

OUTCOMES OF ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT IN ADULT LANGUAGE TRAINING

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to highlight the switch from traditional assessment to alternative, formative assessment, in other words assessment for learning, in adult language training. We focused on two aspects of formative assessment: self-assessment and peer-assessment, methods that can be used as teaching tools in communicative language teaching in adult English classes. Reportedly, these methods lead to improved results in language learning and production, as well as in motivation and self-esteem. Based on previous studies, our aim is to present how frequent employment of formative feedback based on adult opinions and perceptions – obtained via informal interviews – and tailored to their needs, result in improved learner outcome.

Keywords: *formative assessment, self-assessment, peer-assessment, adult training, feedback, learner autonomy.*

Introduction

The present study covers the topic of alternative assessment in adult education. Within this category, we tackled upon alternative assessment as formative assessment or assessment *for* learning, i.e. assessment meant not to rank students or find out about the amount of knowledge absorbed and reproduced by learners, but assessment meant to help learners become better at learning. Assessment for learning is based on the belief that the right kind of classroom assessment has a crucial role in effective learning and teaching. (Little: 2009). This kind of assessment is, in fact, a metacognitive means that learners need to achieve for themselves in order to reach better outcomes. The main forms of assessment *for* learning employed in this analysis are self-assessment and peer-assessment. These methods seem to lead to better results in adult language learners in Romania – in terms of language competence, self-esteem or self-responsibility – who seem to still be needing guidance to properly understand and embark upon life long learning and metacognitive skills.

The aim of the present paper is to combine prior research in the field of alternative assessment methods and the results the application of such methods in adult language classes have triggered. The methods are applied only after informal interviews are held in order to find out what prior experience learners have in alternative assessment. The theoretical and practical approaches are meant to facilitate an understanding of the current situation of alternative assessment in adult language learning and to highlight the idea that feedback, under the form of self-assessment and peer-assessment, leads to improved learning under the form of applied metacognitive strategies.

Feedback is one of the most influential elements upon student outcome in the entire educational process. Within Romanian education and elsewhere, feedback is mainly given by the teacher and it has absolute value, thus limiting the student's potential for development; nevertheless, modern tendencies put an accent on other types of feedback that are equally valuable: self-feedback based on self reflection and peer review. This accent is driven by the changes that also appeared in the process of teaching and learning concretized in collaborative approaches in teaching, learner responsibility, face-to-face dialogue between teacher and student, etc. Falchikov and Boud (2006) saw this kind of active student participation in classroom environment as a more suitable preparation for subsequent working life. The same approaches to both teaching and assessing apply to adult language learning. In this case, learning a language is supposed to cover one of the key competences established by specialists at the European Union level: communicating in foreign languages. To this we might add learning to learn when assessment is put to good use, such as is the case with self-assessment or peer-assessment.

The Canadian Literacy and Learning Network outlines seven key principles of adult learning, i.e. the principles that distinguish adult learners from children and youth.

46. Adults cannot be made to learn. They will only learn when they are internally motivated to do so.

47. Adults will only learn what they feel they need to learn. In other words, they are practical.

48. Adults learn by doing. Active participation is especially important to adult learners in comparison to children.

49. Adult learning is problem-based and these problems must be realistic. Adult learners like finding solutions to problems.

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50. Adult learning is affected by the experience each adult brings.

51. Adults learn best informally. Adults learn what they feel they need to know whereas children learn from a curriculum.

52. Children want guidance. Adults want information that will help them improve their situation or that of their children.

With these principles in mind, we need to say that it is difficult to keep adults motivated, to instill in them confidence, reinforcing positive self-esteem for them to turn into lifelong learners. It is especially difficult for today's adult learners in Romania, who are not yet used to the Bologna concept of life long learning, who have not yet developed motivation and will for continuous learning, who still seem to be needing concrete guidance from their instructors.

In order to motivate adult learners, instructors must learn why their students are enrolled (the motivators); also, they have to discover what is keeping them from learning. Typical motivations for adults include a requirement for competence, an expected promotion, job improvement, a need to maintain old skills or learn new ones, a need to adapt to job changes, or the need to learn in order to comply with company directives. According to Smith and Strong (2009), adults usually require immediate value and relevance from their studies, and they will learn best when they are engaged in developing their own learning objectives. It is crucial for teachers to be aware of the characteristics of their learners and that they develop lessons and assessment strategies that address both the strengths and the needs of their individual students. In the case of assessing adults, the main issue we have encountered so far is that most of the times assessment is traditional, it is a matter of formality, and there is no time for real feedback. When alternative assessment methods are employed, learners react more positively and tend to become more involved and motivated.

Alternative assessment, with its component relevant for our study, self-assessment and peer-assessment, can only be part of formative assessment. To this field of formative assessment belongs assessment *for* learning. The Assessment Reform Group in Cambridge University coined this term in 1999 and spelled out ten principal characteristics:

- should be part of effective planning of teaching and learning;
- should focus on how students learn;
- should be recognized as central to classroom practice;
- should be regarded as a key professional skill for teachers;
- should be sensitive and constructive because any assessment has an emotional impact;

- should take account of the importance of learner motivation;

- should promote commitment to learning goals and a shared understanding of the criteria by which they are assessed;

- learners should receive constructive guidance about how to improve;

- should develop learners' capacity for self-assessment so that they can become reflective and self-managing;

- should recognize the full range of achievements of all learners.

A few years before their proposal, in 1994, Kulm had found five principles of formative assessment that overlap those proposed by the Cambridge group: improving instruction and learning, evaluating learner progress, providing feedback for learners to understand their own thinking, communicating expectations, and improving attitudes toward the subject matter (mathematics in his case). Together with the principles of the assessment *for* learning, adult learning includes the following academic behaviors: speaking and writing skills, flexible, critical thinking, trust in their own learning mechanisms, responsible self-directed learning, autonomy, accountability.

When assessment for learning is implemented, it fosters learner autonomy, thus students "are not merely the objects of their teacher's behavior, they are the animators of their own effective teaching and learning process." (James and Pedder, 2006). As mentioned above, one of the purposes of assessment *for* learning in our case is to turn adult language learners into autonomous, self-directed learners. For this purpose, they need to acquire a certain learning strategy that should be tailored according to their personality, motivation, and level of training. Learning strategies are based on cognitive learning theories that interpret them as abilities and knowledge of the learner, which can be used for later remedies (Scheid, 1995, apud Andreson).

Assessment for learning is best illustrated in the processes of peer-assessment and self-assessment. James and Pedder (2006) argue that in these cases, students develop the motivation to reflect on their previous learning and identify objectives for new learning, structure a way forward, and act to bring about improvement. "In other words, they become autonomous, independent and active learners. When this happens, teaching is no longer the sole preserve of the adult teacher; learners are brought into the heart of teaching and learning processes and decision making."

Specialists in the Assessment Reform Group draw upon Black & Wiliam (1998) findings and state that effective assessment that leads to improved learning is based on five key factors: effective feedback to learners, active involvement of learners

in their own learning, adjusting teaching to take account of the results of assessment, recognizing how much influence assessment can have on motivation and self-esteem, and the need for learners to assess themselves and understand how to improve. Keeping these factors in mind, we might add that adult learners can easily become self-taught or self-regulated learners if they learn how to do this by proper support and guidance. This supposes getting learners familiar with cognitive and motivational competences and establishing a instruction environment that might offer self-instruction possibilities. In 2000, Pintrich defined self-regulated learning (SRL) as strategies used by learners in the process of learning that put an accent on the motivational and cognitive component. The SRL model advanced by the author includes cognitive strategies, metacognitive and self-regulated strategies, and resources management strategies. Of interest to our analysis is the metacognitive aspect, which we consider that can be obtained via alternative assessment, i.e. self-assessment and peer-assessment. Metacognitive strategies include: planning, monitoring, and regulating. Weinstein and Mayer (1986) consider all metacognitive strategies as part of monitoring understanding, when learners simply check what they learnt as compared to the objectives they established for themselves.

To understand how concepts are linked and to what results they can lead, we need to establish further helpful conceptual framework of self-assessment and peer-assessment. An all-encompassing definition of self-assessment was given by Andrade and Du (2007), definition which says that it is a process of formative assessment during which “students reflect on and evaluate the quality of their work and their learning, judge the degree to which they reflect explicitly stated goals or criteria, identifying strengths and weaknesses in their work, and revise accordingly.” Using self-assessment helps learners develop an overview of their work, “so that they can manage and control it; in other words, they develop their capacity for metacognitive thinking.” (Black & William, 2006:15). The informal interviews we held with EFL adult students led to establishing a few traits of self-assessment: only after recognizing what needs to be learnt can learners go on with their learning, this encouraging learner responsibility and ownership of learning; clear-cut learning objectives need to be drawn from the very beginning; alternative assessment works better than traditional assessment; learning how to self-assess improves learners’ future attitudes towards learning; self-assessment and peer-assessment (to a lesser degree) increase self-esteem. Another aspect worth mentioning is that self-assessment was closer to reality in the case of better skilled learners, that is teacher and student opinions

overlapped, and more biased – in terms of negative image of their own learning and low self esteem – in the case of less skilled learners.

In the case of peer-assessment, Falchicov, as early as 1995, defined it as the process whereby groups of individuals rate their peers, based or not on previous discussion or agreement over criteria. The most important feature of peer-assessment we consider to be the fact that it serves to inform self-assessment.

We applied peer-assessment techniques in EFL classes on writing assessments. We also need to mention that communicative approach was employed in teaching English, with the accent put on “real” communication (Harmer: 2004) and with the teacher being both a facilitator and a partner in learner activities. It was interesting to find out that, in general, opinions were more neutral with respect to other people’s works, as opposed to a rather high degree of criticism with respect to their own papers. As observed from applying peer-assessment in classroom, on the one hand, this method can be a useful tool for making adult learners more self-aware of their learning. On the other hand, it requires a lot of training beforehand, otherwise learners tend to be either biased in terms of not offending their peers, not feeling properly prepared for the job, or not being aware of the criteria involved in the process. Since this activity was met with a lot of enthusiasm and indulgence, learners quickly realized the biases that might distort their judgments, therefore anonymity was a method preferred by students in giving peer-assessment, at least during their first attempts. This activity also meant a lot of extra work on the part of the instructor, who had to rewrite in printed form the hand written assignments and to prepare 10-minute sessions for instruction in assessing. And another aspect observed both by teacher and the learners was that applying self-assessment teaches learners how to identify and/or apply common standards and criteria.

A common issue in applying peer-assessment and self-assessment techniques in adult training is that, most commonly, courses for adults are short-term rather than long-term, therefore there is not enough time to dedicate to training learners in assessment. As such, the best instances of alternative assessments took place towards the end of the courses, when learners had already gained self-confidence with respect to learning, and established better inter-relations.

At the beginning of the courses, short informal interviews that focused on learners’ previous encounters with alternative assessment and their opinions on the topic reflected a mainly traditional type of assessment both in pre-university and university years. Only isolated cases of alternative assessment were reported, luckily, in most cases in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classes. This

partly explains the difficulties met by learners in engaging in self-assessment and peer-assessment.

For the two methods to become metacognitive strategies there is need for frequency. Not until they are over and over used until learners get comfortable with them, can they become truly aware of and good at applying them in a conscious, useful manner. The limited number of classes dedicated to adult learning in general may prevent optimal results of alternative assessment. Nevertheless, its usage triggers better learning outcomes – in terms of results, motivation, and accountability. And, keeping in mind that assessment comes from the Latin *assidere*, i.e. sitting next to somebody in order to help, we can say that alternative assessment's principal aim should always be to help students become better learners.

In our attempt to choose a definition fit for our purposes, we need to mention that scholars and practitioners have not yet reached consensus with respect to metacognition. Shawn Taylor's 1999 definition is often cited; it reads that metacognition is an appreciation of what one already knows, together with a correct apprehension of the learning task, which will in time lead to correct, efficient and reliable application of one's strategic knowledge to a particular situation. In other words, it is a skill that makes students active learners. Guiding learners into co-responsibility via metacognitive skills is considered a "Copernican revolution" for education (Manolescu, 2004:11) and requires training of teachers and learners alike. If learners admitted to not being accustomed to alternative assessment techniques, it is nevertheless true that neither are teachers and currently there are developed guides and training courses for teachers in this field.

Metacognition techniques are based on asking questions (e.g. What is the problem here? What resources should I use? What should come first? How should I pace myself?), but the challenge lies in finding the right moment and context for raising the questions, and more importantly in responding to these questions promptly and effectively. Therefore, we consider that first it is the teacher's role to get the process going by modeling questions, setting clear-cut criteria, thus helping students become aware of themselves as language learners. Then an important role in acquiring metacognitive skills is played by self-assessment and peer-assessment, which get learners closer to finding out about their own strengths and weaknesses, about what motivates them, and about the best strategies to tackle in various contexts. With respect to assessment, a change of focus from quantity to quality, from summative to formative, based on alternative methods is necessary, even if so far alternative assessment is not fully understood or completely analyzed via validated and acknowledged empirical research (Neacșu, 2006).

Conclusion

The role of the professor in metacognition is to acquaint adult students with what each metacognitive strategy is called, what purpose it serves, and which of the questions modeled to them it relates to. According to researchers in the field (Conti, 2015), all strategies involved should be named, presented, modeled, and practiced, thus settling a common language. Or, in the words of Wittgenstein, "the limits of my language are the limits of my world."

We should follow the line that connects feedback under the form of self-assessment and peer-assessment with metacognitive strategies; if this feedback is practiced constantly, it becomes metacognition. The main issue in adult learning is the length of the courses. In our cases, adult language courses do not last enough so as to allow the teacher and learners alike to deeply engage in assessment for learning strategies. The first outcomes resulting from using metacognitive strategies in classroom – even if with time limits – were, as far as we could notice, an increased self-confidence, self-responsibility, and motivation. But there is still a lot of exercise and interpretation in store before reaching relevant conclusions.

In conclusion, we can say that using self-assessment and peer-assessment as metacognitive methods for improved learning outcomes can lead to development in competences, that is knowledge as a tool, rather than to development in knowledge itself, as a goal. With the help of self-assessment and peer-assessment, the learner will eventually build their own knowledge (Cucoș; 2002). Feedback is a powerful tool, a tool for learning, that should help learners learn better and not obtain better grades, and it reflects the belief that all students can improve their learning. Assessment is a two-sided concept according to Boud (1995): making decisions about the standards of performance expected and then making judgments about the quality of the performance in relation to these standards. Or, as Andrade writes in her 2007 study, "if students produce it, they can assess it; and if they can assess it, they can improve it."

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