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## Currents and eddies in the discourse of assessment: a learning-focused interpretation<sup>1</sup>

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This article explores processes of classroom assessment, in particular ways in which learners using English as an additional language engage in formative assessment within a primary school setting. Transcript evidence of teacher and learner interactions during activities viewed by teachers as formative or summative assessment opportunities are presented as the basis for an analysis of teacher feedback, learner responses to this feedback, as well as learner-initiated talk. The analyses suggest that there are different teacher orientations within assessment and highlight the potential that assessment dialogues might offer for assessment as a resource for language learning, thus situating this work at the interface between assessment and second language acquisition. The article also questions the extent to which learners are aware of the different assessment purposes embedded within instruction.

*Keywords:* formative language assessment, summative language assessment, instruction, English as an Additional (Second) Language, classroom interaction

Cet article explore les procédés d'évaluation pratiqués dans les salles de classe des écoles primaires en particulier les méthodes que les apprenants de l'anglais seconde langue utilisent dans le cadre d'une évaluation formative. Les transcriptions des interactions entre l'enseignant et l'apprenant durant les activités considérées par les enseignants comme étant des opportunités d'évaluation à la fois formatives et sommatives forment la base de l'analyse du feedback de l'enseignant, des réponses de l'apprenant à ce feedback ainsi que du discours initié par l'apprenant. Les analyses suggèrent qu'il existe différentes orientations de la part de l'enseignant au sein de l'évaluation et mettent en valeur le potentiel que les dialogues d'évaluation peuvent offrir en tant que ressource dans l'apprentissage d'une langue, situant ainsi ce travail dans l'interface entre l'évaluation et l'acquisition d'une seconde langue. L'auteur de cet article se demande à quel point les apprenants sont conscients des différents objectifs d'évaluation ancrés dans l'enseignement.

*Mots clés:* évaluation formative de la langue, évaluation sommative de la langue, enseignement, l'anglais en tant que langue supplémentaire (seconde), interaction dans la classe

## Introduction

The distinction made between formative and summative assessment is a familiar one. It is commonly held that classroom-based assessment should be summative *and* formative, concerned both with establishing what learners can do at a given point in time – focusing on attainment – and with monitoring learner progress and informing teaching as a means to supporting learning. The value of providing feedback to learners is largely uncontested in this respect – for example in highlighting an individual learner's strengths and weaknesses and in guiding the next steps of teaching. Rea-Dickins and Gardner (2000) provide an analysis of uses of information from different assessment opportunities from the perspective of teachers – both mainstream class teachers and specialist language teachers – who support the learning of children who have English as an Additional Language (EAL)<sup>2</sup>. From that analysis we identified teachers' summative uses of assessment data, instances of formative assessment, as well as evaluative uses of assessment data for purposes of tendering for, and the targeting of, resources. However, based mainly on teacher self-reports – as with much other discussion of formative assessment – it was framed largely from the position of teachers and a teaching perspective, thereby representing either a teaching or a bureaucratic orientation to assessment (Rea-Dickins 2001). This article, by way of contrast, focuses on the learners in dialogue with their teachers and peers during the implementation of assessment in order to analyse and reflect upon the formative potential of five different assessment episodes in relation to language development.

## Assessment and pedagogical processes

### Language testing and assessment research

In the applied linguistics literature, relationships between assessment and instruction have been interpreted in a number of different ways by language testing and assessment researchers. Five perspectives are mentioned here. A first set of empirical studies has investigated the impact of assessment – formal examinations and assessment frameworks, including rating scales – on instruction. The majority of these studies have been concerned with the impact of tests and examinations on curricula content (e.g. Alderson and Wall 1993) or on teacher pedagogy (e.g. Cheng 1997; Cheng and Watanabe 2004). The work of Breen et al. (1997) is particularly relevant to the context of this study in that they investigated the implementation of assessment in EAL primary (elementary) schools, focusing on the relationship between assessment frameworks and teachers' pedagogic practice in making judgements about the English language development of their learners. Also in the primary EAL context, Scott (2005) explored learners', teachers', and parents'

perceptions of statutory testing in the UK and washback on teaching in relation to opportunities to promote and support language learning across the curriculum.

Secondly, investigations that have sought to make links between assessment and instruction in terms of the authenticity and congruence of assessment procedures in relation to a particular programme of study are numerous. Robinson and Ross (1996), for example, focused on task-based assessment for student placement, comparing performance-referenced and system-referenced procedures for an EAP reading programme. Cushing Weigle and Lynch (1995), in the revision of the ESLPE,<sup>3</sup> set out to incorporate activities and academic language skills that reflected target language use needs of students studying through the medium of English. The nature and validation of placement tests has also been the focus of studies by Fulcher (1997) and Wall, Clapham and Alderson (1994). From a slightly different perspective involving the teacher-as-assessor of student outcomes, there are a number of studies emerging that focus on aspects of reliability and validity within moderation processes linked to the assessment of students' writing; see e.g. Davison and Tang (2001); Davison (2004); Arkoudis and O'Loughlin (2004).

A third group of studies reflect a concern with assessing the outcomes of instruction – in relation to a curriculum and teaching focus – and the success of a programme in terms of learner attainment. For example, Edelenbos and Vinje (2000) have monitored the English performance levels of Dutch primary school children; two of the variables analysed were time spent on English and teaching method. A programme of ongoing classroom research (Low et al. 1993) and an analysis of language content informed the construction of the measures used to evaluate the primary-level modern languages project in Scotland (e.g. Johnstone 2000).

Issues of classroom assessment are not new (most notably, see Brindley 1989, 1995, 2000), but, overall, there are far fewer studies that have investigated assessment from an instruction-embedded perspective, the concern of this contribution. Teasdale and Leung (2000) focused on the assessment of spoken English as an additional language in mainstream education and, in particular, on the need to clarify the epistemological bases of different types of assessment. The construct of classroom formative assessment is the focus of studies by Rea-Dickins (2001, 2002, 2006), Edelenbos and Kubanek-German (2004), and Rea-Dickins and Gardner (2000). Albeit in a more formal 'testing' setting, Lantolf and Poehner (2004) also adopt an assessment-as-interaction perspective and argue for an assessment approach through which an examinee's performance may be mediated and, thus, enhanced via interlocutor/examiner prompts.

Fewer studies still have adopted a learner and learning focus in instruction-embedded assessment. In a university-level language course, Spence-Brown investigated the construct of authenticity in an assessment activity designed "to optimise authenticity" (2001: 463). Through interviews with students, she identified a range of factors that compromised the

authenticity of a learning task when used for purposes of assessment, leading her to the conclusion that authenticity must be viewed in terms of the implementation of an activity as well as a function of its design. This relationship between the design of an assessment and features of its actual implementation is highly important in classroom assessment research. A more recent study by Leung and Mohan (2004), drawing upon systemic functional linguistics, has focused on the analysis of discourse in multiethnic and multilingual classes. These researchers argue for the need of a theoretically informed research approach to capture ways in which formative classroom language assessment may be recognised and, thereby, developed.

### Assessment as a pedagogic tool

The way in which I represent formative assessment is informed by research in educational assessment more generally and, in particular, by the findings of the Assessment Reform Group (ARG 2001, 1999) in the UK which commissioned a survey of the literature on the relationship between assessment and learning. This review (Black and Wiliam 1998a) provided evidence that: (1) improving formative assessment does raise standards, (2) there are problems in implementing formative assessment, and hence there is room for improvement in practice, and (3) the empirical studies reviewed provided specific pointers as to how formative assessment could be improved. Classroom assessment from this perspective is viewed as embedded in teaching and learning of which it is an essential part, involving interaction that affords the sharing of what is being learned and the standards to be achieved, learner self-assessment, and joint reflection on assessment. Key principles underpinning quality classroom assessment were identified as involving effective teacher feedback, learner agency, and recognition of influences of assessment on pupil motivation and self-esteem (see also Harlen and Deakin-Crick 2003). In a subsequent assessment intervention study with 36 secondary teachers, Black et al. (2003) have exemplified these principles and ways in which formative assessment – in English as a subject and science lessons – may be integrated and embedded within teaching.

But what, exactly, constitutes an assessment or an assessment event? How are these differentiated from, say, a teaching event? Is it even possible to distinguish between them? Teachers, so it seems to me, may engage in a continual process of appraising their learners. This appraisal may be planned, or unplanned and spontaneous; it may be undertaken through formal means (e.g. the unaided elicitation of a written paragraph) or inextricably and almost imperceptibly embedded within teacher–learner(s) interactions (see e.g. Leung and Mohan 2004) involving the implicit or explicit assessment of learner performance: “Many such episodes take place in the classroom automatically, but sometimes they are the result of conscious consideration on the part of the teacher” (Mavromatis 1997: 383).

Further, teachers may adopt one of two assessment roles. In the first more familiar one they act as 'rater' of learner performance when, for example, they wish to identify levels of language achievement (e.g. Rea-Dickins 2006) or find out whether specific language-learning goals have been reached. The other role is quite different in that the teacher is involved in an ongoing appraisal of students through the ebb and flow of classroom discourse. This latter role requires them to provide feedback that is sensitive to the emerging needs of their learners, as individuals or a group. In so doing they may be providing opportunities through which learners' language awareness and acquisition can take place. Such formative assessment opportunities are, thus, inextricably embedded within the classroom interaction, and it is the very nature of formative assessment that the learners' language development is mediated through teacher feedback in the ongoing interaction, most of which can be neither predicted nor planned in advance.

In the episodes presented below, only Extracts 5 and 6 were taken from activities planned by the teacher as summative end-of-unit assessments, as opposed to the potentially formative assessment opportunities in Extracts 1 to 4. Through the two planned activities, the teacher sought to find out how much language her learners would be able to display when working together in small groups. As a consequence, the interaction was not tightly controlled, as would be the case in a one-to-one formal oral interview, and it is interesting how in the explicitly labelled summative assessment (Extract 6) there is some evidence to suggest that for one learner this may have represented a formative learning experience.

From these perspectives, then, feedback has a crucial role to play in teacher assessment processes, as does the engagement of learners in these processes. Although simple to assert, implementation is more problematic since much effective teacher assessment is covert (see Discussion below). In the research context reported on here, language support teachers are observed providing feedback to learners and scaffolding them in various ways (e.g. repetition, contextual embedding, drawing connections between lessons or classroom activities, thereby altering the cognitive complexity of the activity with reference to learner needs; see Rea-Dickins 2001, 2002). Yet teacher scaffolding (this term is used here in a generic sense to encompass all forms of assistance that teachers may provide to promote their learners' language awareness, development and achievement) may confuse rather than clarify. Since the extent to which congruence between teacher intentions and learner interpretations has yet to be researched, at least in the EAL assessment context, we need to ask how this scaffolding is interpreted and acted upon by the learners.

In the same way that not all teacher scaffolding may be useful, not all feedback is positive in terms of promoting learner understanding and development. The assumption that feedback is intrinsically good and that it will lead to improved learning has been questioned. Torrance and Pryor (1998) provide ample evidence for this from their research where teacher feedback may be seen as criticism and an indication of a learner having

produced a 'wrong' answer, with 'praise' seen as encouraging competition rather than boosting a learner's self-esteem. Thus, formative assessment may have negative as well as potentially positive consequences.

The classification of different feedback types has been the focus of a study by Tunstall and Gipps (1996), who make a distinction between evaluative (i.e. judgemental) and descriptive (i.e. competence-related) feedback. They suggest that evaluative feedback may be more closely associated with "affective and conative (effort-based) aspects of learning than descriptive types, where the cognitive emphasis predominates" (1996: 189). They also identify a greater link between descriptive types of feedback and formative assessment.

If, then, teacher assessment has the potential to impact on the development of learner awareness and to provide a resource for student learning, it becomes relevant to examine in more detail the interaction within assessment opportunities: teacher feedback to their learners and, importantly, interaction between learners in formative assessment activities, as well as the nature of dialogue afforded by different assessment opportunities (see Swain 2001). This assumes that: "[l]earning is understood to be a continuous process of constructing and extending meaning that occurs during learners' involvement in situated joint activities" (Swain 2001: 281).

It is also the case that feedback is only formative if it brings about a change of some kind *for the learner*. This implies a change in the level of awareness of a learner about language, or a change in an individual's language development or language use in some way, although identifying 'engagement in learning and evidence of learning' is not unproblematic. The focus of this article is, thus, on a learning agenda in EAL assessment that links teacher orientation in assessment with learning opportunities and learner agency in assessment.

## A study of classroom assessment in action

The study reported on here focuses on the strategies that teachers use when implementing assessment for learners with EAL informed by the following research question:

- What does interaction in assessment tell us about the learner's role in the assessment process, the nature of teacher scaffolding in assessment, and different teacher orientations in classroom-based assessment?

## Methodology

### Participants and design

To obviate the possibility of the lessons and assessments recorded being 'special' in some way, the methodology selected for this research took the

form of tracking a small number of targeted learners for a full week in each of the three terms in a school year. This meant that the researchers observed these learners working in all their school subjects (i.e. not only in English) throughout the school day. In this way, we could be more sure that our data were 'naturally occurring', a view which was corroborated in interviews with the participating teachers (cf. Spence-Brown 2001, who demonstrates how task authenticity may be compromised if perceived by learners as an assessment).

The participants<sup>4</sup> in the study presented here are two language-support teachers and one mainstream class teacher and their learners (age 6–7 years), involved in five different teacher assessment opportunities. In terms of methodology, each assessment was observed and recorded by the researcher and an assistant, and the data were subsequently transcribed from video and audio data<sup>5</sup> and field notes. The language-support teachers were interviewed prior to and after they had implemented an assessment; the class teacher was interviewed after the lesson observation.

A further feature of the research methodology is a longitudinal focus on two learners in each class observed. This means that there are data on a small number of targeted children over a 12-month period. Three of the assessment episodes analysed below included one of these targeted learners – Nuh, who was identified as unable to access the National Curriculum independently and thus received additional language and curriculum support from January 2000 to December 2000. However, he was considered an independent learner from January 2001. Extracts from the assessments reported here cover the range of this period.

### The assessment activities

The assessment episodes were observed in the context of the National Curriculum in England and Wales, three during the Literacy Hour (DfEE 1998) and two during a science class. These have been selected to reflect different characteristics of and teacher orientations to assessment within instruction. The *Mr Crunchy Crisp* episode below was planned as a learning opportunity, and the children were working independently in a group (N=7) with the language-support teacher. In the *Moon* episode, 5 children were working collaboratively with their class teacher to achieve a learning goal which they were to perform independently. In the *False* episode, the children were working in pairs but as part of whole class work, and the assessment was described by the language support teacher as "a collaborative assessment opportunity". Both the *Squeezing* (N=6) and the *Ramp* (N=5) episodes arose from a science activity which the language-support teacher planned as an end-of-unit summative assessment.

In analysing assessment practice, it is important to look across the whole lesson at the full interactional patterns between a teacher and his/her pupils

and the interaction between pupils. For the purposes of this article, however, extracts from interview and lesson transcripts have been selected on the grounds that they are (1) representative of the different assessment activities used within this instructional context, and (2) that they provide evidence of different types of learner engagement in relation to teacher assessment purpose. As part of the research strategy adopted, teachers were invited to comment on the lesson transcripts.

## Analysis

### Mr Crunchy Crisp episode

The first assessment activity was embedded within the Literacy Hour, with the pedagogic focus on the understanding and production of phonemes. The learners were to suggest sentences with words having the phoneme cluster [kr]<sup>6</sup> and then to write their sentences in their exercise books. If they did not know a word, they would ask their teacher and record this new word in their 'Have-a-Go' books. The teacher wrote a first sentence on the whiteboard. This activity presents an example through which we may see learners attempting to engage in an activity and to 'take risks' with language, and one in which the teacher appears to be oriented towards completion of lesson targets and accuracy in the achievement of learning outcomes. Two extracts are taken from this activity (transcription conventions are provided in the Appendix).

#### Extract 1

- 332 LST Right. *MISTER CRUNCHY CRISP CRASHED HIS CAR*. Let's see, Nuh, can you tell me a sentence with the /cr/ sound in? Can you think of some more words?
- 333 Ehi Crush!
- 334 LST Crush, okay. *Ehi's thought of a word, crush*. Okay, so what will Mr Crunch-
- 335 Nuh I know! Mr Crunchy Crisp crushed his bone.
- 336 LST Oh, right, *Mr Crunchy Crisp crushed his bone*. Okay? You've got the words here, *MISTER CRUNCHY CRISP*- How do you think you're going to spell *crushed*?
- 337 Nuh c.r.u.- c.r.u.s.s.
- 338 Nal {No, s.h. [tracing the letters in the air with her pencil as she speaks]}
- 339 LST {that would be cross  
you want crushed. {I'll get some paper
- 340 Ind [addressing Nuh] {these are the words beginning with c.
- 341 LST [addressing Nuh] You need to have a go in your Have-a-Go book. When you get to that word, okay? [Nuh begins to write in his book]

*MISTER CRUNCHY CRISP CRUSHED HIS BONES. Let's see if somebody else can think of another sentence. Ehi, what could you think of?*

During the first part of this activity, the language support teacher nominates Nuh to suggest a sentence with phoneme cluster [kr] (turn 332). However, another learner provides a word (*crush*) with the target phonemes (333), and this is accepted. The teacher then tries to elicit a further part of the sentence but is interrupted by Nuh (335), who goes on to provide a complete and accurate sentence. The teacher then begins to write this sentence on the whiteboard and seeks to elicit the spelling of *crushed* (336). At this point, two learners jump in: Nuh (337) and Nal (338), who corrects Nuh's spelling; she also traces the letters in the air with her pencil. Nal's intervention suggests she is engaging fully in the activity. The teacher appears to bypass Nal's suggestion – perhaps she did not hear it as she was speaking at the same time – and focuses Nuh's attention by telling him it should be [j] and not [s]. Her reference to 'paper' in 339 indicates her intention to write down the correct spelling for Nuh, who can then write this new word into his 'Have-a-Go' book (341). Interspersed between this turn and the teacher's move to elicit another sentence from the group, another learner (Ind) explains to Nuh (340) that "these are the words beginning with c", suggesting meta-cognitive engagement on her part and an example of peer scaffolding. Again, this learner intervention is not followed up: the teacher was actually speaking at the same time.

A later exchange from the same episode is considered next.

**Extract 2**

- 375 LST You didn't know how to spell them, Nuh, so Mrs X writes (\*) for you and then you write the right word. [LST writes the word for Nuh]
- 376 Nuh I will write this one?
- 377 LST You don't have to worry about that now, okay? That's next time, okay?
- 378 Nuh Yes
- 379 LST Do you want to write another sentence?
- 380 Nuh Yes
- 381 LST Okay, what's your sentence going to be?
- 382 Nuh Um- Mr Crunchy Clips can- Um- Mr Crunchy Clisp-
- 383 LST Mr Crunchy Crisp, yes, what can he do?
- 384 Nuh Um-
- 385 LST Can creep?
- 386 Nuh Mr Clunchy Clips can cleep
- 387 LST Okay, do you think you can write that sentence?
- 388 Nuh Yep [Nuh starts writing]
- 389 Px Mr Crunchy Crisp can creep [another learner corrects Nuh's pronunciation]
- 390 LST Right, Tay. What's your sentence?

In this sustained exchange between Nuh and his teacher, I suggest there is evidence of the teacher being primarily concerned with the pedagogic outcomes of the lesson, as prescribed in the Literacy Hour Strategy (DfEE 1998), and with 'managing' and 'getting on with' the business of eliciting sentences with the target phoneme. For example, in 375 the teacher tells Nuh that he does not know the word and writes it for him. Nuh checks up on whether he should write this new word in his 'Have-a-Go' book (376). The teacher's response, "that's next time", appears to be motivated by lack of time. The teacher invites Nuh to write another sentence (379). There is evidence in 382 of Nuh trying to self-correct (he initially says *clips* then modifies to *clisp* – he had demonstrated his ability to say the word *crisp* correctly in Extract 1), but the teacher interrupts him (383) and repeats that part of the sentence, modelling the 'cr' sound for him, and asks him to complete the sentence. She does not wait for Nuh to produce an appropriate word, and in turn 385 provides one for him (*creep*), which he is asked to write down. There is an example of peer evaluation in turn 389, which could also function as peer scaffolding in terms of a pronunciation model for Nuh. Nuh does, however, get the spelling of the phoneme correct in his Literacy Book, indicating perhaps that he is able to copy accurately from the whiteboard or that he knows the correct written form of the words.

In the first episode, the learners have managed to take the floor. In so doing, they take the opportunity not only to provide the 'correct answers' but also to peer correct – two learners do this – and to reflect metacognitively on what is to be learned, exchanging information about the 'what' of the target performance: "these are all words beginning with c" (Extract 1: 340). In the second episode, the extent to which the teacher interventions are valuable in relation to learner language awareness and development and to an understanding of the cluster [kr] – the aim of the lesson – is less obvious. This might be due to the teacher's drive to complete her own teaching goals and to get on with the next sentence. In this sense, Extract 2 comes across as oriented more towards a 'teaching' agenda with the effect, perhaps, of providing learners with less of an opportunity to explore what they are learning, in contrast to Extract 1. On the other hand, it might be a reflection of the teacher's belief that writing down the correct answer will facilitate learning.

### Moon episode

In the following extract, the mainstream teacher has been working on phonics using flashcards with the sounds /oo/, /ue/, /oe/ and /ew/ (see Rea-Dickins 2001 for an analysis of a different episode from the same lesson). One small group of five EAL learners is working with the teacher using a word-maker (a plastic stand to place their letters on, as in Scrabble) to construct their words. In some respects, the interaction is different from the

previous two extracts. There appears to be much more going on, with qualitatively different exchanges observed between the class teacher and the learners that are more conversational in character.

**Extract 3**

- 252 CT Right, the first thing I'd like you to do is this. We've been making /oo/ sounds so I'd like you all first of all to make a double O sound on your word-maker
- 253 Nuh Okay
- 254 CT Cos we're going to look at double O words
- 255 Nuh Okay
- 256 CT So, you're lucky, I've done yours for you. When you've done it, put it
- 257 Nuh Where's a O?
- 258 Px (\*\*\*)
- 259 CT Some of you are very lucky cos you've got grey ones with the double O on. Aal, you've got a double O there, you could use that one, there you go, you could use that one
- 260 Nuh Okay
- 261 CT I'm very kind to you. Right, well you've all made your double O sound
- 262 Px I've got (four)
- 263 Nuh That's upside down
- 264 CT (put it the right way) Okay, we're going to look at some words with an /oo/ in the middle. Can you think of a word with /oo/ in the middle?
- 265 Aas Moon
- 266 CT Moon
- 267 Px I know that one, moon
- 268 CT Okay, moon is {one of those
- 269 Nuh {Poo
- 270 CT Shh. Moon is one of those words with a /oo/ in the middle. Now without using the board, if it's on there, think of the sound, let's see who can make the word moon
- 271 Px {I- I
- 272 CT {Make it, make it, don't tell us, make it
- 273 Nuh Okay
- 274 CT Think of the sounds, **Moon**. We've got the middle sound, we need the beginning and the ending sounds
- 275 Nuh {Where's a /n/? **Moon**
- 276 Mav {I haven't got a n
- 277 CT Haven't you? I can see one
- 278 Mav Yeah?
- 279 CT Hang on, when you've done it, turn it round, let's see who's done it first

174 ♦ Pauline Rea-Dickins

- 280 Aas Done it!  
281 CT Brilliant  
282 Mav I haven't got a N  
283 Px (\*\*\*\*\*)  
284 CT Right, okay. Can you put your- Let's see who's got it. Have you got it yet Aal?  
285 Aal Yeah  
286 CT {Moon, good girl, well done  
287 Nuh {M-oon. That's (upside down)  
288 Aal Oon. (I've got it) upside down  
289 CT Yep, can you turn it round so I can see when you've done it? Cos otherwise we don't know when you've done it. Right, I want you to put your /m/ and your /n/, your /m/ and your /n/ back into the box and-  
290 Nuh /m. n./  
291 CT Can anybody think of another word?  
300 Nuh Yeah [he reintroduces *poo*, which CT accepts]

Although, there is concern with activity completion (e.g. turn 279), there are several assessment management and informing moves when the teacher explains what the children have to do (e.g. 252) and draws attention to the content demands of the activity (264 and 274); further procedural moves are made by the teacher in 272 where he encourages the learners to work on their own and reminds them of the focus of the activity. In addition, there are also instances of teacher scaffolding where he is trying to make the activity more manageable for the learners without giving them the answer, as in turn 277 when he tells Mav that he can see the letter *n* but does not show her where it is; and of encouraging the children to be self-evaluative, as in 284 when he asks Aal to reflect on her work.

A range of different learner engagements is also evidenced. A number are seen 'self-managing' the activity (which was not so evident in the *Mr Crunchy Crisp* interaction), for example explaining that they can't find their letters (257, 276, 282). The function of Nuh's question "Where's a /n/?" in turn 275 is different since he is in fact searching through the letters in order to complete his word and knows he needs an *n* to do this; at the same time he is checking up on the sounds by repeating the target word to himself (275). When he finds it, he shows it to his teacher. In 262, one learner explains that he has four 'double O' letters on his word-maker. In turn 265, Aas is observed rehearsing the target word, whilst in 267 another learner self-evaluates and asserts that he knows the word.

Nuh's performance and engagement is also different from those in the earlier extracts, with opportunities for him to engage more fully in the activity for the following reasons:

- he shows independence in managing what he has to do (e.g. turns 257, 275) when he cannot locate the right letter;
- he tells another member of the group she has her word-maker upside down (263);
- he suggests the word *poo* as one having the same sound as *moon* (269); this word is subsequently suggested again by Nuh and is accepted by the teacher (300ff);
- he regularly confirms his engagement in the activity (253, 255, 260, 273), as do the other learners (e.g. 278, 285);
- he sounds out the two of the target sounds: [m] [n] (turn 290).

Unlike the *Mr Crunchy Crisp* episode, this dialogue appears to have encouraged greater reflection by giving the learners more space to engage in the activity, socially as well as metacognitively, as evidenced by e.g. “I know that one” (267) and “Done it” (280). Further, in replaying the interaction on video, there is a strong sense of collaborative involvement between the teacher and the children, and between learners. What also comes across forcibly from the video recording (possibly less so in the written transcript) is less explicit management of the interaction in order to get the task done, with much more strategic teacher questioning (e.g. 274, 277, 284), which liberates the learners to maximally engage in the activity and provides an opportunity for them to reflect on the requirements of the assessment activity. I suggest this is a more ‘learning-focused’ assessment opportunity, with examples of learner agency.

### False episode

This example, also from the Literacy Hour, is extracted from whole class work. The class (N=24) are sitting as a group on the floor and the class teacher is leading the activity, which requires the learners to work in pairs and to come up with the appropriate antonym for a word which has been selected from a story they have been working with over a series of lessons. Her assessment aim is twofold: to monitor conceptual understanding of ‘antonym’ and language development in terms of being able to produce and use appropriate antonyms. She defined this activity as a “collaborative assessment” through which learning opportunities are made available. The children have just been asked to write the antonym for *true*.

#### Extract 4

- 25 LST alright ready shhh. Listen. Right lots of you have got the right answer the answer is {false but-
- 26 Px {I don’t
- 27 LST Some people have spelt it correctly Sonya you have well done. ‘s a funny spelling look (.) false the ‘a’ making a funny sound (inaudible)
- 28 (indistinguishable)

29 LST ready?

30 Px is there E at the end? is there E at the end? theirs is wrong

In this extract, the teacher's comment that *false* is a difficult word to spell and that the *a* has a "funny sound" (turn 27) serves as a focusing tool for one learner. She does not explicitly refer to language form, yet this reference is picked up by one learner in turn 30 who draws attention to the *e* at the end of the word. The precise function of this learner question is ambiguous: is she generating the hypothesis that *false* ends with an *e*? Or, since she then goes on to apply this knowledge in monitoring the work of another pair of learners who have spelt the word wrong, it might also constitute an example of testing her hypothesis.

In all of the episodes so far, there are instances of children who are confident in self-monitoring during an assessment in relation to language form or to managing and completing the assessment activity. This links with the work of Gipps, who suggests that "[c]ompetent learners are those who self-monitor their work" (1994: 73), which, in turn, relates to the principle identified earlier of an active role for the learner in 'quality' formative assessment. These examples, I suggest, allow us to infer that within assessment activities the potential exists for the development of a child's awareness of language or some personal development in language learning, but that such opportunities need to be 'created' for the learner.

The next two episodes come from the science assessments.

### Squeezing episode

This activity was deliberately planned as a summative assessment, focused on forces in science and, in the words of the language-support teacher, aimed to provide an opportunity for her learners "to talk a little bit about . . . what they've learnt from doing the unit" (E/DC3/Int/LST: 28/13.10.00)<sup>7</sup> and, in particular, on what they have learned about pushing and pulling. The children were to make different shapes with plasticine and then explain what sort of force they were using to make the shape:

it was quite good because on the one hand you've got different sorts of verbs like *rolling* and *twisting* and those sorts of things . . . but also whether that was a push or a pull . . . there's a lot of language . . . not just from the science point of view but because of the rolling and twisting . . . (E/DC3/Int/LST: 23-30/13.10.00)

In the following dialogue, the language support teacher wants to check the children's receptive and productive understanding of the lexical item *squeeze* and to reflect on the forces used to do this. She squeezes the plasticine herself to make a thinner sausage shape, and asks a question.

**Extract 5**

- 271 LST What's another word for what I'm doing?  
 272 Son Break it  
 273 LST Well, it does break, doesn't it. What about this, when I just do-  
 274 Mun Undo it. Undo  
 275 LST Undoing it. There's another word for what I'm doing. Do you remember we had a sponge that wouldn't break, and we had to make it into a long thin shape-  
 276 Aks Squeeze  
 277 LST Right, I'm sort of squeezing- Show me squeezing, everybody. Squeeze, squeeze it. What do we do when we squeeze it?  
 278 Mun Gets skinnier  
 279 LST Squeeze it. Are you squeezing it, Son?  
 280 Aar I'm doing (\*\*)  
 281 LST Push it hard. That's squeezing, isn't it? We're squeezing.  
 282 LST What's this word? Do you know what we're doing? [LST now stretches the plasticine, moving on to 2 new words: *pulling* and *stretching*]

The one nomination in this exchange (279) is an attempt to engage Son, who has gone off task. Overall, this is provided as an example of a tightly scripted assessment, explained by the fact that much of the interaction was focused around the language display of individual lexical items, in this example *squeeze*. Although only one learner actually produced the word *squeeze*, they were all engaged in using this movement with their pieces of plasticine. However, according to the teacher, this activity did not generate as many opportunities for further productive use of the word by all the children as she would have liked. We also observe (282) an instance of the teacher moving on fairly quickly – as in Extracts 1 and 2 above – as she was interested in finding out whether her learners knew all the other words she planned to elicit. In this sense the activity was formative for the teacher in terms of her future action: she was developing an understanding of her individual learners' lexical knowledge and understanding of basic science concepts. It is less clear what impact this had on the learners themselves who were not observed to be pro-active in any way in shaping the assessment dialogue. It would be erroneous, however, to suggest that summative assessment activities of this kind – focused on language 'display' – do not open up opportunities for some learners to try and express their intended meanings, in spite of not having the linguistic resources (*viz. undo* and *break*), as the next extract shows.

## Ramp episode

This activity was designed by the same teacher as a science end-of-unit summative assessment. The learners (N=5) were being questioned about

the forces 'push' and 'pull', and the discussion below focuses on the ramp down which the children had been pushing small cars in a previous science lesson. Although difficult to capture from a written transcript – it is much more convincing on tape – this episode shares characteristics with the *Moon* episode in that the teacher is engaged more as co-participant in the interaction (see Samuda 2001: 129).

### Extract 6

- 400 LST Can you remember when you were working with Mrs B. and you were doing some tests on your models, and she used something to help you do the tests. What was it?
- 401 Kir It was these big wood (stands) things so you can pull them down
- 402 LST Can anyone remember the word for that?
- 403 Jad Axles
- 404 LST We did think about axles. Who can remember what the axles are?
- 405 Jad They're at the end of the wheels
- 406 LST Right. So I think Kir and me are thinking about something different. Can you show me the axles on that- Has that got any axles? [LST points to the train]
- 407 Jad {Yes there
- 408 Kir {The wood that was straight the wood that was straight [still talking about the ramp]
- 409 LST What did we find out about axles, can you remember, Jad?
- ...
- 419 LST Let's think about what Kir was telling us. Describe it to us again, Kir
- 420 Kir Um, when Miss B had these straight woods, yeah?, they were kind of straight, yeah?=  
421 LST =and they- the-  
422 Kir you could hold the cars going down on them
- 423 LST Right, remember that? Do you remember that, Ani? [Ani shakes her head] No? You had two- there's a- Two blocks of wood=  
424 Jad Yeah, I can remember that
- 425 LST =and some pieces of wood on the side. What do we call that? Who knows the name for it?
- 426 Jad A ramp
- 427 LST Good girl, Jad, it was a Ramp. And Kir was doing very well describing it to us. *A ramp*. When we put the cars on the ramp, what happened to them, Ani?

Here, the teacher demonstrates flexibility in her agenda. Although the word *ramp* is her initial focus (400–402), the interaction is subsequently shaped

by the learner who introduces *axles* in turn 403, which continues over ten turns (410–418, not transcribed above) before the teacher returns to her original focus and to the same learner (Kir) who first attempted to explain what a ramp is. Kir, in fact, maintains *ramp* as her focus over several turns (e.g. 408). In turn 419, the teacher provides space for Kir to try and explain herself again, and in 421 she starts to provide a prompt for Kir, who then jumps in and produces – it could be argued – a richer language sample than the sought-after single lexical item *ramp*. The exchanges also provide the opportunity for Jad to recall the earlier lesson, and in 426 to give the lexical item sought by the teacher. The teacher then continues to repeat the target lexical item (an instance of corrective feedback) and provide descriptive feedback (see Tunstall and Gipps 1996 for a typology of teacher feedback) before eliciting from her learners what happens when a car is pushed down a ramp.

The five extracts in this section raise a number of classroom language assessment issues. The discussion below focuses on teacher orientation, opportunities for learning and learner agency within the central theme of formative learner assessment.

## Discussion

### Teacher orientation in classroom assessment

Elsewhere I have talked about different identities in assessment (Rea-Dickins 2001), and both McNamara (2001) and Brindley (2000, 2001) have highlighted the conflicting demands on teachers in assessment (see also Leung and Rea-Dickins forthcoming 2007). With reference to the specific assessment episodes presented here, I identify aspects of *Mr Crunchy Crisp* as more aligned to a teaching agenda in relation to the achievement of closely prescribed curriculum targets. In these two extracts, there is evidence of an activity which is convergent rather than divergent in orientation (see Torrance and Pryor 1998). They also share some similarity with the more summative assessment represented by the *Squeezing* and *Ramp* episodes in that they exhibit a teacher orientation towards obtaining a 'display' of learner's knowledge of discrete language elements (National Curriculum 'tracking'). The learning dimension in assessment, as I have attempted to show, is embedded within instruction and may be viewed as contributing to or nurturing language learning.

The *Moon* episode, through a range of different teacher prompts and learner initiations, illustrates an orientation towards developing learner language awareness, understanding and knowledge, as opposed to measuring language knowledge. In addition, there is evidence of the teacher as co-participant in the assessment 'conversation', with the effect of motivating learners to become engaged in the interaction. In this way, they are

systematically enabled to develop skills of reflection as a basis for self- and peer-monitoring as well as for reflecting metacognitively on their own learning. In other words, the orientation of the teachers in both the *False* and the *Moon* assessment episodes is not towards achieved (or not achieved) targets but, rather, the support of their learners in understanding the conceptual (content) and language (EAL) focus of the lesson.

### Creating opportunities for learning in assessment

Publications in educational assessment have examined the links between formative assessment and learning and have suggested ways in which assessment may effectively scaffold learning. Sadler (1989), for example, asserts that for improvement to take place, a learner must be given help in order to move closer towards the desired goal or 'in closing the gap' (cited in Clarke 1998: 68). This resonates with Swain (2001: 279), who suggests that "noticing a gap in their [learners'] linguistic knowledge may stimulate learning processes"; and with Samuda (2001), who writes of opportunities that teachers have for creating a 'semantic space' for their learners. It is suggested here that the *Ramp* episode, albeit constructed as a primarily summative assessment of learning (language and content), did provide an opportunity for the teacher to push one learner over a series of exchanges to try and explain what she meant when she did not have the appropriate linguistic item to hand. It is also an example of a teacher "focussing on points of [learner] difficulty" (Clarke 1998: 63) and providing "opportunities for pupils to express their understanding" (Black and Wiliam 1998b: 11), both considered important in the concept of 'learning *through* assessment'. Although we do not see this particular learner using the word *ramp* in another context, this represents a potential learning opportunity. Following Lantolf and Poehner (2004: 68), it illustrates how the teacher has been able to "guide learners through dialogic interaction towards enhanced performance and learning".

Other instances of potential language learning opportunities are when the teacher, in Extract 3 (the *Moon* episode):

- highlights a critical feature of the activity or makes the task more manageable for the learner in some way: "Moon is one of those words with a /oo/ in the middle . . . let's see who can make the word moon";
- models the target response, e.g. turns 266 and 274;
- provides feedback on specific strategies that learners can use in working through the set activity, e.g.: "Think of the sounds, **Moon**."

The teacher may also be seen as "aligning himself as co-participant, as in the following exchange from the same episode (276–277):

Mav I haven't got a N.  
 CT Haven't you? I can see one.

Further, the teacher through his scaffolding role would seem to be encouraging this learner to think evaluatively, another key characteristic associated with the learning identity of classroom assessment: "For formative assessment to be productive, pupils should be trained in self-assessment so that they can understand the main purposes of their learning and thereby grasp what they need to achieve" (Black and Wiliam 1998b: 10).

When learners extend a concept, are able to focus attention, and where there is evidence of persistence on a task, these may be interpreted as clues that learning is taking or has taken place (Reynolds et al. 1995, cited in Black and Wiliam 1998a). Again, links can be made to research into language-learning strategies (e.g. O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Chesterfield and Chesterfield 1985; Oxford 1993; Purdie and Oliver 1999). With specific reference to the assessments presented above, there is also evidence of learner involvement and strategy use in both shaping and scaffolding learning opportunities, when, for example:

- Nal models the correct sounds (s.h.) to make the phoneme /j/ for Nuh (Extract 1: 338);
- Ind explains to Nuh that "these are the words beginning with c" (Extract 1: 340);
- Nuh says "that's upside down" to a peer who then indicates agreement: "Ooo I've got it upside down" (Extract 2: 287–288).

Of particular interest in the *False* episode is evidence that this collaborative assessment experience may have provided an opportunity for an individual child to learn or confirm her knowledge that *false* has a silent *e* at the end – seen when she initiates the evaluative comment about the spelling of the two classmates next to her – in a way which an outcomes-oriented formal test may not have done.

In the assessments discussed here, there is some evidence that individual learners may be achieving some kind of personal progression in their understanding and language development, and thus that the assessment opportunities might have been formative for some of them. Extract 2 of the *Mr Crunchy Crisp* episode does not, however, appear to share the features of formative assessment evidenced above. For Nuh, the targeted learner, there is less evidence of his participation in a dialogue that could be taken as evidence of pushing his language awareness and language development forward. The teacher interventions direct the children by getting their attention and keeping them on task. It is less clear how her questions nurture language awareness and self-reflection in support of individual student learning. By way of contrast, the *Moon* episode in particular – consisting of several exchanges between one learner and his teacher – highlights the

potential opportunity of a learning trajectory for an individual during assessment, from awareness raising, through developing understanding and working towards the target goal.

## Learner agency in assessment

I have suggested that in classroom-based assessment, the teacher may be working to one of several competing agendas: e.g. supporting the language development of individual learners, covering curriculum content, and/or gathering data for formal reporting. This view is corroborated by, for example, McNamara (2001: 340), who observes that “classroom assessment is the site of competing demands which do not necessarily match the needs of learners and teachers”. Such tensions may be identified through an analysis of assessment discourse, as I have attempted to do here. If it is accepted that there *are* different agenda which may shape assessment, one question is: How do learners get to know what the assessment purpose is? On the one hand, it is argued that learning intentions should be made explicit to learners. On the other hand, much about assessment is “so covert that it is impossible for an observer to grasp it” (Mavrommatis 1997: 383). This view I find entirely congruent with my own analyses of both transcriptions of teacher assessments and teacher interviews. Given the acknowledged tacit nature of assessment (e.g. Harlen and James 1997; Rea-Dickins and Gardner 2000) and the fact that much assessment is routinely embedded within instruction (e.g. Tunstall and Gipps 1996), it becomes relevant to ask:

- *How exactly* do learners get to know what they need to know about *what* is being assessed, and *why* and *how* they are being assessed and graded? (cf. Clarke 1998)
- How do they know or how do they learn what it is they have to do in order to achieve an adequate or good performance? (cf. Gipps 1994)
- How do they know which criteria teachers are using on different occasions for different assessments?
- How do learners actually interpret teacher feedback on their performance?

Even in cases where the assessment intentions are explained by the teacher, it cannot be assumed that the stated purpose is actually recognised by the learners. There is evidence in the data reported here of teachers explicitly articulating the purpose of the activities. In introducing the activity from the *Moon* episode, the class teacher explained:

Right, the first thing I'd like you to do is this. We've been making /oo/ sounds so I'd like you all first of all to make a double O sound on your word-maker . . . Cos we're going to look at double O words. (turns 252, 254)

Early in the *Squeezing* episode, the language support teacher explained:

We've been thinking about things that you can push and things that you can pull. Who can remember the- there's a word that we use for push and pull. We say that they're different kinds of something? (turn 160)

Samuda (2001: 121) makes a distinction that may have particular relevance for classroom assessment. She differentiates between tasks that "activate, stretch and refine current IL [interlanguage] resources and processing capacities" and those that provide opportunities for language learning which she calls "knowledge constructing tasks", distinctions which the teachers in this study may already be making.

However, the question still remains as to whether the learners are able to, and indeed do, interpret teacher intentions appropriately, in that they are expected to perform in different ways: display their language knowledge and skills for the purpose of checking on achievement, work independently on creating and copying sentences in their exercise books, or develop their understanding of language through collaborative group work in which they are expected to self-evaluate or peer review and reflect on the learning process itself.

## Conclusion

This article has compared instances of instruction-embedded assessment and sought to show how specific teacher purposes for assessment – formative and summative – and different, possibly conflicting, demands on the teacher may influence the framing of the implementation of particular activities. The assessment episodes analysed have illuminated how a primarily 'teaching-focused' agenda closely prescribed by a curriculum (in this case the National Curriculum in England and Wales) may display characteristics that are, in part, different from those where there is relatively greater emphasis on learning and an enhanced role for the learner to engage in assessment processes. Through focusing more closely on the learner, it becomes evident that assessments, whether formative or summative, may present opportunities for language learning or awareness raising. The data suggest that an assessment which is planned to be summative may also provide opportunities for learners not only for language display but also to explore their understandings and use of language. This analysis thus presents further evidence of the complexity of the construct of formative assessment and in particular its relationship with summative assessment (see Rea-Dickins and Gardner 2000; Rea-Dickins 2006).

Potentially formative assessment episodes will occur throughout a lesson. These cannot be identified in any watertight way in advance, as they will unfold and be enacted through the classroom discourse. However, what I

have suggested here is that the constraints imposed on an assessment by either a 'teaching' or a 'curriculum-tracking' agenda might deny learners the opportunity to fully engage in the assessment and to develop their language in some way. What appears crucial is not that all assessment should ideally be formative but that teachers are able to provide for their learners a balance in the types of assessment within instruction. An overemphasis on patterns of assessment where learners are cued to display their language knowledge is undesirable, and it therefore becomes important for teachers to reflect on whether they actually achieve a balance across their assessment activities.

I have also queried the extent to which learners might be aware of the different functions of the assessments – as planned by their teachers – and what the implications may be in terms of expected learner performance from these different types of classroom assessments. It is important to investigate how learners become aware of these different expectations and, in particular, how learners for whom English is an additional language become enculturated into different discourses of assessment. The teachers' agenda would seem to be pivotal in this, but learners may also contribute to shaping the discourse of assessment, and the extent to which their engagement in classroom-embedded assessment facilitates them as individual language learners needs further research. The importance of attending to learner voices in assessment is illustrated from an exchange in the *Mr Crunchy Crisp* lesson where one learner appears to be sensitive to the learning potential of assessment:

- 342 LST MISTER CRUNCHY CRISP CRASHED HIS CAR. (\*\*), Tay, if  
you've gone wrong
- 343 Ind It doesn't matter if she goes wrong because in school sometimes  
you're only having a little test and it doesn't matter
- 344 LST It doesn't matter, that's right, Ind
- 345 Ind This is where we learn from
- 346 LST That's right, Ind!
- 347 Ind I'm not going to copy yours, I'm not. I'm going to put my own!

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that there are strong currents coursing through the assessment opportunities analysed in this article: 'teaching', 'nurturing learning', 'measuring learning', with clear objectives for teachers. These range from the more collaborative and conversational discourse between learners and their teachers to more tightly controlled exchanges. But how do learners get to know what the teacher's intentions are for a particular assessment activity? In part it could be argued that this is made explicit by the teachers themselves. But the three assessment episodes reported here that involve Nuh have revealed different characteristics. How, then, does Nuh know when he is expected to engage and be discursive and to self-monitor, model answers and peer evaluate and when he is to knuckle

down and get on with the teacher agenda and write his six sentences? Could it be the case that inadvertently teachers are creating unreachable eddies for their learners?

## Notes

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2. In the UK, English as an Additional Language (EAL) is the preferred term, whereas in Australia and North America, English as a Second Language (ESL) is still used. In the USA, the terms English Language Learners (ELL) and to a lesser extent learners with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) are also used to refer to children who are not English first-language speakers and who are using English in educational settings.
3. The English as a Second Language Placement Examination, at the University of California, Los Angeles.
4. I am indebted to Dawn Lama, Dawn Lyell, and Stuart Price for their support and welcome into their classrooms and for their permission to use the data reported here.
5. I thank Ewan Adams and Joanna Moe for transcribing the observed lessons.
6. In the Literacy Hour documentation (see DfEE 1998), phonetic transcription is not used, thus the cluster [kr] is represented as /cr/.
7. The first letter of the code refers to the school; DC refers to the data collection phase; Int means interview; this is followed by the speaker, the turn number in the transcript and the date.

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## Appendix: transcription conventions

### Speakers

CT	Class Teacher
LST	Language Support Teacher
Nuh	Named child: first three letters of name
Px	Unidentified pupil

### Coding

<i>Italics</i>	'stage directions'
{	beginning of concurrent speech
[ ]	comments
(*), (**)	inaudible (one word, longer string)
(perhaps)	transcriber's attempt at word
(.)	pause
...	extraneous material omitted
but=	continuation of speech during concurrent speech
twe-	false start, stutter or incomplete word; interrupted word

<b>Octagon</b>	word noticeably lengthened
<u>Octagon</u>	word emphasised
BIG	written text read out by teacher or pupil
/c.o.t.t.o.n/	letters or word sounded out: 'cuh oh tuh' etc.
P.I.G.S.	letter or word spelt out: 'pee eye gee ess'

### Punctuation

Full stops, commas, question marks and exclamation marks used as necessary to illustrate intonation.