

Continuous assessment for tertiary-level language teaching: an aid for learners to monitor their progress?

A B S T R A C T In 2004, based on the findings of scholarly enquiry, the French Section of the University of Cape Town decided to prioritise continuous assessment to measure language acquisition, partly with a view to enabling students to monitor their progress more effectively. In a spirit of quality control (De Ketele, 2003), the purpose of this article is to review that decision. Firstly, by way of context, attention is given to some of the scholarship pertinent to summative and formative assessment which underpinned the adoption of continuous assessment. Secondly, the article interrogates the notion that continuous assessment facilitates learner awareness of progress by presenting and examining the reactions of undergraduate students of French at the University of Cape Town over the last three years.

Key words: continuous assessment, formative, summative, language, acquisition, examinations-only, learner progress

Le contrôle continu pour évaluer l'enseignement des langues au niveau universitaire permet-il aux apprenants de suivre leurs progrès?

En 2004, en conformité avec des recherches en matière pédagogique et didactique, la section de français de l'université du Cap a adopté le système de contrôle continu pour évaluer l'acquisition linguistique de ses étudiants en vue de leur permettre, entre autres, de mieux suivre leurs progrès. Dans un désir d'amélioration de la qualité des enseignements dispensés (De Ketele, 2003), le but de cet article est de passer en revue cette décision. Dans un premier temps et en guise de contexte, nous évoquerons les recherches pertinentes à l'évaluation formative et sommative qui justifiaient l'adoption du contrôle continu. Dans un deuxième temps, nous interrogerons la notion que le

contrôle continu favorise la prise de conscience par l'apprenant des progrès qu'il fait en analysant les réactions face aux modalités d'évaluation émises par les étudiants de français de l'université du Cap pendant les trois dernières années.

Mots clefs: contrôle continu, évaluation formative, évaluation sommative, acquisition linguistique, progrès de l'apprenant

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Introduction

In the course of the first semester of the 2004 academic year, the French Section of the School of Languages and Literatures of the University of Cape Town (UCT) changed the way in which undergraduate students of French would henceforth be assessed. Whereas up until then, summative assessment had held sway with final results being the product of end-of-semester written and oral examination marks, the French Section considered that such assessment modalities neglected research on the benefits accrued through formative assessment to language acquisition.

Several advantages to formative assessment were identified. Firstly, it was deemed that examinations-only (EO) assessment could impact negatively pass / failure ratios and throughput rates and that learners would consequently prefer formative assessment as a fairer means of assessing their performance. This contention is not examined in this article since it has been covered in earlier published research¹.

Secondly, EO assessment modalities were considered to be an imperfect measure of linguistic acquisition across the four competencies (oral comprehension and production, and written comprehension and production) and to neglect completely the competency of social interaction which characterises the use of language as a culturally-imbued, social object. With EO assessment at the exit level, a student could conceivably achieve a pass mark but have no knowledge or skill in certain essential areas of course content. For the purposes of this article, this phenomenon of 'selective negligence' to which Snyder (1971) and MacFarlane (1992) give attention, as well as its consequences for language teaching, need not be addressed since they form part of the theoretical framework to the research referred to in the paragraph above.

The third major reason behind the decision to adopt CA was the belief that it would help students to monitor their own progress. The purpose of this article is, then, to interrogate that supposition. The objective is to review the system operational at the University of Cape Town for nearly eight years to assess undergraduate French with the aim of discovering whether, by jettisoning an EO system of assessment, the French Section has indeed helped students to be more aware of how they are progressing.

¹ Everson, V. 2010. Continuous assessment: an antidote for 'selective negligence? *Feedback? No, just give us the answers. French Studies in Southern Africa*, N° 40.

The rationale behind Continuous Assessment (CA) as a tool for raising learners' awareness of their own progress

In 1967 Scriven coined the terms “formative” and “summative” with the aim of making a distinction between assessment with a pedagogical purpose and assessment with an administrative, certificatory aim. Since the publication of that seminal work, assessment modalities have been the subject of much debate and research. It is not the purpose of this article to revisit the research of didacticians such as Black & Wiliam (1998), Sadler (1989, 1998), Sebatane (1998) and Torrance (1993) which informed the decision to adopt CA referred to above. What is relevant here is that when the French Section of UCT reviewed its assessment modalities, the appeal of formative assessment was that, as summarised by Chaduc (2000: 179), it falls within what the researcher calls “dynamic” as opposed to “comparative assessment”. In this, its purpose is to indicate to learners their level of learning as opposed to ranking them. “Dynamic assessment” is by nature interactive and affords individualised guidance **during** the learning process rather than remediation after the event, “remédiation a posteriori” to use Chaduc’s expression (*Ibidem*). In general terms, then, formative assessment

est renforçatrice en valorisant la réponse de l’élève et en augmentant la probabilité d’obtenir une réponse juste ultérieure; elle est corrective, car le fait de comprendre ses erreurs permet de les modifier facilement. C’est donc une gestion positive des erreurs ; elle est régulatrice puisqu’elle permet d’ajuster en permanence les objectifs suivis et les stratégies mises en place pour les atteindre² (2000:181).

Formative assessment was, then, viewed by staff of the UCT French Section as having the major advantage of assisting the learner by enabling him to track the progress of his language acquisition and by supporting him in his progress. The staff was not immune to the “tension” (to use Taras’s expression, 2005: 466), created (unintentionally) by Scriven’s distinction between “formative” and “summative” and, contrary to Wiliam’s recommendation (2000: 16), did not seek to mitigate that tension. Rather, as was the case for many educational practitioners, the UCT French Staff perceived formative and summative assessments as being mutually exclusive and opted for the former. Indeed, the emphasis placed on pedagogical purpose had made formative assessment a seductive and socially appealing form of evaluating achievement (Broadfoot, 1996, 2000).

The definition of CA that was retained by the UCT French Section, falls, then, within Chaduc’s description of “dynamic assessment”. It can also be considered as synonymous with formative assessment as described above. That being said, it does, however, differ somewhat from Boyer’s definition (as indicated in the research mentioned in the second and third paragraphs of the introduction to this article). He defines the latter as “[une] évaluation initiale ou diagnostique pour mesurer les pré-acquis” (Boyer 1990:174), in other words an initial, diagnostic tool which measures existing learning. Rather, we consider formative assessment to incorporate

² “acts as a reinforcement since value is attached to the learner’s answer and the probability of obtaining a correct answer at a later stage is increased; it is a corrective measure as, when errors are understood, they can more easily be modified. This is then positive error management; it is regulatory since learning objectives and strategies for attaining them can be modified constantly.” All translations are my own.

regular monitoring of whether course objectives are being met, with the starting point for each assignment activity being “les pré-acquis” (Everson 2010: 39). In this way, each aspect of course content builds upon earlier elements and is assessed. Each learning activity is assessed; this indicates to the learner what has been learned and what still needs to be mastered, thereby guiding his future learning behaviour. Each mark allocated is a visible indicator to the learner of the extent of his language acquisition and of his rate of progress.

But could this not also apply to EO assessment? There are crucial differences. Firstly, with EO, there is a time lag between sitting the examination and the mark allocated. In this way, students rarely have in the forefront of their minds the substance of their answers and can be supposed, therefore, to have difficulty in making links between what they wrote and the allotted mark. Secondly, at undergraduate level, an examination invariably comprises several questions. However, the student receives a final mark which is the sum of the marks awarded for responses to the various questions which make up the examination, and cannot, therefore, know how well or poorly he fared at individual sections of the course content being examined. Thirdly, and much more importantly in our view, with a written examination, there is no opportunity for the teacher to point out what has been mastered, where the student has gone wrong and, more significantly, what he can do to improve or alter his learning behaviour. More than twenty years ago now, Chickering & Gamson were already alluding to this in their *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education* when they stated: “Knowing what you know and don’t know focuses learning. Students need appropriate feedback to benefit from courses” (1987: 1). Since then, a significant body of research has been devoted to feedback. The research of Cooper (2000), Gibbs & Simpson (2004-2005), Race (2006), Sly (1999) and Taras (2003) identifies timeous, well-crafted teacher feedback as the means of reorienting students and helping them to progress. Analysis of that research is beyond the scope of this article. However, for the purposes of this study, we can posit that a system of CA which incorporates regular, visible indicators of language acquisition in the form of marked assignments and advice for improvement through feedback, should enable learners to monitor their progress better, the hypothesis which is to be tested in the second part of this article.

The UCT French Section’s move from EO to CA, underpinned as it was by a desire to enhance learner awareness of progress, was also the product of developments in language-learning methodologies. Such learner empowerment is entirely coherent with recent advances. Gone are the days of the top-down teaching modalities which characterised the magisterial or *ex cathedra* approach to language-learning. With the advent of the communicative method in the 1980s and then, more recently, the actional approach, the learner (who is considered to be a social actor) is placed at the heart of the teaching/learning enterprise or, to use Gardner’s expression, “(...) education is fundamentally a social process”, in which students are “**active** agents in learning, not passive recipients of teaching” (2001: 69). Certain theorists (Chevallard, 1985; Houssaye, 1988) have represented such didactics in the form of an isosceles triangle depicting a dynamic, interconnected and balanced relationship between the learner, the teacher and the subject matter. This representation has been adapted to the specificities of teaching French as a Foreign Language (*FLE*³) by Germain (1989)⁴ and has been further refined by Rézeau (2006) to incorporate new technologies⁵.

With the communicative-actional approach to language teaching as outlined in the preceding paragraph, and underpinned as it is by constructivist and socio-constructivist learning theories, it is clear that the teacher's role must change. Indeed, it shifts from that of dispenser of knowledge to that of facilitator-mediator. It is important to add that the communicative-actional approach views such facilitation / mediation within a less rigidly-structured pedagogical intervention than that established by Vygotsky (1962) in his research into mediation as a decisive factor in the cognitive development of the child. Rather it sits within Bruner's extension of Vygotsky's notion of mediation (Raynal & Rieunier, 1997) in its incorporation of tutoring and scaffolding, which Bruner defines thus: "[Scaffolding] refers to the steps taken to reduce the degrees of freedom in carrying out some task so that the child can concentrate on the difficult skill she is in the process of acquiring" (Bruner cited by Mercer, 1995: 73). Raynal & Rieunier's definition of mediation as access-facilitation goes further in describing mediation as follows: "Ensemble des aides ou des supports qu'une personne peut offrir à une autre personne en vue de lui rendre plus accessible un savoir quelconque. (...) Le langage, l'affectivité, les produits culturels, les relations ou les normes sociales sont des médiations⁶" (1997: 220). In fact, in this way, teacher, tutor, classmate, and the learner himself can all have a role of mediator. This broad notion of mediation is further refined by the addition of Mercer's definition of scaffolding: "the provision of guidance and support which is **increased** or **withdrawn**⁷ in response to the developing competence of the learner" (1995: 75). It is within this context of flexible, variable scaffolding coupled with access provision that the teacher is mediator and facilitator. Moreover, this aligns with Boyer & Rivera's recommendation (citing Porquier) of limiting "le rôle de l'enseignant à celui d'un observateur et d'un facilitateur d'apprentissage, servant de témoin (et non de juge) pour la correction formelle et l'intelligibilité des énoncés et pour la conceptualisation⁸" (1990: 40). Furthermore, with the rejection of any hierarchical relationship that such an approach presupposes, learner autonomy – or to use Boyer & Rivera's term (1990: 40) "responsabilisation", is prioritised. Clearly, then, if the learner as autonomous, social actor is to be placed at the centre of the teaching-learning experience in this way, he will need to be able to monitor his own progress.

³ The commonly accepted acronym *FLE* (*Français langue étrangère*) is retained since it is the internationally recognised term for French as a Foreign Language.

⁴ Germain adapts Legendre's SOMA model for language didactics. The SOMA model of the pedagogical situation is one large circle representing the learning **m**ilieu, within which are three smaller circles depicting the **s**ubject (the second-language learner), the **o**bject (language and culture), and the **a**gent (personnel, process, means). A relationship of apprenticeship links the subject and the object, one of didactics links the object and the agent, and one of teaching links the agent and the subject (Germain 1989, in Rézeau 2006).

⁵ With the advent of new technologies which provide a wealth of on-line resources and new opportunities for teaching-learning strategies, the didactic triangle can be modified to reflect the integration of the instrument of mediation and mediatisation (Rézeau's term for "la transposition didactique"). In this way, the learner's access to the subject matter is mediated through instrumentation (the use of technologies), and the subject matter is linked to the instruments of teaching and learning via mediatisation (Rézeau, 2006). Rézeau depicts this, not as a didactic triangle, but as a square.

⁶ "Set of aids or supports that one person can give another with a view to facilitating access to some form of knowledge. (...) Language, feelings, cultural products, relationships or social norms are mediations."

⁷ My emphasis.

⁸ ... "the teacher's role to that of an observer and learning facilitator who acts as witness (and not judge) for formal error-correction, intelligibility of utterances, and conceptualisation."

At this juncture, it is appropriate to refer to the specific South African teaching / learning context. On the surface, there is cohesion between recent *FLE* methodology as described above and South African educational policy which, with the adoption of Outcomes Based Education (OBE), also advocates learner-centeredness. However, South African educational circles have witnessed extended debate on curriculum and OBE which can be traced back to Jansen's paper "Why OBE will fail" (1997). Primary criticism of the national curriculum and OBE came from academics who analysed the conservative ideological and philosophical assumptions "bathed in popular education discourse" (Jansen, 1997: 12). In addition, critics of the National Qualifications Framework of which the curriculum framework was a part, saw "the dominant model of educational development in South Africa post-1994 as inspired by neo-liberal educational approaches which paid more homage to the needs of the economy uncritically conceived than to social justice" (Chisholm, 2003: 9). However, defenders and critics of Curriculum 2005 united to present a "report arguing that outcomes-based education was not the issue but the design of the curriculum and aspects associated with its implementation" (2003: 10). Nevertheless, it is important to note that the Report of the Review Committee "struck a blow in attacking the constructivist theory of knowledge which underlay the curriculum" (*Ibid.*) and was, then, a radical critique of the official ideology of learner-centeredness. Ensuing debate has focused on learner-centeredness in theory and in practice. It has been argued that, whilst placing the learner at the centre of his own apprenticeship "may be a necessary tool to break down decades of learning habits formed to create uncritical and unthinking persons (...), it was undermined in large under-resourced classes with poorly qualified teachers who were unconfident of their subject knowledge" (*Ibid.*). I would contend that the criticism levelled against its implementation by the Curriculum 2005 Review Committee with regard to "large under-resourced classes" and "poorly qualified teachers" who are not confident of the subject matter that they teach, is not applicable to the tertiary-level context. I acknowledge, however, that at tertiary-level, learner-centeredness may have implications in terms of learning support materials and teacher training but would suggest that tertiary-level teachers of French in South Africa are highly-qualified and sufficiently confident in their subject matter to embrace communicative-actional methodologies and so give attention to the appropriateness of positioning their learners at the centre of their teaching, a consequence of which will be the need to empower them to gauge their own progress.

Continuous Assessment as an aid for monitoring progress: analysis and recommendations

As stated in the introduction, the review of CA as an aid for undergraduate students to monitor their progress in French at UCT which is presented here, is part of a quality control process to assess offerings in French. This necessarily involves reviewing the evaluation modalities used by the French Section to measure the language acquisition of its undergraduate students of French. The process is inspired by the work of De Ketele for whom "[é]valuer consiste à recueillir un ensemble d'informations pertinentes, valides et fiables et à examiner le degré d'adéquation entre cet ensemble d'informations et un ensemble de critères adéquats à l'objectif visé en vue de prendre une décision⁹" (2003: 183). The researcher states that the starting

⁹ "Evaluation consists in collecting a set of relevant, valid and reliable data and in examining the extent to which this conforms to a set of criteria which are appropriate to the target objective with a view to taking a decision".

point of any evaluation should be the identification of the “pour quoi” or the “what for” (*Ibid.*). Since the motivation behind the evaluation of the assessment system for French at UCT is to contribute to the quality of undergraduate study of the discipline, two outcomes have been identified. The first is a verificatory outcome whereby CA is assessed with the aim of verifying whether it achieves the ends for which it was adopted: in the context of this present study, does CA help learners to gauge their own progress effectively? The second outcome is correctional and is intended to assess CA with the aim of improving it: how can learners’ ability to assess their own progress be improved? After having identified these two outcomes, the objective(s) of evaluating CA were determined. In the context of De Ketele’s work, the quality control exercise described here falls within “l’évaluation a posteriori” or “a posteriori assessment” which seeks to measure short and long-term effects (*Ibid.*: 184). Identification of assessment outcomes and objectives was followed by data collection which, for De Ketele, comprises “gathering pertinent information” (*Ibid.*: 115). This necessitated selecting work modalities and tools. Based on work done at the University of Geneva, part of which is reproduced below, it was decided that end-of-semester student course evaluations for the past three academic years (2009, 2010 and 2011) would be collated and analysed from both a quantitative and qualitative perspective:

Parmi les différentes pratiques en matière d’évaluation de l’enseignement universitaire, celle qui est la plus usuelle consiste à demander aux étudiants, par le biais d’un questionnaire, de se prononcer sur les enseignements qu’ils suivent. Bien entendu, cette méthode n’est pas la seule manière d’apprécier la qualité d’un enseignement et les données qu’elle fournit n’éclairent qu’une petite composante d’un processus hautement complexe (...). D’aucuns rétorqueront que cette pratique est peu informative et qu’elle n’a aucun effet sur l’amélioration de l’enseignement. Heureusement, les travaux de Marsh (1987) discutent de la validité de cette méthode et démarche pertinente, pour autant qu’elle soit développée dans une perspective formative, même si elle est loin d’être parfaite et exhaustive. A certaines conditions, la validité interne de la démarche peut être assurée : il s’agit, entre autres, de prendre garde à la conception du questionnaire, au choix des items, aux modalités de réponse et aux procédures de traitement des données¹⁰ (Quoted by Le Ninan, 2004: 19).

Thus, students were requested to complete anonymous course evaluations at the end of each semester. Each questionnaire (an example of which is to be found in Annexure 1) comprises 17 questions¹¹. These cover self-evaluation (questions 1 to 3), evaluation of the course as a whole

¹⁰ “The most common practice for assessing university teaching is to ask students to give their opinion on the courses that they take by means of a questionnaire. This is clearly not the only means of quality control for teaching and the data obtained shed light on only a small part of an extremely complex process (...). Some may contend that the practice provides very little information and that it does not lead to improved teaching. Fortunately, Marsh’s study (1987) addresses this issue, stating that, although it is far from being perfect and exhaustive, providing that it is carried out from a formative perspective, the method is valid and the process relevant. The internal validity of the process can be guaranteed providing that, *inter alia*, care is taken over the conception of the questionnaire, the choice of items, response modalities and data analysis.”

¹¹ With effect from 2011, course evaluations are no longer completed in a paper version but are posted on the university e-learning platform, Vula. Since Vula presents questions on each lecturer in individual sections, the number of questions now exceeds 17 and, in 2011, as a function of the number of lecturers involved in any one undergraduate year, varied between 37 and 83.

(questions 4 to 7), an assessment of individual lecturers (questions 8 to 13), likes and dislikes (questions 14 and 15), as well as suggestions for improvement and other comments (questions 16 and 17). For questions 1 to 13 inclusive, students are asked to rank each aspect on a scale of 5 to 1 (with 5 being excellent and 1 poor¹²). For questions 4 to 13 which seek to evaluate both the course and individual lecturers' contributions, rankings are accompanied by a space for comment. Questions 14 to 17 which aim to solicit respondents' personal opinions contain no ranking but provide space for a comment.

Although all undergraduate students were encouraged to complete an evaluation for the course(s) for which they were registered, as shown in Table 1 below, no undergraduate year participated fully during the period surveyed, with participation varying greatly between 0% and 85%.

Table 1: Student participation in course evaluations expressed as a % of total enrolment

Academic Year	French 1	French 2	French 3 ¹³	
			Business French	Language & Literature
2009	27	74	79	0
2010	28	75	85	50
2011	58	55	69	37

As stated earlier, the verificatory objective of this quality control exercise on CA aimed to discover students' ability to assess their own progress. This was done by assessing their responses to Question 6¹⁴ of the course evaluation (reproduced in full in Annexure 1) during three consecutive academic years with a view to detecting any discernable trends. Therefore, the data selected for analysis in this article covers only those courses for which students completed course evaluations for both semesters of all three years surveyed. Thus, second-year first and second semester French Language and Literature (SLL2060F and SLL2061S respectively) and third-year Business French (SLL3066H and SLL3067H) were chosen for analysis. This selection can also be justified by the fact that participation in course evaluations is highest for these courses. For the purposes of this study, since one of the two objectives identified is to verify undergraduate attitudes to CA as a means of monitoring progress, responses to the second- and third- year course evaluations mentioned above are not dealt with separately but have been grouped together for analysis. Although courses for which there is an incomplete record of course evaluations are not subject to this analysis, information relative to the students' ability to assess their own progress with CA for these courses is nevertheless represented in the graphs in Annexure 2. That information is also pertinent in that it enables comparison of second- and third-year student attitudes. Thus, it can be seen that in 2009 and 2010, second- and third-year students viewed CA in a similar way, with CA being considered as an 'excellent', 'very good', or

¹² The scale is presented to students as follows: 5 = excellent, 4 = very good, 3 = good, 2 = not very satisfactory, 1 = poor.

¹³ UCT students of French can major in either Business French or French Language and Literature.

¹⁴ "Question 6. Extent to which you could assess your progress during the course."

'good' measure of progress by over 80% of respondents, whereas in 2011 there is a decline in satisfaction of second-year students but a slight increase in that of third-year students. This variation between second- and third-year student responses could, of course, be a function of the evolution of cognitive sophistication but it is not the purpose of this article to examine that hypothesis; it could usefully be the subject of future research.

We now turn our attention to information supplied by second- and third-year students considered together in order to attain the verificatory objective explained above. In 2009, just under 50% of the second- and third-year students who comprised the sample, declared that they found CA to be a 'good' tool for enabling them to monitor their progress, whereas just over a quarter of them (28%) found it 'very good'. The opinion of an almost equal minority of students was divided in considering CA either 'excellent' (9%) or 'not very satisfactory' (10%) (Figure 1, Annexure 3). The results for 2010 vary slightly from those of the previous year (Figure 2, Annexure 3). The percentage of students who consider CA a 'good' way to gauge progress has declined from 49% to 44%, as has the percentage of those who find it a 'very good' measure (23% as opposed to 28%). Significantly less students find CA an 'excellent' way for them to judge their progress (4%) and slightly more than in 2009 deem it to be 'not very satisfactory' (11%). In 2010, some students even register it as 'poor' (2%). During the 2011 academic year, there is at least one significant shift in that unlike the two previous years, more respondents consider CA to be a 'very good' measure (39%) than those who deem it to be a 'good' way the measure progress (33%). Slightly more students than in 2010 but less than in 2009 find it 'excellent' (6%), whereas 12% of those surveyed consider it to be 'not very satisfactory'. Furthermore, contrary to 2009 when no students deemed it to be a 'poor' way for them to judge their progress and unlike 2010 when a small minority of 2% held that opinion, now as many as 10% hold that view. However, it is noteworthy that all respondents did agree to rank the utility of CA as a means to monitor their progress, in stark contrast with 2010 when 14% of students chose not to rank the usefulness of CA (Figure 3, Annexure 3).

The graph presented in Figure 1 below aims to summarise the analysis undertaken with the aim of fulfilling the verificatory outcome. It can be seen that, despite slight variations (particularly regarding student non-ranking of CA), viewpoints held by learners of French at UCT are very similar in 2009 and 2010. It is also evident that students in 2011 feel slightly higher levels of both satisfaction and dissatisfaction regarding CA as a tool for monitoring their progress than did their counterparts in the previous two years. It is possible to conclude, then, that although in the main UCT students of French consider CA to be a 'good' way for them to gauge their progress, they are far from being unanimous in their satisfaction with it. Clearly, CA only partially fulfils one of the objectives that underpinned its adoption in 2004 in that it does not ensure that all learners are aware of their progress and so it does not fulfil the pedagogical objective of guiding them to adapt their learning strategies.

Now that the verificatory outcome of the study has been achieved, we must turn our attention to what can be done to ensure that its correctional outcome is also attained. In this regard, reference to remarks made by students in response to the invitation to comment on the extent to which they could monitor their progress can prove useful. As can be seen from perusal

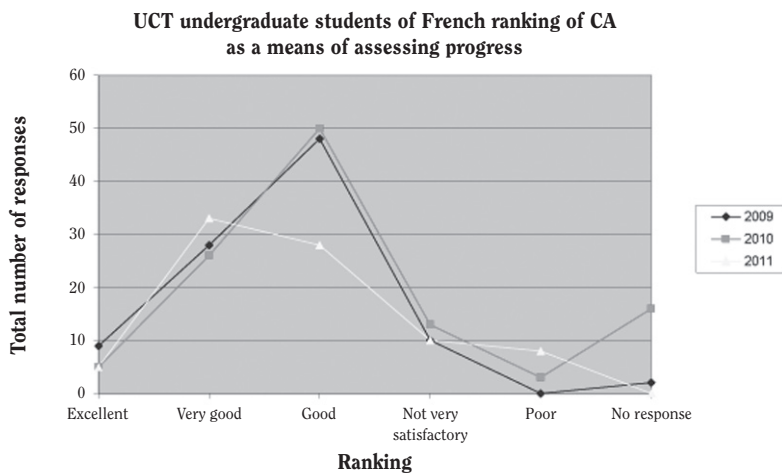


Figure 1: Ranking of CA as a means of monitoring progress by 2nd & 3rd-year undergraduate students of French at UCT

of these comments in Annexure 4, less than a third of the small minority of students who chose to comment perceive any link between the assessment system in operation and their ability to monitor their own progress. The majority interpret the question as an invitation to comment on their own progress and mention personal improvement in various aspects of language acquisition.

As the course evaluation currently stands, learner appreciation of CA as an aid to monitor progress is limited to Question 6 of the course evaluation, whilst also being alluded to in Question 13 (reproduced in Annexure 1). As mentioned in Footnote 14, Question 6 states: “Extent to which you could assess your progress during the course” with a box for the ranking (from 5 to 1) and two lines for a comment. This is undoubtedly insufficiently specific to solicit an accurate or carefully thought-out answer and could, of course, imply that the rankings given by students (as analysed above) do not reflect their true appreciation of the assessment system in operation as a means of monitoring progress. In the future, it will be important to take certain corrective measures. Firstly, in order to have more representative data, student participation must be increased. This could be done by devoting the last language laboratory session to the completion of course evaluations. Giving over that scheduled time to course evaluation questionnaires would have three advantages: it would alert students to the importance of assessing courses; the exercise would be taken more seriously as it would not be eating into free time; and data would be more complete and, therefore, more valid. This, in turn, would ensure that decisions regarding the retention and / or adaptation of CA are based on genuine learner sentiment.

Secondly, I would suggest that no reference be made to progress in Question 13 but that Question 6 be corrected to elicit true reflexion on the part of the respondents. In my view, students’ thoughts should be scaffolded by an initial closed question before proceeding to an open question, as detailed below:

Which assessment system best helps you to monitor your own progress?

Examinations-only OR **Continuous Assessment** Tick as appropriate.

Why?

It will then be important for the teacher-evaluator to verify that answer and to detect any possible anomalies by the inclusion of an additional question. This should ask learners to tick in a series of possible assessment modalities those which they find best help them to judge how they are progressing, for example the end-of-semester examination, weekly corrected assignments done at home, and class tests for each unit of course content. Further cross-verification in the form of two additional, simple, open questions could then enquire why students do not feel that they know how they are progressing and what, in their view, would best remedy that situation. In this way, students could provide further valuable insights into the impacts of CA on progress awareness. Such insights could, for instance, clarify one student comment recorded in the 2011 course evaluation which calls into question the very foundations of CA: “I understand that one needs to encounter the language as much as possible but having assignments and little tests for every little part of the course becomes haphazard and I find myself wondering to what extent it is helpful”.

A third remedial measure is the direct result of student comment canvassed. As can be seen from the comments reproduced in Annexure 4, several students have suggested that, as assignments are assessed, marks should be entered in the Grade Book on the university e-learning platform. Indeed, this would quickly give learners an overall view of their progress and is a measure which the French Section of UCT should adopt with effect from 2012.

Conclusion

The study which is presented in this article aimed to evaluate the system of continuous assessment which has been operational since 2004 within the French Section of the University of Cape Town to assess undergraduate language acquisition, with the objective being, amongst other considerations, to enable students to monitor their progress more effectively than with an examinations-only system of evaluation. The first part of the article sought to present the theoretical framework underpinning that decision. The second section presented the quality control exercise which was implemented with the aim of discovering whether the objective of enabling students to monitor their progress had been achieved. To that end, two outcomes were identified, the first verificatory in nature and the second corrective. Data from those course evaluations for which there was consistent and high student participation during the period of the three-year quality control exercise (2009-2011) were then presented and analysed. In this way, it was possible to verify that the majority of students considered CA to be a ‘good’ way of monitoring their progress. Nevertheless, it is possible to conclude that the adoption of CA has fallen short of fulfilling completely the purpose for which it was initially introduced. Since students are not unanimous in endorsing positively CA as a tool for monitoring progress and in response to the qualitative analysis of student comments during the timeframe of the study, several corrective measures are proposed in this study. From 2012 onwards, the final language

laboratory session of each semester will be given over to the completion of course evaluations. Secondly, marks for all assignments will be entered into the Grade Book on the university e-learning platform so that students have a greater awareness of how they are progressing. Thirdly, student course evaluations, which upon verification appeared to be imprecise, will be reformulated to encourage respondents to reflect on any direct links which they may perceive between assessment modalities and awareness of progress. It will also be important to explain to students at the start of each semester how CA operates. It will, of course, be necessary to undertake a second quality-control exercise of assessment modalities after making those remedial changes and to compare the results to those presented here. After implementation of the corrective measures outlined above, it may emerge from that second enquiry that undergraduate students of French at UCT do in fact feel that CA makes them aware of their progress and helps them to adjust learning behaviour. Alternatively, the majority may well still not perceive purely formative assessment as an excellent aid to progress awareness and may not consider it better than EO in that regard. Clearly, then, future research will need to focus on the merits of differently weighted and integrated combinations of assessment modalities, along the lines that Wiliam recommended more than a decade ago. The somewhat simplistic oppositional paradigm of examinations-only or continuous assessment currently operational within the French Section of the University of Cape Town could be viewed as evidence of the formative-summative tension referred to earlier. Perhaps it should be subject to re-examination if we really want learners to know how they are progressing.

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Annexure 1

SCHOOL OF LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES FRENCH SECTION COURSE EVALUATION

Course: SLL2061S French Language and Literature II B Year: 2010

Please evaluate each aspect of this course by writing one of the following numbers in the box alongside each item:

- 5 = Excellent
- 4 = Very good
- 3 = Good
- 2 = Not very satisfactory
- 1 = Poor

SELF-EVALUATION

1. Your personal effort (participation in class/effort put into homework)
2. Your level of attendance at lectures and tutorials.
3. What class of pass do you expect to get for this course?

Ring one of the classes indicated below.

First	Upper Second	Lower Second	Third	Fail
>75%	74-70%	69-60%	59-50%	<50%

EVALUATION OF COURSE AS A WHOLE

(Comment in the spaces provided if you wish)

4. Structure and coherence of course as a whole

Comment: _____

5. Usefulness of (1) lectures – Histoire Culturelle ; (2) lectures – Langue ; (3) lectures – Stylistique ; (4) lectures – Français et médias ; (5) conversation classes ; (6) lab. sessions

1 2 3 4 5 6

Comment: _____

6. Extent to which you could assess your progress during the course.

Comment: _____

7. Your assessment of the course as a whole

Comment: _____

ASSESSMENT OF INDIVIDUAL LECTURER(S)

A
 Mr. P. Barthezeme
 Histoire Culturelle

B
 Miss. V. Leroy
 Langue

C
 Dr. R. de Oliveira
 Stylistique française

D
 Mrs. A. Gravenor
 Français et médias

E
 Miss. L. Pouthier
 Conversation class

F
 Miss. S. Mutero
 Lang. Lab.

	A	B	C	D	E	F
8. Ability to explain concepts clearly	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Degree of preparedness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. General approachability	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Extent to which you benefited from lectures	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Overall assessment of lecturer's teaching	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. Helpfulness of lecturer's corrections and/or comments (written work or correction of tests/assignments)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Comment: Please make reference to how much you have learned, your progress etc...

YOU ARE ENCOURAGED TO ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS TOO:

14. What did you most like about this course? _____

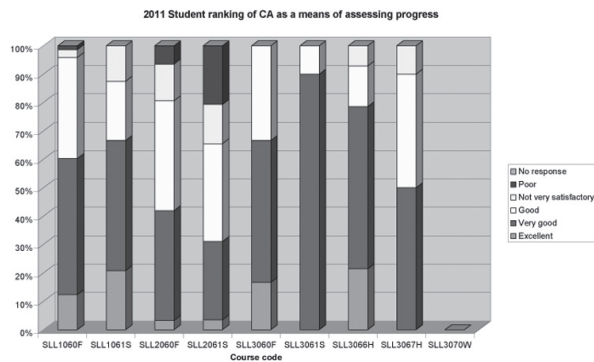
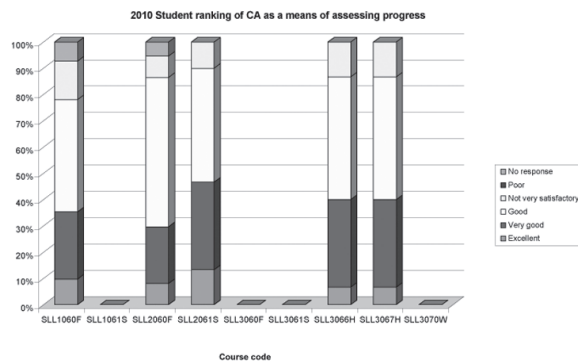
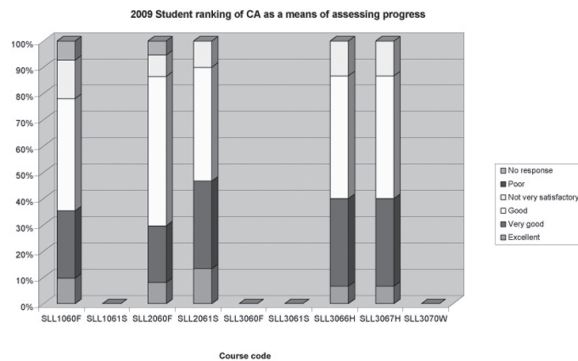
15. What did you like least about this course?

16. How (if at all) do you think this course could be improved?

17. Any further comments?

THANK YOU

Annexure 2



Annexure 3

2009 Student ranking of CA as a means of assessing progress

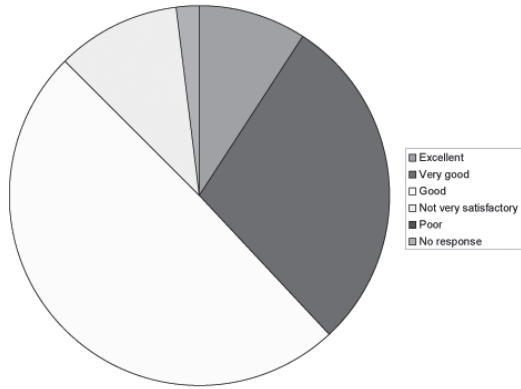


Figure 1: Ranking of CA as a means of monitoring progress by 2009 2nd & 3rd-year undergraduate students of French at UCT

2010 Student ranking of CA as a means of assessing progress

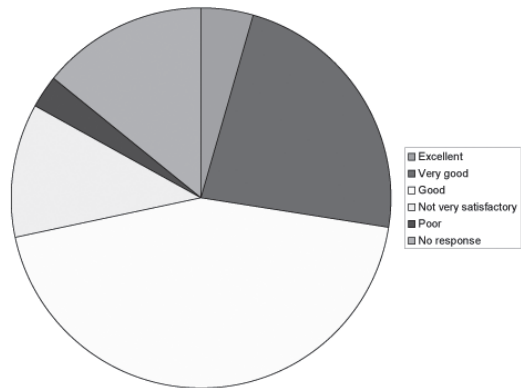


Figure 2: Ranking of CA as a means of monitoring progress by 2010 2nd & 3rd-year undergraduate students of French at UCT

2011 Student ranking of CA as a means of assessing progress

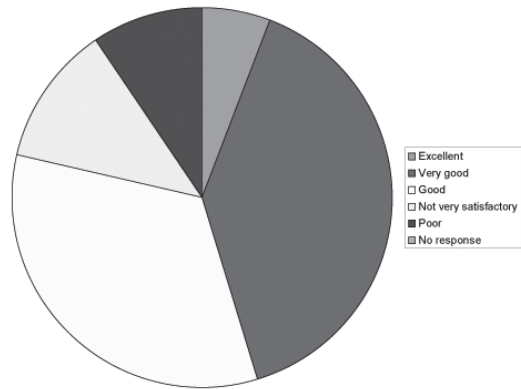


Figure 3: Ranking of CA as a means of monitoring progress by 2011 2nd & 3rd-year undergraduate students of French at UCT

Annexure 4

Student comments concerning CA as an aid to measure progress: 2009, 2010 and 2011 course evaluations

2009

2nd-year French

1. Would do well in one section, then badly in another.
2. My confidence in my French ability has improved and I feel I have a wider command of the language.
3. Have managed to grasp concepts I didn't manage last year.
4. I want to speak French and so I judge according to how much I can say and how much I understand.
5. I feel I have improved my writing and vocabulary. I have deteriorated conversationally though.
6. I find we need more exercises besides the text book Taxi.
7. I feel I can now participate much more fluently in conversation and have a better grasp of French grammar.
8. A lot of the work I did in this course I'd already been introduced to (...) but other than that I think I've shown consistency.
9. The jump from 1st to 2nd was great but progress has been made.
10. Am not so clued up on the system of assessment.
11. I got a bit confused with the weighting and tests but that's because I did not pay enough attention (continually) to the course outline.
12. Marks went up and down according to content.
13. Felt very frustrated at times.

3rd-year French

1. I feel that I have definitely improved in my understanding and my ability to communicate in French.
2. All of the assignments came back timeously with helpful comments.
3. I feel I've improved but there are areas I still find quite difficult.

2010

2nd-year French

1. It would be good if we could see our overall marks on Vula.
2. The only thing I have improved on was my oral skills.
3. I feel like we need to be assessed individually on our oral skills – classes are intimidating.
4. It would be nice to check marks on Grade Book (Vula).

5. There should be more opportunity for listening comprehensions, for speaking and a grammar classe (sic).
6. I personally had a bad semester due to medical problems.
7. Tests were given back quite soon.
8. In some ways there was not enough time to grasp new grammar so it's hard to know if you're improving.
9. are so many assignments it's hard to keep up.
10. Continual assessment works well!

3rd-year French

1. Generally good but would have liked more comments on the essays so I could know how I could improve.
2. I would maybe prefer it if all results were put on Vula. I am always too busy to retrieve marked assignments.
3. I would definitely enjoy more satisfaction if I put in more.
4. A definite progression also seen in evaluation.
5. Received feedback on tests, devoirs and lab work, so was able to assess progress.
6. Good progress in an area of French unknown to me.
7. Good number of assignments and feedback.

2011

2nd-year French

1. Maybe allow students to keep track of their progress (marks wise).
2. Not being able to follow one's progress.
3. I understand that one needs to encounter the language as much as possible but having assignments and little tests for every little part of the course becomes haphazard and I find myself wondering to what extent it is helpful.
4. It is very difficult to track of your progress (sic). Certain things take too much time for what they are.

3rd-year French

1. Uncertainty about what are (sic) marks are.

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