ASSESSING FOREIGN LANGUAGES – ASSESSING WHAT AND HOW?

M. Pace

University of Malta (MALTA)

Abstract

In a school context, assessment is usually carried out to see what learners know, understand and are able to do. It is an essential tool for tracking progress, planning next steps, reporting and involving all stakeholders in the learning process. When teaching languages, teachers often have to measure students' language abilities, which they achieve in various ways. Assessing foreign language skills is no easy task and before deciding on the methods of assessment to be adopted in class, teachers need to carefully consider why they are assessing learners, what information are they trying to access, which language skill/s are being assessed and how can they best elicit this information. Different types of assessment strategies can be used, varying from continuous to summative, from assessment *of* learning to assessment *as* learning to assessment *for* learning. Such strategies should form an integral part of learning in language classrooms whilst helping teachers and administrators diagnose learners' needs, set learning goals and evaluate teaching methods. However, formative and continuous assessment present a challenging approach from a CEFR point of view, given that what seems to be the most relevant at the end of a course is what a student can do at a particular level and less so on the route that the student has taken.

Keywords: Assessment tools, assessment for learning, summative assessment.

1 INTRODUCTION

Assessment is quite a frequently used term in various spheres and aspects of life. We speak about tax assessments, clinical assessments, medical assessments, psychological assessments, sustainability assessments, research assessments, feasibility assessments, environment impact assessments, and so on and so forth. Each of these types of assessments has its own characteristics and specificities aimed at helping assessors obtain accurate and scientific information. And what about educational assessment, and to be more specific, assessment in foreign language learning?

In teaching and learning, assessment is defined in various ways. Allen (2004) states that assessment involves the use of empirical data on student learning to refine programmes and improve student learning [1]. Huba and Freed (2000), on their part, argue that assessment is the process of gathering and discussing information from multiple and diverse sources in order to develop a deep understanding of what students know, understand, and can do with their knowledge as a result of their educational experiences; the process culminates when assessment results are used to improve subsequent learning [2]. On the other hand, Broadfoot et al., (2002) speaks about a*ssessment for learning*, which they define as "the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there" [3].

In a school context, assessment is usually carried out to see what learners know, understand and are able to do. It is an essential tool for tracking progress, planning next steps, reporting and involving all stakeholders in the learning process. When teaching languages, teachers often have to measure students' language abilities, which they achieve in various ways. Assessing foreign language skills is no easy task and before deciding on the methods of assessment to be adopted in class, teachers need to carefully consider why they are assessing learners, what information they are trying to access, which language skill/s they want to assess and how this information can best be elicited. Different types of assessment strategies can be used, varying from continuous to summative, from assessment of learning to assessment as learning to assessment for learning. Such strategies should form an integral part of learning in language classrooms whilst helping teachers and administrators diagnose learners' needs, set learning goals and evaluate teaching methods. As soon as we think of assessment in education a variety of issues come immediately to mind. The list is endless, from assessment schemes to assessment criteria, marks/scores, results, evaluation, verification, reliability, etc. Very often we define assessment as a necessary tool to ensure that students are making

progress. This is quite a tall order and it is fundamental to define what this actually means when learning a modern foreign language. A very pertinent question we as educators need to ask is: What do we mean when we speak about progress in the target language and how can we measure it?

2   ASSESSING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Today teaching has become far more complex than it was in the past and teachers are not simply tasked with forming the citizens of tomorrow (which, in itself is a mammoth task) but, above all, to be agents of change in classrooms that are characterised by diverse populations and which in turn present multilingual and multicultural challenges (Pace, 2016) [4]. This diversity in the language classroom not only makes teachers' day to day work difficult since cultural diversity poses a pedagogical and social challenge to educators, but also presents challenges when it comes to assessing students' language abilities. Teachers as well as students bring into the classroom their own personal cultures, institutional cultures, and even cultures from specific social realities, and it is no easy challenge for the teacher to somehow integrate all this into a "class culture" to produce an environment that is conducive to learning while at the same time assess them individually. Teachers need to be knowledgeable about how students coming from different countries, backgrounds and life experiences perceive the world and how they process the language/s and intercultural aspects being taught in class. They also have to deal with, among others, the students' different linguistic backgrounds, their varying levels of proficiency in the target language, their exposure to the target language. In other words, to be effective, assessment must recognize the diversity of learners and allow for differences in styles and rates of learning. Notwithstanding all this, as stated by Barbosa and Santos Beserra (2015) [5], the aim of every good teacher is that students can have a successful and progressive performance throughout their course.

So a very pertinent question is: How can a teacher of foreign languages assess an individual student's proficiency in the target language thoroughly and accurately? A student's ability to understand a foreign language, engage in conversation, produce a written or spoken text, and be able to express him/herself orally or in writing is not developed overnight but it is a learning process that can be developed over a number of years of learning that particular language and can be facilitated or hindered by a number of external factors. These may include emotional factors, prior linguistic knowledge of the student, the support s/he gets from home and exposure to the target language, the student's determination and persistence. This explains why not all students attain the same level of proficiency in the same period of time and why assessing language proficiency is so important in this learning process. Each and every student needs accurate, focused feedback on his/her developing abilities in the language, that helps him/her identify what s/he is actually able to do with the language and where more effort is needed. In other words, feedback that will eventually enable students become independent learners. There are various classroom activities, both formal as well as informal in nature, that can evaluate language learning and language acquisition and help provide such feedback. The use of rubrics and performance criteria, for example, based on language proficiency and academic progression, can be very helpful to assess a variety of student work by means of presentations, written assignments and reading activities. Rubrics and performance criteria help students know exactly what is being assessed and what is expected of them while ensuring that what the teacher is assessing is clear and fair. Another very useful tool that helps assess students over a longer period of time is the portfolio which can be used to gather various samples of student work to track their development over a determined time-frame. Assessment takes place every time a learner receives feedback about her/his performance. For example, when a teacher listens to a student read and comments on his pronunciation and /or intonation; when a teacher suggests how a student's written description of his bedroom can be enhanced by using more precise adjectives; when a teacher remarks that the student must watch out more carefully for details when listening to a news item; when a teacher praises the student's efforts to improve his oral expressions. All these everyday classroom instances are part and parcel of the formative assessment processes. As Atkinson and Lazarus (2002) state, the greater the harmony between teaching methods and assessment methods, the more likely that the outcomes of each will correspond. In other words the more likely it is that assessment results will give an accurate picture of what has been learned and the more likely also that the learning outcomes will correspond with the original objectives [6].

Assessment may have different purposes which in turn lead to different approaches. Teachers can assess specific, particular aspects of language or learning outcomes by means of simple tasks. On the other hand, one can assess a variety of language skills or learning outcomes by means of a more generic type of assessment task or number of tasks. Usually students and parents, and at times also

teachers, assign a mark or a grade to such tasks which are then used to compare the performance and/or progress of a particular student with that of his/her peers in class, or in the year group. At times it can be used to make comparisons on a national level or even on an international level. This, unfortunately, is a very short sighted view and falls short of the real scope of assessment which should focus on the process of learning rather than on the end result. For this to happen, all teaching and learning should be learner centered, in a way that learners construct knowledge and understanding for themselves to become independent learners. Such a goal can never be achieved without feedback, which is the most important aspect in assessment if we really believe that the purpose of the assessment is to provide immediate and practical help for the learner (or the teacher) to improve the next stage of learning or development.

Many experts in the field of assessment, like Bransford, Brown, & Cocking (2000) [7], Hattie (2008) [8], and Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock (2001) [9], just to mention a few, all argue that by teaching less and providing more feedback, more learning takes place in class. Constructive feedback is, in fact, the backbone of assessment for learning, which happens during the learning rather than at the end of it. In this way, learners know exactly what they are to learn and what is to be expected of them, while at the same time receiving feedback on how to improve their work. This same feedback will also serve the teachers themselves when it comes to preparation of resources, classroom strategies as well as formation of groups. Marzano (2006) [10] states that if educators want to leave a positive impact on learners they must not simply state that something was right or wrong but they should give reasons why something was right or wrong.

Earl and Katz (2006: 29) [11] explain this process extremely well:

> *Assessment for learning occurs throughout the learning process. It is designed to make each student's understanding visible, so that teachers can decide what they can do to help students progress. Students learn in individual and idiosyncratic ways, yet, at the same time, there are predictable patterns of connections and preconceptions that some students may experience as they move along the continuum from emergent to proficient. In assessment for learning, teachers use assessment as an investigative tool to find out as much as they can about what their students know and can do, and what confusions, preconceptions, or gaps they might have.*

As a matter of fact, assessment for learning gives priority to the promotion of learning, and this can only be achieved by providing information to the student which s/he can use as feedback. Such feedback enhances students' motivation and commitment to learning. When learning becomes the focus of assessment, the classroom culture changes to one that favours student success, by making students believe in themselves, by making visible what students believe to be true, by helping them move forward in adaptable and different ways.

When it comes to assessing language proficiency, we need to define precisely what we understand by language proficiency. Many argue that this refers to the ability of the students to read, write, speak or listen in the target language in real life situations and that such skills are to be assessed separately. Others insist that these four language skills are so interactive that no one skill can be separated from another and that consequently all four skills are to be assessed simultaneously given that each skill is dependent on the other three. On the other hand, some might even argue that language consists of all the information that goes on when speaking about a language including, vocabulary, grammar, communication skills, etc, as well as the appropriate use of language in different circumstances. All these different arguments are correct and maybe this explains why, very often, language educators fail to agree on the best way to assess foreign languages, given that each of these three points of view requires a different form of assessment to be able to measure the students' progress. One thing is certain. Whatever the belief one might have of what constitutes foreign language proficiency and how to measure it, this cannot be achieved by means of a single exam or task but it has to be measured over a period of time by means of a number of different tasks. And for assessment to be effective, it must recognize the diversity of learners and allow for differences in styles and rates of learning. This is especially true in the early years of language learning. It is extremely important that assessment techniques are varied and go beyond pencil and paper tasks especially when language proficiency is low as such tasks provide learners with opportunities where they can risk and feel safe to venture into their learning. As Klenowski (2009: 264) puts it, "Assessment for Learning is part of everyday practice by students, teachers and peers that seeks, reflects upon and responds to information from dialogue, demonstration and observation in ways that enhance ongoing learning" [12].

There is no doubt that assessing a foreign language is a very challenging task for teachers in secondary schools not simply because language learning in itself is very complex as it requires various skills to obtain proficiency in listening, speaking, writing and reading but also because it incorporates communicative skills and cultural awareness. Furthermore, a strong dose of willingness to participate and courage to take risks are essential from the student's side. This task becomes even more challenging due to the manner in which a language is learned. This is spiral in nature. As a matter of fact, a language lesson usually consists of a number of small steps that each build on the one before. This makes it even more important for the teacher to constantly assess the student's progress not simply at the end of each step, but also at the end of each lesson. Only in this way can a teacher be sure that the student is ready to move on to the next level of learning. This also explains why, today, a large number of educators and policy makers are questioning the validity of assessment, in foreign language teaching and learning, that is exclusively centered on achievement and that is summative in orientation. Such forms of assessments show great limitations when it comes to capture real learning given that the emphasis and attention is on measurement and reporting of student achievement at the end of a course mainly for administrative purposes. On the contrary, formative assessment, especially assessment for learning, focuses on the process of learning and consequently on enriching student learning and improving teaching practices. As Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & Wiliam, (2003) state, assessment for learning places emphasis mainly on the need to make the assessment criteria and learning objectives clear to students, on students' active participation in their own assessment, and on the role of feedback as a descriptive guide in the learning process [13].

3   CONCLUSION

All of the above might seem, from a CEFR point of view, quite a challenging approach as what would seem to be the most relevant at the end of a course is what a student can do at a particular level and less on the route that the student has taken. In fact, assessment of foreign language courses which are based on the CEFR, would need to focus on what a student can do at a particular CEFR level and much less on the development of the student. Although there is common awareness that assessment for learning is a very helpful way for students to reach a desired level, only summative assessment is deemed as valid to determine whether a student has reached, or otherwise a specific level by the CEFR. However, we must keep in mind that one of the primary aims of the Framework is to raise questions about the way languages are taught and assessed by promoting reflection and discussion in a multitude of contexts where foreign language learning/assessment aims and strategies differ both from an approach point of view as well as from a strategic one. This reflection and discussion, without any doubt, has brought about the much-desired shift from teacher-centred knowledge driven classes to learner-centred communication-oriented instruction, which, in turn, has led to the promotion of self-regulated, autonomous learning which is, after all, the main scope of assessment for learning.

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