Peculiar Features of Alternative Assessment in Teaching English as A Foreign Language

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ABSTRACT

In all academic settings, assessment is viewed as closely related to instruction. Assessment is needed to help teachers and administrators make decisions about students' linguistic abilities, their placement in appropriate levels, and their achievement. The article analyses importance and benefits of alternative assessment in teaching English as a foreign language.

Introduction: The assessment of students' progress and achievement in EFL/ESL classes should be carried out in a manner that does not cause anxiety in the students. The success of any assessment depends on the effective selection and use of appropriate tools and procedures as well as on the proper interpretation of students' performance. Assessment tools and procedures, in addition to being essential for evaluating students' progress and achievement, also help in evaluating the suitability and effectiveness of the curriculum, the teaching methodology, and the instructional materials.

Alternative assessment is defined as "any method of finding out what a student knows or can do that is intended to show growth and inform instruction and is not a standardized or traditional test" [1,2]. Specifically, alternative ways of assessing students take into consideration differences in students' needs, interests, and learning styles; and they attempt to integrate assessment and learning activities. Also, they indicate successful performance, highlight positive traits, and provide formative rather than summative evaluation.

Until recently the assessment scene in EFL/ESL classes has been dominated by summative evaluation of learner achievement, focusing on mastery of discrete language points and linguistic accuracy, rather than on communicative competence, with test items typically consisting of matching or gap-filling. Communicative teaching methodology brings with it a considerable emphasis on formative evaluation "with more use of descriptive records of learner development in language and learning which [track] language development along with other curricular abilities" [2,151]. Therefore, assessment becomes a diagnostic tool that provides feedback to the learner and the teacher about the suitability of the curriculum and instructional materials, the effectiveness of the teaching methods, and the strengths and weaknesses of the students. Furthermore, it helps demonstrate to young learners that they

are making progress in their linguistic development, which can boost motivation. This encourages students to do more and the teacher to work on refining the process of learning rather than its product.

Discussion: Using formative assessment can help decrease the level of anxiety generated by concentration on linguistic accuracy and increase students' comfort zone and feeling of success by stressing communicative fluency. Some teachers and researchers call for allowing students to have a say not only in deciding the format of the test but also in deciding its content and the way it is administered. Thus, Mayerhof suggests allowing students to discuss questions during the test quietly as long as each writes his own answers; of course, she is referring to subjective types of questions [3,45].

Murphey ventures beyond this concept to recommend that students make their own tests. He considers that studentmade tests are an effective "way to mine students' different perceptions and use them, building upon what a group knows as a whole and getting them to collaborate in their learning" [4,12]. He suggests the following process: students choose the questions that will go into the test under the guidance of the teacher; a few days later, working in pairs, they ask each other questions during class; later on, the questions are asked again with a new partner to reinforce what is being learned. Students are graded by their partners or by the teacher for the correctness of their answers and for the appropriateness and correctness of their English.

A final characteristic of alternative assessment techniques for young learners is that they are performance-based, requiring students to perform authentic tasks using oral and/or written communication skills. These techniques can include traditional classroom activities, such as giving oral reports and writing essays, but they may also involve nontraditional tasks, such as cooperative group work and problem solving. Teachers score the task performances holistically. Student

performance should be measured against standards previously discussed in class.

As globalization and communications are bringing the world ever closer together, ever more urgent is the need for global citizens to be competent in other languages. However, in a language class there are situations when students feel psychological tension to perform their communication skills in a foreign language. This tension also causes fear and frustration, which are the main language barrier components.

Psychological barriers were overviewed in the context of different areas of a broad discipline as psychology. In modern psychological science there is a great number of studies and researches focused on showing individual psychological conditions of students proving the ability of successful academic activity of a person and special aspects of teaching process and the process of acquiring a foreign language. W. Littlewood concluded that if people feel confidence in language learning environment, a psychological barrier to language emerges and if the amount of anxiety is more than a certain level, this situation becomes a serious obstacle in language learning process.

Analysis: Most teachers often face problems that arise in large groups of students with different levels of language skills. This is the essential reason for the teacher to select suitable approaches, learning strategies and activities to meet the individual needs and skills of students. Most students feel ashamed when they see their peers speak fluently and low-level students hesitate to speak. Such students have individual differences that cause a language barrier. Language barrier means having difficulties in communication with each other. However, not only the level of students can characterise differences, they may also appear in personal traits (a student may be too active or passive because of his/her shyness); cognitive abilities (mind set); motivation (students can have a high motivation for achieving success in learning foreign language, or are not interested and not ready); previous

experience of learning foreign language; style and approach to learning and in their preferences. Teachers often face the negative reactions of students to different kinds of tasks. One of the problems is lack of confidence, when students are afraid of being criticized by their peers or teacher because of their spelling, pronunciation and grammar mistakes, poor vocabulary and students take decisions not to talk at all than being ashamed.

Methods of speech activity organization are of primary importance and can relieve psychological stress as a natural reaction to the challenge posed by the teacher. The most interesting approach to this issue has been proposed by prof. R. Milrud. He pointed out that activity-related tasks for communicative-oriented foreign language teaching are based on the games and free communication with the various types of group and pair work using role-plays, case studies and projects
Games have been adopted in the teaching process, expanding its principles, intruding into the areas of human thoughts. Games educate, develop, socialize, entertain and most importantly maintain student`s self-confidence. Project-based learning is also one of the ways to minimize stressful situations. Case study eliminates psychological problems and generates a positive attitude towards learning. To overcome psychological barriers in foreign language learning students are engaged in role-plays that show following advantages: ability to express thoughts and feelings freely in the process of communication; ability to demonstrate language skills; each team member remains in the focus of the whole group.

Conclusion

If teachers consider factors such as psychological fear and external factors which greatly affect learning process, it will facilitate the learning of the target language by the students. The importance of solving existing problems obliges teachers to motivate and encourage students implementing communicative activities to warm up their interest as much as possible to overcome their fear of face-to-face communication, have a positive thinking and be positive communicators, giving them more opportunities to develop themselves as independent, motivated and confident persons.

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