

Exploration on the Practice of Classroom Assessment in English Reading Teaching

Webinar handout:

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Definitions

As we saw during the specialist option, formative assessment is hard to define; it seems to have some or all of the following key elements. It:

- has a sense of interaction
- is a process that is extended in time
- gives a focus on improving standards - the feedback as a whole seeks to 'close the gap' between actual and desired performance.
- is characterised by the absence of a 'mark' or 'grade'
- focuses on sharing 'success criteria'
- has an emphasis on questioning

However, in reality, an important question to ask is how far any of the above differ from normal, effective teaching practice? After all, interaction, dialogues and questioning are just normal aspects of what a teacher does, so what makes 'formative' assessment assessment, rather than teaching?

Formative assessment and second language acquisition

It will be important to situate the tradition of formative assessment within considerations of second language acquisition. For example, it will be useful to think of Vygotsky's notion the zone of proximal development, which is 'the region of activity that learners can navigate with aid from a supporting context, including but not limited to people' (Vygotsky, 1934). Ash and Levitt (2003) have shown that formative assessment involves the cyclic determination of differences between teacher and learner understanding'. They base their model on that of Harlen (2000). Other issues relating to second language acquisition are also important when considering formative assessment, notably Krashen's concept of the 'affective filter', which is linked with anxiety, and also the natural order hypothesis, in which it is believed that learning takes place in a particular order. You will be able to think of a number of other theories and hypotheses which might affect the learning and development process, and which are relevant for formative assessment.

Formative assessment, the syllabus and the curriculum

Deciding to engage in formative assessment has an important link to the curriculum, since it may lead to a complete remodelling and reconceptualising of the learning experience. Stiggins (2005) has argued that it is important to test more regularly, and to put test data to better use, but this is only part of the solution, he argues. As Stiggins (2005) states, 'State standards need to be deconstructed into curriculum maps that are articulated within and across grade levels, and the resulting classroom-level achievement targets must be translated into student and family-friendly versions.' This presents a challenge for both schools and teachers. This issue has been raised very vociferously in the proposed changes to the school curriculum in the UK as from September 2014, where schools will be able to develop their own assessment schemes to fit in with levels, and to show progress. This is a partial replacement of the previous system heavily premised on the use of standardised testing across all schools.

MARRA – a useful acronym to remember?

One idea of putting data to better use is to draw on what we know is done in school environments and to model our teaching and assessment practices accordingly. To follow this up, we can see how assessment fits into a wider framework of good assessment, as Brooks (2002) shows. The acronym she has developed is MARRA, standing for:

Monitoring – Assessment – Recording – Reporting - Accountability

As Brooks (2002) suggests, specifically with regard to the UK secondary school context, the above are key factors in assessing learning in the classroom. From this insight, though, we might see some additional suggestions emerging as to how formative assessment now differs from purely good teaching, especially in the area of **recording**. **Formative assessment might**, for instance, involve, **keeping informal/shared records** (but note, not necessarily a list of marks or grades, which is more typical of summative assessment) **to indicate how students perform as they repeat the activity or task several times. Are the students getting better? How are the students 'growing' in their learning? Do they have the same problems each time, or different ones? When have they resolved a problem, and when do they need more work in certain areas?** In other words, what we need is some kind of **record** that can be kept across several different reading or listening tasks undertaken in class, across one term. The records could be kept in an agreed way, whose criteria are fully shared. They could involve, amongst others:

- **(For younger learners) a tree display on the classroom wall**, with frogs or other animals (one for each child); as the children finish a book, they move up the tree. When they get to the top of the tree, they get a prize. (another idea is to give children stickers, which they can put on a card, or which they can wear so that they can tell their parent/carer about what they have achieved.
- A simple tick- sheet which pupils can be given each time they do the task. It is

important that it is the **same tick sheet each time** so that students get used to comparing present and past performances. **Consider what might go into a tick-sheet of this nature and who decides on the content – student or teacher?**

The above are two quite extreme systems, for two very different types of learner. Can you think of some other learner-friendly, shared record systems?

What sub-skills do we want to assess formatively?

This may be an obvious point, but it is worth stopping now to reflect a little more on what skills you might want to assess formatively. It is also helpful to consider how detailed you want the focus to be, but it seems as though at least the following areas need to be covered somewhere in class planning.

READING	Reading for gist
	Scanning for specific information
	Careful reading
	Inferring skills

LISTENING	Listening for gist
	Listening for specific information
	Careful listening
	Inferring skills

A starting point is to consider how you know how, and whether, students can actually do these things? What evidence will tell you? In a summative listening test, we usually gather evidence through some kind of recorded response (e.g. answer to a MCT question, etc), but consider how we might know this in a classroom situation: Group discussion? Interviews? Think-aloud protocols? Students recording their thought processes, etc? All of these might give us some helpful information about HOW the students listen (not just whether or not they get the answer right).

Also to be considered is which skills above are actually priorities? Would you expect to engage in formative assessment of all of them? In that sense, the decisions we make are no different to the sorts of decisions we make in a straightforward testing situation.

So when do we test – the case of the French primary school system and formative/diagnostic assessment of reading

As Stobart (2005) comments, a large amount of reading assessment is summative (i.e. it reports on what stage or level a student has reached at a given moment in time). Such

assessments often take place at the end of a school year or at strategic points in the term. So one needs to be fairly imaginative to try to assess reading in a more formative way.

Some further ideas:

- A key aspect is WHEN to test the students. E.g. Daugherty Assessment Review Group in Wales (2004) – see Stobart (2006). Here, National Curriculum tests should be taken at the end of Year 5 rather than Year 6, so the information gained can be used formatively by teachers. In France, reading tests are taken at the beginning rather than the end of the school year, and also at the beginning of secondary school rather than the end of primary school.
- Assessing reading provides a lot of valuable information about ‘where a learner is at’ in their learning. We can, for example, use evidence from reading assessments to identify misunderstandings and develop a clearer understanding of concepts (Stobart, 2006).
- The use of feedback on reading tasks which does some or all of the following: explaining more clearly the intended level of performance; use of peer and self-assessment; offering additional comments about what to do next;
- In the French primary school system, the objective is not so much to ‘summarise the performance’ of a student on reading, but to use the information gained in a diagnostic way (Remond, 2006). The test items here give information about what a child will need to be able to access teaching effectively in the coming year, or to show what attainments are still in progress.
- In French primary school reading tests, the marking scheme is more than just simply a case of indicating that the answer is correct or incorrect. The tests are marked by teachers, who have at their disposal a number of documents to help interpret their pupils’ answers in the context of the required competencies. It identifies for example where an answer shows another way of reaching the competency that is required rather than just the way that the test developer intended.
- Pearson, leading multinational publishers, are developing a suite of progress tests which fit in with levels on their proposed 90 point reference scale; the tests will assess how far the student have travelled along the band, and whether they are at the lower end, the higher end or in the middle.

Is formative assessment of listening an even greater challenge?

For many reasons, it might be thought that formative assessment of listening may present even greater challenges than is the case with reading, for reasons closely connected with the ephemeral, transitory nature of speech. One useful website that provides many suggestions as to how listening may be assessed formatively is:

http://www.caslt.org/resources/english-sl/classroom-resource-form-assess-listening-esl_en.php although to access all the materials, it is necessary to join.

This site gives very interesting assessment plans that can be directly used by your learners. Here are some suggestions for developing formative assessment of listening:

- Students evaluate their listening by using a pre-defined checklist (could be designed by the teacher or the students, or in consultation), on the basis of which **the teacher**

makes decisions about **what listening text to do next** with the students in class.

- Try **doing the same kind of task on a regular basis** to see how much better the students are becoming at the task (e.g. listening to the BBC news).
- Ask the students to **grade their level of understanding** of texts in a log and to track their development and progress over time.
- The students themselves identify the important aspects of a **text based on their own priorities** and then **make up the questions** based on the listening text. Students could work on several tasks in class, or everyone could work on the same text.
- Students can keep a learner diary which evaluates their own progress in listening.

To consider: How would you exploit course book materials for formative assessment? (as opposed to just good teaching of listening comprehension – which is another, if related, matter!)

Selected references (all available in the Resources Room - LRC):

Brooks, V. *Assessment in Secondary Schools*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Stobart, G. 2005. The role of formative assessment. In *Assessing Reading: from Theories to Classrooms. An International Multi-Disciplinary Investigation of the Theory of Reading Assessment and its Practical Implications at the Beginning of the 21st Century*. Slough: NFER. 168-177

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