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EXPLORING EFL ASSESSMENT THROUGH LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS

Abstract

Although assessment is an integral part of the learning process, often, despite its significance, it is perceived in a negative light, causing many learners stress and anxiety. The questions that arise are why this is so, and how it can be resolved, i.e. how assessment can be brought closer to the learners so that they see it as a tool for their foreign language acquisition, development and improvement. The purpose of this paper is to take a closer look at Macedonian EFL learners' perceptions of assessment, specifically the perceptions of freshmen and seniors majoring in English at the "Blaze Koneski" Faculty of Philology in Skopje, North Macedonia, as well as the factors that may affect how successful assessment is. It will also address what factors teachers need to consider when deciding on the method(s) of assessment to be used, with a special focus on teacher-, self-, and peer-assessment.

Keywords: teacher-/self-/peer-assessment, ESP

1. Introduction

Learning a language, in this case, learning a foreign language (FL), such as English, is a process which requires the acquisition of different competencies, whether grammatical, reading and listening comprehension, speaking skills and fluency, or writing skills, among others. The process itself is not a straightforward one, but rather it is time-consuming and may involve taking several steps back for revision before proficiency is achieved. Certainly, different learners have different goals in terms of why they are learning EFL, with the majority of them learning it to achieve communicative competence and comprehension.

Throughout time, various teaching and learning approaches have been utilized, with the ultimate aim to satisfy learners' needs. However, no matter what approach has been, or is being used, assessment consistently features as a vital element, acting as a link between the teacher and the learner. In other words,

it serves as a bridge between what has been taught and what has been learned. In addition, according to the MacFarlane Report (Committee of Scottish University Principals, 1992), assessment is noted as the single most significant factor in students' learning (Falchikov, 1995: 160). Furthermore, what and how assessment is carried out has a profound influence on learning, and is a major factor that can encourage either surface or deep learning (George and Cowan, 1999: 98-99).

Assessment can be divided into formative and summative, and within that classification, there are numerous assessment techniques and strategies.

Basically, formative assessment is the assessment that happens on a daily basis; it is the type of assessment that allows the teacher and the learner to interact with each other, as it allows them to be equal partners in the learning process. In fact, this type of assessment allows the teacher and the learner to determine whether their respective teaching and learning strategies are successful or not, thus allowing the opportunity to incorporate necessary changes to improve them. This is possible because formative assessment is a part of the learning process; it sets the learner in the central position, and the teacher has the role of facilitator, helping the learner in their L2 acquisition. It is also an opportunity for the teacher to find out if the learning they planned is actually happening (George and Cowan, 1999: 9). Thus, it can be used during a course to form judgements on the success of learning so that remedial action can be taken before it is too late (Petty, 2004: 449). As Hadrill sees it, the process of formative assessment is a key way that reflectivity can be enhanced (Hadrill, 1995: 169). In addition, regular formative assessment can be motivational, as continuous feedback is integral to the learning experience, stimulating and challenging students (Leach *et al.,* 1998: 204).

Summative assessment is no less important, as there is evidence which shows that there is a direct relationship between the development and evaluation of assessment criteria and the development of whole programs of learning (Mortimer, 1998). In fact, that is the underlying purpose of summative assessment, a type of assessment which tends to be given periodically in order to determine at a particular point in time what the learners know and do not know.

Despite the variety of assessment techniques and strategies at our disposal, our choice is to a great extent determined by what skill is being assessed, as well as the learners' age and proficiency, and, as such, assessment can further be sub-divided into *self-*, *teacher-*, or *peer-assessment*.

Generally speaking, *self-assessment* refers to the assessment carried out by the learners themselves, where they are placed in the position to objectively assess their acquisition of various L2 skills. *Teacher-assessment,* as the name implies, is the most common type of assessment, the one carried out by the teacher, while *peer-assessment* is assessment carried out by peers. In all three cases, there are advantages and disadvantages, and it would be worthwhile for both learners and teachers to be aware of them. Because assessment is just one component in the learning and teaching process, these might be incorporated together, at various stages, thus potentially increasing the positive effects. Furthermore, the acquisition of various L2 skills might be better assessed by one of the three types, or a combination of two, rather than just resorting to the same type all the time.

Macedonia is not exclusive regarding changes to assessment practices not having kept pace with the changing environment in higher education. Even though there is increasing recognition of the importance of using a varied assessment arrangement, there, nevertheless, continues to be too much emphasis placed on exams and standard teacher-marked essays and reports; basically, on following a very structured and limiting format, which does not fully allow the learners' various talents to be recognized, and tries to push everyone into one very constraining mold, often stifling creativity.

Changes obviously need to take place in the context of the issue of assessment, and appropriate and fitting assessment practices need to be implemented, practices that would take into consideration all the factors that play a role in its successful realization. Obviously, there is a real need to help pre- and in-service language teachers to improve their language assessment theory and practice, and bring the two together.

2. Previous Research in the Field

Assessment as an issue is nothing new in teaching methodology. Indisputably, it has become a hot topic in the last several decades, its role and significance in FL teaching and learning becoming clearly evident. This is not important just in an abstract, academic way, but it is also important from a practical point of view, as teachers need to be knowledgeable about what assessment entails. For FL teachers, language assessment literacy (LAL) covers extensive and classroom-based assessment knowledge, skills, and practices, including the design, implementation, and evaluation of assessment tools. LAL also includes the appropriate, ethical, and fair use of assessment to improve teaching and learning (Davies, 2008; Fulcher, 2012; Inbar-Lourie, 2008).

Research studies looking at summative assessment, for example, have looked at test qualities, how and what teachers assess, and the nature of the instruments. In that context, Frodden, Restreppo, and Maturana

(2004) conducted a study among 12 English teachers and 5 French teachers in order to gain an insight into the task and assessment methods used, and found that they used communicative tasks, and were starting to use self- and peer- assessment. Frodden et al. (2004) concluded that the teachers used summative assessment much more than they did formative, and they seemed to take reliability and practicality into account. Similar results to those in Frodden et al. (2004) can be found in Lopez and Bernal (2009), who discovered that teachers rely on summative assessment to assess language competence. Along these lines, because of a standards-based influence in China, Cheng, Rogers, and Hu (2004) reported that language teachers tended to overuse traditional, summative assessment. In the study conducted by Diaz, Alarcon, and Ortiz (2012), English teachers focused their assessment practices on achievement tests for grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

On the other hand, testing practices of teachers in higher education have shown a connection with the communicative approach. Even though written closed-ended tests were used, they also included speaking in assessment. Similar results can be found in other studies, which have claimed a limited, mostly linguistic view of communicative competence in their research with university teachers, where, even though they expressed that their practices were formative rather than summative, the researchers identified a discrepancy between this belief and the teachers' practice because they employed mostly summative assessment.

In conclusion, there is ample evidence that suggests that training in language assessment is needed for a positive impact on teachers' assessment practices.

2.1. Research Questions

A survey was conducted among Macedonian EFL majors at the "Blaze Koneski" Faculty of Philology to see how they perceive assessment, and why they perceive it the way they do.

The participants, freshmen and seniors, were asked to fill out a survey, which was anonymous and voluntary, and then do a follow-up interview. There were 10 questions in total; seven in the survey, and three in the follow-up interview. The survey consisted of the following questions:

- Do you feel that assessment, in general, offers a genuine reflection of a person's knowledge? Please elaborate.
- When you think of assessment, how does it make you feel? Please elaborate.
- Has assessment ever been used as a punitive measure/disciplinary tool? Please elaborate.
- Which type of assessment (teacher-, self- or peer-assessment) do you have experience with?

- Which type of assessment (teacher-, self- or peer-assessment) do you feel is the most objective? Why?
- Which type of assessment (teacher-, self- or peer-assessment) do you feel the most comfortable with? Why?
- In your opinion, what are the advantages/disadvantages of each?
- The following three questions were asked in the follow-up interview with the participants:
- As future teachers, how do you plan to carry out assessment so that you get the most objective reflection of your students' L2 competence?
- What is the best/worst assessment technique, in your opinion? Why?
- Should different assessment techniques be used in higher education, as opposed to primary and secondary education? Please elaborate.

The participants' responses will be provided, and analyzed and discussed in the sections that follow.

3. Methods

A total of 56 participants, 34 freshmen and 22 seniors, from the Department of English Language and Literature participated in the survey by answering a set of questions connected to the issue of assessment. The reason why the survey was distributed among freshmen and seniors was to see whether, and what, differences there might appear in the answers, since one group was just starting out in their studies, while the other was completing them.

The questions required more than a simple yes/no answer from the participants; they required them to put some thought when formulating their responses, and allowed them to elaborate. The majority of the seniors provided more detailed responses, while this was lower among the freshmen. This was not unexpected, as the further students are in their studies, the more confidence they have when it comes to sharing their opinions.

The students' participation was done on a voluntary basis, and their answers were anonymous. The survey was done during class time (Modern English Language), while the follow-up interview was carried out at times previously arranged to fit the schedule of the participants.

In terms of the disparity connected to the number of freshman/senior participants, this was due to the attendance rate, which is, unsurprisingly, higher among the freshmen than it is among the seniors. On the other hand, the responses of the seniors were lengthier and more detailed, where they tried to explain and elaborate their responses.

4. Findings Analysis

The results, presented in order of the research questions (see section 2.1. above), are as follows:

Do you feel that assessment, in general, offers a genuine reflection of a person's knowledge? Please elaborate.

This question started out as a closed-ended question, as it required the participants to answer with either a 'yes' or a 'no', but the second part of it allowed them to elaborate on their response. Interestingly, there were cases where the respondents did not answer directly with a yes/no, but broadened and generalized their response with *generally, in most cases, usually* to the yes/no answer, with only about half of them explaining their response in more detail. In any case, 78% of the respondents answered with (generally/usually) 'yes', and 22% said (generally/usually) 'no'.

Those who elaborated mentioned the following:

Explanation	
positive responses	negative responses
- teachers use different ways to see how much students know; - teachers have lots of experience in this, they can just tell how much somebody knows; - tests aren't the only ways that we get points from, they're just one part the final mark consists of.	- not all students are good at taking tests, and sometimes a bad performance on a test may result in a bad overall grade, which is not a real reflection of their ability; - some students do well on a test or exam by cheating, and get a better mark than somebody who did not cheat, but who is better than them.

When you think of assessment, how does it make you feel? Please elaborate.

Here the participants were not limited in their answers by being given a list of adjectives to describe emotions, but rather had the opportunity to write down their own responses. The following emotions were mentioned, synonymous words being grouped together: *scared, tense, stressed, upset, tired, annoyed, resigned.*

The respondents did, in most cases, elaborate their answers, and this will be looked at in more detail in Section 5.

Has assessment ever been used as a punitive measure/disciplinary tool? Please elaborate.

This answer is not illustrated in a chart because it is unanimous, with all of the participants answering in the affirmative, that *yes, assessment has been used as a punitive measure/disciplinary tool.*

Which type of assessment (teacher-, self- or peer-assessment) do you have experience with?

This question had a 100% answer rate: 100% said teacher-assessment, 12% said self-assessment, and 64% said peer-assessment.

> *Which type of assessment (teacher-, self- or peer-assessment) do you feel is the most objective? Why?*

This part of the question had a 100% answer rate, with 64% answering teacher-assessment, 25% self-assessment, and 11% peer-assessment.

In terms of the second part of the question, where the participants are asked to elaborate on their response, the majority of the seniors provide a detailed explanation, while only half of the freshmen participants do so. The detailed explanations are as follows:

Explanation	%
= those who answered teacher-assessment is the most objective: - the teacher is the authority; - the teacher knows best; - teachers have many years of experience teaching and marking.	64%
= those who answered self-assessment is the most objective: - the student is the only person who can honestly know how much they know, for example, they might have cheated, and the teacher does not know that.	25%
= those who answered peer-assessment is the most objective: - you can compare what you know with what your peers know, and see if you know more or less than them.	11%

> *Which type of assessment (teacher-, self- or peer-assessment) do you feel the most comfortable with? Why?*

This question also had a 100% answer rate, with 48% saying teacher-assessment, 31% going for self-assessment, and 21% choosing peer-assessment.

The second part of the question, the why, was for the most part answered by most of the participants, some providing more thought-out explanations, others just a short explanation of one or two words.

Explanation	%

= those who felt the most comfortable with teacher-assessment: 48%
- the teacher is ultimately going to form our marks;
- we've had teachers mark us throughout our education, from primary, to secondary, to university;
- I'm used to being marked by the teacher;
- at least the teacher won't share my mistakes with the other students.

= those who felt the most comfortable with self-assessment: 31%
- it's less stressful than the others;
- I'm the best judge of what I know;
- nobody else needs to know what I don't know;
- I don't need to compare myself with the others.

= those who felt the most comfortable with peer-assessment: 21%
- these are our friends;
- they don't really have the authority to change our overall mark;
- it's less stressful;
- it's not as 'official' (sic);
- they'll probably not notice all my mistakes.

In your opinion, what are the advantages/disadvantages of each (teacher-, self- and peer-assessment)?

Here, some of the participants responded only partially, choosing to note advantages/disadvantages of only one or two types of assessment, or provided just advantages, and not disadvantages, which might indicate that they either feel that there are no disadvantages, that they simply did not read/understand the question fully, that both advantages and disadvantages were asked for, or that they simply wanted to finish faster.

type of assessment	positive responses	negative responses
teacher-assessment	- the teacher has experience doing this; - teachers are experts in assessment; - I'm used to this, teachers always mark our work; - the teacher ultimately forms our marks; - it's the teacher's job, they get paid to do this.	- it makes me feel anxious and stressed; - the teacher always focuses on the negative aspects, and never gives positive comments; - it takes too long until we get our work back; - I don't know where my mistakes are, very general notes.

self-assessment	- it's not stressful; - I don't feel anxious; - I'm the best judge of how much I know; - I'm not judged by others; - I feel important; - it's good practice for the future; - this makes us feel like we're being taken seriously.	- I don't know if I'm being objective enough; - I'm not sure whether I'm doing it right; - I don't know if the teacher will take self-assessment into consideration when forming the final mark.
peer-assessment	- it's not as stressful; - we get more detailed comments; - we get our work faster; - it's anonymous, so the other students don't know whose work they are marking; - it's good practice for the future; - we're learning to pay more attention when giving our peers comments.	- peers aren't competent to mark; - I don't know how seriously the others take this; - peers' comments are not very helpful; - I know more than those who mark my work.

The above seven questions made up the survey. There was also a follow-up interview, with all of the participants who did the survey, which consisted of three more questions, and it was carried out orally. A lot of effort was put into the wording of the questions, so that the participants would not feel intimidated, or feel anxious or afraid of saying the wrong thing. The answers, summarized, to the questions which made up the follow-up interview are presented below:

As future teachers, how do you plan to carry out assessment so that you get the most objective reflection of your students' L2 competence?

- I plan to use many different techniques to assess my students' L2 competence, and besides in-class tests, I plan to give them open-book tests, as well as take-home tests, and assignments;
- group work is also important, and often we don't have very many opportunities to work together; I think this should also be a part of the grade, to see how students can collaborate and work together with other students;
- I think tests are not very useful, so I plan to replace them with oral interviews, and paper assignments;
- tests stress out students, so I'll try to limit them as much as possible, and use other methods to form grades, such as presentations, written assignments, and even extra-points projects.

What is the best/worst assessment technique, in your opinion? Why?

- I think it's best if all of them are used, and then a grade is formed from all of them together, like an average;
- teacher-assessment is both good and bad, and self-assessment and peer-assessment also have good sides and bad; I don't think a mark can be formed by just one of these, they need to be used together;
- teacher-assessment is OK because we're used to it, but it's still stressful, and the other two are not stressful, but I think we need more practice; maybe a combination of these?
- it's hard to say which one is the best and which one is the worst, they all have positive sides and negative sides; I guess the good points would have to be weighed against the bad points and see which side tips the scale.

Should different assessment techniques be used in higher education, as opposed to primary and secondary education? Please elaborate.

- yes, the assessment techniques should be used in accordance with the learners' age, and proficiency level – you can't ask primary school pupils to do self-assessment, for example;
- I think so, the older and more mature the students, the more variety in assessment techniques that can be used;
- in primary school it would probably be best to have just teacher-assessment, in secondary school, besides teacher-assessment, students can also be taught peer-assessment, and then in higher education self-assessment can be introduced;
- at this level, the learners are more mature and they can handle self-assessment, and be objective.

5. Results/Key Findings

From the data analysis presented in the previous section, there might be points where the students' responses are, at first glance, contradictory. This is not surprising, because the participants answered the questions not as a unit, but rather, as standing alone, and for this reason it becomes evident that some of their answers may seem to contradict each other.

In any case, it seems quite clear that though the significance of assessment as a component in the teaching and learning process is never disputed, changes, are, nevertheless, needed in order to change the students' negative perceptions of assessment, and see it, in practice, as the beneficial tool it really is in the context of (E)FL learning.

What these results show is that there is a reason why assessment is not appreciated by students for its intended purpose, that of assessing a learner's knowledge. Furthermore, another clear point that seems to surface is the obvious need for a variety of assessment techniques to be employed, as well as to use them in accordance with the learners' age and level of proficiency.

5.1. Discussion of Findings

The survey questions that the participants were asked to answer, and elaborate on, moved from general to more specific in order to give them a chance to warm up as the questions progressed. There were no questions that were left unanswered, although there were instances when the participants chose not to elaborate on their answers in more detail. Fortunately, the majority of the participants did, to some extent, explain their responses in more detail.

Concerning the first question, as to whether they felt that assessment offers a genuine reflection of a person's knowledge, an overwhelming majority felt that it did, although they were aware that the use of different assessment techniques was vital. This view is also supported by those who felt that assessment was not a genuine reflection of a person's knowledge, since not all students do well on tests, for example. They even went further to mention an example of where one student might cheat and do better on a test, on which, for example, the whole mark is based, than somebody else who did not cheat. Thus, the need for a variety of assessment techniques and strategies is supported by both groups, those who answered the question in the affirmative, and those who answered in the negative.

The answers to the second and third questions are discouraging because there was not one student who mentioned a positive adjective in terms of how assessment made them feel, which was not at all surprising since it was unanimously stated that assessment had been used as a punitive and disciplinary measure. Despite the fact that the majority of students feel that assessment does offer a real insight into a person's knowledge, assessment, itself, invoked in them only negative emotions, such as fear, anxiety, and stress. This should serve as a wake-up call of the importance on working to change students' perceptions of this vital component in the teaching and learning process.

The responses to the fourth question, which is a lead-in to the more specific questions connected to the different assessment techniques, specifically, teacher-, self, and peer-assessment, signal the direction of the responses to the remaining questions on the survey. Since all the participants, without exception, have had experience with teacher-assessment, it is not surprising that the majority of them feel that it is the most objective, and that they feel the most comfortable with it. In that context, it is not surprising that the scant experience they have had with the other assessment techniques would make them question their objectivity, and would make them feel uncomfortable. Despite being aware of the positive and negative sides of the different types of assessment, the participants are, nevertheless, clear that they would prefer familiarity over comfort.

The follow-up interview allowed the participants to orally express their views concerning the issue of various assessment practices, and, in fact, the answers to the three remaining questions indicated that they had a strong grasp of the importance of using a variety of assessment techniques and strategies to get the most objective view of learners' competence and knowledge, as well as the necessity of adjusting and adapting assessment techniques and practices to various other factors, such as the learners' age and FL proficiency, for example.

6. Conclusion and Implications

In essence, despite the various divisions that assessment can be classified into, and the various techniques that exist, it is, undoubtedly, a tool that helps both parties, teacher and learner, to see how successful the teaching and learning process is, and to see what needs to be revisited and revised. However, despite its undisputed importance, there is substantial evidence suggesting that there is significant room for improvement in assessment, since setting appropriate assessment is a complex task, where a number of factors need to be taken into consideration, including the number of students, time, resources, and course objectives.

In fact, assessment is generally a weak area when compared to other aspects of the curriculum; feedback is too often slow and negative, and oftentimes fails to provide adequate guidance for students. Hence, there seems to be widespread and growing dissatisfaction with guidance and feedback, where student satisfaction with assessment and feedback receives lower scores than other indicators.

This is something that should make us, as teachers, who are directly involved in the teaching and learning process, pause and think. In theory, assessment sounds perfectly acceptable, very non-threatening, and undeniably significant. Unfortunately, the reality, as seen from the students' perceptions, is consistently quite different, if not the opposite. In fact, students tend not to perceive assessment as the beneficial instrument it is in terms of providing a reasonable indication of whether the teaching strategies and techniques are efficient, or whether changes are necessary.

Obviously, assessment is only one link in the chain called learning, its significance becoming clear when it is used as a part of that process. Generally speaking, when dealing with the issue of assessment, there are a number of issues that may be mentioned in connection with it, such as the numerous varied purposes it has, from motivating students, directing and enhancing learning, providing useful feedback as regards learner comprehension, and checking whether learning objectives and outcomes are being achieved (Zou, 2008: 82-83).

It is very important that the two major types of assessment, formative and summative, are used as complementary to one another, and not in an either/or sense. Formative assessment, for example, can be classified as developmental from the learners' point of view, as it allows them to monitor and keep track of their own progress and understanding. From the teacher's point of view, on the other hand, it can be seen as diagnostic, as it serves to identify weaknesses, thus allowing the learners the opportunity to spend time and put in extra effort on their improvement. Summative assessment, on the other hand, is usually associated with standardized tests, such as state exams or end-of-semester tests, the use of which is to ultimately determine whether and where revisions are needed, and is the link between the classroom and curriculum development.

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