St Patrick's College (Maghera)
Using Effective Questioning in Spanish

Introduction

St Patrick's College (Maghera) is a co-educational comprehensive school with over 1300 pupils. It was a pilot school for the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum. This case study illustrates how St Patrick's has planned and developed assessment policy and practice to improve learning outcomes. It explores the development of using effective questioning as an Assessment for Learning (AfL) strategy in Spanish at Key Stage 3 and focuses on a Year 9 class.

School Assessment Policy and Practice

There is a whole-school collaborative approach to assessment planning and development led by the vice principal and the senior leader for assessment and involving heads of department, directors of learning and subject teachers.

Assessment policy and practice is planned and developed alongside the college's teaching and learning programme. It is a focus for self-evaluation and development planning. Assessment for Learning (AfL) has been in the School Development Plan since the college was involved in the pilot for the revised Curriculum.

While assessment is used for both formative and summative purposes, its main purpose is to support pupils to improve their learning and achieve their full potential. Assessment is primarily used to help pupils to know where they are in their learning and what they have to do in order to make progress. Assessment is also used to help identify underachievement so that support measures may be implemented. These measures include providing classroom teacher support for pupils and one-to-one mentoring.

St Patrick's uses the Year 8 entrance exam, end of Key Stage 2 and 3 assessment results and assessments set by the University of Durham, MidYIS (Years 8–12), YELLIS (Years 11–12) and ALIS (Years 13 and 14) as well as Fischer Family Trust (FFT) and GCSE results. The data from these sources is used for benchmarking and setting minimum target grades in each of the subjects that a pupil undertakes.

Assessment standards are agreed and there is a process of quality assurance that involves both middle and senior management. Formal written exams take place at the end of the first and third terms. Information about a pupil's progress is reported to parents in the annual report and the pupil's performance in subjects is scored as a percentage alongside a class average (levels are given for English and Mathematics).

Teachers in the college have developed AfL strategies, including:

- Formulating Learning Objectives
- Sharing the Learning Objectives and Success Criteria
- Giving quality oral and written feedback on how to improve
- Effective questioning
- Peer and self-assessment
- Self-evaluation and setting short-term curricular targets

The current focus is on developing effective questioning as part of classroom assessment practice.

Assessment Planning

Assessment is planned alongside teaching and learning. In all subjects' schemes of work, learning outcomes include knowledge, understanding, skills and capabilities and planned assessments. The school's Annual Assessment Calendar includes key dates regarding timing of assessments with summative assessment scores recorded on Assessment Manager.

Effective Questioning is the current focus on our continuing journey to develop AfL strategies. Using the CCEA (2009) guidance on AfL at Key Stage 3, we identified the two key questions that we needed to ask ourselves:

> How can we extend participation in whole class and group questioning to all pupils?
>
> How can we develop questioning strategies that deepen pupils' learning?

We used CCEA guidance (ibid.) to help teachers develop strategies for effective questioning, these included:

- **Asking questions that are more focused** – ask questions to elicit specific information to help gauge pupils' understanding.

- **Asking fewer questions** – avoid asking unnecessary questions that often detract from the importance placed on key questions.

- **Raising the quality of questioning** – ask questions that have a clear purpose and make use of more probing and open questions that encourage pupils to think.

- **Giving pupils more thinking time to respond to questions** – increase the wait time for pupil responses to allow them to move beyond giving answers based on recalling. old learning to constructing more developed and thought through responses.

- **Avoiding 'shotgun' questioning** – ask questions one at a time and allow pupils time to respond, rather than asking a series of questions one after another that give pupils little time to process the information and give a thoughtful response.

- **Using 'no hands up' questioning** – this avoids the same pupils answering questions most of the time by inviting individuals to respond.

- **Encouraging pupil questioning** – this promotes greater pupil participation and encourages pupils to develop Thinking Skills.

To support the development of these strategies we explored the idea of developing a common framework for constructing questions using Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956).

Pupils discuss and share success criteria

Monitoring and Review

The initiative was regularly monitored by teachers, who provided valuable feedback at departmental meetings, and heads of department reporting to the vice principal and senior leader for assessment, who in turn informed senior leadership team and directors of learning of progress. The findings are used to inform the self-evaluation of assessment and college development planning.

Using Bloom's Taxonomy to Support Effective Questioning

The cognitive domain of Bloom's Taxonomy classifies the cognitive skills into six hierarchical categories (Figure 1). Teachers used this framework to develop subject questions that were increasingly challenging and supported pupils to develop higher order thinking skills. Table 1 lists the type of verbs that teachers can use as stems for their questions.
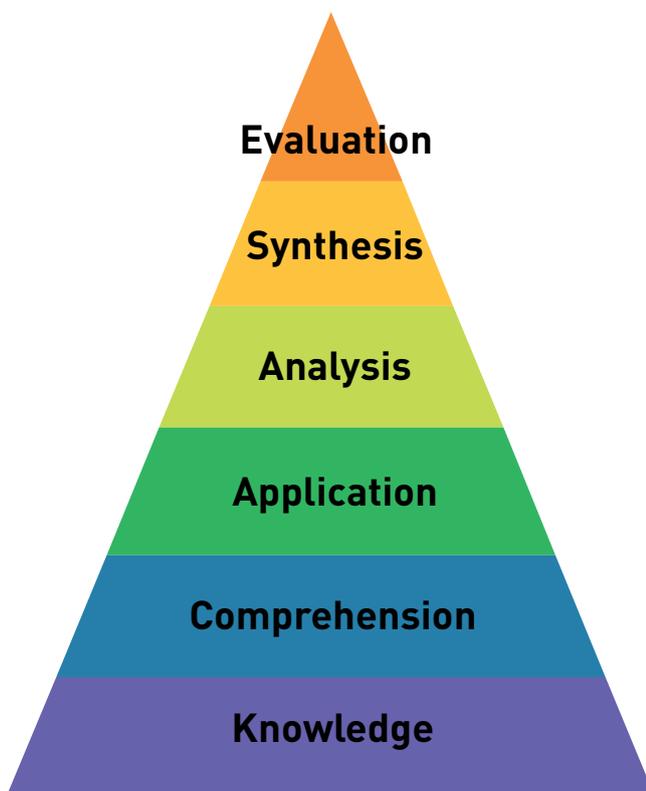
Figure 1. Bloom's Taxonomy

Table 1. Question Stem Verbs

Evaluation: judge, criticise, support, evaluate, consider, recommend, summarise, appraise, compare, prove, predict, assess

Synthesis: compose, originate, hypothesise, develop, design, combine, construct, produce, plan, create, invent, organise

Analysis: compare, contrast, analyse, classify, examine, infer, distinguish, survey, categorise, differentiate, select

Application: organise, generalise, prepare, produce, choose, use, apply, solve, show, transfer, change

Comprehension: match, restate, rewrite, give examples, express, explain, distinguish, summarise, interrelate, interpret, illustrate, demonstrate, paraphrase

Knowledge: Select, List, Name, Find, Describe, Define, Label, State, Recognise, Identify, Recall

Staff Development

Teachers were given training during INSET days to develop their competencies for using effective questioning. The training covered the rationale behind the college initiative and guidance on how to develop effective questioning strategies in the classroom; this included using Bloom's taxonomy as a framework to construct questions.

Spanish Curriculum Content

The scheme of work for Spanish is based on the Statutory Statements of Minimum Requirements for Modern Languages at Key Stage 3. It sets out the learning outcomes for each unit of work in terms of knowledge and understanding and skills and capabilities. Opportunities for effective questioning are highlighted in the scheme of work. Topics covered include self, family, shopping, houses and homes, towns, holidays and the environment.

Using Effective Questioning in Spanish

The case study focuses on Year 9 pupils and the use of effective questioning when learning about the topic of houses and homes. The assessment focuses on pupils' knowledge and understanding of Spanish in this topic and the Communication skills (Talking, Listening, Reading and Writing) and Thinking skills of Managing Information and Decision Making.

Throughout the topic the teacher uses a selection of mainly planned questions based on Bloom's taxonomy. These range from questions based on recall of knowledge to those that challenge pupils to synthesise and evaluate information. This approach provides immediate and accessible information about the stage pupils are at in their learning and is a useful way for the teacher to monitor progress and to identify low and underachievement.

At the beginning of the unit, and for each lesson, the teacher discusses and explains what pupils will be learning about and how they will be assessed and negotiates shared success criteria.

Initially, the teacher uses questions to assess pupils' knowledge of the Spanish language through their ability to recognise and say basic words. Pupils demonstrate their understanding by their ability to communicate using these words in appropriate contexts in reading and listening tasks.

For example, these include questions such as:

Cómo se dice … en español/en inglés?
(How do you say … in Spanish and English?)

¿Qué hay en el dormitorio de …?
(What is in …'s bedroom?)

¿Dónde está la cama?
(Where is the bed?)

To determine how well pupils can apply their learning, the teacher asks and sets questions to assess their ability to communicate in talking and listening and reading and writing. This requires pupils to correctly interpret the meaning of phrases and sentences by selecting the correct words to complete sentences. The types of questions asked include:

¿Cómo es tu dormitorio?
(What is your room like)

Utiliza el texto para mejorar tus respuestas.
(Use the text to improve your answers)

¿Cuáles son las palabras más interesantes/importantes en el texto?
(What are the most interesting/important words in the text?)

A pupil gives oral presentation to the class in Spanish

The pupils' communication skills, decision-making skills and their ability to analyse information is judged by their performance in compare and contrast activities. Pupils are given pictures, photographs and Spanish text about houses and homes and respond to questions such as:

> ¿Qué habitación prefieres? ¿Porqué?
> (Which room do you prefer? Why?)
>
> ¿Qué diferencías hay entre los dibujos?
> (What are the differences in the pictures?)
>
> ¿Cómo se parecen los dibujos?
> (How are the drawings similar?)

Pupils ask and answer questions in Spanish

At the end of the unit, pupils have to prepare and give an oral presentation to the class. This requires pupils to review their learning for this topic and use their prior learning and language skills to create a speech that will engage the audience, including an interesting description of their house. The teacher discusses what is expected and uses success criteria to indicate what they are being assessed against. Pupils use this as a checklist. For example, pupils are prompted to:

> Da una presentación sobre tu casa.
> (Give a presentation about your house.)

Pupils evaluate their learning throughout the unit. The teacher supports them to think about and ask useful questions of others and the teacher to help improve their learning. The pupil's presentation to the class is used to assess their knowledge and understanding of Spanish and their ability to communicate effectively through oral work. This is assessed by the teacher and peers against agreed success criteria. The teacher gives written feedback as well as using the success criteria as a mark scheme to provide a percentage mark. Pupils evaluate their own performance at the end of the presentations to identify areas for improvement, taking on feedback from others.

Monitoring, Recording and Reporting Progress

The pupils' marks for the presentation are recorded on Assessment Manager (SIMS) along with the scores from five other summative assessments in Spanish over the course of the year. This enables the class teacher and the head of department and directors of learning to monitor and track pupils' progress.

This is part of the whole-school development plan and is required across all Learning Areas. The SIMS system is then used to generate annual reports. Teacher's comments are based on the pupil's performance in summative assessments and their knowledge gained from ongoing formative assessment. The report provides the focus for discussion about learning and progress at parents' meetings.

Pupils participating in group work

References

Bloom, B S, Engelhart, M D, Furst, E J, Hill, W H, and Krathwohl, D R, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals Handbook 1: Cognitive Domain* (Longmans, Green, 1956)

Self-Evaluation to Identify Areas for Future Assessment Development

Self-evaluation is part of the college's ongoing process for school improvement. It is used to inform school development planning. Part of this process involves every department completing mid-year and end of year evaluations. The college continues to develop and embed AfL strategies in classroom practice. Recent evaluations have identified the need for further work on developing teachers' awareness of how pupils develop Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities throughout all years. A better understanding of this will help teachers to develop more effective teaching strategies and appropriate assessment approaches. Identifying pupils who need support to develop these skills and capabilities is a key focus, as these are essential for deep learning and support pupils to become more independent learners.