Refocusing Assessment
modern foreign languages

Refocusing Assessment – modern foreign languages

Introduction

SSAT, ASCL and NFER have worked together to produce *Refocusing Assessment*, which is a resource to support schools in developing and reviewing their assessment practice. The resource identifies five key questions for all departments, which you will find below.

In the following pages you will also find some responses to each question. These are drawn from the expert panels that SSAT, ASCL and NFER convened, which were comprised of heads of department and representatives from subject associations. These are not intended to offer definitive answers to the key questions, but may help to support, challenge or structure your discussions.

For details about the references in this document, please refer to the *Refocusing Assessment* overview document.

How to use this resource

1 Spend time with your department discussing each of the five questions.

2 Record a summary of your discussion.

3 Look at the responses produced by the expert panels. How far do they reflect the thoughts of your team?

4 See if you can summarise the 'assessment requirements' for your subject on the template.

5 You may then be asked to share your responses with other departments to help identify the commonalities and differences between subjects in order to help establish a whole school approach. You may wish to consider the following questions:

› How do the needs of different subject areas vary?

› How can you apply best practice in different subject areas whilst also maintaining consistency across the whole school?

6 You may wish to produce an action plan to modify and shape your assessment policy and practice.

7 Set a time to review and evaluate the impact of the action plan on assessment.

Five key questions

1

What does it mean to be a successful student in MFL?

What is the purpose of our subject?

What does it mean to be a good linguist? Is this what we are preparing students for?

What are the core knowledge and skills required for success?

2

What is the purpose of assessment in MFL?

Why do we assess?

Who is assessment for?

3

What does progress look like in MFL?

How do we know when a student is making progress?

How might progress vary over time?

4

How can progress be assessed most effectively in MFL?

Which assessment techniques work best in MFL?

How successfully do we use formative assessment approaches?

How can formative and summative assessment work together to ensure effective assessment for learning?

How do we benchmark/ quality assure our assessment practices?

5

How do the assessment practices in our department contribute to/work with whole school policy?

Question 1: What does it mean to be a successful student in modern foreign languages?

Some thoughts from the expert panel discussion

The purpose of language learning is to develop:

› successful learners, who can reflect on how they have acquired and learned their first language and how this can assist them in further language learning
› confident individuals, who, through experiencing success and support, can interact with others in real-life situations, talk about topics of personal interest and deliver presentations in their new language
› resilient learners who will continue to explore a variety of ways of learning to find ways to memorise and reutilise new language
› effective contributors, who can work in individual, paired and group situations, and establish and maintain contact with other speakers of the target language
› responsible citizens, who have a growing awareness of life in another society and of the issues facing citizens in the countries where their new language is spoken.

Successful linguists have an awareness of their skills as a learner; they are reflective learners who interact with feedback and are prepared to learn from their mistakes.

Students are able to develop a good memory and are prepared to learn, practise and apply new grammatical structures and new vocabulary to different contexts and situations.

Successful linguists develop effective meta-cognitive skills and understand how they learn.

Students display a keen interest in the culture and traditions of other countries and are curious about how language works.

Successful students should be able to see patterns in language (e.g. decoding), and try to reapply them in their own work.

Students are able to apply language structures that have been mastered across different learning contexts.

Effective learners of a new language are not afraid to make mistakes.

Successful linguists are able to respond to the challenge of the unexpected and draw on their knowledge and skills to infer meaning and deepen understanding.

As well as being willing to communicate with self-confidence and communicate appropriately in different contexts, good linguists are also able to listen to others.

Success in modern languages is linked to having the resourcefulness to apply logic or analysis or other strategies within the communicative context.

Question 2: What is the purpose of assessment in modern foreign languages?

Some thoughts from the expert panel discussion

The key purpose of assessment should be to help students understand where they are in their learning - supporting them to know what they are secure with in terms of their knowledge, understanding and skills and helping them identify areas to develop.

However, assessment can also:
› allow learners to reflect on learning over time
› be used to find out where students are before they start something new
› help teachers reflect on their pedagogy
› help teachers to develop a better understanding of the student as a learner
› help to identify learning issues to support the planning of strategic interventions
› provide a basis for a meaningful dialogue with students, parents/carers and other stakeholders, such as school leaders, governors and Ofsted, about students' progress.

Formative assessment can provide helpful insights into learning and take a range of forms, for example: from informal discussions, to the use of 'hinge questions' in lessons, to assessing extended tasks that can be used to tease out more complex and deeper levels of understanding. Formative assessment should address the totality of a student's performance, not just the easily measurable.

In developing formative assessment, it is vital to consider what information the assessment is aiming to collect. Effective formative assessment helps to identify strengths and areas for development and can also help to demonstrate progress over time.

Assessment information is needed for a variety of stakeholders and purposes but, fundamentally, assessment should be focused **on** the student and **for** the student.

Whilst each subject is unique in its own right, the purposes of assessing students are broadly the same in all subjects:
› to allow students to know where they are in their learning
› to help to inform future teaching and learning activities
› to help identify specific learning issues and to provide additional support/intervention where needed
› to track and monitor students' progress and to identify underachievement.

Formative assessment is integral to everyday teaching and is part of good pedagogy. It should be embedded into teaching activities, with regular opportunities for assessment and feedback within each lesson. There is already some excellent formative assessment practice occurring in schools. However, this is not necessarily consistently good across schools or between different subjects or between teachers within departments within the same school. This inconsistency can be due to a number of factors including varying levels of expertise, confidence and experience amongst teachers.

The challenge is in developing staff expertise in formative assessment practices and in assessment literacy more generally. This is a challenge that is relevant to all (Carter, 2015) not just to trainee teachers and newly qualified teachers (NQTs). To make formative assessment even more successful:
› teachers must understand formative assessment and be confident in integrating it fully into their teaching
› there needs to be a supportive and collaborative climate in which staff are encouraged to share good practice and try out new assessment approaches
› there needs to be strategic, long term planning in order to ensure that sufficient time is factored into teaching a topic to allow for feedback to students and for students to review and respond to the feedback given
› the leadership team need to promote a culture of Assessment for Learning (AfL) both within departments and across departments in a school and encourage moderation of assessment practices within and across departments.

Question 3: What does progress look like in modern foreign languages?

Some thoughts from the expert panel discussion

Progress in language learning **cannot** be defined in a linear way. Due to the nature of progression in language learning, progress can manifest itself in many different ways which cannot always be reliably or validly measured.

Progress for students is making sense of their language learning to help them transfer what they have learnt to new contexts. This may involve recognising their own mistakes and correcting them, being able to spot errors made by translation software or extending and using new vocabulary.

Progress can mean a student being able to do something more accurately or with more confidence or fluency than they could do before e.g. writing more accurately in a foreign language, improving intonation in the spoken language, applying vocabulary and grammar to a new context or communicating with increasing confidence, accuracy and fluency.

The four skills of listening, reading and writing and speaking may progress at different rates.

Progress can be mastering the most frequently used words and verbs in a language and being able to use them with confidence in the spoken and written format.

Progress can mean using other languages to help students.

Progress can mean improving students' techniques in decoding unseen texts.

Demonstrating progress as a language learner can mean being able to retrieve language from students' long term memory and use it to support their understanding of new and more difficult language.

Progress can mean being able to work more independently and knowing where to look to check meaning, gender, definitions and language structures. It can involve seeing connections and patterns between different structures and making sense of new and unfamiliar content.

Students develop the ability to use existing grammatical understanding to make sense of unfamiliar content. In this way they become increasingly adept at deciphering the spoken and written word.

Students develop confidence in making links and connections and moving passive language into active use.

Progress can mean mastering a grammatical concept, for example the superlative.

Question 4: How can progress be assessed most effectively in modern foreign languages?

Some thoughts from the expert panel discussion

Learning a language is not a process of passive reception of language but one in which the learners must be active in creating their own understandings about language learning. Formative assessment techniques guide students towards a development of their own 'learning to learn' skills which are essential in mastering a foreign language. Assessments do not all need to be structured to reflect real life situations; there is benefit to be gained from testing new grammatical structures, for example in partial isolation from other language features, to ensure they have been properly understood.

Up till now GCSE assessment has dictated pedagogy and curriculum planning but there is now an emphasis on securing a greater depth and understanding of key structures, grammar and vocabulary with a view to long term learning and sustained progress. This will inevitably shape future assessments.

The department and school should also consider how and whether assessments are linked to minimum target / predicted grades. Whilst these can help contextualise progress, they can also produce ceiling effects on subsequent learning.

Teachers need a wide repertoire of AfL strategies to incorporate into their teaching.

'**Hinge questions**' can bring out any specific student misconceptions to be addressed or areas that require further teaching. These can range from simple multiple choice to more detailed probing discussion during a lesson.

A lot of formative assessment **may not need recording**. The learners themselves may find it helpful to record their own progress in the different skills, but an onerous system of centralised recording may be counter-productive to good formative assessment.

Talking and listening to students enables teachers to fully grasp the students' thought processes while the students are actively engaged in using and manipulating language.

Assessment feedback is most successful where specific lessons are set aside for this. This allows opportunities for self and peer reflection. Members of the expert panel considered that '*you can see more progress being made in that feedback lesson*' because it encourages an explicit formative dialogue between the teacher and students about progress: what students can do, where they need to go and the strategies to get there.

Shared tasks/assessments and moderation can help a department develop a more consistent approach to embedding formative assessment. Teachers should be encouraged to talk about students' learning and progress outside of the pressures of accountability.

Rich learning activities that demonstrate securities and expose insecurities can allow for robust formative assessment. Redrafting a task following feedback or students taking ownership for their learning, for example by preparing individual revision aids (assessed / checked by teacher afterwards).

Feedback needs to be immediate if it is to inform the student's thought processes. **Prompt, qualitative feedback** (even if brief) often has more impact on students than detailed feedback delivered after the student has 'moved on' from a topic.

Peer and self marking is a (teaching and learning) tool in itself. Students are motivated to learn a language when they feel a sense of progress. Critiquing other students' work or model answers this allows learners to see different ways of thinking around the same topic and progress to be evidenced.

Quick tests can be used regularly to assess recall of grammatical structure and vocabulary but aggregating scores over a period of time may not accurately reflect progress.