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THE ROLE OF FEEDBACK IN THE PROCESS OF ASSESSMENT IN EFL CLASSES

Abstract: The article deals with the analysis of the necessity of feedback as an essential component of assessment procedures. Two types of assessment applied in EFL classes described in the article are the basis for different types of feedback techniques, which can be oral or written, explicit or implicit. Eight functions of feedback, which influence on the formation of feedback were also defined. The necessity of addition to existing frames of reference, internalization and personalization of reflection procedures were discussed in the article.

Key words: feedback, assessment, EFL classes, learning outcome, measuring, comment, reflection, knowledge, skills.

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Introduction

The problem of assessment is a topical issue in modern educational paradigm as this process influences not only on the verification of learning outcomes, but also on the level of transparency and confidence in the educational system on the whole. Traditionally, two main types, or approaches, of assessment are defined: summative and formative. Summative assessment aims at making the final decision concerning student's further continuation of the study: a testing technique employed by different institutes where the student learning gets compared against a proper scoring benchmark of the standard of grades. In other words, summative assessment is applied in the course of current, interim, and final control to assess student's achievement with formal scoring system adopted in educational establishment. This type of assessment is an essential component of an attestation procedure, though it mostly aims at defining the level of acquired knowledge rather than skills. However, modern conditions in the labour markets claim for developing both good knowledge and practical skills, abilities to apply the knowledge into real-life situations. In this case the second approach, formative assessment, is more suitable as it "...is a process, not any particular test. It is used not just by teachers but by both teachers and students. Formative assessment takes place during instruction.

It provides assessment-based feedback to teachers and students. The function of this feedback is to help teachers and students make adjustments that will improve students' achievement of intended curricular aims." [1] In other words, formative assessment is not a score-oriented, but feedback oriented process. Consequently, it can help to reveal students' strong and weak points as well as monitor their progress within the learning process and correct it on both levels: teaching and learning. From teacher's position it will be effective to reconsider and design lesson plans to meet the students' needs if the progress is not increasing. From students' position it is useful to analyze the factors preventing them from achieving the better results.

Materials and Methods

Generally, student learning outcomes are statements describing what students are expected to learn after successfully completing an academic program or an individual course. Student learning outcomes focus on the knowledge, skills, and abilities acquired and demonstrated after completion of the learning experience. [2] While these learning outcomes are of most interest to potential employers, they are the most challenging by which to gather data and to subsequently measure. In particular, L. Suskie stated "students learn better when their college



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experiences are not collections of isolated courses and activities but are purposefully designed as coherent, integrated learning experiences in which courses and out-of-class experience build on and reinforce one another". [3, p.4] Yet, how do faculty and program administrators assess whether their programs and courses are meeting their curricular goals and objectives? How, when, and where is student learning being measured? Empirical studies exploring student learning outcomes and the educational ... are scarce. [4] Although most faculty and administrators agree upon the importance and value of measuring student learning, M.Chun admonished that "few agree on how best to assess it". [5, p. 25] In other words, any EFL instructor always intends to achieve the best results and satisfy students' needs by enhancing their performance. All this can be effectively done provided that s/he receives some responses, i.e. feedback, from his learners. Moreover, a proper feedback reflects on not only the present performance, but also may help to improve further performance. In other words, feedback plays a crucial role in any educational process since it can significantly improve both learner's and teacher's performance and indicate some key aspects of their performance which can be improved. B. Dignen argues that feedback is the most important communication skill, both outside and inside the classroom because it is around all the time; it is just another word for effective listening; it is an opportunity to motivate; it is essential to develop performance; and it is a way to keep learning. [6]

In fact, feedback should be an inseparable part of any assessment and course evaluation. It can be done formally and informally. The formal feedback is sought by a teacher's institution in order to discover the quality of education at a given institution, while the informal feedback is usually collected by a course teacher in order to detect students' difficulties in the process of learning and simultaneously reflect on his teaching practices and approaches. Both can be done either continuously or at the end of semester. [7] Moreover, teachers can employ various feedback strategies such as written or oral corrective feedback, peer reviews, students' self-reflection, in-class discussions, course evaluation questionnaires, or focus interviews with students. Different types of rubrics can be also helpful here. All these feedback strategies can undoubtedly contribute to an overall students' and teacher's picture of their progress. As K.Hyland claims, "providing feedback to students is often seen as one of the teacher's most important tasks, offering the kind of individual attention that is otherwise rarely possible under classroom conditions." [8, p. 102-103] Thus, the more frequent and constructive this feedback is, the more performance improvement can be done. Furthermore, T.Dudley-Evans and M.St

John suggests, teachers should first emphasize the positive features and then specify in detail those areas which need further improvement. [9] This fact proves the idea of presenting clear objectives of the lesson / course, which should assume final outcome and assessment procedure as well.

There are a number of assessment methods or approaches available to measure student learning. They include indirect measurements which are generally self-reported perceptions from students themselves about the quality of their academic experiences. Information is usually gathered from surveys (e.g. student, alumni, and employer) and individual or group interviews (mostly focus groups). Another method of assessment of institutional quality is direct measurement of student learning usually conducted by faculty of students in their courses which may include approaches such as grades based on clear rubrics, group projects, homework assignments, research papers and other course-embedded assessments.[3] The most useful direct methods identified in this study were the degree ending capstone or internship experience and the amount of supervisor feedback from this professional experience. "Although it may seem to be the most obvious way to assess the quality of undergraduate education, the use of direct measures of student learning is uncommon". [5, p.25]

M.Chun suggested that major drawbacks include faculty inconsistency from one course to another as well as the lack of institutional comparisons. However, L.Shulman stated that "when we embed assessment in instruction, it is much more likely that what is assessed will contribute to and be compatible with the core objectives of instruction". [10, p. 24] Regardless of the method chosen, emphasis should always be placed on improving student learning while it is impossible to develop a proper achievement without reflection describing the problems of the work and giving the recommendations for the improvements.

As it has already been mentioned, there are several ways of teacher's reflection as well as peer's one. First, let's analyze corrective feedback that has been defined simply as "responses to learner utterances containing an error" [11, p. 28] or a "complex phenomenon with several functions" [12, p. 152]. Considering the functions of corrective feedback, we can define several of them:

1. Respond to every single error in the work
2. Define the problem caused the error
3. Describe the error in clear and understandable manner
4. Give distinct recommendations to improve the situation
5. Improve the performance of further tasks
6. Reconsider the approach to task-fulfillment
7. Motivate students for better learning

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8. Motivate teachers for reconsideration of assignments as well as teaching methods

This list is certainly far from completed as every teacher or language facilitator can amplify it dealing with certain goals of assessment. We emphasize these ones as they play a crucial role in the understanding of feedback importance for language classes. Any instructor should realize that feedback is far from ordinary formal procedure: it is a useful tool that can be advantageously used by both sides of educational process. From teacher's perspective, though it is rather time-assuming, a well-constructed feedback can suggest the ideas for improvement teaching process: from restating learning objectives till reconsideration of the assignments. For learners the feedback is, first of all, the basis to understand their weak points, to see the perspectives of improvement of learning process and achievement of learning outcome, to be motivated for developing their skill. The problem of motivation is also influential here, though the relation between these two concept is not directly revealed. We attract attention to stimulation factor of feedback here to remind about the appropriateness of the writing style, because the main aim of feedback is not to criticize, but to help students realize their mistakes, in other words, to scaffold their learning.

According to P.Race, reflection could be argued to be the essential stage where learning is integrated within the whole learner, and added to existing frames of reference, and internalised and personalised. Perhaps the most powerful advantage of evidencing reflection consistently and coherently is that it opens up the possibility for dialogue with significant others, for example dialogue based upon evidenced reflection between:

- Teachers and learners, enabling learners to gain feedback on the quality and depth of their reflection, so that they are able to improve and develop both their reflection and their learning;

- Staff developers and teachers, enabling teachers to gain feedback on their own thinking about their triumphs and disasters alike, to enrich their own learning about their developing practice;

Appraisers and appraisees, so that appraisal becomes a deeper and more meaningful process for both parties, allowing a greater depth of relevant discussion between them at appraisal interviews, and increased ownership of the appraisal agenda for appraisees. [13] Here, P.Race emphasizes reciprocity of feedback process because reflection should not only be presented in a proper way but also perceived properly. In this way students' attitude to the feedback should also be formed within the study course. Moreover, some types of assessment involve students as assessors: peer-assessment and self-

assessment. These types are also characterized by the availability of feedback, therefore, students should understand this process on the whole.

Several types of corrective feedback in EFL classes can be defined: oral or written, explicit or implicit, recasts, clarification request, meta-linguistic feedback. [14]

Oral feedback deals with an immediate response to the students' work (usually oral as well), for example, presentations, discussion, oral exams, etc. Written corrective feedback is usually more structured and detailed, though it demands more time for performance. Explicit feedback assumes the direct correction of mistakes with further explanation of the reasons, while indirect is referred to the stating the problem around the error aiming at having students think about correction themselves. Recasts refer to a response by the teacher to learners' outputs by reformulating their utterances; however, teachers' responses do not include utterances like "use this word" or "you should say". [15] Clarification request is mostly used in the process of implicit oral correction when the assessor asks a student additional question getting him/her reformulate the answer in case of mistake. Meta-linguistic feedback occurs when the teacher addresses questions or comments and provides information for learners related to their utterances with the purpose of eliciting information from the learners. The teacher may provide information by focusing on a grammar hint like "It's a continuous tense," addressing a question like "Is this how we form continuous tenses?" or simply giving a comment like "you have forgotten something." [14] Meanwhile, the number of feedback approaches is as varied as assessment techniques on the whole and certainly depends on many factors, like students' level of preparation, type of the assignment and course content, time efficiency, etc.

Conclusion

Summing up, the role of feedback in assessment process is highly important and cannot be considered inseparably. EFL classes are featured by the necessity of developing skills rather than only knowledge, therefore, the mistakes occurring in speech (both written and oral) must be competently commented either by teachers or students themselves. There are many techniques intended for improvement this part of assessment procedure eliciting a number of implementations in different courses of language-learning cycle.

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