

## **What happens when interim checks are introduced during learning?**

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### ***Rationale***

Increasing learner engagement, assessing progress and deepening understanding have been at the forefront of educational discourse for a number of years. Educationalist Dylan Wiliam noted the detrimental effects of disengagement and developed formative assessment techniques to improve engagement and achievement (Wiliam, 1998). What emerges from his research are the importance of finding out what students have learnt, and feedback. Teachers must therefore employ these techniques to check for understanding before progressing, and ask students for feedback about their learning, as well as providing it.

In doing so, teachers evaluate the impact of their practice on students in order to increase achievement (Hattie, 2009). Hattie conducted a meta-study of more than 200 million pupils, comparing the effects of numerous variables on student achievement, and found feedback to be one of the most effective. His concern, however, is that feedback about the task is infrequent. It therefore seemed appropriate to investigate the effects of frequent student feedback to check for understanding following a task. Hattie states that learning occurs in classrooms where error is tolerated and welcomed, but that teachers must build up trust before students will admit they do not know, making this point in the school year an appropriate period for the intervention. Encouraging learners to admit they do not know and ask for help aligns with Dweck's growth mindset theory (2012).

In Wiliam's BBC series *The Classroom Experiment* (2010), coloured cups are introduced during lessons for students to use as a signal (green- I'm fine, amber- I need help, red- I need urgent help). It is crucial that support is actually provided following this mid-lesson feedback.

## ***Aims***

Bearing in mind that feedback about the task should be regular and students should provide feedback to teachers, this intervention aimed to investigate the effects of introducing interim checks *during* learning, as opposed to the end of a lesson. It was expected that the inquiry would establish:

- whether pupil understanding of the concept would increase as a result
- whether pupil engagement would increase
- the relationship between pupils' actual performance and the outcome of the self-evaluation exercise.

## ***Methodology***

A mixed ability Secondary 1 class with a number of additional support needs was chosen for this intervention. During each lesson, pupils were required to self-assess against that lesson's success criteria. This was done using traffic lights:

- Green- I can do this easily now.
- Amber- I need to practise/revise more.
- Red- I need more support.

To encourage honest feedback, pupils were instructed to close their eyes when showing the teacher their traffic lights. On the first day of the intervention, some changed their colour when the rest of the class closed their eyes, suggesting they were not being honest when they thought others could see. The number showing each colour was recorded each day, as well as the initials of those who showed red. This allowed the teacher to provide those pupils with targeted support. Notes were made about interactions with these pupils following the interim check.

## ***Findings***

The results of the interim checks were as follows (normal class size is 23):

<b>Week 1</b>	<b>Red</b>	<b>Amber</b>	<b>Green</b>
Lesson 1	2	8	11
Lesson 2	3	2	18
Lesson 3	3	1	19
<b>Week 2</b>			
Lesson 1	2	4	17
Lesson 2	1	3	19
Lesson 3	1	1	20
<b>Week 3</b>			
Lesson 1	2	4	17
Lesson 2	not carried out		
Lesson 3	2	6	15
<b>Week 4</b>			
Lesson 1	not carried out		
Lesson 2	not carried out		
Lesson 3	0	4	19

The intervention had both positive and negative outcomes, which can be demonstrated both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Evidently, pupil understanding did increase (as seen in the increase in the proportion of green), although there is little evidence to suggest that this is due to the interim checks rather than increased familiarity with the concept. The lessons that introduced a new concept, and can therefore be assumed to be more challenging, generally saw a higher proportion of red and amber (e.g. Week 1 Lesson 1, Week 3 Lesson 3). In Week 1, while the number of red traffic lights remained the same or increased (due to absences the first lesson), the number of amber clearly decreased, indicating an increase in understanding as pupils progressed through their learning (those who remained red were given targeted, individual support). Pupils' self-assessment generally reflected their actual understanding as demonstrated in their classwork and from the teacher's observation, indicating a correlation between pupils' self-assessment and their actual understanding of the concept.

The second positive outcome is observational but can also be backed up by the results of a pupil survey. Introducing self-evaluation checks during lessons rather than at the end had a positive effect, as pupils had a way of asking for support when they may not ordinarily approach the teacher to ask for help, thus helping them to develop their growth mindset. When surveyed, 58% of pupils would prefer a self-evaluation in the middle, as opposed to the end of the lesson; when asked why, 55% of those pupils stated that they could then ask for help. The checks therefore had a positive effect on these pupils' engagement by providing a focus and an opportunity to evaluate their progress.

However, the pupils who frequently showed their red traffic light were those who frequently require support. As such, the interim checks did not reveal anything that the class teacher did not already know through their own knowledge of pupils. In another survey question, 66% of pupils stated that the interim checks had no effect on them, as they did not require help, although they acknowledged the benefit of this for others.

Another downside was the suitability of this style of interim check for every lesson. It was not always appropriate or possible to stop the lesson to complete an interim check; often it was done towards the end of the lesson, and became a plenary activity. One survey respondent even stated that carrying out the check interrupted the lesson, which may have been detrimental to pupil engagement.

### ***Conclusions***

Introducing interim checks evidently had a positive impact on some, but not all pupils. The observations and survey figures do favour checks carried out during the lesson, although not overwhelmingly. However, these may be better employed in combination with a variety of *Assessment is for Learning* techniques, in order to suit all pupils.

### ***Implications for Future Practice***

Given that a number of the lessons in the intervention period were teacher-led vocabulary drilling lessons, due to the age group involved, interim checks may be more effective during individual or collaborative work, but not teacher-led lessons. Perhaps carrying out checks against the social skills required for cooperative activities, or against punctuation, grammar or writing techniques would be more effective than a general evaluation of pupils' understanding.

### ***Bibliography***

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