

Developing Skills for a Formative Evaluation

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Evaluation is an essential tool in the development of teaching and learning. It concerns all the different aspects of the teaching/learning context: the syllabus, classroom methodology, teacher development and learners.

Evaluation of learners is an integral and important part of the instruction process. It measures the effectiveness of our teaching, and assesses our pupils' achievement; it diagnoses weaknesses and strengths, and helps us select what should be taught or re-taught for remedial purposes.

Summative evaluation has a much more limited perspective with a focus on learners' achievement at a particular point of a teaching unit, a term, a school year...Whereas formative evaluation examines the teaching/learning process to identify the processes, activities, and learners' pre-requisites. It is an essential and continuous control of learners' skills at intermediate stages before leading to a final judgement and decision.

Evaluation is, then, part of the teaching/learning process; it is planned together with the teaching activities because it allows to diagnose deficiencies, regulate learning and plan activities for remedial purposes. It is concerned with both the process and the product, because it permits to gather information which will help set coherent actions so as to improve learners' production. In the end the results yielded from the learners' performance in an

exam/test may confirm what the teacher has already observed, and may help come to a decision about the future of a pupil. So, we can say that summative and formative evaluations co-exist in the pupil's world and play a crucial role in his learning and career.

-Summative evaluation

It is indispensable in the educational context because it is used for the selection/orientation of learners. It is based on the results of tests and exams at the end of a term or a school year. It provides information about the learners' achievement after a certain period of learning. It is typically quantitative, using scores or letter grades to assess learners' achievement, and evaluate how much they have progressed during a particular course. It may contribute little to the ongoing teaching/learning process, but it is part of the teacher's job because of administrative pressures and also because of the teacher's desire to prepare pupils for exams.

Summative evaluation relies on tests and exams which should obey the criteria of validity (they should test what they are set for) and reliability (they should yield the same grades whoever the scorer is). The results of this evaluation will be used by the teacher and the institution to take a decision (orientation, awarding a degree, or a need for remedial work.)

It is clear then, that this kind of evaluation may be crucial for learners' life and career: the scores obtained in tests/exams will determine failure for some learners and success for others. That is why they need to be done effectively and objectively; they should set objective criteria in assessing learners' competence through their

performance, and should be served with caution for the following reasons:

- They test far too many things at a time, and then make remedial teaching almost impossible.
- Scoring is laborious, time consuming and biased.
- It is easy to bluff: pupils may memorize a set of sentences to impress examiners.

So, this kind of evaluation is never perfect, and the evaluator (the test designer) needs to reduce the biases which may affect it. Biases cannot be completely removed because exams target a group of learners rather than an individual learner. Finally the major drawback of this kind of evaluation is that it is not always congruent with teaching and learning: it does not evaluate all that has been taught in the programme, and what is evaluated has not been necessarily taught. It also comprises some risks like:

- It takes much time and energy of teachers and learners, and does not leave time for innovation, and reduces the time of learning.
- It favors the idea of utilitarianism rather than that of knowledge
- It places the teacher and the learner in opposite camps, and prevents cooperation.
- Learners invest too much on this kind of evaluation which leads to competition, stress, feeling of injustice, fears from the parents, the future, and may affect self image.
- It involves parents whose anxieties can have a negative impact on the learners.

- It favors cramming and cheating.

To be more objective, summative evaluation should be supplemented by a continuous assesement of learners in order to confirm what the teacher has already observed; and to be more effective, it should be supplemented by a formative evaluation in order to bring about the necessary changes and adjustment for a more efficient learning.

- Formative evaluation

It is an integral part of the teaching/learning process because it helps the teacher follow his pupils' learning, and adapt his teaching according to their level and pace of learning. It consists of gathering information on partial learning results and not on competencies; this will allow to identify the objectives which have not been reached, and find the causes of poor learners' performance. The causes may be:

- The learner does not possess the necessary pre-requisites to perform the learning tasks.
- Time to do the activities was not sufficient.
- The learner was not exposed to frequent feed back.

The solutions could be:

- Devising remedial work
- Giving more time to do the activities
- Facilitating the instructions of the teaching activities.

So these solutions aim at an adjustment which will enhance the pupils' learning

Formative evaluation includes diagnostic evaluation which will give precious information about the learners'

pre-requisites; this, of course, has to be continuous and not concerned with an evaluation at a particular point of the learning process. Information on what the learner "knows" will determine what he can learn, and reveal his mental activity. So formative evaluation has a close link with pedagogy, and relies on it to give answers to anxieties that the teacher can have. The teacher is no longer a "judge" but an "observer" who will use the learner's performance and errors to detect his mental activity and strategies. The results of this observation will perhaps explain the learners' difficulties, and together with an analysis of the teaching activity, will perhaps generate a more efficient strategy. Just as an artist who manipulates an object and observes the result to see if he should adjust his gestures in order to get better results, the teacher's adjustments are guided by the temporary results and obstacles he encounters during his work.

- Implementing formative activities

To be efficient, formative evaluation has to go through three stages:

Observation: this includes observing learners performing learning activities, gathering information through questionnaires, diagnostic tests and informal interviews; carrying out the learning activities with the learners, encouraging interaction between learners and the teacher. This is a very important phase, but certainly not an easy task since what is observed is varied and complex: there are too cognitive and affective aspects to be observed as there are also the materials used, methodology, learners' pre-requisites...

- Interpretation

Interpreting what has been observed is equally a crucial phase because it is the results of the interpretation which will determine the appropriate remedial actions to be used in the classroom. In the same way as a doctor examining a patient would first diagnose the illness(through observation and medical tests),then prescribes the prescribes the necessary medicines, the teacher needs a reliable interpretation to intervene with the right adjustment in the moment

- Intervention

Once he has detected his pupils' weaknesses, errors and difficulties, the teacher needs to call on all his skills to adjust his teaching in order to adapt it to his pupils' level and interests. Knowing his pupils' difficulties the teacher can help them learn better by:

Facilitating his teaching through simplified or different explanations

Giving other simplified tasks to pave the way to less easy tasks

Giving tasks relevant his pupils' interests and abilities

Promoting self confidence

Adapting the rhythm the teaching unit to the learners' pace

Rewarding pupils' work, autonomy and responsibility

Using different materials/techniques

Avoiding problematic activities.

It is clear then that formative evaluation is more a formative observation in the service of the teaching process than an assesement of learners' competence. It is more closely related to the development of the learners'

sub-competencies than to the evaluation of their global/final competence, just as Robert Stakes so rightly compares: "*When the cook tastes the soup, that's formative; when the guests tastes the soup, that's summative*".

So it is up to the teacher to carry out this "tasting" and bring the necessary changes that will lead to the final product. This responsibility is not an easy task when we look into the numerous and complex aspects of the teaching /learning process: the rigid and conservative educational setting, structured and overloaded programmed, overcrowded classes, and time allotted to perform the different learning activities are not to facilitate the teacher's task of observing and adjusting his teaching according to the unexpected "discoveries" he makes in the classroom.

Formative evaluation will certainly need to be strongly recommended as a pedagogical instruction in the Algerian EFL classroom especially now that the Educational Authorities, and through school reforms, are adopting a competency based approach in the teaching of EFL. This approach views learning as cognitive and socio-constructivist; it permits the learner to learn how to learn, share, cooperate and communicate with others. So it is essential that the teacher knows how "things go on" in his pupils' heads, to identify their learning strategies in order to optimize them. In this new approach, formative evaluation as a pedagogical action is more emphasized, but requires more reforms of other educational aspects like: the teacher training, the programme, and the textbook, timing and different modalities of learning evaluation. It is certainly not an easy task, but a better

understanding of this new conception of learning will certainly have positive effects on our teaching and our pupils' learning.

References

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