ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

7 *Promoting learning through assessment*

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Assessment in higher education

7.1 ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION – SYSTEM AND PRINCIPLES

The term assessment refers to general processes connected with monitoring of the student's learning progress. Classroom assessment plays a very important role in education and there are mainly four reasons why to assess students:

1. to compare students with each other
2. to see if students meet a particular standard
3. to help the student's learning
4. to check if the teaching programme is doing its job

(Baxter, 1997, p.7)

Classroom assessment has several functions and all of them influence the learner's development to a considerable extent. As Slavík (1999, p.17) points out it is first of all **motivational function**, which is connected to the learner's emotions - accepting or rejecting some assessment. Both negative and positive experience will have an impact on the learner's motivation and attitude towards learning the language. This is why it is very important to handle difficult situations with care. Teachers need to realize that assessment has (unfortunately) crucial importance for students from the early days of schooling. Marks are usually the only information that the two most important authorities for a child (teachers and parents) exchange. This is how children learn from early on days that a mark is what matters.

However, assessment should also have a **cognitive function** through which students should learn why something is or is not accepted and should become able to search for and understand the substance of things. This understanding should afterwards guide them to some kind of action leading towards improvement. This is called **activating function** and it is connected to the students´ will to carry out changes in order to proceed in the learning process.

Joughin (2009, p.2) on the other hand states that *"the concepts of assessment, learning and judgement draw together the three core functions of assessment. While assessment can fulfil many functions, three predominate: supporting the process of learning; judging students' achievement in relation to course requirements; and maintaining the standards of the profession or discipline for which students are being prepared. Each of these is important, with each having particular imperatives and each giving rise to particular issues of conceptualisation and implementation."*

Things that are the most frequently being assessed in school are usually those parts of the subject matter that are easy to be tested, measured and marked and these are very frequently going in hand with the impression of a student as a language user or a learner

in general. However, when we talk about language learning and the aim of learning is reaching communicative competence, it is sometimes difficult to provide assessment in all possible areas that contribute to this competence. For instance, Baxter (1997, p.17) points out several such areas (e.g. language competencies: sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic, the use of the language rather than the usage, learning skills, general behavioural and social skills...) in which it is difficult to provide some assessment although these areas seem to be crucial for the student.

This is why some teachers have certain reservations towards traditional assessment tools (such as paper-and-pencil testing) and prefer the so-called **authentic assessment**. It is based mainly on the ideas of social constructivism (e.g. Williams & Burden, 1997) and points to the fact that school assessment is far from reality and that what we test at school has nothing to do what the students need and do in their real life. "*Authentic assessment is designed to evaluate how the student uses new learning rather than how much he or she remembers. It allows the learner to demonstrate problem solving skills, application of knowledge, and communication of the new information. Although paper-pencil tests may be used, the emphasis is on performance tasks like portfolios, demonstrations, and presentations.*" (Hoffman, 1996-2008)

The table below compares the differences between traditional assessment and authentic assessment:

Table 7.1 Comparison of traditional testing and authentic testing

Traditional Testing	Multiple authentic assessments
1. Specific test questions	1. Assessment can include paper-and-pencil testing but may also include other procedures including portfolios, group work, projects.
2. Tangible and structured	2 Open-ended activities demonstrating student abilities to grapple with the challenges of a discipline in real-life contexts. Feedback is intended to be formative (helping students learn as they are assessed)
3. Can be administered within a limited time period	3. Performances become an integral part of the instructional cycle rather than limited to an examination time. Feedback provided by the teacher and peers is meant to be formative; that is, it is intended to help the student assess his or her strengths and weaknesses, identifying areas of needed growth and mobilizing current capacity.

Hoffman, B., 1996-2008

It is probably useful to explain what is meant by the term **portfolio** since it represents a tool for authentic assessment of a student. Portfolio can be defined as a collection of student's work, which should demonstrate his or her progress in a given period of time. The criteria for the selection of what will go into the portfolio can be specified by the teacher or by the students themselves. It should be clear to the students whether they are to include every piece of work they produce or only a selection of it.

As Hedge (2000, p.390) points out portfolios should help students within the following areas:

- *Make a collection of meaningful work*
- *Reflect on their strengths and needs*
- *Set personal goals*
- *See their progress over time*
- *Think about ideas presented in their work*
- *Look at a variety of work*
- *See effort put forth*
- *Have a clear understanding of their versatility as a reader and a writer*
- *Feel ownership for their work*
- *Feel that their work has personal reference*

The assessment of such portfolios is a very demanding task because the teacher must be clear in what s/he is looking for and must acknowledge the process rather than the product in the portfolio content. A portfolio offers a complex assessment of what the student has managed to achieve in the course and the items that are being assessed were produced in similar conditions to those in which the students might function in the future.

Assessment in higher education is usually conducted through exams or continuous assessment. This kind of assessment is mainly focused on the assessment of knowledge or skills gained by the student within a specific field.

Bologna Declaration with its target to promote European mobility and the quality assurance has had an immense impact on how the evaluation has changed at universities. The main aims of this process were focused on:

- *Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, also through the implementation of the Diploma Supplement, in order to promote European citizens employability and the international competitiveness of the European higher education system.*
- *Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate. Access to the second cycle shall require successful completion of first cycle studies, lasting a minimum of three years. The degree awarded after the first cycle shall also be relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification. The second cycle should lead to the master and/or doctorate degree as in many European countries.*
- *Establishment of a system of credits - such as in the ECTS system - as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility. Credits could also be acquired in non-higher education contexts, including lifelong learning, provided they are recognised by receiving Universities concerned.* [1]

In the past in one-level tertiary education there used to be credits awarded by the teacher at the end of the course usually based on an active participation in the seminars

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[1] http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/about/BOLOGNA_DECLARATION1.pdf

as well as completing some required work (tasks or tests). Gaining a credit only enabled the student to sit for a particular exam. The grades the students received at the exam were three passing levels 1,2,3 and the failing level F.

After the restructuralisation of tertiary education in Slovakia and opening the space to the three-level education (bachelor-master-doctor) ECTS credits were introduced in the system and the students were to gain certain number of credits at each level. Individual courses were awarded certain number of ECTS credits depending on the amount of work the student were expected to study (contact hours, home study, preparing for the lessons, etc.) in order to accomplish the course. The grading system has changed into a five-level system (A,B,C,D and FX) and the grades were awarded for the performance in the exam or as a complex result of continuous assessment throughout the semester. Gaining a credit was no longer a prerequisite for taking part in the exam; instead it carries clear information about the course weight and is awarded automatically with passing all course requirements irrespective of the results.

7.1.1 Exams and continuous assessment

Assessment in the Slovak higher education context is usually organized via exams performed at the end of semester. There are usually two ways how **exams** are conducted – in an oral or written form. Teachers either announce areas based on the syllabus or sometimes even a list of questions they intend to ask in the exam.

Oral exam (viva voce) is traditionally used in higher education as a common means of assessing students. However, nowadays there are a lot of objections and reservations concerning many aspects connected to oral exams. Several situations can demonstrate these aspects:

SITUATION	PROBLEMATIC ASPECT	POSSIBLE CURE
• *student is in exclusive interaction with one examiner*	• *relationship between the examiner and the student can be influenced by external biases and relationships irrelevant to the situation*	• *there could be a panel of at least two examiners with equal status*
	• *the examiner might require knowledge or skill which is not in compliance with the learning outcomes and objectives of the course*	
	• *student might not be able to respond to questions of the examiner but after the exam the student spreads rumours that the examiner´s requirements were inadequate*	
	• *the examiner/the student may behave inappropriately for various reasons*	

• *the examiner offers too many hints when the student is not able to demonstrate the expected response*	• *the final grade will not reflect the students real knowledge/skills*	• *examiners need to hold back when asking for knowledge presentation* • *oral exam could be based more on the discussion about selected problems rather than reciting of memorised facts*
• *student is satisfied with the performance and has the feeling that all has been presented or said. However, the examiner awards the performance rather low without any other explanation.*	• *the examiner does not match the grade to any criteria and just issues the grade to the student*	• *clear system of criteria should be available to students in advance and if the student has not met any of the criteria the examiner should point to this fact.*
• *oral exams last for several hours*	• *examiners as well as students can be tired which can lower the level of their concentration in both performing or active listening. Thus the reliability of the results can be questioned*	• *number of students taking part in an oral exam should be limited and there should be some breaks*
• *a student who performed well during the course, was active in the seminars, fulfilled all the tasks, passed all tests in the semester fails the exam because they have chosen the question they were afraid of*	• *if the grade is based purely on the oral performance some students may feel disadvantaged especially if speaking skills are not their domain*	• *the learning outcomes should be assessed in multiple assessment methods in order to evaluate the student´s performance in its complexity*

TABLE 7.1 Troubleshooting in oral exams

In order to keep oral exams meaningful the examiners should try to run them in a **format of discussion** between the examiner and the student about selected areas. It can also include a problem-solving task so that the students do not just recite memorized facts. If there is a panel of examiners the discussion should be conducted mainly by one examiner (interlocutor) and the rest should hold back and focus on the assessment criteria.

In examination where students are being examined **in a foreign language** there are a few more considerations the examiner should bear in mind. Speaking in front of audience in general is connected with a high level of anxiety and being examined at the same time can create a serious obstacle for the student. It, therefore, is important to make the context of oral exam as bearable and comfortable for the students as possible in order to release the anxiety. The role of the teacher examiner is to elicit, encourage and prompt student to demonstrate all they have learnt. Teachers should try to communicate positive attitude even through the facial expression or gestures so that anxiety does not block the student´s performance.

Written exams are usually based on either answering questions asked by the teacher in a written form or it can also involve writing an essay.

It is an extremely difficult task to produce an appropriate test since the most important quality of good tests is that they are as objective as possible. However, the limitations are unavoidable and should, therefore, be understood because even though we try to prepare a test that we could call "objective", there are so many factors influencing the students´ performance that it is difficult to convincingly claim the results to be a 100% demonstration of an individual student's competence.

There are more viewpoints through which the objectivity of tests might be checked, but there are usually four qualities highlighted in connection with test objectivity. These qualities state that good tests should:

- *… be valid*
- *… be reliable*
- *… be practical*
- *… have no negative effects on the teaching programme (negative backwash)*

Validity of the test means that the test tests what it is intended to test. We cannot test everything in one test and this is why we should select those things which could give us the feedback on how well the student has mastered certain aspects. The test itself should make it clear at first sight what it wants to test also to the students or someone looking at the test. This is called face validity, and it is an important psychological factor for the testee.

Reliability of the test means that the test results that we get from the students would be nearly the same if the students were given the same test again in the same conditions. It means that it is important to eliminate factors which might influence the results e.g. we need to give enough examples, we should use a variety of testing tasks with which students should be familiar, instructions should be clear, there should be enough time for the test, the same conditions, etc.

Practicality is the quality that seems to be very important especially for those who are going to administer the tests – usually teachers themselves. This is why it is necessary to foresee all resources that a test requires, e.g. personnel (how many teachers?), space (can students sit next to each other?), time (will it be longer than 45 minutes, which is one teaching unit?), equipment (will it require special equipment for listening such as tape-recorder? what are the acoustics like?), marking (how easy will it be to score the tests? how long will it take to provide the results to students?), etc.

Backwash effect is the influence that the test has on the teaching itself. It is rather frequent that teaching becomes subordinated to the test and the teachers teach to the test and not the syllabus or the aims of the course.

Penny Ur (1996, p.42) suggests several aspects to consider when designing tests:

- *Validity.* Check that your items really do test what they are meant to!
- *Clarity.* Make sure the instructions for each item are clear. They should usually include a sample item and solution.

- **"Do-ability".** *The test should be quite do-able: not too difficult, with no trick questions. Ask a colleague to read through it and answer the questions before finalizing.*
- **Marking.** *Decide exactly how you will assess each section of the test, and how much weighting (percentage of the total grade) you will give it. Make the marking system as simple as you can, and inform the testees what it is: write in the number of points allotted after the instructions for each question.*
- **Interest.** *Try to go for interesting content and tasks, in order to make the test more motivating for the learners.*
- **Heterogeneity.** *The test should be such that lower-level students can feel that they are able to do a substantial part of the test, while the higher-level ones have a chance to show what they know. So include both easy and difficult items, and make one or more of the difficult ones optional.*

It is also advisable to **pre-test** the set of questions we intend to ask students in the exam or at least check with other colleagues whether the questions are prepared in such a way that they are supposed to generated expected outcomes. This can eliminate problems connected to ambiguity of instructions, allocation of the necessary amount of time, mistakes in tests, as well as reduce stress and allow for perfection of students´ performance.

Besides the above mentioned principles it should be added that higher education assessment needs to as **transparent** as possible since this is one of the key elements of getting fair education (for illustration see the website of The National Centre for fair and open testing)[2]. This means the criteria for assessment need to be clear and specified at the beginning of the course and they need to correspond with anticipated learning outcomes. They should be a part of the syllabus the students get or announced in the online information system for students. These criteria should not be modified or changed during the semester so that students can rely on what is expected of them. Consistency and rigour of applying announced criteria are the basic principles of transparency.

Another way how students in higher education can be assessed is via **continuous assessment**. It differs from the form of exams since the assessment is spread throughout the semester and the students receive their results partially. The reason why continuous assessment is meaningful for the student is that it is usually spread over more than one skill or knowledge area. Many courses typically include into the continuous assessment a variety of tasks, e.g. producing an essay, presentations of selected topics, presentation of a portfolio with selected tasks, chairing a discussion, etc. it means not only knowledge-based tasks but also tasks with such outputs that students can prepare in stress-free environment, in a sufficient amount of time and present them to the teacher.

This aspect definitely lowers the anxiety level traditionally present during writing tests or any kind of written or oral examination. It is important to consider carefully the task output and its relevance for the learning outcomes of the course. Continuous assessment has a

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[2] http://www.fairtest.org/principles-and-indicators-student-assessment-syste

potential to bring about authentic assessment into higher education and link it closely not only to intended learning outcomes but also with the skills students need to perform in their future job.

7.2 FORMATIVE AND SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT AND GIVING FEEDBACK TO STUDENTS

Assessment is a very important component of education since it helps to measure student's progress in the learning process. On the other hand, it is frequently connected to **negative aspects** such as anxiety, negative feelings, frustration and even resignation on the student´s side as well as uncertainty, feeling of guilt, frustration on the teacher´s side. Students may feel that they have completed all the requirements of the teacher and still that was not enough to gain a high score, or they can perceive the teacher´s result as unfair in comparison with other students´ results. At the same time the teacher may worry whether the tasks, their weighting, or relevance are objectively measuring the student´s progress as well as achievements. It, therefore, is crucial to anticipate these negative aspects before the teachers start assessing students.

Higher education students usually receive feedback from their teachers both during the course and at the end of the semester. The former is addressed as **formative assessment** which is given to student during the course with the main aim to identify strengths and weaknesses and to adapt the behaviour in such a way that better outcomes could be expected; the latter, **summative assessment**, is the kind of assessment in which the student receives the overall assessment from the teacher based on the criteria given in advance. This kind of assessment sums up all student´s achievements and leads towards awarding a formal grade.

Even though this dichotomy dates back to late sixties (Scriven, 1967) and developed from programme-focused to student-focused – e.g. for Bloom (1969) *"the purpose of formative evaluation was '… to provide feedback and correctives at each stage in the teaching-learning process'. Summative evaluation was employed to judge what the learner had achieved at the end of a course or programme."* (c.f. Bennet, 2011, p.6) – it is still considered as oversimplified by some authors (ibid.). Nevertheless, the higher education teacher may be aware of the fact that when the assessment is being considered there may be more in it than just the grade at the end of the course.

Feedback has an irreplaceable role to play in the development of student´s awareness of strong and weak areas in own progress. As coined in its definition feedback rather than assessing the students highlights what the student has and has not done, where the student stand strong and where the space for improvement lies.

It is important for the teacher to be aware what kind of language they use during giving feedback. Woodward (c.f. Head&Taylor, 1997, p.190) suggests that instead of saying

You should have...You shouldn´t have... Why didn´t you...You could have... I wouldn´t have... I would´ve... Where you went wrong was... Everything was okay until you... It wasn´t terrible but you...

the teacher might choose less directive and more supportive and facilitative way of indicating the problematic area, e.g.

I noticed that you... Another option available in that situation is... The advantage there might be... The disadvantage there another time could be... Another time you could choose to... What do you feel was the advantage of taking that option?

Giving feedback represents such a learning situation in which one person tries to guide another person´s thinking in order to get to a mutual agreement on what the situation is like and what needs to be done to move on, to improve the current status quo. In this feedback differs from assessment since it leaves the door open to improvement and does not need to close the discussion with awarding a grade. Yet, it is not easy to master giving feedback and set the situation so that it is perceived as a learning event. Jaques (1984, pp. 54-5) underlines that feedback must be carried out with sensitivity and he claims that it is more effective when it is:

- descriptive rather than evaluative
- specific rather that general
- considering the needs of both the receiver and the giver of the feedback
- directed toward behaviour that the receiver can control
- solicited rather than imposed
- well timed
- checked to ensure clear communication (c.f. Head &Taylor, 1997, p.191)

Dörnyei (2001, p.122) in a similar way explains that not every type of feedback is necessarily equally effective and it may even become counterproductive. He underpins his views by claiming that effective feedback needs three things:

- First, feedback can have – when it is due and appropriate – a gratifying function, that is, by offering praise it can increase learner satisfaction and lift the learning spirit.
- Second, by communicating trust and encouragement, feedback can promote a positive self-concept and self-confidence in the student.
- Third, motivational feedback should prompt the learner to reflect constructively on areas that need improvement and identify things that he/she can do to increase the effectiveness of learning. This kind of feedback is often termed "positive information feedback". (ibid. p.123)

This kind of feedback provides the student with the description of the facts and thus is based more on the information than on the judgement. Moreover this kind of feedback will eliminate emotional engagement which is commonly present when one has to defend their viewpoints against somebody else´s.

7.3 ASSESSMENT IN THE COURSE DESIGN

Assessment is an important issue to consider from the early course development stage. **Learning outcomes** of the course should guide the teacher´s thinking in the following way:

- What do I want my students to learn by the end of the course?
- What skill should they achieve?
- What should they be able to do or demonstrate at the end of the course?

And at the same time the teacher needs to consider the following:

- How will they be able to prove their achievements?
- Which tasks or activities will enable them to demonstrate these achievements?
- How can I balance the assessment tasks in order to get a complex ......of the student´s skills and knowledge?
- What assessment methods do I need to use in order to get the desired proofs of the learning outcomes?

The teacher must be absolutely certain from the very beginning about how the students are going to be assessed and whether this assessment corresponds to the expected learning outcomes. Some assessment tasks can be planned as a part of the course and students will carry them out during the semester, especially if the performance takes needs longer preparation while the other tasks can be a part of the final examination.

If the teacher, for instance decides, that there will be several tasks incorporated in the final grade of the course, the weighting of individual tasks becomes a key issue. This is important especially for the courses where theoretical knowledge needs to be accompanied by some practical application. A **sample weighting** of an EFL methodology course can demonstrate how this balance was considered by the course teacher:

- presentation of a selected topic in the seminar (20% of the final grade)
- portfolio with the tasks assigned (10% of the final grade)
- seminar paper (30% of the final grade)
- written test (40% of the final grade)

If the teachers selects this kind of weighting it can be considered by students as a fair type of assessment since 60% of the grade can be obtained by the systematic and rigorous work during the semester and only 40% is connected to a written test which is usually felt as stressful situation and students might not be able to perform efficiently enough due to this stress level.

Teachers need to consider also the assessment methods in relation to what students need to produce.

In **multiple choice tasks** the students will choose from the options given. There is usually one correct answer but some tests combine it with a two-option correct type. This needs to be very clearly indicated in the instruction. Since there is usually a high chance of guessing the answer in multiple choice tasks and sometimes the students are also encouraged to do so even though they are not sure about the answer, some teachers in order to eliminate the risk of "guessing" the answer award penalties for incorrect answers. If this is the case the students need to think twice whether they want to risk the unnecessary loss of points and tend to answer only the questions they know the answer to.

Multiple choice tests are relatively easy to administer so they are time saving for both students as well as teachers. However, the teacher should be aware that they are extremely difficult to design so that the questions are not ambiguous. Nowadays it is also possible to use computer-assisted testing which is relevant especially for this type of testing tasks. In such cases the students know the result immediately after finishing the test and the teacher just needs to take a record of the result. There are several websites which enable the test creation, e.g. Classmarker, Exambuilder, Proprofs Quiz maker, or Online Testing. However, teachers can use also testing instruments which are available e.g. in Moodle.

Open-answer tests on the other hand easier for the teachers to design. The teacher states a clear question and students respond within a time or space limit. These types of tests are, however, extremely time-consuming when it comes to administration. This is why the teachers need to consider practicality of these testing tasks and limit the number of questions to the necessary minimum.

Essays are another typical testing task in a higher education system. As Ur (1996, p.41) states it is *"a good test of general writing abilities.... but marking is extremely difficult and time-consuming. It must be clear in advance, both to the teacher and the students, how much emphasis will be given to language forms such as spelling, grammar, and punctuation, and how much to aspects of content such as interest, originality of ideas, effectiveness of expression, organization."* Essays will thus require a lot of teacher´s time although for some courses this type of testing tasks are unavoidable.

There are other types of testing tasks depending on the subject orientation, e.g. for testing foreign languages the teacher might use tasks as true/false, gap-filling, matching, dictation, translation, cloze, transformation, rewriting, word-formation, sentence combination, error correction, open-ended and guided tasks, etc. (Ur, 1996, Rafajlovičová, Štulrajterová, 2002).

CONCLUSION

Assessment is an important part of any learning process. All learners need some kind of a feedback on how successfully they have managed to achieve the aims of the process or what needs to be done in order to master all requirements. Formal education needs to provide proofs of the outcomes and that is typically organized through exams and continuous assessment of the course.

The key aspects of providing good assessment are to consider the assessment methods together with the learning outcomes already during the planning phase. The syllabus of the course needs to display clearly and explicitly what is expected from the students and how they are going to be assessed. The teacher needs to bear in mind the appropriate balance of the assessment methods chosen for a particular course since one assessment method can hardly demonstrate all student´s achievements and thus might consider by students frustrating and not fair. The feeling of fairness is quite important for the effort to eliminate negative connotations students might hold in connection with assessment.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. What beliefs are usually connected to assessment and what justification can you suggest?

2. Which aspects of assessment can you recall as most problematic during your own studies?

3. What difference can you see between formative and summative assessment and relevant do you feel this might be for higher education?

4. What would you do in the following situations?

> a/ The student in a test did not answer the question you have asked but the answer consists of lots of information connected to the key words and it was presented correctly.

> b/ After correcting all tests according to the criteria given you realize that 40% of students have actually failed the test. Would you reconsider the criteria or weighting? Would you change the results?

> c/ After reading an essay you mark it as A (excellent) and announce the result to the student. Later you find the same essay on the internet and you realize that the student has plagiarized.

> d/ You write a test in the classroom with 50 students and you notice an odd behaviour of one student. When you approach the student you find that the student used illegal aids to copy from. Would you ask the student to stop writing? Would you take away the aid and let the student to continue? Would you fail the student?

> e/ You have asked students to write a seminar paper with the maximum length of 10 pages. One of the students handed in a paper of 14 pages. Would you return it the student and ask for shortening? Would you fail the student of penalize him or her in some way? Would you stop reading at the page 10?

5. What assessment methods do you consider the most representative for the courses that you teach? Do they match learning outcomes of the course? What arguments would you use to support your choice?

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