

CONDUCTING CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT in Grades 1 to 4

A. GENERAL NOTE on CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT

Continuous Assessment (CA) includes **a range of different assessment techniques** which can be used in the classroom (and elsewhere) to gather information about students' learning.

For the purpose of collecting assessment data about student achievement *in particular elements*, some techniques are better suited than others. For example, for the four language elements in Grades 1 to 4, the following tools and techniques are recommended:

Listening: Classwork; day-to-day observation in the classroom; quizzes.

Speaking: Classwork; day-to-day observation in the classroom; groupwork.

Reading: Classwork; homework; projects; day-to-day observation; quizzes.

Writing: Classwork; homework; projects; day-to-day observation; groupwork; quizzes.

(Further tools/techniques, such as Portfolios, Self-Assessment and Giving Feedback to Students, can also be applied to all four language elements — see below, Section C.)

The information gathered in these various ways can be used for two main purposes:

Summative assessment is assessment of students' learning, with the aim of providing evidence for reporting to parents and others. Its purpose is to *measure* standards.

Formative assessment is assessment for learning, with the aim of helping students to achieve the relevant learning outcomes. Its purpose is to *improve* standards.

Both summative and formative assessment are important and valuable; neither should be neglected.

B. THE BENEFITS OF CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT

The most important ways in which Continuous Assessment (CA) can be beneficial are:

- It is based on a positive view of assessment as a natural part of the teaching-learning process;
- It allows assessment of learning outcomes (e.g. Speaking) which are, for practical reasons, difficult to assess by means of formal testing;
- It can provide a fairer, more balanced picture of students' attainment, especially for those who become nervous during formal tests;
- It provides information about students' learning at an *early* stage, making it possible for action to be taken promptly, while the school year is still in progress;
- It encourages teachers to get to know *all* of their students well and to closely observe individual students' on-going progress and development;
- It (possibly) motivates students to work hard consistently, if they know that their everyday work in class contributes to their report card assessment.

C. TOOLS & TECHNIQUES FOR CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT

This Section provides further information and explanation regarding the various tools and techniques which can be used for assessment purposes:

- i. Day-to-day Observation
- ii. Portfolios
- iii. Project Work
- iv. Classwork/ Homework
- v. Groupwork
- vi. Quizzes

- vii. Self-Assessment
- viii. Giving Feedback to Students

[Note: The importance of carrying out **both summative and formative assessment** has already been mentioned. All of the tools/ techniques listed above can be used for both purposes, *except for* the final two items, 'Self-Assessment' and 'Giving Feedback to Students', which clearly have a *formative*, rather than a summative, focus.]

(i) Day-to-day Observation

To 'observe' can be defined as 'to watch (and listen to) someone or something carefully'. In this case, the object of this close attention is *the student and his/her use of the English language*. However, this process involves more than simply **alertness**, i.e. keeping one's eyes and ears open and noticing what is going on. It also involves thinking about and trying to understand what has been observed.

This can only be done effectively if the observer *knows what he/she is looking for*. To achieve this kind of **awareness**, teachers need to have a clear understanding of, and be able to distinguish between, the various general and specific learning outcomes listed in Appendix One. They should also be fully familiar with the assessment criteria outlined in the Rating Scales to be found in Appendix Three.

Effective observation also involves two further qualities. **Objectivity** allows the teacher to see what is actually happening, and to make a fair assessment, without being influenced by pre-conceptions (whether positive or negative) about the student concerned. **Sensitivity** allows the teacher to handle this kind of assessment in a tactful, encouraging way, which gives students a fair chance to show what they can do.

Given the complex demands of teaching in the real-life classroom, it is advisable for teachers to make conscious use of **strategies** to assist them in obtaining assessment data by observation. For example, they can:

- Include, as a standard part of his/her lesson plans, a note of any potential opportunities for assessment during the lesson;
- Build pairwork/ groupwork activities into each lesson and observe students closely during these activities;
- Identify beforehand four or five students whose performance he/she is going to observe closely during the lesson;
- Focus particularly on students whose assessment data is so far either lacking, unclear or (for some reason) doubtful;
- Without making it too 'obvious', give opportunities to individual students or groups of students who are 'quiet' or 'not participating';
- Keep a notebook ready for brief, spontaneous notes on student performances which occur naturally as part of the lesson.

Teachers should use their common sense and professional judgement in deciding which strategies are the most effective in which circumstances.

IMPORTANT NOTE: The following three sections discuss various kinds of work done by students: i.e. Portfolios, Projects and Homework. In all these cases, teachers should make every effort to ensure that all this work has *genuinely* been done by the individual concerned. The simplest way to do this is to adopt a policy of **not accepting** any work which is not genuine. This policy should be made clear to students from the very start and then applied consistently.

One good reason for doing this is, of course, that any marks awarded for non-genuine work will be false, meaningless and unfair, and that this is likely to de-motivate all the honest students in the class. However, an even better reason concerns the dishonest student him/herself: if work is not genuinely attempted by the student, then he/she has no chance at all of actually *learning* anything or of making progress in achieving the learning outcomes.

(ii) Portfolios

- A portfolio is an on-going collection of work done by a particular student. It provides concrete evidence of a student's learning and of the type and level of work that he/she has done.
- It should contain a varied selection of work, which is representative of what the student has achieved. (**Note:** This may include non-paper items such as audio- or video-recordings.)
- All four elements (LST, SPK, RDG, WRT) should be systematically included.
- It is essential that the student is involved in deciding what goes into the portfolio. In this collaborative process, the teacher and the student discuss together which material should be selected for inclusion and why.
- The main container for the student's work will consist of a file, which can be designed and made by the student him/herself. There may, however, also be other items (e.g. posters and other larger display items) which will not fit into this format and will need to be stored in another more suitable location.
- The actual file used by the student can be very simple indeed. It should be remembered that it is the content of the file, not its external appearance, which is important. There is no need for parents to pay large amounts of money for 'fancy' or expensive files.
- At the end of the school year, the teacher should select a small sample of the work done by each student, which can be handed on to their next teacher. The student should then be given the rest of the portfolio to keep at home.
- Like any other language work done by the student, the contents of the portfolio can be used for assessment. Items selected for this purpose should reflect the student's level of achievement in the learning outcomes listed in Appendix One.
- Assessment should focus on the **quality of the language work done**. It is essential that the criteria to be used for assessing work are clearly established *beforehand* and shared with all the students. This provides a framework both for self-assessment by students and for feedback provided by the teacher [see below, (vii) and (viii)].

(iii) Project Work

What is a project? (General Definition)

- It is an activity which, within a given time-frame, aims at producing some *end-product*, e.g. a piece of writing, an oral performance, a poster, a collection of words and/or pictures, etc.
- It is generally *longer and more complex than the usual kind of classroom activity*, although at these grade-levels it is still likely to be very simple indeed.
- It is carried out *independently* by students, with the teacher playing only an advisory and supporting role, rather than a decision-making one.
- It *may* involve:
 - (a) the use of more than one of the main language skills;
 - (b) non-language skills, such as the ability to plan, to organise, to create, to solve problems;
 - (c) the collection of information and material from the outside environment.

Why? (The Benefits of Project Work)

Because projects:

- ...enable students to practise and extend their language skills for real purposes;
- ...incorporate students' previous knowledge and personal experience;
- ...provide a means of motivating students to think for themselves;
- ...provide a context for collaboration and shared learning;
- ...stimulate students' creativity and imagination;
- ...give students a sense of achievement and self-esteem by providing them with the opportunity to produce something which they can show to others.

How should a project be carried out? (Guidance on Implementation)

- Projects can be carried out by individuals or by small groups of students.
- The subject and title of a project should be chosen by the student(s).

- The scope of the project should be **realistic** in terms of:
 - (a) the language (and cognitive) level of the student(s);
 - (b) the amount of time required;
 - (c) the availability of the physical resources required;
 - (d) the cost of the physical resources required;
 - (e) the availability of English language material in the environment.
- The end-product of a project should be more substantial than a typical piece of classwork, but its size should be within certain limits.
- The teacher's role is:
 - (a) *before* the start of the project: to approve the student's choice of title/ subject and proposed working plan. (**Note:** In order to be approved, the project must, of course, allow for the use and development of the language skills and abilities listed in Appendix One, which are the intended learning outcomes of the course.)
 - (b) *during* the project: to provide encouragement, practical assistance and suggestions, where necessary.
 - (c) *after* the project: to assess the work done and give feedback.
- Meanwhile, in deciding on *how many* projects students should undertake, teachers should remember that they are also expected to do projects in *other* subjects.

How should project work be assessed? (Guidance on Assessment)

- Teachers should assess students' work in terms of the particular *elements and sub-elements* which feature prominently in the project concerned.
- Teachers should assess students *individually*. (If the small-group option has been chosen, a clear and specific role should have been assigned to each individual in advance.)
- Teachers should focus on the language **content** of the project, rather than on its external appearance. Written work should, of course, be presented legibly and neatly, but does not need to be typed with a word-processor, written on special paper or presented in an expensive file.

(iv) Classwork/ Homework

Classwork and homework can include a very wide range of language-learning activities and tasks. Their *primary* purpose is to *teach*, i.e. to help students to develop their English language skills, but they can also provide useful opportunities for teachers to assess students' progress in achieving the learning outcomes for Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing.

- *Classwork* can be used to assess any of the 'four skills', but it is of particular importance in the assessment of Speaking and Listening, as these are, for practical reasons, difficult for the teacher to assess outside the school context.
- For Speaking, therefore, teachers should ensure — through the tasks/activities they set, the type of questions they ask and the way they manage the classroom — that their students have sufficient opportunities to speak in class in a variety of ways.
- For Listening, it should be remembered that this does not only mean 'listening to the cassette', but also includes the ability to understand everyday spoken language used by the teacher and other students.

Homework is generally more suited to the assessment of Reading and Writing, although it can be used as a preparation for classroom activities which will involve Speaking and Listening.

(v) Groupwork

Classwork will often be organized in groups, with students working together on specified tasks or activities. Groupwork of this kind provides ideal opportunities for the teacher to observe and listen to students ***without being directly involved in the interaction***.

What is groupwork?

- Groupwork is defined as any activity in which a small number of learners ***interact with each other***, rather than with, or through, the teacher.

- This definition of groupwork does not include *whole-class activities*, but it does include **pairwork**.

Why is groupwork beneficial?

- Groupwork reduces the proportion of 'teacher talk' in the classroom and increases the proportion of 'student talk'. This is clearly of value in helping students to develop and improve their productive language skills.
- Groupwork makes it possible to assess learning outcomes (such as many of those listed under 'Two-way Speaking') which are difficult to assess unless students interact with each other.
- Groupwork involves students *actively* in the learning task, as they are not simply waiting to be addressed by the teacher.
- Groupwork encourages the development of learner independence, whereby students can begin to take more responsibility for their own learning.
- Students who are quiet or shy by nature, or whose pace of learning is slower, can benefit from the sharing of work and mutual support which groupwork can provide.
- Working with others and sharing responsibility for a task also provides the conditions for the development of a cooperative spirit and a sense of teamwork.

How should groupwork be carried out?

- If a group is to *interact* properly, it should not be too large, i.e. no more than six students.
[Note: Groups of this size sitting around the same table(s) can always be split up into smaller sub-groups to carry out interactive tasks.]
- Groups can be formed in many different ways, e.g. according to the type of activity, the composition of the class, the physical and spatial conditions of the classroom, etc.
- Although it is helpful to have moveable furniture and plenty of space, groupwork can still be carried out *even when conditions are not ideal*. For example, it is almost always possible to set up *pairwork* with the minimum disruptive movement of students.
- Groupwork requires good *classroom management* skills on the part of the teacher, particularly in the giving of instructions before the activity and the handling of feedback afterwards.
- After setting up a groupwork activity, the teacher should **monitor** carefully what is happening, and **intervene** as necessary, for example, when the task instructions are not being followed properly. However, it is also important that the teacher does not intervene *too much*.

(vi) Quizzes

- In Grades 1 to 4, there is no formal testing, but the teacher may wish to include short *quizzes* as one of the options for gathering assessment information.
- Quizzes are *usually* given to the whole class at the same time.
- Quizzes should be **short**, lasting no more than 10 minutes.
- Quizzes should be administered as part of normal classroom work.
- Quizzes can be given *with* or *without* advance warning, according to the circumstances and the discretion of the teacher.
- Each quiz should focus clearly on one particular element or sub-element or learning outcome.
- Quizzes are well suited to the assessment of Writing, Listening and Reading. For practical reasons, i.e. the amount of time involved, it is more difficult to assess Speaking by this method, but it can be used with particular individuals, if further information is required about those individuals' Speaking skills.
- Quizzes usually include some sort of written response from the student, but except in the case of Writing, this need not be in the form of actual *language* (letters, words or sentences). For example, in a Listening or Reading quiz, students may simply be asked to indicate a picture or put a tick or a cross.
- Quizzes should **not** be the main (and certainly not the only) technique of Continuous Assessment used by the teacher. If included, quizzes *must* be combined with a variety of other assessment techniques, such as daily observation, class-based activities, etc.

(vii) Self-Assessment

One of the central goals of education is that students gradually become autonomous learners, capable of deciding for themselves what they need to learn and how to learn it. In the English course materials, this autonomy is encouraged from a very early stage by the use of various **self-assessment activities** to be found at the end of each unit.

In these activities, students are asked to reflect on their learning experiences and to ask themselves some basic questions, such as:

- whether they found an activity easy or difficult
- whether they have enjoyed something (i.e. particular activities/ topics/ materials)
- how well they can now do something (i.e. their achievement of a particular learning outcome)
- how well they have performed during the unit as a whole (i.e. their overall progress)
- how they have approached particular tasks (i.e. their learning strategies)

These end-of-unit activities — followed by feedback/ discussion / action — help students to develop the 'habit' of self-assessment. However, if this 'habit' is to really catch on, the teacher needs to do more than this. On a regular, day-to-day basis in the classroom, he/she also should be **asking questions which require students to assess the quality of their own (or other students') work**.

This can be done after a task has been completed and (especially) while the work is still in progress. Typical questions might be: *'What do you think? Is that clear/ correct/ OK, etc?'* If the answer to any of these questions is: *"No/ Not really"*, then the teacher can ask questions like: *"What's wrong with it?", "How can you/he/she make it better?"*, etc, thus pointing the way to improvement.

- In this way, students will (hopefully) come to understand the basic 'criteria for success' with which they can assess their own work.
- They will also (hopefully) learn to appreciate that self-assessment/ self-monitoring is a natural and constant feature of any learning process — and, indeed, of *any* kind of worthwhile work or task that they will do in future.

Of course, the whole process of **self- and peer-assessment** will only work effectively if **the** teacher is able to create the right kind of *classroom atmosphere*, which encourages **openness and honesty**.

IMPORTANT NOTE: It can be seen from the above that the main purpose of self-assessment is **formative**, rather than summative. Self-assessment does not normally provide *summative* data to be used in marks, grades and reports.

(viii) Giving Feedback to Students

Like self-assessment, the giving of feedback to students is an essentially **formative** use of assessment. Providing students with useful feedback is, therefore, an essential part of the teaching-learning process.

However, this does not mean that teachers should give students feedback on *every* activity, performance or piece of work done. They will need to be selective, focusing on **quality** of feedback rather than quantity.

In order for a student to improve, he/she must:

- have an idea of the desired standard of performance,
- be able to compare the actual performance with the desired performance;
- take action to close the gap between the two.

Feedback therefore needs to give the student a clear idea of what to do in order to improve. It should be **specific**, **detailed** and **memorable** enough to achieve this aim.

When giving feedback on completed pieces of work, the use of simple grades ('C') or comments ('good') or marks ('7/10') alone is not sufficient. For example, if a student's hand-writing is difficult to read, a *general* comment about this is of very little use on its own. The student needs to know which *particular* letters are causing the most serious problems, and then to be given some specific suggestions as to ways of making those letters better-formed and more legible. It should also be remembered that even students who are doing very well indeed can benefit from useful feedback, so as to do *even better*.

Students also need to be able to monitor — and then improve — the quality of their work *while they are actually doing it*. So that they can do this, students should, *before* undertaking any task, be reminded of the main criteria for successful performance of that particular task.

- Depending on the circumstances, and the judgement of the teacher, feedback can be given either to individual students, or to groups of students, or to the whole class.
- It can be given either immediately or (a little) later.
- It can be given orally or, where appropriate, in writing.
- It can be given in English or, *where necessary*, in the student's own language.

Meanwhile, it should be remembered that *teachers* are not the *only* people in the classroom who can give feedback. Regular opportunities for students to give feedback *to each other* can produce interesting (and very communicative) classroom interaction, as well as helping them to develop their general awareness of language and of language learning.

D. INFORMAL RECORD-KEEPING

The official recording sheets to be found in Appendix Four are intended as a **formal** record of individual students' achievement in the language elements or sub-elements which are assessed. However, these formal records do not answer a very important question, which will be asked by students, parents, senior teachers, head teachers, supervisors and visiting moderators: i.e. **why** were these particular marks awarded?

Teachers need to be able to answer this question, in other words, to be able to **justify** the marks they have awarded. What is more, they need to be able to do this in a convincing way. This is why it is essential for teachers, not only to fill in the students' marks on the official sheets, but also to note down **additional, more detailed information** about each of their students.

In order to keep these INFORMAL NOTES as efficiently as possible, teachers should follow these guidelines:

- Use **a blank page (or empty box) for each student**.
- When writing down information, use **note form**, rather than complete sentences.
- Develop a set of **abbreviations**, symbols, etc, as a kind of 'private language' for use on this page/ in this box.
- Only note down **new information**, i.e. information which is not already contained in the formal record sheets or elsewhere.
- In your notes, be as **specific** as you can.
- Pay special attention to areas (such as Speaking) where actual **physical evidence** of a student's achievement may be **unavailable**.
- Make a particular note of information which may be **hard to remember**.
- **Include** the following kinds of entries:
 - Notes and comments on different features of a student's performance, either in general or in a particular element, sub-element or learning outcome.
 - Comments on the student's attitude and learning strategies.
 - References to documents, pieces of work, teacher's comments, etc, to be found *elsewhere* (e.g. in the student's portfolio, in the Skills Book, on display, etc).
 - Dates of important events or observations;
 - Relevant personal information and background notes on the student;

- Be **systematic** in managing your time, so that these notes are kept up-to-date for all students. Start early in the school year and check regularly to ensure that no individuals are being neglected.
- Be prepared to **show** your Informal Notes to supervisors, head teachers, etc, explaining their meaning as necessary. However, do not leave Informal Notes 'lying around' for everyone to see. (Some of the information or comments about individuals may be sensitive.)

These guidelines are intended to allow the teacher to collect **the maximum amount of useful information in the shortest possible time**. For the same reason, teachers are advised to concentrate their time and effort on making their 'Informal Notes' as complete, informative and useful as possible. They should, therefore, **not** create or fill in additional forms, sheets, charts, tables, grids, etc. These extra documents:

- involve a great deal of unnecessary and time-consuming paperwork;
- formalize what should be informal; and
- in some cases, actually contradict good assessment practice and the official procedures and guidelines.

The efficient and systematic keeping of Informal Notes takes time, but can also save time. If the relevant information is already 'at the teacher's fingertips', it becomes much easier for him/her to carry out important professional tasks such as:

- making decisions on awarding marks;
- writing descriptive reports;
- preparing for meetings with supervisors and parents, etc. In addition, well-kept

Informal Notes can also be used formatively, providing a useful basis for:

- remedial plans for individual students
- planning and preparation of whole-class teaching
- 'feedback conferences' with individual students or small groups.

E. INFORMAL MODERATION

The purpose of moderation is to ensure that assessment criteria are being applied fairly and consistently at different schools and in different places across the country.

In Grades 1 to 4, **informal** moderation is to be carried out, as a process of on-going consultation and teacher-development. This process is mostly conducted at a local level, with teachers coming together to compare notes and discuss students' work. The purpose is to arrive at a shared understanding of the criteria used for assessing the work and awarding different marks or grades. Some possible examples of Informal Moderation activities are:

1. Two teachers talk together informally about work done by their students, comparing, evaluating and commenting.
2. Two teachers agree to visit each other's classes and contribute to the assessment of students' performance in Speaking activities.
3. All the English teachers in a school get together for a moderation workshop, at which they discuss and agree on appropriate marks for a varied collection of samples of students' Writing.
4. The same as Activity 3, but in two or more schools within easy reach of each other, i.e. a 'local cluster'.
5. Compile a collection of 'exemplars' of student Writing which have already been 'moderated' (i.e. discussed and awarded an agreed mark with comments and explanations). Make this file available for teachers to consult.

6. All the English teachers in a school get together for a workshop on 'borderline cases', i.e. cases where it is difficult to decide on the correct mark (e.g. Is it a '3' or a '4'?) At this workshop, teachers, in turn, describe (in as much detail as possible) particular students who they find difficult to assess in any element or sub-element. Other teachers ask follow-up questions, discuss the case further and suggest marks.
7. Just before the end-of-year reports, the Senior Teacher or Supervisor sits down with a teacher, looks at the CAR-Chart and, selects some of the marks and asks the teacher why they have awarded that particular mark. The teacher justifies his/her mark, referring to Rating Scales, Informal Records, portfolios and other relevant documents.
8. Same as Activity 7, but done earlier in the year, when the marks are still provisional and in pencil.
9. Make audio- or video-recordings of various Speaking performances by students. Use these recordings as raw material for a moderation workshop (as in Activity 3 or 4).

Some of these activities can be initiated very informally by teachers; others require action by a Senior Teacher (with support from the school principal); others require some kind of more official action by Supervisors. Concerning this list, two particular points should be noted:

- (a) Every activity involves teachers getting together to talk about students' work and the criteria for assessing that work; and
- (b) It is *always* possible, whatever the circumstances, to do *something*, whatever the local circumstances.

Informal moderation also focuses on developing teachers' awareness of the kinds of **evidence** which can show that the Continuous Assessment marks which they are awarding are, broadly speaking, fair and accurate, and in line with national standards.

In the case of English, there are two main types of evidence regarding student learning. The first type consists of **records** made by the teacher during the school year:

- Formal record sheets (i.e. Assessment Summary Sheets) for all classes.
- Informal Notes made about the progress of individual students, in particular about their performance in Speaking . (See above, Section D)

The second type of evidence consists of **examples of work** done by individual students:

- Writing: Examples of different kinds of Writing done by individual students.
- Reading: Written responses to classroom reading tasks, including quizzes.
- Listening: Written responses to classroom listening tasks, including quizzes.
- Speaking: Audio- or video-recordings of individual students speaking (either 'one-way' or 'two-way').

These records and concrete examples of student work can provide the basis for discussion and comparison, with the aim of ensuring the accuracy, consistency and fairness of teachers' assessments.
