Developing effective formative assessment practices in the primary modern foreign language (MFL) classroom

Jane Jones
King's College London, University of London

Abstract

The introduction of MFL in primary school education marked the beginning of an ongoing debate among teachers about the necessity of assessing primary MFL – if at all. Assessment, as a means to monitor progress, forms, there is no doubt about it, an integral part of the learning and teaching process. This article will show manageable and sensitive ways of dealing with assessment taking into account the diverse needs of the learners. The emphasis will be on formative assessment and assessment for learning and its principles. Case studies will highlight assessments in all four skills and show how assessment can contribute to the development of self- learning and pupil autonomy in aspects of their language learning. Perceived and used as an aid to learning assessment sows the seeds of a life long learning capability.

Resumen

La introducción de una lengua moderna en la Educación Primaria marcó el comienzo de un debate entre el profesorado (debate que aún continua) sobre la necesidad de evaluar o no dicha materia. La evaluación, como medio de comprobar el progreso del alumnado es, sin duda, parte integrante del proceso de enseñanza/aprendizaje. Teniendo en cuenta las diversas necesidades del alumnado y enfatizando la evaluación formativa del aprendizaje y sus principios, el presente artículo ofrecerá alternativas sencillas y practicas para abordar dicha evaluación. Se nombrarán estudios de caso que pondrán de relieve la evaluación de las cuatro destrezas y demostrarán como la evaluación puede contribuir al desarrollo del auto aprendizaje y de la autonomía del alumnado en lo relativo al aprendizaje de lenguas. Percibido y utilizado como una ayuda al aprendizaje, la evaluación puede sembrar la semilla de un aprendizaje para toda la vida.

Introduction

Assessment needs to be understood as a necessary part of the teaching and the learning process – a statement some classes and teachers might meet with disquiet. This is probably due to a misinterpretation of the concept of assessment, when reducing assessment to one of its aspects, namely tests of one kind or another. Tests often cause apprehension and anxiety if they involve high stakes such as indelible, unchangeable and perhaps publicly available grades, blotting the copy books of the children, teachers and schools concerned. Black and Wiliam's seminal 'Black Box' work on formative assessment (2000) takes care to point out that the use of formative assessment is not a 'magic bullet' for education, yet the improvement it can have on learning in the classroom is significant and measurable. It is in my view essential that primary MFL learning should be located within a formative assessment framework that focuses on what the children can do and offering feedback as to how they can improve and progress. Assessment understood in a broader sense as progression in learning is a key to establish the quality and enduring primary MFL provision.

39

Developing effective formative assessment practices in the primary modern foreign language (MFL) classroom
Jane Jones   *Encuentro* 15, 2005

My research with the King's College Assessment Group (cited in Jones and Coffey 2006) has discovered classroom practice where teachers did find that their efforts made a difference, as Linzi, a teacher of ten years old pupils commented: *"It is making a real difference to pupils' learning. They comment on it themselves"*. Many of the techniques offered by Black *et al.* are simple and easy to incorporate into the classroom and into primary MFL as I shall discuss in due course. What then had this particular teacher, Linzi, been doing?

She had ensured the children were clear about the learning intentions and success criteria for each German lesson she taught, discussing strategies for learning e.g. how to get the right pronunciation by thinking about the rules of German pronunciation, giving them time to think and, above all, making the learning worthwhile and important in their eyes.

To test or not to test: if so how to test?

Some colleagues erroneously perceive primary MFL as a subject in which soft toys are thrown around the classroom in the pursuit of some target language, a 'fluffy bunny' (possibly 'soft') subject, devoid of the rigours of other subjects. Pedagogically it is important to evaluate, value and validate, in other words assess, the children's learning and abilities in foreign languages as in any other subject of the primary curriculum.

There are also strong feelings among subject teachers in particular that assessment has no place, at least no formal place, in the teaching and learning of primary MFL. This is represented in the following assertions:

> " MFL must not be an assessed subject but be seen as free to enjoy, incorporating drama, music, art and the other creative subjects"

> "I hope any imposed assessment scheme would not detract from our motivation-that children enjoy language learning and develop positive attitudes"

These statements from two primary teachers suggest that the 'specialness' of primary MFL identified by many teachers of the subject would be spoilt if the heavy hand of testing were to come down on the subject. At the same time there is a groundswell of opinion that primary MFL *needs* to be assessed for positive reasons to do with validation, recognition, feedback, progression and for the purposes of liaison with secondary school colleagues.

We need parity for the children and to accentuate the importance of primary MFL -an appropriate assessment framework is thus helpful in establishing the necessary rigour.

A learning-centred perspective to assessment

Any discussion of assessment is inextricably linked to the process of learning for as Clarke (1998:5) asserts:

> *It is a child's learning that must be the subject of teachers' most energetic care and attention-not their lesson plans or schemes of work, or their rich and stimulating provision-but the learning that results from everything they do (and do not do) in schools and classrooms. The process of assessing children's learning-by looking closely at it and striving to understand it-is the only safeguard against children's failure, the only certain guarantee of children's progress and development.*

Indeed, it is important that assessment is seen as an essential part of the whole teaching cycle and that a teacher's assessments should inform teaching plans in a seamless way, and not be perceived as bolt-on or peripheral. On the contrary, feedback from the learning process through appropriate and sensitive assessment

40

Developing effective formative assessment practices in the primary modern foreign language (MFL) classroom
Jane Jones   *Encuentro* 15, 2005

is an entitlement for all pupils, in helping them to progress from one year to another and to inform subsequent learning.

This would provide the 'confidence factor' to assess, the lack of which teachers sometimes feel, combined with a view that assessment might destroy some of the fun in learning. The 'fun factor', will not be hampered by context-sensitive assessment and teachers should not hesitate to throw out, re-design or create assessments suitable for their pupils that are in accord with their teaching approach and content of learning. In fact the 'confidence factor' can help to ensure that the 'fun factor' keeps a prominent place in assessment. One primary teacher, for example, reported that she was unhappy with a suggested tick- box style test designed to be administered at the end of a unit of teaching but she lacked the confidence to decide what to do otherwise. Then, in the light of the fact that so many children 'scored' poorly and seemed to be demoralised, she finally decided to dispense with the test and devise her own in conjunction with her secondary school colleague. Teachers, too, are on a learning curve when it comes to developing teaching and assessment strategies and it is an important waystage in the development of the community of effective primary MFL practice, a community that needs to embrace formative practices as part of its continuing developing expertise.

Formative and/or summative assessment

The two approaches to assessment, formative and summative are often contrasted and the former privileged enormously to the detriment of summative assessment. This has probably been in part due to the dominance previously of summative assessment and the often negative impact on pupils whose every effort has been graded, not always in a way that provides encouragement. Formative assessment, defined by Black and Wiliam (1998:2) *as "All activities undertaken by teachers, and by the students themselves, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged"* does not dispense with elements of summative assessment, simply defined as "any assessment made at the end of a period of learning to evaluate the level of understanding or competence". Indeed, summative assessments can and should be useful both as part of a formative framework and as part of the learning process. As Black *et al* write: *"The challenge is to achieve a more positive relationship between the two"* (2003:55-6). The key, then, is to find, select and create worthwhile activities and tasks that will enhance assessment as learning, and that will provide an opportunity for pupils to demonstrate their knowledge. Teachers will need to be clear about the criteria for success and share these with the pupils.

One primary colleague mentioned that she has a wealth of what has been designed as teaching materials and with a dearth of purpose-designed assessment materials, she simply designates some of them to be used as assessment activities in the lesson. The following table is designed to give just a flavour of the myriad possibilities that teachers are using as part of their formative practice repertoire that will include some summative assessment . There are many other possible variations on these themes.

Most of the above are self –explanatory but I here detail two of the techniques which may not be completely obvious to the uninitiated. The techniques all focus on motivating children, getting them to think, establishing a challenge and on providing feedback.

Two stars and a wish is a very simple technique that requires the identification of (at least) two aspects of positive feedback, the two stars. This represents successful output, what has worked, good effort and so on. The second part is the identification of a wish, an aspect to develop or that can be improved in some way. It is very important that as well as identifying stars and wishes, the children understand how they might develop their work. It is just as important for children 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 8 year old pupils to a peer following an oral role play activity in which the latter had been playing a role:

Kieran: You are good at asking the questions

Rebecca: You had good German and brilliant expression

Faye: I wish you had spoken more clearly and a bit louder

Application of Assessment	Practical examples
Peer assessment	• One to one peer assessment of speaking, writing or drawing in response to a target language stimulus • 2 stars and a wish • group peer review of a spoken effort e.g. a role play or a walkie- talkie phone conversation between 2 pupils • peer assessment of audio or video-taped pupil efforts • stop and swap work
Self-assessment	• Quick recap 'test yourself' • Self assessment of taped oral work • Critical review of written attempt against shared criteria • Portfolio collection of selected good work or e.g. personal CD Rom folio • Assessment of progress over time e.g. tick lists, comments and targets • Thumbs up, across or down to indicate understanding
Pupil reflexivity	• Extended wait time • 'Stop and think' spots in lessons • Pupil learning diary activities • Problem-solving skills approach e.g setting a language learning challenge for the lesson • Class reflection • Mind mapping™/ spider diagram techniques • Traffic lighting own work – green for work understood, red for work that is not too well understood e.g. with coloured pencils, coloured sticky dots etc • Thinking homework/ independent learning task
Teacher assessment that is compatible	• 2 stars and a wish • competitions, songs and games with an assessment aim • listen and point/mime/tick • read and draw • qualitative comments and targets • token collection

Table 1: examples of assessment techniques

This is a good example of how children can easily learn how to focus and by giving positive feedback to their peers, and help to create a classroom culture of support for their own learning.

Collecting tokens is an activity whereby children attempt to acquire tokens (small pieces of coloured card, for example, or plastic coins or marbles) for good responses. This can be done with any of the skills and for any defined effort but is a quick and useful way to assess speaking as a token can be handed out immediately following a response. At the end of a lesson, week or learning cycle, pupils, who keep their own tally of tokens, inform the teacher of how many tokens they have, and, this is very important, for what. They can thus have some very tangible idea of how they are progressing. It can be made into a group competition but it can also be a private, individual activity. Pupils could be encouraged to self-nominate or nominate their peers for a token.

Teachers can adapt such techniques and devise many others of their own. The important thing is to ensure that they are comfortable with such techniques and can use them purposefully for the benefit of progressing children's learning. Pupils also need to feel comfortable with self and peer assessment. They need time to develop confidence in these roles and benefit from rehearsing the techniques and discussing success criteria.

In the following example, Michaela, a primary MFL and generalist teacher of other subjects, had been working with her 10 year old pupils on role-plays deriving from a topic in German on school equipment:
"The role play was based on the idea of expressing 'I can't, I need..."
"Lesen!"
"Ich kann nicht lesen! Ich brauche ein Buch!"

Prior to the role-play, the children had learnt the following verbs relating to the topic of school equipment.

"lesen, schreiben, zeichnen, rechnen, malen, turnen, basteln"

The children were also familiar with these nouns based on the school theme:
"Bleistift, Spitzer, Malkasten, Pinsel, Füller, Radiergummi, Schultasche, Schere, Buch, Heft, Lineal, Federmäppchen, Turnzeug, Farbstifte, Filzstifte"

Stephanie's objectives were:
- Clear, accurate German-sounding pronunciation
- Good recall of vocabulary learnt
- Correct use of "einen, eine, ein"

She instructed the pupils to play a board game. If a child landed on a 'magic button' in the game, the group had to choose a verb they wanted them to do (e.g. Basteln!). The child had to reply with 'Ich kann nicht basteln. Ich brauche ein(e)(n) …', choosing an appropriate noun.

The children were reasonably familiar with the idea of commenting on each other's work as their comments show:
Hannah to Robert: You speak with a really good German sound, but sometimes forget to stay in German (He had lapsed into English for counting his dice moves!)
Robert to Beth: You remember the words very well, but need to do the 'r' sound better (referring to the rolled German 'r')
Jack to Keir: I really like your clear pronunciation.
Lisa to Siena: I think you're amazingly quick at learning new words.
Becky to Ellie: 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 (noun), on one occasion)
Alex to Graeme: 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.
Graeme to Alex: What you said made good sense. You say your words very clearly.
Ben to Emily and Robyn: You're very clear.
Ben to Jack: I like the way if you get it wrong, that you go back and correct yourself.

Robyn to Ben: You say your words really clear, and you say 'well done' to others.
Robyn to Jack: You keep forgetting vocabulary. You need to learn 'pencil'.

It is interesting to note how the pupils appear to like 'playing teacher'; Alex's comment to Graeme is a classic in this respect, a perfect take-off of a typical teacher comment! Also noteworthy is the fact that the children find a great many 'star' comments and are able to make criticisms in a non-threatening but direct way in the inimitable style of children.

Whatever peer assessment and other modes of assessment are undertaken in the primary MFL classroom, it needs to be consistent with the whole school assessment framework. The next section features two case studies of practice that work in two different contexts, the first a primary school in the North of England and the second in Scotland. This underlines the need to plan assessment that is coherent and appropriate to the age range, the primary MFL teaching arrangements and the whole school assessment ethos.

Case study assessment scenarios

In the first case, Stephanie, both a generalist teacher with her own class and a specialist primary MFL teacher, teaches German throughout the school from Year Reception class (pupils aged 5) through to 10 and 11 year olds. Stephanie describes the whole school assessment approach herself and points out the main aspects of assessment in the context of her school.

> *'I feel when I am teaching primary MFL I am almost constantly assessing...have they grasped that? ...are they ready for the next bit?...do they need more on that?...is child X really confident?...can I partner them in a role play with child Y?...who needs help?...is that pronunciation as good as it could be?*
>
> *That sort of assessment goes on minute by minute, lesson by lesson. Then at the end of a unit, an end activity will often be useful to assess them...maybe a game e.g. a card game, or a role play, or some other performance. I'm keen to know if they can recall vocabulary learnt, use structures well, use authentic-sounding pronunciation, be keen, be confident to speak out etc. Sometimes I just store the information from that in my head- sorry, not very official!- sometimes the class teacher will make written notes. The class teachers are 'in' on all MFL lessons in school, learning alongside the children, and their own observations of the children's learning, efforts and achievement contribute to a richly qualitative profile of pupil attainment.*
>
> *I don't really assess the younger pupils in areas other than 'Do they respond with enthusiasm? Do they join in? Are they keen to show their finger-puppet role-play to the class? Are they 'with me'? The class teachers who know the children really well make the best links between MFL and other areas. Though, having said that, when we have finished our numbers to 10 topic and colours, I do get them in pairs to place coloured multi-links on numbered squares, listening to my instructions...but I don't keep a written record of those who could/couldn't, because I am more keen that they feel proud that they could!'*

Case study Two

Jane, a Head teacher who teaches French to her own mixed- age top junior class in a small Scottish primary school, identifies many advantages and assessment techniques in her practice and believes that assessment ensures all children are achieving their potential. Free from the time constraint that Michaela has, Jane is able to focus more on the assessment criteria themselves.

> *'Using formative assessment techniques allows the teacher and pupil to see where they are in their learning and where they are aiming to go. Children remain motivated and enthusiastic to learn.*
>
> *With younger pupils, most of the assessment is through observation, listening and visual techniques. Our French teaching in the younger classes is purely done through talking and listening, although stories are read and children are exposed to words, we do not assess reading and writing until the last two years of primary school.*
>
> *We encourage self- assessment in all classes. With young children they can use the "thumbs up" to show how well they fell they understand. Older pupils may colour a checklist of vocabulary using the same colours, or simply give themselves a score out of ten for how well they feel they performed in a particular exercise.*
>
> *We assess all four aspects of learning a foreign language with the older pupils. To assess talking we use dictaphones, tape recorders, video recorders and walkie-talkies. Children especially enjoy using walkie-talkies for*

conversations. This encourages them to learn to question as well as respond. Listening is assessed using tapes giving instructions and directions. We also use story and question sessions and teacher led questioning and instruction sessions. We use" Big Books" for reading and also have sets of the same books in small readers. Children work in groups and pairs to read to each other. Flashcards are used to introduce new reading words after the children have learned to pronounce them.

Occasionally we will carry out a writing task for assessment purposes, but these activities are always well supported with flashcards, word walls, posters etc. It's like teaching Reception children to write. You need to provide as many words as they need until they get used to using specific language.

Pupils like to know how they are doing and are motivated to reach targets. Assessment techniques allow the teacher to see if pupils are retaining key vocabulary and able to use it in the correct context. Teachers can also quickly determine which children have good pronunciation and which need more help. We have pupil profile for each child and record any key events in their learning. Written assessments can be kept in the pupil's folder to refer back to when necessary. During day-to-day assessment, we discuss learning with the children and also record any problems or successes. These then form the basis for reports to parents and for discussion at parents' nights and help the teacher to plan the next steps required in the French lessons.

As children learn new vocabulary, they are able to participate more and more although it is important to constantly revise topics as children will soon forget vocabulary that they are not exposed to on a regular basis. Self-assessment checklists for older pupils also let them see how their understanding of French is growing'.

Common concerns

In the above case studies, it can be seen how aspects of formative and summative assessment blend seamlessly, albeit in different learning and teaching environments. Case study 1 deals with time constraints, the second focuses more on means and recording. Feedback for the teacher is paramount and thus assessment provides an opportunity to find out children's difficulties and gives some idea about how effective the lessons are. Primary MFL lessons are a rich source of diagnostic assessment material as evidence can be gathered during any lesson and observations of pupil work, behavior and questioning the pupil about what they are doing can be done in a relaxed manner. Areas of strength and weakness can be identified and the information gleaned used for the purposes of differentiation. At appropriate stages, assessment data are used for ' feed forward' for secondary colleagues and as feedback for parents.

There is a noticeable concern for the well being of pupils in the primary MFL classroom, especially the younger pupils. Whilst much emphasis is put on the 'fun factor' by many teachers, MFL learning is potentially intimidating given its 'strangeness' in terms of unfamiliar sounds and spellings and the whole concept of 'otherness', hence the priority that Michaela and Jane give to the children feeling comfortable with their learning and assessment.

Which skills should be assessed?

There are differences of emphasis as to which skills are assessed reflecting the different teaching programmes and teacher belief on these issues. Whilst some teachers stick doggedly to their belief that primary MFL learning should be almost exclusively oral and aural, others introduce reading and writing to differing degrees and at various stages. This will clearly be mirrored in the choice of assessment activity.

In listening , for example, beginning pupils might be expected to be able to understand commands, short sentences and questions. A simple assessment as well as a practice activity would be to 'listen and mime'. This could be organised as a self or peer assessment as well as a general check for the teacher.

In speaking, more advanced pupils would be able to take part in simple structured conversations of at least three or four expressions, supported by visual or other clues, with grammatical accuracy and good pronunciation. I have seen teachers identify with the children specific points to look for before engaging in peer assessment of the performed conversations.

Pupils progressing well in reading skills would show they understand short texts and dialogues made up of familiar language. The teacher could make reading cards with a range of differentiated exercises for both consolidation and assessment, two for the price of one!

Pupils in the early stages of MFL learning could be encouraged to hand write or word-process items such as simple signs and instructions. Learning and assessment activities might include a 'listen, stop, think and write' task or a game requiring children to write text into the game diamond shapes on the overhead projector (OHP) or interactive white board (IWB).

This is perhaps the moment to confront again the issue of the written word. Rather than 'writing or no writing' the issue is really how the written word is introduced, how much and when, to enable the pupils to make the necessary phoneme-grapheme correspondence without which they will not be able to progress beyond a certain point. The inclusion of reading and writing vastly extend the range of assessment opportunities and the possibilities for differentiated learning. It can be seen from the example also that the teacher should be able to record assessment data quickly and often with the help of the pupils themselves through self-recording. Many teachers promote the use of a portfolio as a method of continuously recording achievement. The European Language Portfolio (ELP) is perhaps the best known example. This portfolio is an attractive document, with a variety of sections for pupils to record what languages they know and how they are progressing, thus providing tangible evidence of achievement as pupils add to it. MFL has a particular role to play in language awareness training in that it enables children to be reflective and self-monitoring and the portfolio can be a very helpful tool for promoting these processes on the route to more learner autonomy. The recording of achievement is both relatively straightforward for teachers and provides an element of ownership for pupils. Such information provides important feedback about where children are on the 'climbing frame' of foreign language learning.

Conclusion

Many primary MFL colleagues with whom ideas regarding assessment have been discussed are in agreement that the effective assessment of MFL in the primary school is an issue in need of some development in years to come. Teachers accept that they need to be aware of, indeed have evidence, albeit often stored in their own mental 'memory sticks', of the children's achievement and progress, but there is some reluctance to record assessment data, and certainly a dearth of recording instruments. It would be wrong for teachers to expect and rely on a set of ready-made assessment instruments from whatever source since there is the danger this would lead to a fixation with the instrument and the 'teaching to the test' syndrome. Teachers need to identify and create assessment opportunities as part of their own planning, teaching and learning cycle. There are simple, non time- consuming way of assessing and recording that fit with what teachers already do in other subjects as has been described in this chapter. Primary teachers are very skilled at what Torrance and Pryor call *'naturalistic teacher assessment-monitoring the performance of the class as a whole, being broadly satisfied that particular groups and individuals are moving at the pace one would expect'* (1998:35). They argue that whilst this monitoring is useful, assessment *'...is more to do with the quality of teacher–pupil interaction and the feedback provided by teachers during the course of such interactions'* (ibid.).This means reacting to children's feedback about their learning and interacting in such a way that enhances the dialogical nature of assessment.

Assessment when understood and interpreted as a positive, enjoyable and challenging force for learning within a classroom culture that is supportive and that provides a stream of constructive feedback and think time is not in conflict with the MFL teacher's desire to be creative. Much of what teachers and pupils do in the primary MFL classroom can be described as assessment, for example, tasks, quizzes, questions, pair and group work and homework tasks all prompt learners to demonstrate their knowledge and provide

46

opportunities for the pupils to reflect on their learning. Formative assessment is a good tool for making the shift in the classroom from passive recipience by the pupils to meta-cognition and the development of learning and thinking skills. Primary schools are hives of activity in this respect, acutely attuned to the importance of children's need for thinking time with attention currently focused on the development of thinking skills and critical skills. Thinking time is privileged in a meta-cognitive environment and can embrace the construct of 'wait time', a valuable and simple tool that, through extended wait time, (the research of Black *et al.* 2003, showed that many teachers wait for hardly a second before asking another question if no answer is forthcoming) gives more pupils more time to 'stop and think' about a suitable response. The pupils can also exchange thoughts, share ideas and challenge each other providing an opportunity for the teacher to move around the MFL classroom while pupils are on task and make observations and, if necessary ask questions about what they are doing and why.

Assessment, then, is part of the entitlement to quality interactive primary MFL teaching and learning. As primary school teacher Michaela pointed out: *'We need to assess in the broadest sense, otherwise they [the children] may as well learn from a set of TV programmes where the TV delivers, but does not respond to the learning resulting from the delivery!'.*

An assessment framework for primary MFL , on the contrary, has to be very responsive and serve as a tool flexible enough to cater for different school environments.

Bibliography:

Black, P.J and Wiliam, D.(1998) *Inside the Black Box. Raising standards through classroom assessment.* London: King's College.

Black, P, Harrison, C., Lee, C., Marshall, C and Wiliam, D. (2003) *Assessment for Learning. Putting it into practice.* Buckingham: OUP

Clarke, S (1998) *Targeting Assessment in the Primary School*. London: Hodder and Stoughton

Jones, J and Coffey, S. (2006) Issues in Teaching Primary MFL 5-11. London: David Fulton Publishers.

Torrance, H. and Pryor, J (1998) *Investigating formative Assessment. Teaching, Learning and Assessment in the Classroom,* Buckingham: Open University Press

————

Jane Jones is Senior Lecturer in Modern Foreign Language Education, Department of Education and Professional Studies, King's College London, University of London.
jane.y.jones@btinternet.com.