Assessment Of AFL And AOL

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Introduction

Assessment is one of the main ways teachers understand what students know, what they can do, and what still needs to improve. It is often associated with marks, grades, examinations, and final results, but assessment also has an important role during the learning process itself. Two widely used concepts help explain these different functions: Assessment for Learning (AfL) and Assessment of Learning (AoL). AfL is mainly concerned with using evidence during learning so that teachers and students can decide what to do next, while AoL is concerned with judging and reporting what has been achieved at a particular point. The distinction appears simple, yet modern research shows that the two functions can overlap and that the educational value of an assessment depends heavily on how its evidence is interpreted and used. Recent reviews have therefore moved away from treating formative and summative assessment as completely separate categories and instead emphasize the relationship among purpose, timing, feedback, learner participation, and the decisions that follow from assessment evidence (Yan et al., 2022; Yao et al., 2024). A strong assessment system needs both functions. Students need opportunities to identify misconceptions and improve before final judgment, but schools and universities also need dependable evidence for grades, qualifications, progression, and accountability.

AfL and AoL

Assessment for Learning is best understood as a process rather than a particular test format. A quiz, discussion, written task, observation, draft, peer review, or digital activity becomes formative when the evidence it produces is used to improve ongoing learning. The teacher may discover that many students have misunderstood a concept and decide to reteach it, provide a different example, change the pace of instruction, or create additional practice. Students may use the same evidence to revise a draft, choose a better strategy, or recognize that their understanding is incomplete. This emphasis on action is important because simply collecting information does not make an assessment formative. A teacher can administer many short tests without creating meaningful AfL if the results are recorded and then ignored. Recent OECD guidance describes formative assessment as a cycle in which teachers clarify desired learning, diagnose current understanding, provide feedback, and adapt teaching in response to student thinking (OECD, 2025). Research also suggests that successful implementation depends on teachers' ability to interpret student responses rather than merely generate more assessment data. Ndlovu (2025), for example, found that teachers may conduct

frequent assessment activities while still underusing feedback as a tool for changing teaching and learning.

Assessment of Learning has a different primary purpose. It summarizes achievement after a defined period and supports decisions such as awarding grades, certifying competence, determining progression, reporting to families, or evaluating whether required standards have been met. Final examinations, end-of-unit tests, major projects, portfolios used for certification, standardized assessments, and externally moderated tasks can all serve AoL functions. The central question is no longer simply, “What should the learner do next?” but rather, “What level of achievement has the learner demonstrated against the intended standard?” Because these decisions can have significant consequences, AoL usually requires greater attention to reliability, fairness, comparability, and the match between the assessment task and the knowledge or skills being claimed. Yet formative and summative purposes are not completely isolated. Evidence from a summative task can still inform future teaching, and a classroom task can contribute to a grade while also helping a student improve. This is why purpose is more useful than format when distinguishing AfL from AoL. The same essay might function formatively when submitted as a draft with feedback, then summatively when the final version is graded.

Effective Assessment for Learning

Effective AfL begins with clarity about what students are expected to learn. When learning goals and success criteria are vague, feedback becomes difficult to interpret because students do not know what good performance looks like or how their current work differs from the target. Teachers therefore need to make expectations understandable through explanations, exemplars, models, rubrics, questioning, and discussion of quality. After that, assessment activities should reveal students’ thinking rather than simply generate scores. A well-designed question can expose the reasoning behind an answer, while an open explanation, worked problem, concept map, oral response, or draft can show where understanding breaks down. The teacher then uses that evidence to decide whether students need further explanation, a different example, more challenging work, or additional practice. A 2024 meta-analysis covering 118 K–12 studies and 258 effect sizes found a positive overall effect of formative assessment on academic achievement, although the size of the effect varied across settings and study designs (Yao et al., 2024). This variation is important because it shows that AfL is not a guaranteed result of frequent testing. The quality of the task, the interpretation of evidence, the feedback that follows, and the instructional response all matter.

Feedback is especially valuable when it gives learners information they can actually use. Telling a student that an answer is wrong, assigning a score, or writing “good work” may communicate judgment without explaining the next step. More useful feedback identifies the gap between current and desired performance and helps the learner act on it. This can happen through teacher comments, class discussion, conferencing, automated prompts, worked examples, peer review, or self-assessment. Student participation is important because AfL becomes more powerful when learners

are not merely recipients of teacher judgments but active interpreters of evidence. Yan et al. (2022) synthesized 175 studies involving 19,383 participants and found meaningful positive effects of self-assessment and peer-assessment interventions on academic performance. Their findings support the idea that students can learn by judging quality, comparing work with criteria, and using feedback to revise. At the same time, peer and self-assessment require preparation. Students need clear criteria, examples of useful feedback, and opportunities to improve their judgment. A systematic review of formative assessment in K–12 English-language education similarly found promise in peer assessment, self-assessment, technology-assisted assessment, portfolios, questioning, and feedback, while also highlighting the influence of teacher beliefs, student understanding, professional preparation, and educational context (Zhang et al., 2024).

Role of Assessment of Learning

The strong emphasis on formative assessment in contemporary education should not lead to the conclusion that summative assessment is unnecessary. Schools, colleges, universities, employers, and professional bodies need credible information about what learners have achieved. A qualification has value partly because others can trust that the student met an established standard. AoL therefore plays an important role in certification, selection, progression, and public accountability. The challenge is to ensure that the assessment actually represents the intended learning. If a course aims to develop analysis, problem-solving, writing, practical performance, or professional judgment, an assessment system based only on memory-based multiple-choice questions may provide an incomplete picture. Likewise, one high-stakes examination may not adequately represent a broad curriculum or the full range of a learner's capabilities. Strong AoL therefore requires alignment among learning outcomes, teaching, assessment tasks, and scoring procedures. It should also use enough evidence to support the decision being made. A final grade based on a carefully designed combination of tests, projects, demonstrations, and written work may be more defensible than a grade based on a single narrow task.

Fairness is equally important because summative judgments can shape educational opportunities. Students should have a reasonable opportunity to demonstrate the intended knowledge or skill without being disadvantaged by barriers that are unrelated to the learning outcome. This does not mean lowering standards; it means designing assessment so that the score reflects the target construct as accurately as possible. Teachers also need to separate academic achievement from unrelated behavior when reporting learning. For example, reducing an academic grade because homework was submitted late may make the score difficult to interpret if the stated purpose is to represent subject knowledge. At the same time, AoL evidence should not be treated as a complete description of the learner. A final mark summarizes performance under specified conditions and cannot capture every aspect of motivation, creativity, improvement, collaboration, or future potential. Recent literature on formative assessment reinforces this point indirectly by showing that learning develops through ongoing feedback, revision, and self-regulation rather than through isolated moments of judgment (Solis Trujillo et al., 2025). Summative assessment is therefore essential, but its

results should be interpreted for the specific decisions they are designed to support.

Balancing AfL and AoL

The most effective assessment systems do not force teachers to choose between AfL and AoL. Instead, they plan the two functions together. A unit can begin with diagnostic evidence about prior knowledge, continue with low-stakes questioning, practice tasks, drafts, peer review, and targeted feedback, and end with a summative task that evaluates whether the intended outcomes were achieved. This sequence allows students to make mistakes when the consequences are low, learn from feedback, and then demonstrate more independent performance when the final judgment is made. It also reduces the risk that assessment becomes something done only at the end of teaching. OECD guidance on high-quality teaching emphasizes that formative assessment is closely linked with diagnosing student understanding and adapting instruction, while current systematic reviews show that feedback can support academic performance and self-regulation when it is timely, specific, and connected to opportunities for action (OECD, 2025; Solis Trujillo et al., 2025). The practical implication is that teachers should not spend all available assessment time producing marks. Some tasks should exist primarily to create information that can change what teachers and students do next.

Technology can support this balance, but it should not determine it. Digital quizzes, learning-management systems, response tools, dashboards, and artificial-intelligence-assisted feedback can make evidence available quickly and may help teachers identify patterns across a class. However, fast data are not automatically good data. Poor questions still produce weak evidence, automated feedback can miss the reasoning behind a response, and dashboards may create an illusion of precision when the underlying task is narrow. Teachers therefore need assessment literacy: the ability to choose methods that match learning goals, interpret evidence cautiously, recognize limitations, and decide when professional judgment is necessary. The same principle applies to workload. Good AfL does not require a teacher to write long comments on every task. Whole-class feedback, carefully designed questions, student self-checks, structured peer review, selective marking, and opportunities for revision can all provide useful evidence without making assessment unsustainable. The goal is not to assess constantly but to collect the right evidence at the right time and use it for a clear educational purpose.

Conclusion

Assessment for Learning and Assessment of Learning are best viewed as complementary functions within a coherent educational system. AfL uses evidence during the learning process to clarify needs, provide feedback, strengthen self-regulation, and help teachers adapt instruction. AoL evaluates achievement at important points so that schools and other institutions can report results, award grades, certify competence, and make progression decisions. Problems arise when either function dominates. An education system driven almost entirely by high-stakes summative testing can

encourage teaching to the test and give students too few opportunities to learn from mistakes, while an approach with extensive formative activity but weak summative standards may struggle to provide credible judgments about achievement. Current research supports a balanced approach in which learning goals are clear, assessment tasks are aligned with those goals, feedback is usable, students participate actively in judging quality, and final decisions are based on appropriate evidence. The central question should therefore not be whether AfL or AoL is better. The more useful question is what decision an assessment is intended to support and whether its design, timing, evidence, and follow-up are appropriate for that purpose.

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