

Does Summative Assessment Used Formatively Enhance Learning in English for Communication Purposes?

ETTIEN Assoa

lecturer at IREEP/SHS/ Université Félix Houphouët Boigny

Abstract

This research is based on an experiment which tries to compare two ways of assessing student learning. The first one, the one which is currently used at Université Félix Houphouët Boigny consists in assessing all the students at the end of every course and this assessment entitles students to have a mark. This mark, being good or bad, is used to decide who fails or passes. Thus, assessment mode is comparable to a court decision which offers no appeal. This tradition raises the following question: between the mark and learning which one is the target in the teaching- learning process? If we think that learning is the target, then, we should reconsider our assessing tradition. The nature and the results of our proposed assessment approach are to be discovered in the following lines.

Keywords: Summative; formative; assessment; learning; English; communication

Résumé

Cette étude se base sur une expérience qui tente de comparer deux façons d'évaluer les connaissances des étudiants. La première, celle qui est en vigueur à Université Félix Houphouët Boigny consiste à évaluer tous les étudiants à la fin de chaque cours et à leur attribuer une note. Cette note, qu'elle soit bonne ou mauvaise, est utilisée pour décider qui redouble ou passe. Ce mode d'évaluation est comparable à une décision de justice sans appel. Cette façon de faire suscite la question suivante: entre la note et l'apprentissage lequel revêt plus d'importance pour nous dans ce processus d'enseignement- apprentissage? Si pour nous le but est l'apprentissage, alors nous devons revoir notre manière d'évaluer. La nature et les résultats que donne cette nouvelle façon d'évaluer sont à découvrir dans les lignes qui suivent.

Mots clés: Evaluation; formative; sommative; apprentissage ; booster

1. INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

No matter the subject, the role of assessment in the teaching learning process is undeniable. Indeed, well implemented, assessment can be a powerful motivation tool for learners and necessarily leads to success. Poorly executed, it is a source of demotivation leading to learners' dropout. Consequently, assessment should be fulfilled with as great care as possible. How is assessment viewed elsewhere?

Education specialists of all ages have always given great interest to student learning assessment. However, it continues to be a problem in our universities and other institutions of education. Moreover, assessment functions have also evolved with time. Richard J. Shavelson (2007) identifies four major points in the history of student learning assessment in the United States of America. From 1900 to 1933 was the origin of standardized tests of learning; from 1933 to 1947, the epoch of the assessment of learning for general and graduate education; from 1948 to 1978 it was the era of test providers and finally, from 1979 to present is the period of external accountability.

No matter the assessment mode, the way it is implemented makes careful observers develop a series of criticisms. For example Standardized tests that were created to be accurate, fair and reliable faced severe criticisms as well. For Alfie Kohn (2000), *“they limit curriculum and instruction in such a way that what was not tested was not taught.”* Besides, *“the way the subject was tested”* was often said to be *“a model for how to teach the subject”*. Through facts, Alfie presents this assessment mode as a monster that *“threatens to swallow our school whole”*.

All the above cited assessment modes have their devotees and their detractors, but more important is the way each of them is implemented. This is where the following contribution of Walvoord B.E. (2004) seems very interesting. For him, assessment of student learning is *“the systematic gathering of information about student learning and the factors that affect learning, undertaken with the resources, time, and expertise available, for the purpose of improving the learning”*. How can students' learning be improved if we give assessment the power to condemn or to acquit?

Our concern in this paper is not assessment methods but learning. No matter the assessment mode adopted, how do we use students' results to help them learn better? Adult learning principles clearly state that everyone learns at his or her own pace. If we agree that this statement is true, then what do we do with slow learners when the whole class is assessed at the same time and are deprived of the possibility of another chance?

Still for Walvoord B.E (2004), the purpose of assessment is *“informed decision-making, including the use of information about student learning”*. The most important part of his view is the following: *«if you*

are gathering information you are not using, then either stop gathering it or start using it". In another word if teachers are not using the information vehicled by their student assessment results, then they should either stop assessing them, or start using this information. Undeniably, a student whose grade is 06 out of 20 communicates a special message to his teacher. What does the teacher do with this message? How does he exploit such message for his or her students to learn better? Is the mark the finality of the teaching-learning process? Between the mark and learning, which one is our target? Do assessment practices in use at Université Félix Houphouët Boigny help students learn? These few questions constitute the essential of our research questions.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

Our objective in the present research is to initiate a common thinking on summative assessment which focusses on measuring students' learning, thus behaving like a court which has the power to condemn or acquit and which offers no appeal.

General Objective

Our general objective is to analyze the assessment practices in use at Université Félix Houphouët Boigny. This general objective leads to the following specific objectives.

1.2 Specific Objectives

Specific objectives deriving from the above general objective are:

- present the traditional assessment practice in use at Université Félix Houphouët Boigny and its impact on students' learning
- experiment another assessment using evaluation information
- compare the impact of each assessment mode on students' learning

2. HYPOTHESES

Our hypotheses consist of a general hypothesis and specific hypotheses.

2.1 General Hypothesis

Our general hypothesis that justifies this study is the following: "assessment practices in use at Université Félix Houphouët Boigny do not enhance students' full learning."

2.1 Specific Hypothesis

The above general hypothesis generated the following specific hypotheses:

- Assessment practices in use at Université Félix Houphouët Boigny do not help students to achieve full learning
- Offering a new assessment chance to students enhances learning

3. METHODOLOGY

To verify our hypotheses we conducted an experiment aiming at determining whether assessing students formatively could help them learn better and therefore have better results. Thus, we decided to match students' results deriving from a traditional summative assessment with those obtained through a mixture of summative assessment and formative assessment. In another word, we used summative assessment formatively to verify which of the two assessment modes can enhance learning.

3.1 Research Site

The experiment was conducted at the UFR/SEG (School of Economy and Management) of Université Félix Houphouët Boigny. The classes where the experiment was conducted are located at the UFR/SEG. They are MMO (Maîtrise en Management des Organisations) students.

3.1 Research Population

The research population consists of two separate classes of 30 students and 29 students. These 59 young boys and girls are engaged on a special program supposed to lead to employment in public and private companies when they graduate. Consequently tuition fees are far higher than those of the traditional program.

As for their age, it ranges between 18 and 25 years old. 14% of our students are between 18 and 20 years old (premature adults) whereas the great majority (86%) of them are between 21 and 25 (young adults). As we can see, our population is mainly that of premature adults and young adults. Therefore each of them will be treated as an adult learner.

After a short survey, we identified that their learning need was English for communication purposes. They are fully aware that mastering English will be a plus in their professional insertion. English is not their major but only a 30 hour-course. For this population and the whole country, French is the language of instructions. English is therefore learned as a second language.

A pretest enabled us to select 23 students per class on the basis of their results to participate in this experiment. The objective was to have two ideal classes in which students are supposed to have the same abilities. For example, the best of MMO1A was eliminated because there was a gap between him and his pair of MMO1B.

3.2 Research Principles and Strategy

This study is based on the ideologies initiated by the inventors and leaders of authentic pedagogy. Newmann, one of the leaders of authentic pedagogy, (1995) asserted that *“the kind of mastery required for students to earn school credits, grades, and high scores is frequently trivial, contrived, or meaningless”*. In contrast *“authentic” academic achievement stands for accomplishment that is significant, worthwhile, and meaningful.* Their context was American schools and universities, but their achievements can be extended worldwide, particularly at Université Félix Houphouët Boigny.

We are not expecting our learners to reproduce dialogs. As pointed out by Sizer, (1984) for whom all persons, regardless of their formal education *“construct meaning”*, we are expecting our learners to *“use their minds well”* and our role is to help them achieve this high standard. The work of Archbald & Newmann (1988), Berlak et al. (1992), Resnick (1987), and Wiggins (1993) states that the highest challenge in education lies in the construction of knowledge rather than reproducing knowledge.

For the sake of these experiments our strategy was to compare two assessment methods; traditional summative assessment (experiment 1) and summative assessment used formatively (experiment 2). This assessment consists in measuring learners’ oral performance, after studying a certain number of lessons.

Contrary to the assessment tradition, each member of the class was asked to give a mark to those presenting their performance. Moreover, those presenting a performance were requested to give themselves a mark and this is in the line of adult education principles. As an example, Malcom Knowles (1984) recommends involving Adults in the planning and evaluation of their instruction because, for him their experience, including even their mistakes provides the basis for their learning activities. The importance of English and its position as a plus for these learners’ job opportunities constitute a high motivation source to exploit. Consequently, the reference was the performance of a native speaker of English through a context similar to that of the topic. In a clearer term, to get 20 out of 20, students must have a performance similar to that of a native speaker of English.

To be accepted, students’ performance should be free of any pronouncing mistake; the language speed should be at least normal and free from any hesitation and repetition. By repetition we mean that students should not give the impression to have learnt their text by heart. A started sentence should be completed naturally. Students are not allowed to give the impression that part of their conversation has escaped from them and go back to the beginning of the sentence and repeat what was already said with the aim to remember the rest of their conversation. Their performance should be as natural as possible and be very close to that of a native speaker of English.

Besides, students are fully aware that as long as their performance is below 14 out of 20, they will continue training. They also know that nobody will favor them since they are competitors to each other and that the only solution is to do what they have to, to reach the agreed standard. The objective is to make them do their best and they like it.

3.3 Data Collection Method

The only data we decided to use was the analysis of students’ marks. The reason is that for us every grade contains a certain number of coded information and the teacher’s role is to decipher each piece of information and bring suitable solutions to his or her students’ needs. Likewise, the performance itself contains useful information that can help the teacher correct his or her teaching or assessment approach.

4. THE EXPERIMENTS

The material used is English for Accounting written by Evan Fredo & Sean Mahoney, Oxford University Press. Students studied the first three units which gave them the opportunity to learn extensive accounting and finance terms, listen to native speakers of English and get familiar with their speaking manner, construct and practice their own dialogs similar to those of the book. The three units covered the different jobs in accounting, accounting principles, profit and loss statements, analyzing accounts, ratios, tax systems, balance sheets, etc.

The language focus was meeting people, offering hospitality, agreeing and disagreeing, comparing, talking about formulas and equations, saying numbers, being polite, and clarifying information.

This experiment does not consist in testing learners’ comprehension of above abilities but it goes beyond. To use the taxonomy of Bloom to show our expectations we would say that we are expecting them to demonstrate that they are at least at the application level. ,

4.3 Experiment 1

The procedure was to ask students to prepare a short conversation covering the program described above and present it to the rest of the class which plays the role of a jury. After some criticisms about the performance, each member of the class including the presenters proposes a mark to the pair. The teacher has a deliberative power. Though different from the assessment tradition in which the teacher is the only one who judges, experiment one keeps the traditional power to acquit or condemn and offers no chance for improvement, exactly as in use at Université Félix Houphouët Boigny and many other education institutions.

4.4 Experiment 2

The target in experiment 2 is to push students to have a minimum of 14/20. The difference between experiment 1 and 2 is that here, the assessment enables to measure students' learning level and the mark only shows if the agreed standard or requirements are reached or not. In case the requirements are not achieved, learners know what to do: go back for improvement. A second chance or even a third chance is offered to students, since each learner has his or her own learning pace. Students whose marks are above or equal to 14 out of 20 are allowed to improve their performance if they wish to. The target is to get closer to the excellence.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following are the outcomes of experiment 1 and experiment 2. After these results, the discussion phase will start in the line of our research questions which will try to compare students' results in traditional summative assessment and the same students' results in summative assessment used formatively.

5.3 Results

Two results will be presented in the following lines: the fallouts of experiment 1, and those of experiment 2.

5.1.1 Experiment one

06 students had a mark superior or equal to 10 out of 20. The best one got 13/20. The second one got 12/20 whereas the third one got 11/20. Three students got just the average: 10/20. The success rate in this experiment is $6/23 \times 100 = 26.08$ per cent, meaning a failure rate of 73.91 per cent.

Students who failed are classed as follow:

- 09/20, 02 students
- 08/20, 02 students
- 07/20, 04 students
- 06/20, 06 students
- 05/20, 02 students
- 04/20, 01 student

5.1.2 Experiment two:

According to the standard of our university which accepts 10/20 as a passing mark, 100% of our learners passed. However, according to our own standard which advocates a minimum of 14/20, 01 student who got 13/20 and who refused to get prepared and try again failed. Thus the failure rate is $1/23 \times 100 = 4.34$ per cent, meaning that the success rate is 95.66 per cent.

The details of students' results are the following:

- 18/20, 02 students
- 17/20, 06 students
- 16/20, 07 students
- 15.5/20, 01 student
- 15/20, 05 students
- 14.5, 01 student
- 13/20, 01 student

5.4 DISCUSSION

Students' results in assessment 1 show that 17 learners out of 23 (73.91 %) failed. As an adviser, a guide and a facilitator of learning, the "hidden message" is that my students have not learnt! Besides, the few students (26.08%) who are supposed to have learnt got an average grade of 11/20. For me the message is very clear: none of them has really learnt! Students' results must be seen as an outstanding measure of their learning. Excellent results mean that our students have learnt. However, those results should raise the following question: was my course really excellent or was the assessment too easy? The same way, poor results should raise another question: was the assessment really suitable to my students' level? In the specific case of the present experiment, why have our students not learnt?

A possible explanation of this situation is that the taxonomic assessment level in this experiment was exceptionally high when we compare it to teachers' usual assessment practices, but did we really have a choice?

Indeed, students at université Félix Houphouët Boigny are familiar with assessments which stop to the level of remembering or understanding according to the taxonomy of Bloom. Common examples of questions that are usually asked are: what is a trainee accountant? Or what is a back-office manager? Or what is a balance sheet etc.? By answering these question types, students prove that they have learnt and get good marks, but what is the use of such learning when the main objective of the course is students' ability to truly communicate? Does the knowledge of key accounting terms alone develop the ability to communicate? The answer is obviously no.

For us, these question types are important to ask during the lessons, but they are not suitable for a final assessment, particularly when Adult learners are concerned. Consequently, we had no other choice if we really wanted to prepare our students for their future professional communication. Kearsley (2010) wrote that "*Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented*". Besides, at the Bachelor level, these terms are

already known in French or will be known soon. Therefore, limiting our assessment to vocabulary or content does not give our students neither a real chance to use these terms in real life situation, nor a chance to really learn to communicate. The immediate consequence when the object of our learning is not used is that it will be forgotten easily. Many learners of English as a second language cannot speak English because they are never offered a chance to practice their English. The same way, as pointed out by Eduard Linderman (1956) ***“learning which is combined with action provides a peculiar and solid enrichment.”*** Here the action is the effort to practice the English language and this justifies our taxonomic choice for the assessment.

We were fully conscious that asking francophone students studying English as a second language to produce their own conversations, then to enact this conversation by using accurate terms studied during the lessons, through a language speed and quality not too far from that of a native speaker is a bit demanding. However, basing the assessment on vocabulary content is against the objective of an English course which aims at promoting communication in the working environment.

The minimum assessment taxonomic level in our situation was neither remembering, nor understanding, but applying. We knew that this was not an easy task, but to paraphrase Roby Kidd (1959) who ***“believes that all human beings can be aided to become increasingly self-reliant and autonomous”***, we would say that Adult learners can be aided to exhibit the best that they have inside them when they are put in some learning or assessment conditions, particularly when the advisor knows how to involve them in their own learning. This is the reason why we strongly believe that traditional summative assessment in use at Université Félix Houphouët Boigny and many other institutions in the world, and which offers no immediate improvement chance to students who fail is anti-democratic, anti-andragogic and is comparable to a court decision which offers no appeal.

If we share the view that marks are not the main reason for students’ presence in the classroom, if we also think that students register at our universities for the quest of knowledge, then we have no right to give such a power to summative assessment which promotes marks. Giving marks the power to sanction without a possibility of appeal refers to consider grades as the finality of the teaching-learning process. Dissimilarly, giving a new chance for improvement to students who fail is offering them an opportunity to attain our common target which is learning. The excellent results in experiment 2 prove that it is a must to change traditional summative assessment that simply sanctions. Sanctioning here means dividing students into two groups; the good ones, and the bad ones, but what next?

As this experiment is trying to show, the bad ones remain bad, and the good ones remain good in experiment one, but what do we do for the bad ones to improve themselves since, instead of the mark, learning is the target? Moreover, we are not ascertained that all our students who are judged “good” through traditional summative assessment do not need to improve their performance.

Assessing students differently, that is to say giving each of them a chance to improve his or her performance in oral communication or any other subject can help students learn more and better as in experiment 2 where, not only all the participants in the experiment passed (according to the standards of our university), but also each of them became more confident and natural in using English for oral communication.

In the same line, Malcom Knowles (1980) advises that ***“learning activities should be based on the real needs and interests of the participants”*** and that ***“responsibility for making and carrying out decisions should be shared with Adult learners”***. We think that the times have come to experiment these adult learning principles and adopt them when, as in the case of experiment 2, the trials are proved positive.

If for Alfie Kohn (2000), standardized tests as a monster that “threatens to swallow our school whole”, for us no matter the considered assessment mode, every assessment which favors the mark and which gives it the power to condemn or release is a threat to true learning and success. Consequently, traditional summative assessment does not favor students’ true learning because it offers no chance to those who fail at an assessment to improve their learning and performance.

If we choose to never question our teaching and assessment practices, then why do we complain about our students’ massive failures? As professional instructors, it is a must for us to note that we have a share in every success or failure of our students. Therefore how long are we going to continue teaching the way we were taught and assessing the way we were assessed when we were students and never question these practices? What is the place of innovation in our teaching and assessing practices?

CONCLUSION

Our students’ marks are in a sense our own marks. A single bad mark means that the facilitator of learning that each one of us is has failed to help one of those we are paid to assist. What should we do when we realize that we failed to do the work for which we devote our time and energy? A logical endeavor should be to improve our performance instead of letting our students bear alone the responsibility our common failure. Offering a new chance to learners by providing them with new instructions, new explanations and giving them a chance to be assessed again are ways to correct our professional mistake. Furthermore, in so doing we help our students go

through their lessons again and improve their learning. We must never forget that assessment and its correlative marks are not the destination, but just a step in the harsh but fascinating teaching- learning “journey”. Moreover, assessment results should be interpreted and adequate decisions aiming at improving learning quality should be made. Roby Kidd (1959) ascertains that *“people of all kinds, in all places, and of all ages have a marvelous capacity to learn and grow and enlarge”* and we must add “provided correct actions are taken, at the right moment and at the right place”. It is the teacher’s role to take these actions after organizing everything in a collaborative mind, after interpreting learners’ feelings, hidden messages and learning needs. As shown through this experiment, though our results cannot be generalized yet at this level, using summative assessment formatively is one of these actions that really enhance learning in teaching English for oral communication.

References

- Alfie Kohn (2000) "Standardized Testing and Its Victims", Education Week, September 27, 2000
- Archbald, D., & Newmann, F. M. (1988). Beyond standardized tests: Assessing authentic academic achievement in the secondary school. Reston, VA: National Association of Secondary School Principals
- Banta, T.W. (2007) Assessing Student Achievement in General Education: Assessment Update Collection. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Berlak, H., Newmann, F. M., Adams, E., Archbald, D. A., Burgess, T., Raven, J., & Romberg, T.(1992). Toward a New Science of Educational Testing and Assessment, Albany, NY: SUNY Press
- Kearsley, (2010) Andragogy (M.Knowles). *The theory Into practice database*. Retrieved from <http://tip.psychology.org>
- Knowles, M.(1984). The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species (3rd Ed.). Houston, TX: Gulf Publishing.
- Knowles, M.(1984). Andragogy in Action. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kidd, J. Roby (1959). How Adults Learn. Association Press, New York
- Malcolm S. Knowles (1980] The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy (Revised and Updated) .
- Newmann, Fred & all (1995) Authentic Pedagogy and Student Performance, Center of Organization & Restructuring of Schools, Madison, WI
- Sizer, T. R.(1984).Horace's Compromise: The dilemma of the American high school. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Walvoord, B. E.(2004) Assessment Clear and Simple: A Practical Guide for Institutions, Departments, and General Education. Jossey-Bass, 2004.
- Wiggins, G. P. (1993). Assessing student performance. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open-Access hosting service and academic event management. The aim of the firm is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the firm can be found on the homepage:
<http://www.iiste.org>

CALL FOR JOURNAL PAPERS

There are more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals hosted under the hosting platform.

Prospective authors of journals can find the submission instruction on the following page: <http://www.iiste.org/journals/> All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Paper version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

MORE RESOURCES

Book publication information: <http://www.iiste.org/book/>

IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

