

### 3 Key issues in teaching and assessing Foreign Languages

In this chapter we shall examine key current issues, such as where we are in terms of methodology, the notion of authenticity, teaching and assessing in the Target Language (TL), and formative assessment.

#### Where are we in terms of methodology?

From the late 1970s, methodology moved away from a grammar–translation approach, which emphasised describing the language rather than using it. This was also reflected in a change in testing methods: there was a move away from, for example, large-scale multiple-choice objective tests based on testing discrete items and traditional translation. As the methodology moved towards stressing the importance of the ability of the learner to perform in the TL, test designers were challenged to produce tests that could assess the extent to which learners could actually communicate in the TL.

As early as 1965, Chomsky had already made a fundamental distinction between **competence** (the speaker/hearer’s knowledge of the language) and **performance** (the actual use of language in concrete situations). Hymes (1972) added the notion of **communicative** to competence – and this meant adding rules of use of language without which the rules of grammar would be useless.

Bachman (1990) referred to communicative language ability. This comprised two main forms of competence: linguistic competence and pragmatic competence. Linguistic competence was knowledge of the language itself, defined in terms of pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure. Pragmatic competence was knowing *how* to use language to achieve communicative goals or intentions. It involved the use of social knowledge to select language forms to use in different settings.

The new emphasis in methodology was on the actual process of communication and how to teach learners to communicate. New teaching materials reflected this shift away from Reading/Writing to focus on more Speaking/Listening activities, which featured much greater use of the TL.

Grammar still had a place but it was considered less important than the acquisition of real-life communication skills and communicative ability.

The debate of recent years has largely centred on how to develop communicative language ability in our students. Brumfit (1984) talked of the need for activities to promote fluency. In his view, fluency activities enable students to produce and understand items which they gradually acquire during activities which are focused on linguistic form or 'accuracy work'. When considering fluency activities, he cited several factors to be borne in mind:

- What is the need of the learners? (To what use will the language be put?)
- Language is a means to an end – the focus should be on meaning, not form.
- Content should be determined by the learner, who is the speaker or writer.
- There must be negotiation of meaning between speakers – students are involved in interpreting a meaning from what they hear.
- There should be unpredictable language – as there is in real life – with an information gap (a gap of understanding that can only be bridged by real communication).
- The normal processes of listening, reading, speaking and writing are in play (e.g. improvisation, paraphrasing).
- Teacher intervention should be minimal.

Such activities and emerging research in the field of linguistics and language acquisition led to heated debate about the best ways forward in terms of methodology. One prevailing misconception was the idea that accuracy and grammar were no longer important. Teachers and producers of textbooks became preoccupied with how best to integrate input on language form, rehearsal and communicative practice. Teachers found it difficult to reproduce real-life situations in the classroom and to control language in real communicative situations.

The biggest criticism that could perhaps be aimed at the methodology of the 1990s was that much syllabus development and coursebook development focused heavily on topic-based teaching which ignored, or paid little attention to, a sound linear development in terms of structure, vocabulary and grammar. This led to many learners acquiring 'phrasebook knowledge' and a marked inability to transfer their language skills between topics. Syllabuses were developed around speech acts, and these generally placed far less emphasis on grammar, marginalising it in the learning process. This was particularly the case where the whole ability range was learning the foreign language. The desire to motivate sometimes unwilling learners often led to attractive-looking coursebooks with little linguistic content and a topic-based approach, which never

enabled students to move beyond a very basic level of language acquisition.

The move towards a communicative language teaching (CLT) methodology led away from the overemphasis on Writing as the traditionally all-important language skill. Teaching and testing focused upon the equal importance of skills, but frequently at the expense of a sound framework of grammar – even for learners for whom it was entirely appropriate to emphasise not just communicative but also linguistic competence. More able learners sometimes became frustrated that they were not being given the means to generate new language. Phrases and lists of vocabulary alone were not enough to help learners acquire strategies for coping in real life. Unfortunately, the emphasis on communicative competence sometimes failed to take into account the complementary nature of linguistic competence.

### **So, where are we now?**

It is fair to say, at the time of writing, that communication is still at the heart of language teaching methodology, but that grammar has re-emerged. It is now deemed quite acceptable and, indeed, desirable practice to make the linguistic content of our teaching very obvious to students. Grammar and accuracy are once again seen as important. Schemes of work and lesson plans now have to place greater emphasis on helping students to write and speak more accurately, and to understand how linguistic principles work and are applied in Reading and Listening texts. This does not mean that Writing is re-emerging as the most important of the four subskills. It does, however, mean that, whereas many teachers in the 1990s may have felt that teaching grammar was frowned upon, it is being re-established as an important and vital feature of language acquisition and use. This is already apparent in the way new publications have responded and made their grammatical content much more explicit. It is heartening to note that, in many of the countries where I have met international teachers, the concept of teaching grammar was always seen to be one aspect of communication. Such teachers have continued to emphasise the acquisition of structures and accuracy in their own classrooms, alongside a communicative approach. This approach is an entirely sensible one and one which will not be alien to many reading this publication.

### Teacher activity 3.1

- To what extent did your own experience as a foreign language learner reflect aspects of linguistic competence and aspects of communicative competence?
- Consider your basic approach in the classroom. Does your own teaching style reflect a communicative approach – and, if so, to what extent? What are the dangers or difficulties of adopting a totally communicative approach in your own context?

## Authenticity

Closely tied in to the notion of CLT was the notion of authenticity. Authenticity became a paramount objective, both in terms of the nature of task (that it should totally reflect a real-life situation) and of text (that it should be an unchanged authentic foreign language text).

Authenticity of task required teachers and materials authors to produce clearly defined and real-life purposeful tasks. In theory, this was fine; but the notion of authenticity became somewhat removed when one considered that the students were *not* in real-life situations, neither in the classroom nor in the examination room. There is a certain step back to be taken in the teaching context and, however well-meaning the teacher is and however well-motivated the learner is, it is not always easy to achieve an authentic learning situation. As Pachler and Field (2002: 46) comment, there is a difference between ‘learning a language for communication and learning it as communication’. Certain transactional situations such as buying tickets and ordering meals lend themselves to real-life situations. Once into the realm of freer language, it is very challenging to set up situations in which the tasks are authentic and will occur naturally, given that students have only a limited amount of linguistic competence upon which to draw. Teachers and authors therefore frequently fall back upon the authenticated task – in other words, setting up lifelike tasks which require a limited amount of controlled and pre-rehearsed language, which can be presented, practised and then developed in different situations.

In order to reflect the authenticity of text, the nature of examination tasks and coursebook materials changed. Students were presented with a huge variety of texts drawn from authentic materials. Initially, this appeared to be a totally laudable departure from previously encountered materials, but there were problems. Firstly, in the classroom learners are in an artificial situation. They are not immersed in the culture of the TL, and this can be a huge problem if the background knowledge brought to the text by the student is insufficient to comprehend the subject matter. Secondly, if the language is not adapted to match the learning objectives

appropriate to the learner, the text may prove to be so inaccessible that the learner gives up and will not rise to the challenge. In practice, authors and teachers automatically filter the language to make it more accessible and appropriate to the linguistic level of students. Although this may go against the truly communicative approach of meeting unpredictable language in a real-life situation, it is a fact that for texts to have meaning they require teachers to make them relevant to their learners' needs. The teacher remains the best source of reference between the classroom and the outside world of the country where the TL is spoken, and has a vital role to play in filtering texts to make them appropriate to their students.

Test designers are well aware of the need to provide materials which look authentic and are based on authentic sources, but which contain language that is within the scope of the syllabus. This helps teachers to design programmes of study and also gives achievable teaching and assessment objectives – if there were no limits placed on an examination in terms of topic content, structures, vocabulary and grammar, then reliable assessment would be virtually impossible as the whole of human life could be there! It is necessary to be realistic in terms of what the average 16-year-old reads or hears in their own mother tongue and to consider their learning environment before plunging them into a totally 'authentic' language-learning experience.

In my own experience, it is always of paramount importance to consider the authenticity of task and text in relation to the pupils' needs. One can gradually grade both text and task in terms of difficulty of content and language as they progress. As the teacher in the local environment, *you* are the expert who can lead them from total dependence to a degree of coping with the unknown/unpredictable in an independent way, but this needs to be a structured process – one should not aim to present an authentic task or text with no preparation. Ways of preparing a task or text are suggested in the various skills chapters.

## **Teaching in the Target Language**

There are two distinct camps of international schools in terms of Foreign Language (FL) teaching. Firstly, there are those where the FL teachers have a truly international clientele composed of students with a variety of mother tongues – recourse to one 'explanatory tongue' is therefore not an option, and the TL may have to be used all the time. Secondly, there are schools where a language other than the FL being studied is the working language, and where one can expect students to understand explanations which are not in the FL but in the working language. Whatever the case, it is clear that communicative

methodology has gone hand-in-hand with a pedagogical approach emphasising maximum use of the TL as both a teaching and a learning medium.

Within the UK context (where there has been much emphasis since the mid-1990s on maximum use of the TL by teachers), it is not always apparent that such maximum use by teachers has led to maximum use by students. International colleagues frequently tell me the same. We operate in classrooms where we demand a certain ‘suspension of belief’ by students – however many posters we display of the TL country. We also risk, it must be stated, a certain alienation on the part of our students in terms of motivation. Factors such as lesson length, resourcing and the teacher’s confidence in their use of the TL can also play a vital role in the delivery of the lesson. So, where do we start? Different cultural contexts and pedagogical stances may put more or less emphasis on the delivery of a teaching programme entirely in the TL.

Perhaps, the most important questions to ask in your own context are these:

- What are the needs of my students?
- Do they have a common mother tongue or common working language other than the TL?
- Do I want to teach a whole lesson entirely in the FL? If not, how will students know which language to operate in?
- If I choose to operate entirely in the FL, how may this affect the class in terms of management? Will there be implications in terms of classroom control?
- Am I a native speaker, very able FL speaker or perhaps a less-than-confident FL speaker myself? (This has implications as native and FL speakers ‘filter’ language to learners in different ways.)

### Teacher activity 3.2

Make an approximate assessment of your FL activity in the class.

- To what extent do you use the TL?
- Is it effective and well planned?
- Do you switch between languages, or do you have clear periods of time for TL use?
- To what extent do you use the TL?
- To what extent do your students use the TL themselves?

## Why is it 'good' to teach in the foreign language?

Firstly, the number of different mother tongues in the teaching group may mean teachers have no choice. Secondly, there are sound pedagogical reasons. As teachers, we provide a model. Whatever the paucity or diversity of the teaching context, you remain the best model for FL use. Maximum use of the TL in class serves to give students a living model and can increase Listening skills immensely, but as Macaro (2000: 178) states, FL learners cannot pick up the FL like babies in the mother-tongue situation – the teaching in the TL needs to be **systematic** to be effective. We need to think very carefully about schemes of work and to what extent we introduce a variety of vocabulary and phrases in a regulated way, enabling students to react confidently in the FL situation. Macaro (2000: 179) hypothesises that learners use their own mother tongue to help them decode texts. For all but the most advanced learners, the mother tongue is seen as a primary source of comparison and contextualisation. The language of pure thought for many remains the mother tongue. We should learn to accept this reality, whilst trying to put forward a diversity of learning situations and strategies which afford our students maximum, expedient, use of the TL in situations that do not threaten or demotivate them.

Macaro (1997: 6) lists reasons for use/non-use of the TL by teachers as follows:

### **Positive:**

- the amount of language acquired subconsciously by students;
- the improvement in listening skills;
- exploitation of the medium leading to new teaching and learning strategies;
- showing how important it is to students to learn a new language;
- demonstrating how the language can be used to do things.

### **Negative:**

- TL for instructions can be time consuming;
- reaching a point where remaining in TL becomes counter-productive;
- teaching in the TL is tiring and the teacher becomes ineffective.

## How do I encourage good use of the Target Language in students?

If you are a mother-tongue speaker operating in a non-TL environment, then there are specific questions to be addressed. To what extent does your own training coincide/conflict with an FL-learning environment? As a mother-tongue speaker, you will need to filter your language and pitch it at an appropriate level in the classroom.

My own experience of teaching English in a French school proved to me early on in my career that I needed to be much more systematic and structured in the introduction and repetition of lexical items for things such as classroom commands. Frequently, my learners were bemused as I hailed them with a torrent of foreign language. I worked within a department where there was no common policy on use of the TL and a textbook was slavishly followed. These are not approaches I would advocate personally. In my overenthusiasm to surround my French students with the TL, I was giving them too much, too quickly, and not really considering how confusing it was for them.

Any move to a greater use of the TL in the classroom should be a gradual process leading to positive outcomes. It will be more realistic, and less demotivating to students, if the TL is used in a way that enables different learners to develop strategies to acquire, practise and use it. If they fear failure, students will not want to communicate in the TL. It is essential that the teacher establishes an atmosphere of trust and confidence with students right from the beginning, so that motivation remains high and a positive atmosphere prevails.

### Teacher activity 3.3

- Consider a recent lesson with any year group in which the students' motivation was good and the use of the TL was considerable, by *both* you and the students.
- Consider which strategies made this possible. Was the lesson closely structured, with a clear introduction and presentation of language, and a clear summing up? Were activities varied? Were students active / passive / working solo or in groups?
- Was the use of the TL by students of a transactional or a freer nature?
- Were all instructions given in the TL and understood?
- If a mixture of languages was used, how did students know which one to use and when?

## Possible ways forward to develop the use of the Target Language

The following ideas and suggestions should prove helpful.

### Departmental policy

Firstly, is there one? A good policy will define clearly for each year group what all students are expected to be able to say and to understand in the TL. Ideally, students will have lists in their exercise books and record cards to which they can refer and which they can tick off as they go. These lists

can be learnt for homework and closely tied in to units of work. They can be stuck into the back of the students' books, and can include comments used in the department to annotate and grade work. An excellent source of such instructions exists in French, German, Spanish, Italian and Russian in MacDonald (1993). This book is a most useful starting point for developing use of the TL, and is a very practical publication. Schools are allowed to photocopy and use these lists and this can save you some hours.

### Teacher activity 3.4

- Devise a list of instructions / classroom commands appropriate for a group of first-year learners.
- Think of ways in which these can be practised/exploited in a fun way (e.g. games such as Simon Says, posters for the classroom wall) which will reinforce their use.
- Get a group of younger learners to design and put up a set of classroom instructions in the TL.

### Rewards

As an FL teacher, I firmly believe in rewarding achievement. Praise is absolutely crucial in the FL classroom. Smiles, body language and reinforcement motivate enormously. If students use the TL to you or each other, set up a merit system that can feed into a credit system (if your school has one). Alternatively, good use of the TL by students can be rewarded by departmental certificates that form part of a student's record of achievement in the wider school context. Even a simple 'thumbs-up' sign or 'Bravo!' can bring a smile to a student's face. At the younger end of the spectrum, a prize for the best effort of the week can be awarded. Prizes do not need to be big; it is the recognition that counts.

### Planning lessons – using the time constructively

Consider the activities that lead to maximum target use by students. Usually, it is some form of Speaking activity – often linked to a visual, aural or written stimulus. But it is well worth considering that, if lessons are long, concentration will fall dramatically after 20 or so minutes. Some of my lessons, owing to timetable constraints, have been up to 80 minutes long. This is a huge slab of time. An FL learner cannot keep up their concentration and be active or receptive to the TL for all that time unless they are exceptionally able. It is necessary to vary pace and activity so that students have active, receptive periods and 'testing' periods during which their brains can filter and sort any new language. I once had Swahili and Norwegian taster lessons in the TL for an hour. After the total immersion,

I was exhausted, and desperate not to be asked a question! When planning lessons, ensure that different skills are practised and that the language presented is visually supported (with flashcards or OHP). It is also well worth a 2–3-minute break if the lesson is long. Get students to change places, stretch or just do nothing. That can help restore motivation and good will. A pile of TL magazines or readers can be good time-fillers in such rest periods.

## Links

The links between different phases of a lesson and a change of activity are usually best done in the TL. A hand clap, your hand in the air (students then have to follow the action in silence), a quick *Levez-vous* (or equivalent) or just writing *Silence* on the board can all work well. With the attention caught, you are free to move on to the next phase. Everybody develops their own ways, but TL input for the links and instructions is crucial to reinforce TL use and understanding.

## Correcting students' oral work in the Target Language

Students worldwide have one common fear: losing face in front of their peers. We have a basic quandary. We need to give correct language models, but is it always appropriate to stop a student and 'correct' them? A lot depends on how this is done. Many international colleagues at training sessions have indicated that in speaking activities a lot depends on the ability and learning goals of the individual learner. A more advanced learner with more confidence will probably receive constructive correction well; a less able student may feel totally threatened.

On Day 1 with new learners, I tell them (before we even start any TL) that I love them to make mistakes and that they will all learn better if they make them! Oral mistakes of language can be rewarded with a nod and a statement and smile, such as *I've understood* (in the TL) – *Good*, and a correct version can be proffered to the whole group or the individual to repeat. Correction must be supportive and non-threatening if students are to maintain the desire to participate. It is not a matter of discipline but of the desire to help the student, and some students need this to be made very clear.

### Teacher activity 3.5

Consider how you correct students' oral work. Do you have a method? Do you correct different students in different ways?

## Code switching

Beware! If, as a teacher, you operate in two languages, students may be totally unaware of when you want them to use the TL or the other language. At the worst, discipline may break down completely. It is important to establish clear rules or signs that indicate with the minimum amount of disruption when students can or cannot use the TL.

I tell my own students that there are times when I expect maximum effort on their and my part to use the TL, such as whole-class presentations of new work, arrivals, departures, instructions, requests, role plays and so on. This obviously presupposes that one equips students with phrases in the TL such as 'How do I say . . . in French, Spanish . . .?', 'Please can you help me?', 'I can't do this', 'I don't understand!' It is up to the teacher to repeat, smile, encourage and reinforce these coping strategies. It is also important to remember that intermediate and more advanced learners will need language phrases to enable them to react to situations, apologise, express feelings or explain a situation. Rather than saying, 'I'm sorry I'm late', they should be able to say, 'I'm sorry I'm late because the bus didn't come / my alarm clock didn't go off / I have had an argument with my mum!'

It is very difficult to take on a group of students from a colleague who has operated more or less in the TL and has used different rules to indicate when another language may be used. This is why it remains important to try to operate a departmental policy on what students need to know and use. If you find yourself in a situation where you want to achieve greater TL use with a reticent group, remember, it does *not* happen overnight. If *you* operate 100% in the TL, you risk total alienation.

### Teacher activity 3.6

If you are in an English language working environment, consider the extent to which your students know when and how to work in the TL and the non-TL. Can you help to make things clearer to them if you use the non-TL at times?

It is far better to set out small achievable goals – such as TL slots that gradually increase in time, or ten instructions to practise a week. Remember, you can do more with new learners than with ones who have acquired bad habits. If you are a newly qualified teacher, ask to observe colleagues and note how they encourage students to use the TL. Likewise, if you feel a bit stale, ask to see younger colleagues – we can all pick up at least a couple of useful tips concerning delivery by watching each other.

## **Displays**

Some international students may be thousands of miles from the TL country. Do try to bring the classroom alive with as many realia as possible. Signs and posters in the TL can easily be created. Equally appealing can be the students' own TL work or things downloaded from the Internet, such as daily news from a TL country. Older and younger learners can all be encouraged to draw/write/produce/research aspects of cultural or linguistic interest. This is especially important within a truly international context where whole-school policy seeks to emphasise the value of each student and their own cultural heritage. Ask your head teacher, principal or director for a prominent noticeboard outside the Languages area, and fill it with displays on themes from different year groups. Display also who is the linguist of the month. All these little things promote the causes of the FL department enormously, and indeed promote the use of the TL.

## **Disruption**

Colleagues report, and my own experience bears this out, that, when all else fails and teachers need to reprimand in the TL, the tone of voice, intonation and body language used all get the gist of the message across.

It is, however, well worth thinking about how excessive use of the TL, or inappropriate aims and expectations, may increase frustration in some students – especially low attainers. This may be totally different from your teaching context, but we all come across students who can behave in immature or unacceptable ways. They can be reprimanded in the TL. It is perhaps more constructive to think of keeping the pace of the lesson brisk – varying activities and how we use the TL, and varying what we expect from the students. If, at a general level, class discipline becomes problematic, it may be necessary to look closely at the level of difficulty of work set. Is it appropriate to the group? A variation of language presentation, seating positions and activities may be all that is needed. Make sure that different skills are practised so that you do not expect students to produce an hour of TL – it is unattainable and would be exhausting for both you and your students.

## **Teaching students with a variety of mother tongues**

Many of the issues already mentioned are equally applicable to students who do not have common mother or working tongues.

At the lower levels of language acquisition, problems can be avoided by making all new language situations as accessible as possible, for example by using a variety of visuals and introducing new language through more than one of the language skills. The challenge may arise when a point of structure needs to be explained. Strategies suggested by

international colleagues have included asking the school librarian to find appropriate dual-language back-up resources in terms of grammar books and dictionaries, and finding in the school an older or more advanced learner of the same nationality or common working language to mentor the student. Such colleagues have often said, however, that many students are favoured in that they have very good language-acquisition skills across several languages – ones they have had to learn in order to survive in different linguistic and cultural contexts. It is refreshing that colleagues report this diversity in terms of its benefits rather than any potential disadvantages.

### **Teaching and testing – the importance of the integration of the skills**

The end point of teaching an FL is to enable our students to function independently in a TL setting that enables them to generate their own language and understand input outside the confines of narrow topic settings. The various skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing should not, therefore, be taught discretely. A well-planned lesson will generate opportunities for practice in different skills areas: oral work is also dependent upon Listening skills; Listening is likely to require Reading and Writing skills. The skills are interdependent and, if we are to devise an interesting and motivating approach to lessons, we need to adopt a coherent approach in class which aims to develop the various skills in an integrated way.

As Pachler and Field (2002: 103) state:

progression does not take place within an isolated FL skill but across a number of skill areas. Therefore, successful FL lessons integrate a number of activities and exercises, developing different skills that are carefully chosen to build on previous knowledge and understanding.

Such an integration of skills and complementary skills development has long been accepted by both teachers in the classroom and authors of coursebooks. This approach has also been mirrored in terms of assessment. With the arrival of a communicative methodology, it was very apparent that tests of end-of-course measurement and achievement, such as CIE IGCSE, would have to reflect the tenets of communicative methodology whilst remaining reliable.

In testing terms, a good, robust test will strive to achieve high levels of both validity and reliability. Validity is the extent to which the test is successful in measuring what it purports to measure. Davies, A. (1968) saw one important type of validity (construct validity) as the extent to which a test reflects accurately the principles of a valid theory of FL testing. To have high validity, a test should reflect accurately the syllabus on which

it is based (Woods 1993: 45), and it is to this effect that test designers and coursebook authors have defined the content of the examination syllabus in terms of topic areas, vocabulary and grammar structures.

There is, however, a danger in designing tests that reflect totally real-life situations and have high validity: they may lose some of their 'reliability'. Harrison (1983: 10) defines the reliability of a test as its consistency. Weir (1988: 34) states, 'The concern is with how far we can depend on the results that a test produces or, in other words, could the results be produced consistently?' A reliable test has to produce results consistently. This is crucial in terms of an examination such as CIE IGCSE, which tests large numbers of candidates and sets a standard that is recognised on a worldwide basis within the context of a variety of different educational systems.

The CIE IGCSE examinations were amongst some of the first FL achievement tests to attempt testing in the TL on a worldwide basis at this level of achievement. The four language skills were given an equal weighting (importance), but methods of examining Speaking/Listening skills meant that other skills such as Reading and/or Writing were also involved. Reading and Writing skills became integrated into one paper and a separate Writing (composition) paper was introduced to test accuracy of Writing. These examinations were designed and developed to show what candidates knew and could do; and this approach had to be reflected in the mark schemes, which stressed positive achievement. In the examination situation, candidates did not start with a notional 100% and lose marks. They started with zero marks and gained them. This reflected the methodological approach of communicative language teaching within the classroom. Elements of papers that tested Listening and Reading skills were marked for communication rather than accuracy of Writing.

For the first time, therefore, the underpinning test design really did attempt to have high validity whilst retaining reliability. Skills were integrated within test papers and testing was seen not just as a bolt-on, but as a complementary activity. This was important as testing can often influence the nature of what is taught and how it is taught. The 'backwash' of an examination, or the effect it has upon teaching, is now considered as an important element in testing, and it is highly desirable that testing of a summative nature (final examination of achievement) is seen to be complementary to the teaching and learning situation.

## **Formative assessment**

Chapters 4–7 will focus largely on summative testing. A summative test is a test that measures the sum total of what a student has learnt at the end of a course of study, for example CIE IGCSE or O Level.

A summative test is usually not set and marked by the class teacher, and is frequently administered by an external institution such as a ministry of

education or awarding body such as CIE. Tests such as IGCSE and O Level are intended to be an end-of-course measure of learner achievement.

There exists, however, another type of assessment, which is classroom-based and which – when used properly – can have a crucial role to play in the teaching process. This is known as **formative assessment**. As teachers, we constantly make use of this type of assessment, but do we fully exploit its potential?

### Characteristics of formative assessment

One purpose of formative assessment is to enable teachers to use information gained about the learner's progress to inform and to help in the planning of future learning. In this sense, formative assessment can be seen to have a remedial aspect, in that a learner's progress is reviewed diagnostically and areas for improvement can be targeted.

Formative assessment is usually prepared and administered by a teacher on a regular basis and is linked directly to the teaching and learning that precede it. Traditionally, this will take the form of a discrete skill test or set of tests, usually topic-based, at the end of a unit or topic of work. However, a test can only really be termed formative if the teacher does not merely keep track of a learner's mark, but also acts upon this information and relates it to teaching and learning objectives. The focus of such testing is therefore on the process of learning rather than the result of learning.

I have worked in departments where formative assessment has been seen as termly tests involving the conversion of a raw mark to a percentage and then a ranking of the students. Students in such situations have seen tests in a very negative way, as a test of failure. It is therefore important, when considering the content of classroom tests, that clear and attainable learning objectives are made apparent to learners – and that the tests actually do test these learning objectives. The following are useful starting points to consider when designing tests for classroom use:

- To what extent are the students aware of what is being tested?
- Are students aware of how work is evaluated? Do they understand the system of marking?
- How useful is the feedback given by the teacher? Does it indicate errors, or does it indicate areas for further improvement?
- To what extent do students take responsibility for their part in the learning process? Do they keep track of their own progress and evaluate their own performance?
- At the end of the tests, is there an opportunity for students and teachers to evaluate future learning targets?

It is well worth addressing each of these points.

## **Awareness of what is being tested**

At the beginning of each unit of work it is desirable to set out the learning objectives for the group. These can, for example, be divided into communicative tasks (e.g. 'I can book a hotel room'), vocabulary tasks and linguistic structures / language tasks. Students keep their own list and can tick off the tasks as they progress. At the beginning of each lesson it is also desirable to write up on the board learning tasks for students, so that they can see where they are in their course of learning. Once they are aware of the programme of learning, they can be made far more aware of what is being tested. The above learning goals should be related to your schemes of work and it is helpful that most language coursebooks now give learning goals at the beginning of each unit of work.

## **Raising students' awareness of how work is evaluated**

Traditionally, FL teachers have used marking annotation based on a negative approach and error indication. As in the CIE IGCSE tests of Writing, a positive marking scheme can be used. If, for example, written work is being annotated, it is useful to explain that it may be marked for the messages communicated and also for its accuracy. It is of greater use in class tests to write a comment than to indicate and correct every error; students often take more notice of comments. Correction of errors by the teacher is frequently *not* acted on by learners. It can also be fruitful to underline areas of error and annotate the margin with a system such as *Vb* (verb), *T* (tense). This kind of annotation can be displayed in the classroom and given to students, enabling them to locate areas for improvement. It can actually help them to *think* about and rectify their mistakes.

## **Pupil profiling and feedback**

Students can be made more aware of their part in the learning process if they also keep track of their results. To this end it is useful to give each student a profile sheet. This can be a simple grid with the topic / learning stage indicated and space for ticks to be entered by the skills/tasks achieved. The ticks indicate where the students have been successful. Underneath, there is space for them to answer simple questions such as these:

- What have I enjoyed most in this unit?
- What have I found hard?
- What have I done well?
- What can I improve on?
- What are my learning targets?

If students attach their work to the profile sheet and keep it in an assessment folder, it is easy for them to keep track of their own progress. It is important at this final stage to devote a lesson to seeing the students,

in order to set and agree attainable targets. Some students will need to be told to revisit certain areas of work as part of their targets, and may well need further support from the teacher. In my experience, however, they can often tell me what they need to do in order to make further progress. Indeed, several have asked me for a retest to prove to themselves that they have made progress.

If formative assessment is to be of real benefit, it must be viewed not simply as a type of test, but as part of a learning process which involves follow-up action. When used in this way, it will indeed be far more of a positive experience for the learner and, in my experience, will increase learner motivation.

### Teacher activity 3.7

Devise a simple student profile sheet that could be used for students in their final year of FL study for classroom-based tests.



### LOOKING BACK

- ◆ If you have been teaching for several years, consider the extent to which your own views on methodology may have evolved.
- ◆ To what extent does your approach reflect a communicative approach? What role do the teaching and learning of grammar play in your approach?
- ◆ What are the limitations placed upon the classroom and learners by the notion of authenticity?
- ◆ Do you consider the use of the TL important? If so, how can you maximise its use yourself and increase its use by learners?
- ◆ To what extent do you view the skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing as interdependent? Do your learning activities reflect this integration of skills?
- ◆ Does formative assessment feature in your learning programmes? If formative assessment does feature, how do you make use of the results? Are your students aware of the learning objectives and the outcomes?
- ◆ Are your students able to evaluate their own performance?
- ◆ Do the outcomes of assessment feed into future learning?