



LEARNER FEEDBACK

for Language Growth

By Megan Budke, Karen Nickel, and Sarah Strauss

Megan Budke, Karen Nickel, and Sarah Strauss are co-authors of Learner Feedback for Language Growth: A Guidebook for Evaluating Learner Work Through Performance Domains and Indicators, published by ACTFL in 2024. This article summarizes their feedback framework and includes excerpts from the book. Go to tinyurl.com/387tkmbw or scan the QR code for access to this excellent book!



Feedback is information about a performance that is used for improvement towards achieving a goal (Fisher, Frey, & Almarode, 2021; Wiggins, 2012). It is a critical component for advancing learners' language proficiency (ACTFL, 2022). When feedback highlights what learners *can do* and indicates what to do next, it builds learners' capacity and develops their efficacy.

What Makes Feedback Effective?

Feedback is most effective when it (1) provides information about where the learner is, (2) provides information about where the learner is going, and (3) promotes learner thinking on how to take the next steps (Brookhart, 2017; Fisher, et al., 2021; Hammond, 2014; Wiggins, 2012).

Information in all three of these areas is needed for feedback to be goal-referenced, actionable, tangible and transparent, and

user-friendly (Wiggins, 2012). This type of feedback effectively encourages a *can-do* attitude, empowering learners to take action in the learning process to achieve their goals.

What Does Effective Feedback Look Like After a Learner's Performance?

Effective feedback states where the learner is (*You used simple sentences most of the time*), where the learner is going (*moving from the “Meeting” level of performance to the “Exceeding” level of performance in Text Type*), and promotes thinking on how to get there (*How might you write multiple sentences about one activity to create a series of sentences?*). When feedback is provided in all three of these key areas, learners are equipped to take action (Fisher et al., 2021) and adjust subsequent performances for improvement. See Table 1 for learner performance, a scoring rubric, and sample feedback.

Table 1

Sample Learner Performance, Evaluation, and Feedback Possibilities

<p style="text-align: center;">Target performance level: Novice Context: familiar, informal, predictable Content: familiar, everyday</p>	
Task	Write a digital post introducing yourself to the class.
Sample learner response	<i>Hi, my name is Emerson. I is United States. I is 11. My birthday is February 6. I like to play sports. A lot summer. I don't like to sing. Sometimes dance. I is not funny. I like to draw. I like to run. I don't like to write stories. I like to read.</i>

Evaluation: This sample learner response matches the description for the *Meeting* level of Text Type for learners performing within the Novice level.

TEXT TYPE				
	EXCEEDING	MEETING	DEVELOPING	BEGINNING
Performance Domain Indicators	I can form simple sentences, and at times, a series of sentences.	I can use simple sentences most of the time.	I can use practiced and memorized words and phrases, and at times, use simple sentences.	I can use practiced and memorized words and phrases.

GLOW: You used simple sentences most of the time.

GROW: How might you write multiple sentences about one activity to create a series of sentences?

Adapted from Learner Feedback for Language Growth: A Guidebook for Evaluating Learner Work Through Performance Domains and Indicators.

The scoring criteria in Table 1 is an example of Performance Domain Indicators (PDIs) for the Text Type performance domain. The PDIs are meant to create a common language among educators as well as between educators and learners using terms found across ACTFL resources. These PDIs play a crucial role in how world language educators assess learner performance and provide effective feedback. Each performance domain focuses on different aspects of how a learner can perform within a given performance task, creating a continuum of language performance based on established criteria.

When providing feedback for language growth, the how, when, and what we say impacts our learners. Wiggins (2012) notes key elements to consider for effective feedback: Is it goal-referenced? Is it actionable, tangible, and transparent? Is it user-friendly? Is it timely, ongoing, and consistent? Let's consider how these elements of effective feedback apply to the PDIs, using the feedback examples from Table 1.

• Is it goal-referenced?

The PDIs establish communicative goals for learners to work toward with each performance task. Feedback that incorporates the PDIs is goal-referenced because it directly references the communicative goals for the learner and describes the pathway to language growth. For example, the feedback *You used simple sentences most of the time* describes what the learner can do by directly referencing the *Meeting* level of the Text Type performance domain. This feedback indicates where the learner is performing within the Text Type performance domain.

The feedback *How might you write multiple sentences about one activity to create a series of sentences?* is also goal-referenced, as it refers to the *Exceeding* level of the Text Type performance domain. It indicates a new goal for the learner, or where the learner is going next. The learner can now consider what adjustments or new learning might need to take place to reach this next goal.

• Is it actionable, tangible, and transparent?

Empowering learners to take action upon receiving feedback requires careful consideration of the language used to provide feedback. Providing feedback on what a learner *can do* in reference to the PDIs articulates observable and tangible elements of learner success in their performance. The feedback *You used simple sentences most of the time* is transparent, directly referencing a concrete skill the learner can demonstrate when communicating their message.

When considering how to spur learners to take action, Brookhart (2017) indicates that learners need sufficient guidance, but not so much that they passively receive feedback and do not think for themselves. For example, if the learner receives the feedback *I think you should write multiple sentences about sports*, the educator has done much of the thinking on behalf of the learner. However, when feedback is recast as an open-ended question—*How might you write multiple sentences about one activity to create a series of sentences?*—the learner is now invited to consider the possibilities of how they might approach a performance task differently and make choices in how they communicate their message.

• Is it user-friendly?

According to Wiggins (2012), feedback is not effective if the learner cannot understand it or is overwhelmed by it. User-friendly feedback is jargon-free: it avoids highly technical, abstract language, acronyms, or abbreviations. Instead, effective feedback uses learner-friendly language, or language that is descriptive, specific, and developmentally appropriate for learners (Moss & Brookhart, 2012).

Educators also need to consider how much feedback to give. We can help guide learners by focusing feedback on one or two performance domains. For example, the feedback examples provided in Table 1 focus on the Text Type performance domain. A balance of what went well and what could be improved is important.

First, provide feedback that indicates a learner's current level of performance. This aspect of feedback focuses on what the learner does well when communicating a message. For example, *You used simple sentences most of the time* directly references what the learner is able to do successfully within the Text Type performance domain.

Second, provide feedback that indicates an area of improvement for the learner. This feedback should also indicate where the learner is going, or the next performance level. The feedback *How might you write multiple sentences about one activity to create a series of sentences?* indicates a clear pathway of action for learner growth within the Text Type performance domain.

• Is it timely, ongoing, and consistent?

Effective feedback needs to occur while learners are still working on the learning goal. Both Brookhart (2017) and Hammond (2014) indicate that feedback is timely when it is given on something that learners are still striving for, not something that they have already

done. Without prompt feedback, learners can become disconnected from the performance task and lose motivation to improve.

Understandably, one educator cannot promptly provide feedback on all tasks for all learners all the time. Therefore, educators must provide learners with opportunities to self-assess and evaluate their own performances while they are still striving towards their goals. See Figure 2, Table 2, and go to tinyurl.com/self-assessments-2024 for examples of learner self-assessments based on the PDIs.

Learners who self-assess using the PDIs are empowered to own their learning, play an active role in the feedback process, and adjust their performance to achieve their goals. When this happens during the learning process, it allows for timely, ongoing, and consistent feedback opportunities.

Feedback Pitfalls

Here are some common feedback pitfalls and ways we can shift to focus on more effective feedback practices.

• Prioritizing accuracy

Effective feedback focuses on what learners can do to promote learner language growth; that is, it focuses on the meaning of the message the learner is trying to communicate. In contrast, over-emphasizing feedback on form and accuracy can lead to learner demotivation (Reichelt, 2019). Feedback solely focused on accuracy does not value learners' efforts to express meaning. Research has shown mixed results when feedback focuses on error correction.

When it comes to feedback on grammatical accuracy, the type of feedback provided (direct versus indirect error correction), who provides it (teacher or peers), and how it is provided (written, oral, or digital) have varying degrees of impact (Truscott, 2007; Biber, Nekrasova, & Horn, 2011; Sippel & Jackson, 2015; Glisan & Donato, 2017; Sánchez-Naranjo, 2019).

Ultimately, no matter how it's done, feedback that focuses on grammatical accuracy is based on a deficit model, focusing on what learners cannot do. This does not motivate learners to act towards achieving their goal to communicate meaningful messages.

To avoid this feedback pitfall, we suggest using the PDIs as goal-referenced feedback that recognizes and builds on learner assets. That is, focus feedback on what learners *can do*, even if some inaccuracies occur, and what the next steps might be on their pathway to language growth. Consider the comprehensibility of the learner's message, or how well their message is understood by their partner or audience. If the message is comprehensible, focus feedback on one or two performance domains that highlight what the learner can do (GLOW comment) and an area for growth (GROW question).

When inaccuracies do interfere with the message the learner is trying to communicate, feedback can still focus on the goal-referenced PDIs that best support a learner to convey a comprehensible and appropriate message. Focus feedback on the type of error that, if improved upon, would enhance communication.

• Too much feedback

Too much feedback is overwhelming and will be counter-productive (Wiggins, 2012). Instead, focus feedback on just one or two performance domains. Strive for a balance of what the learner can do successfully and an area for improvement. Select one area of achievement that is reflective of what a learner can do well and provide feedback using a GLOW comment. Then, select one area that has potential for growth and provide feedback using a GROW question.

• Short-term goals

Short-term goals based on specific themes, vocabulary, and grammatical structures within a unit of study are limited to the content of that specific unit. That is, the goals will differ from unit to unit based on content. For example, unit goals such as *I can compare and contrast school experiences in different countries* or *I can use the present progressive* are limited to specific content covered within a unit.

In contrast, the PDIs provide both educators and learners with opportunities to remain focused on long-term, overarching communicative goals, such as the targeted level of performance for a course. For example, using the Text Type PDI *I can use simple sentences most*

of the time serves as a long-term, overarching communicative goal throughout multiple units within a course that is targeting the Novice High performance level.

Using the PDIs that align to the target performance level of a course ensures that the communicative goals remain consistent throughout multiple units of varying content. This consistency can lead learners to a deeper understanding of the performance domains and the expectations of performance, which form their pathway to language growth. It also provides learners with multiple opportunities to meet expectations, over time, throughout different units of content.

• Educator-designed and educator-driven

Feedback is not meant to be educator-designed and educator-driven. That is, educators do not need to both design and provide all the feedback to learners all the time. Rather, learners should take an active part in the feedback process.

See Figure 1 for a *Performance Domain Indicators (PDIs)* Assessment and Feedback Guide that streamlines feedback so it is teacher-designed in a way that can be replicated, reproduced, and reused in every unit. Guides specific to each performance domain can be used to provide feedback that is learner-driven.

Figure 1

A Sample of Novice High from the *Performance Domain Indicators (PDIs)* Assessment and Feedback Guide for the Text Type Performance Domain

TEXT TYPE			
Guiding questions	Performance Domain Indicator	GLOW	GROW
<p>Novice High Meeting Can the learner:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> use simple sentences most of the time throughout the performance? <p>What learners do without assistance</p>	<p>The PDI for the targeted performance level in this unit</p> <p>Target performance level: Novice High Context: familiar, informal, formal, predictable Content: familiar, everyday</p> <p>I can use simple sentences most of the time.</p>	<p>What the learners can do in reference to the goal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> You use simple sentences most of the time throughout your performance. 	<p>Questions to help learners consider changes they might enact that will lead to improvement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How might you group sentences on a related topic into a logical sequence to create a series of sentences? How might you say/write multiple sentences on a related topic to create a series of sentences? What connectors (<i>and, but, or, for, so</i>) could you add to better link your ideas?

Adapted from Learner Feedback for Language Growth: A Guidebook for Evaluating Learner Work Through Performance Domains and Indicators.

Self-Assessment Strategies For Learners

Figure 2

Self-Assessment Using the “Make It Visible” Strategy

Directions: Read over your presentational work and mark it accordingly:

- Highlight simple sentences in blue.
- Underline series of sentences.
- **Bold** any coordinators (*and, but, or, for, so*) or subordinating conjunctions (*because*).

Example of how the learner, performing within the Novice level, completes this self-assessment:

Hi, my name is Emerson. I is United States. I is 11. My birthday is February 6. I like to play sports. A lot summer. I don’t like to sing. I is not funny. I like to draw. I like to run. I don’t like to write stories. I like to read.

Adapted from Learner Feedback for Language Growth: A Guidebook for Evaluating Learner Work Through Performance Domains and Indicators.

Table 2

Example of How a Learner, Performing Within the Novice Level, Completes a Self-Assessment Using the GLOW and GROW Framework

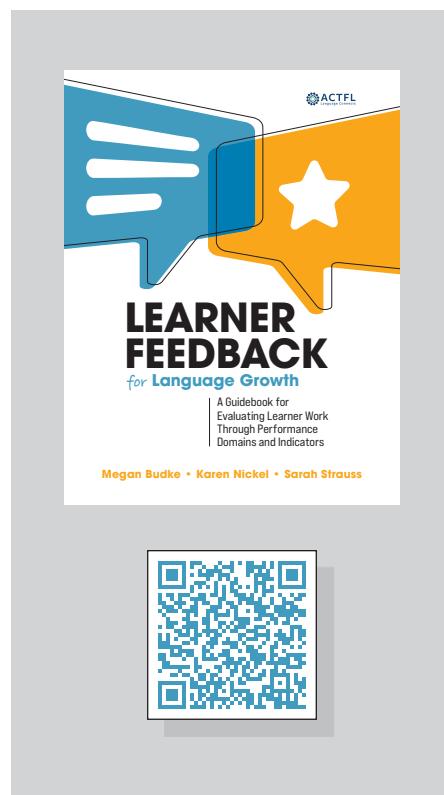
TEXT TYPE		
Target performance level: Novice High Context: familiar, informal, formal, predictable Content: familiar, everyday		
Instructions: Complete the following reflection by writing where you GLOW and where you can GROW in each area. Make sure to include <u>evidence</u> from your work to support your reasoning.		
Where I GLOW: What are my strengths?	Performance Domain Indicator	How can I GROW? What can I do to improve?
I think I used simple sentences most of the time.	I can use simple sentences most of the time.	I could write more than one sentence about one of the activities to create a series of sentences.
GLOW IDEAS		GROW IDEAS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did you use simple sentences most of the time throughout your performance? 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How might you group sentences on a related topic into a logical sequence to create a series of sentences? • How might you say/write multiple sentences on a related topic to create a series of sentences? • What coordinators (<i>and, but, or, for, so</i>) could you add to better connect your idea?

Adapted from Learner Feedback for Language Growth: A Guidebook for Evaluating Learner Work Through Performance Domains and Indicators.

In addition, learners can use the feedback structures provided to self-assess, shifting responsibility and ownership to learners. Learners might self-assess by:

- Using the *guiding questions* in the *Performance Domain Indicators (PDIs) Assessment and Feedback Guide* (Figure 1) in each performance domain to evaluate their own work.
- Circling, highlighting, underlining, using parentheses, or color-coding their work to make features of their performance more visible (see Figure 2).
- Reflecting on the *Meeting PDI* using the GLOW (*What are my strengths?*) and the *Exceeding PDI* using the GROW (*What can I do to improve?*) prompts (see Table 2).
- Using the guided self-assessments (see Figure 3 at [tinyurl.com/](https://tinyurl.com/self-assessments-2024) **self-assessments-2024**), which provide scaffolded questions for learners to reflect upon before determining their level of performance in a performance domain as well as next steps for language growth.

These learner-driven strategies are designed to promote learner ownership and build learner confidence. Regular, ongoing, and consistent self-assessment can promote learner metacognition and self-regulation.



As learners become more self-aware, they have a better understanding of how language helps them communicate a comprehensible and appropriate message to successfully complete performance tasks. They can own their learning, increasing

their motivation and understanding. This leads to self-regulation: that is, learners who use and control their own thought processes (Brookhart, 2017). Learners who self-regulate are able to decide on their next learning goals and have the tools to select and/or devise strategies to reach those goals.

Conclusion

To encourage a *can-do* attitude of confidence, feedback must describe where the learner is, where the learner is going, and promote thinking on how to get there. Use the tools provided to offer effective feedback to your language learners: guiding questions to evaluate their work, the PDIs, GLOW achievement comments, and GROW questions. These tools are intended to empower both educators and learners.

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