



## **Continuous assessment in the methods of teaching and assessing language skills class: issues and suggestions**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the importance of assessment in the LMD system along with the shift from traditional assessment in the classical system to continuous assessment in the LMD system. It also paper looks at the issue of continuous assessment in the methods of teaching and assessing language skills class taught to third year undergraduate students in the English department at the university of Algiers 2. Since assessment is not synonymous with testing, it should be continuous throughout the teaching and learning process in the classroom. In other words, teachers have the possibility to use alternatives in assessment in addition to administering tests. For this reason, assessment tools such as paper and pencil tests, a collection of projects in a portfolio and self-assessment are suggested to assess third year students' achievement in the methods of teaching and assessing language skills class. Finally, this paper evaluates the assessment tools recommended in terms of the five principles of assessment, namely practicality, reliability, validity, wash back and authenticity.

**Keywords:** continuous assessment; alternatives in assessment; portfolios; self-assessment; LMD.

### **Résumé**

Cet article examine l'importance de l'évaluation dans le système LMD ainsi que le passage de l'évaluation traditionnelle du système classique à l'évaluation continue dans le système LMD. La question de l'évaluation continue dans le cours de méthodes d'enseignement et d'évaluation des compétences linguistiques enseigné aux étudiants de troisième année de licence au département d'anglais de l'université d'Alger 2 y est aussi traité. L'évaluation devrait être continue tout au long du processus

d'enseignement et d'apprentissage en classe puisque les enseignants ont la possibilité d'utiliser des alternatives de l'évaluation en plus d'administrer des tests et des examens. Par conséquent, des outils d'évaluation tels que des tests, la collection de projets dans un portfolio et l'auto-évaluation sont suggérés pour évaluer les étudiants de troisième année de licence. Enfin, cet article évalue les outils d'évaluation recommandés en fonction des cinq principes de l'évaluation, notamment l'aspect pratique, la fiabilité, la validité, l'impact de l'évaluation sur l'apprentissage, et l'authenticité.

**Mots clefs :** évaluation continue, alternatives d'évaluation, portfolios, auto-évaluation, LMD.

### ملخص

يتطرق هذا المقال لأهمية التقييم في نظام ل.م.د في ظروف الانتقال من التقييم التقليدي للنظام الكلاسيكي إلى التقييم المستمر في نظام ل.م.د. ويتناول هذه المسألة في إطار دراسة مادة طرق التدريس وتقييم المهارات اللغوية التي يتم تدريسها لطلاب السنة الثالثة في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة الجزائر 2. وتبين نتائج هذه الدراسة أن فعالية هذا التقييم ترتبط باستمراره طوال في الفصل الدراسي حيث يتمتع المعلمون بفرصة استخدام بدائل التقييم بالإضافة إلى إدارة الاختبارات والامتحانات. ولبلوغ هذا الهدف يقترح المقال أدوات تقييم مناسبة مثل الاختبارات، وجمع المشاريع في محفظة، والتقييم الذاتي لتقييم طلاب السنة الثالثة. وأخيرا يقوم هذا المقال بتقييم أدوات التقييم وفقاً لمبادئ التقييم الخمسة، وهي: التطبيق العملي، والموثوقية، والصلاحية، وتأثير التقييم على التعلم، والأصالة.

الكلمات الدالة: التقييم المستمر؛ بدائل التقييم؛ المحافظ؛ التقييم الذاتي؛ ل.م.د.

### Introduction

In 2009, the LMD system was introduced in the English department at the University of Algiers 2 in an experimental way in parallel to the classical system. Few years later, the classical system was dropped and the LMD became the unique study scheme. This latter is believed to overcome the limitations of the



classical system in that it encourages students to be active and autonomous variables responsible of their own learning. Among the characteristics of this system is the aspect of continuous assessment. The classical system was in favor of traditional evaluation; that is to say, students were required to sit one exam per semester which aims at measuring their overall abilities in a given course with the possibility to take a remedial test at the end of the year. As a reaction to this kind of summative and formal assessment the LMD came with the notion of continuous assessment. This paper aims at examining ways and means of implementing this continuous assessment in the year methods of teaching and assessing language skills course by suggesting alternatives in assessment. It also points out to the issues met when implementing these alternatives assessment in this context.

### **1. Importance of Assessment in the LMD**

This article focuses on assessment due to its importance in teaching and learning. Assessment goes hand in hand with teaching since teachers devote an important amount of their teaching time to assessment. This can be incidental and unplanned like comments, corrective feedback; or planned and formal like tests. In addition, assessment is an opportunity for students to learn (Brown, Abeywickrama, 2010). Teachers assess what is worth learning and students revise and focus on assessed items.

In order to be efficient, assessment needs to be accompanied with feedback; that is to say, once students are assessed, they need to be informed about their strengths and weaknesses. This is formative assessment which is different from summative assessment which is expressed through scores or grades only. Students are not informed about what they did well and what is necessary to improve. Good quality feedback contributes to build confidence in students and motivates them to improve their learning. It thus enables them to be involved in the process of learning. Qualitative feedback also leads to transparency regarding the criteria of evaluation; this increases students' face validity as they perceive assessment as being fair.

### **2. The shift from traditional to continuous assessment**



In the 1990's, there was a shift from the rigid and static tests towards more authentic methods of testing which are closer to tasks implemented in real life situations. Researchers saw in alternative assessment a way to assess students' critical thinking and creativity, and a means to focus on long term retention of knowledge to transfer it in real life.

Traditional assessment techniques like selected responses (multiple choice questions, true-false statements, fill in the gaps and matching) are indicators of what is understood. They assess the receptive skills and measure a wide variety of learning points. They are criticized in that they are inauthentic. Bailey (1998) and Lew and Eckes (1995) point out to the fact that tests are not informative. In this respect, Genesee and Hamayan (1994) state that tests do not provide information about students' interests and their learning strategies. Moreover, teachers tend to deal with various kinds of exam preparation practices at the expense of learning activities (Wall, 1996). This encourages students to adopt surface approaches to learning instead of deep approaches (Newstead, Findlay, 1997). Consequently, the learning process is affected because students become passive recipient relying on rote learning.

As a reaction, a shift of emphasis was observed from testing to alternative assessment which refers to the use of authentic techniques to be integrated in the classroom. Smith (1999) describes alternative assessment as continuous techniques to implement inside and outside the classroom at different points in time. It is used to assess students' achievement, motivation, and attitudes to improve teaching and learning.

One purpose of the LMD, among others, is to integrate continuous assessment. The term used in the regulation is continuous assessment, but it actually refers to alternatives assessment like project works and presentations, tasks, activities in addition to more formal and summative assessment such as tests, exams and quizzes. The purpose is to make use of both formal and informal assessment, and formative and summative assessment to have a



broader view of students' educational abilities, motivation, strategies use, problem solving abilities, capacity to deal with real life situations, and performances in the educational environment. The LMD aims at taking distance with the traditional testing of the classical system which was rigid, summative and formal in nature. It consisted of elicitation techniques 'administered in strict time limitations to sample performance of a test-taker in a specified domain' (Brown, Abeywickrama, 2010). These tests have been criticized because they represent decontextualized test items, they are oriented to product, they foster extrinsic motivation, and feedback is limited to scores. As a reaction to the shortcomings of tests, educators proposed continuous or ongoing assessment in an effort to triangulate data yielded by traditional tests (Brown 2010).

With the official implementation of the LMD in the English Department, teachers used continuous assessment and implemented some alternatives in assessment like presentations, projects, multi drafts essay writing during the first experimental year. This is due to the fact that the adequate conditions that fit the spirit of the LMD were met: tables and chairs set in groups to allow collaborative work, a low number of students, and availability of technology devices. The following year, the teaching situation changed. This had an impact on assessment. Consequently, ongoing assessment is now limited to a formal summative test scored out of 15 and 20. Five additional points are assigned for attendance and participation.

To achieve the purpose of this article, I will consider assessment in the third year methods of teaching and assessing language skills course. The next section describes the teaching environment and its different components. The latter consists of the: description of the course, objectives of the course, learners, teaching context, and description of the assessment.

### **3. Description of the Environment**

#### **- Description of the course**

This course provides future teachers with the different methods of teaching, drawing the distinction between the teacher-centered methods and the learner-centered methods. It also introduces the



basic principles of teaching language skills within a communicative framework. The principles of assessment along with the various elicitation techniques used by language teachers are also examined.

### **- Objectives of the course**

By the end of the course, students are expected to meet the following learning objectives:

- Identify major language teaching methods.
- Understand the basic principles of teaching and assessing language skills.
- Demonstrate effective use of analytical and critical thinking skills.
- Use English correctly and appropriately at an advanced level

### **- Learners**

Learners in this course are third year undergraduate students at the English Department.

### **- Teaching context**

The classes take place at the university of Algiers 2 and the same syllabus is used with all the groups. The course extends over one semester.

### **- Description of the assessment presently**

As far as assessment of the course is concerned, teachers agreed to organize a midterm test which is scored out of 15 and to assign 5 points out of 20 for attendance and participation. The sum of these two marks is worked to get the mark of the continuous assessment. The exam is organized at the end of the term. This implies that personal work as projects, or practices are not used.

## **4. Suggestions for continuous assessment**

Because some assessment in the LMD should be continuous and because assessment is described by Brown and Abeywickrama (2010) as 'an ongoing process that encompasses a wide range of methodological techniques' (Brown, 2010), several approaches can be used for assessment in this course. Instead of just administering a midterm test and an exam at the end of the term, it is more desirable to 'assess students' progress and results at different



times and in different ways' (Linville, 2011). To ensure continuous assessment throughout the course, a combination of summative and formative assessment tools is suggested:

- Mid-term and final test (summative assessment)
- Portfolios and self-assessment (formative assessment)

The rationale behind combining different tools is to achieve triangulation. The latter is recommended because teachers cannot evaluate students' abilities by means of only one tool for some abilities may remain hidden (Brown, Abeywickrama, 2010).

#### 4.1-Midterm and final tests

These come in the form of essay questions to answer. They are presently administered in this course as the sole tools of assessment. A sample is presented below.

##### Midterm test:

###### Answer the following in the form of an essay

Explain the different roles learners hold in these language teaching methods: Audio-Lingual Method, Communicative Language Teaching, and Competency-Based Language Teaching.

##### Exam

###### Answer ONE of the following in the form of an essay

What is the role of teachers in the individualized /humanistic classroom?

Explain the main principles of the natural approach.

#### 4.2-Portfolios

They are according to Genesee and Upshur (1996) 'a purposeful collection of students' work that demonstrates ..... their efforts, progress, and achievements in given areas' (Genesee, Upshur, 1996). They are one of the most common alternative in assessment and they include materials like essays and compositions in draft and final form, reports, newspaper or magazine clippings, journals,



**Task One**

-Look at the second unit of the first year secondary education textbook entitled 'At the Crossroads' pp 52-55

- Evaluate the reading comprehension text and reading tasks in terms of the principles and techniques you examined with your teacher in this course.
  
- Evaluate the writing tasks according to the teaching principles and techniques you studied with your teacher.

diaries, written homework exercises, test scores, notes on lectures (Brown, Abeywickrama, 2010).

With regard to the present course, I suggest that the portfolios be a collection of tasks that each student does at different times of the term and that the teacher collects at the end of the term in a file. The collection of different answers provided by a student is seen as an expression of students' lives and identities. If implemented correctly; that is to say, if objectives and guidelines are explicit and if review and feedback are present, portfolios can develop students' intrinsic motivation, responsibility and ownership (Brown, Abeywickrama, 2010).

To achieve this aim in the present course, the following tasks can be administered:





**Task Two****Read the following vignette**

'The teacher stands in front of the class. She is a young Canadian woman who has been in Tokyo for almost a year. Although she is relatively inexperienced, she has an air of confidence. There are twelve students in the class. They are all young adults who are taking an evening EFL (English as a Foreign Language) class. This is the third class of the semester, and the students and the teacher are beginning to get used to each other. Her students have a pretty good idea of what to expect as the teacher signals that the class is about to begin.

"All right, class, time to get started" she says. "Last class we learned the questions

and answers for talking about things we own. 'Is this your pen? Yes, it is. No

it isn't. Are these your books? Yes, they are. No, they aren't.' OK? So, let's see if

you remember how to do this. *Is this your pen?* Repeat."

The class intones, "Is this your pen?"

"Pencil," says the teacher.

"Is this your pencil?"

"Books."

Most students say, "Are these your books?" However, the teacher hears several

of them say, "Is this your books?"

She claps her hands and says loudly "Are these your books? Are these your

books? Are these your books? Again! . . . *books*."

"Are these your books?" the students say in unison.

"Good! Great! . . . *those*."

"Are those your books?" say the students.

"Excellent! . . . *her*."

"Are those her book?"

"Book?" queries the teacher.

"Books, books," say several of the students emphasizing the 's' on the end of the

verb.

"*Your* "

"Are those your books?"

The teacher beams. "Perfect!" she says. The students smile shyly' (Nunan, 2015, p7)



**Questions**

- Identify the teaching method
- highlight the key principles of this teaching method
- Link them to what we studied in the classroom
- Evaluate this method in terms of strengths and weaknesses.

**Task Three**

You will watch a video of a listening lesson. This takes place in a private language school. The learners are adult pre-intermediate.

- Evaluate the video in terms of the teaching principles and techniques examined in the classroom.
- How would you make this class more effective?

**Task Four: Presentation**

In small groups (4-5 students), you will present some of your portfolio (one of the previous tasks). Your teacher will tell you the day and time for your presentation.

You will talk 10-15 minutes. Then there will be 10-15 minutes for questions and evaluations of your performance

I suggest that each task is administered at different periods of the term. As pointed out by Brown and Hudson (1998), Genesee and Upshur (1996), Weigle (2002), urging students to perform these tasks will:

- encourage student-teacher interaction
- individualize learning.
- give the teacher opportunities to be a facilitator
- encourage self and peer assessment and engage students into the revision process
- provide tangible evidence of each student's production.

For this reason, if the required conditions are offered to teachers, it is believed that using portfolios will be beneficial for both teachers and students. They are an opportunity to assess for learning instead of the traditional testing that assesses learning.



### 4.3-Self-assessment

Self-assessment emerged as a result of approaches of teaching that emphasize students' responsibility of their learning, development of metacognitive strategies and a collaborative model of teaching and learning. With self-assessment, the learner is invited to share responsibility with the teacher in the assessment process so that the teacher is no more the one who holds all the power in the assessment process. Boud and Falchikov (2006) argue that the active participation of students in assessment design and criteria is an appreciable preparation for future working life. Andrade and Du (2007) define self-assessment as:

*".. a process of formative assessment during which students reflect on and evaluate the quality of their work and their learning, judge the degree to which they reflect explicitly on stated goals or criteria, identify strengths and weaknesses in their work and revise accordingly."* (Andrade, Du, 2007, p.160)

Boud(1995) states that self-assessment includes two main elements: making decisions about the standards of performance expected and making judgments about the quality of the performance in relation to these standards. When introducing self-assessment, students need to be involved in both of these aspects. As a result, according to Spiller (2012), self-assessment should be implemented by first having conversations with students to explain the purpose of the activity, explain the procedures explicitly to make them know what is expected of them. All this should take place in a safe environment in which students feel at ease to be honest about their own performance without the fear that the evaluation can be used against them.

Students should participate with their teacher in establishing the criteria for evaluation as well as in evaluating their work. Students should also have practice in evaluating some sample work on their own in relation to these criteria. Opportunities should be created regularly for students to reflect on their progress in relation to particular learning outcomes and according to the agreed criteria.



Teachers should support students in the development of self-assessment abilities.

As far as the teaching methods and assessing language skills course is concerned, the following self-assessment example can be used.

- Students can be asked to set the criteria they would use to evaluate task two of the portfolio (see p 8)
- Students discuss the criteria with the teacher
- Students design a self-assessment sheet according to the selected criteria.

The following questions can be included in the assessment sheet:

- What parts of the task were the most difficult? Why?
- What parts were the easiest? Why?
- What are the most interesting parts of the task?
- Why do I think I did not do a good job on this work?
- How can I improve my work?
- Why do I think I did a good job?

Students are required to justify why they evaluate themselves in a given way. This encourages them to regularly go back to the criteria and check their performance against them. They thus become engaged in their learning and develop their understanding of what quality learning is.

This kind of self-assessment can be rewarded by getting an average mark based on a combination of students' self-assessment and teacher assessment. The teacher can also assign an additional mark on students' explanations for the assessment.

## **5. Evaluation of the assessment in terms of the five principles**

In order to evaluate a designed assessment, teachers need to consider five principles of language assessment: practicality, reliability, validity, authenticity and wash back.



**- Practicality**

It deals with evaluating the assessment according to cost, time needed, and usefulness. Bachman and Palmer (1996), on the other hand, defined practicality as “the relationship between the resources that will be required in the design, development, and use of the test and the resources that will be available for these activities.” (Bachman and Palmer, 1996, p. 36).

Brown and Abeywickrama (2010) explain that a test is practical if it:

- stays within budgetary limits.
- can be completed by test-takers within appropriate time constraints.
- does not exceed available material resources.
- considers the time and effort involved for design and scoring.

**- Reliability**

A test is considered reliable if it is administered on different occasions and similar results are obtained. Brown and Abeywickrama (2010) suggest that a test is reliable if:

- it is consistent across two or more administrations.
- it offers clear directions for scoring or evaluation.
- it has uniform rubrics for scoring or evaluation.
- consistent application of those rubrics by the rater is made possible.

**- Validity**

A test is considered valid when it reflects the test-takers' ability and the test does not measure anything else than what it is supposed to measure. Brown and Abeywickrama (2010) indicate that in order to achieve validity a test should:

- measure only what it claims to measure.
- rely as much as possible on empirical evidence.
- offer meaningful and useful information about a test-taker's ability.
- be supported by a theoretical rationale.

**- Authenticity**

Authenticity is defined as “the degree of correspondence of the characteristics of a given language test task to the features of a target language task” (Bachman, Palmer, 1996).

Brown and Abeywickrama (2010) provided characteristics of a test that has authenticity as follows:

- It has language that is as natural as possible.
- It contains items that are contextualized rather than isolated.
- It includes topics that are meaningful, relevant, and interesting.
- It provides thematic organization to items, such as through a story line or an episode.
- It offers tasks similar to real-world tasks.

- **Washback**

Washback is “the effect of testing and assessment on the language teaching curriculum that is related to it” (Brown, Hudson, 1998, p. 667). Washback is used to refer to the influence that a test has on teaching and learning (Hughes, 2003). Washback, therefore, can be positive or negative. Positive washback takes place if a test encourages learning and teaching or if it provides opportunities for students and teachers to enhance the learning and teaching process, and if it affects language acquisition and instruction positively. If the test causes too much anxiety for the students, teachers and parents, the wash back may be negative. Mismatches between the goals and objectives of the curriculum and tests can also be a source of negative wash back. The example Brown and Hudson (1998) gave is that:

*“if a program sets a series of communicative performance objectives, but assesses the students at the end of the course with multiple-choice structure tests, a negative washback will probably begin to work against the students’ being willing to cooperate in the curriculum and its objectives. Students soon spread the word about such mismatches, and they will generally insist on studying whatever is on the tests and will ignore*



*any curriculum that is not directly related to it”.*

(Brown and Hudson, 1998,p. 668).

The mid-term and final term test administered in this course are of essay type. As far the five principles are concerned, essays are practical to design and administer considering the cost and administrative handling: they are prepared by the teacher and can be administered to a large group in 90 mns. However, they are not practical in terms of scoring. It takes more time to score essays than selected response activities as multiple choice questions or fill in the gaps activities, this is mainly true with large groups. Reliability is also lower compared to selected response activities. This is due to the fact that with essays more than one possible correct answer is possible and the grades may differ from one rater to another. To minimize the lack of reliability, teachers should use rubrics to make the criteria of evaluation clear and avoid impressionistic scoring.

Regarding validity, essays are valid if they assess what they are supposed to measure; that is to say, if the topic is relevant and designed according to the content of the syllabus. The design of tricky questions, for example, will decrease significantly the validity of the test. The fact that the questions of the essay design in this course are linked to the content and methodology of teaching English in the Algerian high schools or language schools in Algeria makes the topic authentic.

Besides the task of writing an essay in itself is authentic because many students will enroll in a master course which requires extensive writing: writing essays, research projects and dissertations. For those who will start teaching after they graduate, they will have to write reports about their teaching to inform the hierarchy about the teaching methodology, tasks and activities, teaching materials used.

Finally in terms of washback, this can be positive if students receive qualitative feedback on the part of their teacher. The latter should point out to the weaknesses of students so that the



correction be an opportunity for them to learn. When students are given pieces of advice and are shown how to improve their performance in the test, they become motivated to improve. On the other hand, when the teacher points out to the strong points, the students' self-esteem increases.

Regarding the alternatives in assessment suggested, namely portfolios and self-assessment, they require considerable time and energy on the part of the teacher and students. They are considered for this reason to lack practicality. In addition, the answers are open-ended. This implies that more than one answer is possible. There are as many answers as the number of students because they are expressions of their personalities and styles. The lack of practicality and reliability are a characteristic of the alternatives in assessment.

The latter are on the other hand valid since they are strongly linked to the objectives of the syllabus and contextualized to the syllabus. For instance, in the present situation students are asked to evaluate teaching situations (vignettes, videos), comment on them and make suggestions to improve them. Hence, these tasks are beneficial for students in their future career as teachers, they lead them to evaluate a teaching situation, to choose or adapt a teaching method according to a given situation, select/design the appropriate teaching materials and tasks, assign the adequate role to their students. As a result, positive washback is achieved, especially if they receive generous qualitative feedback from their teacher. Finally, one can say that the alternatives in assessment suggested are authentic because they simulate teaching situation close to the reality of the language classroom.

These two alternatives in assessment can be used by teachers only if the adequate teaching conditions are offered to teachers and students. These conditions consist of a small group of students, not exceeding twenty students, three hours a teaching session of three hours every week, sophisticated teaching materials as data shows for instance. Besides, it is vital to raise students' awareness





about the benefits of these alternatives to motivate them intrinsically and make them participate to these tasks. This can be also achieved by providing guidelines and supervision. Teachers and students should take the assessment of students' production seriously and devote the necessary time and energy to evaluate quality development and give feedback of good quality.

## Conclusion

This article has dealt with the issue of continuous assessment in the LMD system, and particularly in the context of the methods of teaching and assessing language skills course. Assessment tools such as paper and pencil tests, a collection of projects in a portfolio and self-assessment are suggested to be combined in order to assess third year students. Finally, the paper has presented an evaluation of the assessment tools recommended in terms of the five principles of assessment, namely practicality, reliability, validity, washback and authenticity.

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