

Evaluate differently in FFL... what limits?

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Abstract:

Assessment has been the object of many studies in recent years. The interest in this notion has placed it at the very heart of the human and social sciences. However, in the language classroom, the didactician/teacher is always confronted with untenable situations and nagging questions inevitably linked to his professional action, which he must handle with a multitude of didactic situations that are, to say the least, unforeseen. Thus, in this article the challenge is, on the one hand, to highlight the main definitions of this essential notion that is assessment and, on the other hand, to put into perspective the limits of this notion as a didactic and pedagogical practice by questioning the different actors of the didactic action.

Key words: Assessment, language didactics, innovation, intercultural, pedagogy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The multiplication of scientific works, the abundance of research papers and the rise of scientific meetings devoted to assessment demonstrate clearly the colossal importance of this notion which continues to be shaped and molded according to authors, schools and opinions of the 'era. This importance draws its legitimacy from the decision-making nature of the assessment.

It is indeed the momentary or final "decision" (above all) that matters either for the teacher within his class (**internal** assessment), or during important moments as is the case with passing exams (the Baccalaureate for example), competitions, etc. As a result, everyone, without exception, demands explications for this famous notion; learners, parents, principals, the minister and even deputies at higher decision-making levels.

However, in response to this abundant wealth (at the level of discourse), two types of assessments (only!) emerge which are the "close" assessment, linked to what is called "*close communication*" and the "remote" assessment linked to so-called "*remote communication*". The first is characterized by the symbiosis and complementarity between the learner and teacher who must multiply the contact, activate the interaction and encourage the exchange to provide an educational aspect to the act of assessment. Remote communication/evaluation is always primarily technical and technicist, dominated by the scientific and scientistic aspects. In such a situation, and against all expectations, assessment will be (LANDELLE, 1997, 65) the only link/obstacle between the teacher and his learners.

2. OUTLINE OF A CONCEPT

Placed at the heart of the teaching/learning process, assessment is an approach and a practice which aims to judge (with maximum

objectivity) and determine (with maximum precision) the skills established before, during and after the learning, hence the typology of the best-known assessments, which are in this case *diagnostic* assessment, *formative* assessment and *summative* assessment.

At this level, it is necessary to underline the *most well-known* expression (see *supra*.) given that with the multitude of acquisition/learning theories, the field of language teaching witnesses, in the last three decades, a large number of terminologies which determine the different assessments. Amongst these terminologies, as an example, is the so-called "ecological" assessment which, according to (CUQ, 2003, 21), considers learning as "*an active, constructive process based on communication and interaction exercised in a social context and characterized by the diversity of experiences to enable students to construct new meanings from their previous knowledge*". While WIGGINGS, (WIGGINS, 1993) proposes the so-called "*authentic*" assessment which consists of evaluating "*language skills linked to an expected level of performance*" (quoted by CUQ, 2003, 91).

CUQ (2003: 121) emphasizes that heterocorrection is a process which simultaneously accompanies self-correction. Still according to the same author (2003: 121), it is one of the contributions of metacognition especially as it "promotes the learner's awareness of his own cognitive approaches, the construction of his knowledge and their functional reinstallation in contact of action". This procedure represents an objectification of learning through learner/learner(s) and learner(s)/teacher interaction.

Intercultural, continuous, differentiated, computer-assisted, initial and many other types of assessments are new practices that have enriched, and even complicated the field of teaching/learning. This situation will certainly leave practitioners and specialists a little perplexed when facing questions such as:

- Do we really need all these evaluations and this terminological device?

- Will the teacher/evaluator have time to experiment everything and capacity to apply the results of his experiments?
- Do they constitute a real methodological renewal or is it just the same principle that is delivered, each time, with new names in order to respond to practical facts?
- What are the limitations of the evaluations that have recently appeared in the field of language teaching?
- Why and how do these limitations arise?

Providing clear answers to all these questions is not an easy task. Thus, we will focus on providing clarifications related to the last question. These limitations are due to the intervention of several parameters that belong to three different dimensions that we will expose according to the perceived order of importance.

3. THE HUMAN DIMENSION

In the language classroom, the main evaluator is, par excellence, the teacher. Apart from any attempt to "philosophize", the teacher is above all a social subject with ambitions, problems, limits and aspirations. These factors will condition in the majority of cases his teaching and assessment act which will certainly disturb the character of objectivity claimed permanently by the assessment. This objectivity remains a utopia which belongs to the wonderful world of which specialists and practitioners dream.

On the epistemological level, there is a great diversity and a great density of data relating to the assessment even if we tend, most often, to present the same product under another packaging or under another name. The fact remains that all the difficulties and problem relating to the assessment are found at the level of practice; that is to say at the implementation level of the proposed data and their operationalization.

Assessment is, indeed, far from being a scientific practice at the moment (and apparently for a long time!) given the intervention of the

human subject who is in this case the language teacher (see above). For example, through its docimological character, summative assessment has demonstrated that gaps still exist with the same grading system. These gaps are sometimes significant between one evaluator and another and even at the level of the same teacher who is offered the same copy at different times.

Like objectivity, the "scientificity" of assessment is only a "mirage". On this subject, LANDELLE (1997: 61) points out that *"educational assessments are too often subjective and intuitive and denote complacency for the literary rather than scientific attitude (...)"*. In this case, should we resort to what is called Computer-Assisted Assessment (CAA)?

I believe that the use of machines facilitates, in some way, the assessment elements (simple and closed questions, score calculation, progression from one level to another, systematization of the proposed activities, etc.) but beyond these simple practices, the computer can further complicate the assessment by engulfing it in useless, and even absurd, technicality.

In this regard, LANDELLE (1997, 62) insists on the fact that *"the use of the computer, without the pretext of help, will only lock the evaluation in a pseudoscientific cavern where the eyes pinned on the indicator lights, the output states of the printer; it will be reduced to an entirely internal darkness"*. Even SAROUL (1987, 105-107) who considers the computer as a good educational management tool points out that the use of this machine must be done with the greatest prudence.

On the other hand, all the innovation attempts have not really encouraged the assessors to take seriously the revision of their practices, their daily school routines and even their "teaching actions" given that they remain too tied, by sentiment or by reason, to the summative certification/assessment of a docimological nature. In

truth, it is difficult if not impossible to abandon one's "habitus" for perpetually questioned assessment(s).

4. THE PRACTICAL DIMENSION:

At this level, the single example that concerns the practice of oral in language classes is taken. It is clear that learning languages (especially foreign languages) increasingly favors speaking; but what is noteworthy is the lack of real assessment specific to the speaking skills. At this level, language teachers do not have the habit or the necessary tools to get used to assessing the "interactional" activities that take place in class, unlike the (known and used) system relating to writing, where practices are anchored and "habits" are well established, if not fossilized.

The accidental, instantaneous and ephemeral nature of oral communication makes objective evaluation very difficult. Even reformulation can never "say" the same thing with the same authenticity especially since the number of tasks assigned to the teacher at the time of the interaction disrupt and block the evaluation process.

Indeed, evaluating what the learner "says" requires the evaluating teacher to listen attentively, manage the interaction, energize the exchange, take notes (sometimes), note the negative and positive points of the given answers, consider facial expressions, be interested in gestures and ensure that they do not interfere with speech (or that it is interfered with).

At this level, for example, there is no consensus yet to answer questions such as whether the assessor is supposed to correct errors immediately or should he wait for the learner to finish his answer? Should he assess the learner's level of knowledge or the lack of knowledge (or perhaps both)? How should he consider the conditions of the oral interaction in action? In this regard, is it worth recalling that compared to writing, where the subject is generally more at ease

and the conditions of production are generally favorable (silence, considerable time, prior psychological preparation, comfort, assurance, etc.), speaking presents a particular communication situation insofar as the learner's personality is very present or even very heavy; assurance, comfort and time (which, compared to writing, remains unpredictable) are not always assured.

5. SOCIO-CULTURAL DIMENSION

It is noteworthy that the operational assessment systems in our educational systems are of Western origins due to the inability to shape our own systems and forge our own assessment tools. The proposed models, even if effective in their original educational systems, do not necessarily retain their effectiveness after undergoing methodological transfer.

For the assessment, anchoring, adaptation and transfer from one context to another are, like psychological tests, problems. Let us recall that ROUAG (1997) demonstrated that the failure rate, when faced with psychological tests that come from North America and Europe, results on the one hand from their difficulty and on the other hand from their inadequacy to sociocultural factors which are linguistic, cognitive and social.

Faced with such "foreign" systems, the learner is called upon to respond to a "profile" that is not his and to perfect skills that are foreign to him. This attempt is doomed to failure from the start. In reality, the assessment intended to measure skills in learning a language must be distinguished from that of a mother tongue.

Moreover, the limits of the assessment do not only come from the social and cultural contexts which are strongly influenced by economic data. To illustrate this point, the case of *differentiated* assessment which must crown *differentiated* pedagogy is taken (MEIRIEU, 1987: 149-165). This assessment which is intended to be a "*dynamic moment*" and necessary in the educational process aims to

evaluate the learner starting from his "profile". In other words, and as MEIRIEU (1987, 149-165) underlines, *"the teacher will have to adapt to the student, become an epistemologist of his intelligence, be attentive to the vagaries of his personal history, take into account all this socio-economic stewardship that he carries around with him (...)"*.

This assessment is based, firstly, on the differentiation of assessment tools (open and closed questions, conceptualization and memorization exercises, varied activities, etc.). Secondly, on the variation of assessment functions (using as many assessments as possible, especially the best known ones, which are diagnostic, formative and summative assessments) and lastly on the differentiation of assessment statuses, which consists of allowing the learner *"to place himself in a critical position and to adjust the work according to his project"* (MEIRIEU, 1987, 161). In other words, the learner is called upon to activate a *"reflexive"* assessment or what is also called *self-assessment*.

However, even if the principles are ambitious and really deserve to be considered, it turns out that the vagaries of the field and the realities of school life are elements that disrupt and prevent the use of this type of assessment. Indeed, how can we apply an assessment with classes that have large numbers of students (around thirty or forty students in classes in Africa and many Third World countries)? What should we do with a general number of two or three hundred learners as is the case in certain university courses? And what about institutional and organizational constraints?

Added to all this is the nature of the training received and the risk of assessment fragmentation and pedagogical act atomization, which will generate disparate or even useless actions. Moreover, all this terminological panoply and its process will lead, inevitably, to the summative assessment which is summarized in a final mark and a decision of success or failure: In summary, this *"reflexive"* assessment

must, ultimately, pass through the sieve of docimology (MEIRIEU, 1987 and HUVER, SPRINGER, 2011).

6. CONCLUSION

The complexity of the assessment activity is an essential element to be considered in the pedagogical act. This complexity turns out to be a multiverse where an infinity of other "assessments" intersect and fit together so that when assessing the learner, it is imperative first of all to assess one's own teaching skills as a teacher, to assess the quality of the knowledge proposed in the textbooks, to assess the nature of the parents' commitment, to assess the degree of contextualization of the proposed assessments, to assess the educational system in which one is immersed, the systems and means implemented, etc.

Innovation in paradigm must be a matter of renewal and not a matter of fashion, where the transfer of paradigms is only a matter of terminology and packaging.

The assessment, in a sense, must marry the formative character with selective data in order to give meaning and birth to a fruitful and profitable educational effort that escapes in its entirety from any useless scientism and any exaggerated technicality. In other words, create bridges between close communication and distant communication (according to the terminology of MOLES) for a better optimization of the teaching/learning process.

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