

DEMYSTIFYING LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

The field of English Language Teaching has now long championed a student-centred classroom where learners are expected to take an autonomous role in their learning as well as participate in a variety of language activities that promote communicative freedom. This student-centred approach inside the classroom is often at odds with the stance then taken with student assessment where teachers and institutions revert back to traditional teacher focused approaches that students come to fear. The tests and approaches taken to test administration have far reaching and often fundamental influence on students' future study and employment paths which in turn restrict their inclusion to certain social and economic groups in society. This theoretical and practical paper explores these competing positions through a critical lens and concludes by offering teachers and those responsible for curriculum development opportunities to bring assessment closer to in-class practice and in doing so create shared responsibility for all stages of the teaching-learning and assessment cycle.

1 Introduction

1.1 Traditional approaches to assessment

Language assessment has tended to follow the general trends in mainstream education whereby learners are prepared for fixed and often one-off examinations that focus on assessing a narrow range of skills and types of knowledge through a similarly narrow set of tasks or question types (Lynch, 2001; Shohamy, 2001a). The result of this assessment produces a solitary score which has potentially life-changing consequences for the test-taker. Shohamy (2001a, p.374) notes how: "tests can create winners and losers, successes and failures, the rejected and the accepted" and that these tests are often used to make decisions that are irreversible. This type of language assessment is found in equal measures both in classrooms in the form of end-of-semester and end-of-year tests which determine access to further study opportunities as well as in the form of internationally recognized large scale proficiency examinations such as IELTS and TOEFL which determine entry into study and work abroad programmes.

While Brown & Hudson (1998) note that TOEFL scores in their institutions are never used as the sole measure to determine entry into university and that they are used in conjunction with other scores such as high school averages and written personal statements, this practice is sadly very rarely practised in many institutions around the world where TOEFL, TOEIC and IELTS scores are still the only requirement to entry or barrier to education and work programmes.

Traditional methods of assessment like these mean learners are given one attempt to show they have mastered content and therefore knowledge that they have undoubtedly been coached to do in class with the help of the teacher or in test preparation centres. The pressure to pass these one-off tests with narrow constructs is felt not only by students but also by teachers whose own performance, salary and ranking within an institution is often partly determined by student pass rates (Shohamy, 2013). These pressures mean teachers teach to the test and the test becomes the biggest part of the curriculum despite the fact teachers have no part to play in the test's construction and are seen as messengers of the curriculum (the test) (Shohamy, 1998; Troudi, Coombe, Al-Hamly, 2009).

In tandem with the tasks and types of tests that are peddled in institutions and by testing bodies, is the fact that tests are also influenced by national and international language policies and they then maintain these policies through their administration (Shohamy, 2007). In terms of language proficiency examinations, these policies and subsequent tests focus on promoting one dominant language or one or two dominant varieties of this language. In the case of English, this is typically seen through IELTS, TOEFL and Cambridge English and ESOL examinations which favour standard British or American English over other varieties and also favour one standardized answer on vocabulary and grammar tests, which as Shohamy (2007) notes forces test-takers to then learn these standard varieties in order to pass the exam and gain inclusion into work and study programmes.

1.2 Alternative approaches to assessment

Alternative approaches to assessment, like the general learning shift from teacher-centred to student-centred responsibility and involvement, has its roots in an alternative paradigm or way of thinking that supports assessing students using a variety of different methods, assessing a wider range of skills and knowledge bases and allowing more stakeholders including teachers and students a voice in the assessment process (Brown & Hudson, 1998; Balliro, 1993; Lynch, 2001). Alternative assessment aims to change perceptions of assessment and teaching as separate entities and instead sees the two as being connected (William, 2013). This contrasts heavily with the traditional psychometric view of assessment which believes in assigning an objective score to a test where language and language use are seen as being separable. An example of this traditional view in action is the insistence on an end of year writing exam where students have to write a timed composition. In reality this practice does not reflect real-life writing and allows students only limited practice of the process writing stages that they have been exposed to and experienced throughout the semester in class. The fact a time limit is involved also adds pressure meaning the cognitive retrieval of language is influenced and therefore directly impacts on how much of students' true ability is shown during the timed writing tasks. This paper will later lend support to the belief that modern assessment of writing should not be restricted to timed writing but instead showcase different writing skills through portfolio tasks across different genres and tasks in a collaborative environment.

This alternative view of assessment is influenced by critical language testing which is derived from critical pedagogy and critical theory. In education, these theories specifically challenge power imbalances between teachers, students and management and in the case of language assessment this challenge is extended to consider the roles, input and influence the test-takers and testers have. The leading work of Shohamy (1998;2001a;2001b;2004;2013) as well as

McNamara (2001) and Lynch (2001) has highlighted how critical language testing seeks to narrow these power relations by seeing teaching and assessment as being connected where learners are encouraged to have a role not only in their learning but in how that learning process is measured. Critical language testing also accepts that the knowledge of testers is limited and ability needs to be measured by multiple methods using information from a range of different sources (Lynch, 2001; Shohamy, 2001a).

2. Opportunities to apply alternative assessment in the language classroom

2.1 Using Virtual Learning Environments and language applications

Assessing a greater range of skills can be achieved by using a variety of tasks and learning platforms such as using language applications and Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs). Some notable examples of VLEs which share common features are: *Edmodo*, *Moodle* and *Blackboard*. Students can use the many functions these two platforms have to become involved in self and peer assessment. Peer and self-assessment can be easily facilitated and promoted by the teacher or groups of teachers who teach courses together by creating class forums which allow students to complete tasks such as watching videos or listening to audio and sharing their views online together. Similarly, students can attempt quizzes that revise class content and also with the aid of the teacher create quizzes for classmates on what they perceived to be key points in a body of work (White, King & Tsang, 2011). These facilities have been shown to foster and improve skills such collaboration and critical thinking skills (which are not always assessable through standardized rubrics or proficiency bandscales especially at higher levels of proficiency) (Shaw & Imam, 2013; Shohamy, 2007).

Language applications such as *Busuu* as well as the now very popular *Quizlet* can all contribute to assessment that is student and teacher led where students and teachers link up to create and share vocabulary lists that reflect classroom learning as well as assess specific learning outcomes that focus on productive language ability. For a comprehensive review of the latest language applications see Rodriguez- Arancón, Arús and Calle (2013).

2.1.1 Using different kinds of blogs

Encouraging students to create a blog about a particular part of a course or to document the development of a project has also been shown to be useful in terms of building confidence in written language as well as afforded students the opportunity to work together collaboratively and reflect on their learning (Vurdien, 2013). This approach is especially useful when teaching English for Specific Purposes i.e. English or language for other major courses, for example, Architecture and Interior Design students may develop discipline specific language through documenting their progress on project work and work placement opportunities. Blogs can be easily accessed online for free on *Blogger*, *Wordpress* and *Weebly*.

The use of audioblogs may also facilitate the assessment and improvement of oral proficiency levels and as in the case of Hsu, Wang and Comac (2008) allow classroom instruction and course objectives to be improved and better matched to learners' needs. Hsu, Wang and Comac's study focused on students creating audioblogs on mobile phones which course instructors then used to interact with learners. Besides improving oral proficiency this also affords students an opportunity to communicate using a medium they are most likely familiar

with in the form of their mobile phone and allows them to communicate in a less stressful open environment when compared to the classroom.

2.2 Developing test-taking strategies and rubric awareness

Another factor in promoting teacher and student collaboration is teaching students about how they will be graded and what the teacher and examiner look for in a particular task. An effective way of achieving this is by combining the VLE mentioned above and using it with software and tools such as Microsoft Office's track changes to train students to peer review each other's work. The studies of Chang (2012) and Min (2006) are two notable examples where firstly the act of online peer review facilitated a greater sense of freedom to respond and a greater freedom to be critical without dealing with face-to-face conflict and secondly that peer review led to greater writing scores for the learners without the teacher giving extensive written feedback. Rollinson (2005) also notes how the act of peer review also strengthens learners' awareness of writing for specific audiences and writing in different registers.

Similarly, the creation of student-generated test materials has been found to develop students' content knowledge and allow them opportunities to understand how teachers and examiners grade and distribute marks in an exam. In the classroom, student generated test material may involve students making questions for each other and the teacher practicing test-taking strategies with these questions such as underlining key words and deciphering what key words mean as well as students then considering answers their peers have provided. This has been trialled in my own classroom several times across language skills including listening and speaking content quizzes where students reported like Lam (2014) that they understood the rationale and grading of tests better and through practising question creation they understood what the key points of the module and chapters were and it was far more effective than rote memorization of all the content which they struggled to summarize for the questions asked in an exam.

2.3 Interactive e-portfolios

Brown and Hudson (1998) define portfolios as collections of students' work that display their achievements, skills and abilities to a particular class. Portfolios have been introduced to several disciplines including in art, technology and media as well as more practical based apprenticeships (Brown & Hudson, 1998). Portfolios offer a perspective on learning progression and are particularly useful for assessing writing development as opposed to having students write a timed essay at the end of the semester which potentially masks their true ability in writing not only untimed but also their ability to write in more than one genre or register.

Portfolios may increase student learning in the language classroom by focusing learners' attention on learning, facilitating revision processes and capturing students' wide ranging interests whereby language acts as a vehicle to communicate these interests to others. Portfolios also help facilitate the power shift away from those in power such as testing bodies and institutions by giving students power over their content and depth. Equally, portfolios offer teachers the chance to facilitate this power sharing and act as a coach and guide while students create the portfolios (Brown & Hudson, 1998).

The use of electronic portfolios or e-portfolios has also become popular in recent times and the use of technology affords an added bonus in that students also develop computer literacy while preparing their portfolios. Research into e-portfolio use in foreign language classrooms suggests they are well-received by both students, who have a sense of ownership over the work and reflective practice takes place when students are asked to self and peer evaluate their work. However, as with all technology based initiatives the teacher has to act as an instructor or trainer in showing students how to set up and add to their portfolios as not all students are technologically gifted (Chau & Cheng, 2010; Golonka, Bowles, Frank, Richardson & Freynik, 2014).

3 Cautionary remarks and concluding thoughts

This paper addressed the need for a paradigm shift to continue to take place in assessing language proficiency in learners in that assessment must move to match the communicative student - centred classroom that educators freely promote. The paper provided several examples of how assessment could align better with the classroom environment in the form of online and classroom based assessments that encourage continuous student improvement. In addition to promoting improvement and aligning classroom practice and assessment practice, these assessment practices aim to change perceptions about assessment and its role in language education in the eyes of students, teachers and those with the power to change language policies in education. However, it is important to remember that these ideas, like traditional assessment approaches, still contribute to making potentially life changing decisions and while we seek to give students more involvement in their teaching and learning, these alternative practices above must be implemented upon careful consideration of their feasibility in terms of time, economic expense and student engagement potential. It is also important to stress that these alternative assessment suggestions must be designed in such a way that they link and assess the module or programme learning outcomes that they are used for (Richards, 2001). Similarly, the above suggestions work best in conjunction with other measures and should not be used as the sole method of assessment on a course or programme. It is also imperative that educators, curriculum planners and those with ultimate power consider the validity and reliability of these measures in the same seriousness as more traditional approaches and ensure that the same standards of assessment are applied across classrooms and programmes equally (Educational Testing System, 2003; Brown & Hudson, 1998).

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