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Assessment for Learning and EAL learner

Introduction

Assessment has played a major role in public-funded education in countries such as Australia, Britain and the USA since the early 1990s. The introduction of the National curriculum for England and Wales in 1989, for instance, was accompanied by a statutory framework of assessment which included a suite of standardised national tests and teacher assessment at various points of schooling. Since 1997 target setting of academic achievement levels for school pupils, e.g. 80% of the pupil population at the age of 11 should achieve Level 4 in English, has been a prominent feature of educational initiatives. Summative assessment of pupil performance, in the form of standardised test scores, has been used as an important device to gauge educational policy success and school effectiveness.

There is no question that standardised testing, and the test scores that it yields, has been regarded as a key component of the push to raise attainment standards in the past decade in Britain. At the same time, there has been a growing recognition among educators and researchers that assessment is much more than standardised testing. The work of researchers such as Paul Black, Dylan Wiliam, and others in the Assessment Reform Group has been influential in drawing attention to the educational benefits of formative assessment carried out by teachers in the classroom. The ten principles of assessment put forward by the Assessment Reform Group (ARG) are premised on the argument that assessment practices should enhance pupil learning. The central idea in formative assessment is that classroom-based assessment carried out by teachers as part of their ordinary classroom interaction with pupils can provide helpful diagnostic information on what pupils know and what they need learn next. Appropriate teaching and learning support can be built on this kind of teacher knowledge.

The ARG draws a clear distinction between assessment for learning and assessment of learning. The latter is usually carried out in order to grade and report on pupils' performance against national standards, whereas the former has a more developmental use. 'Assessment for Learning is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and the teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there'. (ARG, 2002) The ARG argues strongly that recent government policy in education has focused too much attention on comparing children, teachers and schools, with not enough attention on developing the type of assessment that specifically promotes learning and therefore raises standards and helps pupils become independent learners.

The educational merits of formative assessment, also known as assessment for learning (AFL), have attracted the attention of policy makers and teachers in a large number of countries. In terms of policy developments within the home countries, both Wales and Scotland, now with devolved political power, have adopted major policy initiatives to develop assessment frameworks that promote formative assessment. Hutchinson and Hayward (2005), in an account of the experiences of introducing AFL into Scottish schools envisage that as Scotland moves towards a more teaching and learning oriented system of formative assessment, external tests should only be used at points where pupils need a summative record of achievement, (e.g. when they leave school). Wales has steadily moved towards the introduction of a classroom-based teacher assessment framework since 2002 when Key Stage 1 tests were abolished. By 2008 there will be no formal testing for Key Stages 2 and 3; the AFL approach has been influential in the shaping of the current Welsh policy. (See Leung and Safford, 2006). In England, KS1 tests are now supposed to be used to support teacher assessment, a move away from using standardized tests as the preferred form of assessment. Similarly, guidance from QCA notes that 'the DfES, national strategies, Ofsted and QCA have adopted the Assessment Reform Group's interpretation of assessment for learning and its research-based principles' (see <http://www.qca.org.uk/7659.html>). Perhaps it should be pointed out that professional experience thus far has shown that the introduction of AFL in curriculum subject areas such

as English and Mathematics is not a straightforward process; a good deal of long term professional development and infrastructure capacity building is required.

Black and Wiliam (1998) identified five key factors for improving learning through assessment:

- The provision of effective feedback to pupils
- The active involvement of pupils in their own learning
- Adjusting teaching to take account of the results of assessment
- A recognition of the profound influence assessment has on the motivation and self-esteem of pupils, both of which are crucial influences on learning
- The need for pupils to be able to assess themselves and understand how to improve

From the point of view of EAL, putting the principles of AfL into teachers' routine practice raises some very important questions concerning teacher professional knowledge, teacher judgement and approaches to teaching. (For a further discussion see Black et al, 2003). It is quite clear that language, or more precisely the use of language, plays a very important part in AfL – classroom teacher-pupil interaction is mediated by language. The success of AfL depends on effective teacher-pupil communication in the classroom. Teachers of all subject areas will have no difficulty in recognizing this. Teachers with EAL learners in their classes or subjects, however, have to deal with an additional issue – that the very language in which much of classroom communication is carried out, English, is also the language to be learned by the pupils. In other words, the teacher-pupil communication that is key to effective AfL across the different curriculum subjects does not necessarily provide directly useful information for the teacher. Some pupils may be very knowledgeable about a particular subject/topic but they cannot express what they know through English, or they simply cannot express what they don't know and what they need to know. The issues of appropriate use of pupils' first or stronger language are also important.

All teachers need to know what English language learning needs their pupils have and how to organise their teaching to promote further learning. For this aspect of AfL, teachers need a good working knowledge of how pupils learn an additional language in curriculum context. In England, the current official guidance on EAL tends to focus on helping pupils to participate in classroom activities and to encourage active engagement in curriculum work. Thus official advice on teaching EAL learners is largely concerned with 'access-enabling' strategies; there is relatively little National Curriculum infrastructure dedicated to EAL-oriented language teaching and assessment. This represents a significant difficulty to making AfL 'work' for EAL learners. The ARG (1999) found that one of the inhibiting factors on improving learning through assessment was 'teachers not knowing enough about their pupils' learning needs' (ARG, 1999, p5)

In order for AfL to be an effective process, research suggests that teachers need to:

- Create or be aware of assessment opportunities
- Involve pupils in self assessment
- Provide feedback for learning
- Adjust teaching to take account of the results of assessment

Within this, for teachers of EAL learners, there will be two aspects. Firstly putting these into practice in respect of curricular objectives, and secondly in respect of the English language learning of their pupils. Whilst some trainee teachers will benefit from the support and expertise of specialist language teachers with this, many will not.

Assessment opportunities

Teachers must be involved in gathering information about pupils' learning if they are to begin to involve learners in reviewing their work critically and constructively. The ways in which teachers gain such information identified by the ARG (1999, p 6) were:

- Observing pupils – this includes listening to how they describe their work and their reasoning
- Questioning - using open questions, phrased to invite pupils to explore their ideas and

reasoning

- Setting tasks in a way which requires pupils to use certain skills or apply ideas
- Asking pupils to communicate their thinking through drawings, artefacts, actions, role play, concept mapping, as well as writing
- Discussing words and language structures, and the ways they are used

Many researchers argue that teachers 'engage in a continual process of appraising their learners. This appraisal may be planned or unplanned and spontaneous; it may be undertaken through formal means (eg the unaided elicitation of a written paragraph) or inextricably and almost imperceptibly embedded within teacher-learner(s) interaction (Rea-Dickens, 2006, p.166). Whilst there is a range of teacher practice in assessment, it may be useful for trainee teachers to consider some factors relating specifically to EAL pupils in the commonly seen practices outlined above.

Observing pupils

Observing pupils includes watching, listening and talking to pupils during everyday activities and tasks. Teachers may note and sometimes formally record what pupils do, how they approach learning tasks, what they say and how they use language during their activities. This form of assessment is most frequent in early years classrooms and indeed forms the basis of early years records of achievement. In secondary settings, opportunities for observation may be curtailed due to curriculum pressure and an increasing reliance on using outcomes, such as pupils' written work, to assess what they know and can do. However, observation remains a well used form of assessment in subjects or aspects of subjects in which pupils are required to demonstrate their understanding through action, for example, PE.

Teachers with EAL learners in their classes or subject groups may find observation a useful form of assessment. For example, a pupil at early stages of learning English may be able to demonstrate their understanding of a curriculum task through achieving it, well before they would be able to explain this orally or in writing. Observation can also provide teachers with information on what individual learners know and can do in English in different curriculum contexts, as well as how they cope with the social demands made on them in schools, as learners in class or as individuals. Language sampling (Gardner and Rea-Dickens, 2002) or recording exactly what learners say and do during a task and analysing this later, may be a very helpful means for teachers to become more aware of an individual EAL learner's needs and competencies. Although time consuming, it can be a very useful task for trainee teachers to undertake during teaching practices or with the support of teaching assistants or other additional staff. Language sampling may provide evidence concerning the actual or developing language abilities which it may be useful for trainee teachers to compare with their 'assumed' or formally recorded language needs, such as broad language descriptors. Both language sampling and learner profiles can provide an enhanced understanding of the different pathways the range of EAL learners take in their acquisition of English. They also help teachers understand the task facing bilingual learners coping with learning a new language and learning in that language, and support them in developing tasks to support an assessment of mainstream learning objectives whilst at the same time, developing language

Questioning

Teachers use questioning continually in classroom settings for a variety of purposes and the nature of teacher questioning has received much discussion in AfL. The initiation, response, follow up or feedback (IRF) structure, which involves teacher initiation, pupil response and teacher's evaluative feedback, is widely employed by teachers, but, it is argued, does not necessarily lead to learning through assessment. Some researchers suggest that teachers may need to make a deliberate attempt to avoid ritualised IRF exchanges, and in particular, the evaluative feedback (eg Well done etc) which closes the exchange. It is suggested that questioning, particularly more open forms, should be used to prompt learners to 'think aloud' and examine their own learning strategies.

Questioning has always been seen as having a key role in classroom work with EAL learners. Gibbons (1991) pointed out that 'the questions teachers ask are an important way to create the situations where certain language patterns are likely to occur' and stresses the importance

of using questioning to model the language which learners will need to use during discussion and in formulating and answering questions themselves. Guidance for teachers working with learners at early stages of learning English often suggests posing a series of IRF questions, ending with the early stage learner who by hearing the responses of others will have had a model for their own response. The Primary National Strategy professional development materials for bilingual learners (2006) suggests three types of questions are usefully employed with EAL learners : prompting questions, assessing the extent to which children are able to engage in what is being taught and the tasks set; probing questions, with follow-up comments to assess understanding during and following the teaching and the tasks; and promoting questions, that assess how well children can use and apply what they have learned.

Trainee teachers will need to consider carefully the questions they use in classes containing EAL learners. Just some of the issues they will need to consider will be the balance of open and closed questions, the balance of 'content knowledge' questions to questions designed to scaffold or extend language. They will also need to consider how learners are expected to know what kind of answers are required at any given point and whether shifting the balance of classroom questioning from IRF exchanges to more open questioning might not mean that EAL learners (and particularly those at early stages) have fewer opportunities to demonstrate what they understand and can show they understand, both in terms of curriculum subjects and in terms of their English. Leung and Mohan (2004) suggest that asking pupils to give reasons for their answers is key to extending dialogue and stretching thinking.

Setting tasks

AfL involves the careful setting of tasks, within normal class activities which will allow opportunities for teachers and learners to identify 'where they are in their learning'. Such activities will be 'learning about learning' e.g. opportunities for learners to notice where they are currently at and what they need to learn or do next. In classrooms, this is most frequently seen in the careful setting of focus or group work situations, often involving collaboration.

For pupils learning EAL, it may be useful to set up group work situations where learners hear language and interact with other speakers in a situation where language is used meaningfully for a particular purpose. The teacher will then be in a position to observe and assess whether both the content and language objectives have been met. Although acting as an observer is essential to learn about how and what pupils know, understand and can do, the teacher will often want to intervene. Some observers have suggested that 'Observe, wait, listen, question' is a useful

sequence to follow and this may be particularly true for tasks involving EAL learners. For example, Swain (2001) suggests that noticing a gap in their own linguistic knowledge may stimulate learning processes. Therefore if the teacher moves in too readily to fill or prevent a gap for an EAL learner, it may not be noticed and may not then lead to additional learning.

Pupils communicating thinking

In classrooms, the influence of AfL is most obviously seen in the way in which teachers commonly now make their learning objectives explicit, advise pupils on what the indicators of success in meeting these learning intentions are and involve pupils in assessing how well they have met these. For example, a typical lesson in a primary classroom may involve pupils writing down the learning objective in their books, a short exposition of what might indicate success in meeting that learning objective (or success criteria), and an opportunity at the end of the lesson, to individually or with others, decide whether they have met it. It is argued that learners expressing their thinking through peer and self-assessment can be valuable in supplementing teachers' judgements: they provide additional and different kinds of information, and encourage learners to reflect on their own or others' learning. However, a Rea-Dickens points out (2006, pp 184-5) expanding assessment for learning opportunities can also create difficulties for EAL learners: how does the EAL learner know 'when he is expected to engage and be discursive and to self monitor; model answers and peer evaluate and when is he to knuckle down and get on with the teacher agenda and write his six sentences?'. Thought needs to be given to the ways in which teachers can help to fulfil the EAL learners' need for opportunities for reflection, 'stock-taking' and for valuing what each

pupil brings to the learning situation. Their strengths may encompass knowledge of other languages, cultures or countries, and other approaches to teaching or contexts for learning. thinking about the process of self-assessment, teachers will need to think carefully about the particular difficulties in providing access to self-assessment for EAL learners, and in ensuring inclusiveness in self-assessment opportunities. For example, does self or peer assessment rely exclusively on speech and writing, or do drawings, actions, role play, and concept mapping also have a role?

Words, Language Structures, and the ways they are used

Trainee teachers will want to think both about the language demands of the curriculum – what Gibbons (2002) calls “finding the language” - and what the learner currently know about language and the areas in which they need help. The identification of key vocabulary common in teachers’ planning and the use by learners of this new key vocabulary is often assessed and encouraged both through observation and interaction, and through more formal written assessment. For example, learners’ understanding of key vocabulary is often assessed through IRF exchanges at both the beginning and ends of lessons, along with activities where there is an explicit focus on activating the use of such vocabulary. However an accompanying focus on, and assessment of, the use of language forms and structures is less common, outside of the subject of English.

One of the key principles underpinning good EAL practice is ‘drawing the learner’s attention to the relationship between form and function: making key grammatical elements explicit’ (South, 1999). Given the very diverse language experiences and language learning needs of the different groups of EAL pupils, attention needs to be taken of not just the ‘nuts and bolts’ of the English language, e.g. vocabulary, pronunciation and word order, but also the even more complex and less ‘visible’ aspects of language use. These include social rules of language use (e.g. politeness and formality in context), use of literary and metaphoric language expressions for different purposes, subject specific registers, established and taken for granted social ways of doing things through language in school and in the local community (e.g. conventionalised ways of offering information during circle time, collaborative talk in group tasks). AFL for EAL learners will ideally provide both learners and teachers with opportunities during lessons to ‘notice’ these aspects of language use.

Adjusting teaching to take account of the results of assessment.

‘Teachers may, of course, collect information in these ways but yet not use the information in a way that increases learning. Use by the teacher involves decisions and action – decisions about the next steps in learning and action in helping pupils take these steps’ (ARG, 1999, 8).

NALDIC has developed a set of descriptors for KS1 and KS2 which are intended for use in formative assessment by teachers. They relate to day-to-day assessment of pupil learning as part of their teaching (e.g. talking to pupils about work or marking pupil writing), and using the insight gained from informal assessment to help pupils make progress with their curriculum work. More specifically, they are designed to assist teachers in:

- recognising the language accomplishments made by many of the EAL learners-users as they move through the various stages in the long process of developing English language competence in ordinary curriculum and school contexts
- gaining an overview of the long term EAL developmental trajectories; this professional knowledge of EAL development is vitally important in any attempt to assist pupils to make progress with their language development through the curriculum on a day-to-day basis
- developing professional expertise in noticing pupil EAL accomplishment, diagnosing language learning needs, and offering informed guidance to lead pupils to achieve the next level of learning.

[Introduction to NALDIC Formative descriptors](#)

[<././docs/research/documents/NALDICEALFormativeAssessmentIntroductionfinal.pdf>](#)

[NALDIC EAL KS1 Formative descriptors](#)[<../docs/research/documents/NALDICdescriptorsKS12009-01-06final.pdf>](#)[NALDIC EAL KS2 Formative descriptors](#)[<../docs/research/documents/NALDICdescriptorsKS22009-01-06final.pdf>](#)

A professional development module to support tutors in introducing and exploring formative assessment for EAL learners is available [here <../ite/EALAssessmentforlearning.cfm>](#)

First Published

19 November 2006

Last Updated

7 June 2009

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