

Formative Assessments for English Language Learners

Anthony Devine

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Point Loma Nazarene University

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Abstract

There is a large amount of research that supports the idea that formative assessments help low-performing students achieve learning goals. However, there is less research on formative assessments helping English Language Learners achieve learning goals. This study seeks to determine if formative assessments can achieve beneficial results among ELLs. The problem I am trying to solve is that traditionally at my school ELLs have not been involved in the Benchmark Assessment process. My ELD team needed to begin having our students involved in this process as a way to raise our expectations of them. However, we needed to make sure we gave our students the tools they needed to be successful. This is when our team decided to try using formative assessments. We gave our students short writing assessments along with quick feedback and had students track their learning progress based on a rubric. Our findings concluded that our students' writing ability improved because they participated in the formative assessment process.

The implications of the results of this study are that our ELLs are capable of achieving higher academic learning goals than we have traditionally held them to. Instead of having our ELLs spend years in workbook-like curriculum we need to challenge them with high expectations while providing them with tools, such as formative assessments, to facilitate their success.

Introduction

Assessment is becoming more and more prevalent in education. It is not going anywhere. The way I see it, instead of fighting against assessment, teachers should focus on discovering ways to use assessment to reach learning goals. Our aim is to help our students learn. There is no reason why we can't harmonize assessment and learning in our teaching practices.

I am very interested in this subject because of the implications that assessment has on my student population. I teach English Language Learners (ELL). My students do not have the strong foundation in English that native English speakers have. Still, ELL students are required to pass all of the same assessments as their native English-speaking counterparts. I am not interested in arguing against this practice. I believe that all students should be held to high standards. However, I believe that students should be provided with quality instruction to help them reach those high standards. I am interested in discovering a tool that will improve my students' ability to express what they have learned. My hope is that formative assessments will help my ELL students improve their writing ability to the point of being able to compete with the writing ability of native English-speakers. Until they are able to compete this way, my overarching goal is improvement—constant improvement. I also want my students to be able to see their own improvement. I think that when students are able to see the growth they have made with a learning objective they will become empowered and maybe even transfer that feeling of empowerment to other areas of academics.

Area of Focus

The general area that this paper studies is assessment. Teachers understand that assessment is a vital part of the education process. Without assessment of some kind it is nearly impossible to determine if students have mastered the material and if students are ready to move on to the next level of instruction. However, teachers must avoid assessment for assessments' sake. The point of assessment is to inform instruction, thereby helping students learn material more effectively and at a higher level.

Unfortunately, not all assessments are created equally. The kind of assessment a teacher decides to use will vary based on the goals he or she has in mind. An assessment meant to determine a student's writing proficiency given at the mid point of a grading term has a different purpose than an assessment given at the end of a grading period meant to determine a student's vocabulary knowledge. One could suggest that the purpose of the vocabulary assessment mentioned here is primarily for determining what score a student should have in the vocabulary section of his or her grade. Conversely, the writing assessment mentioned here was given at the mid point of a grading period. This assessment, while it certainly will also influence a student's grade, will help the teacher and the student understand the student's current writing ability. Based on that information, the teacher will be able to help the student improve his or her writing ability before the end of the grading period. The vocabulary test, on the other hand, is final. There will be no additional learning opportunities after that test.

The frequency of assessments also determines their purpose and how they are used. Often, students are given one assessment on a subject and they will rarely revisit that subject again. The teacher "moves on" to tackle the next item on the curriculum's

agenda. This sort of assessment has value as a measuring tool, but it leaves much to be desired as a learning tool. Shorter, more frequent assessments on the same subject given over a period of time, however, can be very valuable as a measuring tool and as a learning tool.

In order to use assessments as a measuring tool my English Language Development (ELD) Professional Learning Community (PLC) is going to use formative assessment to increase student learning. Specifically, we will focus on preparing out students for standardized written assessments. Our district has already made an attempt to use formative assessments to prepare students for the written portion of the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). This assessment is given four times per year whereas students traditionally take the CAHSEE once per year (more for students who do not pass it the first time). Until recently, English Language Learners (ELL) have been left out of this process. As an ELD PLC, we decided to rectify this situation by having our students participate in a quarterly writing assessment also. However, we did not think that quarterly assessments were enough. Our students needed more preparation and more feedback than quarterly assessments could provide. This is when we decided to increase the frequency of our written assessments.

This high frequency of assessments will take place among all levels of English Language Development courses, however the focus of this study will be on my own Advanced ELD students. Advanced ELD students have the greatest chance of passing the CAHSEE because of their superior English proficiency (compared to other levels of ELD) and their experience with standardized testing practices here in the United States. Further, many Advanced ELD students are nearing the end of their high school careers. It

is very important, therefore, that they be given the chance to pass the CAHSEE before they leave high school.

The purpose of this study is to determine if the formative assessment procedures we have implemented benefited Advanced ELD students. This study will compare the Advanced EL students' performance on the Narrative Benchmark Assessment last year to Advanced ELD performance on the same test this year. Beyond that purpose, this study hopes to discover practical, effective assessment devices that help English Language Development students learn and thrive in an environment of high expectations. If formative assessments prove to be useful for this purpose, our ELD PLC plans on refining our formative assessment practices and our writing instruction based on the results of this study. Our goal is that our teachers eventually develop a system that provides our students with a situation where they can focus all of their energy on improving their writing. We don't want to do anything that will waste valuable class time, so everything we do will need to have learning as its foundational impetus. Formative assessments lend themselves to this purpose because with frequent assessments we can frequently shift instructional focus in order to give priority to the elements of writing that most need to be addressed.

Research Questions

- 1) What is the impact of formative assessments on Advanced ELD students' narrative writing performance?
- 2) To what degree do formative assessments improve or deteriorate Advanced ELD students' performance on benchmark writing assessments?

Literature Review

Summative Assessment vs. Formative Assessment

Assessment can be divided into two major categories: formative and summative. Summative assessments are well known in education today. Essays, chapter tests, mid-term exams, and final exams are all examples of summative assessments. Summative assessments are administered after learning opportunities—the point of summative assessments being to show teachers and other adults how much students learned.

Formative assessments, on the other hand, are less commonly used in their most powerful form. Formative assessments are administered continuously during learning opportunities. That is to say that after a formative assessment there are still opportunities to learn and improve in order to reach a learning goal. The formative assessment is a guide letting students and teachers know how close students are to their learning goals and what the next step should be in helping students reach them. The main distinction, then, between these two forms of assessment is summative assessment is “assessment **of** learning” and formative assessment is “assessment **for** learning” (Jones, 2006, p. 1).

There is a place for summative assessment, but students must be more involved in the assessment process in order to increase learning. Summative assessments do not, in themselves, provide students with opportunities to learn from the information they received from the assessments. This is especially true if the teacher provided little or no information other than a percentage correct and a letter grade. Further, if the goal of assessment is to indicate student learning, many assessment experts “agree that numerous short assessments given over a period of time provide a better indication of a student’s learning than one or two large assessments given in the middle and at the end of the

grading period” (Ainsworth, 2007, p. 80). The results of some summative assessments—such as state administered standardized tests—take months to get back to the student. Further, these tests compare students to one another rather than their own individual learning progress (Ainsworth, 2007). What can an individual student learn from this assessment process? The adults in the education process learn what students know and make decisions about teaching practices, curriculum, supplemental educational programs, and so on—but what do the *students* learn?

This is the thought process that causes many who are concerned about education to see assessment as a punitive force that is detached from the learning process. This thought process is often the precursor to disparaging utterances such as *teaching to the test* and *assess and punish*. The reason that assessments are seen this way is because it is difficult to see the connection between something as mundane as a standardized, fill-in-the-bubble multiple choice test and the profound dynamics of what happens in the human mind when it learns something. What we need to do is embrace an assessment process that can help make the connection between assessments and the learning process more clear.

The role of assessment that we need to pay more attention to is its potential as a learning tool. As Stiggins (2007) suggests, we need to ask ourselves: How can we use assessments to cause our students to learn more?

The answer is we need to truly use assessment to drive our teaching. Of course, this model is hammered in to teachers during credential programs and staff development programs, but there still seems to be a misconception about using assessment to drive teaching. When we think of assessment our mind too often goes directly to the

summative assessment. And frankly, the summative assessment does not lend itself toward the “assessment driving instruction” model. Once the summative assessment is completed teachers often move on to the next learning goal—perhaps with the idea of using this year’s summative assessment data to influence next year’s instruction. This means that there is an amazing lag time between the assessment and its effect on instruction. When a teacher does decide to use summative assessment data to influence instruction, the benefit will be given to future students instead of the current students whose level of learning the assessment actually measured. In addition, the feedback provided to students from the summative assessment is nearly powerless. What can a student learn from such an assessment? *Perhaps I’ll try harder next year when we are dealing with this learning goal again.* In order for assessment feedback to have power it must be provided to students and teachers in a timely manner. This timely feedback is essential for students “so that they can identify for themselves what they already know and what they have yet to learn” (Ainsworth, 2007, p. 96). Teachers need timely feedback about students’ current level of understanding in order to help students maximize their potential before the summative assessment (Ainsworth, 2007). The tool teachers and students use to do this is formative assessment and it requires a shift in the teacher’s role as the assessor of student knowledge and ability.

The Logistics of Formative Assessment

The teacher’s role in formative assessments changes from the model provided by summative assessments. With summative assessments the teacher’s job is to design and implement quality assessments that are able to produce data that reflects what students have learned (Stiggins, 2007). With formative assessments teachers are charged with

working with students from the beginning to develop learning goals based on power-standards expressed in student-friendly language (Stiggins, 2007). Ainsworth (2007) summarizes power standards as those standards that are “critical for student success in school, in life, and on all high-stakes tests” (p. 87). Power standards are not the only standards that need to be taught, however when prioritizing standards there are some that are more critical than others and those high priority standards should be the focus of systematic formative assessment (Ainsworth, 2007). For many just starting to create formative assessments based on power standards, it is a good idea to begin with the standards that predominantly appear on standardized tests.

After identifying power-standards and creating short-term learning goals based on student needs, teachers administer several short assessments during the learning process to work with students to track their learning progress (Stiggins, 2007). This requires a partnership between students and teachers. The teacher must provide students with timely feedback that show students how to improve and guide students in recording their learning progress (Marzano, 2007). This timely feedback helps students recognize their learning accomplishments and reinforces their effort (Marzano, 2007). “Reinforcing effort means that students see a direct link between how hard they try at a particular task and their success at that task” (Marzano, 2007, p. 14). When students keep track of their learning progress and the feedback they get from their teachers they can use that information to step closer to their learning goal. Instead of having an assessment situation where there are “winners and losers,” Stiggins’ (2007) analogy for this is using “assessment as a road map to ultimate success, with signposts along the way for both students and their teachers” (p. 72). Think of each formative assessment as a signpost that

students and teachers can use to direct themselves toward a common destination (i.e., their learning goal). It is easy to see why timely feedback is important. Imagine you are trying to drive somewhere and your GPS navigator tells you, “You should have turned left about 50 miles ago.” What good is that kind of feedback?

Expanding on the implications of the road map analogy, formative assessments can be used to predict and create success on larger summative assessments.

Administrators and teachers can use formative assessment data to determine how long it will take and what instructional changes need to take place to get students to arrive at a particular learning goal. Above I mentioned the need to create a link between summative tests (like standardized state tests) and the learning process. Formative assessment provides that link. One important thing to understand about formative assessment is that it is not meant to be confined to the classroom. Although the teacher-student dynamic is key for its success, its value as a measurement of prediction can help educators prepare students for high-stakes assessments. As Ainsworth (2007) states, “[k]nowing—in advance—what the students will need to know and be able to do on the summative assessment will most definitely impact instruction” (p. 83). If teachers know what students do and do not know before taking a high-stakes test then the teachers can better prepare students. But instead of relying on last year’s standardized test to measure students’ current learning needs, it is better to administer shorter, more frequent tests (formative assessments).

The Power of Formative Assessment

Whatever opinion educators, students, parents, and politicians have about standardized tests, we can agree that they are designed to assess students’ mastery of

content standards. Very simply, content standards have been adopted and tests are aligned to them. Much of the frustration brought about by standardized tests comes from the fact that the alignment has not always extended in to the classroom. However, this is changing. We can see evidence of this from many districts adopting “Benchmark Assessments.” My own district (Grossmont Unified High School District) has created a benchmark process to help students prepare for the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE). Particularly, the benchmark assessment is designed to prepare students for the written portion of the exam. Several times per year students across the district practice responding to a prompt following a classic multi-paragraph model (introduction, body, and conclusion). Teachers grade these benchmark essays using a four-point rubric in the areas of content, grammar, and organization. Educators and administrators use this assessment to predict student performance on the CAHSEE and to better prepare students for the assessment. In this case, the benchmark assessment is a kind of formative assessment because it is being used to gauge student progress toward a learning goal. Teachers can use the information from the benchmark assessment to guide their instruction before the next benchmark. This is an example of the assessment alignment extending from the state level to the district level, but the alignment needs to extend further in order to fully realize the connection between learning in the classroom to standardized tests. The next step, as Ainsworth (2007) argues, is “[d]eliberately matching in-school formative assessments to district benchmark assessments” (p. 84). The power of formative assessments is fully realized when the classroom formative assessments are aligned to the district-level benchmark assessments, which are in turn aligned to state standards and standardized tests (Ainsworth, 2007). Do not mistake all of

this alignment as *teaching to the test*. The goal of formative assessment is to increase student learning. The alignment process is a way to realize a link between standardized tests and student learning.

The Emotional Effects of Assessment

When considering the topic of assessment we must also take in to account the emotions that are involved with it. Often, low performing students view assessments as instruments of punishment, which are to be avoided. This view of assessments comes from the lack of control that students have over the assessment process. In order for assessment to be effective, we must provide students with more control over the assessment process (Stiggins, 2007). When we give more control over assessments to students it helps “students advance their learning with enthusiasm and feel in control of their learning as they attain new levels of proficiency” (Stiggins, 2007, p.69). Stiggins (2007) goes on to argue that when students have this kind of control over their own learning they become more optimistic that they will learn. Emotions play an important role in the learning process as the key factor of motivation. When students feel in control and optimistic about their ability to learn, they will be motivated to learn. Further, as students track their success at learning progress (a vital component of formative assessments), that success “becomes its own [motivation], promoting confidence and persistence” (Stiggins, 2007, p. 72). Rather than having the threat of a bad grade as the student’s motivation to learn, the motivation comes from the belief that they can learn. And students can hold fast to that belief because the student has proof in the form of tracked progress toward learning goals. Also, Marzano (2007) emphasizes the importance of celebrating student success. After students have demonstrated learning through the

formative assessment process it is vital that the progress achieved is recognized and celebrated. This will further increase students' motivation to learn when they see that their learning progress can be measured and quantified—it gives students the opportunity to take pride in the effort they have exerted and the success they achieved.

In summary, formative assessments help teachers give students power over and ownership of the learning process. “We do this when we help them learn to improve the quality of their work one key attribute at a time, when we help them learn to see and keep track of changes in their own capabilities, and when we help them reflect on the relationship between those improvements and their own actions” (Stiggins, 2007, p. 75). Formative assessments do work to improve student learning when they are implemented properly.

Methodology

Introduction

During the 2007-2008 school year the English Language Development (ELD) Professional Learning Community (PLC) at El Cajon Valley High School decided to have their English Language Learners (ELL) participate in a benchmark writing process. The motivation behind this decision was that the expectations of English Language Learners in ELD classes should be aligned, as often as possible, with the expectations of native English speakers. In the Grossmont Unified High School District, most students participate in a benchmark assessment that helps to improve their writing and prepare them for the essay portion of the California High School Exit Exam. Until the 2007-2008 school year, the English Language Development courses at El Cajon Valley High School did not have its ELL students participate in a benchmark assessment (even though ELL students still have to take all portions of the CAHSEE, just like all other students). In the spirit of remedying this disparity in expectation and preparation, the ELD PLC began to give its ELL a benchmark writing assessment. The PLC was able to implement one benchmark assessment toward the end of the 207-2008 school year. Although I was not a member of the ELD PLC at the time, I did participate in the scoring of this benchmark.

Beginning in August of 2008 I became a member of the ELD PLC. One of the concerns of our PLC was that while we were proud that we began challenging our ELL students with the benchmark writing assessment, the role of assessment should be improved. As it so happened, our team had assigned itself portions of Marzano's (2007) *The Art and Science of Teaching*. When we read the portions of the book concerning formative assessments we all decided that we wanted to use formative assessments to

prepare our students for the benchmark writing assessment. One of the PLC's concerns about the 2007-2008 benchmark assessment was that before the benchmark assessment students only had one practice test—which happened the week before the benchmark. We decided that students would benefit and learn more from having more practice before having to take the benchmark assessment. We felt like we were moving in the right direction by implementing this kind of a benchmark; we just thought that the benchmark could be better. Thus, we decided to use a formative assessment model, as Marzano (2007) described it, to help our students improve their writing. Before moving on, I must clarify the basic similarity and difference between our formative assessments and the benchmark assessment. By definition, the benchmark is in itself a kind of formative assessment in that it is designed to help predict and improve student performance on standardized state writing tests (like that found on the CAHSEE). However, our ELD classes are considering the benchmark assessment as a summative assessment—as far as our class is concerned. We are thinking of it in this way because the benchmark assessments are meant to take place four times per school year. As a true formative assessment, the benchmark assessment lacks adequate frequency. It acts more like a summative assessment. Now, from the district's point of view, four tests per year may be useful as they consider district-wide initiatives. But for our ELD classrooms at El Cajon Valley High School, benchmark assessments are more summative. Benchmark scores are even recorded in the "Summative Assessments" grading category in all English classes at El Cajon Valley High School. This explanation is meant to clarify any ambiguity between the terms Benchmark Assessment and Formative Assessment as they occur in this paper.

Population and Sample

Although this methodology approaches uniformity across all levels of our PLC's ELD classes, this research will focus on Advanced ELD students. Our ELD classes are divided in to four levels: Beginning, High Beginning, Intermediate, and Advanced. ELL students are placed in one of the above levels based on initial and ongoing assessments, past performance in other ELD courses, and ELD teacher recommendations. After ELL students successfully complete the ELD program or test out of it they can move on to traditional English courses (English 1 through English 8). Therefore, one could suggest that my Advanced ELD course serves as a bridge between ELD classes and traditional English courses.

My portion of this research includes 50 students divided between two classes. There are 15 students whose native language is Spanish. A majority of my students, 33, have Arabic and Chaldean as their native language. The other two native languages in my classes are Albanian and Kurdish. Most of my Spanish-speaking students have been in the United States for more than 3 years. However, most of my Arabic and Chaldean speaking students have been in the United States for less than 3 years. My Spanish-speaking students come primarily from Mexico and one hails from Puerto Rico. All but a handful of my Arabic and Chaldean students come from Iraq, often by way of Turkey and Jordan. As one could imagine, the primary impetus driving my Iraqi students to the US is the war in Iraq. Many of my Iraqi students have lost close family members due to the war.

Data Collection Procedures

The change that this paper will measure concerns the difference between the Narrative Writing Benchmark scores of the 2007-2008 school year and those of the 2008-2009 school year. During the 2007-2008 school year students took the Narrative Benchmark Assessment after taking only one practice assessment, which occurred one week before the Benchmark Assessment. The Narrative Writing Benchmark Assessment during the 2008-2009 school year will be administered after five additional weeks of formative assessments. The ELD PLC at El Cajon Valley High School will implement a formative assessment plan based on Marzano's (2007) explanation of the learning strategy. This means that students will take a practice assessment each week for five weeks. Within four to six days, and always before the next formative assessment, I will provide the students with their scores and feedback concerning their performance on the formative assessment. This feedback will be provided on the Advanced ELD Narrative Rubric (see Figure 1-M). In order to give these formative assessments more focus, and facilitate rapid response on the part of teachers, the ELD PLC decided that students would only be given feedback based on the Content section of the rubric. The way I will do this is by stapling a copy of only the Content section of the rubric to each student's essay.

Figure 1-M

Rubric for Narrative Essay, El Cajon Valley High School, *Advanced* ELD

	1 Below Standard	2 Approaching Standard	3 Meets Standard	4 Exceeds Standard	Score
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Does not use sensory details ___ Inappropriate sense of audience and tone ___ Vaguely addresses only one part of the prompt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Limited use of sensory details ___ Demonstrates little sense of audience and tone ___ Addresses only parts of the prompt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Uses sensory details, dialogue, anecdotes, interior monologue, or other writing devices throughout ___ Demonstrates a general sense of audience and uses appropriate tone ___ Addresses ALL parts of the prompt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Skillfully uses sensory details, dialogue, anecdotes, interior monologue, or other writing devices throughout ___ Effectively addresses audience and uses appropriate tone ___ Effectively addresses and shows insight to ALL parts of the prompt 	
Organization & Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ No introductory paragraph ___ Weak thesis, if any ___ Topic sentence(s) not evident ___ Ideas unsupported by lack of details and/or examples ___ Concluding sentence(s) not evident ___ Does not use chronological order ___ No concluding paragraph 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Weak or unfocused introductory paragraph is unfocused ___ Thesis is unfocused ___ Topic sentence(s) unfocused ___ Some support of thesis with limited details and/or examples ___ Concluding sentence(s) ineffective ___ Inconsistent use of chronological order ___ Weak conclusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Focused introductory paragraph ___ Thesis addresses the prompt ___ Topic sentence(s) in body paragraph support the thesis ___ Details and/or examples support thesis and topic sentence(s) ___ Concluding sentence(s) evident ___ Maintains chronological order ___ Conclusion summarizes the main points 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Introduction draws the reader into focus ___ Thesis addresses the prompt with a distinctive perspective ___ Topic sentence(s) support the thesis and add(s) complexity ___ Details and/or examples support thesis and topic sentence(s) effectively ___ Concluding sentence(s) use transitions effectively ___ Maintains chronological order while using literary devices such as flashback and foreshadowing ___ Conclusion summarizes the significance 	
Language Conventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Incomplete sentences ___ Repetitive sentence forms ___ Does not use correct verb tense and subject-verb agreement ___ Mostly incorrect grammar usage ___ Mostly incorrect punctuation ___ Mostly incorrect spelling of grade level words ___ Errors interfere with understanding the essay 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Inconsistent use of complete sentences (some fragments and run-ons) ___ Limited sentence forms ___ Inconsistent verb tense and subject-verb agreement ___ Inconsistent grammar usage ___ Inconsistent punctuation ___ Inconsistent spelling ___ Errors may cause distraction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Mostly complete sentences ___ Uses some variety of sentence forms ___ Mostly consistent verb tense and subject-verb agreement ___ Mostly correct grammar usage ___ Mostly correct punctuation ___ Spells majority of grade level words correctly ___ Errors do not interfere with understanding the essay 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Mostly complete sentences ___ Consistently uses a wide variety of sentence forms ___ Consistent verb tense and subject-verb agreement ___ Minor errors in grammar usage ___ Minor errors in punctuation ___ Takes risks spelling and using above grade level words ___ Minimal errors 	
TOTAL SCORE	<p style="text-align: center;">Below Standard 3 = F (30%) 4 = F (40%)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Approaching Standard 5 = C- (72%) 6 = C (75%) 7 = C+ (78%)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Meets Standard 8 = B- (82%) 9 = B (85%) 10 = B+ (88%)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Exceeds Standard 11 = A- (92%) 12 = A (95%)</p>	

02/25/08

Instrumentation

As stated above, there are four levels of ELD. For the purposes of this learning goal (writing a narrative essay) the ELD PLC developed a unique rubric for each level of English proficiency. The Advanced ELD Narrative Rubric used during the 2008-2009 school year is the same rubric that was used during the 2007-2008 school year. This rubric is a four-point rubric. A score of one is below the standard for content; a score of two is approaching the standard for content; a score of three is meeting the standard for content; a score of four is exceeding the standard for content. The attributes for each score are illustrated on the rubric (Figure 1-M).

An additional tool to collect and track data is the Narrative Essay Student Progress Chart (see Figure 2-M), which the ELD PLC designed based on a sample provided by Marzano (2007).

Figure 2-M

Narrative Essay Student Progress Chart

Name: _____ Class _____ Period _____

Learning Goal _____

My score at the beginning: _____

Explanation: _____

My goal is to reach: _____ by: _____

Specific things I am going to do to improve: _____

Chart Representing Progress

4					
3					
2					
1					
0	a	b	c	d	e

a. Date: _____ Explanation: _____

b. Date: _____ Explanation: _____

c. Date: _____ Explanation: _____

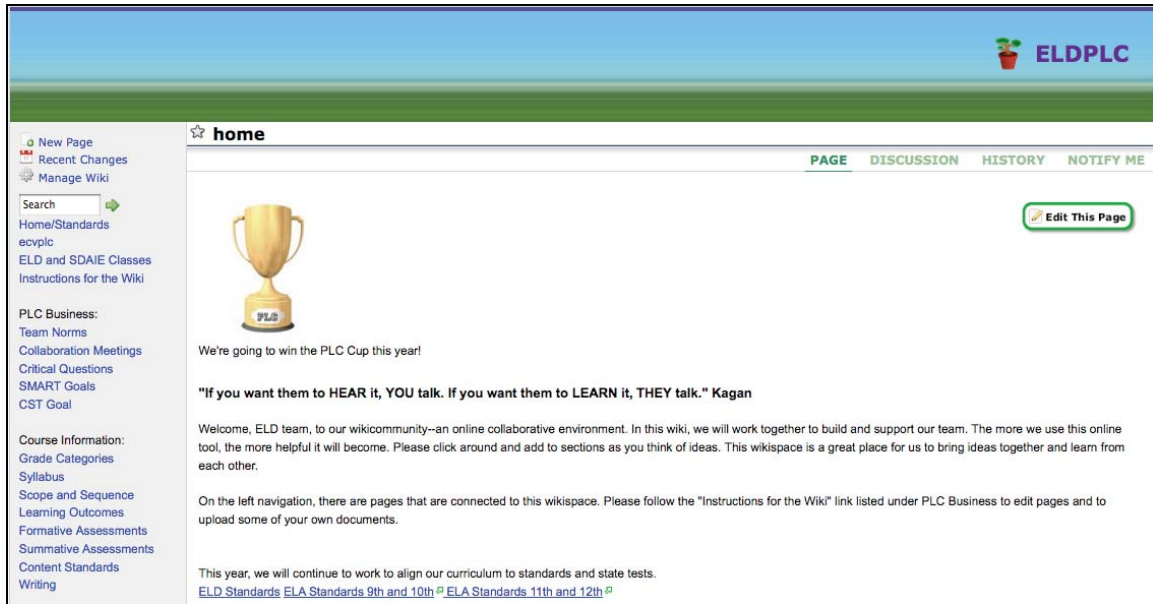
d. Date: _____ Explanation: _____

e. Date: _____ Explanation: _____

Part of the implementation of formative assessments is that students must be cognizant of their ongoing learning progress. Therefore, students will keep track their own individual learning progress using the Narrative Essay Student Progress Chart. When a student receives his/her score on the formative assessment he/she will record that score on the personally maintained progress chart. Beyond charting the score, students also need to complete the “Explanation” portion of the chart, which requires students to think about why they received their score. This tool is designed to help students track their learning progress as well as reflect on their performance.

Finally, the ELD PLC will be using an online collaboration tool to record and share our data. Our PLC has developed a web page (see Figure 3-M) through a web site called Wikispaces.com:

Figure 3-M



Our PLC prides itself on its high level of collaboration and this online tool allows us to increase our collaborative abilities because we are able to share ideas and information through our web page without having to find the time to meet in person. Of course, we still have our PLC meetings every week, but this online tool allows us to have additional collaborative contact. We will use this online tool to post our students' average scores each week (see Figure 4-M) and share lessons (including sharing files such as PowerPoint presentations). Additionally, we will use this tool to post our weekly formative narrative assessment writing prompts (see Figure 5-M). Members of the ELD PLC will take turns developing prompts and uploading the files to the ELD PLC web page.

Figure 4-M

Narrative Formative Assessment Results

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ELD Results	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
Kipp	1.0	1.6	1.7	2.0	2.3
Lucero	1.2	1.4	1.8	2.2	
Jacoub	1.6	2.2	2.6	2.0	2.3
Sagapolutele	1.5	1.7	2.0	2.2	1.8
Bethe	2.6	2.8	2.8	3.1	2.6
Devine	1.3	1.8	2.8	2.8	2.7

Reading	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
Devine	1.1	1.7	1.8	2.7	2.4
Gross	1.5	1.9	1.9	1.7	2.1
Harris	1.3	1.1	1.7	2.0	2.2

CAHSEE Prep	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
Jacoub	1.3	1.8	2.0	2.8	2.6
Bartell	1.6	1.5	1.9	2.5	2.3

Figure 5-M

Narrative Formative Assessments

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The same prompt will be used for all levels of ELD, Reading, and CAHSEE Prep

Week 1 Prompt:	Week 1 Narrative Paragraph	
ELD Prompt Week 1.doc	My first day at ECVHS.doc	
Week 2 Prompt:	Week 2 Narrative Paragraph	
ELD Prompt Week 2.doc	My best family gathering.doc	
Week 3 Prompt:	Week 3 Narrative Paragraph	Week 3 Narrative Paragraph Key
ELD Prompt Week 3.doc	Halloween.doc	SpookiestKey.pdf
Week 4 Prompt:	Week 4 Narrative Paragraph	Week 4 Narrative Paragraph Key
ELD Prompt Week 4.doc	Day at the Zoo.doc	Zoo Key.pdf
Week 5 Prompt:	Week 5 Narrative Paragraph	Week 5 Narrative Paragraph Key:
ELD Prompt Week 5-1.doc	Doctor/Visit.doc	DoctorKey.pdf
Week 6 Prompt:	Week 6 Narrative Paragraph	

Rubrics

- [Student Progress Chart.doc](#)
- [Learning Outcomes](#)
- [Formative Narrative Assessment Grading](#)
- [Narrative Formative Assessment Results](#)

Weekly Steps:

1. Direct instruction: narrative content, organization and focus, grammar and mechanics. Provide students with rubric information.
2. Practice and feedback
3. Provide models
4. Weekly formative assessments: Students will respond to the writing prompt in ELD on Thursdays and Mark the text in Reading or CAHSEE Prep on Fridays.
5. Grade formative assessments before Monday
6. Students will chart their progress and reflect on their goal every Monday

Analysis of Data

ELD teachers will maintain a progress chart to keep track of their own students' learning progress. Each week, ELD teachers will find their students' average score and record it. This is done by adding the point value of all of the formative assessments for the week and dividing that number by the number of formative assessments that are graded. In brief, as each student keeps track of his/her personal learning progress, the ELD teachers will week track of their students learning progress—as a whole. ELD teachers will end up with a score between one and four each week. This process for teachers will become a data analysis exercise. After the teacher scores the formative narrative assessments and records the average score each week, the teacher will reflect on the past week's narrative instruction as well as any misconceptions the formative assessments demonstrate and use that information to guide the following week's instruction. I speak of this process in the third person because it is the process that all ELD PLC members agreed to implement, not just me. This process of scoring, recording, and reflecting will repeat each week for five weeks until it is time for the Narrative Benchmark Assessment.

When it comes time to score the Narrative Benchmark Assessment all ELD teachers will take part in a Pull Out Day in which we will score essays all day. Each ELD teacher will provide the rest of the ELD PLC with sample anchor papers, which are meant to represent the below standard, approaching standard, and meets standard criteria according to the rubric. The PLC will then score the anchor papers and each teacher will share the score he/she gave the papers. The point of this process is to ensure that we are all grading the essays in the same way. If there are any significant disparities between

scores, the teachers will take time to explain their reasoning behind the scores they came up with. This process does take time, but it is an important part of the scoring process to ensure that the scoring process is standardized. It is also important to note that ELD teachers will not score Benchmark Assessments from their own students, even though he/she has been scoring the formative assessments. This will be done to ensure that teachers do not take in to account any past performance or other factors when scoring essays. The scoring of the Benchmark Assessment is meant to be entirely objective.

After the formative assessments and after the Benchmark Assessment, I will compare the Advanced ELD Narrative Benchmark Writing scores from the 2007-2008 school year to those of the 2008-2009 school year. I want to see if the formative assessments had an impact on the Benchmark results. I will use this comparison, as well as my reflection on the formative assessment process as I implemented it, to modify instruction in order to benefit my current students. After this first round of narrative formative assessments we plan on continuing in this vein by doing another round of formative assessments with expository writing. Our PLC hopes this process will help us help our students learn the writing skills that they need to succeed academically.

Limitations of the Study

The focus of this paper is to investigate the difference between the Narrative Benchmark Writing scores of the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 school years. The most blatant limitation of this study is that this is my first year teaching English Language Development students and therefore I had no influence upon last year's Advanced ELD Narrative Benchmark Assessment scores. I did participate in the scoring of the essays last year, but I did not participate in the instruction part of this process.

Along that same vein, the fact that this is my first year teaching an English Language Development course presents another limitation of this study. Before joining this ELD PLC, I had not received any additional training in teaching ELL students above the generic, abstract courses on the subject in BTSA and my credential program. My lack of experience teaching at this level may influence the outcome of this study.

Another limitation to this study has is the way the rubric will be used. For the formative assessments, as a way to speed up the scoring process, teachers are only going to focus on the Content section of the rubric. However, as seen earlier, the rubric has three sections. This means that while students will be encouraged to keep track of their learning progress as far as content is concerned, the other areas of their writing will not receive the same amount of attention. And when the Benchmark Assessments are graded the scorers will be using the full rubric. The difference between what is being closely assessed and monitored during the formative assessments and what will be assessed for the Benchmark may present a limitation. The question is, will students' overall writing scores improve even if most of the writing instruction focuses on the content over language conventions and organization? We will see.

Further, my subject population may present a significant impact on the outcome of this study. As mentioned earlier, I have a significant Chaldean and Arabic speaking population. This group of students presents unique language acquisition issues that, traditionally, is different than the language issues that Southern California teachers are used to working with. In the past, ELD teachers in Southern California have worked predominantly with Spanish speaking students. While working with this population teachers have been able to develop and share strategies that are useful when teaching

students from the Hispanic culture. However, Chaldean and Arabic speaking students have unique cultural conflicts and concerns in United States schools. Further, Spanish speaking students have the benefits of having English-Spanish cognates and the same letters as the English alphabet in their native language. Arabic and Chaldean students do not have many cognates make connections with and their alphabet is completely different than the English alphabet. This is not to say that the Chaldean and Arabic speaking population presents nothing but challenges. Most of my students are first generation immigrants. As a teacher, there are extremely beneficial implications associated with having first generation immigrants as students. My Arabic and Chaldean speaking students are among the most diligent and respectful students I have ever had the pleasure to work with. Teaching in this environment means that I have very few behavioral issues—something that too few teachers can claim. I think that the level of intrinsic motivation to learn among my Chaldean and Arabic speaking population is going to have a beneficial influence on my hypothesis that students will improve their writing through the formative assessment process.

On the other side of the coin is the role that the Chaldean and Arabic speaking culture's collectivism will have on the formative assessments. In a collectivistic culture, students often make decisions that benefit the whole group. Group success takes priority over individual success. This is especially true in families and we have several Chaldean and Arabic speaking students with large families attending our schools. Of course they will be tempted to work together to help each other perform well on the formative assessments. In an effort for our ELD teachers to align our expectations, we have agreed on using a unified prompt for each formative assessment. Although we have agreed to

give our tests on the same day, we know that students who take the formative assessment early in the day are sure to share the prompt topic with students taking the assessment later in the day. When education students from a collectivistic culture this is something one needs to keep in mind. We will explain to students that the purpose of the formative assessment is, essentially, to give them practice facing the same situation they will encounter on the writing portion of the CAHSEE. That situation is being presented with a prompt, having no prior information about it, and having to produce an essay in response to it. Even after explaining the importance of this kind of practice, the collectivistic influence is strong and some students may still share information that may give their friends and relatives an unfair edge on the assessment. This sporadic edge provided to some of the students represents a limitation of this study.

Another limitation stemming from the population of the study is that the students in Advanced ELD last year are not the same students taking Advanced ELD this year. Students who took the Narrative Benchmark Assessment last year have moved on to Sheltered ELD English, freshman English, or high school graduation. However, although the results from the two Benchmark Assessments come from different students, they still come from the same level of English proficiency. Another way to address this limitation is to compare Intermediate ELD Narrative Benchmark results from 2007-2008 to the Advanced ELD Narrative Benchmark results. The reasoning behind this is that many students currently at the advanced level were at the intermediate level last year. This comparison also has its flaws due to the nature of ELD progression. Some students skip levels according to English ability and there are some students new to the US (or new to El Cajon Valley High School) who are starting at the Advanced ELD level. Still, the

limitation of the shifting group of focus can be partially addressed through comparing Intermediate ELD one year and Advanced ELD the next year.

The final limitation of this study has to do with the data. Our PLC team is able to work together to make sure that the scoring of the Narrative Benchmark Assessment is objective. There are multiple scorers and the scorers work together to normalize their scoring methods. As we work together to score the essay, each member of the PLC is responsible for scoring seven to ten essays for each level. However, each teacher grades his and her own formative assessments for five weeks. This can be a daunting task. Each week ELD teachers need to quickly grade 50 to 75 essays. The ELD teachers have the rubric as a tool to keep scoring consistent, but it is inevitable that the teacher will make some errors in judgment while grading so many essays each week. Grading writing is a very time intensive process. One cannot simply create a multiple-choice test and quickly and easily grade formative assessments when dealing with writing. Each piece of writing has to be analyzed. Often, unique, personal feedback is the most effective way to offer students advice about how to improve their writing. Also, when grading writing teachers often need to read essays two or three times. This feedback loop takes time and it can wear on a teacher. This means that the quality of scoring may suffer from the arduous task that grading writing is.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The quantitative data of this study is based on the four-point rubric shown below:

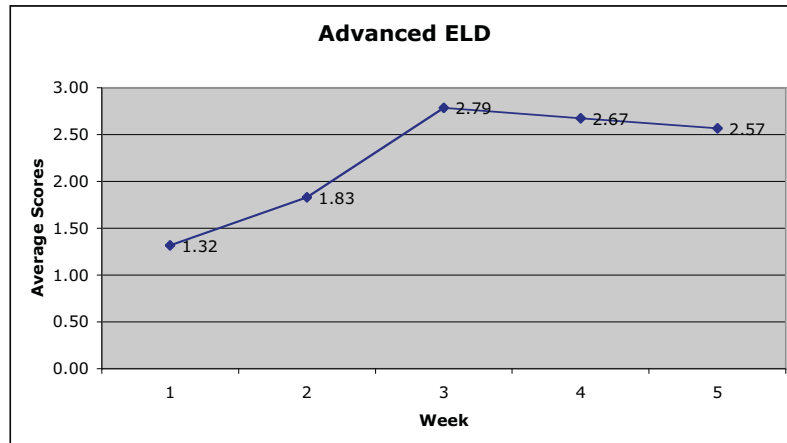
Figure 6

Rubric for Narrative Essay, El Cajon Valley High School, <i>Advanced</i> ELD					
	1 Below Standard	2 Approaching Standard	3 Meets Standard	4 Exceeds Standard	Score
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Does not use sensory details ___ Inappropriate sense of audience and tone ___ Vaguely addresses only one part of the prompt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Limited use of sensory details ___ Demonstrates little sense of audience and tone ___ Addresses only parts of the prompt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Uses sensory details, dialogue, anecdotes, interior monologue, or other writing devices throughout ___ Demonstrates a general sense of audience and uses appropriate tone ___ Addresses ALL parts of the prompt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Skillfully uses sensory details, dialogue, anecdotes, interior monologue, or other writing devices throughout ___ Effectively addresses audience and uses appropriate tone ___ Effectively addresses and shows insight to ALL parts of the prompt 	
Organization & Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ No introductory paragraph ___ Weak thesis, if any ___ Topic sentence(s) not evident ___ Ideas unsupported by lack of details and/or examples ___ Concluding sentence(s) not evident ___ Does not use chronological order ___ No concluding paragraph 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Weak or unfocused introductory paragraph is unfocused ___ Thesis is unfocused ___ Topic sentence(s) unfocused ___ Some support of thesis with limited details and/or examples ___ Concluding sentence(s) ineffective ___ Inconsistent use of chronological order ___ Weak conclusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Focused introductory paragraph ___ Thesis addresses the prompt ___ Topic sentence(s) in body paragraph support the thesis ___ Details and/or examples support thesis and topic sentence(s) ___ Concluding sentence(s) evident ___ Maintains chronological order ___ Conclusion summarizes the main points 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Introduction draws the reader into focus ___ Thesis addresses the prompt with a distinctive perspective ___ Topic sentence(s) support the thesis and add(s) complexity ___ Details and/or examples support thesis and topic sentence(s) ___ Concluding sentence(s) use transitions effectively ___ Maintains chronological order while using literary devices such as flashback and foreshadowing ___ Conclusion summarizes the significance 	
Language Conventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Incomplete sentences ___ Repetitive sentence forms ___ Does not use correct verb tense and subject-verb agreement ___ Mostly incorrect grammar usage ___ Mostly incorrect punctuation ___ Mostly incorrect spelling of grade level words ___ Errors interfere with understanding the essay 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Inconsistent use of complete sentences (some fragments and run-ons) ___ Limited sentence forms ___ Inconsistent verb tense and subject-verb agreement ___ Inconsistent grammar usage ___ Inconsistent punctuation ___ Inconsistent spelling ___ Errors may cause distraction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Mostly complete sentences ___ Uses some variety of sentence forms ___ Mostly consistent verb tense and subject-verb agreement ___ Mostly correct grammar usage ___ Mostly correct punctuation ___ Spells majority of grade level words correctly ___ Errors do not interfere with understanding the essay 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Mostly complete sentences ___ Consistently uses a wide variety of sentence forms ___ Consistent verb tense and subject-verb agreement ___ Minor errors in grammar usage ___ Minor errors in punctuation ___ Takes risks spelling and using above grade level words ___ Minimal errors 	
TOTAL SCORE	Below Standard 3 = F (30%) 4 = F (40%)	Approaching Standard 5 = C- (72%) 6 = C (75%) 7 = C+ (78%)	Meets Standard 8 = B- (82%) 9 = B (85%) 10 = B+ (88%)	Exceeds Standard 11 = A- (92%) 12 = A (95%)	

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In order to give this research more focus, the ELD team only used the Content section of the rubric. Students wrote a one-paragraph response to prompts such as the one shown in Figure 7. This prompt was given to students for the week-three assessment. After the teacher scored the paragraph based only on the Content section of the rubric, students then kept track of their learning progress. In order to do this students used a learning progress chart adapted from a model from Marzano (see Figure 8).

Chart 3



My first research question was: What is the impact of formative assessments on Advanced ELD students' narrative writing performance? The data I have collected shows that at the beginning of the formative assessment process students, on average, scored Below Standard (using the language of the rubric) in Content. The average score was 1.32 on a 4-point scale. This means that, on average, students did not respond to the entire prompt and they did not use sensory details in their narrative writing. Clearly, at the beginning of this process, my Advanced ELD students' narrative writing performance was poor. The next two formative assessments led to dramatic improvements yielding average scores of 1.83 and 2.79, respectively. Following this period of improvement, student performance leveled off; even lowering to the week 5 final average score of 2.57. This score represents that students, on average, were between Approaching Standard and Meets Standard on the Content section of the rubric. It is interesting to note that while the two sections of Advanced ELD had a disparity of score averages weeks 3 and 4, they both ended up with identical week 5 scores. The answer to my first research question must be that formative assessments improved Advanced ELD students' writing performance. While average student performance did not continuously improve over the

5 weeks of assessment, student performance did end significantly higher than where it began. In this way, students reached their learning goal because their writing improved, as the data illustrates. Hypothetically, this process should have prepared students well for the next step in this process: the Narrative Benchmark Assessment. This hypothesis is the concern of my second research question.

My second research question was: To what degree do formative assessments improve or deteriorate Advanced ELD students' performance on benchmark writing assessments? This Narrative Benchmark Assessment has only been used since the spring of the 2008 school year, so there is not a large amount of data available to compare student performance. However, I am able to compare Advanced ELD Narrative Benchmark Assessment scores from the spring of 2008 to those gathered in the fall of 2008.

Chart 4 (2007-2008 Benchmark Narrative Results)

	Below Standard 3 = F (30%) 4 = F (40%)	Approaching Standard 5 = C-(72%) 6 = C (75%) 7 = C+ (78%)	Meets Standard 8 = B- (82%) 9 = B (85%) 10 = B+ (88%)	Exceeds Standard 11 = A- (92%) 12 = A (95%)
Number of students:	5	26	21	0
Percentage:	10%	50%	40%	0%

Chart 5 (2008-2009 Benchmark Narrative Results)

	Below Standard 3 = F (30%) 4 = F (40%)	Approaching Standard 5 = C-(72%) 6 = C (75%) 7 = C+ (78%)	Meets Standard 8 = B- (82%) 9 = B (85%) 10 = B+ (88%)	Exceeds Standard 11 = A- (92%) 12 = A (95%)
Number of students:	0	19	23	4
Percentage:	0%	41%	50%	9%

There is a difference between this data and the data collected for the formative assessments. Remember, the formative assessments focused on the Content section of the

rubric. The Benchmark Narrative Results includes student scores based on the entire rubric. The results of the 2007-2008 Narrative Benchmark show that 10% of Advanced ELD students scored Below Standard), 50% scored Approaching Standard, 40% scored Meets Standard, and no students scored Exceeds Standard. Comparatively, the results of the 2008-2009 Narrative Benchmark show that no Advanced ELD students scored Below Standard, 41% scored Approaching Standard, 50% scored Meets Standard, and 9% scored Exceeds Standard. The answer, then, to my second research question is that the formative assessment process helped students improve their performance on the Narrative Benchmark Assessment. The data shows that student performance improved. No students scored Below Standard and the number of students scoring Exceeds Standard went from zero in 2007-2008 to four in 2008-2009. Further, fewer students scored Approaching Standard and more students scored Meets Standard when comparing the two result charts. The outcome of this comparison shows that Advanced ELD students who participated in formative assessments improved their narrative writing ability above the writing ability of Advanced ELD students who did not participate in formative assessments.

The data reflects that the formative assessment process has a positive impact on student learning. When students are given high frequency assessments based on one learning goal their learning increases. The learning goal of this study was that students would be able to use narrative writing conventions. Their ability to do so improved because of the formative assessment process.

Action Plan

The findings of this study support the hypothesis that using formative assessments is an effective way to help students improve their writing ability. More specifically, formative assessments help English Language Learners improve their writing. Students make significant gains toward attaining a learning goal when they are given high frequency assessments combined with speedy, relevant feedback.

I am excited by the success of formative assessments in my classroom. I plan on continuing this process. In fact, after this study was completed my team conducted a second round of formative assessments concerning the Expository Benchmark. The way we implemented the expository formative assessments were similar to the way we did the narrative. However, instead of grading only the Content section of the rubric after each formative assessment, we graded all three parts of the rubric. This did mean more work on the teacher's part, but we decided that if students improved in the area of Content so dramatically with formative assessments then students might also improve in the areas of Organization and Language Conventions. Now, because implementing the Benchmark Assessment process for English Language Learners is new at our school, we are not able to compare this year's results to last year's results. We did not complete an Expository Benchmark last year—we were only able to conduct the Narrative Benchmark. However, now that we have this year's data on the Expository Benchmark our ELD team looks forward to comparing next year's results to this year's results.

Chart 6 Expository Benchmark Results 2008-2009

Below Standard	Approaching Standard	Meets Standard	Exceeds Standard
3 = F (30%)	5 = C- (72%)	8 = B- (82%)	11 = A- (92%)
4 = F (40%)	6 = C (75%)	9 = B (85%)	12 = A (95%)
	7 = C+ (78%)	10 = B+ (88%)	
1	22	21	2
2%	48%	46%	4%

As you can see from Chart 6, most students scored Approaching Standard and Meets Standard with the Expository Benchmark. However, a higher proportion of students scored Meets Standard with the Narrative Benchmark this year. We are not sure if this is because of changing the formative assessment process (giving students feedback based on the entire rubric instead of just the Content section) or if this is because expository writing is more difficult than narrative writing because of the emphasis on evidence, logic, and organization. Next year, our ELD team will decide if we will continue using the entire rubric for these formative assessments, or if we will focus on one part of the rubric like we did with the Narrative Benchmark. Although we will decide as a team how to approach this next year, I will suggest that we focus on one part of the rubric for most of the formative assessments. I think that it is beneficial to focus on one learning goal at a time when dealing with formative assessments. The improvement I saw between last year's Narrative Benchmark results and this year's Narrative Benchmark results supports this thinking. Still, as the leader of my ELD team next year I will encourage that we discuss how we approach formative assessments in the 2009-2010 school year. After we all have provided opinions and support I am sure we will end up with a plan that will help us improve upon this year's benchmark results and increase student learning.

The impact on this study on me, personally, was very positive. I was encouraged to see my students improve over time. Often, I become so involved in the moment while teaching that I doubt whether what I am doing in class is causing learning. Through this study I was able to witness tangible evidence of student learning in the increased average scores. Further, I saw the increase in scores between last year's Narrative Benchmark results and this year's results. Students were excited by their progress, but I was excited because I felt like a successful teacher. I think the success of a teacher should be based on the amount of learning the teacher helps happen in the classroom. This study helped me feel like I am a successful teacher. Now, I still feel like I have a lot of room for improvement, but I am encouraged by this study. It made me feel like I am moving in the right direction as a teacher.

The action research process of action, reflection, and action has really just started. I plan on continuing this process and finding new ways to increase student learning in my classroom. I am excited to see how my students' learning will increase next year. Also, I plan on discovering other areas in my curriculum to use formative assessments.

My team and I will continue to share our results via our wikispace.

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