

How do they and we know they're learning?

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In June 2003 the Department was asked to participate in the Assessment is for Learning Project. I was very pleased to be able to take part in a project which gave me funding to have thinking time and to take forward the fruits (if any) of my deliberations.

The invitation to join the Project coincided with my taking over a somewhat disenchanted S2 'middle' set. It was immediately obvious to me that I would need to engage their interest by employing more creative teaching methods than those to which they had previously been exposed as these clearly had not worked. I spoke to the class and asked them to identify for me the difficulties they saw in French. To my surprise they identified learning and retaining vocabulary as the key stumbling block to progress in and enjoyment of French. This then became the focus of my work on the Project.

I read the 'Black Box' series of booklets on Formative assessment with great interest and felt immediately very much in tune with their thinking and the Formative assessment strategies which they advocated. I was particularly interested in 'traffic lighting' as a learning strategy where pupils compartmentalise what they know they know (**green**), what they half know (**amber**) and what they know they don't know (**red**). I wanted to find a more hands on way of implementing this strategy in order to motivate pupils and to respond to the needs of the kinaesthetic learners in the class.

To introduce the core vocabulary I used colourful, commercially-available OHTs and a Domino game from a Nelson Thornes Repromaster. Pupils had to match weather pictures and phrases and if correctly done the cards formed a perfect rectangle. Pupils enjoyed playing the game but were definitely learning too.

Given that any class contains a variety of learning styles it was important that any innovations catered for the visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learners in the group. I therefore devised a system of word cards which addressed the problem of learning and retaining vocabulary as identified by the pupils. The core French vocabulary for each section of the topic was typed on one side of a card with the English on the back. Pupils initially focused on recognising the English then moved on to the French side. For both of these activities I provided each pair of pupils with three clear plastic word boxes with coloured labels representing the traffic light colours. Pupils placed cards in the various boxes reflecting how able they were to give the correct answer to their partner. This proved a remarkably successful strategy as pupils took responsibility for their own learning and could see the progress they were making. They also had the additional support of help from their partner if they got stuck. In addition this had a spin-off for their partner who was learning as well as checking their partner's answers.

It has been established departmental policy for several years to have clearly-identified language and grammar targets in workbooks and in textbooks. In the last few years, however, this policy had been extended to include individual lesson targets written up on a small whiteboard in the classroom. Pupils are therefore very clear about what they are expected to learn and can see the progress they are making as the lesson develops. In the past teachers have not always shared with pupils where they were heading and how they were to get there. Pupils respond well when they can see and understand what they are meant to be doing.

The workbooks created for the Project contained targets, self and peer assessment boxes, commercial worksheets, 'diary pages' and a core vocabulary sheet. In the diary pages, pupils commented on how well they got on in the lesson, and what they found difficult. They were able to see at a glance the progress they were making as I asked them to jot down how many cards for each vocabulary area they were able to get into the green box each day. Every three lessons I took the workbooks in and replied to them. When I returned the workbooks, I made a point of speaking to about one third of the class individually each time about their progress in the topic. Time was made available for this as pupils were taking much more responsibility for their own learning and this thus freed me up to engage with pupils who really appreciated the personal communication – as did I. This last strategy, however, would be extremely difficult to maintain on a longer term basis with lots of classes. Diary entries could however be continued in a simplified form.

I tried another Formative Assessment strategy called 'increased wait time', which was new to me. Because of its success in the project, I and a number of staff use this as appropriate with every class. Using this strategy, pupils do not put their hands up to answer but wait a little longer and the teacher selects a pupil with the clear expectation that most of the class will have the right answer. In my experience there is a higher rate of correct answers using this system and pupils feel less pressurized by time constraints. I think it is vitally important to bear in mind that we all learn and think at different speeds and that there should be no race to be right.

To finish the project, I had created a differentiated board game combining all the elements of the topic. Pupils selected either a bronze, silver or gold card depending on the level of challenge with which they felt able to cope. Some less confident pupils opted for the safe option of bronze on the first day we played the game but then felt confident enough to try the harder levels, having learned from the other players the day before. Again the cards were printed on both sides with the phrase on one side and the correct answer on the other. Pupils were thus supported and could be independent learners. This also enabled me to have time to talk to individual pupils.

At the end of the project I asked the class to fill in a questionnaire about the work we had done during the project. Feedback was extremely positive with the word boxes and the games getting high praise. Pupils felt they had learned and had enjoyed learning. They indicated that their confidence had been boosted and they were very much more enthusiastic about learning French. They were delighted to have been exposed to the wide variety of teaching and learning strategies and were keen to have the types of strategies employed during the project extended to the other units in the course. As a teacher it was extremely rewarding to find such a positive response to a unit of work. Increased motivation, enthusiasm, better relationships and better performance ... what more could I ask for?