Evaluation of communicative performance

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Summary:

   The aim of this paper is to shed light and attract foreign-language practitioners' attention on an important variable in language teaching; that of evaluation. The focus is much more on the fact that the techniques used for the assessment purpose in English departments do not match with the theoretical expectations targeted through teaching English as a foreign language in Algeria. A case study (Batna University) is mentioned here to illustrate from field experience that the theory of Foreign language Evaluation is not well conceived to be put into practice . The overall problem is that we teach   a foreign language for communication   purpose , but evaluate only the written aspect of it while it is expected that evaluation should concern both the written and the oral aspects of the language equally.

الملخص:

يهدف هذا المقال إلى لفت انتباه مدرسي الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية إلى نقطة هامة جدا و هي التقويم التربوية يجدر ذكره هو أن طرق ووسائل التقويم غير متوافقة مع الأهداف المسطرة نظريا .ذكرت دراسة حالة هذا للاستدلال تجريبيا بان المفهوم النظري لتقويم قدرات الطالب في اللغة الإنجليزية غير مجسد ميدانيا بالإضافة إلى هذا فان الإشكال المطروح هو أن الهدف من تدريس اللغة الأجنبية هو تمكين الطالب من الاتصال بواسطتها غير أن تقويمه يخص الجانب الكتابي على حساب الجانب الشفاهي مما أدى الى اختلال التوازن بين التدريس والتقويم.

Introduction:

Field experiments and experience show that in the English departments the more learners progress in their courses the less they are evaluated on the oral and   phonological aspect of the language they are learning. The focus in the last stage of their training (third and fourth years) tends to neglect learners' mastery of oral communication in the foreign language , because learners take more written courses than oral ones. In addition , success and / or   failure   is   determined   only through written exams. Furthermore, official   texts and directives assert that Teaching English as a Foreign language in Algeria   aims at enabling communication in the   target   language. Meanwhile, courses distribution in the   English   department   programs show   the imbalance between what the theory suggests and what goes on in practice. In fact ,   two oral courses against eleven written ones that students follow throughout the four years develop the skill of writing on behalf of the skill of speaking. Contradictory enough, this learner- once a teacher- will need to speak more than to write

There is evidence to suggest that evaluating communicative performance   in the   department   of English studies at Batna University ,and other universities, is a matter   of debate . On the one hand, learners in this department receive   less   courses on the oral aspect of the language. They, inevitably, have few chances to be assessed on their oral performances. On the other hand , these same students continue facing difficulties in their future task as teachers   of   English in secondary   schools   mainly. The phenomenon of the linguistic incompetence is remarkably witnessed among these teachers in workshops and   seminars organized by Inspectors general   of   English. One indicating factor is   that these green teachers, themselves , assert that the four -year term English training they followed at the University   did not sufficiently prepare them for such a task as this .

A-   Assessment and/or Evaluation

In the field of education and particularly foreign language teaching/learning, the common belief is that evaluating learning is an educational strategy which reports to teachers ,as evaluators , valuable information upon which instructional decisions can be made .This strategy can also serve as feedback to teachers and to learners on how well both teaching and learning have been successful.

Best theories were set for teachers .Different types of evaluations are suggested . Each of which determines learners' mastery of a given, skill needed for a given purpose .It is the type of the skill required on behalf of the learner that dictates the kind of the evaluation most appropriate to be used .

There are three types of evaluation that occur regularly throughout the academic year : Diagnostic, Formative ,and Summative evaluation. They are all concerned with holding judgments and making decisions about an individual learner or groups of learners. Meyer and Simonard Cited in DeLorme (1992) report that :

"…mais évaluer , c' est aussi apprécier , critiquer: bon élève…

enfant appliqué …bavard… »(P.92)

This means that evaluating does not mean only scoring a test , although testing is the fundamental procedure in evaluation. Rather ,evaluating means , as Wallace (1997) put it:

" putting a value or an estimation of worth upon

someone or something".(P.121)

This is to say that we may evaluate someone , a colleague , for instance , when we say he/ she is a good teacher .We may also hold a judgment on a syllabus and say it is impossible to go through, or it is really useful .But most importantly , we evaluate a learner and say he /she is successful and passes to the next class.

Assessment and evaluation are integral components of the teaching /learning process ; in that the central intention is to orient and improve both learning and teaching. The undeniable link assessment has to teaching is best expressed by Spandel and stiggins (1990) in the following words:

" in effective learning environment , assessment and

instruction are inexorably linked"(P.ix)

The link   between these two processes is perceived in the sense that effectively well planned assessment and evaluation can promote learning. The argument , here , is that assessment data assists the teacher in planning and adapting for further instruction. In this sense , the Saskacheawen education (1998) reports that   teachers can enhance students' understandings of their own progress by involving them in gathering their own data.Such participation makes it possible for students to identify personal learning goals.

Teachers generally gather information about students from the scores these latter have obtained in tests .What is worth stating here is that scoring is considered as an evaluation not only by students , but by teachers as well.Delorme (1992) who investigated this issue concludes that:

" Les présentation   traditionnelles des élèves   ,   des enseignants ,

et des parents convergent généralement pour associer et confondre   la   notion   de   notation   et   celle d'évaluation ».(P.22)

In most cases , this is true . Students generally develop different attitudes towards the mark , and apprehend the nature of the task assigned to them in different manners. They often show anxiety as to whether the task they have to perform is to be graded and , thus , constitutes part of their evaluation ; or rather it is simply an other way to keep them busy.Perceiving things this way means that students make more efforts if their performances   in a given task   will be scored .They will certainly do the same task but with more ease and less anxiety when the work assigned to them is not an evaluation or part of it. To learners , what matters most is the final mark they get at the end of the year, for indeed , it is the final mark which confirms success or failure .

B .Empirical Research Results

This part shows the results we obtained after four three years of field work. The investigation was carried out in the department of English at the university of Batna .The aim was to underline teachers' intentions, as well as students perceptions, of the present way of English language evaluation .Our other

intention was to highlight the imbalance between the language proficiency developed and the type of the evaluation used in this same Department.

Teaching and evaluating communicative competence in the department of English at the university of Batna are far from being accurately carried out. The problem of evaluation seems to be highly linked to many factors, not in all instance academic.

Teachers and learners agree that most conflicts between them originate from the lack of a unified understanding and use of evaluation. Among teachers, the same apprehension of the situation is shown. If the majority of teachers acknowledge that evaluation was not part of their training programs as language teachers, in our view most misunderstandings and misuses of assessment stem from this very same factor.

To learners, personal relation slips between them and their teachers may shape the students' mark upon which success and/ or failure is determined. Subjectivity in test correction and short experience of teachers are two elements on the ground of which most students' criticisms of their teachers tests are made.

According to teacher, students generally do not show considerable interest in learning because of the absence of strong incentives. Two official exams throughout the whole year are enough to bring learners enquire more about their learning. Motivating students requires more tests which keep them in continuous contact with their material. This also provides teachers with a clear image of students' progress.

Learners complain about exams and on evaluation in general because of the overemphasis on written tests. Meanwhile, teachers assert that even written tests may be the only measures at hand to evaluate students. For, as explained in different items, the possibilities of assessing oral performances through oral test decreases as the number of students increases yearly.

Students prefer being evaluated through oral ways though they claim that they do no receive enough oral training. Their teachers do understand well this situation, but remain unable to do much . Discussions between teachers and learners on evaluation is a rare aspect of the teaching and learning process. The absence of a dialogue between these two partners contributes to enlarge the gap between them.

The majority of students develop a feeling of failure when exposed to an exam and think they are at the mercy of their teachers who are the only ones responsible for their success and/or failure.

It is, in fact, not the exam itself which frightens students but the way it is approached and analyzed by their teachers. Tests' results are in the view of students measures which inadequately reflect their real level. Unfortunately, only tests and tests results are used to evaluate students.

The fact which makes students feel subordination to their teachers and makes of evaluation a subtle reinforcement of the teachers' power is now well understood.

As a matter of fact , two thirds of the English department teachers are B.A holders. This – it has to be said - has considerable effects on students' appreciations of the evaluation system they undergo in particular and of the quality of teaching they receive at large. Claiming that the type of training which students presently receive is appropriate and the kind of the evaluation used is adequate means simply ignoring the problem.

What students are expected to receive is not what teachers actually provide .To assert that learners face minor difficulties in learning indicates clearly the little attention given to this issue; the consequences of which are widely witnessed when these learners carry out their carriers as teachers of the foreign language they have been learning.

Students feel they are not trained enough to successfully carry out the task of language teaching. Teachers, too, confirm this and add that the question whether or not learners are well prepared for this task remains still not answered. It is on the oral aspect of the language that students still need more training, and it oral testing that teachers should emphasize. Will teachers in the department of English at the university of Batna give a backward glance to the type of the communicative competence their students acquire with the will of bringing innovations , or rather continue claiming that they prepare future teachers of English ; who indeed know little things about teaching it?

Recommendations

An oral aptitude test as means for entry to English studies should be established. Its results together with the written exam results gained

in the BAC.allow entrance for candidates who achieve 10 out of 20
as an average mark.

- During the first two years at advanced level of learning ,
  students receive intensive oral   language courses .The aim is
  to make the learner move closer to the language ,accept its
  characteristics, and develop a positive attitude towards   it.
- Use intensively audio- visual supports to raise the learner
  eagerness to
  know more about the foreign language, its country , its people,
its culture
  and so on.
- Make the learner engage in communicative exchange as much as
  possible
  to acquire basic oral fluency.
- Test the learner's performances through oral ways.
- During the third and forth years , develop the learner's skill of
  writing .A
  skill which the learner is supposed to have acquired through
previous
  language learning in middle and secondary schools.
- Introduce intensive writing courses and activities , and test the
  learner's
  language competence through formal ways using performance
  assessment.(Mc Namara1996,Norris, Brown, Hudson and
Yoshioka1998).

Conclusion:

Teaching English at the university (advanced level) aims at
preparing future teachers of that language in secondary schools. A
learner at the department of English is   exposed to the foreign
language through a series of courses most of them(11 out of 13)
develop the skill of writing. Hence, the learner is evaluated eleven
times through written exams and only two times through oral tests. It
seems that final objectives in teaching English a s a foreign language
at the university level are not yet fixed , or at least they still need a
backward glance. In fact, teaching English at the secondary school(
which is the immediate future task of most the these learners) does
not rely entirely on what the learner knows about English , but rather
on how competent he is in English and how flexible he is to teach

that language to beginners most of them adolescents .This task, we believe , can not be gained by the present course distribution   and following the old syllabus

Fig.1(p9) summarizes our suggestions   and recommendations drawn on the light of the results we gained in field experience through this modest investigation. The short comments following the figure explain our attempt   to bring innovations and orient future changes in terms of improvement.

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