

Innovative Methods for Assessing Students' Performance in the ESP Classroom

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Abstract

Learning is usually assessed through performance, i.e. what students can do with the acquired knowledge and skills. In its turn, assessment (formal or informal, high- or low-stakes, anonymous or public, individual or collective) is an integral part of the teaching and learning process. Student performance is assessed in accordance with the program standards and practices, the overall learning outcomes and the subject-specific overall expectations. This paper aims at presenting and analyzing assessment as part of the teaching and learning process and at illustrating several efficient assessment methods. The first part tackles several issues related to the learning process and to how assessment is an integrating part of it. Furthermore, it analyzes and particularizes assessment, with a special focus on assessment methods. The second part of the paper has an applicative nature and consists of a case study based on the comparison between assessment methods (traditional vs. innovative ones).

Key words: assessment, performance, ESP, learning, experiment

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1. Introduction

Teaching, learning and assessment are interconnected. In order to diagnose problems, and to evaluate the results of the teaching and learning process, teachers turn to assessment. This tool can provide information on what learners have learned and what skills have been improved. In a formal educational institution such as school or university, the act of teaching and learning is comprised of two essential components: curriculum and instruction. However, curriculum and instruction alone represent an incomplete model of teaching and learning in the classroom. Besides knowing what to teach and how to teach it, a teacher must also be able to discover the nature and degree of student learning at any given point in time. Representation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment illustrates the integrated nature of the teaching and learning process.

The way in which teachers can see student learning is through a process known as assessment, and assessment, like teaching, is integrally related to learning. Assessment is defined as the process of using tools and techniques to collect information about student learning. In other words, assessment is the way teachers see their students' learning (Gareis, 2015). Assessment is an integral part of the learning-teaching process. It is constant in an interactive and communicative curriculum. Tests, which are the main tool of assessment, can provide authenticity, motivation and feedback to the learner. In this regard, we should take into account several basic principles. For instance, by means of periodic assessments, teachers can increase the students' motivation and monitor their progress. When students study for assessment they also remember and memorize the information.

There are two main purposes for assessing students according to Harlen (2007), i.e. to inform and make decisions about learning experiences and to report on what knowledge and skills the learner has acquired. As far as assessment for learning is concerned, it is extremely important to create a strong and long-lasting connection between the assessment and learning processes, because

the former should be aimed at promoting, inducing, and reinforcing learning (see Airasian, 2005). By complying with the parameters typical of the assessment for learning, students take more seriously their involvement in assessment activities and become thus the main actors of the learning process: "Teaching, learning, and assessment have to come together and work together if we are to raise students' standards of achievements" (Berry, 2008,p.19).

As a continuous process, assessment helps teachers identify the students' learning problems and difficulties; moreover, they can monitor their student's learning process and provide them with the necessary feedback. In addition, the assessment results can help teachers improve their teaching style/ methods and their students' learning, by adjusting teaching methods to different learning styles, needs and interests.

2. Theoretical background: ways of assessing student performance

Students are usually nervous when it comes to assessment. Many of them get anxious before the test. They feel more comfortable when they do not have to take a test as an assessing method. Assessing students without tests is a more attractive way of evaluating students. During the schooling years, students are assessed many times in different ways. Informal assessment can have different forms, starting with short questions or responses along with comments and feedback. Many teachers assess students during a speaking activity, during classes or on their notebooks, by giving suggestions, writing the correct form of a word, etc. Assessing without tests can include free responses to real-world issues, continuous long-term assessment or creative responses (see Butler and McMunn, 2006).

In the last years, experts have suggested that teachers should go beyond the traditional paper-and-pencil tests, because modern and more effective teaching and learning methods should also trigger alternative assessment forms, involving students in practical activities, debates, problem-solving and essay or report writing. It is noteworthy that, in the literature, the expression "alternative assessment" is often synonymous with other terms such as "authentic assessment", "performance assessment", "performance-based assessment", or "productive assessment"(see Brady and Kennedy, 2005, p. 3; Berry, 2008, p. 82).

Furthermore, by using alternative assessment activities, students feel more motivated and more responsible for their learning process. In addition, the teacher provides them with opportunities to reflect on their own learning and on its outcomes, enabling them to make plans according to their own learning needs, to enhance their learning. Therefore, in alternative assessment, students play an active role in the learning process, offering them continuous feedback. Alternative assessment can reflect student performance in different aspects and domains of achievement. An alternative assessment strategy, such as a project, can more easily provide for the complexity of the learning, the connection among skills, and the need for a more authentic basis for judging student learning.

Students can be assessed for their achievements in real-world or imaginary situations, for example authentic representations of their understanding of the subject matter or application of the knowledge gained from the course to real situations. Different students may approach the same general task in distinctive ways, something that is not possible with traditional assessment when the task is given in such a way as to require students to respond in the same way.

Examples of alternative assessment strategies include portfolios, journals, observations, exhibitions, oral presentations, experiments, interviews, and projects. Alternative assessments can be classified into product and performance, since any performance which is being assessed will take the form of either a product, such as a research paper, or a performance, such as an oral presentation. On the other hand, traditional assessment involves both product and performance. Alternative assessment strategies which are more product-oriented require students to produce or create something to demonstrate their understanding of the learning intentions.

Whether it is product-based or performance-based, alternative assessment has a direct impact on learning, as the learners need to consider the body of knowledge that they have acquired and to select the appropriate concepts, principles and procedures to present that product or performance. However, in our opinion, alternative assessment should not replace tests. According to Harlen (2007, p. 17), testing is "a method of assessment in which procedures, such as the task to be undertaken and often the conditions and timing, are specified". Tests are designed in order to

measure the students' skills, competencies, knowledge or performance in a certain field of study. Most language tests measure the competence of students to read, write, speak and listen in the language they learn. There are tests which are designed to measure specific information about grammar or vocabulary. Test results may give a general opinion of the students' knowledge, but they can also check specific competences (Brown, 2003, p. 3).

Paper-and-pencil tests, also known in the literature as traditional assessment forms, are written tests organized according to certain well-established testing standards (i.e. the content of the test, the administration procedures and the marking criteria of the test are identical for every candidate/student). Moreover, the teacher can administrate different types of tests before, during and at the end of courses or seminars. The key question is the purpose of the test. Different tests, such as progress tests, summative tests, placement tests, diagnostic tests, proficiency tests, are administered for different purposes and are used at different stages of the course as a means of gathering information about students. Language teachers should decide on the type of test for particular groups of learners and particular teaching situations.

It is important to connect assessment with teaching and learning. The instructional objectives should be related to the cognitive domain, including recall of knowledge and other forms of intellectual abilities and skills (see Gottlieb, 2006). Learning intentions and teaching objectives should include thinking skills such as application of knowledge or creating new meaning.

3. Methodology

Assessing student performance can be a difficult task for teachers; therefore, teachers need to be aware of the act they are performing, set realistic objectives, choose the most appropriate methods based on a thorough selection process, set criteria and be as objective as possible. Throughout the years, we have used many assessment methods, trying to give our students the chance to express themselves, to communicate and support their ideas and opinions, to become confident and use English as much as they can in the classroom, at home, wherever and whenever they need it.

Based on a wide array of factors, such as our students' age, level, needs, interests we plan the contents, design lesson plans, activities, teaching aids, and select the assessing tools. Another important criterion for our planning is the profile of our classes. The teaching methods and techniques used are a combination of traditional and modern (alternative) elements, such as digital books and textbooks, handouts, worksheets, grammar and vocabulary books, CDs and videos.

In order to conduct our research, we chose two groups of students from Business Economy, second year of study. In the first group, hereinafter Group A, there were 20 students, aged 20-21, with grades from 5 to 8, rarely 9s or 10s. They enjoyed English because most of them played computer games or listened to music and it helped them understand it better. In the second group, hereinafter Group B, there were 22 students, also aged 20-21. They were good students, with grades between 7 and 10. Both groups had one English seminar every two weeks.

During each English seminar, the teacher (one author of this paper) checked the students' homework and corrected the mistakes together with her students. When the learners did not know how to solve an exercise or if they admitted to not having understood a task, it was explained to them again. Later on, each of them was asked to come to the board and show the class what seemed difficult. They all tried together to practice as much as possible. This was done by the two groups of students.

Applying different (traditional and/or alternative) teaching and assessing methods to both groups, the outcomes were different. For example, when teaching grammar, we used the traditional method of transferring information from teacher to students, like presentation-practice-production, with explanations and examples. We generally wrote some notes on the board, which contained the formulas for the structure we were teaching at that moment, with examples and then we tried together to extract uses, forms. When teaching a new vocabulary lesson, we always began with a pre-speaking activity, such as brainstorming, picture description, open questions related to the topic of the lesson (see Maruntelu, 2006). During these activities, we always noted down the students' mistakes and discussed them after the lesson. We also assessed the students' knowledge and skills informally during the seminar. On a report paper, we noted down grades, points, pluses, minuses, missing homework, speaking/reading/listening/ grammar activities in order to have some data

about the students' development.

The objectives of the research study were to check the reliability of summative tests on 42 students and to present the differences between several assessment methods. As research methods, we used direct observation and the experiment. Observation is one of the most powerful and accessible means through which teachers can organize their teaching and assessing. Through close observation of the students in the process of learning, teachers can learn a lot about how students learn, behave and what their expectations are about learning a foreign language. In order to perform direct observation, we used a) a needs analysis questionnaire; b) a classroom observation report for writing down information about their preparation, performance in class and practice before a test, c) a self-assessment questionnaire to find out what they think about their performance during the English seminar.

Direct observation supplies the teacher with valuable information that can be used to record development progress for each student, to evaluate each student's strengths and weaknesses, to analyze specific problems, to plan the appropriate syllabus and instruction based on each student's needs and to improve teaching practices.

In the second part of our research, we conducted the experiment. The experiment is frequently used as a research method by scholars, especially for drawing up research papers. The researcher manipulates one variable and controls the other variables. There is a control group, in our case Group B, and an experimental group (i.e. Group A); in this research, the main goal was to establish how teachers can develop and improve ways of assessing student performance.

There are a few steps in performing this experimental method. First, the researcher has to identify the problem and define it. Therefore, we had in view methods for motivating students in Group A, improving their self-esteem and social skills (especially through pair work and group work activities). The next two steps are to design and then to conduct the experiment. We thought of analyzing a similar (initial) test administered to both groups. This initial test comprised 5 items. The first one asked the students to choose the correct form of the verb (multiple-choice exercise). The second item was a "fill in the gaps" exercise, where students had to complete the blank spaces with the correct form of the verb. The third task was to fill in the blank spaces of a text with a suitable preposition. The fourth exercise asked students to put the words in brackets into the correct form (derivation) and the last task involved writing a (formal) letter of application.

After analyzing the initial test results, we focused on the weaknesses of both the control and the experimental groups and tried to improve their competence and skills. Moreover, as far as the control group was concerned, we focused only on the students that got lower marks (more exactly on those who did not manage to get at least 50 points) and relied on drills. For this purpose, we planned a few remedial tasks based on repetition, assuming that through practice they must be able to get better results.

Then we administered the final test and checked if they managed to improve their knowledge level and their speaking skills. After these two steps, the data were gathered and analyzed, and we were able to present the conclusions of the experiment.

4. Findings

The results have been compiled from the analysis of all the tools used in the research activities performed during the second semester of the academic year 2016-2017. The students in the experimental group prepared a portfolio with various helpful materials concerning grammar structures, worksheets, a vocabulary notebook with new vocabulary from every new unit/lesson they studied and sometimes they brought dictionaries to perform writing activities. The students seem to be interested in learning a foreign language, but their motivation is not high. The fact that they are not active or that they do not answer voluntarily shows that maybe they feel insecure as far as their knowledge of English is concerned; moreover, they may feel embarrassed in front of their classmates or they may fear that the teacher would give them a low grade if their answers were not correct.

The results of the self-assessment questionnaire applied to the experimental group showed that learners consider themselves situated between levels 2 (bad) and 4 (good), which is similar to our informal assessment. This means that students are aware of their performance and that they know

what they are good at and what areas need improvement: listening (there is no student with good or very good listening skills); speaking (there is no student with very good speaking skills); writing (there is no student with very good writing skills); grammar (no student self-assessed himself/herself as very good; only one student said that she is good at grammar); in terms of reading, pronunciation and vocabulary, only one student self-assessed himself/herself as very good.

After analyzing the results of the observation report and the questionnaire, we designed a needs analysis form/sheet for the experimental group. First, students had to rank the most important things that they need English for, from 1 to 10, 1 being the most important and 10 the least; they had to choose between travel, jobs, reading, emigration, general interest, study, exam, friendship, relationship and conferences. The students' answers were influenced by their age, needs and interests. Thus, many of them placed friendship and relationships on the first place because they use social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, in order to connect to other people and they have to speak English in order to communicate with their friends all over the world. Secondly, they selected *jobs and emigration* because, after graduation, they either want to work in multinational companies or to work abroad. Thirdly, they chose *travel* because many of them connect learning a foreign language only to the necessity of knowing it when travelling. The fourth place is occupied by *general interest*, meaning that students want to know English well and to be able to understand it.

Second, they had to write five things they would like to be able to do better in English (e.g. write an application letter, speak with friends, clients, read books, in the working place, write formal letters, play online games, etc.). The results reveal that almost half of the students (i.e. 45%) are interested in learning and speaking English as general interest. In addition, the same students want to enhance or develop their communication skills (involving listening skills and oral and written production) for the purpose of connecting and communicating with their friends from abroad. Moreover, a quarter of them stated that in the future, they would like to use the English language at work, while 15% want to move to another country and, as such, consider that the English skills are a prerequisite for success. 10% of the surveyed students want to travel to other countries and are interested in using English during their trips. Last but not least, one student expressed her desire of being able to write in English better.

Third, they had to specify which things (i.e. reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, presentations, tests, projects) they want or need to study more, by marking the box and adding a comment to explain why they chose that answer. This item was designed to find out what they want or need for their language learning. Among the pleasant activities, they mentioned listening, speaking, role play and of course using English as a social media tool on the internet and in the society. They also like to do projects and their reason is that they have fun when they are part of a project team. They get involved and they feel useful. Their least favorite activities are writing and pronunciation, grammar practice and tests.

Fourth, they had to specify what they find enjoyable, boring, easy and difficult when studying language. Their answers show that all of them enjoy reading interesting and funny texts that also improve their general knowledge and keep them up to date with the news from different areas; moreover, they are also interested in teamwork activities. They also enjoy dialogues and role-play because they can express themselves and these activities are more interactive. Listening activities are also enjoyable because the students want to improve their pronunciation. As expected, they get bored when they have to do grammar exercises (through teaching and practicing). They are more active when they have vocabulary exercises and when they know the correct answers. Some even get frustrated because they did not get the chance to answer. Another difficult activity, besides grammar, is doing homework. They do not like it although they know it is useful.

Fifth, they had to specify how much time they spend studying per day. Most students spend between 1 and 2 hours per day studying, doing homework, projects and anything that has to do with academic tasks for the next day/week.

The initial test results emphasize the differences between the two groups involved in the experiment, i.e. the control and the experimental group. Thus, the average grade shows that the students from the experimental group encountered certain difficulties when solving the test's tasks and exercises. The general average of the group was 7.25; the highest grade was 9.40 and the lowest grade was 5.1. As far as the control group is concerned, the general average of the group

was 7.52; the highest grade was 9.70 and the lowest grade was 4.70. This shows that there are slight differences between the results of the two groups.

As a measure of improvement, the students from the experimental group were given five remedial plans, based on modern, student-centered learning and teaching methods; as far as the control group was concerned, we decided to design three remedial plans only for a few students, i.e. to give them extra work and to help them overcome their difficulties. It is noteworthy that we used traditional, teacher-centered learning and teaching methods and activities with the students in the control group, such as drills, memorization, translations. According to the remedial plan they have received, all learners had to finish the revision and present their extra work. The average grade obtained by the experimental group on this second test was 8.52. They still made mistakes when they used the comparative forms. However, they managed to understand the tasks and have improved their knowledge about the structures required, showing that extra work and remedial plans can improve learning. As far as the control group was concerned, the average grade on the second test was 8.15, i.e. less than the average grade of the experimental group. Although some verb forms and prepositions were still mistaken, nobody scored below 60 points, and the students improved their knowledge. These results show that after the students from the experimental group had done extra work and had practiced more according to their level and higher, they managed to pass the second test and their results were even slightly higher than those of the control group.

5. Conclusions

This paper aimed to illustrate the importance of assessment for the teaching/learning process and to discuss some concepts which may help teachers of English improve their teaching and assessing activities. Moreover, our research checked how assessment can be improved by taking into account a wide range of factors, such as our students' motivation, needs and interests, self-esteem, general and English knowledge, reasons for studying English as a prerequisite for their future job and career progression. The results showed that the students' performance was higher when they got motivated (through attractive topics, discussions and even debates, but also through presentations, research and internet-based activities) and interested during the English classes due to the teacher's attention paid to more communicative, student-centered teaching methods, student's different learning styles, interests related to their future job, social and entrepreneurial skills.

In conclusion, teachers need to take into account various ways of assessing students' performance when planning, designing, conducting and evaluating activities. Teachers need to engage students in the teaching/learning process and activate their thinking skills. While learning is an individual process, it can be enhanced by teachers' methods and concern.

6. References

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