VISUAL TOOLS FOR FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN KS3 GERMAN: A CLASSROOM STUDY OF COLOURED CUPS AND MINI WHITEBOARDS

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Introduction

This article explores the use of two visual tools to enhance real-time formative assessment in Key Stage 3 (KS3) German lessons. The need for this research emerged from a formal lesson observation in Year 8, where, despite high student engagement, follow-up questioning revealed that students had varying levels of understanding. This highlighted a key challenge in language learning: making comprehension visible and providing immediate support. This project contributes to that discussion by trialling two strategies—coloured cups and mini-whiteboards—to capture students' understanding at the moment better.

Background of the Problem

As I joined Hartland International School this academic year, and following a formal observation in September, feedback revealed that although students were participating well, their understanding of the content varied greatly. Some could follow the lesson in German, while others struggled to translate key sentences or engaged with the material without fully grasping it. The observer recommended exploring strategies to assess comprehension in real-time. This project aimed to address that gap.

Literature Review

Formative assessment has been widely studied as a method for improving teaching and learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Wiliam (2011) notes that Assessment for Learning (AfL) is most effective when it includes strategies to make student thinking visible. Hattie and Clarke (2019) emphasise that feedback should lead to action and that formative assessment fosters learner autonomy. Hansen (2024) similarly highlights that AfL is not just a means to improve instruction but also a way to encourage reflective learners. This research aligns well with these principles, being focusing on specific tools that make student understanding visible, foster active engagement, and enable quick pedagogical responses.

Methods

This action research used classroom-based strategies to explore how coloured cups and mini whiteboards can support AfL in KS3 German. The guiding questions were:
1. How do these tools help students to show what they understand?
2. Which tool is more practical and informative for the teacher?
3. Do students feel more confident and involved when using these tools?

Methodology

This project followed a cycle of observation, tool selection, implementation, adjustment, and reflection. After identifying the need, I choose to introduce two tools in German lessons: coloured cups (red, yellow, and green) and mini whiteboards. Students used whiteboards for sentence construction, grammar practice, and quick checks. Cups allowed them to indicate their level of understanding without speaking.

Participants

The study was conducted with a Year 8 German group at Hartland International School. Students had two 50-minute lessons per week. Seven students participated in the feedback phase.

Data Collection

Data was collected through student questionnaires, teacher reflection notes, and informal tracking of student engagement and responses.

Data Analysis

Feedback was categorised into three main areas: comprehension, usefulness for the teacher, and confidence. Key findings included:

- Most students found lessons easier to follow.
- Whiteboards improved spelling and sentence construction.
- Cups helped the teacher identify confusion silently.
- Students became more confident and participative over time.

Quotes such as, "*It helps with our concentration and confidence,*" and "*The teacher knows when I do not understand*" reflected these insights.
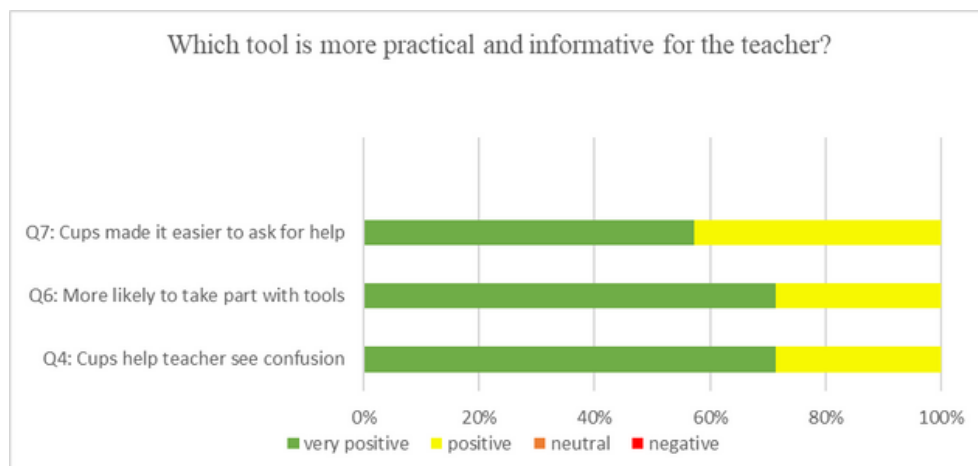
Results

RQ1: Students said the tools helped them understand better and receive help more quickly. (see **Figure 1**)

Figure 1
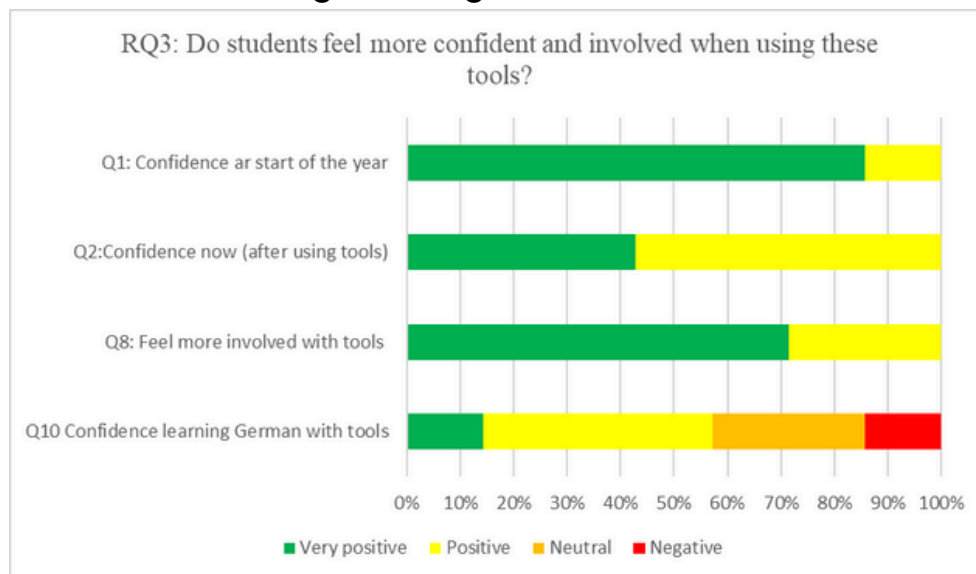**Effectiveness of Learning Tools for Students**
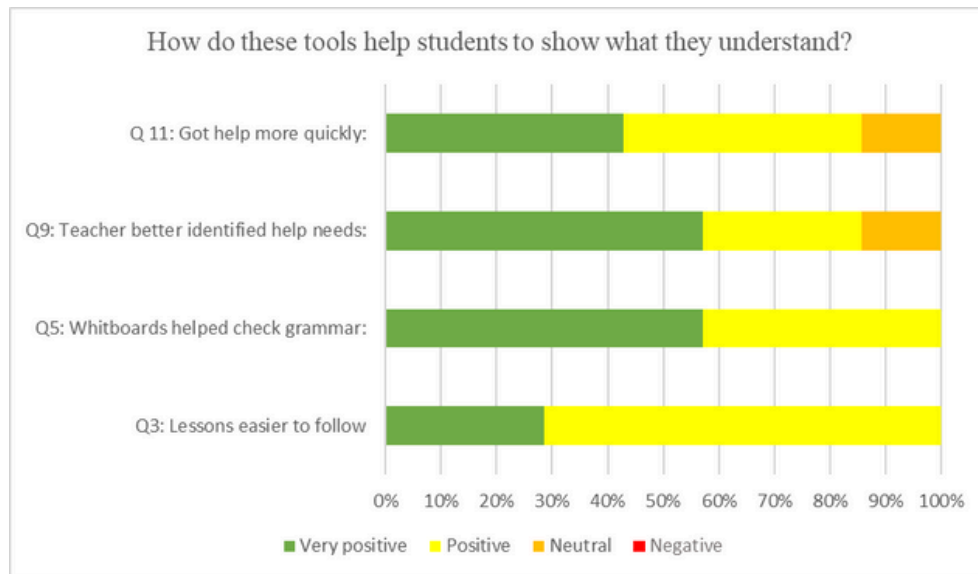
RQ2: Cups clearly showed who was confused, even those who did not usually ask for help. (see **Figure 2**)

Figure 2
Effectiveness of Learning Tools for Teachers

RQ3: Confidence improved, and participation became more consistent across the group. (see **Figure 3**)

Figure 3
Student Confidence in Using Learning Tools

RQ3: Do students feel more confident and involved when using these tools?

- Q1: Confidence ar start of the year
- Q2:Confidence now (after using tools)
- Q8: Feel more involved with tools
- Q10 Confidence learning German with tools

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

■ Very positive ■ Positive ■ Neutral ■ Negative

Discussion and Reflections

As I learned, introducing these tools required some patience. Initially, students misused whiteboards for doodling or off-task writing. I initially lost hope that I could teach students to use the whiteboards properly due to early misuse. However, a brief PD session led by a math colleague helped me recognise the value of investing time in teaching clear routines, which made a significant difference.

From a teacher's perspective, both whiteboards and cups were helpful tools in the teaching process. Whiteboards gave everyone a voice and a chance to make low-risk mistakes. Cups were quieter but very informative when checking general comprehension, especially for for shy students. One boy who had never asked a question before placed a red cup in front of him in the first lesson using them—silently letting me know he needed help. At that moment, I gained insight into how valuable this tool is. After that, he continues to use the cups to demonstrate his level of understanding consistently. Several students were genuinely surprised that I cared whether they understood or needed help. This simple visual system shifted their perceptions and helped create a more open, supportive classroom environment.

These tools supported metacognitive thinking, making students more aware of their own learning needs. They also limited avoidant behaviour; students who usually pretended to work but avoided engaging with the task were forced to think and decide early whether they needed support. There was less room to disengage silently.

This project changed how I think about feedback—I now see AfL not only as a teaching strategy but also as a way to build student self-reflection and autonomy.

Conclusion

1. Visual tools, such as mini whiteboards and coloured cups, can significantly enhance formative assessment in MFL.
2. They empower both teachers and students to act in the moment.
3. With modelling and routine, the tools can transform classroom dynamics and support inclusive, differentiated learning.

References

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