

A Useful Chart for Providing Self-Assessment Opportunities to Students

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Abstract

When learning something, it is of paramount importance to evaluate our progress during the several steps involved in the process. Providing an assessment environment helps our students to reflect constantly about their performance and the things they should avoid or do as to attain better results. It is also a necessary activity for helping them to learn effectively the English language. As they become aware of the possibilities that offers using a tool allowing them to assess their learning and performance, their proficiency, monitored in this type of environment, shapes the expected results.

This article presents an experience based on the use of an assessment chart provided to students to help them assessing themselves when learning the English language. Professors involved in the application of the chart referred to the changes occurred in the students' performance and their awareness about certain elements that they were not able to identify and control previously to the implementation of the chart. After that, they considered them as of great importance for evaluating their performance when learning the English language both as learners and as professors to be.

Keywords: assessment, evaluation, performance

1. Introduction

Since Gordon Allport (1968) talked about "learning to learn" it has become a necessity for learners not only to learn the content to be received, but also to learn how to learn. This change in the learning paradigms demanded from teachers the necessity to be aware during the teaching-learning process as to think, apart from the act of teaching certain content, in the learning strategies that they could teach their students. Learning to learn enables students to think reflexively about what to do at any time. Thus, control, within the ELT, is handed down from professors to students.

For achieving this state students need to evaluate themselves through all their learning and performance. One way to provide evaluation lies upon the basis of what we call assessment.

This article proposes an approach to the assessment process while reflecting on an experience based in the use of an assessment chart provided to help students (teachers in training) at Universidad de Oriente from the Foreign Languages specialty, included in the Faculty of Education on Social Sciences and Humanities in Santiago de Cuba.

2. Development

Before deepening on the topic under analysis it is a necessity to refer to some concepts which underlie in this work.

There are different definitions in the field of education in general. Different authors, following their own principles, lines of thought, beliefs and ideas have worked on it. However, they all come to the point that EVALUATION is a pedagogical category.

Evaluation is an integral component of the teaching-learning process and it consists on the systematic gathering of information for the purposes of decision making. It uses both quantitative methods (like tests), qualitative methods (like observations, students 'questionnaires, etc.), and value judgments.

As a component of the teaching-learning process, say objectives, content, methods and teaching aids; evaluation becomes a dynamic and systematic part of it. All together form a dialectical-unity.

The information gathered for evaluation is done through assessment which does not include in itself value judgments. Assessment is the continuous and ongoing process of gathering information that is used during evaluation. This latter, includes the process of drawing conclusions based on the information collected during assessment, and the reporting of those conclusions. Testing is the quantitative side of evaluation and it is the use of any procedure for measuring ability, knowledge or performance through tests. So, the old view of seeing testing and evaluation as two separated elements from teaching and learning, both in theory and practice has become obsolete and divorced from objective reality

Thanks to the outcomes of evaluation teachers can have useful information about the efficiency of classroom work. Therefore, evaluation must be designed to encourage continued learning and there should be a positive attitude towards it. Evaluation shouldn't be used as punishment, threatening the students with a non-pedagogical position on the part of the teachers, creating a sense of fearfulness and insecurity on the part of the students. It can be seen both as a result and as a process, as a summative and as a formative process since it can provide valuable information that is relevant to students, teachers, parents, directives that are concerned with the teaching-learning process. It provides evidence of the results of learning and instruction and hence feedback on the effectiveness-educative side of the teaching programs itself.

Evaluation has an important element. It should help the teacher to teach more effectively and to adjust his teaching in accordance with the needs and the level of the students and include remedial work. If evaluation (testing) is left until the end of the semester, the diagnostic function of testing is undermined and the remedial work becomes impossible.

Thus, evaluation can be seen both as a result and as a process, as a summative and as a formative process, since it can be a valuable tool for providing information that is relevant to several concerns in language teaching. It can provide evidence on the results of learning and instruction.

Evaluation accomplishes different functions. They are isolated for pedagogical purposes because in fact, they interact and form a dialectical whole.

Let's deepen into the educative function of evaluation:

- An educative function
- An instructive function
- A diagnostic function
- A developmental function
- A control function

When evaluation is well-structured and correctly applied, becomes an important factor of high educative value because it favors a responsible attitude towards the independent study, stimulates the will to succeed and the spirit of laboriousness. Studying becomes a pleasure rather than a duty, a must. It also favors the educative influences of the school, the family, and the students' collectivism. It achieves its supreme educative value through self-assessment or self-evaluation.

There are different types of evaluation in the teaching learning process taking into account different criteria

According to other approaches assessments could be: traditionalists (structuralist nature), communicative, etc.

Other types could be, of course, bearing in mind the objectives teachers pursued. If the teachers take into account the frequency:

A. FREQUENCY

_ Systematic Assessment

_ Partial Assessment

_ Final Assessment

SYSTEMATIC ASSESSMENT

If the ASSESSMENT is done during the development of a class .It is also called frequent evaluation and could be a daily control or a previous control class and it can prove that the learners are or are not ready for the new content and thus their teaching could be a waste of time since language is a system of subsystem.

PARTIAL ASSESSMENT

Partial assessment covers certain periods and partial objectives and higher level of students learning.

I.e. Mid-Term-Test

FINAL ASSESSMENT

It aims at the essential objectives of the academic course and it covers a semester or a whole course

B. LEVELS OF ASSIMILATION

According to the level of the students or cognitive level of assimilation, evaluation could be of recognition, reproduction, application and creation.

Other Types:

- Proficiency Test
- Achievement Test
- Progress Test
- Diagnostic “
- Placement “
- Peer and self-evaluation
- Discrete point tests
- Integrative tests
- Norm-reference
- Criterion reference
- Portfolio

When evaluation is well- structured and correctly applied, it becomes an important factor of high educative value and favors a responsible attitude towards the independent study, stimulates the will to succeed and the spirit of laboriousness. Studying becomes a pleasure rather than a must. It also favors collectivism and strengthens the educative influence of the school, family and community. For this reason it recommendable to design an evaluation strategy

The Foreign language evaluation has specific characteristics because the acquisition of a language constitutes a complex and dynamic process, since language is both a means and an end in itself. Therefore, language evaluation requires to precise:

- The level of mastery reached by the learners in terms of (knowledge – habits –abilities)
- The quality of the mastery achieved
- Suggestions to be followed by teachers and students once they have the outcomes
- The remedial work that is required.
- Orientations for bettering-up and enriching the students’ knowledge-habits and abilities.

Independent work definitely leads to autonomous learning and thus to self-evaluation on self-assessment.

Self-education, self-instruction, self-assessment, self-connection, all together, are genuine representation of a superior degree of independence on the learners side and reveals self-control, self-consciousness. Teachers become facilitators, tutors, mentors. Self-assessment procedures can be developed departing from the class itself like:

- Comparing some exercises done in class with the correct answers and learners reflecting on them.
- One learner answers the exercises on the board (model) and then the teacher asks about the ones who did the tasks in the same way. Teachers should pay attention to the algorithms of the exercises and specify the moment in which students fail.
- Using dictation for establishing phoneme-grapheme correspondences.
- Checking composition and observing the requisites they have to follow to consider them worthy.

- Giving the learners in advance the invariant, standard actions necessary for peer and self-assessment either quantitatively (2-3-4-5) or qualitatively indicators (originality, fluency, accuracy, correctness, economy, flexibility, creativity, vocabulary choice, relevance, etc.)
- Using surveys or interviews at the end of a unit or period to know what was weak and best understood in the teaching-learning activities.

By being involved in the process, the students will feel much more responsible for their own learning but the teacher should give them orienting points so they can monitor themselves and regulate their performances. Otherwise, there is the risk of overestimating or underestimating their performances.

3. Assessment Definition

In a general sense assessment is, according to Merriam-Webster's definition, the action or an instance of assessing and assess means to determine the rate or amount; or to make an official valuation.

Assessment, from a didactic perspective, has been defined and discussed by several authors as Foucault (1975), Alderson (1986, 1995), Almond (2001), Fulcher & Davidson (2004) among others. It is conceived as a systemic and continuous activity which is integrated within the educative process and has as purpose to provide the necessary information to make better the learning process, facilitating guidance and help to students on their performance. In other words, it allows us to gather or collect the necessary information about the learner's progress and achievement using different techniques and tools. It is convenient to say that assessment and testing are not the same. Assessment is less formal than testing.

4. Benefits of Assessment

Assessment should be a crucial element within the teaching-learning process no matter the educative level or tendencies followed concerning education because of its several benefits. The importance of assessment rests on the fact that:

- 1-It provides professors with the opportunity to gather information about the students' current condition regarding the fulfillment of learning goals (what professors expect from students).
- 2-It helps professors to conduct the process itself by grading the content and goals according to every student's own pace (what professors can do).
- 3-It provides the students with the opportunity to assess themselves upon the basis of reflexive thinking about their performance (what students should expect from themselves).
- 4-It provides the students with the opportunity to plan a strategy in short or long term for dealing with their insufficiencies detected (what is expected by the students' behalf from so on).
- 5-It provides the students with the opportunity to develop their autonomy as learners.

5. Types of Assessment

Mary Spratt, Alan Pulverness and Melanie Williams consider in their book entitled TKT that there are several types of assessment and classifications assumed. Other criteria and classifications are added by Common European Framework.

Considering the level of formality, there may be two types: informal assessment and formal assessment. Informal assessment is used when students are doing something and professors make comments about the students' performance. Formal assessment is used when tests or exams are applied to students as to give them a mark or grade.

Considering the period within the term in which the assessment is done, there may be: diagnostic tests, placement tests, formative assessment or proficiency tests. All these ways of assessing are based generally on formal assessment.

Considering the person that evaluates, there are three types of assessment: self-assessment, peer-assessment or professor assessment. When a student evaluates himself, it is said that he uses self-assessment; when another student evaluates him, it is said to be peer assessment; and when professor evaluates him, it is called professor assessment. Students should be trained on receiving and doing assessment in every possible way.

5.1 What to Assess?

In a teaching-learning environment professors could assess more than what they can imagine. Traditional paradigms had set only the content as the most important element to assess. However, nowadays language researchers and professors agree on the necessity to expand the framework concerning the aspects to be assessed. Common European Framework proposes a very attractive and challenging group of elements distributed among competences. We may assess general competences such as declarative knowledge (savoir), skills and how to know (savoir-faire), existential competence (savoir être) and ability to learn (savoir apprendre).

5.2 How to Build a Good Assessment Environment in Your Classroom

It is a regular tendency that students become nervous or stressed when they hear words such as “evaluation”, “mark”, “rank” and “assessment”. It happens because they perceive that providing a mark for them will automatically classify them as “good” “medium” or “bad” students, and they are mostly afraid of that.

Professors must help their students to change their appreciation about what assessment is. In fact, students need to understand that the process of assessing is richer than a final mark (this one represents the final step - ended product - and a little part of the process). These are certain things professors can do to build up a good pro-assessment environment in their classrooms.

-Creates a positive-reflexive attitude on your students' behalf regarding their mistakes and errors.

-Teach your students the benefits and necessities of assessment.

-Be an example by assessing yourself and asking your students to evaluate your lesson.

As students become aware of the chances provided by using assessment to measure their learning, performance and proficiency, the results will increase qualitatively.

5.3 An Experience Assessing Students in the Specialty on Foreign Languages

Professors who teach the subject “Integrated English Practice I” at Universidad de Oriente from the Foreign Languages specialty, included in the Faculty of Education on Social Sciences and Humanities in Santiago de Cuba perceived that the majority of their students found difficult to adapt to the new studying style from university and knew almost nothing about how to evaluate their learning process concerning the English language.

The teaching staff conceived as strategy the elaboration of a chart that students could use for assessing their development at the learning and use of the English language, considering their level (1st year of the career). Professors consulted several bibliographies and the syllabus as to be sure which elements include within the chart.

After having a time with students to explain them how to work with it, professors and students started using the chart. Observation has demonstrated so far that it has provided us with the opportunity to train our students to think reflexively about their daily performance and proficiency when learning and exercising the English language. When students use the chart, they know which elements must take into account as to enhance and assess their performance objectively.

We have also prepared some texts including topics related to assessment, learning strategies, multiple intelligences, how to study efficiently, among others, to provide a theoretical knowledge and basis useful for their assessment.

5.4 Features of the Chart

The chart has eight areas that could be used for providing assessment at any time. Using descriptors or elements in the assessment tool help us to focus both, learners and teachers, on an action-orientated approach. These areas are related with important elements that allow students to evaluate themselves when learning the content. These are: 1) motivation 2) oral language 3) written language 4) learning strategies 5) participation and practice 6) interaction 7) discipline and 8) personal development. Every area has 5 items; so, in total, there are 40 elements to consider. These items are presented in form of questions as to let the students to think reflexively.

All these items let us assess our students concerning their performance at the use of language, their attitudes toward the subject, the learning strategies to use in order to learn, the type of relationship they could build in a classroom environment with their partners and the conducts they are expected to assume during a lesson. In short, it is more than a group of didactic elements because it also includes educative elements among others.

The chart puts the students in situations where they have to assess themselves in a non-conventional way considering elements that go beyond a simple mark. The chart is accompanied with brief instructions devoted to students about how to use it.

5.5 How to Work with the Chart

The chart permits professors and students to interact with it in non-fixed patterns. Since students are the ones in charge of their learning, professors have granted them with the chance to select from time to time the elements to be assessed in. Students may be assessed in one element, in two or even in all of them at the same time. We found better to start working with one element and include others, step by step, at their own paces.

Another way is to select one item per area. Thus, professors have the chance to deal with all the areas at the same time. After several sessions, professors could include another item and go increasing the number periodically.

Numbers...or letters?

We also found viable to provide not only an evaluation ranked in numbers (from 1 to 5) but also in letters (Y / N).

5.6 Evaluation Chart

What is this?

The material you have in your hands is an evaluation chart. It may be used for evaluating yourself or to evaluate your classmates when you are learning the English language.

Why?

Assessment (evaluation) is very necessary because it allows you to know your current situation concerning strengths or weaknesses in learning a language in relation to a particular area.

So, accept the challenge and try to provide self-assessment (evaluating yourself) or peer-assessment (evaluating others) to determine your proficiency at the use of the language during classes.

Which are the features of this chart?

The chart has 3 columns: the first one is for the element or area, the second for the criteria you will use and the third for the mark or letter you will write down when evaluating.

The chart has 8 areas in which you can be evaluated. Of course, you don't have to evaluate yourself in all of them at the same time, but if you feel like doing this, that sounds great! Each area has 5 elements. So, in total you will have 40 elements, but don't be scared.

As you can see, the elements are presented in form of questions because they will help you to think reflexively.

How to work with it?

The final column, which is devoted to marks, is for providing a quantitative evaluation (you can also discuss with professor the possibility to use letters instead of marks). The evaluative range may move in a scale from 1 to 5 (1 for the lowest and 5 for the highest). Your final marking is determined by the total amount of points you gather from all the elements within a particular area (final score). Remember that you may evaluate yourself in one area, more than one or all of them at the same time.

There are two ways for computing. First, you may sum all the elements upon the basis of 25 points or provide the averaged calculating on the basis of the total amount of elements considered.

Suggestions to work with this chart

1-You should keep a record to see how well you improve and overcome your previous marks.

2-Even when you provide a general note, observe carefully how the balance among areas behaves. So, if you have 3 areas that have reached the maximum mark, you know you should focus now on the others lacking attention.

3-From time to time you may exchange experiences with your partners or ask them to evaluate you and vice versa. (You may also ask your professor to do this)

4-Try to plan strategies to accomplish in short or long term as to overcome difficulties you may have.

5-Encourage yourself to ask for your professor or partners' advice, suggestions or guidance concerning evaluating yourself or setting strategies to improve your level.

-May this chart help you on the way you learn the English language (1st year teacher staff)-

Elements Questions / Evaluation Criteria Mark

Motivation Did I have any expectations about the lesson before it started?

Did I feel motivated toward the lesson I received?

Did I feel the necessity to participate before my teacher asked me to do it?

Did I participate willingly when professor ordered me to do it?

Did I feel fine after participating / taking part on the activity?

Oral Language Did I pay attention when my professor and partners talked?

Did I understand my professor and partners when they talked?

Did I speak enough during the lesson?

Did I speak without too much pronunciation mistakes?

Did I speak fluently (without too much hesitation)?

Written Language Did I pronounce the words I read in a good manner?

Did I pronounce the words I read fast and without erring too much?

Did I write without too much spelling mistakes?

Did I write a lot of ideas in a short time?

Were the ideas that I wrote, written correctly?

Learning Strategies How much aware (focused) I was when receiving the new content/explanation?

Was I conscious of using any particular learning style on that situation?

Did I use any strategy to fix anything that was difficult for me?

Was I aware of my own and other's mistakes?

Did I do anything to correct my / others' mistakes when I / they made them?

Elements Questions / Evaluation Criteria Mark

Participation and Practice Did I participate during the lesson?

Did I participate frequently during the lesson?

Was my participation good? (Was it helpful and revealing for others?)

How good I was integrating the elements of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary?
integrating the four abilities?

How good I was

Interaction Did I feel fine practicing with my partners?

Did I receive help from my professor when I needed it?

Did I receive help from my partners when I needed it?

Did I offer assistance when I had the chance to help others?

Did I improve my relationship with the group by means of the lesson?

Discipline Was I respectful about following professor's commands / orders?

Did I respect others' opinion?

Did I behave properly?

Did I help to maintain discipline within our classroom?

Did I help to take care about our class organization and cleanness?

Personal Development Was the lesson a new experience for me?

Did I learn anything new?

Did I have the opportunity to learn anything new from others?

Did I expand my knowledge about any other matter apart from the study of the language?

Did I have the opportunity to link the subjects treated with any personal experiences of my own?

6. Conclusion

Taking into consideration the results achieved in this investigation, and the effectiveness of using this tool for providing assessment, the authors of this paper arrived to the following conclusions:

Assessment is a necessary element within the ELT that could become a triggering factor in a conscious and reflexive learning and performance when our students learn the English language. It could also boost learners' autonomy and independence from professors. Finally, and no less important, assessment can change students' perception about the nature of measuring their performance, achievements and failures, if professors provide an authentic, challenging and transforming assessment environment.

The authors believe that using assessment tools, as the one presented, will bring new opportunities to our students to overcome old stigmatized conceptions regarding evaluation letting them to appreciate the value and benefits assessment offers to them as learners.

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