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Formative assessment and the learning and teaching of MFL: sharing the language learning road map with the learners

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ABSTRACT

Whilst formative assessment is now well established as a valuable practice in improving the involvement and attainment of pupils, its specific implementation in particular school subjects has received little attention. This paper sets out to discuss the development of formative assessment practices in the learning of languages. A general introduction to the recent development of formative assessment is followed by a brief summary of the current context of foreign language teaching. The main elements of formative practice are then discussed in detail, with examples of the application, in language teaching, of feedback in dialogue and on written work, and of the development of peer- and self-assessment. A closing section gives brief guidance on ways to support teachers in making the changes that are needed, emphasising that the development and dissemination of these practices is a challenging task.

1 Background history

This paper has its origin in a review of research, published in 1998 both as a full article and as a short booklet (see Black and Wiliam 1998), which established that there was strong evidence from research that formative assessment can raise standards of pupil achievement. This led the group at King's College to explore the potential for practical improvement by collaborating in a two-year project with a group of forty teachers of English, mathematics and science, from six secondary comprehensive schools. Almost all of the teachers were positive about the project's effects for them, and there were significant gains in test performance for the classes involved. The findings were summarised in a second short booklet for teachers (Black et al. 2002) and reported at length in a book (Black et al. 2003).

Since then, formative assessment has become a central feature of several national and regional initiatives. The King's team has worked with teachers in all subject areas, and has found that formative assessment has *generic* features, which will apply to learning across all stages and all school subjects, and features which are *specific* – to primary teachers and to individual secondary subjects. In this paper we first explain the meaning of formative assessment. Then a brief summary of the aims of language teaching is followed by four sections describing different methods of implementing formative practices.

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2 The meaning and implications of formative assessment

It is important to define formative assessment clearly, which we do as follows:

> Assessment for learning is any assessment for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting pupils' learning. It thus differs from assessment designed primarily to serve the purposes of accountability or of ranking or certifying competence.
>
> An assessment activity can help learning if it provides information to be used as feedback, by teachers, and by their pupils in assessing themselves and each other, to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Such assessment becomes 'formative assessment' when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching work to meet learning needs.

Effective learning demands an alternation of feedback, pupil to teacher and from teacher to pupil. Thus the starting point for a classroom activity may be a question formulated by the teacher to ascertain the pupils' existing understanding of a topic. This implements a first principle of learning, which is to start from where the learner is, rather than to present strange new ideas to overlay the old and so cause confusion.

Then the teacher has to use this feedback to modify the teaching plan, so that the new vocabulary and structures can be introduced through challenging activities for the pupils that extend their learning. In this way, teachers are implementing a second principle of learning, which is that learning cannot be done *for* learners, it has to be done *by* them, albeit with the teacher supporting any new input.

3 The context of foreign language teaching

National Curriculum guidelines for MFL have developed, from the early skeletal content-free

framework of attainment targets and level descriptors, to language learning objectives enhanced by strategy learning. The new guidelines enable teachers to plan lessons and schemes of work and to wrap these objectives around the desired language content in a meaningful way. We have arrived at a point where cross-phase planning increasingly makes sense of the new 7-14 continuum of learning (Jones 2005), allowing pupils to progress, in theory, smoothly from their primary MFL learning experiences to the secondary phase. The Key Stage 2 Framework for Languages, KS3 Framework for teaching modern foreign languages and the National Curriculum have strands that resonate with the literacy initiative and with primary pupils' familiarity with target-setting, and thereby provide an increasingly coherent learning trajectory in MFL that is structured, progressive and differentiated.

Such coherence meshes well with a formative assessment framework, where language learning is demystified through the sharing of learning intentions and success criteria. This is a welcome development given the findings of research with Year 9 pupils which showed that, although the majority of the pupils were positive about language learning,

> These pupils lack a clear view of what learning a language really means. They are unclear about what they are supposed to gain from their lessons (Lee at al. 1998, p.5).

For pupils, the specificity of well-thought-out rather than repetitive MFL learning objectives (in English or in the target language according to circumstances) enables them to make progress in their foreign language competence and to monitor their own progress as independent language learners, the ultimate aim of language learning.

For their teachers, formative assessment helps them to sift the rich data that arises in classroom interactions and activities, so that professional judgements can be made about the next steps in learning.

4 Questioning and dialogue in classrooms

Two-way interactions between teachers and pupils can be achieved in several ways, but the essential ingredients are:

- challenging activities that promote thinking and discussion
- rich questions
- strategies to support participation by all learners
- encouraging open discussion

CHALLENGING ACTIVITIES

If teachers want to find out what pupils understand and/or can do, rather than just what they know and can recite from memory, then these pupils need to be challenged by activities that make them think and perform. This may involve applying the linguistic knowledge and skills that they already have within a new context or/and from a different angle, requiring various language transformations, for example, the use of different persons or of alternative qualifiers (for specific examples see Barnes and Hunt, 2003). These activities could take many forms, including both individual and group work, the aim being to encourage learners to apply their knowledge and understanding to new situations, and so test out their ideas. Task-based group work encourages learners to bring their ideas to the fore and free the teacher to monitor and provide targeted support.

RICH QUESTIONS

If questions are to serve a formative purpose in the MFL classroom, it is necessary to focus attention on how well they serve this purpose - which factual questions usually fail to do. Collaboration between teachers to exchange ideas and experiences about good questions can be very valuable. It could be part of professional development to reconsider questioning techniques, perhaps to model Q/A to peers to help them all to develop skilful 'laddering' and spiralling from simple to complex questions. In this scenario questions could be included that would allow for factual responses, for imaginative and speculative ones and for developing pupils' competence in asking meaningful questions themselves.

"If teachers want to find out what pupils understand and/or can do, . . . then these pupils need to be challenged by activities that make them think and perform."

Let us take by way of example the topic of transport. The presentation and practice of key vocabulary – going by bus, train, bike etc – was undertaken by a teacher of German with a Year 8 class, doing a classic 3-stage questioning routine, going from basic factual, naming questions to open-ended ones (and back again) using flashcards, actions and games to consolidate the learning. One pupil wanted to say he went to school on his skateboard and having learnt the structure in German that involves the dative e.g. in 'I go by car' (*ich fahre **mit** dem Auto*), speculated, understandably, that the same rule would apply for a skateboard. This, in fact, is not the case with a skateboard - the name in German is also *Skateboard* but the rule is not the same (*ich fahre Skateboard*) and the teacher gave the pupil the task of finding out how to say it correctly.

The teacher then moved in subsequent lessons to a more imaginative travel scenario involving travelling to the moon. Pupils were asked to think of imaginative solutions for travelling there and had also to utilise previously learnt vocabulary, such as size, colours, and number of windows, to describe the type of spacecraft being used, in both oral presentations and in written descriptions. Pupils were well rehearsed in basic question formats by the teacher ('How many passengers can the craft take? How big is it?') so that they could ask different questions of each other. This was extended to the use of a more speculative type of question from the teacher, using, for example, the conditional tense, ('Would it need a pilot? How much would it cost?) and the future tense ('Will it go directly to the moon or stop on the way?'). The pupils responded appropriately, with careful scaffolding by the teacher. The whole teaching sequence provided an opportunity for combining new with old language

items and for the teacher to evaluate the quality of previous learning.

STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT PARTICIPATION BY ALL LEARNERS

Through formative questioning, the teacher hopes to collect rich evidence of the pupils' understanding. The aim is not simply to find out what they do know but also what they do not know and possibly, more importantly, what they partly know on an interlingual basis. Teaching is about helping youngsters realise this and then guiding them to upgrade their part-knowledge to a fuller understanding. It is the opposite of assessment of learning, where we try to find out only what pupils know.

Demanding questions require time for the learner to work out an answer, so the teacher ought to wait for some time before expecting a response. Rowe (1974) found that the wait time in primary science classes was very low, less than one second. In secondary classrooms, we found that teachers could, with practice, increase their waiting time to around 3-5 seconds and that this had dramatic effects on the involvement of their pupils in classroom discussion. Our research showed that:

- longer answers were given than previously;
- more pupils were electing to answer;
- fewer pupils refused to answer;
- pupils commented on or added to the answers of other pupils;
- more alternative explanations or examples were offered.

"The teacher's role . . . is to . . . encourage pupils both to try to answer and to listen carefully to the answers from their peers."

Even when waiting time is increased, some learners are reluctant to offer answers. Some teachers adopt a 'no hands up' strategy, taking the view that if sufficient wait time is given, then everyone should be expected to answer, so they select individuals to answer. We have seen such techniques in use in MFL classrooms; they do remedy the unsatisfactory situation where quick thinkers who raise their hands either dominate proceedings or feel rebuffed because they are ignored.

However, pupils are often reluctant to commit themselves to an answer because they feel they may reveal their inadequacies. The teacher's role when formative questions are asked is to act as a facilitator and to encourage pupils both to try to answer and to listen carefully to the answers from their peers. This is vital in the MFL classroom where attentive listening is necessary to promote taking turns appropriately, and thereby to help development of listening skills.

Peer discussion plays an essential part in creating such an environment. If pupils can first discuss their responses to a question within a small group, they can explore, articulate and check ideas before they reveal their group's combined effort to the whole class. When pupils are uncertain, the individual reporting on behalf of a group will feel less inhibited about expressing tentative ideas.

More generally, in a classroom culture that encourages best efforts and does not penalise mistaken or erroneous ones, pupils will feel encouraged to 'have a go' and to signal to the teacher their current level of understanding either after peer discussion, or where a rapid check is appropriate, through such methods as thumbs up or traffic lighting. This provides much more reliable feedback to the teacher than a sea of vaguely nodding heads and forms in itself, an extended opportunity for target language use.

ENCOURAGING OPEN DISCUSSION

Sometimes questions can be used to encourage learners to reflect both on what they think and what they have heard from others. This is an essential stage in shaping understanding. Developing extended or alternative answers might involve the teacher probing in the following way, using the target language:

What can we add to Yagnesh's answer?
(In this case, the teacher could provide a series of possible alternatives.)

Do you agree with Suzie's answer ?
(Here the teacher could take a show of hands on who agreed or disagreed with a response, and pupils can be asked, in pairs, to provide a reason.)

Can someone improve on Jack's answer?
(A suitable prompt might be for the teacher to suggest using a connective for a richer description.)

Teachers need to be patient and wait for the various ideas to be revealed before they start correcting and steering the direction of the responses, providing scaffolding as necessary but allowing pupils to 'have a go' before intervening. Some teachers do not find this easy but if intervention comes too soon, then pupils' interlanguage might not be revealed and there may be too little opportunity for learners to reflect on what they hear and on suggestions for improvement. Whilst sometimes pupils may appear to lack the linguistic knowledge to provide elaborated responses (and it must be said that this is rather more difficult in MFL than in other subjects), teacher prompting is a way to help pupils provide richer and more elaborated responses.

5 Feedback on written work

Research into the motivation and self-esteem of learners has explored different kinds of feedback on written work (Butler 1988; Dweck, 2000). One kind gives only marks or grades. This is a judgment on the work and helps to develop 'ego-involvement' in pupils; its effects on both motivation and on subsequent test attainment are negative. It

discourages low attainers, but also makes high attainers reluctant to tackle tasks if they cannot be sure of success, for failure would be seen as bad news rather than as an opportunity to learn. The second kind gives only comments on what needs to be done to improve. This helps to develop 'task-involvement'. Its effects are positive for it can convince all pupils, whatever their past achievements, that they can do better by trying and that they can learn from their mistakes. It also produces better test results. If feedback provides both marks and comments, the negative effects follow because pupils tend to ignore the comments and attend only to the marks. Thus, marks give no formative feedback and emphasise competition rather than personal improvement, whereas comments can be formative and so ensure that written work contributes to learning.

EFFECTIVE COMMENTS

Questions are useful ways of framing comments. Compare these two comments on pupils work designing posters with information in the target language about recycling:

> A nice picture but you need to add more writing

> Your poster catches my eye but I am wondering why I should really want to recycle my rubbish! Can you persuade me? How about some imperatives? Some statistics that might encourage me to take action! What can I do? What should I do?

The second comment initiates thinking immediately, enabling the learner to discuss their thoughts either with the teacher or a peer, whilst the questioning nature encourages the pupils to initiate improvement. The first comment simply describes the deficit in the piece.

Targets can form part of helpful comments, and the more focused the target is the better. General statements, as in the first example, should be avoided. Points that need to be considered next time may be useful but comments that prompt immediate action are better. It may help if the feedback comment relates to success criteria or to a description of quality that might be shared with or devised by the pupils, so that they can consider the criteria as their work progresses. The feedback is then the teacher's appraisal, which can be matched against the pupil's own judgement of quality. For example, if pupils are asked to create an attention-catching poster about conservation and recycling, then what is required is:

- facts and figures to 'persuade' using strong qualifiers
- suggestions about what individuals can/should do using e.g. modal auxiliaries
- visual interest.

The second comment relates to these criteria in an effective way.

CREATING THE IMPROVING CLASSROOM

The opportunity to respond to comments is essential, for learners need to see that the teacher really wants the work improved and that improvement is being monitored. This might mean providing opportunity in lesson time for learners to read comments on their work and to discuss with their teacher or with peers the necessary improvements.

One simple way to support these aims is to record comments on a sheet of paper each time a piece of work is comment-marked: the learner slips this between the appropriate pages of her book. The sheet then contains an accumulation of comments and allows both learner and teacher to recognise where improvements have been made or where specific problems keep arising. This comment sheet can implement a written dialogue between the teacher and the learner. In the case where the teacher had written the above second comment on a piece of work, the pupil responded with the following comment which pinpointed the learning difficulty that she was having:

> I know how to say 'you can' – it's 'on peut' but I'm not sure about how to tell people in the poster what they should do.

If learners could be this precise in identifying their uncertainties, then teaching would be much simpler. Such recognition by the learner initiates the desire to sort out their uncertainty; in this way, feedback drives formative action.

It is not necessary for teachers to mark every written exercise in this thorough way, and there can be advantage in having some work checked by peer assessment. Careful comments written every 2-3 weeks can be more useful than a mark on every piece of work, and from the teacher's point of view, a balance between comment-marking and peer-assessment (not forgetting targets for developing speaking skills) can help release time for devising useful comments and can begin to move the responsibility for assessment onto the shoulders of the learners.

For example, writing skills can be developed as part of an ongoing drafting process, using teacher feedback and negotiated targets for improving the work e.g. with the use of connectives, better qualifiers, a wider range of tense. Time spent on developing such peer-assessment can enhance pupils' confidence in the process. Year 7 MFL pupils in a Cheshire school reported that they were nervous at first about assessing a peer or friend's work but that when they got used to it, they did it with great care and sensitivity and learned a great deal from each other.

Schemes of Work might well be reassessed to ensure that there are sufficient numbers of such activities reasonably spaced throughout. This makes the marking load more manageable whilst also giving pupils time for work on improvement before the next detailed feedback is due. Pieces that require several paragraphs, rather than one word or a single

"...learners need to see that the teacher really wants the work improved and that improvement is being monitored."

sentence, can provide a richer source of evidence to help the teacher appraise the learning of individual pupils and so provide individually useful advice.

6 Self- and peer-assessment

Developing effective self-assessment is an essential part of managing one's own learning. It requires the pupil to have a clear picture of the learning targets, an understanding of what would count as good quality work that meets them, an idea of where one stands in relation to those targets and a means to achieve them. The work of Lee et al. (1998) showed that pupils often lack this clear picture, are not aware of the rationale behind specific tasks and cannot find their way to attaining their individual targets. The overall aim here is to achieve meta-cognition, which is the power to oversee and steer one's own learning so that one can become a more committed, responsible and effective learner.

Our work with teachers has shown that peer-assessment helps pupils develop their self-assessment skills. Pupils can be taught to recognise both quality and inadequacies in other pupils' work even if their own level of competence is different from the level of the work that they are reading. With coaching focussed on criteria for quality, pupils can develop awareness of successes and problems in pieces of work and can articulate this in discussion, a process which teachers can help by providing regular comments to serve as models. As pupils assimilate the criteria, they thereby assess their own work with greater clarity. Such practice encourages improvement as pupils begin to see how small changes, or different ways of approaching parts of the work, can easily raise its quality – and the regular small pushes forward help embed better learning and raise overall attainment.

"Where pupils do not understand the meaning of a target, . . . it may help to engage them in modelling exercises..."

One such change uses a very simple technique, *two stars and a wish*. The *two stars* are two pieces of positive feedback, identifying successful outcomes. The wish identifies an aspect that can be improved in some way. However, as well as identifying stars and wishes, the pupils consider how they might develop their work. It is just as important for them to know the success criteria of the star element so that they can transfer their skills and knowledge on future occasions. The following is an example of star and wish feedback given by three Year 4 primary pupils in a Cumbrian Primary school to a peer, who had been playing a role in an oral role play activity:

> Michael: You are good at asking the questions.
> Stephanie: You had good German and brilliant expression.
> Helen: I wish you had spoken more clearly and a bit louder.

This is an example of how pupils can learn to focus and, by giving positive feedback to their peers, help to create a classroom culture of support for their own learning. The pupils were becoming familiar with the idea of commenting on each other's work as their further more detailed comments show:

> Hanif to Robbie: You speak with a really good German sound, but sometimes forget to stay in German (He lapsed into English for counting his dice moves!)
>
> Barbara to Eliza: You're good at remembering the words. You have good pronunciation. Make sure you say what you mean. (She said one thing, but meant another on one occasion.)
>
> Alec to Guni: With your pronunciation, it's hard to tell if you're German or English, but you need to put a bit more effort into your 'r' sound.
>
> Guni to Alec: What you said made good sense. You say your words very clearly.
>
> Billy to Jake: I like the way if you get it wrong, that you go back and correct yourself.
>
> Roberta to Jake: You keep forgetting vocabulary. You need to learn 'pencil'.

Another example of peer assessment involved Year 7 pupils assessing, as a class activity, letters that had been drafted for homework in French. The teacher first agreed the criteria with the pupils, then in pairs they discussed each other's letters and exchanged ideas. This made for a very good use of learning time and validated the homework immediately.

With assessment applied in such a way, pupils gradually acquire the habits and skills of collaborative learning from a very early age, and, through peer assessment, develop the objectivity required for self-assessment.

The use of traffic light icons can help develop self-assessment skills. Pupils label their work green, red or amber according to whether they think they have good, partial or little understanding. This provides information for the teacher about individual pupil's confidence levels with particular topics. If many pupils use red, then the teacher can see that this work has to be revisited. Conversely, a plethora of greens indicates that the class is ready to move on. A mixture of reds, greens and ambers calls for different action; the teacher could pair up green and amber pupils to help one another, leaving her free to deal with the problems of the red pupils. Overall, the teacher can map the pace and content of future work according to the pupil needs.

Where pupils do not understand the meaning of a target, or have little idea of what a piece of work that met the target criteria would look like, it may help to engage them in modelling exercises: for instance, in the letter assessment activity described above, taking them through a concrete example in order to convey the meaning of criteria which are often specified in abstract terms.

7 Formative use of summative tests

Preparation for a test can be a formative opportunity. Some classes used traffic light icons as a guide to their revision, applying them to test items or to examination syllabuses and then working in groups on common problem areas. Through these activities, pupils were able to plan their revision for high-stake tests more effectively. Mind mapping is a useful technique here, the pupils mapping what they know in their books, for example, then adding to this as they increase their knowledge of the topic area, so giving a good basis for eventual revision.

A useful approach is to analyse test responses to see which questions are causing the main problems

and then to return the scripts to pupils, asking them to mark one another's answers to these questions, inventing the mark schemes themselves. This makes pupils think out what counts as a good answer. Teachers then use the time after marking to revisit problematic questions and to give pupils further examples to try. For test questions where only a few have answered incorrectly, pupils can ask successful peers to help them.

One teacher decided to give his class the end-of-topic test in the first lesson of the topic so that they could inform him of what they did or did not know, using traffic light icons to indicate their familiarity with the skills or the understanding required. The teacher could then plan to concentrate on the areas of unfamiliarity or difficulty.

8 Learning together : learning from others

Our experience shows that teachers who take on the development of formative assessment need to work in a team for mutual support in sharing ideas and resources. That team must have a plan and must have support also from the department and/or school, since some innovations may be, or may be seen to be, contrary to some aspects of departmental or school policy. Evaluation is a vital part of any plan, calling for mutual observation and formative feedback. It might also be summative at certain stages, when evidence of experience, including pupils' test results, might be collected, and supplemented by evaluation by colleagues not directly involved. This should also lead to a phase when dissemination is undertaken – to all in the department, perhaps to the school as a whole.

Our experience has also shown us that most teachers have found this work very rewarding, but also challenging, in that they represent changes to the way they work with pupils and to the way that pupils take responsibility for their own learning. These do fit well with the current culture of language learning as dialogic and interactive and with a view of language learners as metalinguistic and reflective. However, these methods often seem risky. Indeed, what is involved is best seen as a voyage of discovery, a journey into new territories of teaching and learning.

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"Evaluation is a vital part of any plan, calling for mutual observation and formative feedback."