

Assessment in secondary modern foreign languages



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Introduction

This free course, *Assessment in secondary foreign languages*, will identify and explore some of the key issues around assessing MFL in secondary schools. Engaging with these issues and debates will help you to reflect upon and develop your assessment practice as a teacher of MFL. You will also develop a greater awareness of how assessment can be used in developing students to become more independent in their use of the target language.

This course is based on a learner-centred approach to teaching that is underpinned by a constructivist view of learning – the idea that students will construct knowledge and understanding for themselves as a result of classroom activities and experiences.

Now listen to an introduction to this course by its coordinator, Maria Luisa Pérez Cavana:

Audio content is not available in this format.

As you work through the activities you will be encouraged to record your thoughts on an idea, an issue or a reading, and how it relates to your practice. Hopefully you will have opportunities to discuss your ideas with colleagues. We therefore suggest that you use a notebook – either physical or electronic – to record your thoughts in a way in which they can easily be retrieved and revisited. If you prefer, however, you can record your ideas in response boxes within the course – in order to do this, and to retrieve your responses, you will need to enrol on the course.

This OpenLearn course is part of a collection of Open University [short courses for teachers and student teachers](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- articulate what it means to make progress in MFL
- list a number of key assessment strategies
- identify the challenges to assessing language learning
- outline the differences between formative and summative assessment
- classify some different assessment approaches.

1 What does it mean to make progress in MFL?

Assessment is all about ensuring that students are making progress. But what does this actually mean when learning a modern foreign language? What does progress in the target language look like? In this section you will consider defining good language learning and what this means for assessing progress.

1.1 The good language learner

Making progress in MFL is about students moving towards becoming independent users of the target language. The ultimate goal is for pupils to be able to communicate effectively, understand what is being said, and deduce meaning in the spoken and written word.

Grenfell and Harris (1999) consider good language learning to be about increasing autonomy in the use and development of a second language. They argue that knowing a language is extremely complex and has different levels: that is, fundamental levels of phonetics, phonology, morphology and syntax, as well as the manipulation of sound and organisation of structure. In addition, there has to be communication of meaning with the understanding and expression of ideas, as well as appropriate management of social and cultural 'dimensions' of the language (Grenfell and Harris, 1999, p. 41). All of these aspects of target language use will need to be assessed as the students move towards becoming good language learners.

In this context, making progress in language learning goes beyond simple knowledge of vocabulary and grammar structures. Therefore, monitoring and assessment strategies need to support students as they become increasingly independent users of the target language. For Grenfell and Harris, this means an emphasis on 'learning to learn' and approaching language learning from a different direction that focuses on the learner – their particular competence profile, learning styles and stage of developmental. Consequently, monitoring and assessment this requires consideration of 'knowledge about language as well as knowledge of language', and the inclusion of tasks and activities that develop both (Grenfell and Harris, 1999, p. 50).

If your approach to teaching a language includes also teaching the pupils how to learn a language, then how much and what kind of assessment will also need to reflect this.

Reflection point

Consider the assessment strategies you have observed in a school context or begun to use in your own teaching.

What aspects of language learning are assessed? How much consideration is given to pupils' knowledge about language as well as of the language?

1.2 External assessment

In addition to monitoring and assessing students to support their development as good language learners, students will also need to make progress according to external criteria. These include any statutory curriculum requirements and national examinations such as GCSE and A levels. Curriculum requirements differ from nation to nation, along with the criteria against which pupils' progress is measured, but schools need to find a way of monitoring and assessing students to demonstrate fulfilment of these.

For example, the National Curriculum guidance for England, introduced in 2013, states that MFL teaching should enable pupils to 'to understand and communicate personal and factual information that goes beyond their immediate needs and interests, developing and justifying points of view in speech and writing, with increased spontaneity, independence and accuracy.' It sees progress in terms of grammar, vocabulary and linguistic competence, which includes initiating and developing conversations, expressing ideas and coping with unfamiliar language. 'Linguistic competence' refers to competence in speaking, listening, reading and writing (the four skills).

Activity 1

Allow about 1 hour

Consider how external or statutory examinations assess language learning in a school context that you know of. In your opinion, to what extent do the criteria allow pupils to demonstrate all aspects of the good language learner as defined by Grenfell and Harris? Make a note of your thoughts.

1.3 Validity and reliability

Any assessment should be both valid and reliable. Validity asks whether grades generated by the kind of statutory testing described earlier represent a student's achievement in the whole of the subject. Can a series of timed, written tests at the end of a key stage assess all those things MFL teachers think are important for students to learn about?

An over-reliance on test results may lead teachers to make generalisations and judgements about a pupil's capability in all aspects of a subject, based on the formal testing of a subset. For example, a National Curriculum level tells us nothing about a pupil's problem-solving ability or creativity, nor about their ability to work in groups or engage in extended tasks. Perhaps all that can be said is that the tests simply tell the teacher about the capabilities of pupils to answer questions at a particular time and of a particular type (and in the conditions and circumstances of the test) – no more and no less.

Reliability asks whether pupil performance changes (or not) depending on the particular questions that are set. Ideally, assessments should give every pupil optimal opportunity to demonstrate what they know. In practice, however, tests have been found to be biased against pupils from particular backgrounds, socio-economic classes, ethnic groups or gender (Pullin, 1993). Equity issues are particularly important when assessment results are used to label pupils or deny them access to courses or careers in the future.

2 What should be assessed in MFL learning and how?

Having thought about what is meant by progress in MFL learning, this session will help you think further about the specifics of assessment, and to understand the importance of assessment in a learner's language development. In particular, you will consider what should be assessed and how.

2.1 What should MFL teachers assess?

You have already considered how there are multiple things that need to be assessed in the MFL classroom – the four skills, cultural understanding, willingness to participate, willingness to take risks, and so on. Any assessment methods to monitor progress should be clearly linked to the teaching and learning that has taken place. Atkinson and Lazarus (2002) state:

The greater the harmony between teaching methods and assessment methods, the more likely they suggest that the greater the harmony between the two, the more likely that the outcomes of each will correspond; for example, the more likely it is that assessment results will give an accurate picture of what has been learned and the more likely also that these learning outcomes will correspond with the original objectives.

In considering what should be assessed, Atkinson and Lazarus (2002) identify two broad categories: fluency and accuracy.

Fluency consists of the following:

- achieving a task
- conveying a message
- making meaning
- being creative
- effective communication.

Accuracy includes:

- pronunciation
- accent
- grammar
- spelling.

Activity 2

Allow about 1 hour

Reflect on how these criteria are assessed in a school context that you know about and how they relate to the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Is there a greater emphasis on some of these criteria than others? Why do you think this is? Make a note of your thoughts.

2.2 Using assessment to support learning

How assessment is carried out and how students are able to respond to it is of prime importance if it is to support their target language development. It is not simply what a teacher does that is important, but how it is done. Various techniques and approaches are available to teachers, and choosing the most appropriate approach requires skill and knowledge. You may well have already seen how experienced teachers adopt different assessment strategies depending on the type of activity or its focus; for example, whether it concerns the introduction of new language or the practise or manipulation of already familiar vocabulary and/or grammar.

Assessment can be summative (assessment of learning) or formative (assessment for learning). Effective assessment is planned and integrated into everyday lessons so that you are aware of what the students have learned during a lesson, after a lesson, after a sequence of lessons and at the end of a course or academic year. Formative assessment can be carried out by the teacher or by the pupils themselves through self- or peer assessment.

The purpose of assessment **of** learning (AoL) is to find out what pupils know, understand and can do, which may then be used for formal certification, to report progress to parents, and to judge teacher and school effectiveness.

Assessment **for** learning (AfL) also finds out what pupils know, understand and can do, but includes the pupil in the process, and enables the teacher to plan how to help the pupils make progress and develop their understanding and skills.

2.3 Assessing language skills

In the MFL classroom, where a lesson will often consist of several small steps that each build on the one before, it is important that the teacher constantly assesses the students' progress at the end of each step, as well as at the end of each lesson, to ensure that the students are ready to move to the next level of activity. This is particularly important when new language is introduced into the lesson. The students need to become familiar with that language before moving on to practise its use in different ways before being ready to perform and/or manipulate that language independently.

The next activity will enable you to consider what needs to be assessed in MFL teaching and learning, and how that assessment can be managed and made effective.

Activity 3

Allow about 90 minutes

Read the document 'Good assessment practice in modern foreign languages (MFL)', which sets out Ofsted's view of good practice in the assessment of MFL. (Ofsted is the inspection body for education in England.)

Summarise the advice it gives in a table, listing the assessment activities and examples of good assessment practice that matches these activities. Some examples are provided in Table 1.

Table 1 Good practice in MFL assessment

Assessment opportunity	Example of good practice	Explanation
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Oral work	Correction of pronunciation and intonation	The teacher is by and large the 'model' for correct pronunciation and intonation
Focused questioning	Teacher asks closely focused questions to elicit understanding (e.g. grammatical patterns)	The 'Socratic' approach (using questions to guide the learner to a better understanding) is a very effective technique
Plenary	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
Vocabulary testing	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
Written work	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
Homework	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>

Go back to the different elements in the two categories identified by Atkinson and Lazarus (2002) that should be assessed in MFL: fluency and accuracy. How do the assessment activities and examples of good practice that you have noted in the table help you to assess these? Add any other examples that you have observed or used in your own school context.

2.4 Involving students in the assessment process

It is not only the teacher who can carry out assessment; students can also assess their own learning. Involving students in assessment this has the potential to empower them and lead to a greater commitment to learning and progress. Students are more likely to understand the learning goals and assessment criteria if they are discussed and devised with them rather than imposed on them. Students will also become more engaged in their learning, and will build their confidence in discussing work with peers in a reflective, collaborative process, which in turn will develop their metacognition skills.

This means encouraging students to review their work critically and constructively, and involving them in identifying the learning goals that they will work towards (see Black and William, 1998).

Involving students in the assessment process will be considered further in Section 3.

3 How can we use assessment to enable MFL learning?

Having considered what we mean by progress in MFL and what should be assessed, this session looks at how using assessment can support students to develop their language skills. You will consider:

- the role of feedback and target setting
- how involving students in the assessment process can contribute to their learning
- how assessment can be used to support students in becoming independent learners.

3.1 Including students in the assessment process

Involving students in their language learning assessment supports their progress as they need to develop an understanding of what constitutes 'success'.

You may have seen occasions where a teacher has involved the students in the assessment process by:

- sharing learning goals and assessment criteria with the students
- helping students know and recognise the standards they are aiming for
- involving students in self-assessment
- providing feedback that helps students recognise their next steps and how to take them
- reviewing and reflecting on assessment data with students.

Encouraging students to reflect on their own work and that of their peers is an important language learning strategy, because it builds higher-order thinking skills. In addition, being able to monitor your own progress against learning outcomes (i.e. to self-assess) is important in becoming an independent learner. Discovering for yourself how to move forward (i.e. to use self-assessment formatively) develops self-regulation and self-efficacy. An improved ability to self-assess is an outcome of engaging with criteria and giving feedback, which is required in peer assessment.

Peer assessment is an important tool in helping students to move towards using the target language independently as they develop the ability to self-assess effectively and use metacognitive skills to regulate their own learning. Metacognition is a process requiring knowledge about both cognition and how to control, monitor and regulate cognitive processes (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001).

As students learn to become more self-regulatory and therefore independent in facilitating their own target language learning, they are able to monitor, direct and regulate their own actions towards their learning goals.

3.2 The impact of feedback on student progress

in MFL

Feedback on students' progress in the MFL classroom takes place during a lesson constantly. You may have already observed experienced teachers as they correct students' pronunciation in oral work, provide suggestions to reading or writing tasks as they circulate around the room, and praise correct usage of grammar or recollection of vocabulary. Immediate feedback like this supports students within a lesson, helping them to adjust or correct their responses to oral or written tasks.

Other forms of feedback may include a written assessment of performance with targets set on how to improve. As well as feedback from the teacher to the student, it can also be from one student to another, or from a student to the teacher.

Many theories have been proposed as to the most effective forms of student feedback. Some schools still use effort grades and marks out of 10, while others use National Curriculum levels and GCSE grades.

Feedback is most effective when the system is transparent, and students understand exactly how successful they have been and how they can improve. Feedback that is discussed with the students is particularly effective and allows them to contribute to identifying how they have fulfilled the success criteria and any areas for improvement. In order for students to make progress, any feedback needs to include a summary of what has been achieved, the points to improve on and what the learner actually needs to do to correct the weaknesses in a piece of work.

William and Black (2002) suggest a number of effective forms of feedback that enable students to make decisions about their future learning and become more effective learners. The next activity will help you identify these.

Activity 4

Allow about 2 hours

Read the article '[Feedback is the best nourishment](#)' (William and Black, 2002) and note the most effective forms of feedback, as suggested by the authors in a table like Table 2 below. Complete a second column to add your opinion of the benefit or drawback of the form of feedback, and a third column to note when you might use this form of feedback in MFL lessons.

The first row of the table has been filled in for you as an example.

Table 2 Forms of feedback

Form of feedback	Benefit/drawback?	When to use in MFL?
Oral feedback from the teacher to the student	More immediate and personal	During group or pair work
Giving a mark	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
Giving a written comment	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
Student-to-student (peer) assessment	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>

Student self-assessment	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
Focus of feedback	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>

3.3 Target setting

An important part of feedback is to set targets that to support students' further progress in their use of the target language. Assessment information can also be used to help the teacher decide on the next steps in their teaching and inform their planning of future lessons.

These targets give every learner a 'next step' to take in improving their learning in a logical and systematic manner. The more that the students are involved in setting these next steps themselves, the more they learn – and the more they also learn about the skills involved in language learning.

Good language learners are usually able to set out their next steps with only minimal assistance. Helping less accomplished or less effective language learners to consider criteria and set out appropriate next steps for themselves can be difficult, but it will help them move towards becoming more successful and independent learners of the target language.

To be effective, student targets should be:

- negotiated with the student (so that they have ownership of the targets)
- achievable and realistic
- relevant and pertinent to the student's progression in MFL (this involves knowing the student and their work, and identifying the most significant factors hindering progress)
- limited in number (it is easier for a student to concentrate on one or two targets, and success in these will improve their motivation)
- concise, focused and specific
- supported with suggestions for actions (these indicate how the targets might be achieved)
- clear in terms of indicating criteria for success (so that students identify when they have reached their targets).

Activity 5

Allow about 1 hour

Watch the video clip '[Secondary assessment for learning – modern foreign languages](#)' about assessment for learning (AfL) in MFL. (Alternatively, you can read a transcript.) As you do so, make notes on the different approaches to AfL in MFL that you see. How do they support students in becoming good language learners? Use the following questions to help you:

- What aspects of the assessment process are shared with students?

-
- Who sets deadlines?
 - How is assessment used to support students' progress?
 - How are targets set?
 - How are students encouraged to reflect on their learning?
 - What do you need to consider when planning for peer and self-assessment?

4 What are the challenges to effective assessment in MFL?

There are a number of challenges to assessing progress in language learning, particularly how to assess the different aspects of language learning in a classroom context, how to record assessment and the role of target language in assessment. This section will help you think further about some of these aspects of assessment.

Reflection point

Which aspects of language learning do you find most difficult to assess?

Can you think of any reasons for this?

4.1 Assessing oral work

Assessing oral work can present MFL teachers with a particular challenge. There are many reasons why this is so, such as:

- the size of classes can make it difficult for teachers to hear all students regularly use spoken language independently
- a lot of the speaking work done in class may be 'practice' rather than the independent production of language
- spoken work is ephemeral, and it is difficult to record the outcomes of speaking activities during lessons, especially if the teacher leads the activity and cannot record students at the same time
- at the higher levels of performance, few people other than the teacher can provide the stimulus that students need to extend the scope of the language they produce.

Activity 6

Allow about 1 hour

In this activity you will look at issues involved in assessing oral work in MFL. Look at the following settings for oral work:

- role-plays and simulations

- asking and answering open-ended questions
- use of classroom language
- use of spontaneous language
- mini-talks or presentations made individually or in groups (for example, using illustrations on a whiteboard or in a PowerPoint presentation).

Using Table 3, note down in the middle column which setting from the list above could be used to assess the component of oral work listed in the first column.

In the third column, note the type of record you would make.

One example has been provided for you.

Table 3 Assessing speaking – setting and records

Component to assess	Possible setting	Type of record
Pronunciation	Pair work Role-plays or simulations	Note students whose sounds are particularly French, German or Spanish Note students who need to work on the sounds Note sounds that the class needs to hear and practise
Intonation	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
Range of vocabulary	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
Initiative	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
Accuracy	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>

Despite the challenges, there are many speaking tasks that can be carried out during lessons that afford opportunities for assessment, for example when students are engaged in pair work.

When assessing oral work, both permanent and ephemeral evidence can be gathered. Permanent evidence will often consist of recordings of spoken work that can be assessed at a later date.

Ephemeral evidence is produced at the moment of learning and consists of actions or words. It is important to listen to students as they talk, and to ask them questions that will allow them to demonstrate their level of attainment. Gathering such data is time-consuming, so it is important to identify in advance which students are to be assessed and which aspect of their speaking work needs to be assessed, so that no time or opportunities are wasted.

You may also wish to refer back to the elements identified by Lazarus and Atkinson in session 2. How might you assess the different aspects relating to ‘fluency’?

4.2 Keeping student records in MFL

With so much to assess in the MFL classroom, another challenge for all teachers, but especially beginner teachers, is what assessment to record and in what way.

Reasons for keeping a record of students' progress

It is important to keep records so that you are able to monitor the progress of individual students over a period of time. Keeping records allows the teacher to see whether individual students are making consistent and appropriate progress in all areas of language learning or whether a student finds a particular aspect of language learning more difficult. You can also look for patterns that tell you if a student is working at their identified level or if they may need some form of intervention or particular support.

How to record student progress in MFL

For any assessment information to be useful it, therefore, has to be meaningful. It will also need to make sense to you some time after it has been recorded!

Activity 7

Allow about one hour

Look at the record of student progress in Table 4.

Table 4 Student progress

Date	2 March	16 March	16 March	20 March	23 March	27 March
Task	Homework: family tree	Unit test: writing	Unit test: listening	Speaking test: out of 28	Classwork: reading Unit 3, page 6	Vocabulary test: schoolbag items, out of 12
Student 1	✓	Level 2	Level 2	25	B	11
Student 2	✓	Level 1	Level 2	24	B	11
Student 3	✓	Level 1	Level 1	24	C	8
Student 4	✓	Level 2	Level 2	27	A	12
Student 5	✓	Level 3	Level 3	26	A	12
Student 6	✓	Level 2	Level 3	27	B	10

What does this record tell you about the progress of each student? What information does it give you about what each student has learnt? What do the test results tell you about each student's strengths and weaknesses? As a teacher of MFL what would you

need to know about students' writing, listening, reading and speaking skills that would be useful?

Now look at the example of student progress in Table 5

Table 5 Student progress

Date	3 April	4 April	10 April	11/17 April	18 April
Task	Vocabulary test	Reading	Listening	Speaking	Writing
Student 1	10	10	10	A P✓	C A✓
Student 2	9	10	8	A✓ P*	C✓ A*
Student 3	10	10	9	A P✓	C A✓
Student 4	9	10	9	A P✓	C✓ A*
Student 5	4	6	5	A*	C* A*
Student 6	6	9	9	A* P✓	C✓ A*
	10 places (inc. gender)	Recognise 10 places on map	Recognise places in a dialogue (/10)	Ask and give directions	Describe your town

Key: A = accuracy, P = pronunciation, C = content; ✓ = good, * = improvement needed.

What does Table 5 tell you about the progress of each student? What information does it give you about what each student has learned? What can you learn about each student's strengths and weaknesses? What does it tell you about how the assessment was carried out?

Table 5 is a more helpful record, because the information at the bottom indicates what the students were required to do and some indication of individual strengths and weaknesses.

Conclusion

In this free course, *Assessment in secondary foreign languages*, you have considered the complex nature of assessing progress in MFL. It has encouraged you to explore ways of assessing students' progress and using approaches and strategies that support students towards becoming independent language learners. The challenges to assessment in the MFL classroom remain, but examining the key issues in these sessions will have helped you to become more confident in finding ways to overcome these.

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