

Using Formative Skills in the Project Work

Dr. Ouerrad Belabbas

Maitre de conférences

Département de langue anglaise

Faculté des Lettres, des Langues et des Arts

Université Djilali Liabes. Sidi Bel Abbes

In this article, I would like to consider a very important aspect of the teaching/learning process: it is evaluation. Evaluation is an essential tool and concerns all the different aspects of the teaching/learning context: the syllabus, classroom methodology, teacher development and learners.

Evaluation 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

1- Summative Evaluation

We may be more accustomed to summative evaluation which focuses on learners' achievement at a particular point of a teaching unit, a term, a school year. 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. The results of this evaluation will be used by the teacher and the institution to take a decision (orientation, awarding a degree 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 tests 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 the learners.

-It favors cramming and cheating.

It is beyond the scope of this article to go through the criteria that should be obeyed to design tests/exams, the drawbacks and the risks of relying solely on this type of evaluation. I would like to focus on another type of evaluation: it is formative evaluation, because it is concerned with both the process and the product. It permits to gather information which will help set coherent actions so as to improve learners' production. It is an essential and continuous control of learners' skills at intermediate stages before leading to a final judgement and decision; just as Robert Stakes so rightly compares: "When the cook tastes the soup, that is formative; when the guests taste the soup, that is summative"

To be more objective, summative evaluation should be supplemented by a continuous assessment 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.

2 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.

3-Implementing Formative Activities

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

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 many cognitive and affective aspects to be observed as there are also the materials used, methodology, learners' pre-requisites...

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 necessary medicines, the teacher needs a reliable interpretation to intervene with the right adjustment in the right moment.

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 of 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 assessment of learners' competence. It is more closely related to the development of the learner' sub-competencies than to the evaluation of their global/final competence.

Formative evaluation will certainly need to be strongly recommended as a pedagogical instruction in the Algerian EFLclassroom 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 a cognitive and socio-constructivist; it permits the learner to learn how to learn, share, cooperate and communicate with others, and these are the main objectives of the project work.

Pedagogically, the assemblage of a project is a classic example of a constructivist activity because the construction of a project enables students to continuously construct and revisit their knowledge, beliefs, and biases about (Foti, 2002). Constructivists believe that teaching is an active and learner centered process. This belief recognizes that students build their own understanding of the world by using what they already know to interpret new ideas and experiences. According to constructivism, learning is an active process and should be whole,authentic, and real. Piaget's theory of cognitive development suggests that learnerscannot be "given" information which they immediately understand and use. Instead, theymust "construct" their own knowledge. They learn by fitting new information togetherwith what they already know. Learners learn best when they actively construct their own understanding. Learning is also affected by the context, beliefs, and attitudes of the learner. Learners are encouraged to invent their own solutions and try out new ideas andhypotheses. They build their knowledge through experience (Vygotsky, 1978)

Since project work is a pedagogical activity which is process and product oriented, it needs to be observed and

evaluated. The teacher will have all the opportunity to observe, interpret and intervene. He can do that more easily since he is sometimes member of the group and co-learner. He is no longer the judge who spots every single mistake and "punishes" those who make it (sometimes in front of the whole class), but he is member of (a) small group(s) and acts as an observer, the knower, the adviser, the facilitator, the guide and occasionally the co-learner.

Since project work goes through three different stages (the preparation, the realisation, and the presentation phases) he can easily play these roles in the 1st and 2nd stages. He will play an important role in:

- Selecting the theme with his pupils

- grouping them

- teaching them

- distributing tasks

- Setting the deadline(s)

- Advising about the means to be used and strategies to be adopted

Then in the 2nd stage (realization), he will have to:

- evaluate the group as well as the individuals according to the tasks assigned to each one

- regulate his teaching according to the information he has gathered through observation of the group work. This can be done in the form of remedial work or by introducing, consolidating, recycling some of the necessary language forms within the different sequences of a given file, or giving directly/spontaneously/briefly extra information which he can judge as necessary for the realization of the project work and the refinement of the final product which will be presented in the final stage.

Conclusion

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

- Foti, S. (2002). *A Comparison of two Electronic Portfolio Models*. Society for Information Technology and Teacher Education 2002 Conference Proceedings, 561.
- Germaine, K. and Rea-Dickins, P. (1992) *Evaluation*, Oxford University Press.
- Perrenoud, P. (1999) *l'Evaluation des élèves de la fabrication de l'excellence a la régulation des apprentissages. Entre deux logiques*. Bruxelles: De Boeck Université.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.