Formative Language Assessment for English Learners

A Four-Step Process

Formative Language Assessment for English Learners

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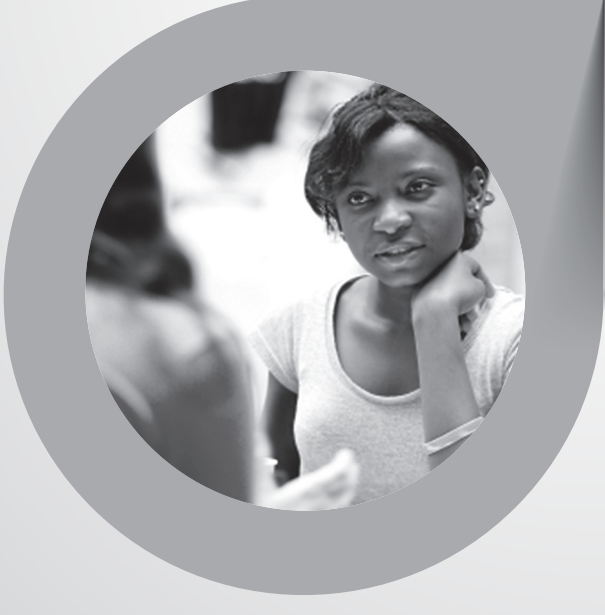

HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH

Heinemann
361 Hanover Street
Portsmouth, NH 03801–3912
www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

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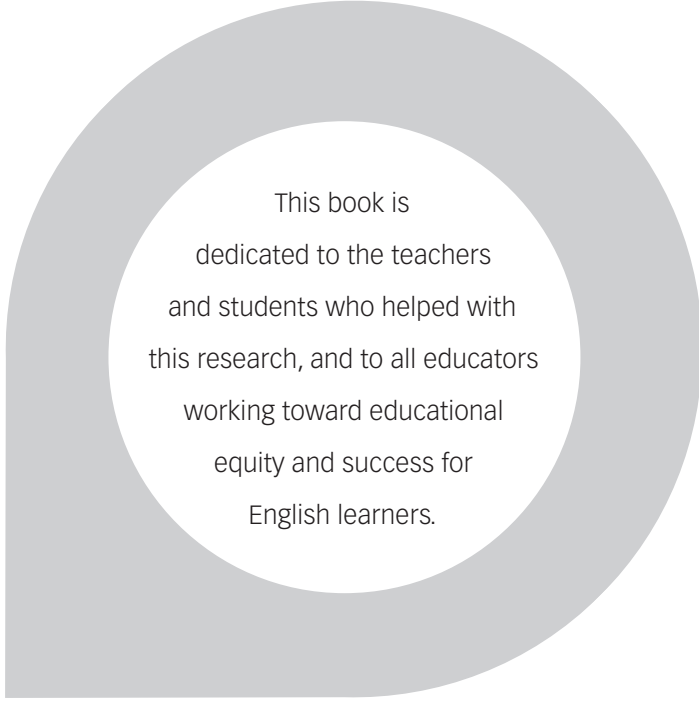
Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file with the Library of Congress.
ISBN: 978-0-325-05357-8

Acquiring Editors: Yvonne S. and David E. Freeman
Editor: Holly Kim Price
Production Editor: Sonja S. Chapman
Typesetter: Valerie Levy, Drawing Board Studios
Cover and interior design: Suzanne Heiser
Manufacturing: Steve Bernier

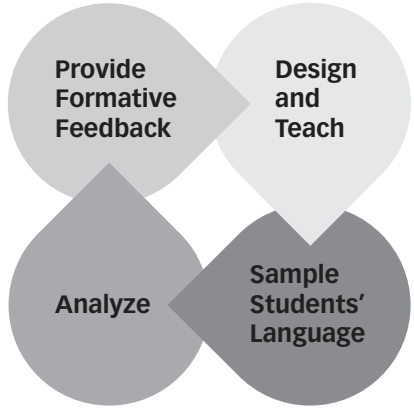
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
19 18 17 16 15 EBM 1 2 3 4 5



CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to extend their appreciation to the Carnegie Corporation of New York for its generous support of the Formative Language Assessment Records for English Language Learners (FLARE) project and to the three FLARE partner districts: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, North Carolina; Chicago Public Schools, Illinois; and Garden Grove Unified School District, California. The authors would also like to thank the many individuals who have contributed their comments to earlier drafts, including Jennifer Daniels from WIDA, who provided a teacher's perspective of the manuscript. We would like to give a special thanks to Margaret Heritage and Ed Roeber, whose expertise and experience in formative assessment has guided this work and whose thoughtful feedback on an early draft clarified both our ideas and their expression.



Introduction

Formative Assessment: Assessment for Learning

"To many of today's teachers, assessment is synonymous with high-stakes standardized tests. But there is an entirely different kind of assessment that can actually transform teaching and learning."

—Margaret Heritage (2007, p. 140)

High-stakes educational assessment is on all educators' minds these days. As local and state education agencies discuss how best to assess students' progress toward new educational goals, and evaluation of teacher performance is more and more frequently tied to student progress, these tests are shaping the educational landscape. Regardless of the effects of these tests and debates, teachers continue to sit next to students in classrooms across the country, doing their best to help students grasp the next important idea that they need to weave together a web of knowledge and skills to sustain them in their education, their careers, and their lives as citizens—and they are doing this for all students, including the increasing numbers of English Language Learners (ELLs) in their classrooms. High-stakes tests will have little to offer students and teachers as they discern the next steps, but there is a type of assessment that will make a difference.

This "different type of assessment" that Margaret Heritage refers to is *formative assessment*, which occurs in the midst of instruction and compares students' ongoing progress to possible trajectories of learning. It can help identify the most productive next steps in instruction. Excellent work on formative assessment (CCSSO 2012; Heritage 2007, 2010, 2013;

Assessments for Formative Purposes can include . . .	Formative Assessment means specifically . . .
1 year ago I I I X	TODAY
Interim assessments, given over several months to determine student progress over several units, are used to inform curriculum revision.	A teacher observes a student during a lesson and responds immediately with comments or questions to guide the student's attention or effort.

Figure I.1 The current formative assessment landscape

National Research Council 2001; Popham, 1995, 2008; Shute 2008; Wiliam 2012) has helped educators learn about and integrate this powerful tool into their repertoires. As educators explore the exciting possibilities presented by formative assessment, more nuanced understandings evolve. Today, the term *formative assessment* can mean different things depending on who is speaking, and some clarity regarding the terminology can be helpful.

If we envision formative assessment as the continuum shown in Figure I.1, we see that the specific term *formative assessment* has come to mean assessment that is literally in the moment: The teacher interacts in the moment with comments or questions to guide a student's attention or effort. The teacher does not go away to analyze student work against some criteria; her understanding of the learning trajectory and of the success criteria based on that trajectory is immediately available to her, as is her knowledge of multiple resources to support students' learning in the moment. This level of skill with immediate formative assessment and interaction is built up over time through solid training, support, and experience.

In contrast to this specific term, *assessment for formative purposes* is a much broader category of tools and processes that could be used to shape instruction over time. Some experts on formative assessment suggest that any type of assessment—even an annual test given to evaluate a program—can be considered "formative" if its results are used to analyze and shape instructional practices. In other words, the purpose for which assessment results are used, rather than their contingency to classroom instruction, is what categorizes an assessment as having a formative purpose. A major difference between these two types of assessment is the direct interaction with students as they are learning: Formative assessment involves ongoing interaction with students. Assessment for formative purposes may or may not.

The process we describe in this book falls at the X point on this continuum. We will be describing a process developed over five years of interaction with middle and high school teachers who wanted to learn how to better support students' language development during their instruction. With these teachers, we gathered frequent samples of student writing to

analyze the language used and think about how best to support the next steps in students' language development. The analysis of student writing is rarely an "in the moment" interaction; therefore, the process we describe falls into the area of "assessment for formative purposes." The process we describe is very close to that instructional moment though. Student language is sampled during the course of an ongoing series of related lessons, when students are in the process of learning to write specific types of genres and when rewrites are expected as students are supported in their movement toward successful writing. Our process is situated well before the point at which student work is graded (a summative activity). The results are used to guide the upcoming teaching-learning interaction, by helping teachers shape the next steps in their instruction and assisting students in identifying the next steps in their learning—not "in the moment," but perhaps "in the upcoming moment." It may be that when teachers and students are familiar with using this process, they may use "in the moment" formative assessment.

This book offers an understanding of a process (not a test) that can be used by teachers and students to reflect on the effectiveness of students' language and to interact in productive ways to strengthen students' ability to use language effectively—all of it deeply contextualized and part of the ongoing flow of teaching and learning, not an "add-on." Because we have written from our experience, we focus on students' writing, a language domain that lends itself more easily to observation than do the receptive language domains of reading or listening, and one that results in a more easily studied artifact than does the other productive domain (speaking). The process we describe can serve as a foundation to reflect on and interact productively around student language in all language domains.

Few resources currently exist to assist educators in the use of formative assessment practices and strategies related to students' growing knowledge and skill with English, the medium through which teachers and learners convey ideas in most U.S. classrooms. Research currently underway on the Dynamic Language Learning Progression (www.dllp.org/) promises to provide detailed, empirically derived information about how language development progresses during the elementary school years, for both English learners and English-fluent students. At the secondary level, the Carnegie-funded Formative Language Assessment Records for English Language Learners (FLARE) project developed a process of language assessment that could be used for formative purposes with English Language Learners at the secondary level.

This book shares what we have learned about language assessment strategies for formative purposes for and with ELLs. This book grew out of five years of working with ELLs and their teachers through the FLARE project, where we collaborated with middle school and high school teachers in three school districts (Chicago Public Schools, Illinois; Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools, North Carolina; and Garden Grove Unified School District, California) to develop language assessment practices that could be used formatively for ELLs in secondary classrooms. The project brought together research on learning progressions

with the procedures, tools, and insights of the many teachers with whom we worked. What emerged from that project was a language-focused model for assessing language for formative purposes. This book presents the distillation of those five years of work: a series of steps for (a) weaving a language focus into content lessons, (b) sampling students' language, (c) analyzing students' language to help them broaden their linguistic choices and share ideas more effectively, and (d) creating and maintaining active partnerships with students as they learn and practice new ways to use English.

Each chapter in this book presents detailed information about the steps in the model. We illustrate each step of the process with examples. Although we present those steps separately, we want to stress that they often occur simultaneously and are woven into the fabric of teaching and learning.

This introduction provides background information about the process of assessing language for formative purposes, and it introduces the three teachers and three students whose stories we use to illustrate that process in the coming chapters.

What Is Language Assessment for Formative Purposes?

Language assessment for formative purposes is a systematic process of language analysis that provides students and teachers with feedback on students' progress toward specific instructional goals for using English. ELLs—the many students in American schools who are learning English as an additional language while they learn mathematics and science and social studies—are held to the same accountability standards as their English-proficient peers. Given that ELLs must simultaneously learn new content and a new language, they have been described as having to do "double the work" (Short & Fitzsimmons 2007). To succeed in this challenge, ELLs and their teachers need explicit information about their progress in acquiring knowledge, skills, and *academic language*. When teachers have the tools and knowledge needed to analyze student language and identify probable language learning trajectories and next steps, teachers can adjust their instruction accordingly to help students understand and engage actively in their own language development.

The work of clarifying learning goals is not limited to ELLs, of course. In *How People Learn*, Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2000) pointed out that all students need ongoing information about their own progress and learning. In this book, and especially in this chapter, we explore the kind of information about progress and learning that ELLs need and describe a framework for gathering samples of students' language, analyzing those samples, and providing timely and actionable information, or *formative feedback*, to students to improve their learning. Formative feedback is information communicated to learners to improve learning (Shute 2008). By extension, formative *language* feedback is information communicated to learners to support their development of academic language.

Teachers have always worked to provide students with ongoing feedback on their progress, but this information has not always been specific enough to help students take the next, most attainable step in their academic language development. We've discovered in our work with teachers that they are interested in exploring ways to gather, analyze, and share specific information about language development with ELLs. Together with teachers, we've developed a process and tools to accomplish these goals. Teachers suggest that effective use of the process helps them gather the type of data they need to adjust ongoing instruction and to deliver the specific, actionable feedback ELLs need to improve their achievement of intended instructional and linguistic outcomes. Classrooms defined by effective assessment for language for formative purposes become dynamic spaces in which teachers and students alike develop deeper understandings of language and then use that information to plan clear, attainable steps to increase their effectiveness in communicating ideas in English.

How Does Language Assessment for Formative Purposes Fit into Teaching and Learning?

Teachers constantly observe student behavior to notice specific ways students respond to a task or activity and then make inferences about what their students are learning and the challenges they are facing. These inferences help teachers adjust curriculum, instruction, and assessment in their classrooms. Many teachers test their students in multiple ways to obtain information about conceptual or language development, but it is often too much of the wrong kind of assessment and too little of the right kind. To obtain a full and useful picture of students' progress in language learning, teachers need to work together with school leaders, students, and researchers to create a *balanced language assessment system* composed of a variety of assessment tools that include, but go beyond, tests.

At a minimum, a balanced English language proficiency assessment system should incorporate formative, interim, and summative assessments based on explicit linguistic expectations for each student. Balanced language assessment systems, as shown in Figure I.2, include:

- *Formative assessment*—an ongoing assessment process that occurs within instruction and provides students and teachers with feedback on students' progress toward specific targets in their language development. Language assessment for formative purposes can involve observation, student self-assessment, peer assessment and feedback, or teacher analysis of language samples. What is most important is that whatever is being analyzed, it is a naturally occurring part of the classroom learning activities and that the information is used to make helpful adjustments to instruction within the lesson.

- *Interim assessment*—a periodic assessment that provides students, parents, and educators with information on unit attainment or progress across units. Interim assessment can be seen as a short-cycled summative assessment.
- *Summative assessment*—an occasional (often annual) assessment that provides parents, educators, and policymakers with information on students' progress with regard to a course and/or standard. Examples of summative English language proficiency assessments are WIDA's ACCESS for ELLs, California's CELDT, and the TELPAS in Texas.

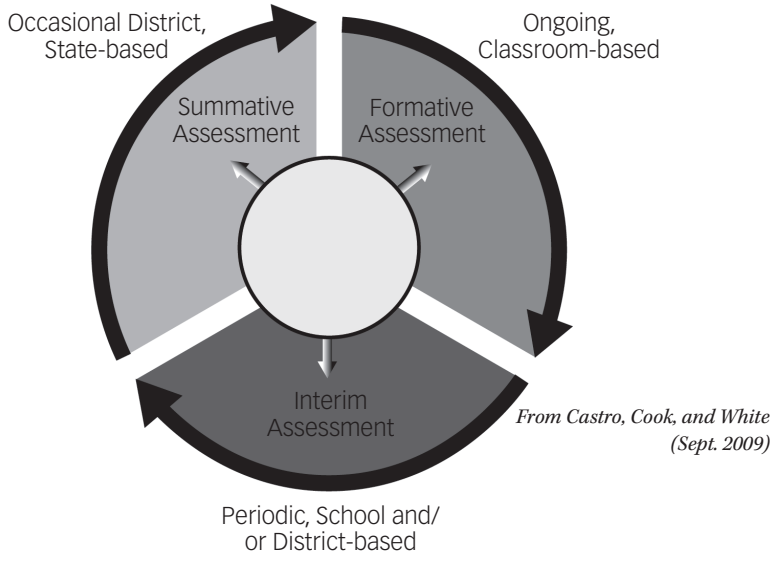


Figure I.2 A balanced language proficiency assessment system

What distinguishes these three types of assessments, then, are (a) the *grain size* of what is measured (specific targets, unit goals, or course goals and grade-level standards), and (b) the frequency of assessment, their varied degrees of proximity to instruction, and their impact on instruction. In formative assessment, students and teachers obtain and use information that changes instruction in the moment, rather than leading weeks or months later to changes in curricula or programs (Chappuis et al. 2011). Figure I.3 illustrates the relative frequency of assessment.

What unites a well-balanced language assessment system is continuity of purpose and coherence between learning targets and standards. At the heart of the balanced language assessment system are the same language standards that drive instruction. The assessment process is directly linked to an instructional target derived from these language standards in conjunction with content standards.

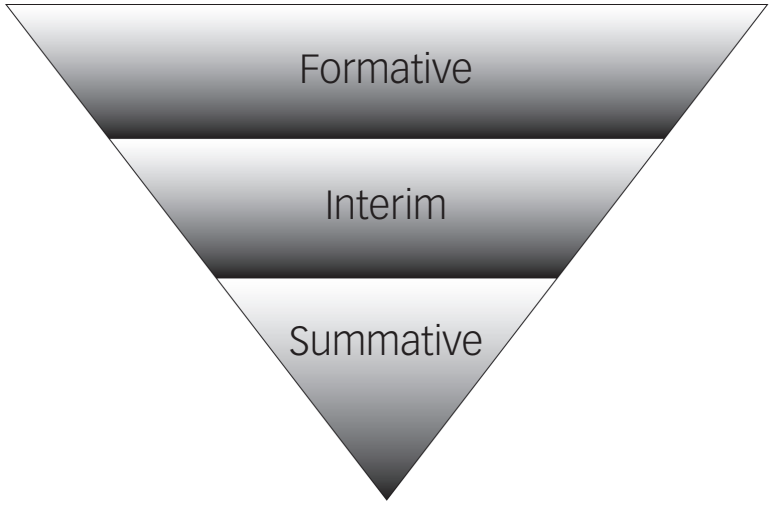


Figure I.3 The relative frequency of components of a balanced assessment system

A *balanced* language assessment system does not imply an equal number of tests of each kind, or that each assessment or test should carry the same weight within the broader system (Redfield, Roeber, & Stiggins 2008). What makes a language assessment system balanced is the correspondence of each component to the user's purposes. Mandated summative assessments are important and necessary for accountability purposes and for assessing the efficacy of programs or instructional models, but do not provide much actionable, evidence-based information about ELLs' actual language proficiency or content knowledge. In a balanced assessment system, summative tests are accompanied by periodic interim assessments and daily formative assessment activities to assure that ELLs' classroom instruction is tailored to their individual progress, giving students and teachers the opportunity to identify what students need to learn and to shape instruction to help them learn it.

The Process

In observing teachers as they engage in formative assessment practices, we have noticed the many creative ways they gather the information they need. We want to call attention to two kinds of variation. First, formative assessment varies in terms of the learning target. Some teachers may target content, language, or both at various points during instruction. A chemistry teacher can offer students feedback on their use of chemistry concepts in completing a laboratory exercise. Others may choose to combine the monitoring of chemistry concepts with a task that yields a language sample for analysis, so that the one activity serves as formative content assessment as well as an assessment of language for formative purposes.

Ideally, teachers plan and develop ways to assess language for formative purposes prior to a lesson and implement them at key points in the lesson. A journal entry assignment that invites students to self-assess their performance in mathematics is an example of formative assessment that may have been planned weeks before the semester started. Many other types of probes can be used at important junctures while students are working toward some end goal in a lesson or curriculum unit—some as simple as an exit card asking students to explain a concept or to draw the relationship between concepts. Many types of simple, brief activities can provide glimpses into students' current level of understanding in either content or language—planning a question-and-answer session during a lesson, observing students during an activity, or asking students to provide examples.

Formative assessment can also be spontaneous, immediate, and unplanned. While giving directions on how to perform a chemistry experiment, a teacher may recognize through her observation that some students do not understand that a reaction will occur when they mix the two chemicals and may decide to quickly review what a chemical reaction is. This would ensure that the students have the knowledge needed to comprehend what will occur and provide them with the language needed to express that knowledge—an example of spontaneous formative assessment and modification of instruction.

Regardless of whether it is planned or spontaneous, the goal of formative assessment is not to provide a grade. Rather, the goal is to provide teachers with the immediate feedback they need to adjust instruction and to provide students with the feedback they need to improve their learning. The goal of *language* assessment for formative purposes—our focus in this book—is to provide feedback to students and teachers so that students can take the next steps toward increasing their effectiveness in using English.

The Four Stages of Formative Assessment

The process we developed has four stages, as illustrated in Figure I.4. We explain these briefly here and in more detail in subsequent chapters.

- *Stage 1: Design and Teach.* The first stage involves designing and weaving a consistent focus on academic language into lessons, articulating clear language learning targets and objectives, and planning for the language assessment events. Chapter 1 will discuss this in more detail.
- *Stage 2: Sample Students' Language.* This stage involves building opportunities into lessons to gather samples of target language, a process we'll discuss in more detail in Chapter 1.
- *Stage 3: Analyze.* The third stage of the process involves analyzing students' language samples, using a set of lenses to help identify what is emerging in students' language, and considering how to adjust instruction, all of which will be discussed in Chapter 2.

- *Stage 4: Provide Formative Feedback.* The next stage, discussed in Chapter 3, is to give students clear, progress-oriented, and actionable information about their language use—both what they're doing well and what they can do to become more effective users of English—and to adjust instruction to meet students' needs, which brings us full circle to Stage 1. During formative feedback conversations, students and teachers plan together the next set of success criteria or targets and decide how to gather the next round of information. Chapter 4 provides examples of easily constructed tools that simplify data collection for formative assessment.

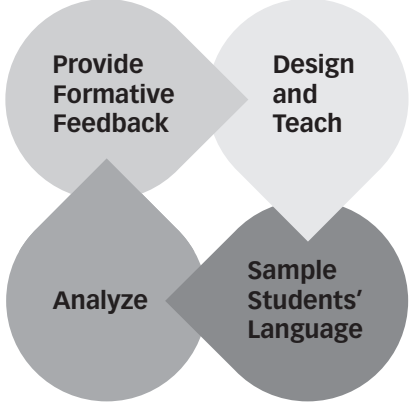


Figure I.4 The process for assessing language for formative purposes

Best Practices of the Assessment of Language for Formative Purposes: The IDEAL Model

Our observation of teachers in three school districts has helped us describe IDEAL language assessment for formative purposes. At its best, this type of language assessment has the five qualities (Castro, Cook, & White 2009) that are listed next.

It Is Integrated

Good language assessment for formative purposes is coherent with other language assessments in the school, district, and state. In other words, it shares the same language standards and language learning targets. The information gathered from all these sources can thus provide multiple lenses through which to view students' language development.

It Is Dynamic

Good language assessment for formative purposes is planned as part of the fluid instructional process, embedded in instruction, not distinct from it. This process results in language

instruction that shifts and moves in response to information gathered through language assessment for formative purposes.

It Is Enlightening

The purpose of language assessment for formative purposes is to provide descriptive feedback to guide language instruction and development. Clear language learning targets make what students are aiming toward both explicit and specific. Students should have examples of what effective use of this new language should look or sound like, and both students and teachers need a shared understanding of the desired outcome.

It Is Attainable

Good language assessment for formative purposes fits well into the realities of classrooms and instruction, sampling and analyzing language during the regular flow of a lesson. If feedback is truly meant to shape instruction, the formative assessment process should not be something added after a lesson is planned, but should be planned as part of the natural flow of a lesson.

It Is Linked

Since students learn language best by putting it to important uses, good language assessment for formative purposes targets language that is integral to the content students are learning. Language learning targets should be shaped by students' emerging language abilities but, just as important, by the language demands of the content and the specific task as well. These links make the process relevant and authentic and ensure that the targets illuminate the path to academic success for ELLs.

The approach to integrated language assessment—the IDEAL model of language assessment for formative purposes used in this book—rests on two assumptions. First, ELLs are performing *double the work* of native English speakers in the country's middle and high schools (Short & Fitzsimmons 2007). To be successful in school—to graduate with a high school diploma, to enter an institution of higher education, or to find significant employment—ELLs must become proficient simultaneously in *both* the English language and the academic content of schooling. The challenges facing these students, their teachers, and their schools are substantial, especially for ELLs in the later grades who are working to assimilate abstract content and concepts with emergent English language skills, differing background knowledge, and, in some cases, with interrupted formal education. To meet these challenges, ELLs need immediate and systematic information about how the development of their language abilities is interacting with their academic performance.

Second, educators who serve ELLs in secondary schools need to continually build their knowledge and experience with second language acquisition, sheltered instruction, and differentiation, and to cultivate their ability to identify and teach the academic language and literacy of their content areas (Short & Fitzsimmons 2007). Teachers need practical strategies and knowledge to help learners develop the specific language abilities necessary to succeed in school (Bailey 2007; Bunch 2013).

Anyone who has observed a child knows that language, just like any other complex content, isn't learned all at once. Language learning is a process, and learners use tools like those we'll describe in this book to help them identify where they are in the process. These tools are a critical part of a tool kit for those who teach ELLs. Knowing where students are and where they need to end up helps teachers and students understand the direction and next steps to take. The resources in this book are designed to support that navigation along the path toward effectiveness with academic language.

How We Have Structured This Book

We have found that it is more effective to demonstrate good language assessment for formative purposes rather than to talk or write abstractly about it. To explain the cycle of formative assessment, we've chosen to show how it unfolds stage by stage in a school setting. In each of the following chapters, as we describe the steps in the cycle and introduce the tools teachers need, we will exemplify those steps by showing how a teacher might put the tools to work. To present the process in action, we provide a set of school, student, and teacher examples in subsequent chapters. Although the student language samples we provide are real, the setting and the characters themselves are fictitious, based on our collective experiences teaching ELLs in a variety of settings. Before we move on to explore the cycle in more detail, we'll introduce the schools, teachers, and students to help you visualize and apply the process.

The Schools

Just as ELLs are a very diverse group, so are the types of schools and instructional programs where they learn. In areas with high percentages of ELLs in each grade, school districts may have stand-alone programs that parallel the general education curriculum during the initial stages of ELLs' language development. Some districts have full bilingual education curricula. A very large percentage of ELLs in many states in the United States, however, are enrolled directly into mainstream classrooms and receive limited language support from specialist teachers who may either "push in" to the classroom, "pull out" students for separate language lessons, or co-teach with the content specialists. The variety of programs is a testimony to the creativity of teachers! We will situate the teachers and students in one of these latter, more typical and highly creative districts, where teachers use a variety of approaches to meet

ELLs' language learning needs in mainstream, English-only classrooms with limited support from English language specialists. The formative assessment cycle and the specific tools we'll share have been applied successfully across Grades 6–12, but to keep the "cast of characters" to a reasonable number, we'll situate all of the students in the same grade. We'll focus on three teachers and three seventh-grade students.

The Teachers

Jason Gardner is the English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher for the Metropolis School District, which has a small but growing number of ELLs. Jason's full-time position is shared among two elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. Jason is a creative teacher who has developed several ways to meet the varied needs of his students. For students who are at the intermediate stage of English proficiency, he provides direct language instruction focused specifically on the academic language demands of various content areas. (Figure 2.2 in Chapter 2 shows a description of these English proficiency levels.)

For students whose English proficiency is at a lower level, Jason provides more frequent support, either through active collaboration with their classroom teachers (analyzing the language learning needs in the context of content lessons and developing strategies for integrated content-language instruction) or through co-planning and co-teaching occasional curriculum units with content specialists. This embedded and distributed professional development technique helps to increase the internal capacity of district faculty for integrated content-language instruction.

Kevin Davis is a seventh-grade history teacher. Kevin is new to the district, and this is the first year he has ELLs in his class. Three of the ELLs in his class are above intermediate level in proficiency, and one student, Kia, is new to the district. Kevin's work with Kia will be supported by Jason's frequent visits to the classroom, during which he will assist Kevin in delivering integrated content and language instruction. Twice a week during Kevin's planning time, he will meet with Jason to learn how to analyze the language central to his history lessons and develop strategies that integrate a focus on language development into his history lessons.

Elena Santos is a seventh-grade science and mathematics teacher. Because of her frequent collaboration with Jason during the past five years, she is accustomed to analyzing ELLs' language learning needs in science and mathematics and to building in instructional supports. She consults with Jason as needed, and she has offered to assist Kevin during his first year of differentiating instruction for ELLs.

The Students

Jorge was born near the border between Mexico and Texas in a community that spoke an indigenous language. He traveled with his parents as part of a migrant farm worker

group, living and working in the Midwest from April through October, and returning to Texas for the rest of the year. His parents speak both Zapotec and Spanish and very little English. Like many ELLs, Jorge speaks several languages. He and his older brother can speak Zapotec, Spanish, and English. Last year, when Jorge entered the sixth grade, his parents found year-round jobs in the Metropolis School District and decided to settle there. Jorge was happy to stay in the same neighborhood and keep the friends he had recently made. Jorge is good-natured, well liked by teachers and classmates, and is a talented guitarist. Jorge's language proficiency level has not advanced from the intermediate level for the last three years. Although his language skills in listening and speaking are strong, his teachers have not had success in helping him use English more effectively in reading and writing, and, despite ESL support, he seems to be stuck.

Kia came to the United States four years ago at age nine when her family left Laos to join an aunt who had moved to the United States. Her family settled immediately in a neighboring town with an established Hmong community, where they continued speaking Hmong, with translation support provided by a few neighbors when needed. Kia entered school in third grade in a newcomers' English program that included intensive English language development, sheltered content classes, and acculturation of new students to the American school system. She spent less than a year in that program before her family moved to Metropolis, where ESL support is more limited. Kia's parents speak little English and have a limited understanding of the school system that serves Kia and her two older sisters and younger brother. Kia struggles in academic classes. Because she and her parents believe that education is critical for success, Kia has enrolled in an after-school program to improve her English. College students from the Hmong community staff the program, and Kia works primarily in English to learn how to use computers, playing games and managing a Facebook page.

Migdalia is a thirteen-year-old girl who was born in Caracas, Venezuela, who arrived in the United States one year ago. Her parents came to the United States as part of a church sponsorship program for immigrants. Back at home, her father was an engineer and her mother, who had completed a bachelor's degree, did not work outside of the home. In Venezuela, Migdalia attended private schools. She has strong literacy in Spanish and is a skilled writer, crafting short stories and poetry that she shares with her Spanish-speaking friends in Venezuela. Migdalia has many Spanish-speaking friends with whom she stays in touch via Facebook, but would like to have more friends who speak English. With much help from her father, who speaks both English and Spanish fluently, she is earning passing grades in core academic subjects. She tries hard to please her teachers, but school in the United States has been difficult for her in spite of her strong skills in English.

We'll follow these three students and teachers throughout the rest of this book, watching how the teachers embed formative assessment of language into their daily instruction and how students are engaged as partners in their learning.