Good assessment practice in   
modern foreign languages (MFL)



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### Features of effective assessment

Assessment in modern foreign languages (MFL) is most effective when it is seen as an integral part of teaching and learning. The scheme of work clearly indicates assessment opportunities for sequences of lessons and expectations of pupils are made explicit in terms of progression through the national curriculum levels or against GCSE criteria. When planning individual lessons, teachers clearly identify learning objectives and how they will monitor pupils’ progress in their achievement, taking account of informal as well as formal assessment. They make effective use of this information to help pupils to improve their skills in understanding and using the target language, and modify subsequent lesson plans accordingly. Pupils have a clear understanding of what they know and can do, and what they should do next to improve their performance. This close monitoring of pupils’ learning helps them to achieve their potential, especially in the case of boys, whose performance at GCSE is closer to that of girls than in schools in general.

### Day-to-day assessment

The ongoing use of assessment is particularly important in MFL, with its emphasis on using the target language as the usual medium of instruction. Effective assessment involves constant monitoring and feedback to pupils and appropriate action to promote improvement, as in the following example:

The teacher picks up points to correct in plenary, and does so rigorously and sensitively, getting the class to repeat the correct answers so that all can benefit without individual pupils being demoralised. She gives credit for an ‘almost right’ answer, but doesn’t stop there. She commends pupils who take the initiative in going beyond the minimum with an extended utterance, in order to raise the expectations of the rest. In monitoring oral work in pairs, she explains how the utterance can be improved, using reference to similar patterns or to work covered earlier. She makes it clear how pupils can get better at reading the target language by linking a comment to the national curriculum levels which are displayed in the classroom for all to see.

Day-to-day assessment in MFL is most effective when:

* learning homework is regularly set, and consistently followed up in a variety of ways which include paired testing and marking of vocabulary, and whole class testing by the teacher
* questioning is used to reinforce accuracy of pronunciation, clarify points of grammar and draw out longer answers
* teachers provide individual feedback to pupils, for example when monitoring pair or group oral work.

### Marking and Feedback to Pupils

Pupils tend to find it easier to identify their progress in written than in oral work. In general, their awareness of how well they are doing is linked to the amount of effort invested by teachers into explaining criteria and systems. For example:

Pupils were made well aware of how they were doing in speaking during ‘routine’ oral work, and by periodic mini-tests in speaking, which they had to re-do until they got a satisfactory mark. They were alerted to the most common errors in writing as these were discussed by the teachers with the whole class. In another school, pupils could explain what was expected in terms of the school’s content – language accuracy mark scheme – and were provided with very clear information about effort grades, homework marking, national curriculum level descriptions and examination criteria.

Marking in MFL is most effective when:

* it is done consistently, in appropriate detail and with a clear purpose
* errors are indicated, with specific indication on how to improve accuracy (eg position of adjectives, gender, use of capitals/lower case etc.)
* a brief written comment is given (in the target language where appropriate)
* grades are related to the school’s overall assessment system
* there is oral feedback to the individual and/or to the class, making teaching points out of the more common mistakes.

Some of the elements of good practice identified in this report result from a considerable investment of teacher time. Heads of department in particular carry a heavy load, especially if mentoring new colleagues in an ever-shifting staffing situation. However, procedures in MFL departments can be made more manageable by a number of approaches:

* reducing over-reliance on the assessment instruments provided with the coursebook (for example, reducing the formal assessments from one per unit to one per term in each of the four skills)
* identifying key objectives against which assessments of pupils’ progress are to be made (for example in the scheme of work for each unit)
* being very clear about the purposes and outcomes of marking of pupils’ written work
* making better use of formative, on-going assessment of oral and written work for summative purposes
* establishing clear criteria for the content and layout of markbooks so that they provide effective sources of evidence.

### Using assessment to inform teaching and learning

Departmental handbooks are an important starting point for establishing clear procedures and guidance for MFL teachers on assessment matters. The most effective link assessment, recording and reporting policy for MFL to objectives in the departmental development plan, with analysis of assessment data contributing to annual action plans and directly influencing medium- and long-term planning. For example:

Teachers use information about pupils’ specific strengths and weaknesses well in planning future units and lessons, for example in targeting weak areas of vocabulary or deficiencies in spelling. They use January Year 9 examinations to identify areas of skill and understanding to raise in national curriculum levels by the end of Key Stage 3, particularly the level 5 ‘hurdle’ in attainment target 2 and 4; and they use June Year 10 module results to identify areas for improvement in listening and reading skills.

Self-assessment plays an important role in helping pupils to understand assessment objectives and criteria, as in the following example:

‘Aim High’ sheets set out for each skill the national curriculum level descriptions presented in ‘pupil-friendly’ language. Pupils use these to monitor their progress and to identify what they need to do to reach a higher level in a particular skill. They find this motivating and, along with other strategies, such as pupil tracking, it has resulted in pupils’ performance in MFL rising significantly in recent years.

In effective MFL departments, recording and analysis of assessment information are complemented by focused target setting. Targets are included in reports and discussed during parent/pupil interviews. For example:

GCSE grades are estimated at three points in Key Stage 4: December of Year 10, end of Year 10, after Year 11 mocks. On each occasion these are shared and discussed with pupils in ‘off timetable’ individual interviews. Another school sets interim learning targets, such as ‘learn the spelling of these ten words’ as opposed to ‘improve your spelling’ which is too general. Each pupil has a summary sheet on which he/she must enter ‘what I have done about this’. The teacher signs off each target when it is achieved.

The use of assessment data is most effective when:

* it informs short-, medium- and long-term planning
* pupils have a clear understanding of the criteria against which they are being assessed
* pupils are given specific targets and guidance on what they need to do to improve.

### Using external criteria to assess MFL

National curriculum and GCSE criteria are used most effectively to assess MFL where departmental handbooks give clear guidance on their application, and when there is regular discussion between staff about samples of pupils’ work. In Key Stage 3, there is often a need for national curriculum level descriptions to inform teaching and learning more explicitly, as they do in the following example:

The school identifies under-performing groups within its setting system, and breaks down national curriculum levels in MFL in Key Stage 3 into ‘abc’ in order to be able to gauge improvements in performance more accurately.

In best practice, departments which enter pupils for coursework at GCSE have moved towards expecting pupils to undertake more extended writing in Key Stage 3, as well as focusing on more general skills:

The department in which pupils have previously suffered from under-expectations and under-achievement has a systematic approach to developing study habits in Key Stage 3, such as note-taking and organisation skills, in order to prepare pupils for the demands and discipline of coursework at GCSE.

In Key Stage 3, effective standardisation is usually carried out by the shared setting and marking of end-of-unit or end-of-year tests, with explicit reference to national curriculum levels to agree judgements on performance. Portfolios of work by current or previous pupils are not used extensively in ‘levelling’ although there is some movement towards developing their use. Moderation in Key Stage 4 tends to rely on shared awareness of GCSE requirements, rather than on formal procedures, but some departments use past examples to moderate coursework against the board’s criteria.

The use of external assessment criteria is most effective when:

* they are incorporated into schemes of work and linked to teaching activities and learning objectives
* they are used to inform expectations across both key stages
* teachers evaluate and discuss samples of pupils’ work.