ASSESSMENT IN ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES. A PSYCHOPEDAGOGICAL APPROACH TO TESTING BUSINESS AND MEDICAL ENGLISH

Ovidiu Ursa, Casa Cărţii de Ştiinţă, 2019

Anişoara POP[1]

We test, evaluate, and assess students at different stages during their learning and our teaching of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), but how many of us are able to distinguish among these terms or among the criteria at the basis of a valid, reliable, and authentic test, let alone apply such a test? What if our evaluation methods are biased towards negative outcomes, if we predominantly test rather than continuously assess and provide formative feedback, or if we test specialised knowledge rather than the students' communicative competence? Could the directive speech acts we employ when we administer a test increase the students' anxiety, which in turn is likely to trigger negative washback effects? Do we just test and measure according to a procrustean bed the correct use of terms and standard structures or are we able to transform the information obtained from evaluation into a learning opportunity? How can tests reflect and simulate realities that students will confront with in their future professional communication or, to put it differently, how can we ensure that our tests will predict the students' performance in a real situation, not just during the test? What are the roles of motivation, anxiety, attitude, and other individual, non-cognitive factors involved in ESP assessment? How can we make language assessment more dynamic, supportive, and contextualised?

These are just some of the questions whose answers are detailed in Ovidiu Ursa's book based on his doctoral research entitled: *Assessment in English for Specific Purposes. A Psychopedagogical Approach to Testing Business and Medical English.* The author performs an in depth comprehensive study that combines the descriptive explanatory pedagogical investigation with quasi-experimental action research on the complex interdependence between cognitive and non-cognitive, personal factors involved in ESP testing and evaluation.

What is in it for Business English, Medical English and other ESP practitioners?

The theoretical part of the book, a lead-in synthesis of the literature preceding the actual scientific study, pinpoints semantic delimitations of the terminology that we constantly have to employ in the higher education ESP evaluation-related practice

[1] Anişoara Pop, GE Palade University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science and Technology of Târgu Mureş, anisoara.pop@umfst.ro

and research. The author then synthesizes the types and methods of ESP evaluation that are part of the yearly syllabi and which, for some of us, have suffered significant shifts in time from the earlier traditional approaches to the modern paradigms, and for all of us, to the online paradigm. The applied part of the research brings further evidence-based insight into the role of individual factors involved in testing and evaluation, i.e., the interdependence between testing and its framing/contextualisation as an independent variable, and anxiety, motivation, and test results as dependent variables.

The survey of the literature is based on references from seminal international and national specialists in psychopedagogy and methodology. The author argues on the types of tests (p. 49) and testing techniques according to a specific communicative competence and offers detailed recommendations on how to avoid the negative impact of testing and evaluation in ESP and in linguistic certification (p. 41). Of particular relevance is one observation which maintains that a test should reduce the number of items that implicitly or explicitly test specialized knowledge. This is one aspect Medical English teachers might find defective and difficult to apply in their own practice. However, as the author contends, it is precisely this specialized knowledge that ensures test validity and motivates the students. Consequently, the author recommends a careful balancing of the two levers in each test: specialised vocabulary on the one hand, and items that test the communicative competence, on the other. Furthermore, although rarely done in less formal current ESP practice, harmonisation of evaluators through previous trials and consequent revisions by colleagues are general principles at the basis of valid, reliable tests.

In the same line of thought, the author explains in great detail the difference between the so-called traditional/standard or cognitive testing including translation, composition, multiple choice, gap filling, True/False items, which many students might find attractive as they are easier to deal with, and "authentic" testing. However, traditional tests are decontextualised and non-authentic, promoting extrinsic learning and they test cognitive abilities, versus the latest psycholinguistic, pragmatic, and post-modern eclectic approaches that assess the communicative competence and are based on real or realistic situations, are integrative, provide multiple sources of data, encourage collaboration, negotiation of meaning, and focus on higher order thinking skills (p. 67, 72). Although we still rely on the former type of tests, the latter should become a common ESP practice, as well.

Among many significant personal contributions of Ovidiu Ursa's book to the study of ESP testing and evaluation, one that addresses the practitioners rather than the researchers refers to the contrastive analysis of different materials used for testing Business English according to different criteria. This part includes a practical model of designing and administering a Business English test, with all it entails in terms of objectives, competences, content, etc. (p. 81), a model that can be safely applied and customised to other ESPs.

Why is testing important?

Test results are important and most often they are at the basis of crucial decisions and choices of professional paths in both business and medicine. However, in the educational continuum of teaching-learning-evaluation, too much testing can be a dangerous thing since tests may reduce motivation and increase anxiety, thus failing to capture the test taker's full potential. As the researcher underlines, lest evaluation should become counterproductive through exclusive focus on test and exam preparation, it should measure the students' progress, but at the same time tests should signal encountered learning strengths and difficulties and, as such, reflect back on them and improve potential shortcomings, assess the acquired competences, and only eventually would they allow the selection of the evaluated students and applicants (p. 28).

In order to meet their aims, tests must be valid, reliable, authentic, feasible, discriminatory, relevant, transferable, and useful. However, quite often tests fail to allow solid predictions of a student's future performance in real life situations and the *washback* effect (i.e. test feedback on teaching/learning) can lead to teachers feeling pressured to "teach to the test" (Baker, 1989: 77, apud Ursa, 2019: 38). Given the possible risk of compromising good teaching material through the design of improper tasks, the author pleads that the teachers acquire adequate pedagogical training, with specific focus on evaluation and testing. Likewise, involving colleagues and students not only in the process of selecting materials for tests, but also in the analysis of test characteristics are also worth mentioning and applying in current ESP test practice. The author's conclusion is that testing is a key aspect of evaluation, yet authentic evaluation goes beyond testing and above measuring. Evaluation can and should enhance learning, motivation, and attitude (p. 88, 217-228) and it should involve alternative, congruent methods such as systematic observation, projects, portfolios, and self-evaluation, which are likely to offer sufficient information for effective decision making in the continuum of the learning-teaching-and-evaluating triad.

Within the academic ESP context, evaluation of communicative competences remains a genuine, sometimes controversial topic, especially in these volatile times of fluid switching between onsite and online learning when tests alone fail to provide a full picture of what students know or can do with the language in a real context. Besides the psychopedagogical research proper, which may occasionally escape a less informed teacher's full comprehension, the book has a plethora of detailed suggestions, examples, and insight derived from the author's extensive expertise as a practitioner in Business and Medical English teaching and evaluation. We, therefore, highly recommend Ovidiu Ursa's book to ESP teachers as a must-read in their initial and continuing pedagogical development, alike.