



A Learner-Centered Approach to Standards-Based Teaching and Assessment: The EFF Model

- **This paper addresses the potential for integrating standards-based and learner-centered approaches to adult ESOL instruction. This paper contains a brief scenario of classroom teaching and assessment using the Equipped for the Future (EFF) approach to standards-based, learner-centered teaching and assessment. This is followed by a discussion of qualities that assessments should have so that they can provide useful information for educational improvement within an approach that is both learner-centered and standards-based. The paper also provides a sample of standards-based performance-level descriptions (using the EFF standard Listen Actively as an example) and describes how adult ESOL instructors might use a standards-based assessment framework such as the EFF standards and performance levels as a guide for learner-centered teaching and assessment.**

Introduction

Is it possible to combine a learner-centered approach to adult ESOL teaching with standards-based teaching and assessment? It is if the standards guiding teaching and assessment are grounded in the learning goals and applied skills that matter to adult learners. This paper begins with a brief scenario of classroom teaching and assessment guided by a set of standards that have been developed on a learner-centered foundation, the Equipped for the Future (EFF) content standards and assessment framework. The second section of the paper builds on the scenario to highlight the qualities that assessments should have so that they can provide useful information for educational improvement within an approach that is both learner-centered and standards-based. The final two sections of this paper provide a sample of standards-based performance-level descriptions (using the EFF standard Listen Actively as an example) and describe how adult ESOL instructors might use a standards-based assessment framework such

as the EFF standards and performance levels as a guide for learner-centered teaching and assessment.

How Can Standards Help Guide a Learner-Centered Approach to Assessment?

Consider the following scenario: A student in a multilevel ESOL family literacy class comes to the teacher before class and asks for help with an upcoming parent/teacher conference scheduled for the end of the first nine weeks of the school term. This class is in a program that is using the EFF Content Standards (Stein, 2000) as a way to align student goals, instruction, and assessment. The teacher takes the student's request as an opportunity to introduce and discuss with the class the components of performance of the EFF standards Listen Actively and Speak So Others Can Understand as a way to focus the students' attention on the skills that they may need to work on to prepare for the parent/teacher conferences. The teacher explains the components of performance in language that the students can understand and use. Because most of the students speak Spanish, she also shows students the Spanish-language version of the standards and components of performance. All the students in the class are parents and after some class discussion, they decide that they need to work on formulating questions and practicing listening to get ready to obtain the information they need about their children's schooling.

The discussion of the EFF standards Listen Actively and Speak So Others Can Understand focuses the students' attention on the importance of clarifying the purpose for speaking and listening. The students decide that, in this case, the purpose of the communication is to gather information about their children's progress, behavior, attention, and homework assignments. The teacher initiates a question-generating activity and after corrections to vocabulary and grammar, a set of questions is compiled to form a questionnaire that students can practice and eventually may take to the parent/teacher conference to help them formulate questions and record responses.

Throughout the initial discussion and in the course of question-generating activity, the teacher is making informal observations and gaining information about the knowledge and skills that the students in the class already possess—the knowledge and skills that are the starting points for further learning.

One thing that becomes very clear to the teacher and students in the first practice session using the questionnaire is that the responses elicited by many of the questions on the form are likely to be quite complex and difficult for the students to decipher. Based on this observation, the teacher decides to focus additional learning activities around the components of performance of the Listen Actively standard (see Figure 1). Specifically, the teacher directs the students' attention to a set of active listening strategies that they can use to monitor and overcome barriers to comprehension.

Figure 1 The EFF Standard—Listen Actively

To fulfill responsibilities as parents/family members, citizens/community members, and workers, adults must be able to:

Listen Actively

- Attend to oral information.
- Clarify purpose for listening and use listening strategies appropriate to that purpose.
- Monitor comprehension, adjusting strategies to overcome barriers to comprehension.
- Integrate information from listening with prior knowledge to address the listening purpose.

As this is a multilevel class, the students have a range of speaking and listening abilities. The teacher uses the Listen Actively performance-level descriptions of key knowledge, skills, and strategies (see excerpts in Figure 3) to evaluate each student's listening performance ability and to decide what level of performance on Listen Actively they should be working toward. Based on a variety of sources of evidence, including in-class assessments and observations of each student's performance in listening activities in the classroom, the teacher has determined that some students in the class are performing at EFF Listen Actively Performance Level 1, others typically show performance ability in listening consistent with the descriptions in EFF Performance Level 2, and still others show performance at EFF Levels 3 and 4. The teacher uses this appraisal of her students' performance levels to help plan their learning activities and to monitor their learning progress and achievement.

The EFF performance-level descriptions give the teacher ideas for planning instruction. The performance-level descriptions also provide the teacher and the learners with criteria that can be used to monitor learning progress. The teacher uses performance-level descriptions to design learning activities that incorporate performance assessment tasks and scoring rubrics. These embedded assessments (part learning and part assessment) are designed as opportunities for students to try out their listening skills and to provide both students and teacher with a window on what students can do well and what they still need to work on.

Finally, as the time of the actual parent/teacher conferences draws near, the teacher develops a more formal performance-assessment task to document the progress that students have made and give them confidence in their improved listening ability going into the conferences. The assessment task again takes the form of a simulated parent/teacher conference, but unlike the embedded assessment activity, the conditions for performance are more authentic. A native English-speaking assistant takes the role of "teacher" in

the conference and students must go through the role-play from start to finish without pauses, restarts, or requests for outside assistance. The teacher observes the interaction and afterward debriefs each student on his or her performance using a scoring rubric as a guide to point out areas of strength and weakness in the listening performance. The teacher and student also discuss strategies for making best use of the listening abilities the student has demonstrated mastery of in the upcoming parent/teacher conference.

How Will We Know Good Assessment When We See It?

The question of what makes for good assessment is complicated by the wide variety of purposes that educational assessments serve. As indicated in the scenario above, educational assessment can take many forms, varying from informal observations, assessments embedded in learning activities, and relatively formal stand-alone assessments of learning results. The information provided by this variety of educational assessments serves a variety of information needs: placement, planning instruction, monitoring learning progress, and documenting and evaluating learning results. The EFF initiative has produced a number of guides to assessment for various purposes.¹ In each case, the EFF approach to assessment is guided by a common model of standards-based educational reform and improvement and by a common set of criteria for quality in educational assessments (for more information see the EFF Assessment Resource Collection at <http://eff.cls.utk.edu/assessment>).

Before describing the general qualities that assessments should have so that they can work well within a learner-centered and standards-based approach to adult ESOL instruction, we should consider what it means to align learner-centered goals and educational content standards. We know that a standards-based educational improvement system cannot function in the absence of high-quality student testing. We also know that tight specifications for content are required to support development of tests for high-stakes uses. This leaves us with an apparent dilemma: On the one hand we need a standards-based alignment of educational content and assessments; on the other hand, we need instructional approaches and content that are consistent with adult-learner goals.

It is certainly true that standards-based reform (a mechanism for promoting improvements in educational outcomes by aligning educational content, assessments, and accountability) can be pursued—and often is—with total disregard for learner-defined educational goals. However, any system of educational standards that does not allow for flexible adaptation within a learner-centered approach not only violates well-established basic principles of adult-learning theory, but also it negates the potential for accountability mechanisms to provide feedback that will support educational improvement. To put it another way, when high stakes are attached to a test result (program funding, teaching assignments, student certification, etc.), teachers will teach to that test. So the first question we should ask about such a test is who decided what the content of the test should be. The follow-up might be to

ask what (if any) connection the content of the test has to learning goals that led adult learners to participate in what is, after all, a noncompulsory educational program.

Ananda (2000) developed the following list of key criteria for quality in standards-based assessment:

- Be linked directly to standards;
- Be grounded in theories of learning;
- Serve as instructional and assessment tools;
- Be cognitively demanding, requiring application and integration of knowledge;
- Require shift in roles of instructor and student;
- Reflect and accommodate diversity;
- Demonstrate technical quality—including clear targets, focused purpose, proper method, sound sampling, accurate assessment free of bias and distortion.

These criteria for quality assessment of performance on the EFF standards are applicable to any assessments designed to reflect both standards and learner-defined outcomes. The criteria are discussed further in Ananda (2000) and in Stites (2003).² Here, it will be useful to focus on a set of basic criteria pertaining to quality in the design of educational assessment as a prelude to the descriptions of the EFF performance levels and of their uses as guides for learner-centered and standards-based instruction and assessment that follow.

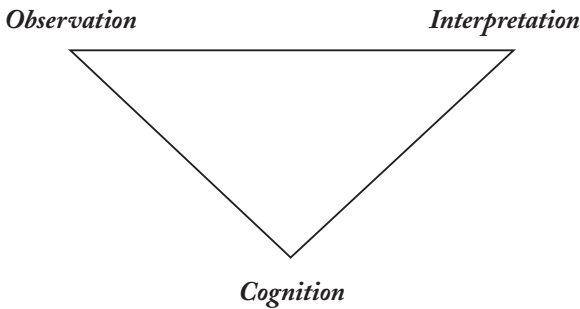
Every educational assessment, no matter how technically sound, is always imprecise to some degree. As noted in the National Research Council report, *Knowing What Students Know: The Science and Design of Educational Assessment*, “an assessment result is an *estimate*, based on samples of knowledge and performance from the much larger universe of everything that a person knows and can do” (NRC, 2001, p. 37, emphasis in the original). In essence, a good assessment is a process of “reasoning from evidence,” drawing reasonable and defensible inferences about what a person knows and can do on the basis of limited data (Mislevy, 1994, 1996, as cited in NRC, 2001, p. 38). To ensure that the inferences we draw from assessment results about performance ability are sound, we need to collect and interpret good evidence. What counts as good evidence depends upon what we believe about the nature of the competence we are attempting to measure in the assessment. In other words, we need to start the assessment-design process with a clear understanding of the cognitive processes underlying proficient performance. This understanding or model of cognition will shape the design of observations to collect evidence of performance. The nature of evidence collected and the model of cognition that informs the collection of evidence will in turn shape the methods used to interpret the evidence as an indication of performance on the model of cognition.

In *Knowing What Students Know* (NRC, 2001), three essential elements of good assessment design are identified:

- *Cognition*—the definition of the aspects of achievement to be assessed;
- *Observation*—the definition of tasks that will be used to collect evidence about performance ability;
- *Interpretation*—the methods used to analyze the evidence resulting from the performance on the tasks.

These three elements are portrayed as an “assessment triangle” (see Figure 2) to emphasize the interrelationships among all three elements. According to the NRC report (2001), no assessment can be designed and implemented without consideration of each of the three elements in the triangle. Making each element explicit and making sure that all three elements work well together is the key to good assessment design.

Figure 2
The Assessment Triangle



(NRC, 2001, p. 39)

The first step in good educational assessment design is being clear about what aspects of learning and development you want to assess. In designing assessments of performance on the EFF standards, we started with a model of cognition that represented learning and development in a particular domain of performance, such as speaking and listening. The model of cognition (or construct domain) underlying each EFF content standard includes:

- The name of the skill domain (for example, Listen Actively) and its components of performance, which name and define the domain as a particular skill process (see Figure 1);
- A four-dimensional model of performance that is the framework for describing performance levels;
- Performance-level descriptors, which identify specific behavioral indicators on each of the four dimensions of performance (increasing depth

and structure of the knowledge base, and increasing fluency, independence, and ability to perform in a range of conditions; see Figure 3).

The next step in designing assessments of performance on the EFF standards involves the observation corner of the triangle. Here we focus our attention on identifying the kinds of tasks or situations that will best afford opportunities to observe and collect evidence on the important knowledge, skills, and strategies of performance we have identified as central to our model of cognition.

The final element in good educational assessment design is a model for interpreting available evidence in ways that will lead to valid and reliable inferences about ability to perform. In other words, a good-quality assessment must provide quality information about a student's performance that is useful to the teacher (and others). One way to make sure that an assessment produces useful information (for example, information to guide instructional planning or information about learning outcomes) is to use a method of interpretation (for example, a scoring rubric) that evaluates performance on the assessment task in a way that is closely related to the understanding of learning and development (the model of cognition) that we started from in the cognition corner of the assessment triangle.

We used the assessment triangle to design assessments for the EFF standards. Because the EFF standards are complex skill processes, we believe performance assessments are the most suitable method for observing and collecting evidence of performance on the standards. Performance assessments simulate the conditions in which key skills are used in real-world activities—optimizing the ability of the assessments to measure learning that will transfer to daily life.

Other forms of assessment may provide a partial measure of an EFF standard. Assessments with a selected-response format, for example, have the advantage of ease of administration and easily achieved reliability in scoring. But they fall short in capturing comprehensive evidence of performance on tasks involving the purposeful and integrated application of a skills process as defined in the EFF content standards, and they can provide only a small part of the information that we need to clearly see how well a student is progressing on the continuum from novice to expert performance on the standard.

Why Do We Need a Strong Model of Adult Performance?

The assessment triangle helps us to understand how important a strong model of learning and development is to designing good assessments (for any purpose). The triangle makes it clear that assessments are best able to provide the information that help to improve learning and instruction when teachers and students (and test developers and psychometricians) understand exactly what a test has been designed to measure, what kinds of evidence of performance are needed, and how that evidence should be interpreted to suit the purpose of the assessment. For the past several years, the EFF team has been col-

lecting data on adult-learner performance on the EFF standards so that we can construct strong models of adult performance on each of the standards, describe key benchmarks for levels of performance, and design assessments to measure those performance levels.

How did EFF define the learning results that matter most in adult basic education? We approached this task through a long-term, participatory, and consensus-building process that engaged educators, policy-makers, and content specialists in answering the complex question: What do adults need to know and be able to do to carry out their roles and responsibilities as workers, parents and family members, and citizens and community members?

To make sure that the dimensions we defined would make sense to teachers, we reviewed descriptions of adult performance on the standards prepared by teachers in our field-research sites in relation to the key characteristics of expert performance.³

The Performance Continuum for each EFF standard provides a picture of what developing expertise looks like for adult learners using the standard. To create this picture, we arrayed along a continuum all the data that our teacher/researchers provided about learner performance. Then we reviewed this continuum, identifying commonalities across multiple reports of learner performance at a particular range on the continuum and looking for places in the data where multiple reports described a qualitative change in learners' ability to use the standard. We marked such qualitative changes as a level. Thus, each EFF performance level defines a key threshold in adult learning and development—characterized by observable changes in proficiency.

In some cases we noticed five qualitative changes in learner performance along the continuum. In these cases, we created five levels. In other cases, we noticed six qualitative changes. In these cases, we created six levels.

The descriptions of performance at each EFF performance level focus on observable (and therefore measurable) changes in proficiency from one level to the next. The performance levels are like individual rungs on a ladder of increasing proficiency. Because we want to draw attention to the benchmarks (features of performance) that indicate change from one level to the next, we also do not repeat aspects of learner performance that remain the same from level to level.

Performance levels for EFF standards can be found on the on-line EFF Assessment Resource Collection (<http://eff.cls.utk.edu/assessment>). As an example, two (of five) performance levels on the EFF Performance Continuum for Listen Actively (Levels 2 and 3) are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3
How to Read the EFF Performance Continuum for
***Listen Actively* and Two Example Performance Levels**

Each performance level of the EFF Performance Continuum for each EFF standard is divided into four sections:

Section 1. Section 1 is the definition of the standard. The definition of the standard in the components of performance is a useful tool for communicating to adult learners and their teachers the essential features of the construct for each standard. As a result of “unmasking the construct” in this way (making it clear how the skills of listening and speaking are defined; see Gitomer & Bennett, 2002), adult learners are better able to articulate their own learning goals for improving proficiency and teachers are better able to focus learning and instructional activities that build toward the goal of increasing ability to Listen Actively to accomplish everyday activities.

The standard does not change from level to level. It remains a consistent focal point for learning and instruction. What changes from level to level is the growth and complexity of the underlying knowledge base and the resulting increases in fluency and independence in using the standard to accomplish an increasing range and variety of communication tasks. These changes are reflected in the descriptions of key knowledge, skills, and strategies at each level (Section 2); descriptions of fluent and independent performance in a range of settings at each level (Section 3); and the examples of real-world activities that can be accomplished at each level (Section 4).

Section 2. Section 2 of the performance continua for Listen Actively contains descriptions of some of the key knowledge, skills, and strategies that form the basis for proficient performance on the standards at each level. This listing of key knowledge, skills, and strategies is specific to each level and is the foundation for designing assessments to measure performance at that level. Beyond serving as a guide for assessment development, the key knowledge, skills, and strategies described at each performance level can also be used to identify instructional objectives or can be included in the criteria used for placement of learners in instructional levels.

Section 3. Section 3 is the description of fluency, independence, and ability to perform in a range of settings expected for proficient performance on the standard at each level. Like the descriptions of key knowledge, skills, and strategies in Section 2, the descriptions in Section 3 are specific to each level and are intended to serve as a basis for guiding assessment, learning, and instruction that is appropriate to that level.

Section 4. Section 4 of the performance-level descriptions provides a short list of examples of the purposeful applications of the standard (activities) that can be accomplished by an adult who is proficient at each level. This list of examples is illustrative and not exhaustive. As in Sections 2 and 3, the descriptions of activities in Section 4 are specific to each performance level. These examples of things that adults can accomplish in the real world at each level of performance on the continuum are useful to adult learners and to their teachers as ways of making concrete the purpose and need for attaining increasing proficiency in performance on the standard.

Listen Actively—Performance Level 2 **(Exit point for NRS High Intermediate ESL level)**

At this level adults are able to:

1. Listen Actively:

- Attend to oral information;
- Clarify purpose for listening and use listening strategies appropriate to that purpose;
- Monitor comprehension, adjusting strategies to overcome barriers to comprehension;
- Integrate information from listening with prior knowledge to address the listening purpose.

2. Use Key Knowledge, Skills, and Strategies

Adults performing at Level 2 are able to:

- Understand and respond to explanations, conversations, instructions, and narratives made up of sentence-length utterances and some connected discourse on familiar topics related to personal background and needs, social conventions, and everyday tasks;
- Use several strategies, including formulas for asking for repetition and clarification, and strategies for indicating understanding, for giving feedback, for gathering missing information, and/or for repairing problems in comprehension, such as by rephrasing, substituting a different word, or drawing a picture;
- Apply linguistic, sociocultural, and other background knowledge and strategies (such as expressing an opinion or collecting relevant information) to understand the intent of the speaker and what is required to respond appropriately and to meet the listening purpose.

3. Show Fluency, Independence, and Ability to Perform in a Range of Settings

Adults performing at Level 2 can listen for structured and well-defined purposes related to maintaining personal conversations, acquiring information, or completing basic transactions, either face-to-face or in a brief telephone conversation when language is somewhat simplified and frequent opportunities for repetition, rewording, and clarification are provided. For English language learners, level of ease using English may be growing but varies depending on the level of familiarity with the audience and purpose and the stressfulness of the context.

4. Accomplish a Variety of Communication Purposes

Adults performing at Level 2 can Listen Actively to accomplish a variety of goals, such as:

- Listening for and identifying relevant information to pass along in a face-to-face conversation (such as a safety problem and to whom it should be reported);
- Participating in a conversation in which a speaker gives background information about his or her experiences and the listener appropriately shares one or two experiences about the same topic;
- Listening to a recorded telephone message adjusted for English language learners (such as weather-related school closings or simple driving directions) and pass on details to another person;
- Following a series of multistep instructions (such as a demonstration of a more complex piece of equipment or appliance) and using several strategies to confirm and clarify understanding;
- Listening for and following the main idea in different kinds of small-group presentations (such as about a school field trip or community cleanup day).

Listen Actively—Performance Level 3
(Exit point for NRS Low Advanced ESL Level)

At this level adults are able to:

1. Listen Actively:

- Attend to oral information;
- Clarify purpose for listening and use listening strategies appropriate to that purpose;
- Monitor comprehension, adjusting strategies to overcome barriers to comprehension;
- Integrate information from listening with prior knowledge to address the listening purpose.

2. Use Key Knowledge, Skills, and Strategies

Adults performing at Level 3 are able to:

- Understand and respond to conversations, explanations, instructions, and short narratives of a somewhat complex nature but related to familiar tasks and situations. Tasks may include short routine telephone conversations and some simple information conveyed through electronic media, such as television or radio;
- Know when to use a range of strategies to repair gaps in understanding, comprehend information, and give feedback even when opportunities to seek clarification or repetition are somewhat limited and the context is somewhat unfamiliar;
- Apply linguistic, sociocultural, and other background knowledge and strategies (such as by taking notes and summarizing main points to share with others, evaluating what was heard, and sharing responses of a more complex nature) to understand the main intent and details

communicated by the speaker, to respond appropriately, and to meet the listening purpose.

3. Show Fluency, Independence, and Ability to Perform in a Range of Settings

Adults performing at Level 3 can listen and respond to most basic content related to personal background information, everyday transactions, and simple routine tasks but understanding the full range of details on less familiar topics may still be uneven. Only limited adjustments in the text may be made. English language learners display growing comfort using English in simple interactions and social situations but may be less at ease in more complex and/or stressful contexts.

4. Accomplish a Variety of Communication Purposes

Adults performing at Level 3 can Listen Actively to accomplish a variety of goals, such as:

- Listening and making relevant contributions in a small-group planning meeting (such as planning for a parent's meeting or class trip);
- Listening to a simple, authentic television news report, summarizing the issues addressed, and expressing an opinion on the topic;
- Listening to a presentation to identify key information relevant to one's own situation (such as information related to enrolling in a vocational program);
- Listening and providing appropriate feedback and response as a familiar, nonthreatening speaker describes a personal problem (such as a classmate describing a problem getting to class or finding the funds to buy a new car);
- Taking part in a simulated job interview, responding appropriately to open-ended questions related to one's own experience and skills.

How Can a Standards-Based Assessment Framework Be Used to Guide Learner-Centered Teaching and Assessment?

The Listen Actively performance levels are a foundation for specifications for assessment development. Test publishers can use the performance levels to develop standardized, high-stakes tests. At the same time, teachers and others can use the levels to evaluate and informally monitor student performance and to develop a variety of (low-stakes) instructional assessments. It is through such a common framework that the alignment of high-stakes (accountability) and low-stakes (instructional) assessment is possible. When such alignment is achieved and when assessments are developed to meet the quality criteria described above, teaching to the test becomes good instructional practice.

In response to questions from teachers and others about what teaching, learning, and assessment in a standards-aligned system might look like in practice, EFF staff and field researchers developed an eight-step EFF

Teaching/Learning Cycle. The Teaching/Learning Cycle provides guidelines for a standards-based and learner-centered approach to teaching and learning that can be adapted by teachers in a variety of contexts. The basic steps of the cycle are described in Figure 4. More details, examples from practice, and a Teaching/Learning Toolkit of resources for teachers can be found on-line (<http://eff.cls.utk.edu/toolkit>).

Figure 4
Steps in the EFF Teaching/Learning Cycle

Step 1. Determine the adult learner's goals and purposes and identify the standards that will help him or her achieve them. Identify the learner's prior knowledge about the goals and standards.

Step 2. Identify a shared interest, purpose, or goal and determine the group's prior knowledge of the topic. Identify the standard that will help the group address the shared goal. Make clear the connection between the class focus and individual learners' needs.

Step 3. Design a learning activity to address the real-life concerns of the learner(s).

Step 4. Develop a plan to capture evidence and report learning.

Step 5. Carry out the learning activity.

Step 6. Observe and document evidence of performance of the standard.

Step 7. Evaluate and reflect on how what was learned is transferable to real-life situations.

Step 8. Determine next steps to help learners meet their goals.

As illustrated in the steps described above, the instructional process begins with finding out individual adult learners' interests and immediate real-world goals through intake and goal-setting activities that take place in the classroom. (See the EFF Teaching/Learning Toolkit at <http://eff.cls.utk.edu/toolkit> for suggested activities). As part of this process, adult learners and teachers together identify the EFF standard that will be the focus of instruction (Step 1).

Recall the scenario of standards-based, learner-centered instruction in the multilevel ESOL family literacy class described in the introduction. The teacher in the scenario identified the EFF standards Listen Actively and Speak So Others Can Understand as focal points for instruction based on a student request and a follow-up discussion with the class. The class discussion in the scenario corresponds to Step 2. During this process, learners begin to become familiar with the standard and how the standard can help them to meet real-world goals (in this case, prepare for the parent/teacher conference). Through the discussion with the teacher's help, learners identify "what we already know/can do" and "what we still need to find out/be able to do." This is an informal assessment of prior knowledge and experience with activities related to the goal and to the standards. As noted above, the teacher was able to use this discussion in combination with EFF performance-level

descriptions to identify “gaps” in key knowledge, skills, and strategies, and starting points for instruction.

Self-assessment is also a part of the scenario. Note that the adult learners in the scenario are actively involved in developing learning activities (Step 3) to help them to meet their goal of building listening skills to prepare for the parent/teacher conferences. At the same time, as their teacher helps them decide on instructional activities to build listening skills, she also focuses the learners’ attention on the question of how they (and others) will know they are making progress in developing listening skills. The class discussion follows a simple planning guide prepared by the teacher that poses three key questions:

- What do we need to know?
- How can we learn it?
- How will we show we know it?

In planning learning activities, the teacher in our scenario looks to the EFF performance level just above the level that best describes the students’ current listening performance. The students who generally show listening-performance ability that matches the performance-level descriptions at EFF Level 1 will work on the knowledge, skills, and strategies described in EFF Performance Level 2; those showing EFF Level 2 ability will work on the skills described in Level 3; and so on. For the students who will be working on the level of listening performance described at EFF Level 2, the teacher prepares a set of activities that focus on learning and practicing formulaic clarification questions and requests for repetition. For those students working on the listening performance described at EFF Level 4, on the other hand, the teacher prepares learning activities that include practice in listening for and responding to the affect conveyed by a teacher’s comments—what aspects of their child’s schoolwork is the teacher pleased with, what aspects displease the teacher?

Once the teacher (based on input from the learners) has developed and implemented her plans for instructional activities appropriate to their various levels of skill in use of active listening strategies (Step 5), she also communicates the criteria that will be used to assess learning progress and results (Step 6). A set of scoring rubrics developed by the teacher plays a large role in providing this information to students and to the teacher. In this case, the teacher develops her own rubrics by selecting level indicators (particular knowledge, skills, or strategies, or descriptions of fluency, independence, and range of performance) from the EFF performance-level descriptions that fit the evidence (observable behavior and work products) available from the students’ practice using the questionnaire in simulated parent/teacher conferences. These rubrics are shared and discussed with students as they continue practicing parent/teacher conferences so that they can evaluate their own and their peers’ learning progress.

To create her own instructional assessments and scoring rubrics aligned to the EFF standard Listen Actively, the teacher in our scenario follows some

guidelines that EFF staff have developed to help teachers use the EFF performance levels for this purpose. These guidelines are meant to help teachers think through two key points—gathering sufficient performance evidence and then scoring it fairly and appropriately.

First, we ask a teacher to consider the *issue, problem, or topic* that is, or recently has been, the context for teaching and learning to a targeted standard at a particular level. Next, we ask the teacher to think about a meaningful, real-life task related to that issue, problem, or topic that learners will care about accomplishing, that is doable in the instructional setting, and that will allow learners to produce evidence that they have mastered (or have not yet mastered) the targeted standard at the appropriate level. Finally, we suggest that teachers use the descriptions in Sections 2 and 3 of the performance continuum to:

- Clearly identify (and share with learners) the performance goal of the task: Why and in what meaningful context will learners use the targeted EFF standard in this task?
- Outline the major activities or components of the task: What will learners do?
- Decide what kind of performance evidence learners can generate during the task—and how that evidence will be documented and collected.
- Identify any texts, tools, or other materials (including answer sheets, observation forms, and so on that teachers will need to develop to collect performance evidence) that learners will use to perform the task.
- Plan for where learners will perform the task and approximately how much time they will need to complete it.

As noted in the scenario, as the time of the actual parent/teacher conferences approaches, a more formal assessment of the learners' readiness for the conferences is conducted. Toward the end of the cycle, teachers and learners are encouraged to reflect on what they have learned from the learning activities, their ongoing assessment work, and their participation in any instructional assessments that were part of the activity (Step 7). This step allows them to evaluate what they have learned, how it can help them to meet their real-world goals, and how their learning might transfer to other life roles and situations. Finally, just before the time of the parent/teacher conferences, the teacher in our scenario conducts the formal assessment to document achievement of a higher level of performance in the use of active listening strategies (Step 8). This assessment is an opportunity for the learners to demonstrate to themselves and others what they have accomplished. It is also an opportunity for the teacher to evaluate their strengths and advise them on how these strengths can help them in the upcoming parent/teacher conference. By knowing their strengths (and weaknesses) as listeners, the students in the class can gain confidence in their ability and plan strategies for repairing lapses in listening comprehension. The post-assessment discussion is also an opportunity for the teacher and learners to discuss needs for future instruc-

tion and learning. Looking further ahead, the fact that the instruction and assessment in the scenario is standards-based, as well as learner-centered, means that the achievement indicated by the end-of-the-unit assessment has a place on a continuum of performance levels. Each adult learner can see his or her place on the continuum of increasing proficiency. They and their teacher can see what they need to be taught and learn to reach higher levels of proficiency—including levels of proficiency consistent with assessing and reporting learning gains for program accountability.

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Endnotes

- ¹ The *Equipped for the Future Assessment Report* by Sri Ananda (2000) lays out guidelines for quality in low-stakes, classroom uses of assessment within the EFF Framework. Another EFF publication, *Results That Matter* (Bingman & Stein, 2001), describes quality criteria for uses of assessment within a model of program improvement using EFF. In *Improving Performance, Reporting Results: The Guide to the Read With Understanding Assessment Prototype* (EFF Assessment Consortium, 2004), we describe the development of the EFF performance levels and provide a working model of standardized performance assessments to be used to measure and report learning gains to meet guidelines for accountability in the National Reporting System (see DAEL, 2001).
- ² See also the general standards for assessment development and use published by the American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, and the National Council on Measurement in Education (AERA/APA/NCME, 1999).
- ³ For details on field data collection and analyses, see “Equipped for the Future/National Reporting System Data Collection Project, 2000–2001: An Interim Report on the Development of the Equipped for the Future

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