Focus Question:
What can I use from the ideas on feedback and assessment for learning in UK primary classrooms?

Shirley Clarke talks about learning goals and feedback
Shirley Clarke, from the UK, has worked on assessment for learning with primary teachers and students. She is now an author of resource material and a consultant on assessment in the UK.

Interview transcript
Shirley Clarke was [formerly a] lecturer in assessment and curriculum at the Institute of Education, University of London, and is author of Targeting Assessment in the Primary Classroom, Unlocking Formative Assessment, and Enriching Feedback in the Primary Classroom.

In July 2002 she visited New Zealand at the invitation of the Ministry of Education, to speak to assessment groups. This is an edited transcript of an interview with Dr Jenny Poskitt, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Learning and Teaching at Massey University. She asked Shirley Clarke about practical ways for teachers to implement formative assessment strategies in the classroom.

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Based on the findings in the Gillingham report, what strategies are there for ... teachers to improve learning?

If they are working on their own and not making whole-staff decisions, it’s important to realise that it’s not a quick fix – they shouldn’t try to do everything in one day. They could start with sharing the learning intentions in the classroom, in one subject, and then begin to develop success criteria. Don’t worry about everything being perfect. Gradually, over a year, introduce other things, and see that year as an experiment.

How and when can teachers share learning intentions?
The usual time is in the first five minutes, when you tell the children, “We are learning to ...” and write it on the whiteboard.

Secondly, when you’re teaching, invite them to come up with the success criteria just before you give them the task: “What will you need to do to achieve this learning intention?” The teacher will have already planned these.

What might teachers think about when giving feedback?
The research shows that to be effective, whether it’s oral or written, feedback should be tailored to inform children about what they’ve done, against the learning intention of the task – rather than on other superficial features. At best, it should focus on where they achieve success, and how they can improve.

What strategies are there for giving feedback?

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There are three basic approaches. The easiest is to refer the child to the learning intention of the task, as a reminder: “Can you explain more about this?” However, this is more effective with the brighter child, and not so helpful for many other children.

For those who need some support, the teacher needs to make a leap, and ask herself: “What would I do if I were the child? How can I feed this into the improvement suggestion?” Model what they might write, or put the idea you want them to elaborate on, into a starting sentence.

Thirdly, you can give children an example prompt. This is where you write two examples of what the child might write for the improvement, with the prompt, “Choose one of these, or write your own.” It’s amazing how many children, given this type of prompt, come up with an improvement of their own after the stimulus of the teacher’s ideas.

What are the Gillingham findings on marking?
We asked teachers to mark work once a week at a distance against the learning objective, highlighting one, two, or three successes for a specific part, and writing up one improvement suggestion. The impact was remarkable – they found a great improvement in students’ work. The children loved the specificity of the marking, and teachers found it surprising what the children were capable of. But there is a learning curve as you find out which improvements work best.

To what extent can students and their peers assist in this, as opposed to teacher modelling?
The process is so specific, it’s relatively easy to start to hand over control to the children. Within two or three weeks, you could ask students to identify their own successes against the learning objective alone, or in pairs (for instance by circling). Then in discussion they could identify areas for improvement against the learning intention. Eventually they will make their own improvements.

To train children to understand and use this marking strategy, teachers find it works well to take a story, on a piece of acetate, using the OHP. They go through the whole thing with the class, marking it together and looking for one to three successes and one improvement point. This whole-class approach provides a rich learning experience, because so much can be discussed rather than simply written on paper. Teachers do this on a regular basis. They’ve also found that a guided writing session is a useful time to use the strategy.

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Note:
The “Gillingham Report” mentioned above is available for download in three parts from the AAIA website in the UK at: http://www.aaia.org.uk/assessment.asp

Reflection Question:

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