

Formative assessment in primary FL classrooms: Documenting learning outcomes and informing future practice

What this research was about and why it is important

This chapter aimed to present how formative assessment opportunities could be incorporated into daily classroom routines. It modelled how teacher and pupil dialogue contributed to the development of learner autonomy and engagement as well as providing data on the language learning process. The investigation involved a teacher/researcher who implemented an oracy and literacy teaching approach in two English primary school classrooms (45 children in total). The researcher collected quantitative data on French FL outcomes and L1 variables (L1 literacy and verbal working memory). Qualitative data were also obtained in the form of classroom recordings and children's weekly work. Findings showed that either the L1 or wild forms were part of the process of learning to spell French. It was also evident that through the use of questioning in both the TL and L1 children became aware of, and involved in, the FL learning process.

What the researcher did

- The teacher/researcher taught a programme of French oracy and literacy for 24 weeks in two primary school classrooms (learners aged 9-11).
- The teacher/researcher measured the children's progress in French oracy and literacy on four key FL outcomes. These were FL oracy: FL receptive vocabulary and FL elicited imitation. For FL literacy the teacher/researcher measured FL reading aloud and FL reading comprehension.
- The teacher/researcher also designed formative assessment practices which were used throughout the teaching programme to document the learning process and also to inform the teaching.
- The teacher/researcher also collected weekly written work to see how the children's writing was developing and classroom recordings documented specific aspects of the learning such as the spelling of French core vocabulary.
- A form of questioning (three-stage questioning – Jones & Coffey, 2006) was adapted to incorporate a fourth step, a means of assessing progress in remembering the written word form.
- The children were tested at the beginning of the teaching programme (pre-test) and at the end (post-test). They were also tested seven weeks after teaching finished (delayed post-test) to see whether any learning was long-term.

What the researcher found

- After several "rounds" of presentation through three-stage questioning, the fourth step (the reproduction of the written form of a word from its spoken cue) proved challenging and involved the use of either L1 sound/spelling links or "wild forms" which resembled neither the L1 or the FL.
- The teacher/researcher noted that during this fourth step the children were becoming less motivated. The teacher/researcher was personally concerned about a reduction in pace as it took the children much longer to try to write the written word from memory.
- Following the first round of formative assessment, the teacher/researcher adapted the pedagogic routine so that the children were asked to discriminate between two written FL forms (one target-like; one non target-like). The children responded well to this change, and were more successful at choosing the target-like form.
- Teacher and learners engaged in dialogic interaction to reflect on the vocabulary learning process and to increase the level of challenge in this activity. The children were eager to increase the difficulty of tasks.

Things to consider

- It is important to recognize that this was a small scale study with one classroom teacher and therefore similar results and reactions cannot be guaranteed in different settings.
- It is also possible that exposure to the target language (TL) was reduced in the assessment activities which explored metacognition although this was principally due to beginner proficiency in French.
- That said, formative assessment opportunities can include use of the TL although this might be slightly formulaic i.e. relies upon instructions such as *écrivez* (write) or *corrigez* (correct) or is accompanied by extensive modelling such as gestures.
- Teachers and learners can use classroom talk to design learning and formative assessment opportunities and reflection on these can support understanding of the learning process.