

Setting Students Up for Success: Formative Evaluation and FLES¹

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Abstract: *A team of French teachers across Canada developed prototype evaluation instruments congruent with recent curriculum changes for core French. A series of formative evaluation instruments for beginning-level students (grades 4–6) was refined and field-tested. Encouraging results of the field-test highlight a positive response to the experiential nature of the evaluation tasks. Both students and teachers commented on the potential of the various instruments to (1) help students organize their work; (2) raise student awareness of the processes of language learning; (3) provide students with useful feedback; and (4) motivate students to improve their performance in French.*

Introduction

Recent curriculum changes in core French (CF)² programs across Canada resulted in the need for new evaluation tools. In response, the National Core French Assessment Project (*Le projet pancanadien en évaluation en français de base*) was established to create new formative evaluation instruments. A variety of prototype instruments, congruent with the curriculum model advocated by the National Core French Study (NCFS), have been developed and tested for classroom use. The first phase of this three-year project focused on evaluation at the intermediate level (see Vandergrift and Bélanger 1998). The second phase focused on the beginning level, that is, CF instruction in the elementary school from grades 4 to 6.

This paper will focus on the design and field-testing of the instruments created for beginning-level students. The theoretical framework will be presented, and reactions from both teachers and students will be analyzed to assess the potential impact of these prototype instruments on teaching and learning.

Background

During the last decade, CF programs in Canada have been redesigned to provide a more stimulating learning experience for students. A multidimensional curriculum was introduced to integrate four syllabuses (experience/communication, culture, language, and general language education) into one unified curriculum model (Stern 1983). The NCFS researched and defined the content of each syllabus in order to provide the provinces with a framework for developing a richer CF curriculum (LeBlanc 1990). These curriculum changes are somewhat similar to the national standards for foreign language learning initiative in the United States, which integrates five components (communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities) into one curriculum model (*Standards* 1996).

The NCFS framework uses the communicative/experiential syllabus as the organizing principle for teaching units, replacing the linguistic focus of earlier programs. Experiential learning exposes students to authentic oral and written texts and encourages students to use the target language in real-life communication as they are learning it. Communication of authentic mes-

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sages is no longer left until after the linguistic code is mastered; it is emphasized throughout the program (see Poyen 1993).

The content of the other three syllabi (language, culture, and general language education) is determined by a theme related to the life experience of the students and the objectives of the targeted communication experience or task (e.g., creating a brochure to promote a club). The language syllabus, which consists of the linguistic elements needed, is organized according to the language functions necessary to complete the task. The culture syllabus, which acknowledges that language and culture are intertwined, integrates specific culture objectives related to the project (e.g., appropriate letter writing conventions). Finally, the general language education syllabus, which encourages students to reflect on the nature of language and language learning, integrates a teaching focus on learning strategies useful for facilitating learning (e.g., a focus on prediction for a listening task). In summary, the new CF curriculum model in Canada, similar to the new U.S. model, offers an expanded view of language learning to engage students in topics of interest and to offer them a richer language learning experience.

A recent study of provincial CF programs revealed sufficient commonalities to merit interprovincial collaboration on new initiatives (Vandergrift 1995). In particular, CF representatives from each of the provinces highlighted the need to work together on valid and realistic evaluation instruments consistent with the recent curriculum changes. The CF representatives decided to focus on the development of formative evaluation tools, since “there is a pressing need for a great deal more work on formative evaluation...to help provide the information which feeds into the process of learning and ... to enable learners and teachers to modify their behavior in an ongoing way during instruction” (Skehan 1988, 13).

Theoretical Framework

Formative evaluation seeks to enhance learning by providing students with feedback on their progress in meeting the stated learning outcomes. In contrast to summative evaluation, which emphasizes student mastery of content or ranking of student performance, formative evaluation emphasizes a student's strengths and weaknesses and offers suggestions for improvements.

Formative evaluation instruments that are congruent with the principles underlying the curriculum can have a positive feedback effect on teaching, as noted by d'Anglejan et al. (1990). In order to respect this elemental principle of evaluation, the design team created the prototype instruments to conform with the following principles (CASLT 1998, 7–13):

1. *Formative evaluation is most useful and valid when it*

is consistent with the teaching methodology; in this case, a communicative/experiential methodology as delineated by the NCFS. Since language is first of all a means of communication, evaluation methods must also emphasize communication of real messages (d'Anglejan et al. 1990). To reflect the integrated nature of experiential teaching, instruments to evaluate each of the four language skills accompany each theme.

2. *In order to be valid, these formative evaluation instruments must be directly linked to common learning outcomes. Student progress must be evaluated with respect to the common learning outcomes for each one of the four syllabuses for CF at the beginning level. Common learning outcomes for CF programs across Canada are found in Appendix A.³*

3. *Formative evaluation is best conducted in the context of language tasks. A simple oral presentation, reading a poster, listening to an advertisement, or writing an invitation are all tasks that can be carried out and evaluated at the beginning level. For a task to be appropriate, it should respect the age and cognitive level of the student and should be achievable in a reasonable period of time (Lussier 1991).*

4. *Formative evaluation is most useful when it is criterion-referenced, that is, assessing only a limited number of specific outcomes at one time. Because of its purpose, formative evaluation cannot be global; it is better to cover a few specific outcomes at a time, focusing on a limited number of skills, items of knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors (Bélair 1995).*

5. *Formative evaluation is most effective for improving performance when students are given quality feedback. Oral and written feedback must go beyond mere judgment of whether expected outcomes have been mastered or not (Cornfield et al. 1987). Formative evaluation is primarily intended to improve learning by giving students constructive, precise feedback on their strengths and weaknesses with regard to specific outcomes — encouraging students to reflect on their performance and to make the necessary corrective adjustments.*

6. *Formative evaluation is more effective when students are progressively and systematically involved in the process. Formative evaluation instruments are designed to give students a more active role in all parts of the evaluation process. Self-evaluation can be an effective form of evaluation if students are: (1) asked to make specific, constructive comments on their performance; (2) encouraged to appraise their strengths, weaknesses, and learning goals; (3) provided with models of the kind of comments expected; (4) given time to reflect on their performance and progress; and (5) permitted to give as much weight to self-evaluation as to teacher evaluation (see, e.g., Harris 1997; McNamara and Deane 1995; Pearson and Berghoff 1996;*

Figure 1

Ta famille

Liste de vérification

Nom : _____ Date : _____

	OUI
Communication	
L'élève	
exprime un message complet	—
a) le nom de chaque membre de sa famille	—
b) l'âge de son(ses) frère(s) et de sa(ses) sœur(s)	—
c) un fait sur chaque membre	—
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Langage	
L'élève	
utilise le vocabulaire relié au sujet	—
utilise les structures appropriées	—
Stratégies	
L'élève	
utilise des photos ou des dessins	—
parle suffisamment fort	—
Commentaires : _____	

Figure 2

Liste de vérification par un pair **Ta famille**

Nom de l'élève qui présente : _____ Date : _____

L'élève :

identifie les membres de sa famille.

dit le nom de chaque membre de sa famille

dit l' âge de ses frères et sœur(s)

raconte un fait intéressant

parle e

a une t

parle assez fort

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Complète la phrase d'appréciation.

♡ son sujet	♡ son affiche
♡ son information	♡ sa voix

J'aime surtout _____

Ta signature _____

Scallion 1996; Smolen et al. 1995). Systematic and progressive involvement in the evaluation process will encourage students to acquire the metacognitive strategies required to become successful, autonomous language learners (e.g., O'Malley and Chamot 1990).

7. *Formative evaluation is more effective when diversified.* Since language performance requires students to demonstrate a wide range of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, a single instrument or the performance of a single task is not enough to provide these students with an accurate picture of their strengths and weaknesses. The use of several methods of evaluation and several different kinds of instruments provides a more reliable assessment of student performance (Huerta-Macias 1995).

8. *Formative evaluation is preferably conducted in the target language.* Although the instruments are intended to be accessible to beginning-level students, teachers are encouraged to modify the instruments according to the actual language level of their students. The vocabulary used for evaluation should be taught gradually.

Sample Instruments

Thirty-nine prototype formative evaluation instruments were created by a design team of teachers from across Canada.⁴ The design team divided into groups based on a specific field of experience or theme. Each group of two developed instruments to evaluate all four language skills within their chosen theme. The themes chosen are those generally addressed in a beginning level program of studies: *Moi et ma famille* (Me and My Family), *Mes ami(e)s* (My Friends), *L'école* (School), *Les animaux de compagnie* (Pets), *Les loisirs* (Pastimes) and *L'alimentation* (Food). The specific challenge facing each team was to produce instruments that were task-based, reflective of a multidimensional curriculum, and generic enough to be used for other themes as well.

Team members drew heavily on their own teaching experience, recent documents on formative evaluation, and recent literature on new evaluation practices (e.g., Allal 1991; Bélair 1995; Harris 1997; Lussier 1991; Lussier and Turner 1995; McNamara and Dean 1995; Wiggins 1995). Drafts of instruments prepared by individual team members were critiqued by the entire team. Those selected for use were revised by the group and then refined by the Project Director, who subsequently prepared the initial kit of formative evaluation instruments.

To help readers better understand the nature of these prototype instruments, four examples will be examined more closely: (1) a *Liste de vérification* (Teacher evaluation form) and a *Liste de vérification par un pair* (Peer evaluation form) for an oral presentation; (2) a *Tableau* (Activity sheet) and a *Fiche d'autoévaluation* (Self-evaluation) for listening comprehension; (3) a *Grille d'accompagnement* (Student

checklist) for writing a letter; and (4) a *Fiche d'observation* (Teacher observation form) to record the use of observable strategies. Within the kit, each set of instruments is prefaced by a presentation page that introduces the assessment activity, the skill(s) and the learning outcomes to be evaluated, the proposed task that provides the context for the evaluation, and directions for the task. Suggestions for a *retour réflexif* (guided reflection) are provided to help the teacher evaluate, with the whole class, the activity and the strategies used to complete the activity.

The teacher checklist (Figure 1) and peer evaluation form (Figure 2) can be used with a short oral presentation to the class (e.g., introducing one's family with the help of pictures). The task requires each student to (1) identify the members of their family and provide some information about them (communication); (2) use simple sentences (e.g., *voici ... c'est ... elle s'appelle ... il a ___ ans* (language); and (3) use visual aids and speak loud enough (strategies). While each student presents his or her family, two (or more) classmates complete the peer evaluation form by completing the checklist and by providing written feedback on the content of the presentation. The teacher checklist provides specific feedback to the student on the quality of his or her presentation. Space is provided for written comments on what was good and where the student can improve.

The instruments relating to listening (Figures 3 and 4) attempt to sensitize students to the processes involved in successful listening comprehension. The task requires students to (1) obtain specific information (communication); (2) understand the vocabulary related to the theme (language); and (3) predict answers on the basis of previous knowledge and listen attentively (strategies). The comprehension exercise, Figure 3, requires students to use their world knowledge to predict what each animal will eat or drink. Students then listen to verify their predictions. Figure 4, a self-evaluation form intended to be used in concert with Figure 3, helps students focus their attention while listening. After the prelistening activities (including the prediction exercise), but before hearing the text itself, students read through and check each criterion. After listening, students complete the second section, which forces them to reflect again on what they did as they were listening and on what they found easy or difficult.

A performance checklist (Figure 5) guides students in the preparation of a simple letter. The task requires students to (1) write a short letter to a pen pal introducing themselves and expressing some of their interests (communication); (2) use simple sentences (e.g., *J'aime ... , Je m'appelle ...*), appropriate vocabulary, and greetings (language); (3) respect conventions for letter writing in French (culture); and (4) use appropriate reference tools, word lists, and so forth, and revise and correct preliminary drafts

Figure 3







Tableau

Des renseignements

Nom : _____ Date : _____

Consignes

1. Avant l'écoute :
Lis le nom des animaux. Prédis leur choix de nourriture : coche (✓) dans la première colonne ce que tu penses que l'animal aime manger ou boire.
2. Écoute le document oral. Coche (✓) dans l'autre colonne ce que l'animal aime manger ou boire.
3. Écoute une deuxième fois. Vérifie tes réponses.

Animal	 Poisson	 Graines	 Eau	 Viande	 Légumes	 Lait
une tortue						
un chat						
un chien						
un hamster						
un oiseau						
un poisson						
une gerbille						
un lapin						
un cheval						

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Échelle d'appréciation

Ta compréhension est :

- Excellente Tu as trouvé 17 ou 18 aliments
- Très bonne Tu as trouvé de 14 à 16 aliments
- Bonne Tu as trouvé de 12 à 13 aliments
- Attention! Tu as trouvé de 0 à 11 aliments

Tu as pu faire de bonnes prédictions. Oui Non

Commentaires :

.....

(strategies). Each student uses the checklist as a guide in preparing and executing the task. The teacher evaluates the completed task by checking (as appropriate) each item on an accompanying form and commenting as necessary.

An observation checklist (Figure 6) allows teachers to monitor student use of the desired observable strategies used in class. This instrument can be used over a period of time covering several different themes, and it can serve as a reference for report card preparation. Each day the teacher observes a specific number of students to determine to what degree they exhibit the desired behaviors. The kit contains blank versions of this particular instrument so that teachers can incorporate the specific observable strategies that they wish to monitor.

Field-Testing the Instruments

To ensure validity, 33 of the 39 instruments created by the design team were field-tested over a four-month period by teachers and students across Canada during Fall 1997. Participating teachers and students were asked to evaluate their experience in order to (1) determine the suitability of the instruments for beginning level CF students; (2) further improve the instruments; and (3) provide concrete examples of how teachers can use and adapt the instruments. The types of instruments included teacher checklists, student checklists, self-evaluations, peer evaluations, observation charts, rating scales, chart completion, and multiple-choice items. Most instruments included some form of guided reflection that required students to reflect on their performance (oral and written production tasks) or the process of language learning (oral and written comprehension tasks). A total of 162 questionnaires were completed by teachers (some tested more than one instrument).

Teachers were asked to provide feedback on the technical aspects of the instrument and its usefulness for formative evaluation. They commented on the clarity of the instrument and its accompanying presentation page, any modifications made to the task or the instrument, the difficulty level of the French used, and the appropriateness of

the task at this cognitive level. Teachers were asked if they would use the instrument again, and, most importantly, they were asked to comment on the capacity of the instrument to provide appropriate feedback and to realize positive effects on student learning. Finally, teachers were asked to identify the strong points and weak points of each instrument and to provide general reactions.

The student questionnaire asked students to comment on the task as well as the instrument. Considering the age of the students involved, student responses to the instruments were solicited by class (teachers recording student responses on one questionnaire) rather than individually. A total of 148 student groups responded. With regard to the task, students were asked what they liked best about it, what they learned in French, and how they needed to improve their performance. They were also asked to comment on what they discovered about their abilities (to comprehend, speak, write, or read) in French. Finally, they were asked to provide suggestions for improving the look and organization of the instrument and any general comments. Copies of both questionnaires are included in the final report (Vandergrift 1998).

Teacher responses provided both quantitative and qualitative data. Only qualitative data were generated by the student responses. Quantitative data were collected from responses that required a "yes" or a "no" answer. Qualitative data, gathered from the comments section after each question on both the teacher and student questionnaires, were examined for common themes. Research questions guiding the data analysis included (1) the potential of the instruments to positively affect student achievement; (2) the usefulness of the instruments as evaluation tools; and (3) the capacity of the instruments to make students aware of their progress in learning and how to improve.

Results

Teacher Responses

The data presented in Table 1 represent the responses of

Table 1

TEACHER JUDGMENTS OF THE USEFULNESS OF CORE FRENCH FORMATIVE EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS

Question	Yes	n (%)	No	n (%)
Selon vous, les instruments ont-ils le potentiel d'avoir des effets positifs sur le progrès des élèves en français? (Do you think these instruments can have a positive impact on your students' progress in French?)	148	(91.4)	14	(8.6)
Utiliserez-vous de nouveau un tel instrument? (Would you use such an instrument again?)	151	(93.2)	11	(6.8)

the participating teachers to two questions. Teachers agree that these instruments could have positive effects on student progress in learning French (91.4%). Teacher responses indicate a high degree of satisfaction with these instruments as appropriate and useful evaluation tools; in fact, 93.2% of the participating teachers said that they would use these instruments again. Furthermore, an analysis of the teacher comments provides further insight into the strengths and weaknesses of these evaluation instruments and their potential for enhancing student progress in learning French as a second language.

It appears that contextualized, task-based evaluation is still a relatively new concept for most teachers. Both teachers and students tended to respond more to the task than to the formative evaluation instruments. Many commented on how refreshing the experience was for them and their students. Some representative comments include: “Children loved the hands-on work that this kit allowed them to do.” “Je crois que tout le matériel est excellent. Les nouvelles idées sont formidables et rafraîchissantes. C’est une ‘banque’ excellente. J’aime beaucoup les activités variées.” (I think all the material is excellent. These new ideas are great and refreshing. It is an excellent “bank” of material. I really like the varied activities.) In sum, as pointed out by one provincial representative, the authentic nature of these evaluation instruments was a “real eye-opener” for some teachers.

Most teachers acknowledge the adaptability of these instruments and the potential for quality feedback to the student. They recognize that these instruments can be changed to reflect different emphases in the learning outcomes, as pointed out by one teacher: “allowance is always made for adding something to the evaluation or for using instruments with your own criteria.” They recognize the instruments as models or prototypes for evaluation within a particular framework. While teachers appreciated the adaptable nature of the instruments, they also expressed appreciation for the ready-made dimension and variety of instruments. Teachers could see how to evaluate different components of language performance at the same time with instruments that facilitate the process of evaluation (“les instruments touchent à tous les aspects qu’il faut évaluer” [the instruments touch on everything that needs to be evaluated]). Working with these instruments made teachers more aware of the importance of providing feedback to students on progress in learning. As stated by one teacher: “I find myself assessing the students formatively (for myself) but not making them aware of where they are at.” These instruments will help teachers to provide more quality feedback to their students.

The strength of these instruments is the innovative ways in which the learning process is enhanced. Teachers pointed to two types of instruments in particular. First, the

retour réflexif (guided reflection) helps students to reflect on the comprehension process or the preparation of written or oral productions, that is, what they did well and what they could do the next time to improve. Second, the *grille d’accompagnement* (checklist) helps students organize their work, ensuring that all elements of the task are completed. This in fact encourages the development of metacognition, as pointed out by one teacher: “The best thing about all of these tasks/assessments was the metacognition that was encouraged. My students took absolute control of their learning — they felt empowered and motivated to reach the goals that had been set. The emphasis on *mots clés* (key words) and *mots-amis* (cognates) was terrific. The tie-in with all the rubric work in other subjects was helpful— all these activities helped make the students better overall learners.” While the *grille d’accompagnement* proved to be difficult for students to understand at first, future use will be much more efficient, as acknowledged by one teacher: “as this was the first time, some training and translation was needed — less of this preparation will be necessary for similar tasks in the future.”

Teachers noted that when encouraged to reflect on learning, students become more aware of what they need to work on, and the language learning strategies they can use to facilitate comprehension or production. The listening and reading activities were particularly strong in helping students to focus on the cues leading to meaning. While teachers recognized this potential, this sentiment was not reflected in the student comments. Student comments tended to focus less on the learning dimension and more on the fun dimension of working in groups on interesting, new tasks.

Finally, use of these instruments made the evaluation process enjoyable. Both students and teachers commented on the fun component which, in turn, can potentially increase student interest and motivation in learning French. When students were asked what they discovered about their abilities in French while doing the task, they replied that they were capable of more than they thought or that what appeared to be difficult at first was not so difficult after all. One teacher shared that her grade three class “all wanted to give it (oral presentation) a try... Interestingly enough, they saw themselves as successful French speakers, which says, I suppose, volumes about their levels of confidence. They didn’t see themselves as ‘risk takers’ per se; they just felt they could do it.” The instruments help to set up the students for success.

A comment by one provincial CF representative summarizes the feedback well: “le projet a inspiré les enseignants à perfectionner leurs pratiques en évaluation (the project encouraged teachers to improve their evaluation methods).” The results of this field test warrant implementation with further in-service sessions to confirm the

Figure 4

Fiche d'autoévaluation

Des renseignements

Pré-écoute

- Je comprends la tâche.
- Je connais le nom des animaux.
- Je prédis ce que chaque animal aime manger ou boire.
- Je me prépare à bien écouter.

Post-écoute

- Je me suis concentré(e).
- J'ai porté attention aux noms des animaux et des aliments.
- J'ai fait de bonnes prédictions.

FPO

J'ai trouvé :

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J'ai trouvé difficile :

Figure 5

Grille d'accompagnement Une lettre personnelle


Nom : _____ Date : _____

* * *

Ma lettre a	
la date	<input type="checkbox"/>
une formule d'appel	<input type="checkbox"/>
mon nom	<input type="checkbox"/>
mon âge	<input type="checkbox"/>
un autre	<input type="checkbox"/>
le nom du lieu où j'habite	<input type="checkbox"/>
mes 2 activités préférées	<input type="checkbox"/>
une formule de salutation	<input type="checkbox"/>
Pour m'aider à bien écrire, j'ai utilisé des outils	<input type="checkbox"/>
des modèles de lettre	
des banques de mots	
un dictionnaire	

* * *

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initial findings about the value of these formative evaluation instruments for language learning. Furthermore, with appropriate in-servicing, many more teachers can be motivated to make changes in their evaluation practices and thereby enhance language learning.

Student Responses

Student comments on the formative evaluation instruments were collected through a plenary discussion, led by the teacher. The teacher then recorded the overall impressions of the students, attempting to state the sentiments in

Figure 6

Fiche d'observation (1) **Exemple**

Observation de : stratégies

Légende: = = oui - = non = = Plus ou moins facilement ? = À vérifier

Objets d'observation

Arrière plan pour la classe.					
Partir/jo avec activités					
Écrire individuellement					
Répète les mots et les expressions					
Réutilise les mots et les expressions dans des phrases					
Écritelle les consignes					
Répond aux questions posées					
Prend le risque de parler en français					

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Nom de l'élève	Dates				
Nom de l'élève	Dates				
Nom de l'élève	Dates				
Nom de l'élève	Dates				

the students' words. The responses were then grouped by categories, some of which were similar to those voiced by the teachers. Students expressed a high degree of appreciation for the learning experiences prompted by the language tasks in which the evaluation took place. Responses demonstrated that students found these instruments to be motivating for learning, directive for improving future learning, helpful for organizing work, and useful in making them aware of language learning processes.

First of all, students were inspired by the experiential nature of the tasks in which the evaluation took place. They perceived these tasks as real-life use of French ("learning how to speak in a situation that I may actually use someday"), suggesting that their regular class work generally did not incorporate many opportunities for authentic communication ("It wasn't just notes, reading French or doing an assignment but actually talking in your own words"). Students often used the word "fun" to describe their experience with these instruments, for example: "We liked working with a partner and presenting was fun." "It was fun working with my partner and pronouncing (*sic*) French words." They also recognized the enhanced learning potential of experiential learning, as illustrated by the following comment: "The more creative ways we do things to learn French, the easier it makes it and it's more fun. It will stay longer in our memories." To conclude, an emphasis on the use of authentic communicative tasks inherent in experiential learning makes learning more enjoyable ("I didn't realize that I was learning") and leads to greater ease in using French for real-life purposes ("activities make you less nervous to speak in French").

Closely related to the fun element of the experiential tasks is the motivational dimension of working with these evaluation instruments. Students felt that the experience gave them a greater sense of how much they already knew, in contrast to the typical evaluation that tends to penalize them for what they do not know, as reflected in the following statements: "We were able to speak better than we thought we could." "My ability was better than I thought... I was surprised at what I could say." This does not mean that students did not have to work at successful completion of the task; they were guided to successful completion of the task ("If I work hard, I can do it." "It was confusing at the start but when I tried I could do it OK"). When students are set up for success through formative evaluation instruments such as these, they gain the confidence to experience future successes ("It was easy and we felt smart").

Third, the directive or diagnostic nature of formative evaluation was also appreciated by the students. In addition to being motivated to complete the required task, students noted that the instruments were useful for improving

their performance on the task as well ("a good way to show where we can improve next time"). In many cases, students indicated the specific ways in which future presentations could be improved ("not giggling and laughing, but presenting loud and clear"). In particular, the *grilles d'accompagnement* (checklists) helped students check for successful completion of the task ("we liked having a checklist because we know what we did and didn't do...it helped us be sure to include everything the teacher wanted").

Peer evaluations involved students in the evaluation process and made them more sensitive to the requirements for successful completion of a task, something usually perceived as the teacher's role only ("we liked it cause we kinda got to be the teacher"). Once again, students were guided in the successful completion of a task as well as improvement of performance ("we liked checking the boxes and it was good to have comments from the teacher on another sheet").

Fourth, the formative evaluation instruments helped students organize work, particularly for language production tasks. With the help of these instruments, students could verify that all the components of a task were in place before the final production ("the grille helped us organize our speech and made sure we were ready"). Students appreciated the fact that these instruments provided them with neat, easy-to-follow guidelines for preparing their written and oral productions at school or at home, as indicated by one group of students: "We liked the checklist because we know what to put in our book, then you know if you've missed anything and so do our moms."

Finally, these instruments helped students become aware of the processes involved in language learning, in particular the processes involved in successful listening and reading comprehension. Students were sensitized to the many cognates between English and French ("many words look the same as English words") and the importance of focusing on key words ("we need to read French more carefully and look for key words that we understand and words that look like English words"; "focus on key words, but sometimes we could not find the key words easily"). Students learned the importance of predicting and using their previous knowledge to make logical predictions ("we liked seeing if our guesses were right"; "what you predict may not always be right but predicting helps"; "If I never knew a word, I could use the picture and think"). Students learned to listen attentively and learned the importance of staying focused ("listen and not letting our minds wander, if you get lost you can't catch up"; "how carefully we must listen to find details"; "we had to listen and not talk"). Students learned the importance of focused, attentive reading and listening ("I can learn to understand my reading better if I pick out the words that I know"; "pay attention to important words; you don't have to understand all the

words”; “we could figure out some words on our own and were able to piece together the rest”). Guiding students through the processes involved in successful comprehension teaches them to focus on what is important.

Discussion

The results of the field test reflect overwhelming support for these formative evaluation instruments; over 90% of the teachers indicate that they would use the instruments again. It would appear that the potential of formative evaluation for language learning has been established by this field test. In addition, the comments of both teachers and students point to the potential impact of formative evaluation on (1) learner empowerment; (2) learner motivation; and (3) learner autonomy.

Both student and teacher comments highlight the importance of experiential, task-based evaluation. While some of the enthusiasm might be attributed to the novelty of this kind of evaluation, the strong response demonstrates a genuine appreciation for active student involvement in learning. Students perceived these evaluation tasks as “real French,” in contrast to what they normally did in class. They were engaged in experiential learning (i.e., authentic communicative activities) complemented by and interwoven with congruent assessment activities (i.e., formative evaluation activities that stimulate active involvement in the learning product and the process). This reinforced the teaching methodology and gave students a greater sense of empowerment. Furthermore, students were more involved in learning through their active involvement in the evaluation process. Pearson and Berghoff (1996) note that the interweaving of assessment and instruction encourages students to participate actively in their own learning and leads to their empowerment.

Second, formative evaluation is motivational. Because of its diagnostic character, formative evaluation provided students with feedback that focused on more than just what was wrong. Students learned what they did well and what they needed to improve. An emphasis on the process of learning as well as the creation of the language products (tasks) led students to be more motivated. This is consistent with the views of Deci and Ryan (1985) who contend that, to the extent that teachers support autonomy and provide informative feedback, students’ sense of self-determination and intrinsic motivation can be enhanced. Involvement of students in learning through formative evaluation activities provides them with a sense of autonomy and feedback that both informs them of what they do well and where they can further improve. This leads language learners to approach a learning task positively; it represents a challenge to their existing competencies and requires them to use their creative capabilities.

Finally, these instruments made students more aware

of the learning process and how to become more autonomous language learners. Both teachers and students commented on the power of these instruments to enhance learning, that is, to plan for the successful completion of an oral or written production task or to reflect on the processes in comprehending an oral or a written text. Engaging students in reflection on their learning made them more aware of the learning processes and the strategies involved to become more successful, autonomous language learners. Students become more aware of the components of a task or the steps that lead to the successful completion of a task. As pointed out by Harris (1997), getting students to reflect on their own performance is perhaps the key to perceiving progress in communicative terms. Since progress in language learning in terms of communicative ability can often seem elusive, regular systematic self-assessment, in addition to other types of formative evaluation, can make students aware of gains in communicative ability that may not be perceptible otherwise.

Conclusion

This study has pointed to the promise of formative evaluation with children learning French. Results indicate that these instruments have the potential to appropriately evaluate the targeted learning outcomes and to provide useful feedback to students on their performance. Teachers perceive these prototype instruments as adaptable, flexible tools that facilitate evaluation and learning. Comments from both students and teachers suggest that these instruments can (1) help students organize their work; (2) raise student awareness of the processes of language learning; (3) provide students with useful feedback; and (4) motivate students to improve their performance in French.

Some interesting questions for further investigation remain to be explored. First, we need to examine the tacit assumption that an experimental group of students who uses these instruments over a period of instruction (e.g., a unit of study or an academic year) would demonstrate superior achievement to a group of students not exposed to formative evaluation activities during the experimental period. Second, we need to explore whether the positive results were due to the novelty of the instruments. A longitudinal study with different curriculum frameworks (i.e., a communicative/experiential curriculum or a more traditional language-based curriculum) might shed further light on the enduring effects of formative evaluation on student attitudes over time.

Notes

1. Funds for this project and research were granted by the Department of Canadian Heritage to the Canadian Association

of Second Language Teachers. Further information regarding this bank of formative evaluation instruments can be obtained from the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers at 201, 57 Auriga Drive, Nepean, Ontario, Canada K2E 8B2, caslt@istar.org or at www.caslt.org.

2. Core French, in contrast to French Immersion, is the basic program where French is taught as a subject for 20 to 40 minutes per day from three to five days per week in elementary schools.

3. The common learning outcomes, taken from Vandergrift (1995), were based on an analysis of the beginning-level CF guidelines or outcomes of all provinces and territories, and subsequently validated by all provincial CF representatives.

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Appendix A*Common Learning Outcomes for Core French (CF) at the Beginning Level*

Beginning level CF students will be able to:

Experience

- participate in a variety of language experiences, individually and in groups, related to their interest and life experiences.

Communication

- express meaningful but brief and simple messages
- express coherent messages of a few utterances
- express messages with adequate content
- understand simple short oral texts on familiar topics
- write short messages containing one to three utterances
- transcribe high-frequency sentences
- understand simple short written texts on familiar topics and standardized written messages

Language

- Use simple sentence structures with verbs in the present, the past, and the future tenses and vocabulary related to the fields of experience (oral production)
- Use high-frequency sentences and vocabulary related to the fields of experience (written production)
- Understand simple sentence structures with verbs in the present, past, and future tenses and vocabulary related to the fields of experience (oral comprehension)
- Understand high-frequency sentences with vocabulary related to the fields of experience (written comprehension)

Culture

- Identify concrete elements of francophone culture at the local, regional, and national levels
- Understand present francophone culture, the cultures of one's own community, and those of other cultural communities in Canada

General language education

- Use prediction, monitoring, and comprehension evaluation strategies
- Use strategies in communication

Source: Vandergrift (1995), in CASLT (1998)