

On Measuring ESP Proficiency at University

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Abstract

Testing, or formal assessment, has always been considered as the usual means of measuring learners' achievements in a foreign language. New requirements to proficiency in ESP suggest developing various ways of evaluating learners' performance.

The integration of informal assessment into the English classes increases learners' motivation in perfecting language skills throughout the academic year, and it allows teachers to have unbiased evaluation of each learner's progress.

Introduction

Increasing demands for proficiency in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) pose new requirements to learners and teachers. Learners are expected to attain fluency in professional language within a short instruction time while teachers are expected to improve the efficiency of teaching. The integration of informal assessment into the routine of language instruction and practice in professional language skills seems to be the right means for achieving the goals.

Research objective

The objective of this paper is to report the research data on the role of the interrelated testing and informal assessment and its influence on the mastering proficiency in ESP. Experiment has been carried out in the ESP classrooms by introducing new ways of measuring learners' progress and analysing learning effectiveness. The concepts of testing and informal assessment are defined as follows.

Testing which is well known to all practitioners and understood as formal assessment is defined as 'tests given under conditions which ensure the assessment of individual performance in any given area'.

Informal assessment is defined as 'system for observation and collection of data about students' performance under normal classroom conditions'.

(Harris, McCann, 1994)

Background

There is a great amount of available literature on testing. The structure of testing procedures is thoroughly described by Brindly (1997). We will cover one aspect of testing, i.e. what ESP teachers have to do on the everyday basis: 'to develop tools and procedures for monitoring, recording, and assessing learners' progress and achievements in the classroom on a systematic and formal basis' (Brindly, 1997).

In our settings, a formal assessment of ESP comprises two written tests each term, which amounts to eight tests throughout four academic semesters that English is taught. ESP vocabulary test aims at checking students' ability to define law terms in English. "Weaker" students choose an easy alternative of providing a translation into the mother tongue. Grammar test aims at checking grammar in the ESP context. The format of a grammar test is usually a multiple choice. Remedial work was an important part of a learning process. After being tested, students were requested to identify the right answers working either in pairs or small groups. Consolidation exercises were designed by students themselves as a part of their weekly homework and presented in the classroom on transparencies using the overhead projector. Teachers' interference was necessary only if self-designed exercises were not satisfactory. Teaching through testing, which is an important part of our experiment, has proved efficient.

Students take a final examination at the end of the four-semester course. Examination consists of five tests: listening comprehension test, reading an ESP text (2,500 characters) and writing its summary, grammar test in the ESP context, ESP vocabulary and speaking tests. Each test is marked on a 1 - 10 band scale accepted in all universities in Lithuania.

At the beginning of the course, all students are informed how they will be assessed and graded throughout their studies. At the Law University of Lithuania, there is a validated system of coefficients K_i which allow formal evaluation of student's performance in the classroom. Each student knows what amount of work should be performed for getting a credit at the end of a semester. Coefficient K_i for two successful tests (ESP vocabulary and grammar) is equal to 0.3; it is 0.2 for being active in the class; homework, a presentation and a summary comprise $K_i = 0.1$; an IT-based task is evaluated as high as 0.2. The minimum coefficient for getting a credit is 0.6 provided that a mark for each task is no lower than 5.

Students' work throughout four semesters is accounted for by including the value of coefficient K_i , which is equal to 0.6, or 60%, into an exam mark, and performance in final tests is accounted for by the value of coefficient K_i , of 0.4 (or 40%): 0.2 is given for speaking, and 0.2 - for other tests. Thus, a final mark P is calculated using a simple formula:

$$P = \sum \frac{K_i P_i}{N_i}$$

Here, K_i is a coefficient for a particular task, P_i is a respective mark for a particular task, N_i is the number of tasks performed. Student's final mark in exam is counted by averaging all his/her marks received during semesters' tests, performance in class activities, both oral and written, for delivering prepared or unprepared talk, for homework and exam tests according to this formulae. The application of 'coefficient system' in the process of learning encourages students to plan their work during semesters and stimulates on-going learning.

Language testing is known as an individual and stressful activity for learners and teachers likewise. Collaboration between a student and a teacher is an extremely important element in the process of learning and teaching a foreign language. Sometimes it requires a lot of energy from teachers to achieve rapport between them and learners. Testing time 'destroys' this vulnerable link. To eliminate the pitfalls of testing, some practitioners (Plasberg, 1999) suggest a novel approach of replacing it by informal assessment.

Informal assessment: procedure and criteria

In our experiment, we introduced informal assessment of students' productive skills. Some of our experience in organising informal assessment in the ESP was reported in our previous paper (Januleviciene, Kavaliauskiene, 1999). We have highlighted that assessment should be a continuous process and it must be carried out in a learner-friendly manner in order to be beneficial to students.

At the onset of the course, students are informed that their performance will be monitored by their teacher during all the classes. In the long run, such an attitude does not create any tension; learners are not forced to speak if they feel insecure or not ready to perform. Students are aware of assessment criteria, which are described below. It is important for learners to realize that an element of subjectivity is removed from teacher's evaluation, and assessment is as impartial as possible.

The special emphasis has been laid on the productive skills, i.e. oral and written components of performance that are vitally important to ESP learners. It is noteworthy that assessing command of the spoken language in systematic or realistic way is extremely hard. In our situation, the following criteria have been used to assess spoken language:

- 1) accuracy
- 2) appropriateness
- 3) fluency
- 4) adequacy of vocabulary and content

Ease in speaking and expressing of ideas, as fluency is known, is usually omitted by many practitioners, because majority of school graduates can hardly achieve it. Nevertheless it is obvious that only an ability to use language spontaneously in real-life situations proves an adequate command of language. Teachers must encourage students to make efforts in perfecting impromptu speeches with ideas and words flowing easily and smoothly.

The criteria for the written component of productive skill, which might be either an essay or a summary of an authentic text, is assessed in accordance with four criteria: 1) adequate ESP vocabulary, 2) faultless grammar, 3) accurate, brief and clear wording, 4) appropriate scope with no copied sentences. In the class, learners produce their summaries on transparencies working in pairs or small groups. After having finished writing, they analyze their written work using an overhead projector, and analysis proceeds as the whole class activity. The process of students' learning to write properly by practising writing in pairs removes the anxiety that learners feel during tests. However, informal assessment of learners' progress by teachers proceeds simultaneously, i.e. during analysis of the written work. It may sound unfair to learners, but it is not. Active students are awarded grades after each class or on a weekly basis - the arrangement is flexible. The weak students are not awarded poor grades so as not to discourage them. Generally, in the early stages, some passive students tend to fail to gain any grades in the assessment scheme by refusing to take part in analysis. This deprives them of one assessment component in the semester and/or annual assessment. As soon as they become aware of advantages of such an assessment scheme, their attitudes change: they are not afraid to experiment with language and their writing changes for the better.

In the process of assessing informally, teachers face the issues of praise and criticism. Praise is always welcome by human beings but in a limited dosage. Too much praise undervalues its effect. It is also important who to give it for and how. It might sound strange, but not all learners like being praised in public. It is for the teacher to decide how much, when and how often praise should be given. Psychological effect of either praise or criticism must always be on teacher's mind. Criticism is ever such a sensitive matter. We made it a rule not to criticize learners in front of their peers and encouraged our students to follow this rule when commenting on somebody's writing (a summary) or speaking (a presentation). There are always discreet ways of disagreeing with somebody's view. Any unfavourable remark, particularly coming from teachers, is better to be avoided at all times. Criticism is generally counterproductive, but if unavoidable (student's truancy or failure to

do homework), it should be delivered face to face, e.g. during counselling sessions.

Our experiment has shown that informal assessment removes learners' stress and anxiety, which have a negative effect on their performance. Such evaluation of learners' efforts puts them at ease and improves their self-confidence and motivation. It has a positive influence on learning, basically because learners are not inhibited by being tested informally.

In order to increase learners' active participation in the process of learning we have also integrated students' self-assessment into on-going informal assessment and testing scheme, which has been described elsewhere (Januleviciene, Kavaliauskiene, 2001).

Conclusions

It has been shown that a systematic approach to integration of students' informal assessment into the process of learning increases learners' active participation by making them aware of their own progress and achievements.

The sense of being assessed during each class encourages learners to plan their contributions into class activities and increases the learning efficiency. In the long term, comprehension of tangible achievements motivates students to seek proficiency in the ESP.

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