giving a formal presentation and is not talking to you.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments: __________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________

Figure 1. Sample quantifiable rubric (Note: A similar rubric was made for each criterion on the presentation column of the holistic rubric.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Excellent** | • Student presents clearly and does not read to the class.  
• Student makes consistent eye contact with audience.  
• Student speaks with a loud, clear voice, full of confidence.  
• Body language is positive and gestures enhance presentation.  
• Student makes positive and clear reference to the visuals/artifacts.  
• The talk stays within the time frame. |
| • Student clearly articulates and explains the question he/she answered at the beginning.  
• Student clearly explains interest in topic and makes a personal connection.  
• Student gives a detailed presentation with facts so that the audience can answer the question presented at the beginning.  
• Student makes a clear, deliberate and specific link to show how the question and facts link to the culture of modern day or ancient China.  
• Student clearly wraps up by providing key points and either connecting to today’s world or adding rhetorical questions.  
• Student asks for questions, gives clear articulate responses, or is able to say that he/she does not know the answer with confidence. |
| **Good** | • Student presents clearly most of the time but reads the presentation from note cards occasionally.  
• Student makes occasional eye contact with audience.  
• Student is confident and is able to be heard most of the time.  
• Body language is generally positive and gestures are used effectively.  
• Student makes reference to the visuals/artifacts.  
• The talk mostly stays within the time frame. |
| • Student mentions the question, though some parts may be unclear.  
• Student explains interest in topic.  
• Student gives a presentation with some facts so that the audience can answer the question presented at the beginning with some information.  
• Student makes some links to show how the question and facts link to the culture of modern day or ancient China.  
• Student wraps up by providing key points.  
• Student asks for questions and some responses may lack clarity while others are clear. |
| **Needs Improvement** | • Student reads the majority of the presentation or cannot be heard.  
• Student rarely makes eye contact.  
• Student is not confident.  
• Body language is not particularly positive and limited gestures are used.  
• Student does not make reference to the visuals/artifacts.  
• The talk is either too short or too long. |
| • Student does not mention the question.  
• Student gives limited to no information about interest in the topic.  
• Student gives a presentation with minimal facts, making it hard for the audience to answer the question presented at the beginning.  
• Student makes minimal to no links to show how the question and facts link to culture of modern day or ancient China.  
• Student does not include a wrap up.  
• Student does not ask for questions or responses are unclear. |

**Figure 2.** Holistic presentation rubric

Presentation using the rubric and teacher modeling as a guide. The students were then able to set two specific goals related to the skills of presenting that would become their initial focus. Focusing on specific goals increased their engagement at the instructional level, thus maximizing learning and reducing boredom and confusion (Baker, D’Mello, Rodrigo, & Graesser, 2010).

Throughout the first half of the unit, middle level students would informally create presenta-
The teacher would look at the peer feedback, noting student reflections and comments, and she and the student would discuss steps that the student would take to improve the presentation.

**Observations and Final Presentations**

This teacher started the unit hoping to find a way to make oral presentation skills explicit to her middle level students. She had them practice these skills in class using formative assessment, affording them an opportunity to provide meaningful and critical feedback about peers’ presentations. By identifying and quantifying the goals and objectives of the unit, modeling a strong presentation, and systematically evaluating and tracking progress, the teacher helped students strengthen their presentation skills. In fact, on the final presentation or summative assessment,

**Week 1:** Administration of preassessment, show students model presentation, and allow students to set goals.

**Weeks 2–4:** Differentiated lessons on presentation skills based on student-/teacher-set goals and self, peer, and teacher feedback. Students engage in at least two formative assessments in this time frame.

**Week 5:** Mid-unit check-in: All students give a mini-presentation for full evaluation from teacher.

**Weeks 6–7:** Continued practice of presentation skills with goals set from week 5. Students also begin their research for final presentation. Students engaged in at least one formative assessment.

**Week 8:** Final presentation

**Figure 3.** Sequence of lessons
of the 17 students in her class, 2 received above an A, 10 received an A, and 5 received a B. For the first time in her class, no student received lower than a B.

Because criteria had been made explicit, the students had a common language and a firm understanding of what good presentation skills encompassed. As a result, they were able to provide critical feedback to their peers. The regular formative assessments using quantified rubrics made the expectations clear so students could articulate strengths and weaknesses. Rubrics fostered concise communication of expectations (Andrade & Du, 2005), and because they were quantified in this setting, they provided students a clearer sense of when mastery was met. Using a 1–3 scale with explicit criteria along with the presentation model, the students could accurately conceptualize what an effective presentation should look like.

Furthermore, it is important to provide students the opportunity to learn through participation activities, which in this case meant providing them with an opportunity to both present and watch others do so (Morita, 2000). The combination of presenting and seeing others present throughout this unit helped students understand how to master the presentation skills. The formative assessment framework made it possible for the teacher to ensure that the students could consistently practice the art of presenting. Opportunities to practice not only strengthened oral presentation skills, they also made it possible for the teacher to use formative assessment to track each student’s progress.

In addition, because the teacher regularly consulted with each middle level student about his or her performance on each formative assessment, she could help ensure that instructional time was being effectively differentiated based on each individual student’s skill level. The middle level students were engaged and on task during this unit, possibly because they were working at their instructional level and knew the specific skills that they were expected to develop. Teaching students effective oral presentation skills will help them not only in their lives today but also in the future. Making criteria explicit, asking students to regularly engage and practice a skill, and helping them systematically track their progress using formative assessment seems to yield favorable results.

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