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**The impact of pupil-set targets on achievement in speaking:
An Action Research project involving a mixed-sex Year 9
German class**

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Abstract

This study considers the practice and viability of pupils using AfL to set and assess their own and their peers' oral attainment in German lessons and thus to determine whether there is a particular method of target-setting which particularly benefits the development of speaking skills. The study demonstrates that whilst there is a clear link between perception of ability, enjoyment and actual speaking ability; together with awareness of a language 'roadmap', students also need a co-ordinated approach to the process of self/peer assessment and target-setting and that this process needs to be entrenched within a whole-school L2L approach to be of most benefit.

The impact of pupil-set targets on achievement in speaking: An Action Research project involving a mixed-sex Year 9 German class

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Research questions

1. What are the factors which influence achievement in speaking?
2. How do pupil-set targets impact on achievement in speaking?
3. Is there a particular method of target-setting which most benefits attainment in speaking?

Introduction

Throughout my training, it struck me that regardless of actual overall linguistic ability, there is often a discrepancy between a pupil's ability to speak the language as compared to their comprehension and writing skills. Indeed, it is probably fair to say that it is easier to understand a foreign language than to independently produce it competently and accurately, whether in written or spoken form.

Multi-skill lessons recognise this and are often planned with the speaking activity taking place after the other skills have been practised and with a degree of structure and support. QCA (2006, 2008) reports that speaking is the skill that students find hardest to master, regardless of ability, and that as far as assessments (formal or otherwise) are concerned, the element which causes most concern to the students.

The skill of speaking requires a student to call on the ability to pronounce accurately and the confidence not only to speak out loud but also to take risks in front of peers and think on their feet; valuable stand-alone skills in MFL as in other subjects but for which too often schemes of work are hard-pressed to fit in. Effective speaking also depends upon effective listening and pre-production comprehension skills as much as it does upon the speaker's own basic communication skills in their

native tongue.

A student could therefore be grammatically accurate but be terrified of public speaking, and so will be very reluctant to speak in a foreign language in class. A fear of failure and a reluctance to speak unless it is totally correct are just two factors which affect even the most able students and may render them weaker speakers, and possibly also affect their own enjoyment of the subject.

It could also be argued that motivation in MFL is affected by a student's ability to speak the language. The importance of the ability or perception of ability to speak should not therefore be underestimated by either teacher or pupil.

The National Curriculum emphasis on oral production of target language (TL) within the classroom for non-topic based work is intended to increase students' receptive and productive communication: the more they hear and they are placed in situations in which TL responses are required, in theory, the more practised and the more at ease students become speaking the language. It is also of note that using TL in the classroom is also an issue for teachers, with some displaying similar reluctance and lack of confidence in their own ability as students (Woods, 2005).

Woods (2005) also suggests that speaking is the skill that is the hardest to quantify: students do not give it the same importance as the other skills. In addition, students find it hard to see where improvement is needed, as it is a skill which ultimately requires teacher or FLA (Foreign Language Assistant) moderation, rather than a piece of written work which can be self or peer-marked alongside a set of provided answers.

Indeed, it is the oral exam that is perhaps most feared by students at GCSE with role-play, spontaneous speech and conversation skills being tested. In order that students become accustomed from an early stage to the process of speaking out loud and in a foreign language, it is doubtless of benefit to instill a sense of confidence in their public speaking and to encourage awareness of the particular skills that bring speaking exam success. This is particularly relevant in a school (such as that in which this study took place) in which students only start learning the language in Year 9 and then sit public examinations two years later.

Getting students speaking

Following an introduction to the concept of Assessment for Learning (AfL), and in particular target-

setting and how this can help students to focus on their achievement, I decided to undertake an Action Research study into whether the process of target-setting can be utilised to overcome difficulties in speaking and whether this would in turn increase attainment. Given the nature of teaching interventions required in order to properly analyse whether target-setting would affect achievement, such as the introduction of the notion of self and peer-assessment and target-setting, it was clear that a Case Study approach would not have been as beneficial for the purposes of this research.

Given too that I sought to inform my own teaching practice with the research - particularly with that specific class, but also to provide a basis for understanding the issue as it relates to other individual students, classes and ability groups, it was clear that an Action Research project would be the most suitable for my purposes. Ferrance (2000) suggests that the tool of Action Research be employed once a potential problem has been identified in order to provide structure to the solution by means of systematic data collection and analysis, reflection and data-driven action to be taken concluding in a possible re-definition of the original problem. Whilst the scope of my research allowed me to identify a problem (difficulties - perceived or otherwise - speaking), collect and analyse data and make recommendations about implementation, albeit solely on a class level, rather than that with wider implications for language teaching in the school as a whole, time constraints meant that a fuller application of findings and the re-calibration of the original question were not feasible to the extent that I would have liked. A selection of literature on the matter of Action Research emphasises that the research cycle may never be truly over (Ferrance, 2000): the quest for new data and research and re-interpretation can be compared to a continual cycle (Tripp, 2005) in which the situation is repeatedly analysed and guidance sought from the conclusions to influence teaching practice. The nature of my study could have been continuous, were I to remain in the same school. It could for example have encompassed a whole year group and range of abilities, examining the various motivating factors and influences on speaking and the varied effects and results of self-peer assessment strategies to improve speaking.

In essence, as I sought to affect not only my teaching practice but also to help students increase their subject based attainment, I needed to undertake a study which examined firstly why and how students come to language classes with particular concerns about undertaking oral work. I also needed to analyse what the students had achieved without my intervention, thus involving rigorous data-analysis. My particular teaching style was then introduced and the effects monitored and measured to ascertain whether the teaching had the desired effect on the students' marks. Following

this, I anticipated feeding any conclusions and recommendations back into my own teaching practice and ensure that the techniques and principles learnt from the exercise could also be applied to other classes, and adapted where necessary. This in turn would have provided further data in due course which could also be analysed and evaluated and re-used within the cycle. One important factor would also be that recommendations and results could be extracted, interpreted and re-applied on various levels: the individual student, the class, the ability set, the year group. Conclusions could be reactive at first, but as patterns emerge, then it may be possible to predict developing trends and act upon them within teaching for the benefit of the students. In my research this could potentially be the very manner in which speaking activities are conducted and assessed, so as to better take pupils' motivation and difficulties in oral work. This could include for example a rigorous method of practising and assessing oral work in order perhaps to help students build confidence speaking. Were my research to be a case study, it would be harder to develop a means of collecting data, applying data in my teaching, evaluating the success of it and then repeating the exercise with a view to collecting continual data as to attainment and achievement.

Research Group

I therefore decided to consider the issue of short-term target-setting with the specific goal of improving speaking with a high-ability group of mixed Year 9 double-linguist students, but concentrating on German. The school is a rural upper school based in Suffolk with a Sixth Form. Students joining in Year 9 have undertaken three years of French at middle school and whilst they are not set *per se* into ability groups, double-linguists tend in the school to be classed as Able, Gifted and Talented (AG&T), and are highly motivated learners in most, if not all of their school subjects. Students make choices before joining Year 9 as to which language(s) they wish to study; more than two-thirds of the class had chosen German and French as their first option, and the rest had chosen German (with French as a second choice) or German and French as a second choice. Members of the class were therefore keen to develop burgeoning language skills in French as well as explore new languages with many students are continuing with either German or French at KS4.

The class itself consists of twenty-five students, ten of whom are boys. They have three 50-minute language lessons per week, two of which are German and the other is French. Single-linguists, in comparison, have three language lessons per week. I started teaching them both languages in mid-January, after they had made their KS4 option choices. I decided to concentrate this study on their learning of German, as for each of them, it was a new language, and as the students come from

different middle schools, they have had varying experiences of the teaching of French. Their learning of German has, in contrast, been solely at their current school, had been with the same teacher since September and is not therefore dependent on other teachers or experiences.

This study therefore considers firstly, a discussion of the literature surrounding not only the issues involved in AfL in the MFL classroom with a particular emphasis on pupil-set targets, but also the general difficulties encountered in getting students to speak. I then describe the sequence of lessons and interventions that I took, together with their rationale, after which I present and analyse the data obtained. Finally, I present my conclusions and evaluations together with proposals as to how my findings could be applied in the development of speaking skills for this and other groups.

Literature Review

Getting students speaking

What is speaking? Is it simply the oral transmission of something written or pre-prepared? Or is it rather the ability to spontaneously produce oral utterances in TL? Indeed, KS4 examinations require a combination of the two and test therefore ability to recite orally and accurately what has been prepared in written form and the ability to communicate by listening to another's prompts and convey a message. The former requires pronunciation practice and can be doggedly learnt and reproduced. The latter requires a degree of confidence, independence and creative thought on the part of the speaker to process and construct the message to be conveyed (ideally with no written prompts) and then deliver it effectively. Students struggle with both forms of speaking, but with practice and encouragement, even the reticent can succeed.

A student's ability to speak is affected by not only ability but also intrinsic (personal interest, enjoyment) and extrinsic motivators (qualifications, career) (Lee, Buckland & Shaw, 1998). Lee et al also suggest that whilst an often overlooked factor in language learning motivation of students is that of parental attitude to languages, it is unclear whether gender plays a similar role, even amongst pupils of average ability. Despite this, Lee et al also argue that an over-emphasis on assessment of whatever nature, leads to demotivation, even amongst the more able and motivated students.

What are targets?

The notion of targets and target-setting forms part of the concept of AfL, a process whereby teaching and learning are carried out in such a way as to ensure the most personalised and effective

approach to learning possible through the means of formative, rather than summative assessment. It can encompass teacher-set targets following written work, or in termly reports, for example, which may consist of vocabulary learning, grammar practice or developing a linguistic skill such as the ability to check for errors. Pupils can however also - following successful self and peer-assessment - set their own targets.

Assessment for Learning

It is perhaps a misnomer to describe AfL as a form of assessment, as it is more a process of analysis and development with the aim of improving learning and achievement. The Assessment Reform Group (2002) describes Assessment For Learning as “the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there”.

Colby-Kelly and Turner (2007) describe assessment in this context as the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for making substantively grounded decisions or judgments about the product of a learning task.

Development of AfL

AfL was a concept initially elucidated by Black and Wiliam in 1998 at a time - they argue - when policy reform and an emphasis on management, standards and achievement risked counter-productivity in the classroom. The input of various and at times conflicting expectations into what they called the black box of the classroom by policy-makers, resources, managers, teachers, parents (and even the pupils!), was expected to achieve the output of increased results. Black and Wiliam argued that without looking at what takes place inside this black box and adjusting the way in which classroom processes take place, the desired output would not be achieved. Teaching was not therefore simply a means by which knowledge was imparted and pupils gained results. It was more a process of understanding not only the needs, abilities and learning styles of each pupil, but also the needs and nature of the teaching itself and how these can be best presented. They explain that teaching and learning need to be interactive and that teaching needs to respond to varying needs. This requires knowledge of the pupils’ own progress and abilities together with an ability to adapt teaching techniques to suit the topic being taught or the needs of the pupil(s). Alongside the tracking of individual pupil progress which will inform future teaching plans (for the whole class as

well as for the individual), teachers are also encouraged to find out first hand from their pupils how they learn and to discuss with them how their teaching can better benefit learning.

Black and Wiliam (1998) also stress the importance of formative assessment, which they describe as being teacher and student led assessments, which provide information which can be used as feedback to modify teaching and learning activities. This differs from summative assessment as evidence obtained from the process is used to inform and adapt future teaching and learning processes. The authors argue that this process is far more beneficial in raising standards than traditional assessment methods, yet successful implementation depends on re-thinking teaching and learning processes and drastically changing the flow of communication between teacher and pupil. They also claim that formative assessment can also affect motivation and self-esteem levels in pupils, which in turn also affect academic achievement.

Research in several educational systems has shown that traditional summative assessments are felt to be ineffective: testing can for example encourage rote learning; an over emphasis on marking and grading precludes the giving of useful learning advice and encourages competitiveness and teachers know little about the learning needs of their individual pupils (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

The substance of AfL

Black and Wiliam (1998) proposed various principles which underpin the concept of successful AfL. Two-way feedback between teacher and pupil is essential, within which comparisons with other students should be avoided and positive advice to improve together with the opportunity to work on the improvement should be given. Pupils should be encouraged to take responsibility for the direction of their own learning, and be taught the skills to assess, analyse and advance their own progress. The process of teaching should give pupils the opportunity to express their understanding which in turn will allow the teacher to modify current or future teaching. Finally, learning exercises should be clear and relevant to the learning aims.

Subsequent research (Assessment Reform Group, 1999) concluded that the active involvement and analysis by pupils in their own learning alongside the sharing of learning goals and adapting teaching on the basis of evidence collected from the pupils themselves in order to guide students on their individual learning journey are essential for raising attainment.

Examples of AfL in practice

More recent research recommended the means by which these AfL principles could be successfully incorporated into the classroom and suggested techniques such as a hierarchy of questions, increased waiting time for answers, examples of constructive feedback and a formative use of summative tests (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & Wiliam, 2002).

Of particular interest to my own study were the conclusions they reached about peer and self-assessment, insofar as this can only be truly beneficial if the pupils have been taught how to develop those particular skills. Self-reflection about understanding and how their learning can progress is a core concept of AfL: it influences the depth of their communication to the teacher and in turn has an effect on how the teacher can adapt future teaching. Pupils can better reflect on their learning and achievement if they can access, for example, the criteria for success and are aware of the aims and objectives of the work, not only on a piece by piece basis, but also how the work fits into the overall scheme and schedule of learning, together with the benefits of successful completion and understanding (Black et al. 2002).

‘Whole-school’ AfL

It is clear that the traditional roles of teacher and pupil are re-defined in a successful AfL environment. Both Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) (2009) and OFSTED (2003a, 2003b) agree however that implementation of a sound school-wide ethos of teaching and learning is as essential to raising attainment as the individual teacher’s attention to pupils in a lesson. The beneficial use of data, provision of support and guidance and the value placed on learning and self-esteem are important elements of a successful AfL policy in all subjects.

In addition, school-wide policies and provision on AfL, together with those on literacy and other core skills, when co-ordinated across subjects, can be of significance in the MFL classroom. Learning to Learn schemes (often described as 'L2L') in schools whereby students develop fundamental cross-curricular skills and Personal Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS) are of particular benefit in guiding students on how to guide themselves and take responsibility for their own learning (QCA, 2009-2; 2009-3)

AfL in MFL

Literature on the use of AfL in the MFL classroom appears to concentrate on using the recommended techniques to overcome common difficulties faced by MFL learners of all stages, for

example: increasing confidence, particularly in speaking and listening activities; checking of understanding and the use of written feedback to develop linguistic and grammatical awareness (Black & Jones, 2006). The authors imply that demonstrating how the current teaching fits in with the overall scheme of learning and of speaking the language – they describe it as sharing the language learning road map – is perhaps most beneficial in overcoming traditional hurdles faced by MFL learners.

By using the AfL techniques of sharing success criteria, demonstrating context and providing targeted guidance, learners can gain confidence, become more motivated and attain better results. Even if the chosen AfL methods are not immediately reflected in increased attainment, all authors agree that the implementation of successful AfL processes lead to an increase in confidence, self-esteem and motivation amongst learners which in turn can lead to better results (Black & Wiliam (1998), Assessment Reform Group (1999), Black et al. (2002), Black & Jones (2006)).

If learners' confidence, self-esteem and motivation are factors which hinder success more in the MFL classroom than elsewhere, then AfL techniques are certainly a means of successful engagement with pupils which should in the longer term lead to increased attainment.

AfL strategies to overcome MFL difficulties

A particular challenge in the MFL classroom cited by Black & Jones (2006) is the application of linguistic knowledge in more complex or new contexts. This is particularly true when considering the skill of speaking. One suggested means of tackling this using AfL is to employ task-based group work so that pupils can self and peer-assess and pool their ideas and knowledge so that the teacher is freed up to provide targeted feedback to participants (Black & Jones, 2006).

A further difficulty common in the MFL classroom is a reluctance to speak or answer questions, whether through unwillingness to speak, fear of being incorrect or lack of understanding. Black & Jones (2006) explain that not only directed and targeted questions, but also incorporation of waiting time for an answer can benefit pupils significantly as well as develop pupils' own speaking and listening skills. In addition, using a peer discussion technique, in which pupils are encouraged to work out their answers in advance with a partner or in a group, pupils are more likely to participate in whole-class activities and have an opportunity to demonstrate their linguistic knowledge to the teacher. Teacher prompting and scaffolding are also seen as AfL techniques which can encourage better and more accurate oral participation in MFL lessons.

Colby-Kelly and Turner (2006) conducted research amongst foreign language teachers in Canada on the types of activities undertaken in the classroom and found that whilst many teachers were at times sceptical of formative assessment techniques, many employed activities within their own teaching which unconsciously implemented wholly or partially the AfL principles, such as error analysis, self and peer-assessment, teacher-student conferencing and directed written feedback.

It may therefore be that MFL teaching by its very nature calls for an extensive repertoire of techniques designed to test and advance learning which would in all likelihood be employed by a teacher without recourse to the AfL label. Their research however is silent on the particular skills of MFL teaching which would benefit from specific AfL methods.

Good AfL practice in the MFL classroom

OfSTED (2003a) too emphasises the importance of AfL in the MFL classroom in the form of constant monitoring and feedback alongside appropriate action to promote improvement, such as points to pick up on in a plenary, giving credit for almost right answers and providing targeted feedback with examples on how to improve to pupils during paired oral work. Clear departmental policies are recommended, together with a cohesive approach to AfL methods, both of which assist in data gathering, analysis and reporting and contribute to more effective medium and long-term planning.

OfSTED also makes specific reference to pupil self-assessment in the MFL context and recommends that success criteria be made available to all pupils at the outset of a term or unit and that National Curriculum (NC) levels are communicated in pupil-friendly language, so that pupils can better track and evaluate their own performance. Good practice would also be for teachers to set specific and individual targets for pupils which can be recorded and signed off when they have been achieved. These could be incorporated into an established school, department or class reward culture.

Leung & Mohan (2004) argue that even during a programme of self-assessment of oral skills, oral feedback and guidance from the teacher can be as important as written responses, and indeed given the immediacy and aural nature of the response, students can act upon it far sooner and seek to improve their work.

Target-setting and self-assessment in MFL

Within the literature, reference is more often made to the concept of self-evaluation, of which target-setting is therefore part. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2006) provides many resources to MFL teachers on incorporating successful peer and self-assessment techniques and includes recommendations such as the engineering of productive pairs and the sharing of learning outcomes. The same DfES guidance also agrees that self assessment requires the teaching of the skills of self-analysis and that frequent and consistent attention is allocated to the students' consideration of their own progress, what their targets should be and how they will go about achieving them.

Self-assessment and pupil-set targets

Pupil-set targets depend upon effective self (and possibly peer) assessment techniques and, carried out effectively, repeatedly and consistently over the long-term, develop the learner's sense of responsibility and autonomy and helps students to achieve goals (Chen, 2008). The DfES (2006) proposes various strategies for self and peer-assessment in all subjects, such as asking for the level of confidence with a particular piece of work and proposing ways to overcome any problems, or commenting on the strengths of another's work and suggesting areas for improvement.

In order that successful self and peer assessment form the foundation of pupil-set targets, learning objectives and outcomes need to be explicit and transparent (DfES, 2006). In addition, it is argued that self-assessment skills are best developed after those of collaboration and peer-assessment, so that pupils are able to objectively assess their own targets and become increasingly independent (DfES, 2006). At the same time, peer-assessment needs to be directed sensitively so as to ensure the most effective results: whilst collaborative learning can be undertaken by peers of differing ability, an unmanaged imbalance of ability amongst peers could lead to an overly-didactic role for higher-achieving participants (Watanabe, 2008). Similarly, if peer-assessment is to form part of target-setting, the nature of the goal to be achieved needs in some way to be communicated to the peer and the peer be in a position to effectively analyse whether the success criteria have been met.

DfES guidance suggests breaking down oral work into word, sentence or concept level stages (perhaps mirroring NC levels) and communicated in an accessible manner to students so that they can determine what they (or others) have already achieved and what they now need to consider achieving (DfES, 2006).

Patri (2002) concludes however that successful peer and self-assessment (as the basis for pupil-set targets) can only take place if clear assessment criteria (for example, those set by the teacher) are provided. Patri also reinforces the need for students to be properly grounded in the skills of self-assessment, particularly where such techniques are new to students. Experience from other subject areas suggests that a understanding of quality or success criteria is essential for effective self-assessment and the setting of personal targets (Harlen & Winter, 2004).

Klein (2007) proposes that starter and plenary activities, combined with regular pupil recording of understanding of topics and points to improve on, can be employed to assist students self-assess their achievements, provided that the use of such techniques are sustained and the teacher is able to regularly monitor the pupil recordings and adapt teaching to mirror any difficulties noted.

There is of course a potential lacuna between the ability of a student to self-assess and the ability of that student then to elucidate the steps needed to take learning further. It is at this stage that teacher-provided guidance and a road-map, of the rest of the topic, of success criteria or of additional skills and how to go about enhancing them are necessary so that a student may draw on these and determine how best to proceed.

Research Methodology

Pre-intervention

Having identified the group, and the timing and specification constraints imposed by the restricted (two hours per week) timetable, I set about collating data on the students' current speaking ability, as evidenced by the teacher-set targets in their autumn cycle reports and End of Unit test (EOU) speaking assessments (Appendices 1 and 2).

EOUs are conducted by their class teacher; students are told in English the gist of what they will need to say in German, given time in class and as homework to prepare a script (and read it if they wish, but they are encouraged to use little or no support) and follow the same marking structure each time: 2 marks for a grammatically correct answer, 1 mark for something inaccurate but 'which would be understood by a sympathetic native-speaker' and no marks for anything incomprehensible, with a total of ten marks available.

The structure of the answers required follow the NC attainment levels in speaking. Appendix 3

shows that pre-intervention, speaking scores were weaker than other skills, but that gradually, speaking was the skill in which students made most progress.

Before embarking on the intervention, I conducted a speaking EOUT (despite not having taught the topics to which it related) in order to ascertain for myself current speaking levels and degree of oral ability of each student (Appendix 4). Over one third of the students had already improved on their previous EOUT speaking score.

Intervention

Lessons in the teaching phase on the Scheme of Work encompassed the topics *Sport und Hobbies*, *Das Wetter* and *Essen und Trinken*. It was not practical to teach a skills rather than topic based series of lessons to then compare their speaking with an identical EOUT because of time-tabling and other practical constraints. After teaching the three topics, I held another EOUT and compared scores pre- and post-intervention (Appendices 5 and 6).

I conducted an interim speaking assessment in the topic of *Das Wetter*: during a carousel activity lesson allowing students to utilise their speaking skills half way through my teaching series, I eavesdropped on students and recorded them undertaking various games and activities in TL. Whilst this is not as controlled an environment as an EOUT, this gave me a basic indication as to whether students' confidence and general speaking skills had improved (Appendix 4). I was later able to use these results and observations to provide an estimated attainment grade for several students who were absent from the final EOUT (Appendix 6).

In order to determine whether the students' ability to speak had improved as a result of my intervention, I conducted an EOUT after the intervention in order to compare to the previous results. Students had a set of questions on each mini-topic and could choose two topics to be assessed on (so that any assumptions about linguistic ability could be considered in light of more than one topic area, in order to iron out any possible inconsistencies). Some students asked to answer all three topics, which for the same reasons, I allowed them to do.

Process of target-setting

Upon starting each mini-topic, I provided students with a target sheet with a word, sentence and concept breakdown (following DfES guidance) of the work that would be covered. This represented a form of roadmap for students, together with a space for them to determine what their future target

would be and how they would go about achieving it. The statements and requirements were aligned with NC levels. At the end of the first lesson on each topic (this being similar to Klein's starter and plenary suggestion for self-assessment), students were invited to assess their own ability and consider which targets they felt they could complete as a result of the teaching, e.g. *I can say individual words about the weather; I can use a verb when talking about the weather* etc.

Students then had to prove their ability to a partner by saying out loud the sentence or statement in German relating to that target. The partner would then comment on the sheet whether they considered that the target had been met. I did not consider that Watanabe's concerns about a mismatch of ability when peer-assessing in this manner were problematic for this group: all students were of a similar enough ability and any differences would be neutralised by the requirement that students ask a different peer each time to assess them.

At the end of each lesson, students were asked to reflect on their learning that day and determine whether they had met their goals by proceeding down the list of things to say. Time was again allocated for students to peer-assess their claims.

The target-setting and enforcing process was entirely student-led, although at the start of the teaching series, I led a lesson on speaking skills in general and how to improve speaking and combining it with SMART target-setting techniques. Students kept their sheets in their exercise books, and I often went round the class whilst students were engaged in work and had a look at the sheets and spoke to individual students about their perceived progress and any difficulties that they had encountered.

Interactive feedback

Having ascertained that all students had internet access either at home or at school and were IT proficient, I utilised the school's online Learning Platform (LP) not only to distribute and collect homework, but also to obtain interim feedback from students on their self-set targets, the progress of these targets and their views on whether the process of target-setting was beneficial to them. I created a secure forum accessible for all students of that class to post and share their feedback with me and each other. Students were then able to provide me with their views in their own time and at their own pace without having to disturb their learning of German or any other subjects or commitments which arranging focus groups or interviews would herald.

Also on the LP was a questionnaire designed to ascertain students' views on and motivation for speaking German. This asked for the students' views not only on the relative ease and enjoyment of speaking as compared to the other skills, but also asked students to reflect on how attainment and ability in speaking enhances their enjoyment and ability of the subject as a whole, in order to put the development of speaking skills into a subject-wide context.

How did the students' feedback affect my teaching?

Following feedback from students that they took some time to adjust to new expectations to determine the direction of their own learning, I altered lesson plans to make it more obvious to students that they could now complete the next target(s) on their target sheet: providing signposts for their roadmap learning, perhaps! I would, for example, after having taught a particular structure, say that if they felt confident using that structure, they could now tick off point X on the target sheet and get a partner to test you. I had hoped that students would be able to go further and work more independently than I would take the classes, for example by making connections with previously learnt language and imitating structures and applying grammatical points in new contexts, but this (at least in the short time that I taught the group) was not to be.

Teaching of the topics therefore ended up being more of an exercise teaching to the roadmap to enable students to tick off more targets (i.e. the next one on the list), rather than an exercise in students finding out for themselves how to say certain structures or specifically improving their speaking skills. This approach certainly appeared to have helped students' motivation and simple achievement: ticking the targets off enabled students to see a positive and immediate impact of their work. The increased emphasis on speaking activities in lessons certainly appears therefore to have paid off in terms of increasing general speaking awareness and exposure to oral practice.

The most effective lesson in terms of targets and self/peer assessment was a revision session in conjunction with the Foreign Language Assistant (FLA) prior to the last speaking assessment. Students were given (as usual in their tests) a framework of statements to which they are required to script oral utterances. The statements contained structures that had not been explicitly taught as part of that topic, but as part of another topic (e.g. use of *gern* and *weil*: The structure of *Ich spiele gern Hockey, weil es interessant ist* became: *Ich esse gern Obst, weil ich gesund bin*) and students were required to collaborate to produce their responses and test them out on each other. Students were also reminded that this was a good opportunity to complete as much of the target sheets as possible

to show just how far their learning had developed. Students worked well and began to make the links and apply the speaking skills advice when assessing their own and their peers' work. Many commented during the lesson that it had been most helpful to go at their own pace, work at a level that they were comfortable with and see the benefits of speaking practice take effect.

Many students were absent for the final EOUT, so I was able to use my own interim grading of their achievement (Appendix 4) and an analysis of their general achievement in class to estimate their NC Levels.

Data Analysis

Initial data analysis pre-intervention

I was able to ascertain from the initial data that those students whose attainment was overall lower than average were also low achieving speakers.

An initial analysis of the previous EOUT data does however suggest that for the majority of the remaining students, speaking is the skill in both EOUTs in which most students gained the highest possible level. Most students improved between Autumn and Winter and some (but far fewer) went on to improve in Spring with the majority remaining at their then level. This could have been because the leap between NC Levels 2-3 and 3-4 is far greater than that between Levels 1-2, or simply because of the nature of the questions posed and the time allocated to students to prepare and practice.

Despite this, between Winter and Spring, some students' attainment slipped, as they achieved a lower level for their speaking than earlier in the year, even though scores for their other skills remained relatively stable. This could be as a result of the degree of speaking task becoming harder, the novelty of a new language wearing off and the recognised difficulties speaking becoming more prevalent. At the same time, the Spring EOUT was conducted a few weeks after students had made their KS4 options choices, and it was generally for those whose attainment had tailed off or fallen, who had chosen not to continue with languages. This certainly suggests that aspiration for those students affected their ability and efforts put into their language learning for the remainder of the school year.

Intervention analysis

The results of the EOUTs that I conducted show that all students either maintained their current speaking level or achieved at least one level higher. No student's attainment worsened although for four students, because of absence, there was insufficient data to determine progress. Many had increased in confidence and those who spoke less in the initial test appeared more fluent and confident in their speaking. Common mistakes such as ei/ie and w/v pronunciation, together with linguistic errors such as word order still persisted, but many appeared to be much more at ease with the task of speaking in German.

It is however difficult to apportion credit for all of this solely to the process of target-setting, although the increased emphasis and practice on speaking skills in general, the regular speaking to a partner in class and awareness of the kinds of independent steps that students might take to achieve their targets are more likely to have placed the theory and practice of speaking at the fore of the students' minds.

What do the results of the feedback on targets mean?

Whilst the majority of responses to the forum and the questionnaire were overwhelmingly positive about speaking and learning German, and the ways in which this is effective and enjoyable, the majority of students commented that they would have benefited from being taught explicitly how to evaluate their own work and set targets. The most powerful statements on this matter came from two of the potentially highest achieving students:

- “I do not think that setting the targets have helped me improve my speaking. They have not been useful to me at all because I do not have all the information in my book to achieve those targets. I think that we need to do more work in the lessons with teachers and spend more lessons on topics such as this one. I also think that setting them is quite time-consuming and we could be learning more in that time.”
- “I think that setting these targets were a good idea but at the same time I think they were a waste of time because we have been doing this quite a long time and we could have learnt a lot of German by now. If we were to do this again it would be helpful but I think we should maybe do it for a shorter time and not just focus on doing targets but on other work at the same time.”

As a result, some responses suggested that without this foundation, students would not have the patience or motivation to see this through on a long-term basis. Having considered this point, I also reflected that if other subjects are habitually setting targets and speaking of achievement and attainment, students may become target hostile, particularly if much of the target-related work was left to the students alone to regulate and with little teacher input.

It was also of note that the more able students, such as those cited above, did not seem to engage with the target-setting as much as I had anticipated. From their responses, it appears that they are more at ease with traditional methods of teaching language than with the student-led potential of the project.

I was aware throughout the intervention that I had not communicated to students their initial NC level attainment, as it was not common practice in the department to do so, and many commented independently that if they had known their initial grade, it might have motivated them more to participate in the target-setting process.

I was also aware that very little time had been devoted to the ground work of targets and the process of self and peer assessment within the languages classroom, and despite a school-wide policy on academic tutoring and the process of self-evaluation and direction, students appeared to prefer to take such decisions when presented with more information about their own achievement and the success criteria of each exercise.

Were this process to be repeated, therefore, I would spend longer introducing the concepts of peer and self-assessment in the MFL classroom over various topics and across the skills base, so as to ensure that the notions of target-setting and active pupil-led assessment for learning permeated all aspects of language teaching. In doing so, I would also hope to spend time with each student in a two-way discussion dealing with attainment, progress and individual steps to take, which could then form a framework roadmap for students to determine their own direction, safe in the knowledge that it was independent work but in a teacher-encouraged direction. This approach however would be far more time-consuming and input-heavy than the short-term project that I conducted.

Despite this, a more prolonged and intensive intervention spread across both the academic year and across the skills would be far more likely to produce actual results of attainment, than the relatively short-term intervention period of my research.

What do the results of the questionnaire on motivation mean?

Alongside the encouraging attainment levels indicated by the pre- and post-intervention EOUT speaking scores, many of the students said that there was a clear relation between their ability to speak and their enjoyment of the subject overall. Fifteen members of the class said that they either enjoyed speaking and found it easy, therefore their enjoyment of the subject was high, whilst the others intimated that they found speaking harder, therefore German lessons were less enjoyable, regardless of their actual ability as evidenced by their EOUT scores. Ability to speak affected motivation and enjoyment as a whole, therefore improvement in this ability alone has the potentially significant impact on a student's overall attainment scores for each skill.

It seems that for most, the main criterion for enjoyment and perceived ability, is how well they can actually speak German, rather than read, listen or write the language. In addition, a small proportion of these students (generally those capable high achievement) appear to underestimate their actual ability. This is perhaps influenced by the fact that the students' levels of attainment in speaking have not traditionally been communicated to students, even though their levels for the other skills are routinely recorded in their books. This would suggest that lack of awareness of their oral attainment leads to uncertainty in students' own abilities and, in the long-term, affects their enjoyment of the subject (and possibly even take-up on the subject at KS4).

In addition, most if not all of the students were sufficiently self-motivated to recognise that in order to improve speaking, attainment and enjoyment of lessons, they had to put in the 'leg-work' of practice in their own time. The majority also requested that more class time be devoted to speaking practice - not necessarily in the form of consolidation-type activities, but simply repeating the words to ensure that pronunciation was correct.

For some, the pressure of concentrating on targets was too much and it was that factor which had affected motivation: "I enjoyed learning German at the start of the year but I don't enjoy it anymore because I feel pressured about doing the targets and getting things right". This could be as a result of the somewhat artificial imposition of the notion of targets in the classroom for the period of the intervention without sufficient preparation or pre-training. Perhaps also this is indicative of the nature of how target and achievement are communicated to students throughout the school rather than simply in MFL.

In order to establish realistic speaking targets, and for students to assess their own abilities to

determine how they can proceed, students would greatly benefit from a prior awareness of their speaking ability; something which was not common practice in the school at the time of the research.

Whilst the students' views on the process of target-setting tended to be negative, it was clear that the majority of them had increased confidence to speak in class, with the FLA and with me. Perhaps the emphasis on the specific skills and techniques of speaking and the increased classroom time for practice had given the students greater confidence in their speaking ability: certainly many commented that the process of concentrating on speaking had been helpful to them. With hindsight therefore I would have included further points in their closing questionnaire: 'How confident do you feel in speaking German?', 'How has your enjoyment of speaking German changed?' and 'How has your enjoyment of German overall as a subject changed?'

Crucially, within the questionnaire the topic of learning styles arose. Some students stated quite clearly that they disliked an emphasis on speaking skills, as they preferred to learn traditional teaching methods:

- "I think that the way we learn things is affecting my speaking. Change the way that we learn things."
- "Instead of looking around the class for the new words, the way in which we do, I would prefer to go back to how we used to do it when it would be on a slide show; that way I can understand and pronounce the words better."

Others however who had found speaking difficult in the past appreciated the emphasis on speaking and listening of the intervention, as they had the opportunity to learn in the manner in which they found easiest.

These results simply emphasise the constant need to consider and incorporate each learning style into MFL lessons, and in particular in relation to speaking skills, when much of the emphasis needs to be on aural and kinaesthetic, rather than visual styles. Teachers should therefore be aware of a variety of methods in which to engage visual learners in developing speaking skills. Were I to repeat the intervention, on the basis of the results of the survey, I would certainly ascertain the pupils' preferred learning styles and explore the type of activity in that light, particularly if I were concentrating on enhancing a non-written skill (i.e. speaking or listening) and if that skill (such as

speaking) were deemed by students to be less popular or perceived to be harder to succeed in.

Conclusion

The ability to speak rather than simply understand a foreign language, can indeed be a challenging topic to teach, to learn and to succeed in. There are many factors which influence a student's ability and motivation to speak, as compared to other MFL skills. Crucially, however, the ability to speak is perceived as the most important by students and has the greatest impact on their overall enjoyment and understanding of the rest of the subject. This in turn appears to affect their own self-confidence in speaking exercises. Students often underestimate their own ability to speak: by the end of the intervention, most students had met, if not exceeded the target level for speaking as set in the November reports, despite a lack of confidence in their own responses on the forum and to the questionnaire. Perhaps therefore what is required is also a concerted confidence and self-esteem building exercise when embarking on spoken work, particularly where students are required to assess their own achievement (and that of others!) and determine the direction that their learning takes.

The process of student-led target-setting can indeed be a useful technique in which to develop language skills, as it reminds students of what they can do, what they need to be able to do and it hands to them the reins of their development. This surely is the very crux of Black and Wiliam's concept of Assessment for Learning: making the learning process - and not just the subject under tuition - more accessible to students.

For many, the process of target-setting and analysing can be motivating and confidence-boosting, but it needs to be more than a stand-alone exercise in one skill for a short period of time. Ideally, it should be integrated into language teaching across the board (and teaching across the school) from the start of the course, so that it becomes second nature to the students to self-assess and evaluate progress. Time-table constraints however meant that this was not feasible for the period of my intervention. A more seamless process of target-setting and independence of development would have meant that I was not teaching to the targets by the end of the project and the exercise would be less of a list-ticking exercise but more a programme of collaborative and independent reflection for the students.

The students in this group were not only high achievers but also very motivated to learn languages and to succeed, even at things they found hard: the results in the speaking attainment may not have

been quite so wide-spread had it been a less motivated class or of a lower ability. Similarly, group dynamics play a role too: many students found it easy to work with each other to peer-assess; had the group contained a different mixture of abilities, it is possible that there would have been less of a competitive atmosphere to succeed which had manifested itself by the end of the series of lessons.

It would have been interesting to have applied the same techniques to the teaching of French to the same group to see if similar results and degree of attainment were achieved. It would then have been possible to see if any language-specific issues relating to target-setting for speaking could be identified (such as pronunciation).

On reflection, communication is key to the success of any target-setting process, regardless of the skill under question. Had the students been initially aware of their attainment levels and received individual feedback from me on areas to improve before the intervention, then more students could have seen greater improvement. Leaving the impetus to the students and asking peers (who do not have the same degree of language knowledge or the ability to recognise good or bad practice) to indicate whether they could improve should not necessarily be the key to a target-setting and assessment process, particularly in a lower-ability/lesser motivated class and where the assessment skills are not already part of the approach to MFL!

Teacher-set (or at least guided) targets could have been a good guide for students to begin their initial self-assessment - even if they are gradually withdrawn and students have more independence to assess their learning. With hindsight I could also have provided more guidance on what constitutes a good utterance, e.g. pronunciation, accent, accuracy, and degree of fluency, as this would have helped frame students' targets and help them better assess their peers' work. I did consider though that my oral guidance, questioning techniques and feedback, as advised by Leung and Mohan (2004), particularly in the interim assessment sessions were effective in encouraging students to speak more.

Despite this, the overall results that the majority of students improved and none worsened is pleasing. Upon reflection, this is probably more to do with the concentration on speaking skills and confidence rather than the explicit nature of the self-assessment and target-setting, but it is clear that thinking about targets at least was sufficient to prompt many to undertake more oral practice in their own time and thus improve their general confidence and speaking skills.

Perhaps future targets (based on the results of these tests?) should be more linguistic-based, such as *practice pronouncing ei/ie sounds*, rather than task or list based such as those exhibited by students in this study.

It is important to be aware that concentration on improving one skill potentially risks temporarily sidelining other skills. Perhaps in the future, any joined-up target setting MFL policy should consider cross-skill targets, or indeed give students one target per skill at a time, so as to ensure that other skills are not neglected or learning styles ignored.

Similarly, a longer-term and better grounded project, following for example the model advice in Chen's (2008) research for long-term projects, is likely to be more reliable in determining whether student or teacher target intervention was more beneficial in increasing speaking attainment.

It must also be considered, that if the nature of the target-setting in this project was not as grounded or as effective as it could have been, whether the students' speaking ability would have improved anyway, without the target-setting policy. Would an emphasis on oral practice and self-esteem have been just as beneficial to speaking attainment? Given the students' feedback on the nature of target-setting, it is possible to argue that it was not the targets themselves that prompted attainment. On the other hand, even those who said that targets were not helpful still managed to increase their grades!

Now that PLTS are becoming more integrated into education and students are learning how to learn, perhaps when teachers and students are more accustomed to their working, pupil-set and assessed targets will become the norm soon, whether for speaking or the other MFL skills, as they certainly have the potential for success, regardless of the ability of the students. Indeed the success of any MFL policy depends to a great extent on the whole-school approach to AfL and target-setting: demonstrating a cohesive approach to assessment for learning throughout the school is far more likely to convince students of the benefits to them of evaluation, assessment and targets.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Background student data

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Appendix 1**Background student data**

S	G	R	M	KS4 options									
				AT1	AT2	AT3	AT4	Ave age level	Fr	Ge	Ge Fr	Sp Fr	Jan. 2009
F1		103	I	5	4	5	4	5	2	4	1	3	F
F2		105	I	5	4	4	4	4	2	3	1	4	G
F3	AG &T	130	BL	5a	5a	6c	5a	5	2	4	1	3	FG
F4		no data	BA	4a	5c	4b	4b	4	3	4	2	1	-
M1		105	BE	5b	4a	5c	5c	5	2	1	3	4	-
F5		103	BE	5b	6c	5b	5a	5	4	3	1	2	F
M2	AG &T	109	BL	5a	6c	5a	6c	6	4	1	2	3	-
F6	AG &T	120	I	5	5	5	5	5	2	4	1	3	F
M3		121	BE	5b	4a	5b	5b	5	3	1	2	4	-
F7		103	BE	5a	5c	5c	5a	5	3	4	1	2	-
M4		101	I	4	4	5	4	4	4	2	1	3	-
F8		101	I	5	5	5	5	5	2	4	1	3	G
F9		100	BL	5c	4a	5b	5c	5	2	1	3	4	G
F10		111	BE	5c	4a	5c	5c	5	3	4	2	1	F
F11		119	BE	5a	5b	5a	5a	5	3	4	1	2	-
F12		94	BL	5c	4a	5c	5b	5	3	4	1	2	-
F13		107	I	4	4	5	4	4	4	2	1	3	G
M5	AG &T	121	BE	5a	6c	5a	6a	6	4	3	1	2	G
M6		104	I	4	4	5	5	5	2	1	3	4	G
F14		106	I	5	4	5	5	5	3	4	1	2	F
M7		115	BE	5b	5c	5c	5c	5	2	3	1	4	G
M8		124	BL	4b	4c	4b	4c	4	3	1	2	4	F
M9		124	BE	5c	4a	5c	5c	5	3	1	2	4	G
F15		100	BL	4a	5c	4a	5c	5	4	3	1	2	G
M10		124	I	4	4	4	5	4	3	4	1	2	G

S: Student

G: General student data (SEN/AG&T)

R: French AT data provided prior to transfer from Middle School (12+ reading score)

M: Middle School transfer options data

Appendix 2:

EOUT analysis - Attainment between Autumn and Winter 2008

Student	Previous EOUT speaking results - Autumn 2008	Previous EOUT speaking results - Winter 2008			
	Score /16	NC Level	Score /10	NC Level	- / no change / + on previous test
F1	15	3	9	4	+
F2	15	3	8	4	+
F3	16	3	10	4	+
F4	16	3	8	4	+
M1	13	3	-	-	n/a
F5	16	3	8	4	+
M2	-	-	-	-	n/a
F6	16	3	9	4	+
M3	13	3	8	4	+
F7	15	3	6	3	no change
M4	8	2	6	3	+
F8	16	3	10	4	+
F9	15	3	10	4	+
F10	13	3	8	4	+
F11	16	3	9	4	+
F12	8	2	7	3	+
F13	12	3	9	4	+
M5	16	3	9	4	+
M6	14	3	8	4	+
F14	-	-	6	3	n/a
M7	15	3	8	4	+
M8	14	3	8	4	+
M9	15	3	9	4	+
F15	15	3	9	4	+
M10	14	3	10	4	+

Appendix 3:**Initial assessment of speaking ability - March 2009**

EOUT March 2009 - Die Stadt und wo ich wohne				
Student	Score /10	NC Level	Addn. info.	- / no change / + on previous test
F1	9	3	++	-
F2	8	4	v/w ei/ie pronunciation	no change
F3	10	4++	no script!	+
F4	8	3	not confident	+
M1	-	-	-	n/a
F5	8	3	not confident	-
M2	-	-	-	n/a
F6	9	4	included colours of objects	no change
M3	8	4	used dative! forgot reasons	no change
F7	6	3	no reasons given	no change
M4	6	3	no reasons given	no change
F8	10	4+	excellent - lots additional info	+
F9	10	4+	no script for some!	+
F10	10	4+	steady pronunciation	+
F11	-	-		-
F12	8	4	steady and precise	+
F13	10	4+	good pronunciation, very clear	+
M5	10	4+	great word order!	+
M6	8	4	good pronunciation, very clear	+
F14	5	3	good effort but not confident	no change
M7	7	4	tried without script but forgot some - resorted to script but still found pronunciation difficult	no change
M8	5	3	spoke French!	-
M9	-	-		n/a
F15	8	4	ei/ie pronunciation	no change
M10	9	4	confident and clear - no script	no change

Appendix 4:

Interim speaking evaluation

Student	Effort	Comments
F1	++	confident and sure
F2	++	confident and sure
F3	++	confident and sure
F4	++	steady and able
M1	+	confidence?
F5	+	confidence?
M2	.	able but reluctant!
F6	++	needs to practise vocab
M3	+	confidence?
F7	.	shy? reluctant?
M4	-	actively disengaged himself from activities despite encouragement
F8	++	will actively puzzle new vocab out and has confidence
F9	+	confidence? good vocab though
F10	+	reluctant but generally accurate
F11	.	reluctant
F12	.	reluctant
F13	+	shy when being observed
M5	++	very confident speaker
M6	++	has confidence to speak even when he know he makes mistakes
F14	+	confidence?
M7	++	great efforts - needs to work on vocab
M8	+	used some French!
M9	+	made off topic comments - but in German!
F15	++	confidence?
M10	++	asked for help...in German!

Appendix 5:

Results of intervention - EOUT May 2009

EOUT - May 2009									
Sport und Hobbies / Das Wetter / Essen und Trinken									
Student	Score /10 (+5 bonus)	NC Level	*		**				
		Sports	Wetter	Essen	Overall				
F1	14	4+	4+	4+	4++	improved		improved	
F2	8	4	4	-	4	no change		no change	
F3	10	4+	4+	-	4+	no change		no change	
F4	6	-	3	3	3	no change		no change	
M1	6	3	3	-	3	no data		absences - no data	
M2	6	-	3	3	3	no data		absences - no data	
F7	8	-	4+	4	4	improved		improved	
M4	7	4+	3	-	4	improved		improved	
F8	15	4+	4+	4+	4++	no change		no change	
F9	10	4+	4+	4+	4++	no change		no change	
M7	8	4+	3	-	4	no change		no change	
M8	7	4	3	-	4	improved		improved	
F15	10	4+	4+	4+	4++	improved		improved	

* Improvement on previous results?

** Therefore: Have NC levels for those present at EOUT increased as result of intervention?

Appendix 6:

Estimated results of intervention for those absent for May EOUT, based on interim assessment and classroom observations.

	Students absent for formal EOUT, May 2009			
Student	Estimated NC level for those absent, based on interim assessment	Improvement on previous result (for those absent and with an estimated level)?	Comment on those absent and their improvement: evidence supporting estimated grade.	Have NC levels increased for those absent (based on estimate) as result of intervention?
F5	3	no change	Unclear - several absences	no change
F6	4	no change	Unclear - needs to maintain results and take more creative risks!	no change
M3	4	no change	Develop confidence in class	no change
F19	4+	improved	Increased levels very well - needs to keep this up! Confidence etc growing	improved
F11	4	improved	Able when pressed in small groups/1-2-1 but dislikes speaking out loud.	absences - not enough data
F12	4	no change	Able but through laziness (!) makes silly mistakes. Needs to work on pronunciation.	no change
F13	4+	improved	Excellent achievement!	no change
M5	4+	improved	Excellent achievement!	no change
M6	4+	improved	Needs to keep up standards of work and gain confidence to make mistakes.	improved
F14	3	no change	Needs to gain confidence.	no change
M9	4	improved	Achieved higher level and has started making impromptu comments in German!	absences - not enough data
M10	4++	improved	Needs to maintain high standards - has already started using German spontaneously in class!	improved

