Challenges of Academic Assessment in the Community or Region Where I Work

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Abstract

Challenges of assessment might come up from different reasons or circumstances which generate huge obstacles and dissatisfactions for teachers and students in the same time. Meanwhile, teachers of foreign languages see them as barriers or complications due to an effective and reliable assessment. Firstly, this paper elaborates on theoretical part of assessment, as a crucial tool to measure students' performance of speaking, as a significant English skill, and then it is presented the elaboration of challenge and its sub-challenges during my work as an English assistant at my tutorial classes on a specific course such as "Integrated English Skill III", particularly focusing on speaking skill. After it, there is an expansion of others' research done on this issue, supported by different teaching approaches, and relying on others' work related to such issue. And at the end of this paper it can be found the summary and recommendations, which wereconducted from the empirical research.

Keywords: Assessmets, approaches, methodologies, English skills

Introduction

What is an assessment?

Teaching as a process is seen as a complex and flexible one, which should be elaborated and developed based on students' need and objectives of a specific course or subject. When it comes to teach any foreign language, the academic staff(teachers, professors, assistants) have to carry on many challenges, and issues during the process of teaching and of course in the mean time on evaluating students. Based on my experience as primary English teacher and being an assistant in the same time the most challenge which I have faced with was assessing those pupils or students. In this regard, assessment is the phase in which you become a friend or enemy in the eyes of students, or they will judge you, disagree, or debate with you. Before we move on the purpose of this paper, I would like to clarify the definition on the assessment, because we can elaborate, discuss, and debate on many things related to assessment, but deep down what does assessment stand for? Assessment is an ongoing process that encompasses a much wider domain, whenever a student responds to a question, offers to comment, or tries out a new word or structure the teacher subconsciously makes an assessment of student's performance (Brown, Jul.21, 2012). Actually assessment can be seen as an evaluative activity of student's performance, which teachers or professors use such activities to find out if students got the meaning of a specific subject or they have to go back and work on weakness point that students might have on that specific part of any foreign language. But still do we have to do everyday such activities or at the end of semester? Hence, we come up with types of assessments so called: Formative and summative assessment. According to CERI (2008) formative assessment refers to frequent, interactive assessments of student progress and understanding to identify learning needs and adjust teaching appropriately, whereas summative assessment are used to measure what students have learnt at the end of a unit, to promote and ensure students that they have met required standards on the way to earning certification for school completion.

Speaking skill as an assessment challenge

As complex and complicated process formative or summative assessments are part of my everyday job, and require a lot of work, motivation, and efforts in order to make a reliable assessment of students' performance in my tutorial classes. On this paper I have chosen to elaborate on assessment challenges that I face on during my tutorial classes on the course of

"Integrated English skill III" particularly on speaking as English skill. The aim of "Integrated English skill III" is to prepare students how to communicate effectively or academically on specific topics, which are selected by the professor. It is generally known that each course in faculty has its syllabus, and at the end of it has its passing criteria, in which students are going to have their own percentage based on: attending lectures, attending tutorial classes, and performing well during the tutorial classes, which in this case I assess speaking skill. The assessment which I use in my tutorial classes, is formative one, and based on students' performance I have to write for each of them how well is she or he doing, any comment, and so on. During this process of assessing I face with many challenges and have to carry on many things and questions on my mind such as:

1. What if I did not assess in the right way him or her?

2. Am I going to be whole time an observant assistant?

3. Do I have to take care first with motivation of students and then to assess them?

4. Can I do it for three hours a week among 25 or 30 students?

Well, these questions sometimes frustrate me and also are like barriers on my mind during the whole semester, and probably the presence of these doubts or questions are in majority of academic staff no matter the institution(primary or secondary school), especially when you have to assess such skill of any foreign language, so-called "Speaking skill". Regarding to the challenges and importance of speaking skill Kathleen B. Egan (1999) sees speaking as the most important or significant skill of any second language teaching, and also we may face many challenges due to assess it. So testing oral proficiency of foreign language students is a complex task which may cause considerable problems at any stage of the process (Aleksandrzak, 2011). Based on another survey that was done in October and November of 2013 (Oxford, U.P.E. 2014) related to classroom speaking challenges in which participated many English teachers from different countries such as: Czech Republic, Serbia, Switzerland, and Bulgaria conducted that all these English teachers face many challenges due to speaking activities and its assessment in the classroom. The majority of challenges were: what activities should be used in order to avoid students to use their mother tongue during pair or group work, classes with up to 40 students, how to raise student's motivation during speaking skill, and mixed-ability classes students that have prior knowledge who tend to be more active in speaking activities rather than students who do not want to make mistakes in front of their classmates. To support these challenges another research that was done by Mohammad Ali, University of Canterbury, New Zealand (2011) elaborates that speaking skills are critical part of any language learning and the teaching process, and it is extremely difficult for students to master English language in terms of speaking and listening as these are not currently assessed formally for the examination, and in most of the cases teachers appear to avoid oral assessments as it is time consuming and needs lots of preparation and physical support. In addition the researcher recommends that in order to avoid such challenges the government should recruit effective teachers and arrange training programmers for the teachers, as well as each school should develop a language laboratory and collect necessary materials such as audio-recording devices and other supporting materials, and in meantime teachers must create an English speaking environment and encourage students to speak English. Related to the importance of the formative assessment and its usage in my tutorial classes (see page 1) and also my questions due to assessment challenge of speaking skill Ali's research supports the idea that formative assessment should be used and developed in English speaking class or whatever skill in order to assess students' achievement more effectively. Therefore, based on Ali's research the best method in order to face such challenges or to find the answers for these questions such as: if you are assessing right or wrong the speaking skill (see page2) or do I have to be a whole time observant teacher (see page2) might be that teachers should use the method "keeping the records" during the teaching process, or in my case in tutorial classes, and this might be the fairness way of speaking assessment process. On the other side according to Heaton (1988, page 88) the spoken language is transient, it is impossible without a tape recorder to apply such procedures as in marking of compositions, where examiners are able to check hack and make an assessment at leisure. According to question number 2 (page3) Heaton supports my challenge saying that examiner of an oral production test or assessment is working under great pressure all the time, making subjective judgments as quickly as possible. Even though samples of speech can be recorded during the assessment (Ali, 2011a) but in the same time is an adequate way to provide an accurate means of reassign or checking score, since it cannot recapture the full context of the actual situation, all of which is so essential to any assessment of the communication that takes place (J. B. Heaton, 1998a). But still Heaton agrees that the use of language laboratories for such tests has made it possible in some cases to administer more reliable oral production test to large numbers of students, the actual scoring of the tests has not been so easily solved. Well, to summarize this elaboration based on many authors due to importance of speaking as a skill,

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and its assessment during the lesson hour, we come up to search for an appropriate approach or teaching trends that might help us to make a reliable and effective speaking assessment. During my all experience till now, Communicative Language Teaching Approach (Richards, J.C. 2006) has been used during my teaching process, since it is one of the methodologies that provides fluency and accuracy activities, and helps students' motivation, and its purpose is to create environment of students' centered class. But does CLT really help teachers or professors to assess speaking in most reliable or fairness way or did it help me to answer those question written above (see page2)?

Well actually not really, and this negative response force us to explore and to search for different approach that might help us and provides an effective assessment, which by using it we will face such challenges of assessing in the same time a high number of students, the reliable way of speaking assessment, and in the same time you do not to be under pressure by taking all the time notes for students' performance. A useful approach or teaching trend that could help to eliminate such problems during the process of assessing is so-called CALL approach. Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) it is seen somehow as an approach to language teaching and learning in which the computer is used as an aid to the presentation, reinforcement, and assessment of material to be learnt, usually including a substantial interactive element (Davies, n.d). According to Davies (same page) CALL's origin can be tracked back to 1960's originated in the USA, by then it had many changes in its function till 1980s when CALL became the dominant term. Furthermore, CALL grew out of field at Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI) and draws on other fields such as Educational Psychology, Artificial intelligence (AI), Computational Linguistics, Instructional Design, Human Computer Interaction (HCI), and SLA (Second Language Acquisition), and recently it has been impacted by developments in the field of WBI (Web Based Instruction) (computing, n.d). According to Torat (n.d) CALL provides:

-strong motivation for learning

-improvement of learner's attitudes toward learning English

-authentic communication that motivates students to use language outside language classroom

-immediate responsiveness and feedback

-accurate records of the learner's performance and progress

-the participation of all students in the process of teaching and no student is left behind

-to low the amount of time required to master some materials.

So, CALL as communicative approach facilitate teachers, and in the same time students too, also there is no space for misunderstanding, or angriness between students and teachers, or having disagreements on the evaluation, or the final result since CALL records students' performance which is not judgmental but it is predictable as an approach (Torat, n.d). Hence, CALL could be one of the recommendations for assessing speaking or any other English skill, since it provides great features due to realization of effective and reliable assessment. But this does not mean that the role of an assistant or an English teacher is meaningless, a CALL approach always needs an instructor or a flexible teacher/assistant to act if there is any problem or if students need any detail due to activities. On the opposite of CALL's advantages there are presented also limitations of its usage, regarding to this Torat (n.d) mentioned that teachers/assistant must be trained in order to lead CALL approach, sometimes the computer hardware is difficult to be installed, and the access to internet is not easy, also a great investment should be done in order to use CALL during the process of teaching or in tutorial classes.

Conclusion and recommendations

From the very beginning of this paper was described the importance of assessment due to teaching process and its types, and also were presented four questions which actually highlighted the challenges of assessing speaking as an important and crucial skill for any foreign language of the world. Based on the citations of others' work and different researches done by different authors it can be conducted that English teachers around the world share same challenges, problems, barriers and feel frustration sometimes when it leads to assess students' skills in more adequate way. Based on what was found out it can be presented three recommendations, which might seem appropriate and worthwhile methods of speaking assessment. The first recommendation is: The usage of CALL approach which is created to prevent such challenges, and provides facilitative and communicative activities during the process of teaching and provides a reliable evaluation for speaking assessment. As was already mentioned the criteria of using such approach was too high and sometimes in the

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faculties or schools with lack of conditions its implementation is impossible. Whereas the second recommendation (if the first one is impossible) could be the implementation of laboratory (equipped by audio-recorder, video tapes, etc) for teaching foreign language, in which students are going to be exposed to different English skills by using communicative activities, and also the process of assessment can be realized in reliable way. And if the second recommendation still cannot be possible, the last way how to assess their speaking skill might be the usage of charts, in which the teacher lists things that she or he will evaluate or assess during students' performance. This chart which was formulated (see below) by me might be worthwhile if two recommendations mentioned above are impossible to realize, even though it requires a lot of work to realize, too much time, and concentration during the assessment.

Table 1

Student's name:_____	Great	Very good	Good	Needs to improve on:	Comments	Academic Year: Date:	Topic:
Pronunciation (Fluency)							
Vocabulary (Accuracy of words' usage): *Pre-intermediate* *Intermediate* *Advanced*							
Accent *American or British*							
Grammar							

An example of speaking assessment chart

As it can be seen, the chart contains elements that a teacher will assess during the class hour due to speaking skill, such as: pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and so on. For e.g. if there is any activity which includes "debate" on certain topic, the teacher or assistant will write down the performance of student's speaking due to elements listed above (see the chart), and may add any comment related to such assessed elements.

So, in order to be facilitator and to full fill students' needs during their learning or studying process we have to be flexible, modern one (in choosing different approaches), to share our own challenges and solutions, to communicate with others, and also to be updated with latest information related to any reliable and enthusiastic or motivated way of assessment, for the purpose to achieve our teaching goals and to end the course with great success.

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