

THE ROLE OF ASSESSMENT IN SELF-CONTROL OF LEARNING

By: María Stella Martínez. Universidad del Norte,
Barranquilla, Colombia.

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the role of assessment as an affective variable which influences the process of building and managing students' own learning as found in a classroom experiment carried out in ESP courses at Universidad del Norte, Barranquilla, Colombia. The overall analysis drawn upon teachers' and students' perceptions of the whole process revealed that getting students motivated in a self-control process of their own learning cannot be achieved simply by developing awareness-raising activities, but that these ought to be integrated with new assessment procedures. In doing so, a shift from traditional paradigms based on product-oriented procedures to more process oriented practices is required.

BACKGROUND OF THE EXPERIMENT

The experiment was carried out with students in the last of three levels of English (English III) and who are in the second year of Engineering studies. To date, the teaching of reading comprehension has been the main concern in the development of ESP courses at Universidad del Norte. In the two previous stages, students are expected to have mastered the basic vocabulary and grammar which should allow them to cope with texts in English related to their academic subjects used in Level III.

The idea of searching for a new methodology which would allow students to take more control of their own learning/reading process originated from the fact that an increasing demotivation was observed in students at that level. It has been noted that this attitude towards managing their own learning/reading process is basically due to the following reasons:

First, the educational system of our society in which the university is immersed is mainly product-oriented. The emphasis is placed on the use of instruments which attempt to measure quantitatively the final product rather than making a quality analysis of students' performance throughout the learning process. Furthermore, students are often required to attain and keep up a standard average mark or else they will be left out of their programmes. As a result, all their efforts concentrate on developing certain strategies which help them cope with the type of questions which are aimed at determining the quantity of knowledge already acquired with very little or no concern for evaluating the quality of their own learning.

Secondly, at this stage in their studies, students do not perceive an immediate purpose (Johns and Davies, 1983) in learning English, even though it is widely recognised that learning this language is necessary to be able to get access to the vast realms of scientific and technical information available in the world today. Bibliography in English, for instance, is rarely assigned for the fulfilment of their core subject work in the areas of specialization, therefore, the acquisition of linguistic knowledge in the ESP class becomes meaningless.

Thirdly, it was found that the methodology used at that time did not propitiate an adequate environment for enhancing students motivation towards reading in English. Content and materials, which were basically selected according to the teacher's criteria did not fulfil students' expectations. No space for a kind of negotiated syllabus was allowed here (Nunan, 1988).

In view of the above constraints, a search for ways which would allow students to take more control of their own learning process according to their particular needs and expectations was undertaken. It was then thought that by developing activities which would raise students' awareness of the importance of managing their own learning, students would become motivated to participate in the process of building and managing their own learning processes. In this way, s/he would be able to identify her/his own strengths and weaknesses in their reading process and to make decisions on the strategies/ways required to overcome their difficulties. Wilhelms (1967) sustains that the most fundamentally important outcome of evaluation is what happens in the learner himself... "to some degree, he has to be equipped to be his own diagnostician, because in the final analysis he will be his own diagnostician, anyway he is the person who is in control of his own learning energies". (Wilhelms, 1967, p. 323). It was therefore believed that if the student is engaged in the process of being equipped to be her/his own diagnostician, motivation to read would increase.

Two basic assumptions underlie the approach: one refers to the emphasis made by Scott (1987) on ... "the importance of one's whole attitude towards Education as a process along which people are able to use whatever is available in the world while knowing why and what for one does that in order to control knowledge which is individually and socially meaningful". The other alludes to the importance of motivating students to assume greater control of their learning by helping them become aware of and identify the strategies they use or could potentially use (Holmes and Ramos, 1991). Base on the above ideas, an experiment was designed and carried out aimed at motivating students through awareness-raising activities to participate in a process of self-control and building of their own learning, which in turn would enhance motivation to read beyond the classroom.

DESCRIPTION OF THE EXPERIMENT

The study involves several aspects concerning the implementation of a methodology which allows students to take greater control of their own learning process according to their needs and expectations. Among those aspects are the type of activities required to raise students awareness of their capacity for managing their own learning, the activities for reinforcing coöperative learning, the development of suitable material which intends to meet students' language difficulties and the type of assessment procedures to follow. The intention of the author is not to make a full description of all the above elements, though reference shall be made thereto in relation to the assessment procedures used, rather, the emphasis is placed upon the role of assessment as an affective variable which influences the process of building and managing students' own learning as found in the study.

For methodological purposes the study has been divided into three main stages. All the above-mentioned aspects were implemented throughout the study almost in the same way, except for assessment procedures which were eventually changed as results at the end of each course were analysed. During the three stages, great emphasis was placed upon awareness-raising activities such as answering questionnaires and group discussion about motivation, expectations, student and teacher profiles, setting the rules of the game for improving individual and group work, self-monitoring of students' own learning by filling self-evaluation sheets (see table 1 below) with the help of a checklist (see table 2 below) and the development of time-management skills. Activities related to coöperative learning were also developed. These were introduced with the purpose of making students aware of the fact that sharing views and getting support from their peers would help enhance their learning and their capacity for developing social understanding.

The material used in the classroom experiment was rather fixed at the outset of the experiment. It mainly consisted of a set of texts selected by the teacher. To a certain extent, students were not allowed to choose their own reading passages in any way. Eventually, some freedom was granted in the second stage of the experiment in which students had to deal with both fixed texts, provided by the teacher as well as texts chosen by themselves on a wide range of topics, often with no obvious link between them. The introduction of a project-based task in the last stage of the study required a more flexible criteria for material selection: fixed texts selected by the teacher were still used to meet language difficulties and to train students to recognize their weaknesses and strengths; however, the main work was carried out with texts selected by students themselves for the development of their individual projects.

The kind of assessment procedures used was of two types. During the first two stages, product-oriented type of assessment modes such as filling traditional questionnaire tests constituted the basic means of measuring students' performance. A small variation in the methodology was introduced during the second stage: students were allowed to choose by themselves part of the material to read and be assessed. However, this new procedure still only intended to measure the final product in quantitative terms. Up to here, assessment techniques were only concerned with measuring the final product (results) quantitatively. The final stage of the study was devoted to the integration of some assessment procedures in the whole learning process. An attempt to integrate awareness-raising activities of various types including activities for facilitating cooperative work was made through the development of a project-based task. This new manner of assessing students' work was thought to be more process-oriented. A brief description of this assessment strategy will be provided in the discussion section.

METHOD

The method used to gather information about the results of the experiment consists of direct observation of classroom practice, informal talks with students and application of questionnaires to evaluate the course at the end of each semester. Quantitative methods based on statistical measurement were not used in this case, since the degree of motivation to learn/read achieved by students is an essentially subjective phenomenon which does not lend itself to numerical analysis.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Findings are discussed here as they appeared in each stage of the experiment:

During the first stage, it was found that the mere act of developing awareness-raising activities was not enough to increase students' motivation to read and to evaluate the **quality** of their own learning. Analysis of the outcome of awareness-raising activities revealed the students' capacity for self-evaluation of their goals, expectations, strengths and weaknesses. For instance, they came out with interesting profiles of their own attitude towards learning. They could recognise themselves as good/bad, lazy/industrious, punctual/hard-working and in many cases as cheating or deceitful students ! In addition to this, students seemed to be aware of the need for self-evaluating their own learning process. On the whole, awareness-raising activities were found interesting by the students, but not essential for their success in getting a "passing mark" in the subject. They were rather more concerned with facing tests and exams and the need for developing certain strategies which helped them cope with this product-oriented mode of assessing, intended to measure quantitatively the amount of knowledge stored in their minds. Put in Boud's words,... "if the form of assessment emphasizes the

memorizing of a set body of knowledge, when the learning which precedes it has gone well beyond this and has not focused on the memory component, then independent learning and the students themselves will be discouraged". (Boud, 1982, P 26).

In the second stage, the "new variation" was introduced in the assessment procedure which allowed students some freedom to choose part of the material to read and to be assessed. Apparently, it helped improve students' motivation a little. However, this new attempt did not bring about a positive change in students' attitude towards managing their own learning, since the emphasis was still placed upon measuring the final product quantitatively, plus the fact that tests and examinations were still used.

It was not until a radical shift from product-oriented to a process-oriented type of assessment was made that students started to show some improvement in their motivation to read in English. In this third stage, assessment procedures concentrated more on measuring students' capacity to evaluate their own learning/reading process. According to Boud, evaluation and assessment if externally conducted must reward the component skills of independent learning as well as the competence of the final product (Boud, 1982, P 26). This time it was noted that the level of anxiety to reach a "passing mark" in their subject was reduced as traditional ways of assessing students' performance were removed. Finally, concern with evaluating their own reading process and the quality of their learning was gradually shown by students.

A description of the mode used to assess students' performance which is believed to have helped increase students' interest in reading and evaluating their own learning process is presented here (see tables below). The purpose is not to propose the techniques used in the course of this experiment as a definite way of facilitating qualitative formative assessment (Radnor, 1994) but to stress the importance of the

close relationship between assessment and self-control of learning.

As mentioned above, in the final stage of the study, the assessment procedures revolved around the development of a small project. Students were asked to choose a topic related to their study subject and then carry out bibliographical research. In this way, students could perceive an immediate purpose in their learning of English and therefore, the task became meaningful.

This project was developed through group work whose rules were previously set by the participating members. Each individual was asked to evaluate her/his own progress as the project developed. S/he was provided with a self-evaluation sheet (see table 1) so that s/he would be able to become a diagnostician of her/his own learning process. S/he was also aided with a checklist (see table 2) which was intended to be used as a guidance for her/his self-assessment activity. The students' progress in the development of their projects was assessed in three stages (see table 3). Each stage consisted of three tutorial meetings. In these meetings, students discussed with the teacher the results of their work as well as the types of difficulties encountered and the ways they were solved. The student's capacity of self-evaluating her/his own learning progress was an important component in setting the assessment criteria. In short, this way of assessing is thought to be a process-oriented procedure.

Table 1

SELF-EVALUATION SHEET					
NAME:					
PROJECT TITLE:					
TEXT No.					
TEXT TITLE:					
Date	Objective	Achievement	Reasons	Solutions	Evaluation of solution

Table 2

EXAMPLES OF THE CHECKLIST OF OBJECTIVES AND THE AREAS CONCERNING THE REASONS OF ACHIEVMENT
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Summarize information. 2. Identify text structure. 3. Identify main ideas. 4. Identify writer's purpose. 5. Identify specialised vocabulary. 6. Analyze sentence structure.
<p>AREAS CONCERNING REASONS OF ACHIEVMENT</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Background knowledge of the topic. 2. Familiarity with the vocabulary. 3. Time devoted to the activity. 4. Strategy use. 5. Text selection. 6. Interest in the activity. 7. Frequency of the activity.

Table 3

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA SHEET

STUDENT: _____

PROJECT TITLE: _____

1. Assessment of the process

Criteria	Project Stages								Average Mark
Attendance to group work.									
Previous individual work.									
Participation in group discussion.									
Appropriate use of resources.									
Task fulfilment in the time proposed.									
Capacity for self-evaluation .									
Presentation of work.									
MARKS									

2. Assessment of the final product

Mode	Criteria	Mark
Written essay	Coherence	
	Coverage	
	Language Features	
Oral Presentation	Use of resources	
	Clarity	
	Average Mark	

CONCLUSION

The overall analysis drawn upon teachers' and students' perceptions of the process revealed that:

1. Assessment plays an important role as an affective variable which influences the process of building and managing students' own learning. Therefore, getting students motivated in a self-control process of their own learning cannot be simply achieved by developing awareness-raising activities, these ought to be integrated with a rethinking of assessment procedures. In doing so, a shift from traditional assessment paradigms based on product-oriented procedures to more process-oriented ones is required.

2. Despite the emphasis being made for quite a while in the literature upon the importance of the role of evaluation and assessment procedures in learning (Wilhelms, 1967 and Boud, 1982, just to name a few) it seems that we teachers and probably course designers too tend to be more concerned with material development, the type of language activities employed or the various classroom procedures intended to motivate students in their learning. As a matter of fact, very little attention is given to assessment procedures and their relation

with the whole learning process. This may be due to various reasons among which, some are mentioned below.

3. The implementation of this approach to learning demands on the one hand a flexible attitude on the part of the teacher with regard to traditional teaching paradigms, where in most cases s/he is firmly attached to the idea of being totally responsible for whatever is bound to happen in the classroom and therefore, s/he is the only one capable of controlling students' learning processes; on the other hand this approach demands a great commitment on the part of the student in fulfilling her/his work.

4. It also demands a great investment of time for preparation of classroom activities of all kinds and therefore the work becomes extremely exhausting, especially with large classes. However, the implementation of this approach to teaching can be rewarded by the fact that the teaching/learning process becomes more challenging for both teachers and students. It allows students to constantly evaluate their own progress and the quality of their own learning. It provides a closer understanding of the individual and the group, thus facilitating an adequate environment to develop the affective channels which stimulate self-control of learning (MacCombs, 1988).

5. Finally, these findings all serve to validate Boud's assumption ... "that there is no point in introducing independent learning if students are to be judged and rewarded on grounds which are incompatible with the goal". (Boud, 1982, P 26).

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- 1: BOUD, D. (1982) "Toward Student Responsibility for Learning" in BOUD, D. (Ed.) "Developing Student Autonomy in Learning". London, Kogan, 1982, Pp 21-37.
- 2: HOLMES, J. & RAMOS, R. (1991). "Talking about Learning: establishing a framework for discussing and changing learning processes" in JAMES, C. & GARRET, P. "Language Awareness in the Classroom". London: Longman 1991, Pp 199-212.
- 3: JOHNS, T. & DAVIES, F. (1983) "Text as a vehicle for information: the classroom use of written texts in teaching reading in a foreign language" in Reading in a Foreign Language, Vol. 1, No. 1, P 2.
- 4: McCOMBS, B. (1991) "Motivational Skills Training. Combining Metacognitive, Cognitive and Affective Learning Strategies in WEINSTEIN, C.E. et al "Learning and Study Strategies: Issues in Assessment, Instruction and Evaluation". California Academic Press, 1988.
- 5: NUNAN, D. (1988) "The Learner-Centred Curriculum" CUP.
- 6: RODNER, H. (1994) "The problems of facilitating qualitative formative assessment in pupils" in British Journal of Educational Psychology, No. 64, Pp 145-160, UK.
7. SCOTT, M. (1986) "Concientizaçao" in Working Papers No. 18, CEPRIIL - Centro de Pesquisa, Recursos e Informacao em Leitura, PUCSP, Sao Paulo, Brasil.
- 8: TORRENCE, H. (1989) "Theory, practice and politics in the development of assessment" in Journal of Education, No. 19, (2), Pp 183-191
- 9: WILHELMS, F.T. (1967) "Evaluation as Feedback" Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development Yearbook, Washington D.C. Pp 2-16.