

Alternative methods on assessment as a challenge for change in teacher education

*Esther Gómez Morales
Elizabeth Us Grajales
Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas*

Abstract

This study aims to illustrate how a curricular innovation can affect teachers' and students' theories of actions about assessment. Through interviews and questionnaires administered we can analyse that alternative methods on assessment are effective ways to achieve learning. However, these methods can be a challenge if teachers and students have not been trained how to use them or if they do not have a sense of ownership. Adopting more formative approaches of assessment in the new LEI programme is a challenge because we need to implement strategies for convincing teachers and students on the usefulness of them.

1. Introduction

Due to the changes that the University has recently been undertaking regarding curriculum, the three language schools in Chiapas adopted and adapted the New UNACH Curricular innovation in which the methodology is based on learner-centred and experiential learning approaches.

The UNACH Curricular innovation has as a main goal to encourage learners to become more responsible for their learning, showing evidence of reflection and critical attitude before knowledge and teaching practice. (Proyecto Académico 2002-2006) Thus, the Initial Teacher Training (ITT) programme should take this guideline into account whereby reflection is an important element to achieve quality in learning.

Based on the essential elements proposed by Breen and Candlin in Hall, 2001 (See Figure 1) below, we had strong motives for changing the assessment approach.

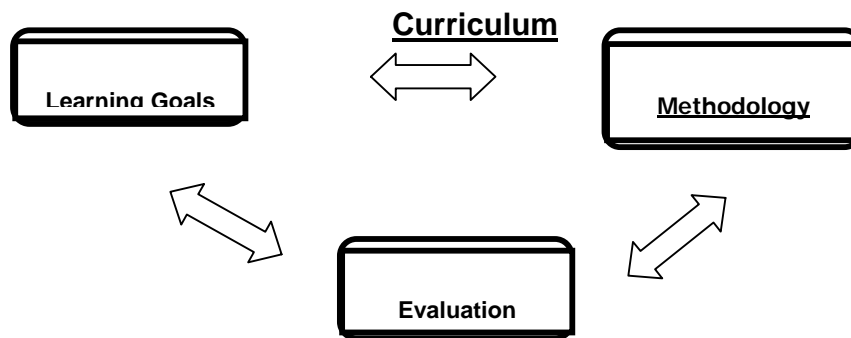


Fig. 1 UNACH Curricular Guidelines for renewing Programmes
 (Adapted from Proyecto Académico, 2002 and after Breen and Candlin in Hall, 2001)

These changes in the curriculum created the need for the Language School's Committee to choose a more formative approach in which the assessment methods and the teaching strategies can achieve the learning goals set. In this, Hockly (2000, p. 124) suggests "... pre-service courses often require trainees to be able to reflect on their teaching, a skill which is more likely to develop with experience," Fish (1989, p. 184-185) also states "if the goal is to produce a reflective practitioner, then the student must be more involved in assessment and the focus of assessment must expand." We believe that both trainers and trainees' can make a difference using a more formative assessment approach to transform our insights and attitudes about assessment and learning.

Our proposal was to design a handbook which can be used for both trainers and trainees concerning new alternative methods of assessment included in new Initial Teacher Training Programme (ITT) to assess our trainees' learning. We will present our experience and our conclusions on this study.

The main aims of this study are divided in two categories which are as follow:

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Personal aims | <p>To deepen our understanding of assessment theory and of written reflection aids.</p> <p>To reflect on our teaching and learning practices through marking panel workshops and critical friendship.</p> |
| 2. Professional aims /Institutional aims | <p>To find out trainees' and trainers' beliefs on learning and assessment</p> <p>To know the types of assessment used by trainers</p> <p>To set standards for assessment criteria on the Initial Teacher Training Programme.</p> <p>To design a training course on assessment for trainers to fit in the improvement of staff.</p> <p>To make participants aware of the benefits that reflection and feedback bring in their teaching and learning practices.</p> <p>To motivate participants to be change agents in their own learning and in their trainees' attitudes.</p> |

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Assessment for learning

In this section, we will explore the theory underlying assessment in order to validate the new assessment approach in the LEI Programme, 2006. Firstly, we will define what assessment is. The Code of Practice for Assessment, QAA (2006: 2) says that "it describes any processes that measure an individual's knowledge, understanding and skills." That is why it is a core element in curriculum evaluation. Similarly, Potterton and Partsons (in Gibbs, 1994: 56) view it "as an attempt to get to know about the student and find the nature and quality of his learning..." In order to

understand the quality of learning, let us see how learning is viewed in this new assessment approach.

2.1.1 Learning

Learning is viewed as a lifelong human process. Regarding it Race (2001:26) summarizes: "...to learn is to be human...wanting/need, doing, feedback and digesting are so close to the essence of being human..." both trainers and trainees have experienced these factors through our lives. Race (2001) considers these factors essential to be successful learners and we are sure that in any discipline or any activity, our main goal is to achieve effective learning. However, it is not an easy cognitive process. Montgomery (in Gibbs, 1994) shows that there are strategies to move students from surface to deep learning. See Fig.2:

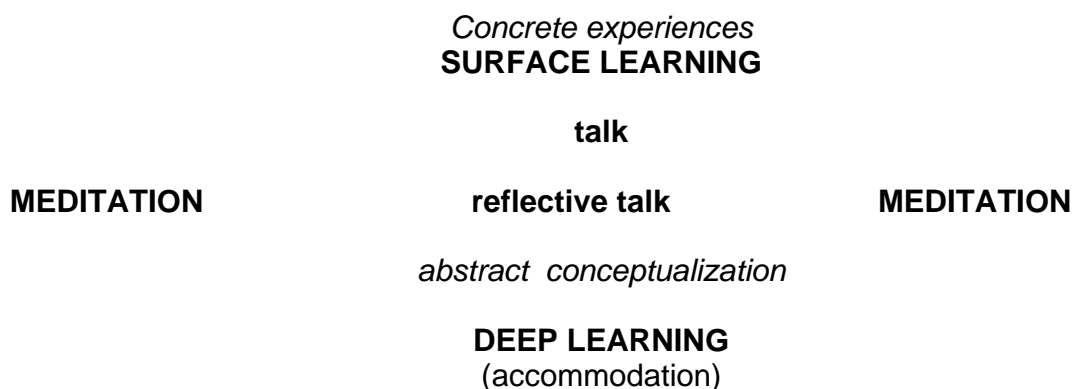


Fig. 2 Cognitive Process of Learning. (After Montgomery, in Gibbs, 1994: 97)

The concept of *meditation* is what Kolb, 1984; Shön, 1987; Moon, 2004 and others authors called *reflection*. In our ITT Programme (2006:115) our essential purpose is that our trainees can "be active learners who continuously seek, assess, apply and communicate knowledge as reflective practitioners through their studies and their lives." Therefore, it was necessary to change not only methodology and content but also the assessment approach to achieve this outcome. As trainers, we need to encourage in trainees new ways of studying, reflecting and giving feedback.

2.1.2 Intended Learning Outcomes

Any course or programme has intended learning outcomes. They are defined as "... simply the outcomes from a learning process. They are statements that predict what learners should have gained as a result of learning." Trainees have to demonstrate that they have achieved them to pass courses. Nevertheless, the Code of Practice for Assessment, QAA (2006:2) points out that: "the way in which students are assessed fundamentally affects their learning..." since learning cannot be measured with a ruler. Therefore QAA (2006) suggests trainers should design a good assessment practice. Likewise, Carless (2003: 14) wonders how we might facilitate learning through assessment. Feedback has been the key word for learning, teaching and assessment.

Regarding this, Race (1994:86-87) points out "If 'assessment is the engine that drives learning', then the ways which we give feedback are important in gearing and lubricating the engine so that maximum effect is achieved from the effort put in by all concerned." Then, feedback needs to be: timely, intimate, individual, orientated to open doors, empowering and manageable.

2.1.3 Rationale for assessing students

Boud et al. (1999:413) state that "assessment is the single most powerful influence on learning in formal courses." Thus, there are endless reasons for doing it which are as follows:

- to find out what learners know and don't know already
- to give learners a sense of purpose
- to measure the objectives of the course
- to see whether learners need remedial teaching
- to help learners assess their own performance
- to see whether learners can move to the next level
- to maintain standards
- To give feedback to teachers
- To certificate learning
- We have always done it
- Students expect it and are motivated by it

(After Potterton and Partons in Gibbs, 1994:56 and Merricks, in Jarvis, 2002:161, Lethaby, 2002:5 and Race, 2001:35)

Merricks (in Jarvis, 2002: 162) argues that “assessment contributes to the learning process only when learners and teachers share an understanding of the purposes of the assessment and the criteria for marking and grading.”

2.2 Assessment theory

We will explain fundamental concepts to understand this moral and complex activity.

2.2.1 Formative and summative

Assessment can be both formative and summative. The difference between them is that formative assessment helps learners in their subsequent learning during a course (or part of it). It is not graded and the purpose is development not judgment. According to Graves (2000: 208) summative assessment “is done at the end of the course and provides information about the students’ overall achievement as well as the overall effectiveness of the course...” and it is graded. Race (2001:34) suggests that “assessment should be formative, even when it is also intended to be summative” If we want to develop lifelong and reflective learners, our purpose needs to be focused on formative rather than summative.

2.2.3 Reliability and Validity

According to Brown and Knight (1994:14) “reliability refers to make sure any assessment result describes the phenomenon being assessed and it is not a product of the measurement instrument used.” Moreover, Lethaby (2002:12) says that it basically asks the question:

‘Can we trust the results of the assessment?’ Would we get different results if the assessment was done again or assessed by a different person? If the answer to either of these questions is yes, then we can say that our assessment is not reliable. This is affected by questions such as; how subjective is the scoring? Was the assessment done under the same circumstances by everyone? In other words, we want to know whether the assessment is a consistent measure of what it is supposed to measure.

On the other hand, validity “has the primary meaning of measuring what you set out to measure.” (Brown and knight, 1994:17). It is very difficult to balance both of them as Lethaby (2002:14) states:

“When we improve the reliability of an assessment method (such as by making it more objective), the validity starts to go down. When we try to improve the validity of the assessment method such as by giving the people to be assessed more freedom in how they carry out the task to be assessed, the reliability of the test tends to go down.”

2.2.4 Grading System

Wallace (1991:132) describes Norm-referencing as “a statistical concept whereby the total number of candidates is assumed to fall into some kind of ‘normal distribution’, in which there will be a few very able people, a few very weak people, and the majority scattered at various points in the middle.”

On the contrary, Lethaby (2002:16) says that “criterion-referencing – classifies people according to whether they are able to perform some task or set of tasks satisfactorily.” As well as Douglas (2000:16) talks about “people who are taking a scuba diving test. It is clearly not important who knows more than someone else in this case, but what is important that the people who pass the test know the essential terms.”

In the ITT programme, 2006 trainees can pass or fail the following courses: Practicum, Social Service, Sports and Arts just by carrying out process-oriented types of tasks through the length of the course. But, in the rest of the courses, each type of assessment tasks has a percentage. To illustrate this, we will show two samples of courses:

Practicum Course

Teaching/learning log*
 Microteaching and self-
 assessment as a teacher
 assistant*
 Report*

Participation in a debate*

**Pass/ fail if a trainee does not carry out all these activities*

Research course

Position paper	25%
Theoretical Framework	25%
Research report	<u>50%</u>
	100%

2.3 Assessment types of tasks

We will talk about the types of tasks for assessing trainees' learning. We will classify them on product assessment or product-oriented types of tasks and process assessment or process-oriented types of tasks. Rowntree (1994:153) defines them as "product assessment is where there is a physical product to assess. The product could be a piece of writing or a test. Process or performance assessment is where there is assessment of an activity (e.g. a role play), which may or may not result in a product."

2.3.1 Product-oriented types of tasks

The first type of task is *examinations* which have been considered "to be very efficient form of assessment because all students sit in the exam at the same time, a pile of scripts can be relatively easily marked, especially if marking is only summative and not formative." (Brown and Knight, 1994: 67) Now, we are going to describe its advantages and disadvantages:

Advantages

- Relatively economical
- Teaching staff are familiar with them
- We know whose work it is
- Exams cause students to get down to learning
- Equality of opportunities

Disadvantages

- Students get little or no feedback
- Badly-set exams encourage surface learning
- Technique is too important
- Exams only represent a snapshot of student performance, rather than a reliable indicator of it.

(Taken from Race, 2001: 42-43)

The second type of task is *essays* which Brown and Knight (1994:65) comment that they "tend to be ballasted with information and copious references to stock sources. Marks are largely awarded for what the learner makes of that knowledge, yet this is definitely the minor part of the essay." We will also show some advantages and disadvantages of using them:

Advantages

- Essays allow for student individuality and expression
- Essays can reflect the depth of student learning
- Essay-writing is a measure of students' written style

Disadvantages

- Essay writing is very much an art in itself
- Essays take a great deal of time to mark objectively
- Essays take time to write
- Write down the number we first thought of.

(Taken from Race, 2001: 56-57)

The third type of task is *reports* which are considered by Race (2001: 62) as “one of the most problematic study–skills areas...” Similarly, he suggests some advantages and disadvantages of them:

Advantages

- Report writing is a skill relevant to many jobs
- Reports can be the end-product of useful learning activities
- Report writing can allow students to display their talents

Disadvantages

- Collaboration can be difficult to detect
- Report writing can take a lot of student time
- Report marking can take a lot of time

(Taken from Race, 2001: 62-63)

2.3.3 Process-oriented types of tasks

This is a step towards a more process-based assessment method – it is more formative and looks at the trainees' development over the course, rather than just their final achievement at the end of it.

The first one is *Learning Logs or diaries*. According to Graves (2000: 119) “They are records kept by the students about what they are learning, where they feel are making progress, and what they plan to do to continue making progress.” Trainees and trainers can record data about reading, study habits and attitudes. Students are invited to write about their own personal development, new insights about learning or teaching.

Deen (in Bailey, 1990: 224) comments on the usefulness of having a dairy: “ keeping a dairy helped me very much in clarifying my thoughts and feelings about learning and my way of handling problems that came forth from doing real learning” However, Bailey (1990) suggests to be careful with our trainees because we cannot force them

to write them. The main disadvantage is to assess them since we do not know which criteria to use.

The second type of task is *dialogue journal*. According to Peyton (2000:1) they are “written conversations in which a learner and a teacher write regularly (e.g. weekly) in a journal which the teacher responds to.” The journal content can be structured or unstructured. The advantages and disadvantages are the following:

Advantages

- Extended contact time with learners
- Management of classes with learners of varying languages, ability, and interest levels
- Assessment of learner needs and progress.
- Facilitation of language learning

Disadvantages

- Correctness of the writing
- Time to respond to learners' writing
- Writing that is overly personal

Taken from (Peyton, 2000:3-4)

The third type of tasks is *Self-assessment or peer-assessment* which is described by Carless, (2003:17) as “a fundamental skill for lifelong learning.” However, let us consider its advantages and disadvantages:

Advantages

- learner autonomy and responsibility
- to understand clearly what they are able and not able to do

Disadvantages

- Lack of reliability
- subjectivity

(After, Lethaby 2002:41-42)

The last type of task is *Portfolio* which is described as “a purposeful selective collection of learner work and reflective self-assessment that is used to document progress and achievement over time with regard to specific criteria.” (Kohonen in Douglas, 2000: 241-242) The content of portfolio can have different possibilities which need to be specific:

- texts read by the learners during the course
- reading exercises done by learner
- reflections on learning (diaries/evaluation sheets)
- small research tasks
- reading summaries/reviews and books read
- videos of oral presentations
- self assessment by learner/ placement/progress/ achievement test

Cole et al (2000:79) reflects that “portfolio implementation, when develop correctly, gives everybody involved more responsibility for managing and adapting the learning process.” Trainers and trainees need to decide how many pieces of work, what kind, the form of assessment, criteria and how assessment will be used. They need to plan when they will meet for review, procedure. The trainer needs to provide opportunities for peer review and discussion throughout the course and make sure that trainees have a shared understanding of the level expected of their work. We will show advantages and disadvantages of using them.

Advantages

- Portfolios tell much more about students than exam results
- Portfolios can reflect development
- Portfolios can reflect attitudes and values as well as skills and knowledge

Disadvantages

- Portfolios take a lot of looking at
- Portfolios are much harder to mark objectively
- The ownership of the evidence can sometimes be in doubt

To conclude, we can quote Melanie who says (in Gibbs, 1994:78) “...to explore innovative and exciting methods of teaching and learning....the practitioner of the future [adopts] more student-centered approaches... and in turn this facilitates interesting ways of assessment, such the portfolio”

3. Methodology

In order to carry out this study, we integrated a committee to design a research project for this proposal. Two trainees of the ITT programme were invited to participate and one graduated trainee was also invited. They are writing their own theses based on this project. We started looking for information on assessment,

learning, teaching, evaluation, feedback, benchmarks, among other concepts. Our supervisor was the Reader Tony Wright from the University of Exeter, UK who recommended bibliography, websites and ideas from succeeding in our project.

We designed a semi-structured interview for trainers and a questionnaire for trainees. The purpose of the instruments was to gather information about their beliefs and experience on assessment, evaluation, feedback, learning and teaching.

We also organized marking panel workshops in order to set standards for assessing different types of assessment methods such as essays, reports, presentations, learning logs, portfolios, projects, among others. Trainers from the three UNACH Language Schools were invited to participate. Besides, it was necessary to know trainees' opinions about the criteria discussed on the panels. That is why we also invited some trainees to participate. Each participant (trainer) was assigned a type of assessment a month before the panel. Each one had to work on the criteria for assessing that type of assessment, bringing to the panel a presentation of 20 minutes. Participants expressed their opinions on those criteria and modified them if it was considered necessary.

The criteria discussed for each type of assessment are included in the handbook. The purpose of the handbook is to help trainers and trainees know criteria for assigning a grade for learning. This also includes concepts, theory on assessment, samples of types of assessment and criteria. After writing the final draft, we will pilot it by training both trainers and trainees. We would like to share our experience and to know more our trainers' views on alternative methods on assessment.

4. Analysis of data

Trainers' interview

14 out of 19 trainers, working for the ITT programme, were interviewed. Their data were very important to design the marking panel workshops and the courses. The interview was divided in two sections. We asked if they knew the difference between evaluation and assessment. 7 trainers knew what assessment was, but they were not sure if evaluation has the same meaning. The rest of them did not know

what assessment and evaluation meant. Even though not all trainers knew what assessment was, all of them considered it as very important for language teaching.

We will show below some comments:

“The only way that students can move to...to better standards...is the only way that you can see their change where they were and what they become at the end of the semester...”

“It has a vital role because it is an indicator if I’m working correctly with my students and if they are obtaining their goals to successfully communicate in the target language...”

“The role of assessment should be everyday ...what student is doing and how is he performing...”

“I think it plays an important role although I think many more traditionally we would think of tests, but I don’t think it necessary to be tests...although I think institutions think tests are ... what decide whether if they are learning or not...”

Another question was to know the types of assessment they used or known. They were given a checklist to tick them.

Types of assessment.

	known	have used
Oral interviews and verbal assessments	13	14
Story or text retelling	14	8
Writing samples	10	7
Projects / Exhibitions	11	9
Experiments / Demonstrations	12	7
Constructed- Response Items	11	6
Teachers Observations	12	10
Portfolio	14	6
Examinations	13	11
Essays	13	12
Short - answer questions	12	10
Multiple choice questions	13	12
Case studies	11	0
Written reports	13	12
Learning logs	13	6
Dialogue journal	11	3
Presentations	13	14
Practical tasks, simulations and work-based activities	12	12
Others	3	3

As we can see in the chart above, trainers said that they used more presentations and oral interviews to assess their trainees' learning. However, on the second place we can find essays, multiple choice questions, practical tasks and written reports. Finally on the third place, examination was mentioned. There are other types of assessment which were mentioned just for few trainers such as projects, teachers' observations, dialogue journals. Nobody has used case studies. Just three trainers said that they have also used transcriptions and translations to assess learning. As we can notice from the chart above, trainers know more types of assessment, but they said they have never tried them.

They suggested a training course for all ITT trainers on alternative methods on assessment and to set clear and flexible criteria in order they can adopt and adapt them to their own courses.

Trainees' questionnaires

165 out of 215 trainees answered the questionnaire. We also asked their beliefs on assessment and evaluation. 27 % of them knew what assessment was, but 73 % of them confused the concept with feedback, evaluation, tutorials or teaching. He also asked why it was important. 34 % of them said that it aided the learning process, 30 % wrote ambiguous answers, 29% said that it measured learning process, 4 % said that they get experience for the future classes and 3% did not answer the question.

Another question was how they felt being assessed by their teachers. 50 % of them said they were motivated, comfortable, relaxed, confident and well. 23 % wrote ambiguous answers, 18 % said that they felt stressed, worried, nervous, unfair and bad. 9% of them did not answer the question.

Similarly, we asked them if they thought that their teachers should change their assessment methods. 32 % of them said yes. 25 % said no. 18% said that it depended on who the teacher was. 10 % said perhaps. 10 % wrote ambiguous answers. 5 % did not answer the question.

We also asked how feedback contributed to their learning. 45 % said that it helped them to reflect on their own learning. 30% said that it helped them to improve

on their own learning. 19 % wrote ambiguous answers and 3% said that it helped them to be motivated, and finally 3% did not answer the question.

Generally speaking, 52 % of the trainees said that the grades they got in their courses reflect effective learning, 27 % said that it meant that they had passed the course, 17% said that it meant that they have achieved the objective of the course and just 4% said that it meant that they could get and keep a scholarship. 111 trainees also agree with that presentation is the most common type of assessment method used by their trainers. On the second place are examinations with 95 mentions and on the third place are reports with 84 mentions. However, they said that teachers should change their assessment methods.

5. Conclusions

As we have seen in this study, both trainers and trainees want to know and try new alternative methods of assessment. Training is very important for convincing the people involved on the benefits of reflection for learning. Tanner and Jones (2005) state that “assessment is only valuable if it changes the way the teacher teaches and the students learn.” We are convinced that by using alternative methods we can make trainees reflect on their learning and for trainer reflect on their teaching. Assessment has been like a positive or negative taboo for some people depending on their previous experience with it.

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Mtra. Esther Gómez Morales

She studied the BA in Educational Sciences with a major in Educational Psychology at the University of Morelos, Nuevo León. Then, she did a Diploma in English Language Teaching at the University of Mérida, Yucatán. In 2003, she did the MA in English Language Teaching at the University of Essex, England.

egomez7mx@yahoo.com

Mtra. Elizabeth Us Grajales

She got a B. Ed in Language Teaching at the Language Faculty in Xalapa, Veracruz. She studied a Diploma in Language Teaching. Similarly, she got the diploma COTE, a master's degree in Education in Veracruz, and master's degree in Trainer

Development by the College St. Mark and St. John, University of Exeter as well as a Diploma in Teaching English for Specific Purposes by The British Council.

elizabeth.us@gmail.com