Practice guide for primary and secondary schools

Develop techniques and practices

Australian Education Research Organisation

Monitor progress

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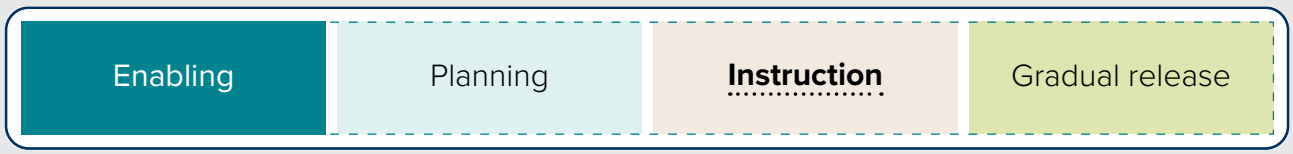
Monitoring students' progress by checking for understanding helps you determine what they know and can do, identify gaps in their learning, and adjust your teaching to meet their needs.[1] It helps you create a learning environment where students feel safe and supported to be active participants in the learning process, and it better equips you to provide valuable feedback.[2] Checking for understanding is a crucial part of effective instruction and formative assessment.

This practice guide will help you understand how to:

- check your students understand and can apply the knowledge and skills they have gained
- be responsive to students' needs by supporting them with additional instruction, guidance or feedback where necessary.

Check for understanding and give additional instruction, guidance or feedback as needed (*Monitor progress*) is one of 18 interconnected practices in our Teaching for How Students Learn model of learning and teaching. This practice sits in the **Instruction** phase, which focuses on managing students' cognitive load as they process and acquire new learning. This practice is interconnected with:

- **Enabling**, which focuses on positive, respectful relationships in a culturally safe, learning-focused environment
- **Planning**, which focuses on developing and using a sequenced and structured plan for the knowledge and skills students will acquire
- **Gradual release**, which focuses on maximising students' opportunities to retain, consolidate, and apply their learning.



Understanding this practice

The following examples demonstrate what checking for understanding and giving additional instruction, guidance or feedback might look like in the classroom, and potential misapplications in practice.

What it is

- Checking students' understanding regularly throughout a lesson, including before moving to independent practice or removing scaffolds.
- Checking students' understanding using varied methods during a lesson to support students with sharing and explaining how they arrived at their answers.
- Being responsive to the difficulties or misconceptions students demonstrate during checks for understanding by reteaching or providing additional instruction to students in temporary and flexible groupings, or to the whole class as needed.
- Providing prompt verbal feedback, correcting misconceptions and explaining correct answers and processes as you proceed through a lesson.

What it isn't

- Checking students' understanding only at the end of a lesson or sequence of learning.
- Closed and non-specific questions (such as 'Does everyone understand how to solve this problem?') that don't prompt and support students to explain their thinking.
- Dividing the class into subgroups with different instructional approaches and curriculum goals for extended periods.
- Attempting to provide written feedback to every student in every lesson, or only providing feedback on tests or assignments.

The importance of monitoring progress for effective teaching and learning

Key points from the research

- Regularly checking students' understanding can help teachers identify additional learning needs, allowing them to refer students for additional small group or individual intervention that is delivered with increased intensity and frequency as necessary.[3]
- Checking student's understanding in multiple ways can support diverse learning needs – for example, using non-verbal signals to allow EAL/D students to demonstrate their learning.[4]
- When teachers ask students questions about what they're learning, it prompts students to draw from long-term memory. Retrieving learning from memory builds new and strong connections, consolidating that learning and connecting new information with what students already know.[5]
- Each opportunity to draw on prior learning and practice helps students retain knowledge in long-term memory and consolidate their understanding. Over time, and with varied opportunities to check their understanding and receive feedback, students construct more accurate and meaningful mental summaries of what they've learned.[6]
- Checking students' understanding is part of a broader assessment landscape that encompasses different assessment cycles for learning.[7] Short-cycle formative assessment, like checking for understanding during a lesson, provides greater impact than assessment cycles that span weeks or terms because it generates immediate and relevant feedback, and facilitates on-the-spot adjustments in teaching focus.[8] Our review of the evidence on formative assessment in different contexts indicates that it's beneficial for student learning across age groups, abilities and key learning areas.

Key strategies and techniques

Combining effective questioning, active engagement with students, and timely feedback in a safe and supportive environment will help you embed ongoing progress monitoring and responsiveness to learning needs in your teaching. This section describes key strategies and techniques (see summary in Figure 1) that can support you with checking for understanding and offering additional instruction, guidance and feedback as required.

Figure 1: Key strategies and techniques to monitor progress

Key strategies	Key techniques
Use checks for understanding to support active participation in learning	Check for understanding frequently throughout each lesson Connect with learning objectives and success criteria Use varied methods to reinforce active participation by all students Use predictable routines and provide constructive responses
Support students to progress with additional instruction, guidance or feedback	Respond to struggles or mistakes promptly Guide attempts to respond Frame feedback constructively
Use evidence of learning to inform teaching decisions	Monitor errors to decide whether to provide feedback or additional instruction and guidance Move between guided and independent practice with flexible groupings Monitor for students who may need small group or individual intervention Draw on student responses to check your practice

Use checks for understanding to support active participation in learning

Check for understanding frequently throughout each lesson

Use checks for understanding both when introducing new content, and throughout learning, rather than waiting until the end of a lesson or a sequence of learning. Checking for understanding regularly during a lesson allows you to identify misunderstandings as they develop, rather than allowing students to repeat mistakes, practise incorrectly and commit misconceptions to memory.

Connect with learning objectives and success criteria

Before a lesson, develop key questions that will check the understanding of students about subject matter that is directly related to the learning objectives and success criteria. This alignment will help students become familiar with what they are able to do, know or demonstrate during that lesson, as well as where to go next. Use checks for understanding that reinforce *already stated* expectations to reinforce students' focus on the relevant area.

Use varied methods to reinforce active participation by all students

Allow and support students to explain their learning in different ways at various points during their learning. Invite responses at individual, group and whole-class levels so all students can participate and use a variety of methods to suit diverse student needs. For example, a shy student may prefer to share their learning without always having to answer questions in front of the whole class. Consider how you can use these methods so all students are prompted to think and be ready to respond, even if they're not required to provide a response at that time.

You can use the following examples of methods for checking understanding to inform your next teaching decisions, based on students' responses:

- Ask students to simultaneously show their answers on mini whiteboards or using digital platforms.
- Ask all students to 'turn and talk', explaining their answers with a peer before asking a random, small number of students to share back to the whole class.
- Call on a student to describe aloud how they solved a problem or completed a task (supported with regular modelling of what 'thinking aloud' looks like and sounds like by the teacher).
- Ask the class or individual students specific questions about what you've just taught. If a student struggles to answer, move on to another student before circling back to give them another turn.
- Ask a student to explain their opinion on a topic, and why they think that way.
- Ask all students to self-rate their level of agreement, current level of confidence, or response to a multi-choice question by raising a certain number of fingers, or using another non-verbal cue or gesture.
- Ask students to fill in exit slips to answer a question, identify what they've learnt or highlight concepts that need further teaching or revision.

Use predictable routines and provide constructive responses

Establish and practise consistent, constructive routines associated with checking for understanding so students know what to expect and how to respond, and feel safe taking risks, making mistakes and learning from them. For example, this can include routines for calling on individual students, sharing with a peer and reporting back, or routines for whole-class concurrent responses. Develop routines students can initiate to signal when they need guidance. For example, students can learn to place a coloured pop stick on their desk to seek teacher attention, or use exit slips that give them an avenue to inform teaching decisions for the next lesson.

Support students to progress with additional instruction, guidance or feedback

Respond to struggles or mistakes promptly

Provide timely feedback or guidance to students. Unaddressed difficulties or repetition of incorrect answers or mistakes can lead to misconceptions forming, and to students feeling they don't have the support they need to overcome and strive for challenge. Timely feedback and guidance allow students to monitor and adjust their approach to learning. Feedback may be direct, such as verbal corrections or reteaching on the board, or indirect, such as providing a scaffold for students to use to review and correct their work.

Guide attempts to respond

If students don't know how to answer a question, offer supportive guidance rather than allowing them to pass and moving on. Instead, you could establish a routine approach to moving on and circling back later to a student who is struggling. Support students to keep thinking and trying without singling them out in a way that might feel unsafe or unsupportive. Scaffolding questions with cues and prompts can make questions seem less intimidating. Simplifying the question to a multiple-choice format with 2 options can also help students attempt a response.

Frame feedback constructively

Create a classroom culture that fosters trust, supports students' participation, is accepting of mistakes, and supports improvement. This can be achieved by framing feedback on mistakes in productive ways that open discussion or prompt action, such as:

- 'Many students struggle with this one. Let's look together at what went wrong here...'
- 'I'm glad we found that mistake. It teaches us something that we have to fix before we've mastered this.'
- 'I understand why your first instinct was to use [incorrect strategy]. In this situation, though, we need to use [correct strategy] because ...'
- 'Check your work. What's missing at the beginning of your sentence?'

Use evidence of learning to inform teaching decisions

Monitor errors to decide whether to provide feedback or additional instruction and guidance

If most students struggle to respond or make errors, additional explicit instruction at the whole-class level (such as using a different explanation, model or worked example) may be more effective and efficient than providing corrective feedback and moving students to guided or independent practice. You can help maintain learning progress by reteaching and modelling with additional examples flexibly – whether to the whole class (if the majority need it), small groups (if a small proportion need it) or individuals (if just a few need it). Being ready with both guided and independent practice tasks for students to move on to helps keep the whole class moving forward.

Move between guided and independent practice with flexible groupings

Generally, it's necessary to move backwards and forwards between providing instruction, guiding practice and offering opportunities for independent practice. Tailor teaching plans to allow for flexible and temporary groups of students based on ongoing evidence of student learning. A useful guide is to aim for 80% of students providing correct answers during guided practice before moving those students to a group for independent practice, while supporting the others with further guided practice or additional instruction. Once students have demonstrated their understanding, provide further opportunities for independent practice so all students can use and apply what they've learned for deeper learning.

Monitor for students who may need small group or individual intervention

Checks for understanding can reveal students who persistently struggle during guided practice, and this may indicate significant gaps in prior learning. Some gaps can be addressed at that point in time with whole-class instruction, and flexible groupings. Others may require more intensive small group or individual intervention beyond the classroom. Regular progress monitoring is important until students have mastered the content, and intervention should be accompanied by increasing intensity of progress monitoring too.

Draw on student responses to check your practice

While checks for understanding can highlight areas of persistent struggle for students, you can also use these checks to support reflections about whether your practice is appropriate and responsive to students' learning needs, and whether adjustments in practice may facilitate more effective learning. The most useful judgements about how well your teaching is supporting learning progress will come from multiple forms of evidence.

Developing your practice

Consider what's informing your current practices, expectations and beliefs. Use these questions to reflect, make a plan to develop your practice and seek feedback to monitor the impact for your students.

- How does your approach to monitoring student progress help you respond to the diverse learning needs of students with a range of background knowledge and skills? What strategies do you use when trying to identify aspects of learning that students may be struggling with? Why do you prioritise those strategies over others?
- How do you actively respond to students who need additional instruction, guidance or feedback? How can you identify strategies that will ensure all students achieve learning success with the right support?
- Review the 4 capabilities in our formative assessment rubric. How do your other teaching practices support you with checking for understanding and responding effectively? Which of these other formative assessment capabilities could you focus on to support you in applying checking for understanding?
- Review our formative assessment checklist. Which of these areas are you already confident in or could put into action immediately? Which area could be a focus for your next professional learning goal?
- What would others (peers, students, leaders) notice about your approach to monitoring progress? What might they notice you do, create or say to monitor and respond to students' learning progress? How could you invite and use their feedback to strengthen your approach?

Further reading

Hollingsworth, J., & Ybarra, S. (2018) *Explicit direct instruction. The power of the well-crafted, well-taught lesson* (2nd ed.). Corwin Teaching Essentials.

Chapters 5 and 6 of this book provide practical strategies for using checks for understanding to help students retain new information and connect it to what they already know.

Archer, A., & Hughes, C. (2011). *Explicit instruction. Effective and efficient teaching.* Guilford Press.

This book provides clear guidelines for checking for understanding, as well as other aspects of explicit teaching. It provides sample lesson plans and includes content related to working with students who have diverse needs.

Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2007) *Checking for understanding: Formative assessment techniques for your classroom*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

This book explains how to support learning success via ongoing assessment and adjusting teaching accordingly.

Endnotes

1 Rosenshine, B. (2012). Principles of instruction: Research-based strategies that all teachers should know. *American Educator*, *36*(1), 12–19. https://www.aft.org/ae/spring2012/rosenshine

2 Lee, H., Chung, H. Q., Zhang, Y., Abedi, J., & Warschauer, M. (2020). The effectiveness and features of formative assessment in US K–12 education: A systematic review. *Applied Measurement in Education*, *33*(2), 124–140. https://doi.org/10.1080/08957347.2020.1732383

3 Australian Education Research Organisation. (2023). *Introduction to multi-tiered system of supports*. https://www.edresearch.edu.au/guides-resources/practice-guides/intro-multi-tiered-system-supports

4 Cabrera, M., & Martinez, P. (2001). The effects of repetition, comprehension checks, and gestures, on primary school children in an EFL situation. *ELT Journal*, *55*(3), 281–288. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/55.3.281

5 Willingham, D. T. (2021). *Why don't students like school? A cognitive scientist answers questions about how the mind works and what it means for the classroom* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

6 Weinstein, Y., Madan, C. R., & Sumeracki, M. A. (2018). Teaching the science of learning. *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications*, *3*(1), Article 2. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41235-017-0087-y

7 Wiliam, D. (2011). *Embedded formative assessment* (US ed.). Solution Tree Press.

8 Wiliam, D. (2011). *Embedded formative assessment* (US ed.). Solution Tree Press.