

Discuss the importance and effectiveness of developing Assessment for Learning throughout the primary school, including critical analysis of personal implementation of ONE AFL strategy from Professional Teaching Experience.

Children learn by forming connections between cellular neurons in the brain. When a child encounters a new fragment of information, the information becomes a single neuron in the brain. In order for the child to learn and retain the information, they must build new fibrous connections between the new information and their prior knowledge. This requires the information to be processed into structures that make sense to the learner and repeated in order for its deposition into the long-term memory. Many Assessment for Learning (AFL) strategies rely on processing new information in order to make links with previous learning and commit it to long-term memory.

Raising the standards of school-based learning and pupil attainment is a priority for countries world-wide. Many strategies have been trailed, including improving whole-school planning and holding more frequent inspections, neither of which have shown any significant success. Black and William (1998) refer to the classroom as a “black box” into which outside pressures, such as external exam pressures, are fed. The output of the “black box” is expected to include high test results and more knowledgeable pupils. Black and William propose that without first studying the goings-on within the black box, changing the input only succeeds in adding yet more uncertainty to the classroom environment.

Black and William discuss the use of formative assessment in order to raise both standards and pupil attainment. ‘Assessment for learning is any assessment for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting pupils’ learning.’ (Black, 2004). Here Black explains how the intention of the assessment can classify it as Assessment for Learning, which is synonymous to formative assessment. The learning gains accredited to a technique are measured by the effect size. This is calculated using a pupil’s improved score by implementing formative assessments in their learning, to what they were predicted to achieve without it. An effect size of between 0.4 and 0.7 were typical results when using formative assessment, showing that implementing the findings of various AFL strategies in future lessons can progress pupils’ learning by, on average, 6.6 months.

According to Featherstone (2011, p.21) there are three elements of assessment: assessment, recording and reporting. Assessment involves collecting evidence mainly via observation, recording is the condensing of the evidence and reporting is the process of finding the key information from the recording stage to present to an audience.

Generally, Assessment for Learning follows three basic steps; observe where pupils are currently in their attainment and achievement, identify where they need to be to develop their learning further, and determine how their learning can be progressed to reach that target. There are four aspects of Assessment for Learning: sharing criteria with learners; quality of questions/ quality of talk; use and quality of feedback; and peer and self-assessment. The Assessment for Learning strategy to be discussed within this document is 'What Makes Good' (WMG). This strategy asks pupils to use paired work to discuss the features that a particular piece of work should include to be successful. It is based within the sharing criteria with learners aspect, although, as pupils will be discussing their criteria, 'What Makes Good' has links to the quality of questions/ quality of talk aspect.

Many initiatives have been introduced to improve the quality of oracy in schools, multiple having links to the quality of talk aspect of AFL. The importance of oracy in education has been highlighted in the current National Curriculum where speaking and listening have been awarded a separate attainment target. Oracy also features in the Literacy and Numeracy framework in the aspects of both speaking and listening.

Oracy is vital within the Language, Literacy, Communication and Skills area within the Foundation Phase. The Foundation Phase Outcomes allow practitioners to complete assessments based on level descriptions. They allow the formation of complete judgements based on the performance and strengths and weaknesses of the child. Oracy is a consistent feature, spanning outcomes 1-6, as well as the Bronze, Silver and Gold outcomes.

Norman (1992) confirmed that The National Oracy Project, proposed in 1987, aimed to improve talk for learning. The project intended to accentuate the vitality of discussion to allow pupils to take control of their own educational journeys and become empowered thinkers. This was to be achieved by collecting a myriad of low-level initiatives into a larger scheme, it was implemented across over half of England before the end of the project in 1993.

However, former Education Secretary David Blunkett believed otherwise. Blunkett (1997) explained that “the job of primary schools is to teach children to read, write and add up”. This statement was repeated by Blunkett throughout his time as Education Secretary, seemingly dismissing the entire concept of oracy and encouraging both teachers and schools to focus on the strands mentioned, all of which are tested in summative assessments by the government. Furthermore, with there being an increased emphasis on test-lead assessment, it proves difficult for practitioners to afford sufficient time for oracy.

Following the strand of oracy, Piaget explains that children are ‘lone scientists’ and develop by interacting with materials that stimulate them. Here Piaget is discouraging the use of talk partners and oracy and recommending the use of independent discovery in its place.

Vygotsky (1962) takes an opposing view on cognitive development, stating that in order for pupils to develop cognitively, they must engage with children as well as adults using spoken language, as development is social as well as biological. Vygotsky also discusses the role of verbal communication in the development of identity and self-worth within a person. This holds strong links with the proposed Health and Wellbeing area of learning within Professor Donaldson’s (2015) Successful Futures Curriculum.

When pupils are in discussion with a teacher or a more able peer, cognitive scaffolding takes place. Cognitive scaffolding was originally referenced by Wood, Bruner and Ross in the 1970’s and involves using interactions with the learner to bridge their zone of proximal development. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a theory by Vygotsky (1962) which names the divide between a pupil’s existing understanding and skills, and the understanding and skills that can only be developed using support from teachers and more capable peers.

During Professional Teaching Experience, mixed ability groups exemplified the use of cognitive scaffolding well as higher and lower ability pupils were able to participate in meaningful discussions based on their WMG. It could be clearly observed that pupils were assisting each-other in bridging their individual ZPDs, allowing the practitioner to adopt a facilitator role for a brief time.

Pupils engaged well when asked to discuss their 'What Makes Good' with their talk partners. Giving pupils the opportunity to discuss their success criteria gave them greater ownership of their task and ensured that the task was fully understood. Within the class, pupils were seated in mixed ability groups, thus allowing cognitive scaffolding to take place, as advised by Bruner. By contrast, Piaget would encourage the use of independent thought and discovery, a compromise to implement both view-points may involve a technique similar to 'Think-Pair-Share' as pupils are first asked to consider their own thoughts and ideas before communicating with others.

On the one hand, encouraging the development of oracy through paired discussions addressed the speaking and listening strands of the Literacy and Numeracy Framework as well as contributed to the achievement of the oracy attainment target. Moreover, giving pupils the chance to discuss their ideas before sharing with the class follows a humanistic approach to learning. The main factors of the humanistic approach are emotional wellbeing, and personal growth and development. Sharing ideas in a pair before feeding back to the class removes pressure from those pupils who may not yet feel comfortable sharing their own ideas with a large group. On the other hand, it proved to be a time-consuming exercise, taking approximately 10 minutes at the beginning of every lesson for pupils to address all of the expected points.

According to Sadler (2010), success criteria should gradually become a regular feature of the appraisal vocabulary of students. This development should allow them to improve their reasoning skills to judge their work and the work of others by comparing it to the set criteria. Saddler proceeds to discuss the difference between straightforward criteria and abstract criteria. Straight-forward criteria may be more easily understood by pupils as they have sharp boundaries, such as word length. Abstract criteria are more complex in nature and require a deeper understanding before they can be used competently by pupils. An example of abstract criterion may be judging the understanding of another pupil by reading a piece of their work.

Bruner (1996) explains that children are active learners and engage best when they are involved in their learning. On these grounds, Bruner emphasises the importance of teachers having interest in what learners believe they are doing and any reasons that they have for doing so. Sharing criteria with learners ensures that they are aware of what they are doing, and allows them to contextualise the task in order to give it meaning.

Conversely to Piaget's belief of the child being a 'lone scientist', providing learners with set criteria may limit their capabilities and deter the use of creativity. Donaldson (2015) may be supportive of this line of thought as one of the four purposes of the proposed Successful Futures curriculum involves young people becoming 'enterprising, creative contributors'. The freedom to be creative and follow one's own plan is essential for an individual to develop innovative and original ideas which may be far superior to that of the practitioner.

During Professional Teaching Experience (PTE), the AFL strategy was trialled with a high ability year 6 Mathematics set, a low ability year 5/6 Science set, and a mixed ability year 5/6 Religious Education group. The strategy was most successful with the higher ability group as pupils remained on-task when asked to discuss their WMG and were able to highlight the vital criteria with very little prompting. In comparison, the low ability group required multiple, short intervals to discuss criteria, congregating as a whole-class frequently to ensure pupils were on task and covering the expected points.

Throughout PTE, the aforementioned strategy was used in the vast majority of lessons. Toward the end of the experience, pupils were beginning to become familiar with the use of success criteria and were often able to utilise abstract criterion as well as a range of straight-forward criteria. However, there were some lessons where this strategy was not used and pupils were asked to complete tasks without having had their 'What Makes Good' explained to them. On these occasions, it was observed that pupils were unsure of what was expected of them and engaged with the activity less as a result.

That aside, this strategy did show weaknesses in the field of classroom management. When introduced, it proved difficult to regain the attention of pupils after discussion time. This was resolved by introducing a bell to the scenario, ringing it to indicate that discussion time was over. When this was less effective, positive reinforcement was used to reward pupils who were displaying the desired behaviours. This is considered a behaviourist approach, rewarding and reinforcing positive behaviour links to operant conditioning, a theory of Skinner (1938). In addition, rewarding favourable answers, with praise and Dojo Points, associates with Pavlov's (1890) classical conditioning theory. With this in mind, pupils progressed to link the sound of the bell with praise and Dojo Points, meaning that they became eager to contribute positively.

For this AFL technique to be implemented across the whole school, a number of alterations could be made. As demonstrated with the lower ability groups, pupils could be given shorter time frames to discuss criteria to ensure that discussions are covering the expected points. Practitioners could also take a slightly more active role in the lower year groups by affording pupils general headings or 'clues' that each success criterion is based on, providing more cognitive scaffolding in an attempt to bridge pupils' ZPDs.

During PTE, a variety of AFL strategies were used, all with varying success rates. The success of a strategy is dependent on a range of factors, including the personalities of individuals in the class, the age of the pupils, and potentially the lay-out of the school day. For this reason, a range of techniques should be employed from each of the four aspects to assist the practitioner in understanding which ones benefit their class the most.

It has been shown that Assessment for Learning is a key tool for practitioners to raise the bar for all learners whilst reducing the spread of attainment across a cohort. The effect size produced by the average AFL strategy clearly demonstrates its importance within teaching. If practitioners are able to progress their pupils' learning journeys by an added 6.6 months, on top of the progression made in a standard academic year, it would be difficult to justify ignoring AFL as a teaching tool.

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