Unlocking Student Success: The Power of Success Criteria, Relationships, and Clarity

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Abstract

This article emphasizes the importance of success criteria as a tool to support students' academic success. Research has consistently shown that strong teacher-student relationships lead to improved academic outcomes, but building strong relationships involves defining their impact on student learning outcomes. Success criteria support personal development and academic success, leveraging relationships by answering three key questions: *What am I learning?; Why am I learning this?*; and *How will I know that I have learned it?* By describing what learners must know and be able to do, success criteria make the learning target visible to both teachers and students. The article further examines the concept of teacher clarity, central to effective learning partnerships within a culturally responsive context. When teachers are unclear, students may lose motivation and engagement, leading to low achievement, especially for underperforming students. Therefore, effective communication through success criteria can support academic success and build strong teacher-student relationships.

Keywords: assessment & feedback, student experiences, classroom instruction

Introduction

Effective teacher support can be the key factor in unlocking student success, with research consistently showing a strong correlation between positive student-teacher relationships and improved academic outcomes (Fisher & Frey, 2014; Hammond, 2015; Hattie, 2012). Teachers often think of relationship building as saying hello to students in the hallway, getting to know them personally, or finding time to chat with them informally. That is all true, but in an educational context, relationships are further defined with a focus on their

impact on student learning outcomes. The Education Trust defines strong relationships as "expressing care, challenging growth, providing support, sharing power, and expanding possibilities" (*Strategies to Solve Unfinished Learning*, 2021, p. 2).

Imagine Sara, a high school Spanish student who is having difficulty with the following interpersonal speaking prompt:

> At lunch one day, you and your friends are arguing about social media. Does it bring people together or does it isolate people? You will be assigned a role and must argue your position effectively, providing reasons and examples from your own experience and from texts we've examined in class.

Sara's teacher has given the rubric to the students, but Sara is not clear about what the rubric is for or why she isn't meeting expectations. In other words, she does not know what success looks like or how to get there. Sara is stuck as a learner, which presents an opportunity for her teacher to consider some readily available tools that support academic success.

Success Criteria, Relationships, and Student Outcomes

Success criteria can be one of those tools, because they support personal development and academic success. According to Almarode, Fisher, Frey, & Thunder (2021, Ch. 1), success criteria answer three key questions:

> What am I learning?
> Why am I learning this?
> How will I know that I have learned it?

"Success criteria make the learning target, or 'it,' visible for both teachers and students by describing what learners must know and be able to do that would demonstrate that they have met the learning intentions for the day" (Almarode et al, 2021, Ch. 1). To illustrate the potential of success criteria, consider the research on *effect size*. In educational research, *effect size* is described as the measure of the size of the impact of any school-related influence (e.g., instructional strategies, ability grouping, feedback, homework) on student learning outcomes. Hattie (2012) describes the average effect size as .4; anything above that average has the potential for a positive impact on learning (p. 3). Almarode et al. (Ch. 1) point out that success criteria have a potential effect size of .88–well above the average–meaning that they have *tremendous* potential to impact student outcomes. They further note the vital "relationship between high-impact, high-quality success criteria and meta-cognition, deliberate practice, feedback, and equity" (p. 5). Building strong student-teacher relationships is central to integrating these elements into daily classroom experiences to effectively leverage the potential impact of success criteria.

Collecting data from classroom walk-throughs, Almarode (2021) made some interesting observations about students and their awareness of learning expectations. Presented with the questions: *What am I learning?; Why am I learning this?;* and *How will I know that I have learned it?* about 80% of the students were able to answer the first question. About 70% could answer the second question, and only about 30% could answer the third question. Sara fits into the majority who could not answer how they would know that they had learned it, which should give Sara's teacher pause. In what ways is Sara's teacher unintentionally not clear, and what can she do about it? Embedded in these three key questions is the concept of teacher clarity. Opportunities for Sara to engage with the key questions throughout her learning process can make a big difference in her subsequent achievement. How many times do teachers create an assignment, but not the rubric? How many times do teachers have the rubric but not use it as a learning tool? How many times do teachers look

at a class set of assessments only to realize at the end of a unit that students have not grasped the major concepts at all? When teachers are unclear, of course the students are unclear! Lack of clarity can not only result in low achievement, it can result in the loss of student motivation and engagement, especially for underperforming students. Saphier (2016) makes this argument with precision: "It is quite common that underperforming students don't actually know what we're looking for in a quality product. The clarity of the criteria plus the implicit message of valuing when we take the time to go through criteria personally with them can have a big impact" (p. 84). Chardin & Novak (2020) describe underperforming students using Hammond's term *dependent learners*, and note that dependent learners are overly reliant on the teacher, and aren't sure how to complete tasks. Dependent learners, they contend, often sit passively until a teacher steps in (Ch. 1). Teacher clarity is central to what Hammond (2015) calls *learning partnerships* (developmental, academically-oriented relationships) within a culturally responsive context (p. 19). She notes that effective learning partnerships are "anchored in affirmation, mutual respect, and validation," and require teachers to work with students to "tackle a specific learning challenge" (p. 75). She presents the following teacher clarity dilemma concerning culturally and linguistically diverse students:

> Too often, culturally and linguistically diverse students who struggle have developed a set of learning moves that aren't effective and they are not sure what's going wrong or what to do about it. They cannot do higher order thinking or complex work if they cannot learn to adjust their learning moves, acquire new ones, or strategize about how to tackle a task (p. 101).

From a Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) perspective, CASEL (CASEL: Advancing Social and Emotional Learning) illustrates four academic mindsets that support students' social, emotional needs while also emphasizing the importance of teacher clarity and positive relationships with students:
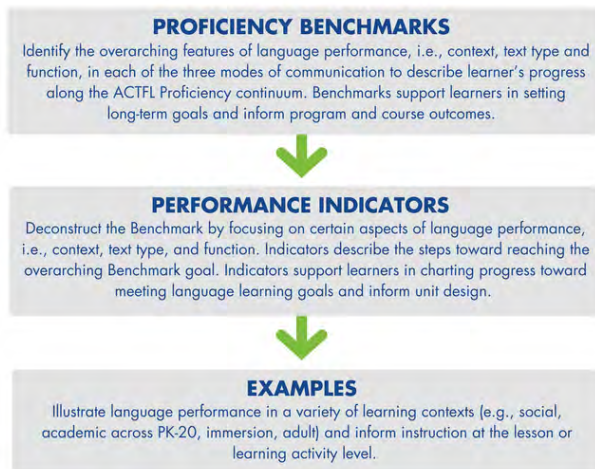
> *I belong in this academic community.*
> *My ability and competence grow with my effort.*
> *I can succeed at this.*
> *This work has value for me.*

All students benefit from teacher clarity and strong relationships, but especially those students who experience a "high level of environmental adversity or a high level of personal challenge" (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011).

Success Criteria, Planning, and Instruction

The intersection of clarity and relationships is central to reframing instructional design that focuses on improved student outcomes. When teachers ask the three key questions (namely, *What am I learning?, Why am I learning this?,* and *How will I know that I have learned it?*) from the learners' perspective during the instructional design phase, these questions transform into a conceptual framework that fosters precision in the pedagogical process, cultivates interpersonal connections, and attends to Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) principles, all critical elements of the three stages of backward design described by McTighe and Wiggins (2012): *Identify desired results. Determine acceptable evidence. Develop a learning plan.* This is where the deep work happens. In world languages, the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements (n.d.) are a key resource because they are carefully aligned with the backward design framework and "...describe what learners can do consistently over time, help learners set goals, are part of a self-assessment system, can be used for goal-set-

ting, and performance-based grading" (*What Are the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements?*, 2020). Figure 1 shows the organizational structure of the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements.

PROFICIENCY BENCHMARKS
Identify the overarching features of language performance, i.e., context, text type and function, in each of the three modes of communication to describe learner's progress along the ACTFL Proficiency continuum. Benchmarks support learners in setting long-term goals and inform program and course outcomes.

PERFORMANCE INDICATORS
Deconstruct the Benchmark by focusing on certain aspects of language performance, i.e., context, text type, and function. Indicators describe the steps toward reaching the overarching Benchmark goal. Indicators support learners in charting progress toward meeting language learning goals and inform unit design.

EXAMPLES
Illustrate language performance in a variety of learning contexts (e.g., social, academic across PK-20, immersion, adult) and inform instruction at the lesson or learning activity level.

Figure 1. Organizational Structure of the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements

At each stage, teachers should address the three key success criteria questions from the outset. During the first stage (*Identify desired results*), teachers establish what learners should know, understand, and be able to do in terms of language functions and interculturality. In the second stage (*Determine acceptable evidence*), teachers decide on the assessment criteria that they will use to measure students' success and align them with the proficiency target for the class. During the third stage (*Develop a learning plan*), teachers create lessons and learning opportunities that will assist students in progressing towards the desired learning outcomes. Figure 2 (next page) shows the Backward Design model developed for the performance assessment our learner Sara has encountered. Sara's teacher can use a rubric like the one in Figure 3 (p. 100) to illustrate the desired outcomes and learning targets for this intermediate mid interpersonal speaking task from the outset of the unit. In this way, Sara and her teacher have a shared tool with accessible success criteria that define the pathways, include multiple steps, are measurable, and allow Sara and her teacher to monitor Sara's progress through checks for learning (Almarode et al., 2021). In a nutshell, the three key questions play a deep role within the context of the backward design process. "[Teachers] focus on ensuring that learning happens, not just teaching (and assuming that what was taught was learned); they always aim and check for successful meaning making and transfer by the learner" (McTighe & Wiggins, 2012, p. 1). Without intentional clarity on the part of her teacher, Sara won't be able to answer the three key questions.

Success Criteria, Feedback, and Student-Teacher Relationships

Having established a basic backward design outline, Sara's teacher proceeds to construct the flow of instruction and learning, considering the integration of Hammond's (2015) learning partnerships into the design, with an acknowledgment that strong relationships can have an impact on students' academic mindsets (*CASEL: Advancing Social and Emotional Learning*). Effective feedback is another crucial ingredient in learning partnerships (Hammond, 2015, p. 101). Feedback is most effective when it is, "desired, timely, comprehensible, actionable, appliable, and implemented by the learner" (Coss & Van Gorp,

2022, p. 20). Teachers can use tools like comment banks (See Figure 4) throughout the unit to help bring the rubric alive for students and streamline the feedback process, and can even co-construct comment banks with students based on their work, giving students greater agency over their learning. "...Clarity for learning is not a one-way exercise, but bi-directional. Not only do we have to communicate the learning intentions and success criteria, but our learners have to engage with these two components of the learning experience and leverage them into clarity about the what, why, and how of their learning" (Almarode, 2021). Using the intermediate mid rubric and comment bank or other resources as learning tools throughout the unit, Sarah's teacher can target feedback, personalizing it for Sara. The more teachers involve students in the process, the more impact they have on students' positive academic mindsets, resulting in students who are engaging with the feedback to their benefit.

Proficiency Benchmark (Desired Results)	Performance Indicator (Acceptable Evidence)
I can participate in spontaneous spoken, written, or signed conversations on familiar topics (social media and technology), creating sentences and series of sentences to ask and answer a variety of questions, and ask appropriate follow-up questions, to keep the conversation flowing.	I can express, ask about, and react with some details to opinions about whether or not technology and social media bring people together. *Performance Assessment Prompt:* At lunch one day, you and your friends are arguing about technology & social media. Does it bring people together or isolate them? You will be assigned a role and must argue your position effectively, with reasons and examples from your own experiences.
Learning Plan	
The learning plan includes lesson-level can-do statements, checks for learning and understanding, feedback, reflection, and goal setting, using the rubric as a teaching and learning tool. Some examples: - I can identify different technologies and social media and their uses. - I can indicate which technologies and social media a person uses in their daily life. - I can list technologies and social media I used recently, when, and why I used them. (etc.) - I can sort social media platforms. - I can identify the purpose of different social media apps. - I can identify arguments in favor of activities that involve getting together without the use of social media. - I can describe ways I spend free time with family or friends that do not involve social media.	

Figure 2. Backward Design Model

Writing & Speaking Performance Rubric & Feedback Form

Wellesley Public Schools

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Can Do's	I can express, ask about, and react with some details to opinions about whether or not technology and social media bring people together, by creating simple sentences and asking appropriate follow-up questions.

Emerging	Developing	Meets standard	Strong
I can **independently** create a spoken or written message using language below **intermediate-mid**.	I can **independently** create a spoken or written message using some **intermediate-mid** language and some below **intermediate-mid**.	I can **independently** create a spoken or written message using **intermediate-mid** language.	I can **independently** create a spoken or written message using **intermediate-mid** language and **level-up** language.

INTERMEDIATE-MID SUCCESS CRITERIA	Emerging	Developing	Meets standard	Strong
I can be easily understood by someone used to a language learner, and possibly by a native speaker who doesn't know I'm a language learner.				
I can use a variety of words, expressions and personalized vocabulary and begin to use expanded vocabulary. I can give details.				
I use strings of sentences to describe or explain. I combine simple sentences using connector words to create original sentences. I pose questions to direct or advance a presentation or written work.				
I convey my knowledge of differences in familiar (learned or experienced) cultural products and practices. I use culturally appropriate vocabulary and expressions.				
My errors with targeted structures and/or word order do not interfere with communication.				

TEACHER NOTES or STUDENT REFLECTION: EVIDENCE THAT SUPPORTS ON-LEVEL PERFORMANCE & FEEDBACK FOR GROWTH

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Figure 3. Wellesley Public Schools Intermediate Mid Writing and Speaking Rubric & Feedback Form

Interpersonal Speaking Comments:

Teacher Feedback: **What I did well**	**Teacher Feedback:** **What I need to work on to meet the target:**
❑ You used high quality verbs in your speaking.	❑ Vary the verbs you use when speaking to include more specific action verbs.
❑ You incorporated a lot of vocabulary from different resources from the unit.	❑ Go back to readings/videos from the unit and add vocabulary to your list to expand.
❑ You asked a lot of questions to your group members.	❑ Ask more questions to your group members.
❑ You varied the kinds of questions you asked.	❑ Ask different kinds of questions.
❑ You followed up with what your group members said with questions or reactions.	❑ Ask follow up questions to your group members to learn more about an idea they said.
❑ You responded to questions well.	❑ Take your time answering questions.
❑ You helped your group members out.	❑ Don't dominate the conversation; let others have a turn.
❑ You used quality connecting words to explain yourself.	❑ Look for more variety in your connecting words.
❑ You used connected sentences when speaking.	❑ Connect your sentences more to give more detail.
❑ You had few to no errors with your x-tense.	❑ You had errors with the x-tense that got in the way of comprehension.
❑ You used both regular and irregular x-tense verbs.	❑ Make sure your subjects agree with the verbs.
❑ You leveled up and added different tenses.	❑ Level up next time and try the "you may want to" section
❑ You demonstrated your own voice/personalized message.	❑ Your ideas were not clear.

Figure 4. Teacher Feedback Comment Bank

Closing Thoughts

"One simple way in which to turn students off learning is for them to have a poor relationship with the teacher. The essence of positive relationships is the student seeing the

warmth, feeling the encouragement and the teacher's high expectations, and knowing that the teacher understands him or her" (Hattie, 2012 p. 141). Ultimately, implementing success criteria effectively is a critical component of academically-oriented relationship building with students, and of their educational journey. Through clear learning targets, Sara's teacher can help her understand what is expected of her, and guide her towards higher achievement. Sara's teacher can develop a supportive and inclusive learning environment, one in which Sara and other students are engaged and motivated because they know exactly what they are learning, why they are learning it, and how they will know that they have learned it.

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