

Teachers' evaluation and their feedback on written exam papers

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1. Introduction

The introduction of the LMD programme at university level in Algeria aims at integrating both teachers and students in the international educational system. To reach such an objective, both teachers and students should have the adequate levels and qualifications to allow them to join such a system. However, reality is quite different for both protagonists.

Complaints about students' rather poor performance are often expressed by teachers, as most reports and pedagogical meeting minutes illustrate when compiled for this investigation.

The society in general and education specialists also keep hammering their dissatisfaction with teachers' performance.

It is not the purpose of this reflexion to blame on either side, since it is an admitted axiom that failure to teach, to pass information over to the learner, often results from the emphasis put on one area of teaching at the expense of the other, two areas as problematized by the theme of this colloquium "Le métier d'enseignant". Miliani suggests that any, or the slightest magnifying of the pole of this triangular relationship: Knowledge / learner / teacher, may induce unsatisfactory results, if not corrected on time, generate recurrent serious language deficiencies.

Therefore a stimulating classroom setting presupposes and includes a delicate balance between these three elements: knowledge / teacher / learner. Each one of them is determined by cognitive variables such as mood, difficulty of the lesson, general atmosphere of the situation in context. To these three flexible variables, we ought to add a fourth one, that unfortunately tends to overcome them, which is the importance of the "arithmetic" of marks and numbers, pushing evaluation in the shadow of additions, subtractions and multiplications.

This query purposes to bring this fourth element back in the light of examination, and enhance the mechanisms that failed to make a stimulating means of didactic empathy.

The present study tries to examine how teachers evaluate students' exam papers, as testing is the principal way of assessing the students' performance in terms of language learning (content as well as language items i.e. spelling, grammar, etc.).

The paper addresses the following questions about 'evaluation':

- a) How do teachers evaluate students' exam papers ?
 - Do they focus on form ?
 - Do they focus on content ?
 - Do they focus on both ?
- b) If teachers' evaluation implies feedback :
 - How is this feedback expressed ?
 - How does it stimulate the student's performance to improve ?

2. The teacher in context

2.1 The role of the teacher

Although the emphasis in education today is on the student as the focus of learning, and despite the development of modern technology and the introduction of computers in language learning (CALL: Computer-Assisted Language Learning), the teacher is still "*the person specially trained to guide the student, help him/her select appropriate learning materials, and create a positive classroom environment.*" (Lopez, 1994:12).

The teacher is also the person who evaluates the student properly, as compared to a computer that it is not well-suited for recording how the student chooses the answer.

There are endless debates and useless anxieties in the university community about a utopian view that predicts that computer technology might one day create conditions where the teacher's job would become needless. Such myths may entertain illusions in the mind of people who ignore what a pedagogical setting and knowledge transmission require to teach and learn. Artificial intelligence will never anticipate nor initiate answers for unforeseen situations, and this is exactly what teaching is about. Computer means may massify standard exercises in learning, but remains beneath human capacity to adapt to unpredicted situations.

2.2 Students' evaluation

In language teaching, both teaching and testing are essential. Yet, it is necessary to distinguish between them, and to use testing judiciously.

In some language teaching situations e.g. in Algeria, at university level, testing seems to prevail with 4 exams a year (2 EMDs (Epreuves de Moyenne Durée) + D.S (Epreuve de Synthèse) in June + make-up exam in September). With so many exams, it seems that we are "*adopting a testing rather than a teaching approach to language learning.*" (Podromou, 1991:23). This situation is stressful for both **teachers (2.2.1)**, and **students (2.2.2)**

2.2.1 Teachers

Because of the big number of exams (4 exams a year) and the increasing number of students, teachers spend most of their time marking exam papers, instead of doing research, developing more teaching materials, etc.

Such a situation seems to have resulted in "*the teacher's dispensing of marks and in the detection and penalisation of error, and by raising anxiety levels in the class.*" (Podromou, 1991:23) as the table below shows.

Testing emphasizes:	Teaching emphasizes:
Failure Correctness Impersonality Anxiety Marks Boring content Judgement Extrinsic motivation Competition Teacher control Solemnity Fragmentation Crime and punishment Stick and carrot Product	Success Appropriacy Personalisation Pleasure Results Interesting content Support Intrinsic motivation Cooperation Student control Humour Integration Give and take Ripeness is all process

Table 1 : The main differences between testing and teaching (Podromou, 1991:23)

Some features of 'testing' and 'teaching' e.g. boring content / interesting content; crime and punishment / Give and take; product / process, etc. will be selected from **Table 1**, and referred to in the following parts of this paper.

2.2.2 Students

Students also seem to have as the only objective 'to do and finish the exams' aiming to reach a pass mark only (10 / 20) for most of them.

In a previous study done in collaboration with three colleagues (Kaid-Slimane, Lakhdar-Barka F., and Rahal, for the 'Laboratoire de Recherche N°21'), we found out that 4th year students' written performance (exam papers in American literature / African civilisation / Sociolinguistics) at the Department of English of Oran University between 1998 and 2002, showed serious deficiencies at all language levels (grammar / Syntax / lexis / spelling), and discipline content.

These results showed a mismatch between teachers' syllabii and students' achievement. The table below shows the students' pass rate of the fourth year study.

Year of study	Registered students	Number of students who passed	Percentage
1998-1999	200	130	65%
1999-2000	179	85	47.48%
2000-2001	250	163	65.20 % *
2001-2002	276	160	58%

Table 2: Comparative results of June of the fourth year study at the Department of English (1998-2002)

Table 2 shows that the pass rate of the year 1998-99 was 65%, and it then decreased in the following years.

* The figure of the year 2000-2001 seems quite high because it includes September results, not those of June, because of the non-availability of the June results at the department administration.

-The limitation of the corpus to the three modules listed above, was due to the availability of the exam papers at the Department of English.

-The choice of the Department of English at the University of Oran is due to two reasons:

- As the aim of the 'Laboratoire de Recherche' is to produce teaching materials for students at university level, the study was done with the purpose to find out the problems met by the students in the department

where the four of us teach in order to consequently develop a textbook for our students.

- b. As the Department of English is not representative of the whole population of learners in Algeria, we started with this portion of learners i.e. learners at the Department of English, with the aim to do such a study on a much bigger scale e.g. In different departments of different universities.

3. The choice of the years 1998 to 2002

The study for the 'Laboratoire de Recherche N°21' started during the academic year 2001-2002, so we started with the year 2002, and looked back three years before. The aim was to check whether there was any improvement in terms of results from one year to the other.

The present study is based on the analysis of written exam papers. It will probe into the observations carried out through a great number of exam sheets, that have been compiled. One sample will be kept as a point of illustration to confirm what was an intuition and will gradually transform into a methodologically established assumption.

Intuition and the complaints reported by my colleagues have induced me to apprehend the existence of a gap, or a vacuum in the chain of 'the give and take' relationship that involves the teacher and the learner.

3.1 Selection of the corpus

The corpus consists of a selection of fourth year exam papers (Exams 1 and 2 i.e. EMD1 and EMD2) in four modules: Sociolinguistics / American literature / Educational psychology and African civilisation taught by seven teachers during the year 2004 - 2005.

Exam papers were selected for this study for three main reasons:

- a. Fourth year university students at the Department of English are supposed to have reached a degree of competence in the target language that allows them to produce a satisfactory piece of writing.
- b. These are 'content' modules i.e. the learners are supposed to have gone beyond the acquisition of language skills, and developed enough expertise to assimilate and give 'content' back, in a rather comprehensible form.

- c. "Writing can give a language student a sense of command over the language that no other language activity can give so quickly ." (Leki, 1994:178).

The total number of exam papers examined amount to 60 (fifteen copies in each module whose marks ranged between 12.5 / 20 and 05 / 20) distributed as follows:

- five exam papers with a good mark;
- five exam papers with an average mark (between 10 / 20 and 11 / 20);
- five exam papers with a bad mark i.e. a below average mark, since it is considered as a fail mark.

3.2 Teachers' evaluation

The examination of exam papers shows the following types of evaluation.

- a. Teachers who evaluate both content and form;
- b. Teachers who evaluate content only (with little reference to other errors/ mistakes).

Teachers who evaluate 'content' only should not focus too much on 'process'. If the good marks take it into account, the bad marks must show 'shortages' in content in spite of the good level of process.

If the five bad marks are given mostly because of grammar, syntax, etc. mistakes, therefore there is a contradiction between the objectives of teaching and what actually testing considers.

- c. Teachers who give only an overall mark (with no other comment at all), ought to correspond to a 'give and take' emphasis, and testing is more a 'crime and punishment' sanction.

This last type of evaluation is questionable. It does not illustrate an evaluation philosophy; it implements a practice of teaching, rather commercial, or transactional: 'I give' and 'you take', no comment. If you do not take, it is a crime, and as such you will be punished.

This type of teachers (fortunately, a very small number) does not seem to question the complex network of interactions that determines the pedagogical contract.

The reason for such a type of evaluation could be explained, but not justified, by the number of exams (4 exams a year) and the tremendous number of exam papers to mark (between 200 and 300 per module).

However, we should normally give exams to get feedback in order to improve the students' performance. In this context, Fathman and Whalley suggest that

while reading student papers, teachers should often ask themselves, "*How can I give the best feedback to help my students improve their compositions?*" (1990:178). and this is what we should be doing.

3.3 Teachers' feedback

While evaluating the students' exam papers, most researchers agree that attention must be paid to both content and form. Teachers should look at content as well as errors in structure.

In this study, most teachers paid attention to content, and some of them either identified the errors and their kinds (i.e. grammar, spelling, syntax, etc.), or they only locate the errors without specifying the kinds.

The kinds of mistakes / errors that occurred most frequently in students' papers were:

- **spelling** (and the list is endless), e.g. Chekespear (Shakespeare); Pre-sident Boosh (President Bush); dymantions/dimentions (dimensions); binifits (benefits); codyfied (codified); desert (instead of 'dessert'); difrent/difrence (different / difference); pronounciation (pronunciation); sellection (selection); concequence (consequence); enought (enough); well-fair (welfare); etc.
- **vocabulary**: the choose (choice) of the style; the lexic (lexis); twen-teenth (twentieth) century; etc.
- **grammar and syntax**:
- The 3rd person singular/ present tense is often omitted (He never **say** / When the teacher **ask** the student in the classroom.... / If the learner **succeed**), or overgeneralized: I has (I have) / we has (we have) ...

Incorrect use of verbs and tenses: The educated is talking with Classical Arabic and the non-educated is talking with Algerian Arabic.

Additions and double negation: He didn't gave her nothing. (He didn't give her anything / He gave her nothing).

- Interference from L1 / L2 to L3:

It exists many paired-items (Il existe);

In British English we write 'fulfill' as that (translated from Arabic /hakadha /) but in American English it is written 'fullfill'. (The student meant 'fulfil' and 'fulfill').

As one linguist said ... (from Arabic / kama gala ahad/)
 The educated is talking with classical Arabic (from Arabic / yatakalm bi l arabiya el fusha /).

- **Lack of Background knowledge:**

In Civilisation, the students referred to: The (British) system / government / colony, and prices / taxes interchangeably, without making any difference between these terms.

- **Punctuation:**

Students rarely use capital letters to start a new sentence / paragraph. This may be due to the fact that there is no capital letter in Arabic ;

Lack of punctuation: Use of very long sentences (in the form of a paragraph).

At last, this is an example of a sentence written by one of the students to show the ratio of mistakes. In Sociolinguistics, talking about the use of formal English, the student wrote:

" Will you tell me the court where were you the night of Tuesday in the fourth November." (5 mistakes in one sentence only).

3.3.1 location of feedback

- Some teachers gave an overall mark with comments in the margins of the paper (2/7);
- Some other teachers gave a mark with only a general comment at the top of the paper (2/7);
- Some teachers gave a mark with a combination of comments in the margins and a general comment at the top of the paper (1/7); and
- few teachers gave simply an overall mark, with no feedback at all (2/7) .

(The number given between brackets (1/7) should read: one teacher out of seven, etc.).

3.3.2 Kind of feedback : Positive versus negative comments

The feedback included :

- **positive comments** such as :
 - Good answer (product + process);
 - Mature reflexion (product)
 - Very interesting, well discussed and well presented. Carry on. (product + process);
 - A lot of relevant points and examples (product);
 - Some good points;

- Good personal style;
- Your style is excellent, however you don't try to go deeper into the analysis of the theme ...

(The comment '*Your style is excellent*' for an Algerian (non-native) fourth year university student, has been justified by the teacher as 'compared to the other students' written performance.')

Positive feedback was also followed by negative comments (which gives balanced opinions) such as :

- Lots of good points (product) but very badly structured and presented (process);
- Interesting and detailed but lacks structure (in form): Introduction, Body and Conclusion.
- Although your composition is full of information and details, it lacks very often clarity and coherence because of English i.e. Written Expression.
- **Negative comments:**
- Most of your answer is beside the point and very badly written. (product + process);
- Your answer does not make sense. (product);
- You have not answered the question at all. This is a hotch-potch. (product);
- Your English is too bad for a fourth-year student. (process);
- You seem to have learnt what you have written by heart. In any case, it is superficial and incomplete. (product);
- Irrelevant and full of mistakes. (product + process);
- Very superficial / serious mistakes. (product + process);
- This is by no means a serious work ! (product + process);
- This is not a serious answer to a serious question. (product).

Some teachers' comments were vague and did not provide any specific reaction to what students have written. This type of feedback may fall within the contradiction: '*teaching*' emphasizes '*personalisation*' and '*testing*' stresses '*impersonality*' (**Table 1**), which is often difficult to perceive as different from objectivity.

The teachers who did not give feedback, no comment and no visual corrections (signs, codification, etc.) may just have a misconception of what evaluation is. This is nothing but a supposition that establishes the idea that the bulk of students are seen in a manichean way, those who fail and those who pass: two groups of learners without shades of grading nor identified quality. This binary conception of learners may fit the contradiction '*boring content* /

interesting content'. To come out with a sound conclusion, an investigation should be carried out, focusing on these teachers and their students, with directions towards the content of the module.

4. Recommendations

The study of the situation and the analysis of the way teachers evaluate exam papers, allow one to make the following recommendations.

a) Reduction of the number of exams

As stated in Part 2.2 of this paper (Students' evaluation), the number of exams (4 exams a year in each module) should be reduced to three exams maximum (2 EMDs + 1 make-up exam); and this is what is suggested in the LMD system.

The reason for omitting the D.S. exam is that the marks between EMD2 and the D.S. showed little or no improvement.

b) use of continuous assessment

Each discipline could be evaluated in the form of a 'continuous assessment' that would be more efficient, and learning could be made more rewarding than the traditional term paper for the routine pass mark, unique administrative obsession.

When evaluating students' papers, we should use what Bailly (1998:96) refers to as '*une évaluation formatrice*', together with '*une évaluation formative*' (a formative evaluation).

By reducing the number of exams, teachers would save time to deal with the following recommendations.

c) Students' rewrites

This part addresses the question: Does correction assist language learning ? and how ?

Once the original exam papers are returned, students should be asked to make revisions and rewrite their original papers. They can be given 30 minutes to complete their rewrites. The rewrite can be done by the author with the teacher guidance, or by the author and his classmates. Students and the teacher or classmates should work together and collaborate to get the text to look as good as it can.

Although, no text will be error-free, students' rewrite will contribute in improving the original paper and by finding out about the different strategies to be used for such corrections.

d) **With the advent of the LMD system, teachers can also create a self-access centre** where students can work independently of the teacher or with the teacher when / if s/he is available.

Teachers will have to develop materials dealing with language learning / teaching items (grammar, punctuation, etc.) and activities for communicative purposes.

Each exercise / activity should be supplied with an answer key so that students can correct the activity they have done and evaluate themselves.

Self-access activities provide opportunities for self-evaluation and progress in learning.

The self-access centre needs the collaboration of all the teachers of the department, each teacher contributing in his / her own field.

e) **Publishing an ELT newsletter on a local scale where both teachers and students can contribute.**

What our students need most is 'motivation'. If students think their work will be treated as important and worthy of publication, they will hopefully get motivated.

Teachers and students can work together to select the best piece of writing (written essays and exam papers) and discuss the criteria for such selection before publishing it.

The selection of the best piece of writing and the discussion of the criteria of the selection can be considered as a remedial strategy, as students will find out by themselves what to write and how to write it. Also, by participating actively, students will feel that they are not simply passive learners.

f) **Curriculum development and teacher self-development**

By evaluating 'evaluation', teachers should normally check what had worked and what had not, and adjust their curriculum accordingly. Through students' evaluation, we gain information in order to bring innovation and change in language teaching. For bringing such adjustment, teachers need to go through the process of self-development as well.

Rea-Dickins and Germaine (1992:55) find that there are three principal reasons for conducting an evaluation. The first is for assessment and accountability for administrative purposes. In the second and the third, evaluation can serve a developmental function, that of curriculum development and teacher-self-development, (in Bailly, 1998:104).

5. Conclusion

To round off the question, one would say that both teachers and students are central in teaching / learning situations, and that we should pay special tribute to teachers for the work they do.

I reiterate the fact that the aim of this paper is to blame neither the teachers nor the students, but to try and shed light on a specific, but very essential element in language teaching i.e. language testing, focusing mainly on teachers' evaluation and feedback.

Therefore, for testing students successfully, we should keep in mind the characteristics of a good test (as stipulated by Bachman and Palmer, 1996):

- *“ Scores reliability: the scoring procedure in such a situation yields data which are easily quantifiable;*
- *Security: the examinees know how they are going to be scored;*
- *Feedback: students know well how they have obtained such marks: they view the test as meaningful, useful, and fair. It encourages them to use their own words rather than punish them for something they do not know”, as the name of student is / talib / in Arabic, a metaphoric appellation, referring to the noble function of learning as being ‘begging knowledge.’*

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