

ETHICAL AND PROFESSIONAL CONSIDERATIONS IN ASSESSMENT

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Abstract:

The issues of professionalism and ethical considerations in assessment have caused perplexity and controversy among educators and practitioners during the last few decades in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It has been observed that assessment criteria do not abide by the worldwide conventions, and teachers do face difficulties in having a single standard testing scale. Thus, this study aims at looking, first, at the notion of assessment in the Algerian context, and investigates how this latter is conceived from an ethical and professional lens. It attempts to shed light on how teachers could manage to balance between their ethical values and professional practices, and the demands of the stakeholders and market. The current study adopts an exploratory approach to address three focal research questions. First, it attempts to identify the different testing methods used by EFL teachers. Second, it delves into the strengths and limitations of the multi-sources of evaluation conventions adopted in the EFL context. Third, it examines the properties of testing scales employed in the English department. The study involves 48 teachers of the department of English at Batna 2 University. The study has shown that EFL teachers at Batna 2 University tend to have different benchmarks for examining learners' oral and written productions. Also, it has been found, also, that EFL teachers do value more the ethical aspect of assessment and the different professional practices at the expense of testing standards, notwithstanding that there are some teachers who are unaware of the different testing criteria. In fact, this study endeavors to come up with some concrete proposals for reconsidering the aspect of assessing EFL proficiency.

Keywords:

Ethics, Assessment, Professionalism, Testing Properties, EFL proficiency

Introduction:

Assessing learners' proficiency is a convoluted process that caused immense debate among practitioners especially if we have to consider the different professional and non-professional ethical conducts of those in charge. Theoretically speaking, assessment has been conceived as a process of looking at learners' progress and achievement in a given field. The term "assessment" was primarily coined by William (2011) to refer to the "the processes of evaluating the effectiveness of sequences of instructional activities when the sequence was completed" (p.1). It also refers to "the wide variety of methods or tools that educators use to evaluate, measure, and document the academic readiness, learning progress, skill acquisition, or educational needs of students" (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2015, p.1). Within the same respect, Walvoord (2004) defines assessment as "the systematic collection of information about student learning, using the time, knowledge, expertise, and resources available, in order to inform decision about how to improve learning" (p.2). From here, it could be assumed that the focal purpose of assessment is to deploy the appropriate conditions that would maximize the learning potential. Nonetheless, in our university, measurement and evaluation techniques are far beyond idealistic. Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at Batna-2 University face real hurdles in assessing learners' oral and written productions. This is due to the lack of standardized criteria and to the absence of teachers' awareness of common assessment standards. Henceforth, the current study is an attempt to unveil the dilemma within which most of our EFL teachers fall. It has been observed that professional teachers tend to assess their students' abilities regularly to inform their learners about their skills and any improvements needed. Of much concern relevant to the assessment process are the ethical and professional considerations. This study endeavors to suggest some concrete solutions for reconsidering the nature of assessing EFL proficiency.

1. General Perspectives about Ethics in Assessment:

The issue of ethics in teaching foreign languages is of paramount value to guarantee a professional conduct of the different academic practices. It has been confirmed, though, by many scholars such as Schmeiser (1995) that ethical obligations include professional competency, integrity, honesty, objectivity and fairness. In reverence

with this, to guarantee a professional act towards the different contributors to the teaching enterprise, teachers should consider conduct, aims, attributes, or qualities that characterize or mark the teaching process, and more importantly the assessment acts. Unfortunately, it has been observed that teachers and educationists suffer from serious moral dilemmas and unethical behaviors. For instance, some teachers tend to use their authoritarian position to misevaluate their students' skills. The unfairness of some teachers in scoring students' assignments has often been reported. Consequently, students always claim to see their grades increase. Thus, provided that these unethical behaviors are observable facts in our context, there is an urgent call to examine how far our EFL teachers are aware of the different ethical standards and principles meant for assessment in the EFL context.

Undoubtedly, ethical principles in assessment are not a state of the art. As remote as 1972, the National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME), the Association for Measurement and Evaluation in Guidance (AMEG), and the American Association for Counseling and Development (AACD currently known as the American Counseling Association) established a position paper on the mindful utilization of tests proposed to guarantee that tests are given, and that examinees are dealt with decently and judiciously (Schmeiser, 1995). The gist of this paper was to emphasize the requirements of the users of standardized tests. This latter acknowledged the focal importance of these principles as a means to enhance ethical and professional assessment. Verily, the existence of these measures is confirmation that the associations named above are aiming at advancing high "specialized" principles for evaluation instruments and high "moral" guidelines for individual conduct as they work with assessments (Schmeiser, 1995). Yet, there remains a significant predicament in the Algerian context in reverence with assessing learners' abilities. It has been observed, though, that assessment criteria do not abide by the worldwide conventions, and teachers do not use common criteria for testing. In our next section, we are going to have a closer look at the suggested exploratory approach to understand what is going on in the EFL context to understand better the testing regulations in Algeria.

2. Testing Properties:

To abide by the rules of effective assessment, a range of specific criteria should be respected such as: usefulness, practicality, validity,

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reliability, authenticity, fairness, integrity, transparency, and washback.

2.1. Usefulness:

According to Bachman and Palmer (1996) test usefulness “provides a kind of metric by which we can evaluate not only the tests that we develop and use, but also all aspects of test development and use” (p.17). Usefulness, thus, could be considered as pivotal of language assessment because this latter entails that tests should be designed with a purpose, defined test-takers, and predetermined language features.

2.2. Practicality:

Another focal layer of assessment is the notion of practicality. Hence, practicality entails that testing measures could be applied into practice. That is, in a language classroom, the context should be healthy and positive within which the tutor would be able to administer tests that abide by the following rules:

- a. “Not being excessively expensive,
- b. Stays within appropriate time constraints,
- c. Is relatively easy to administer, and
- d. Has a scoring/evaluation procedure that is specific and time-efficient” (Rizki, 2014).

Thus, practical concerns in assessment include financial factors, time adequacy and pedagogic resources.

2.3. Validity:

The concept of validity entails that a test measures what it intends to measure. As it has been contended by Hubley (2011, p.xxii), validity means “test what you teach and how you teach it”. From here, it could be assumed that validity ensures the level whereby assessment purposes have been met.

2.4. Reliability:

The term reliability refers to the consistency of test scores whereby replication of the same assessment tools would lead to similar results. For instance, if we measure learners’ written performance twice at different contexts, we will obtain the same results provided that the exam is reliable.

2.5. Authenticity:

Bachman and Palmer (1996) define authenticity as “the degree of correspondence of the characteristics of a given language test task to the features of a target language task” (p.23). Besides, it has been argued by Hubley (2011) that learners feel prompted to perform better if they have been exposed to authentic circumstances. Consequently, real world authenticity in assessment entails that the tutors attempts to evaluate learners’ performance using real-life situations and expose them to genuine materials.

2.6. Fairness:

Fairness is a socially-driven instead of a psychometric notion. Its definition confides on individual considerations. Fairness could be portrayed as the decent treatment of all examinees. Testing conditions, access to practice materials, performance feedback, retest opportunities, and different components of test organization, including giving proper accommodation to test takers with disabilities when convenient, are critical features of fairness under this perspective (SIOP, 2017).

2.7.Integrity:

Integrity is defined by the Free Dictionary (2017) as the uncompromising adherence to moral and ethical principles. Hence, integrity in assessment is the provision made by the examiner to abide by the principles of ethics and morality.

2.8. Transparency:

Transparency refers to the clarity of objectives and purposes of the exam, and the procedures implemented to test the learners’ skills. In reverence with this, transparency entails that the examiner should provide a clear account of the formats, results, time allotted and scoring criteria. Transparency requires engaging learners in the testing process.

2.9.Washback:

Washback refers to “the effect of testing on teaching and learning” (Hughes, 2003, p.1). This effect is usually prior to the assessment itself. Tests can have positive and negative impacts, or washback. Positive washback alludes to expected test impacts. For instance, a test may urge learners to study increasingly or may advance an association

amongst benchmarks and direction. Negative washback alludes to the unforeseen, unsafe outcomes of a test. For instance, direction may concentrate too vigorously on test planning to the detriment of different exercises. Washback from tests can include expert educators and learners and entire classes and projects. One approach to guarantee positive washback is through instructional planning that interconnects teaching and assessment. By choosing a test that mirrors your instructional and program objectives, you can all the more nearly adjust assessment to teaching (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2017).

3. Methodology:

The present study adopts a comparative exploratory approach to examine Batna-2 university EFL teachers' tests as compared to international tests. Tests of oral expression, written expression and grammar used by forty eight teachers have been analyzed and compared.

4. Results:

The analysis and evaluation of the different tests indicate that the techniques for assessing EFL learners' oral and written productions are categorized as follows:

1. EFL teachers tend to use both summative and formative assessment types.
2. The majority of teachers tend to use free written and speaking activities to test the students' oral and written skills. However, there remains a small proportion that uses guided-activities testing.
3. EFL teachers tend to assess their students through assignments and homework prepared as research projects.
4. The majority of the tests observed tend to be holistically scored.
5. Teachers in their assessment consider both form and content whereby content is more valued than form.
6. Teachers do not have common testing criteria, and more significantly there are some teachers that are unaware of the most prominent assessing criteria.
7. The tests evaluated do not really reflect the exact level of the student. It has been observed that some tests do not abide by the course objectives and purposes.

8. The issue of ethics and professionalism is more valued than the assessment criteria themselves, mainly fairness and transparency.
9. Teachers do not base their assessment on the difficulties EFL learners have in different skills.
10. The testing criteria for some teachers are not clearly stated to the students, mainly in the oral tests.

From above, it could be assumed that the most significant consideration accounted for in Batna-2 university EFL context as far as assessment is concerned is ethics at the expense of some professional testing guidelines.

5. Discussion:

From the collected data and findings obtained, the current study reveals that the question of professionalism in assessment is of much concern to all teachers; nonetheless, the issue of ethics is more valued to the detriment of testing norms. The study has demonstrated that EFL teachers at Batna-2 University have a tendency to apply distinctive benchmarks for evaluating learners' both oral and written productions. In addition, there remains a number of teachers who are ignorant of the distinctive testing criteria. Thus, based on the strengths and limitations of assessment considerations in Batna-2 University, some pedagogical implications and recommendations could be suggested:

1. Sensitize EFL teachers about the different ethical and professional assessment benchmarks and guidelines.
2. Set standardized testing scales that abide by the international testing regulations.
3. Organize and encourage training among teachers to enhance their awareness about what shall be done, and how to reach effective assessment approaches.
4. Provide the necessary managerial resources for teachers to help them develop assessment tools that adhere to worldwide testing principles.
5. Organize more meetings and debriefings with teachers prior to exams.

To sum up, the issue of ethical and professional considerations in assessment in the EFL Algerian context tends to be quite new, and, henceforth, needs a particular attention. In fact, to take into account

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ethical and professional premises, a national chart for these purposes stands as a must.

Conclusion:

Professionalism should consider teachers' needs as well as those of learners; otherwise, it will remain as a one-way professionalism as David Maister (2000) puts it: "Professionalism is not a label you give yourself. It is a description you hope others will apply to you". Actually, it is probably the manner to reconcile both actors. It is, also, valuing and accepting the other, being flexible, remaining permanently tuned to learners' wants and desires. These characteristics are what most literature in the field put forth as positive aspects of ethical and professional considerations.

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