

Assessment in the EFL University Classroom: between Tradition and Innovation

التقييم في قسم اللغة الانجليزية الاجنبية المستوى الجامعي: بين الطرق التقليدية والحديثة

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Abstract

Assessment has long been one among the crucial subjects of debate in Higher Education especially in light of the new changes and implementations worldwide. Recently and with requirements of the multilingual age, university teachers are urged to step towards innovation in their classrooms and at large scales. In the field of assessment and with reference to EFL (English Foreign Language) teaching/learning in Algeria it is a reality that many teachers are unfortunately still hesitant to deal with novelty by implementing diverse forms of assessment in their classrooms, particularly the ones which are more 'learner-centred' in the sense that they are proved to be more effective in providing learners better control over their learning. With reference to what have been mentioned, the present paper is a case study that attempts first to identify then understand teachers and students attitudes towards assessment in general and its different implementations in the EFL classroom in particular. It strives to know their opinions concerning the newly advocated forms of assessment (within the LMD 'License-Master-Doctorate') compared to the traditional ones (used in the classical system). We thus address the following issues: How can the university teacher assess his students effectively in the EFL classroom? What forms of assessment are more suitable to the students taught and the outcome to be achieved? Do EFL teachers prefer to use teacher oriented forms of assessment or alternative forms and why? Are students aware of the importance of assessment in their learning? Shall teachers consider assessment as part of the educational process or as a prerequisite for success of the process? The study confirms that EFL teachers and students are well aware of the importance of assessment in the teaching/learning process at the university level, however, most of them are still not ready to cope with novelty in using alternative forms of assessment.

Key words: Assessment, EFL University Classroom, Innovation, University Teacher, University Student.

الملخص

لقد شغل مؤخرا موضوع التقييم في التعليم العالي حيزا كبيرا من الاهتمام لاسيما في ظل التغيرات والمستجدات الكثيرة عالميا، فأصبح من الضروري على الأستاذ الجامعي أن يخطو نحو التجديد في هذا المجال من أجل مواكبة متطلبات و تحديات عصر الرقمنة. في هذا السياق وبالإشارة إلى واقع تعليم و تعلم اللغة الانجليزية الأجنبية في الجزائر أثبتت الكثير من الأبحاث الميدانية بأن بعض الأساتذة لا يزالون مترددين في إدراج كل ما هو جديد من أشكال و طرائق التقييم في صفوفهم بالرغم من أن الكثير من ذوي الاختصاص أكدوا تميز هذه الأخيرة عن غيرها من أشكال التقييم التقليدية الأخرى.

بالتركيز على أهمية التقييم في التعليم العالي، تهدف هذه الدراسة الميدانية إلى تحديد ثم فهم مواقف الأساتذة والطلبة إتجاه التقييم بشكل عام وتطبيقاته المختلفة في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية الأجنبية بشكل خاص. كما تهدف إلى معرفة آرائهم بشأن أشكال التقييم الحديثة تحت نظام ال ل.م.د (ليسانس- ماستر-دكتوراه) مقارنة بأشكال التقييم التقليدية تحت النظام الكلاسيكي. وبالتالي سنحاول مناقشة الأسئلة التالية: كيف يمكن للأستاذ الجامعي تقييم طلبة اللغة الانجليزية الأجنبية بشكل فعال؟ ما هي أشكال التقييم الواجب اعتمادها من أجل تحقيق نتائج مرضية؟ هل يفضل أساتذة اللغة الانجليزية أشكال التقييم التقليدية أم الحديثة منها؟ هل الطالب الجامعي على وعي بأهمية التقييم في عملية التعليم؟ هل يعتبر الأساتذة التقييم جزءا من العملية التعليمية أم شرط أساسي لنجاح هذه الأخيرة؟ استدلالا بالنتائج المتحصل عليها أن أساتذة وكذا طلبة اللغة الانجليزية على وعي كبير بأهمية التقييم في عملية التعليم و التعلم على مستوى الجامعة غير أن الكثير منهم لم يتأقلم بصورة كاملة مع مستجدات طرائق التقييم الحديثة حتى يتم تبنيها بشكل صحيح.

الكلمات الدالة : التقييم، قسم اللغة الانجليزية الأجنبية، التجديد، الأستاذ الجامعي، الطالب الجامعي.

1- Introduction

The major aim of this research work is to spotlight on assessment at the Algerian university with a particular focus on the EFL classroom. It aims to present new directions in assessment by taking into account teachers and students' attitudes, opinions, views and reactions to the innovatory assessment procedures advocated by the LMD system as alternatives to traditional forms of assessment adopted in the classical system. As a background for the study, a distinction between assessment, testing and evaluation is presented followed by definitions of non-traditional or alternative forms of assessment in comparison to traditional forms. A bird's eye view in this concern is put on the major characteristics of alternative assessment and its importance in any language classroom. The methodology we used, the steps we followed, the objectives we aimed to attain as well as results of this small scale case study are all explained.

2- Assessment, Testing and Evaluation

There has been strong emphasis on the field of language assessment among researchers in recent years (Douglas, 1995; Shohamy, 1995; Kunnan, 1997; Brindley, 1998b; Turner, 1998; Perkins, 1998; Kroll, 1998) due to the importance role assessment plays in the teaching/learning process and at different levels. In the same field and despite the existing nuance between the three terms '**assessment**', '**testing**' and '**evaluation**', teachers in various educational settings including the university often use them interchangeably. A clear distinction between the three terms is thus necessary.

'Assessment' is defined by Sommer (1989) as the process of finding out who the students are, what their abilities are, what they need to know and how they perceive the learning will affect them. Validity and reliability represent two key requirements in assessment which places the needs of the students at the centre of the teacher's planning. According to Brindley (2001, p.137) the term assessment refers to "*a variety of ways of collecting information on a learner's language ability or achievement*". Assessment can serve different purposes, which include:

- *Selection*: eg. To determine whether learners have sufficient language proficiency to be able to undertake tertiary study;
- *Certification*: eg. To provide people with a statement of their language ability for employment purposes;
- *Accountability*: eg. To provide educational funding authorities with evidence that intended learning outcomes have been achieved and to justify expenditure;
- *Diagnosis*: eg. To identify learners' strengths and weaknesses;
- *Instructional decision-making*: eg. To decide what material to present next or what to revise;
- *Motivation*: eg. To encourage learners to study harder.

(Ibid, p. 138).

Assessment is an umbrella term that encompasses some instruments used to measure learner's achievement such as: tests, project works, observation..... '*Testing*' is different from assessment and a test is "*a method of measuring a person's ability or knowledge in a given area*" (Brown, 1994, p.252). According to Cohen (1994, p.196): "*a single test of overall ability...does not give an accurate picture of an individual's proficiency and that a range of different assessment procedures are necessary*". Because of numerous issues and biases with standardized tests (Garcia & Pearson, 1991, 1994; Wrigley & Guth, 1992), development in language assessment methods and procedure have resulted in "*an increase in the use of 'alternative' methods of assessing and recording achievement which can capture the outcomes of learning that occur in the classroom but which do not involve standardized tests*" (Brindley, 2001, p.142).

'Evaluation' is also distinguished from assessment and testing since it is concerned more with "*the overall language programme and not just with what individual students have learnt*" (Ibid, p. 137). The two terms '*evaluation*' and '*assessment*' though complementary "*are technically different. Assessment of an individual student's progress or achievement is an important component of evaluation: it is that*

part of evaluation that includes the collection and analysis of information about student learning” (Genesee, 2001, p.145). Undoubtedly, the field of language assessment is complex and rapidly evolving as it underwent significant change (Brindley, 2001).

A shift of focus is nowadays put on methods of assessment which include structures observation, progress grids, learning journals, project work, teacher-developed tasks, peer-assessment and self-assessment (Brindley, 1989; Cohen, 1994; Hamayan, 1995; Genesee & Upshur, 1996; Bailey, 1998; Shohamy, 1998). A further shift in the assessment landscape is the increasing attention paid to assessment of achievement, an area which was somewhat neglected in the past (Weir 1993, Brindley 1998a). In what follows the importance of alternative (innovatory) assessment and its role in overcoming some of the shortcomings of traditional forms of assessment will be highlighted.

3- Assessment: Classical Vs LMD System

As an attempt from the Algerian authorities to pursue requirements of the globalized multicultural world, new reforms have been implemented at large scales and with different levels. In Higher Education for example reforms emerged with the introduction of a new organizational framework for university courses: the “LMD” system (*Licence-Master-Doctorate*) as an identical system of most developed countries. From time to time “*Some new ideas in the teaching of English become quickly established in practice because they are so right, so timely, so useful*” (Panaflorida, 1998, p. 347). In this respect and as far as EFL teaching/learning at the university is concerned, novelty in this innovatory system lies mainly in the way students are assessed, i.e., the area of assessment.

The major differences between assessment in the EFL classical classroom (*old paradigm*) and the non-traditional LMD classroom (*new paradigm*) are similar to the ones identified by Richards and Renandya (2002) in their comparison between old and new paradigm of assessment (See the table below).

Old Paradigm (Classical System)	New Paradigm (LMD System)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focus on language - Teacher-centred - Isolated skills - Emphasis on product - One answer, one –way correctness - Tests that test 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focus on communication - Learner-centred - Integrated skills - Emphasis on process - Open-ended, multiple solutions - Tests that also teach

Table1: Old and New Paradigm of Assessment (Adopted from Richards & Renandya, 2002, p.336).

A wealth of research (Anthony et al, 1991; Goodman, 1991; Holt, 1994; Navarrete *et al*, 1990; Wilde *et al* in press) provides illustrations of alternative assessment procedures. However, the difference between traditional and alternative (or non-traditional) assessment remains a subject of wide debate among specialists in the field.

The term *non-traditional* suggests “*the existence of other forms of assessment outside the conventional or traditional system*” (Panaflorida, 1998, p. 345). A variety of labels have been used to distinguish alternative assessment from traditional standardized testing (Macias, 1995). In this respect, Garcia & Pearson (1994) identify some labels to refer to non-traditional assessment such as : *performance assessment, authentic assessment, portfolio assessment, informal assessment, situated (or contextual) assessment, and assessment by exhibition*.

According to Macias (1995), alternative assessment is more learner-centred and when compared with traditional forms of assessments it seems to be more efficient in the language classroom in the sense that:

- It is based on the daily classroom activities; it also reflects the curriculum, unlike traditional, standardized tests that often test skills incongruent with classroom practices. Because the data collected are based on real-life tasks, alternative assessment provides information on the strengths as well as the weaknesses of a student.
- It actually asks students to show what they can do. Students are evaluated on what they integrate and produce rather than on what they are able to recall and reproduce.
- It provides a menu of possibilities, rather than any one single method for assessment.

Thus, student growth can be more reliably assessed because information from various sources is included in the process.

• It, contrary to traditional testing which typically provides only a set of numbers.

documents a story for every student-and what is the ultimate goal of evaluation if not to give us the knowledge to be able to reflect on, discuss, and assist a student's journey through the learning process? Alternative assessment gives us the power to do all three.

• It gathers valid and reliable procedures that avoid many of the problems inherent in traditional testing, including norming, linguistic, and cultural biases.

(Macias, 1995, p. 39-3 42)

Furthermore, the non-traditional assessment is characterized by its emphasis on:

- Multiple types of information , student achievement, attitudes, learning styles, need and aspirations;
- Alternative and varied methods of information collection to complement tests;
- Concerns for both the processes and the products of teaching and learning;
- Criterion-referenced, standard-based and objectives-based interpretation of student learning; and
- Inclusive participation, including visible and strong roles for teachers, student and (where appropriate) parents.

(Genesee, 2001, p. 149).

Alternative assessment therefore provides alternatives to traditional testing in that it:

- a- Does not intrude on regular classroom activities;
- b-Reflects the curriculum that is actually being implemented in the classroom;
- c-Provides information on the strengths and weaknesses of each individual students;
- d- Provides multiple indices that can be used to gauge student progress; and
- e- Is more multiculturally sensitive and free of norm, linguistic, and cultural biases found in traditional testing.

(op.cit, p. 339).

Richards & Renandya (2002, p. 336) further argue the importance of alternative assessment in comparison with traditional assessment. For them:

"Although traditional forms of assessment can provide psychometrically valid measures of students' performance, they often fail to provide the kind of information that the typical classroom teachers are interested in, namely, what the student can do in their second/foreign language. Because of this, an alternative to the traditional forms of assessment has been proposed in recent years. This has come to be termed alternative assessment, authentic assessment, or informal assessment. This new form of assessment focuses more on measuring learners' ability to use language holistically in real-life situations and is typically carried out continuously over a period of time. In this way, a more accurate picture of students' language profile can be obtained"

In short and in order to understand the important role of alternative assessment in Higher Education in general and in the EFL classroom in particular one needs to bear in mind that alternative assessment:

- Consists of all those *"efforts that do not adhere to the traditional criteria of standardization, efficiency, cost-effectiveness, objectivity..."* (Garcia & Pearson, 1994, p. 355)
- Aims to *"gather evidence about how students are approaching, processing, and completing 'real-life' tasks in a particular domain"* (Ibid, p.357)
- Provides teachers with *"useful information about what can form the basis of improving their instructional plans and practices"* (Richards & Renandya, 2002, p. 335).

In this research work and with reference to the EFL university classroom, we seek to know about students and teachers' attitudes towards innovative forms of assessments (alternative assessment procedures) that have been recently introduced at the level of Algerian universities.

4- The Study and its Objectives

This small scale study is conducted at the department of English (Hassiba Ben-Bouali University of Chlef-Algeria) with twelve 1st year EFL students and teachers, exactly six students and six teachers. The six students

who participated in the study are 'repeat students' who studied their first year of English under the classical system and because of their low grades they failed to get the year and are currently studying under the LMD system, i.e., they witnessed different forms of assessment. They are, therefore, the best category to speak about the main differences and similarities between assessment in the traditional system and the LMD system which represents innovation in Higher Education. The six EFL teachers are also chosen for the mere reason that they teach 1st year EFL students in the two systems and are accustomed to traditional and non-traditional forms of assessment. It is worth reminding at this level that this study seeks to know:

- a. Students and teachers attitudes towards assessment in general.
- b. Students and teachers viewpoints about and reactions to alternative forms of assessment introduced by the LMD system.
- c. Students' proposals in the area of assessment and teachers' recommendations for effective assessment in Higher Education.

In order to achieve these objectives, we conducted two semi-structured interviews with teachers and students (**See Appendices A and B**), the results of which are presented in the following section.

5-Data Collection, Results' Analysis and Interpretation

Data gathered from the subjects' answers to the interviews were carefully analysed and the results interpreted.

5.1. Students' Interview

The students were interviewed in this section individually. For the question which aims to help the researcher know about students' attitudes towards studying EFL in general, the majority of them answered that they like studying EFL. They argued their opinion in approximately the same way, stating that:

1. Most of their EFL modules help them learn more about EFL, its native speakers and culture.
2. They feel comfortable when interacting in English in their EFL sessions.

3. Their EFL sessions represent the main space where they can practice EFL freely.

4. In their EFL sessions they are supervised by teachers who aid them learn and improve.

Few students only show dislike towards their EFL sessions arguing that they feel not comfortable with teachers speaking all the time about students de-motivation and laziness instead of helping them improve their level in learning. When asked about the way in which they frequently assess their achievement in learning the foreign language, the majority of the subjects state that they rely primary on their teachers' observations in the classroom or their comments just after exams. Among the six subjects, two students stated that grades after exams do not always reflect the exact level of the students since there are always pressures of various types during exams that may effect positively or negatively their grades. These students show dissatisfaction because their teachers do not give them any chance to be centred in their learning. One student stated that grades in exams and tests are the best way to assess students' level.

Moreover, students' answers to the question about their teachers' ways of assessment were few and different; some of them stated that their teachers assess them through tests and examinations mainly. The remaining students said that teachers differ greatly in their assessment but a large number of them use exams as their reference to assess students' progress in learning EFL.

When they were asked about assessment in the classical and the LMD classroom, most students show preference for the LMD classroom where the general assessment of their progress is based not only on their grades in exams; other components such as attendance, motivation to study EFL, classroom assignment, projects and oral participation are all taken into consideration. For most of them, assessment in the classical classroom is based only on exams and extra-work is seldom taken into consideration.

Likewise, students think that the new system brought novelty in EFL classroom in general and in the way they are assessed in particular. It was clear from their answers that they are aware of the changes introduced by the LMD system and that the type of assessment used

in the classical classroom has been strongly reinforced. Furthermore, students show motivation to study EFL using alternative forms of assessment which as one student stated: *'It helps us become more competent in learning EFL and become autonomous in our own learning and our personal assessment'*. They believe that innovation in assessment is worth the while but needs collaboration between teachers and students.

Students' suggestions were few and precise aiming primary to make the EFL a comfortable place where their learning is effectively assessed. Most of their suggestions were addressed to teachers and they fall in the same idea of taking into account their previous weaknesses and bad experiences when assessing their learning.

5.2. Teachers' Interview

The second participants in the study are teachers who have been also interviewed individually. Most interviewed teachers showed happiness to take part in the study especially in the *'very delicate area of assessment'* as one of the interviewed teachers said.

The six interviewed teachers were very motivated to answer the different questions of the interview. They all agreed that assessment is part of the learning process and an indispensable feature of the classroom. For them, everything done by the students in the classroom is part of assessment of the learning process and they also believed that innovative forms of assessment are better than the traditional ones in that they encourage students' autonomy and they help teachers refine their teaching practice. Assessment at the university level in general and in the EFL classroom in particular is in their views a hard task that needs wisdom, attention and collaboration of efforts from teachers.

Furthermore, the interviewees asserted that it is crucial in the LMD classroom to guide students and assess their progress simultaneously. Most of them argued that assessment, especially at the university level, should not be related to the official examinations only but also to students involvement in the learning process and their willingness to improve their level. Some teachers even mentioned that assessment cannot be effective unless the teacher takes time to

assess students gradually following a set of steps and appropriately designed procedures. Thus assessment for most teachers should not be done at random but following pre-determined stages.

Teachers proposed a number of suggestions and recommendations that they believed will be of great help in assessing students. Their suggestions fall into three parts; suggestions for students (to take care of their learning, to be more autonomous, to double their efforts in the classroom and to consider assessment as part of the learning process), for decision makers (support teachers' training and development and help them understand assessment and its possible forms), for their colleagues (put goals for assessment and try to be up dated with new forms of assessment).

6- General Discussion and Recommendations

In light of results of the present study, it seems that as teachers our understanding of assessment is somehow ambiguous *"Some of us want assessment to play a role that is totally different from the role it now plays. Others may want to do away with traditional assessment altogether and to use alternative or non-traditional forms"* (Panaflorida, 1998, p. 345) and that our students as well are not well informed about the role of assessment in shaping their failure or success. We thus find it crucial to increase university teachers and students awareness of the importance of assessment and its role in the EFL classroom. Necessary is indeed for teachers as agents of change in the classroom to bear in mind that one of their missions is to engage students not only in learning EFL but also in assessing their learning, because *"when students actively participate in the selection and discussion of their works, they gain a true sense of ownership, which results in personal satisfaction and feeling of self-worth"* (Ibid, p. 348). In addition and as part of the reflective teaching movement, teachers are encouraged to conduct research in their own classrooms (Nunan, 1989; Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Genesee, 2001).

Students integration in assessment is also recommended and in different contexts, in this respect Oscarson (1997) stresses the considerable

growth of interest in the use of self-assessment with language learners in various educational settings. This has major benefits on students, especially in assisting them to become skilled judges of their own strengths and weaknesses and to set realistic goals for themselves, thus developing their capacity to become self-directed (Dickinson, 1987; Oscarson, 1997). However, it is still common in most of our EFL university classrooms that:

“Despite the advances in language assessment, a number of important areas are in urgent need of further investigation. More data-based studies of language skills in use are needed to increase our knowledge of the nature of language ability. We need to find cost-effective ways of integrating new technology into the design and delivery of tests, and we also need to study and document the interfaces between teaching and assessment”

(Brindley, 2001, p. 142).

7- Conclusion

Results of the present study confirm that teachers and students are well aware of the need for change in the EFL classroom especially in the field of assessment in order to pursue requirements of the technological age. However, most EFL teachers are still relying on traditional forms of assessment even after the integration of the LMD system, a situation that needs reconsideration. EFL students are also somehow hesitant to adapt themselves to any innovation in the classroom, especially when they find themselves centred in their learning. It is therefore recommended from teachers and students to co-operate and explore new directions in assessment so that it becomes a relaxing task instead of being a burden for most of them.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Students' Interview

* Dear students, please, answer the following questions:

1. Do you like your EFL sessions?

2. How do you assess your achievement in EFL?

3. How do your teachers assess your progress in learning EFL? Do they use traditional or alternative forms of assessment?

4. What do you think of assessment in EFL (the classical system and the LMD system)?

5. Do you think the way you are assessed is worth the while?

6. What do you suggest to your teacher to take into consideration when assessing your achievement in learning EFL?

Appendix B

Teachers' Interview

* Dear teachers, please, answer the following questions:

1. How do you define assessment in EFL?

2. Do you prefer traditional or alternative forms of assessment?

3. Do you think the way you assess your students is an effective one? If yes argue, if no what do you recommend?

4. Is assessment at the university an easy task?

5. What do you suggest in the field of assessment in Higher Education?