

Assessment – Albanian educational system reality and challenges.

Laureta Vavla

Department of English and German Languages
Aleksander Xhuvani University, Albania
loridimashi@hotmail.com

Abstract: This paper stresses the importance of assessment in second language class today in the Albanian educational institutions, and in particular the advantages of using assessment in improving teaching and learning. Assessment is generally seen as something done to students by teachers. Many students may feel panicked and confused. Tests descend upon them from time to time and have to be ‘got through’. This paper discusses the reality of the Albanian teaching and learning institutions in regard to assessment and tests and the challenges encountered. The study goes on and makes a modest attempt to give some practical solutions to these challenges and problems.

Key Words: Assessment, testing, teaching, learning

Introduction

Teaching, learning, assessment and testing – choices in the EFL classrooms

Teachers should not only be considered as lifelong learners but they should also be considered as lifelong assessors. These three components: learning, teaching and assessment are and should be considered as interrelated. Without learning there could be no teaching, and vice versa. It is through assessment and testing that we can guide and improve our teaching and learning. And it is teaching and learning that we assess while assessing and testing. Ultimately, without assessment there would be no improved teaching and no improved learning. So as teachers and students could understand what they have fully accomplished and what they still lack they definitely need to make some type of assessment. But what is the position that assessment actually has in our classrooms?

Mid term and end term tests are the traditional and typical tools used to assess the students’ knowledge in Albania. These two tools have been inherited from the past generations and teachers and they still hold a key role in today’s teaching environment. But other types of assessment are also being embraced and applied more and more: discrete point, integrative, formal, informal, formative, summative, etc. This means that the choices have become many in number which leads to much more complicated choices on the part of the teachers. It is the purpose, reason and the goals of testing and assessing that need to become the leading guide for choosing the right tool when assessing.

Formative assessment is the typical type of assessment I personally use more frequently. In my opinion the major advantage of this type of assessment lays on the fact that it helps in “evaluating students in the process of forming their competencies and skills with the goal of helping them to continue that growth process” (Brown, 2004, p.6). This means that by applying this type of assessment we follow the same track pursued by our students. Whenever a group presentation is made or whenever a class debate is organized, feedback plays the crucial role – it is not only the teacher that makes the comments and the evaluation but it is also and most importantly the other students who think critically over the presentations or debates made and express their opinions freely.

Alternative assessment is a fairly new approach in the Albanian teaching environment and as such more and more stress should be placed on the importance of the usage of various types of testing and assessment. The latest trends are those of the usage of oral presentations, journal writings, portfolios, debates etc. One of the reasons why these tools have not been largely accepted is because teachers have not become sensible of the outmost important role that assessment plays in teaching and learning. It is from here that teacher trainers should start and elaborate this issue further on by informing and training teachers about the various assessment tools at their disposal.

On the other hand, even students should withdraw from their old mentality that is the grade that matters and not the knowledge gained.

Reflection on assessment processes followed in our institutions

Education is undergoing tremendous changes each year and more. Simply by reflecting on the kind of tests and examinations we have taken as students and those we are currently offering to our students, we can easily notice

that the differences are immense. Some of these differences are positive (or at least that has been the objective) but yet, there is a lot of work waiting to be done and carried on by students and teachers altogether.

Unfortunately, in Albanian educational system, the final written exam gets most of the credits for the ultimate evaluation of the student. What teachers and students are mainly interested in is what the students produce at the final examination. Even though this type of assessment of the students' knowledge has been widely used it can still be improved by carefully defining the scoring criteria. 'We should also inform students of at least the basic outlines of our assessment, so that not only is our assessment reliable, but it is seen to be reliable and fair by our students' (Harris and McCann, 1994). What could be done to achieve this is:

- Provide an answer key to the questions included in the test
- Provide a table at the end of the test that clarifies the corresponding grade and characteristics of each of the points achieved by the students.

What is more, administration reliability is also a concerning issue in Albanian educational institutions. During exam periods, freezing or melting temperatures highly affect the students' concentration and final scores. Better physical teaching, learning and testing (assessing) conditions/environments should be created so as to achieve administration reliability. In addition to this, noise is also a problematic topic. While some students take exams, some others continue their normal studies/activities and as such interrupt the students who are taking their exams. One way of solving this problem is by setting fixed hours, days or classrooms for exams that do not match with the teaching and learning timetables of the other students who are not taking an exam.

Another important element to be taken into consideration is authenticity – which is intermingled with the fundamental reasons why we learn and take tests. If a student is learning English because he or she needs it in his international organization or business it is logical that the focus of the English he or she learns will be on this sphere of communication. So as to provide authenticity, teachers should always try to match the real life situations to their tests and exams. As an illustration I could bring my experience in teaching lexicology. Throughout the entire course I offer to my students many examples that illustrate the issues we cover such as synonyms, euphemisms, proverbs etc. I always try to take examples from real life situations and it would be illogical not to include these practical examples into the final exam. The same should be applied even in other subjects/courses the students learn.

In regard to washback, we have all witnessed, in the role of the student or even of the teacher, that the type of final test or exam the students are going to take usually guides the method the teachers use in the classroom. 'If all these exams were forward-thinking and communicative this would be positive. Unfortunately this is not always the case (Harris and McCann, 1994). As such, teachers should organize their lessons not (only) lead by the final exams the students will take, but most importantly by what the students will effectively learn of the language and in the language.'

The fields of improvements in the Albanian educational institutions are many. Some of them are related to administrative issues, some others with reasons why we assess or with what we really assess. Some of the issues that we can easily improve are mainly related with practicality and accountability. Practicality can be achieved by shifting the goal of teaching English from a theoretical one and test-oriented into a more practical one and real-life oriented. This will lead into the building of practical tests and assessment activities throughout the whole teaching and learning process. Assessment should be considered an on-going process, going alongside with teaching and learning.

In relation to accountability what we should try to do is to provide our students, parents and colleagues with continuous feedback on what the students have achieved or have not achieved. As Harris and McCann have put it 'we should be able to explain the rationale behind the way assessment takes place and how conclusions are drawn, rather than hiding behind a smoke screen of professional secrecy (Harris and McCann, 1994).'

What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of the assessment process used in Albania?

The final grade a student receives at the end of a course is the result of putting together the different pieces of the puzzle comprised by various types of assessments and tests. Since that grade determines (although not always) a student's academic and professional life, assessments and tests should carefully analyze, test and grade the new knowledge and information the student has received in the classroom. What should be improved in my country's education system is the mentality teachers and students have about teaching and assessing. They should understand and apply an assessment process that is parallel to the teaching and learning process.

Teachers, students and parents need to understand the important role that continuous assessment plays in education. "As teachers, when we carry out assessment, we have to measure the performance of our students and the progress they make. We also need to diagnose the problems they have and provide our learners with useful feedback. (Harris and McCann, 1994)." This definition given by Harris and McCann clearly defines assessment as a measuring tool not only of the student's progress but also of the instructor's teaching. By diagnosing our student's problems, we can appropriately adapt our teaching methods and techniques to our learners.

Many of the *summative tests* we prepare lack student – related reliability. In a survey done with students of the third and fourth year at the University of Elbasan, I noticed that many students did better in the final test

compared to their overall preparation. The main reason for this is that many students study hard for the final exams since they have one week time to prepare for that particular exam and as such they fully use this time to study that subject. They do not prepare regularly but since the traditional importance of the final test is strongly rooted in their minds they save all their energies till the end of the course – and study hard during that one week, exam preparation period. This leads to poor student – related reliability summative tests because the knowledge the student has received within one single week cannot be lasting knowledge and if the student is faced with the same test, let's say a month later, he will not score the same.

Apart from the weak points mentioned above, the same tests I have taken into account have their own strengths. In my university, these final tests and many other similar ones are planned to have their written phase and a couple of days later their oral phase. This leaves enough space to the teacher to check the students' comprehension not only in a written form but also orally which complicates the situation for the students and leaves room to the teacher to make a more mature decision. In this way, the teacher is able to judge not only the students abilities in grammar, spelling and content but also in speaking which is crucial to our students who are going to become English teachers. Too much importance is usually given to grammar and vocabulary but the final goal of learning English is that of communicating in English and as such the speaking part of the test is and has to be considered as very valuable.

What changes could be implemented?

The actual situation of the students in the Albanian universities is rather depressing and pessimistic. The students spend less and less time studying or even reading the lectures or books assigned and ultimately this leads to poor exam results as well as to poor performance of the students. One of the components that plays a major role in this reality is assessment. As students throughout all these years have been evaluated mainly based on their final exam for which they had one week to prepare, they still continue to not prepare throughout all the academic semester or year. This leads to a poor performance of the students during seminar hours and to a passive participation during lectures.

Only through ongoing assessment could students become aware of the importance of continuously building new knowledge and of positively linking the new information received with their background information. By adapting various types of assessments and tests and by fulfilling all the requirements and principles needed, throughout all the academic year, students will be obliged to study and why not they will also be motivated to learn more and more.

Some of the changes to be applied are:

- a) the wrong mentality that assessment is just the same as testing should not exist anymore
- b) assessment should focus on all the four language skills altogether and not only on one or two
- c) students should be well informed about what they will be tested on and on the kind of assessment they will undergo since from the start of the course and before every test or assessment done throughout the entire course.
- d) assessment should be seen as an on-going process

By applying these changes in the teaching and learning environment of the school, students will first of all understand that “testing or formal assessment, where test or exam conditions are established, is certainly an important way of assessing learners. However, it is not the only one and both informal assessment and self-assessment are vital (Harris and McCann, 1994).” This will probably lead to less stressful and painful exams and tests as they will not anymore be seen as the only tool used by the teachers to set a grade to students. They will also get used this way to the fact that they themselves have the ability to assess the knowledge they have received independently from the instructor.

In regard to the second change that needs to be brought, it should be noted that its implementation is profitable not only for the students who will no more be taught only grammar or single vocabulary items but also for the teacher who will be able to successfully achieve his or her final goal of preparing the learners for the real life foreign language practice. “An over-reliance on grammar tests gives students the clear message that they have been wasting their time trying to communicate in class. What matters is grammar (Harris and McCann, 1994).” This reality must be changed and these changes will have drastic effects on the methodology used by the teacher while teaching, as well as while testing and assessing.

The last change to be applied (yet not the very last one because the changes are a lot more than these), is closely related to both teachers and students. “Learners feel alienated by assessment because they have no role in it, apart from as passive participants (Harris and McCann, 1994).” This is the picture one can get in the Albanian universities (and I guess not only) and this should definitely change. Learners should become active in their learning, teaching and assessing processes because without their participation and their voice in our decision making, no real and effective progress can be made. As the saying goes – Change starts from oneself!

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