1. WHAT DOES THIS BOOKLET OFFER?

In the current educational climate, there is no shortage of encouragement – and pressure – for teachers to work more effectively in order to improve students' grades. Nor is there any shortage of advice about how this might be done. Teachers face a constant stream of initiatives and guidelines that purport to help them raise educational standards. All too often, the enthusiasm of their proponents is not matched by evidence that they will be either feasible or effective in practice.

Like many other publications, this booklet offers advice to teachers on how to interact more effectively with learners, and to encourage more student-to-student interaction, thereby promoting students' learning in the foreign languages classroom. Also in line with many existing publications, it seeks to make explicit and build on what effective language teachers already do. The difference is that the advice given here is backed up by rigorous evidence – summarised in section 2 – that it is likely to be effective, and that it is feasible in real classrooms.

There are important differences between foreign languages and other school subjects, and some of these are explored in section 3, and in section 4, we lay out the principles that underlie effective learning and teaching in foreign languages. Subsequent sections focus in more detail on practical ways of implementing formative assessment in the foreign languages classroom, and the final section outlines how formative assessment can be developed within a foreign languages department.

2. BACKGROUND HISTORY

Beginning with the work of Gary Natriello and Terry Crooks in the late 1980s (Natriello 1987; Crooks 1988), the past 20 years have seen a steady accumulation of evidence that formative assessment is one of the most powerful ways to increase student engagement and achievement. In 1998, Black and Wiliam updated the reviews of Natriello and Crooks (Black and Wiliam 1998a) and also began to draw out some of the policy implications of this work in a booklet entitled *Inside the Black Box* (Black and Wiliam 1998b). In the ten years since then, the Formative Assessment Research Group at King's College London has worked with many local authorities to explore how these findings could be implemented in real classrooms. The first implementation studies involved mathematics, science, and English

teachers in Oxfordshire and Medway, and found that nearly all the teachers involved were positive about the effects that the project had for them (Black *et al.* 2003), and about the significant gains in test performance for the classes involved (Wiliam *et al.* 2004). The work in Oxfordshire and Medway was summarized in the second booklet in the Black Box Assessment for Learning series entitled *Working Inside the Black Box* (Black *et al.* 2002).

Following that initial project and the response to it by practitioners, members of the King's College London team have made literally hundreds of contributions to teachers' conferences and to school-based professional development sessions. They have also helped in developments on a larger scale, notably with the Scottish Educational Education Department and with the States of Jersey. This led to the King's College's direct contribution to the development of formative assessment as a significant component of the DfES Secondary Strategy (DfES 2004).

We have also worked specifically with groups of teachers of foreign languages (principally in Hampshire) and have found that the principles of formative assessment work as well in foreign languages classrooms as they do in mathematics, science and English classrooms.

From this work, and in particular by working with whole-school assessment teams, we have gained a greater understanding of the *generic* features of formative assessment (i.e. those that apply to learning across all stages and all school subjects), and also of those that are *specific* to particular phases (e.g., infant classes) and to individual subjects in the secondary school. The focus in this booklet is on the needs and opportunities relevant to secondary foreign languages teachers, although many of the ideas can be transferred and are adaptable for the primary classroom as examples are drawn from both secondary and primary classrooms.

3. THE CONTEXT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES TEACHING

The study of foreign languages occupies a unique place in the curriculum. As English has become the global *lingua franca*, the argument that students need to study languages in order to be able to communicate effectively to others around the world rings increasingly hollow. However, as Harris (Harris and Nelson 1992) has remarked, bilingualism is the rule rather than the exception in many, if not most, parts of the world, and the Common European Framework

(Council of Europe 2001) promotes the need for multilingual capability. For those who do not speak English, English is of course an obvious choice for a second language, but for native English speakers, the choice is not so clear; Spanish, Mandarin, and Arabic are spoken by hundreds of millions, although most of our schools are much better equipped to teach French, German and Spanish. By learning another language, students can acquire new ways of looking at the world, and also can gain insights into their own language (it is often argued that one never really understands grammar until one learns a second language). This has been recognised by the government's decision that all primary school students at Key Stage 2 should be given the opportunity to learn a language and its reconsideration of language-learning pathways for the 14 – 19 age group.

In England, the National Curriculum provides a framework of attainment targets and level descriptions that determine what needs to be covered in the foreign languages curriculum. The most recent guidelines enable teachers to plan lessons and schemes of work and to wrap these objectives around the desired language content in a meaningful way. Cross-phase planning increasingly takes into consideration the new 7 – 14 continuum of learning (Jones 2005), providing a pathway for students to progress from their primary foreign languages learning experiences to the secondary phase. The Key Stage 2 *Framework for Languages,* the Key Stage 3 *Framework for Teaching MFL* and the National Curriculum have overlapping strands that align with the literacy initiative and build upon primary students' familiarity with target-setting. It is therefore much easier than it was to develop learning trajectories in foreign languages that are coherent, structured, progressive and differentiated (thus also consistent with the agenda of personalised learning). Such coherence meshes well with a formative approach where language learning is demystified by sharing with the students learning intentions and success criteria. This is crucial, given the findings of research with Year 9 students which showed that, although the majority of students were positive about their language learning:

> *These pupils lack a clear view of what learning a language really means. They are unclear about what they are supposed to be gaining from their lessons. (Lee et al. 1998, p. 5)*

Well thought out learning objectives can enable students to make progress in their learning of a foreign language, and to develop the capacity to own and monitor their own progress as

independent language users – the ultimate aim of language learning. In classroom-based learning, students also need to be conversant with ways of talking about language (sometimes called meta-language) so that they can utilise the greatest possible range of strategies in their lifelong language learning endeavours. Becoming familiar with the language of assessment will furthermore ensure that students can derive the utmost benefit from the formative approach. Where this language is interpreted in the target language, further opportunities for authentic target language use arise, making the language learning classroom multilingual in more ways than one.

Information and communication technology (ICT) is used increasingly in foreign languages teaching and learning and provides valuable opportunities for learning that is self-directed, but still interactive. These are key factors in a formative approach both in the foreign languages classroom and beyond, allowing students to direct their learning independently both within school and in society.

Formative assessment fits naturally into the foreign languages learning setting, since teachers can collect and sift data that arises in classroom interactions and activities, so that professional judgements can be made about the next steps in learning. In a classroom culture that values and rewards participation, rather than penalising mistakes, students will feel encouraged to 'have a go', thus signalling to the teacher their current level of understanding, providing more reliable feedback to the teacher and an additional opportunity for authentic language use.

A formative approach requires a further critical reappraisal of the use of English, which may then have a clearer role in supporting target language learning (Cooke 2001). While we believe that formative assessment is consistent with the goals of foreign languages teaching, certain assumptions about the use of the target language that preclude the development of formative assessment in foreign languages classrooms may need to be moderated. The judicious use of English provides an opportunity for students to become more active learners, to use their knowledge about language to help them in learning a foreign language and to reap the benefits of formative assessment. We should make it clear, however, that we do not in any way advocate a return to lessons that take place in a 'gale of English'. In our view, the majority of foreign languages teaching should be in the target language, thereby

maximising exposure to the target language and providing opportunities to think about using it creatively, and validating it as a legitimate medium of communication and instruction.

This booklet highlights some particular features of the foreign languages learning experience that readily interface with formative assessment approaches based on key principles of learning that are part of an effective classroom community of foreign languages learning.

4. PRINCIPLES OF LEARNING

Of all the various opportunities for feedback in classrooms, two types are essential to formative assessment: the first is from student to teacher, the second from teacher to student. Learning is supported by alternation between these, in which each contribution responds to the other. The foreign languages classroom presents a unique situation in that the interaction between student and teacher is conducted to a great extent in the foreign language as communication on a meta-level. Learning in this particular environment can be facilitated when teaching is based on four principles of learning.

The **first** of these principles within this conceptual framework consists in meeting the students at their level of knowledge, i.e. revisiting prior learning in the form of revision. This allows the teacher to verify that the student has understood what has previously been learnt as well as clarifying any outstanding questions, thus providing a basis for the introduction of new material. The structures can then be extended and consolidated using the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. During this process the teacher listens to responses, provides feedback and sets challenges to actively involve the students, implementing a **second** principle of learning, which is that students must be active in the process – learning has to be done *by* them, it cannot be done *for* them.

The **third** principle is crucial for the learning process as the teacher needs to introduce the learning objectives and the students learn to understand these as a frame of reference for the evaluation and improvement of their own work. In short, the learners have to establish *what* they are working towards, *where* they stand in relation to the criteria of what is considered quality work and discover ways and ask questions aimed at clarifying *how* to get there. Successful learners become aware that the process is not linear but a spiral of refinement and amendment. They thus learn to evaluate their work from a more detached point of view.