



Overview of assessment in higher education

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Abstract: The article is dedicated to carrying out small research, focused on overview of assessment in higher education. This topic will be useful for EFL teachers, who want to conduct research on improving assessment system in higher education. The objectives of the article are to clarify what is assessment and its types.

Key words: EFL- English as a foreign language, washback, validity, estimating, self-assessment, appraising.

Introduction

For many years, Assessment has been a powerful tool used for raising students' achievement within universities, with educationalists acknowledging the significance of assessment within the curriculum and pedagogy. However, there are diverse interpretations of the definition and purpose of Assessment in Educational disciplines; an absence of consensus on how it is applied despite the fact that teachers are largely engaged in skill-based learning, where assessment is "appraising or estimating the level or magnitude of some attribute of a person". In educational practice, assessment is an ongoing process that encompasses a wide range of methodological techniques. Whenever a student responds to a question, offers a comment, or tries out a new word or structure, the teacher subconsciously makes an appraisal of the student's performance. Written work—from a jotted-down phrase to a formal essay—is performance that ultimately is "judged" by self, teacher, and possibly other students. Reading and listening activities usually require some sort of productive performance that the teacher observes and then implicitly appraises, however peripheral that appraisal may be. A good teacher never ceases to assess students, whether those assessments are incidental or intended.

More recently higher education has attempted to address the issue of quality by using the rational evaluation method. This method borrowed heavily from the scientific method, but attempted to evaluate what occurred at a college from a problem-centered perspective. The method dealt with a limited number of variables, functioning under supposedly controlled conditions which allowed for predictability by removing the activity being studied from its origins and its surroundings. Evaluation attempted to be completely objective and in doing so, carried with it a flaw that prevented it from being effective - the attempt to impose the classical

scientific method on a human activity. It attempted to quantify the teaching and the learning experiences, activities that are based on human relationships and are resistive to measurement.

Second, a test must measure, which may be defined as a process of quantifying a test-taker's performance according to explicit procedures or rules. Some tests measure general ability, whereas others focus on very specific competencies or objectives. A multi-skill proficiency test determines a general ability level; a quiz on recognizing correct use of definite articles measures specific knowledge. The way the results or measurements are communicated may vary. Some tests, such as a classroom-based, short-answer essay test, may earn the test-taker a letter grade accompanied by the instructor's marginal comments. Others, particularly large-scale standardized tests, provide a total numerical score, a percentile rank, and perhaps some sub scores. If an instrument does not specify a form of reporting measurement—a means for offering the test-taker some kind of result—then that technique cannot appropriately be defined as a test.

Discussion

Measurement is the process of quantifying the observed performance of classroom learners. Bachman (1990) cautioned us to distinguish between quantitative and qualitative descriptions of student performance. Simply put, the former involves assigning numbers (including rankings and letter grades) to observed performance whereas the latter consists of written descriptions, oral feedback, and other nonquantifiable reports.

There are clear advantages to quantification. Numbers allow us to provide exact descriptions of student performance and to compare one student to another more easily. They also can spur us to be explicit in our specifications for scoring student responses, thus leading to greater objectivity. On the other hand, quantifying student performance can work against the teacher or tester, perhaps masking nuances of performance or giving an air of certainty when scoring rubrics may actually be quite vague. Verbal or qualitative descriptions may offer an opportunity for a teacher to individualize feedback to a student, such as in marginal comments on a student's written work or oral feedback on pronunciation.

Yet another potentially confusing term that needs explanation is evaluation. Is evaluation the same as testing? Evaluation does not necessarily entail testing; rather, evaluation is involved when the results of a test (or other assessment procedure) are used for decision making. Evaluation involves the interpretation of information. Simply recording numbers or making check marks on a chart does not constitute evaluation. You evaluate when you "value" the results in such a way that the worth of the performance is conveyed to the test-taker, usually with some reference to the consequences—good or bad of the performance.

Conclusion

The answer depends on your perspective. For optimal learning to take place, students in the classroom must have the freedom to experiment, to try out their own hypotheses about language without feeling that their overall competence is being judged in terms of those trials and errors. In the same way that tournament tennis players must, before a tournament, have the freedom to practice their skills with no implications for their final placement on that day of days, so also must learners have ample opportunities to "play" with language in a classroom without being formally graded. Teaching sets up the practice games of language learning: the opportunities for learners to listen, think, take risks, set goals, and process feedback from the "coach" and then recycle through the skills that they are trying to master.

At the same time, during these practice activities, teachers (and tennis coaches) are indeed observing students' performance, possibly taking measurements, offering qualitative feedback, and making strategic suggestions. How did the performance compare to previous performance? Which aspects of the performance were better than others? Is the learner performing up to an expected potential? What can the learner do to improve performance the next time? How does the performance compare to that of others in the same learning community? In the ideal classroom, all these observations feed into the way the teacher provides instruction to each student.

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