

Reflecting upon classroom assessment

Assessment Literacy for Teachers
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As a final task for the course titled Assessment Literacy for Teachers, we have been asked to choose a classroom test we have used this year and answer 4 questions that link to the concepts we have been learning about.

This has been my first year teaching secondary education and one of the levels I taught was *2º Bachillerato*. It was a mixed Sciences / Arts class of 31 students and one of my priorities was to prepare them for the external state examination that leads to university - *Evaluación para el Acceso a la Universidad (EVAU)* - which they took in early June. Due to the new education laws and regulations passed this year there was some uncertainty regarding whether there would be any changes in the exam. It has traditionally contained no assessment for the skills of listening or speaking and it is possible that this may change in the future. However, the exam format was released and it was the same as it had been in previous years. I decided to prepare students by setting a mock test every Tuesday to train for the test. As well as using real exams, I tried to incorporate into lessons activities, exercises and tips that would further help them. One of the lessons I prepared included the formative classroom test / activity I present, which is to be found attached to this paper as a PDF file.

On Wednesday, 22nd March 2017 there was an attack on the parliament in London. On the same day as this happened, I selected a piece of news from The Guardian newspaper and prepared a series of items to work on. My idea was twofold. Firstly, to use a current piece of news and reflect upon important issues on a relevant topic in today's society, and secondly, to make use of the text to further prepare students towards the external examination format. The focus is on reading comprehension, vocabulary and writing a summary, in order for students to work on their ability to synthesize and to prove understanding of the main points in a text.

1. Comment on four assessment principles in relation to the test: Validity, Reliability, Practicality and Impact

Validity and reliability

Validity deals with how well an assessment can be proven to accurately reflect the test-taker's true level of ability. Reliability reflects how consistent the measurement can prove given different characteristics of the testing situation and also across different tasks.

It is vital to set off by deciding what it is we want to measure. On this occasion, I was assessing students' performance on the following:

- a.) reading comprehension
- b.) writing
- c.) speaking

For a.) reading comprehension, I decided to copy the format of EvAU items in 2 of the 5 questions I posed students (questions 3 & 4). These consist in an item with True / False statements, which students need to provide evidence from the text for, and an item on providing synonyms from the text for a series of words. These questions allowed students to self-check their progress on the state exam requirements. The b.) writing task involved writing a summary, so it also involved showing understanding of the text. Perhaps the task of writing a summary provides a more meaningful and appropriate interpretation of students' understanding. It is, however, from what I understood in the course, more difficult to assess and score than closed questions. Perhaps that is why the state examination uses 2 closed-ended items. As for the T/F statements, it is probable that the score appropriately reflects the understanding of the text, although it is true that they refer to specific sentences. This could make it easier for students to strategically skim the text and scan for the information but the interpretations we make of their results may not be as meaningful as those inferred from a summary. It is true that the EvAU test also contains an item on reading comprehension questions that require a short, open-ended answer to, and I suppose this adds to the validity of the test. As for the item that asks for synonyms, one could argue this is solely assessing students' vocabulary but it is also true that they also need to demonstrate an understanding of the context to make their selection.

As for the assessment of b.) writing, question 2 asked students to provide a summary. This was to be collected by the teacher and, thus, would serve as a piece of evidence for the skill of writing. A summary would allow to focus on students' use of, on one side, grammatical structures, vocabulary, cohesion devices, spelling, punctuation. These, could perhaps be measured and scored in a way that could be more consistent when marked by different examiners. However, other aspects such as text effectiveness or the ability to synthesize information may prove to be more subjective and difficult to provide a reliable result for. During the course we were able to use a rubric or marking scheme (assessment criteria descriptors) to give our scores for some short written compositions and found out that we were inconsistent when marking a couple of them.

Question 5 was aimed for students to practice speaking in a classroom context and for the teacher to assess this skill. The teacher would make notes of student's performance. The

questions also tap into reading comprehension of the text, so perhaps it would be difficult to separate, when interpreting scores, what would refer to each skill. This is probably why official examinations clearly distinguish assessment on the different skills with different tests. In this sense, the mix of skills in my proposal probably negatively influence its validity and reliability.

I realize my focus is perhaps too holistic and I should focus on more analytical aspects of language. It is true that the level of students at this school is high in comparison to those of other schools. We were in fact using a C1 level textbook. As far as the strictly grammatical and vocabulary components of what I wanted to focus on, I did not specifically check, trusting my belief of their appropriacy or not. In order to provide a more valid and reliable test I should have probably focused on assessing just one skill at a time, rather than combining them in a single activity. As we were suggested in the course, it would help to get somebody from outside the classroom to do the test themselves and to provide feedback. Also, to share it with colleagues prior to setting the test in class.

Inter-reliability. In the light of student's results in their EvAU, there was a 0,2 points difference in the average of the external assessment marks and those awarded by myself. This suggests that my inter-reliability was satisfactory and therefore that, presumably, the mock tests and formative assessment activities and tests such as the one I present for this task, allowed students to prepare adequately. This is positive data with regards to validity and reliability of the test / activity proposed.

Practicality

As for how practical the test is for the teaching-learning context, the particular class in which the test was implemented was that with 31 students, a high temperature and also a significant level of stress and fatigue, especially towards the end of the year as the EvAU came closer. I found most effective to have '1-day-serving lessons', in the sense that the mocks were carried out in a single lesson, mimicking, as much as possible, the conditions of the real test. As for marking, we were able to correct certain items together, as a whole-class activity. I took the text students wrote home and gave them feedback on their performance. Equipping students with a marking key and training them from the beginning of the year to use a rubric or marking scheme to assess their own work helps towards practicality.

Impact

This year I observed in these particular 2^o Back students that the fact of using self-assessment was effective. I called it 'Reality Check'. It was no longer the teacher giving them a mark but an opportunity to check how well they could do towards the real exam. Some students were quite eager to self-assess themselves in order to perform well on the EvAU, planning strategically so as to achieve the highest scores possible towards their entry mark into university. Raising awareness on the terms and conditions, such as time and length constraints imposed on the particular test helped to carry out self-assessment in an efficient manner, and had a powerful impact on students.

2. Explain 3 ways in which you would improve the test with a rationale for each of your suggestions

There are several ways in which the test could be improved. The course has allowed us to reflect, through practical exercises, the mistakes we make when writing test items and how to improve them. Three of these can be observed in this activity / test and they are the following:

Grammar aspects and vocabulary

For practical reasons, in state secondary schools, textbooks are used. These contain the ready-made exams for teachers to use. However, when setting out to create a test of my own, I tend to think holistically, relying on experience, and only skim through the contents that the students were working on. For example, when I prepared this particular test / activity, what drove me was the event of the attack in London as a relevant piece of information that students needed to be aware of as it affects the situation of a country directly linked to the language they are learning. When it came to writing the actual items, for some, as I mentioned before, I copied the EvAU model as far as the type of items were concerned. For others I used prompts that would hopefully trigger students to think critically, and to make use of all their background knowledge and experience to answer. However, I did not check the curriculum to make sure I was testing vocabulary and topics that were relevant for students. In this sense, in the future, I would be aware at the beginning of the course what level from the CEFR the students curriculum is aligned with and would refer to it in order to check the adequacy of the test. I would also be more analytical as far as planning the test and items, and not only rely on a holistic view.

Answer key

When I prepared the test I did not prepare an answer key to go with it: I relied on my memory. However, when sharing the test with colleagues and also while implementing it, I realized that there was more than one possibility for at least one of the synonyms in test item 4. In relation to this, something mentioned throughout the course was the importance of having an answer key and for the key to be 'one and only one'. In the future I would prepare the answer key on a separate document, ready to use and for students and colleagues to clearly access the correct answers.

Allot marks

The test I present does not include the marks that will be given for each of the exercises. It is true that the document was used more like a worksheet in the sense that it contained items that were assessed and some that were not, but still, it would have been appropriate to allot marks to how much each exercise would count towards the scoring. This is vital to provide students information on how the test is assessed and also allows them to think strategically about how to go about executing it.

3. Evaluate the impact of the test on your own classroom practice

The impact of a test is related to the consequences of its use at micro and macro level. In this case, the fact of selecting a live piece of news raised students' awareness of what's happening in their world and acts as an eye-opener to their surroundings. My aim was also for them to juggle different possible topics that could come up in their EvAU exam. I found the students responded positively to this, as they feel the teacher is genuinely involved in their success and they are being treated respectfully. Furthermore, selecting a serious piece of news make them feel empowered as 18-year-old English students and soon to be at university: the objective it is not to use English within the artificial environment of the classroom that we learn, but to interact in the real world. Bringing a real piece of breaking news into the classroom helps bridge this gap between the academic world and real life.

The fact of sharing this test with the colleagues in my department, via email, also has an impact. On one side, it is putting oneself on the spotlight, but, on the other, when one does so providing something that he/she considers decent enough, it also sets a standard and, hopefully, impacts in the way that teachers will give back, deciding to create material and share it. This dynamic could result in a more collaborative atmosphere in the department, influencing a a larger scale and having an impact at a more macro level.

A powerful argument that I found had a strong impact on students was the fact of using self-assessment, as the fact of calling it a 'reality check'. Sometimes, students (and teachers!) are reluctant to taking full accountability of their weaknesses in order to improve, and too often receive praise but no critical feedback. 2^º Bach students are about to go out into the real world and will be on their own to organize their schedules and achieve results. I observed that some of them hadn't quite fully realized this and used certain psychological mechanisms to, ultimately, fool themselves about their performance. However, when a student is confronted to an external exam with an answer key and marking scheme / rubric, there is no way out. There is no point in fooling anybody and at this point it is the student's call to face reality. It makes them accountable for their own performance and realize it is their responsibility. Introducing this idea earlier in secondary school and even infants and primary may help students towards their self- regulation and to set aside avoidance mechanisms.

4. Outline two activities for classroom practice with Teachers Notes to practise the skill(s) assessed in the test.

Speaking activity - classroom debate.

One of the skills assessed in the test through item 5 was speaking. It was also designed to create discussion and for students to practice formulae and linking devices that introduced arguments, counter-arguments, and that involved other people in a conversation. The truth is that sometimes students will hesitate to speak in class and the classroom environment is not always the best to encourage students to do so. In order to help in this sense, I surprised students with a different classroom set-up for a speaking activity. In break, I sneaked into the room and hung on the walls some strips of paper with starters for formulae, expressions and connectors that we had been revising to use in argumentative texts.

Aim: To practice cohesive elements in argumentative texts in a realistic speaking activity, debating on an issue.

Resources: Role of paper used by cashiers in supermarkets to print receipts (can be bought in stationary / office suppliers and are not expensive). Different colour felt-tips to identify starters, expressions to introduce arguments, formulae to further develop an idea, or emphasize / strengthen and argument, introduce counterarguments, etc.

Class set-up: Split the class in two groups and have the students face each other. My classroom was long and narrow with a space acting as a corridor in the middle. Students can slightly rotate their chairs in order to face the members in the other team.

Sequence: Students are posed test item 5a. and are asked to defend two distinctly opposite stances. They may link to political views, as newspapers are usually framed likewise. Students are asked to initiate a debate and to use the visual support of the strips that they have on the wall in front of them to try and make their point across as convincingly as possible.

Assessment: The teacher is able to take notes of which students speak, how many of the linguistic devices they use, the accuracy of their spoken performance, the richness in vocabulary, ideas and how well their discourse is organized towards a cohesive and coherence whole.

This activity also helped students transfer skills, as they are frequently asked to write argumentative texts in EvAU exams. The fact of using language in different contexts and through different skills will presumably help them to better internalise the content.

True or false

An alternative or extension idea for question 6. on the worksheet could be to have students turn their questions into true / false statements from the text. This could help students further practice for this type of exercise in the EvAU test and also ensure comprehension of the text and extend vocabulary.

Aim: To foster deeper understanding of a text by creating True / False statements.

Resources: Cards for students to write the statements on and to later hand in to the teacher so as to create a whole-class / group activity. If given appropriate technology, a Google Docs could be created so as to project statements on the board for all students to see and to work collaboratively.

Class set-up: Students could be grouped in teams to create statements or asked to work individually at their desks. No special set-up.

Sequence: After finishing the exam or on a different day, students are reminded the item that will come up in their EvAU regarding the T/F statements. A whole-class brainstorm is proposed in order to activate prior knowledge concerning this type of item and how to respond to it in order to get the highest score possible. Then, the teacher picks a specific statement from a test and analyses it, eliciting how it is worded, the part of the text it refers to and what it tries to measure regarding the comprehension of the text. I could use the guidelines we used in the course regarding creating items. Students are then asked to produce a T/F item individually / in pairs or small groups. Perhaps each person / team can be asked to concentrate on a specific part of the text.

Assessment: When students share the items created, the rest of the class can answer and assess how well the guidelines introduced prior to the activity have been met. The teacher is able to check for students' understanding of the rules mentioned, and also, from the T/F statements created may assess aspects such as understanding, and students' appropriate use of vocabulary, and grammatical correctness in a writing activity.

Test used for the purpose of the activity. Please find the original text extracted from The Guardian newspaper after the test.

Attack on Parliament in London: what we know so far

1. Read the text and underline any new words or expressions. Look them up in a dictionary and copy the definitions if need be. State your sources.

2. Give a brief summary of the piece of news as stated in the text.

3. Say if the following are true or false and provide evidence from the text to support your answer.

a. It is clear that this is a terrorist attack and procedures are being carried out accordingly.

b. The prime minister refused to leave the House of Commons until everything had been clarified.

4. Find words in the text that have a similar meaning to the following:

film recording:

confinement:

boundary:

removed:

enclose:

the injured:

5. Questions for further discussion

a. What impression does this newspaper give, in terms of reliability? Support your argument with evidence from the text, prior knowledge you may have, or other connections that you make.

b. When was this text published? Have you heard anything since then?

6. Make up a question for the rest of your class. Your teacher will select some of them for discussion.

Attack on parliament in London: what we know so far

With events unfolding rapidly at Westminster in and around the Houses of Parliament, here is what we know so far



Roads have been closed off by police around Westminster Bridge and the Houses of Parliament. Photograph: Jack Taylor/Getty Images

Esther Addley

Wednesday 22 March 2017 15.52 GMT

Events are unfolding rapidly at Westminster after a number of incidents in and around the Houses of Parliament.

Here is what the Guardian has been able to confirm so far:

- A police officer has been stabbed and the alleged assailant shot by armed police following an incident inside the security cordon of the Houses of Parliament.
- Photographs emerged of a number of casualties on Westminster Bridge, next to the parliament buildings, who had apparently been struck by a car.
- Footage showed a car that had crashed into the perimeter railings of the parliamentary complex.
- Other images, taken from inside the Palace of Westminster building, showed paramedics treating someone inside the Old Palace Yard, within the security cordon.

- Scotland Yard said the attack in Westminster was being treated “as a terrorist incident until we know otherwise”.
- The House of Commons has been put in lockdown, with many MPs confined to the Commons chamber after parliamentary business was suspended.
- David Lidington, the leader of the House of Commons, confirmed to the assembled MPs that there had been a “serious incident” inside the parliamentary estate.
- He said: “It seems that a police officer has been stabbed; that the alleged assailant was shot by armed police. An air ambulance is attending the scene to remove the casualties. There are also reports of further violent incidents in the vicinity.”
- Minutes after the incident, an emergency services helicopter landed in Parliament Square. Air ambulance medics are attending to the casualties inside the Old Palace Yard and on Westminster Bridge.
- The prime minister, Theresa May, was evacuated safely from the Commons building and driven away.

Topics

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