Constraints of Successful Assessment within the LMD System in Algerian University: Case of the English Department at Tlemcen University

Dr. Hadi Kheira∗

hadi-k-44@live.fr, English Department, Ain Temouchent university centre, Algeria

ABSTRACT :

   Assessment is a major subject in teaching and learning process in higher education, it holds importance in the wave of change and innovation that took place in Algerian university, within the implementation of the LMD system. EFL teachers find themselves teaching by a different method and assessing their EFL students differently than they used to. This article is an attempt to shed light on obstacles and constraints EFL learners and teachers are witnessing in the process of assessment in the LMD system, it is a case study held in the English department at Tlemcen university, through the use of two research tools, a questionnaire to EFL teachers and an interview with EFL learners both randomly selected. The aim behind such research is to elevate the veil on these obstacles and give suggestions and recommendations to EFL teachers and learners to better cope with assessment.

Keywords: *assessment ; constraints; EFL teachers; LMD system; obstacles*

Introduction

   In order to ameliorate higher education, the new system (LMD) brought changes in the method of teaching; even the system of assessment is largely changed. There has been strong emphasis on the field of language assessment among researchers (Douglas, 1995; Shohamy, 1995; Kunnan, 1997; Brindley, 1998, 2001) due to the important role assessment plays in the teaching/learning process. And since assessment is not an easy task to deal with at university, it is necessary to investigate how EFL teachers are actually assessing their students in the EFL classroom, and investigate as well the difficulties those teachers are facing in the process of assessment. The EFL teachers are required to give opinions about several issues on assessment among which, the way university teachers can assess their students successfully within the LMD framework. Before dealing with these issues, it is necessary to give a theoretical guideline to the research by giving definitions to terms such as: evaluation, testing and assessment, they are used sometimes interchangeably, though certain differences between them exist.

1.Theoretical Background

1.1 The Difference between Assessment, Testing, and Evaluation

   Assessment is a Latin origin word that refers to making calculation, however, in the field of education according to Brindley (2001) it means "different methods of collecting information on learners' ability and achievement" (p, 137). It is in fact, an interpretation to the learners' behavior within their performances in class. Assessment is in the heart of the learning process, teachers can assess students while they are performing tasks such as: describing, narrating, and even in giving opinions; in this respect Brown (1994) gives a definition to assessment as "…an ongoing

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∗ Corresponding Author

process that encompasses a much wider domain. Whenever a student responds to a question offers a comment, or tries out a new word or structure, the teacher subconsciously makes an assessment of the student performance" (p, 249). As a final comment, assessment is an indelible process in teaching and learning. In his definition, Brown (1994) maintains that assessment provides information on whether teaching/learning has been successful. EFL teachers need regular information on how students' knowledge, skills and understanding are developing, to determine what kind of feedback or remedial work is needed to improve EFL students' learning.

According to Brindley (2001) the term assessment refers to "a variety of ways of collecting information on a learner's language ability or achievement"(p, 137). He puts further that assessment can serve different purposes, which include:

• Selection: e.g. to determine whether learners have sufficient language proficiency to be able to undertake tertiary study;

• Certification: e.g. to provide people with a statement of their language ability for employment purposes;

•Accountability: e.g. to provide educational funding authorities with evidence that intended learning outcomes have been achieved and to justify expenditure;

• Diagnosis: e.g. to identify learners' strengths and weaknesses;

• Instructional decision-making: e.g. to decide what material to present next or what to revise;

• Motivation: e.g. to encourage learners to study harder.

In approaches to assessment, two central tendencies emerge which are relevant to language as subject. One places emphasis on the assessment of learning, where reliable objective measures are a high priority. The focus here is on making summative judgments. The goal of summative assessment is to evaluate student learning at the end of an instructional unit. Examples of summative assessments include: a midterm exam and a final project. An alternative approach is to change the emphasis from assessment of learning to assessment for learning, implying a more formative approach, where there is much more emphasis on feedback to improve performance. Formative assessment takes place during the course of teaching and is used essentially to feedback into teaching and learning. The goal of formative assessment is to monitor student learning, to provide ongoing feedback that can be used by instructors to improve their teaching and by students to improve their learning. More specifically, formative assessment helps students identify their strengths and weaknesses, target areas that need work, and help faculty recognize where students are struggling and address problems immediately.

While evaluation is a systematic determination of a subject's merit, worth, and significance. Evaluation is seen also as an attempt to gather information in order to make a decision or a judgment. In language learning, evaluation refers to the collection of data on students' work and the judgment issued by test makers. According to Davidson (2005), "Evaluation seems to provide a strategic procedure as it envisages what comes after the collection of data and the value

judgment, only evaluation can tell us 'So what?'(p, 5).   Differently stated, evaluation tells scholars and stakeholders in what way this information is important and worthy in taking, and making informed decisions about students' performance, program, and course, etc.

Testing is different from assessment and a test is defined by Brown (1994) as "a method of measuring a person's ability or knowledge in a given area" (p, 252). According to Cohen (1994) "a single test of overall ability…does not give an accurate picture of an individual's proficiency and that a range of different assessment procedures are necessary (p, 196). Testing refers to the systematic procedure for obtaining a sample of student behavior in periodic phases through examination papers, usually in a specific place and scheduled planning. Differently stated, testing is the physical realization of the test makers' intentions to collect verifiable data on students under work. Moreover, testing is considered as series of questions, problems, or physical responses designed to determine knowledge, intelligence, or ability. Testing is generally considered as series of questions, problems, or physical responses designed to determine knowledge, intelligence, or ability.

Assessment is an umbrella term that encompasses some instruments used to measure learner's achievement such as: tests. Evaluation is also distinguished from assessment and testing since it is concerned more with the whole language program and not just with what individual students have learnt. The two terms 'evaluation' and 'assessment' though complementary are technically different. According to Genesee (2001) "Assessment of an individual student's progress or achievement is an important component of evaluation, it is that collection and analysis of information about student learning" (p, 145). As a final analysis, there are certain nuances; these three constructs contain one another from most general to the more particular. Therefore, evaluation includes both assessment and testing, and assessment includes testing.

1.2 Assessment between Tradition and Innovation in Algerian University

In the light of university reforms, assessment has become among the crucial subjects of debate, changes urged EFL teachers to adopt new methods of assessment in their classrooms, especially those which are "learner-centered" so as to provide EFL learners with better control of their own learning. There are certain innovatory assessment procedures brought by the LMD system, these are considered as alternatives to traditional ways of evaluation within the classical system. There are certain differences between assessment in the EFL classical classroom and the non-traditional LMD classroom. The classical system did not give such great importance to the continuous evaluation and the formative evaluation as the LMD does, while the formative evaluation is optional in the classical system, it is compulsory in the new one. Moreover, EFL learners used to be assessed by one exam only per semester during the classical system, whereas, within the new system certain elements are taken into account when evaluating including: the students' attendance, participation, written and oral tests, projects; and homework, etc.

The new system of evaluation is based on the learners' personal work to a great extent; its implementation would give the students a strong will to be autonomous in English learning and more self-reliant rather than spoon-fed learners. However, as far as EFL teaching/learning at the

university is concerned, novelty in this innovatory system lies mainly in the way students are assessed. The major differences between assessment in the EFL classical classroom (old paradigm) and the non-traditional LMD classroom (new paradigm) are similar to the ones identified by Richards and Renandya (2002) in their comparison between old paradigm and new paradigm of assessment, they claim that old paradigm focuses on language, and on correctness, it is teacher-centered, and assesses skills in isolation, tests are made for testing. While the new paradigm is learner-centered that focuses on the product and on communication, it assesses integrated skills, and tests are made for testing and teaching as well.

Alternative assessment is more learner-centered, and when compared with traditional forms of assessments, it seems to be more efficient in the language classroom in the sense that it is based on the daily classroom activities; it also reflects the curriculum, unlike traditional, standardized tests that often test skills incongruent with classroom practices. Because the data collected are based on real-life tasks, alternative assessment provides information on the strengths as well as the weaknesses of a student. Alternative assessment makes students show what they can do. Students are evaluated on what they integrate and produce rather than on what they are able to recall and reproduce. Moreover, this kind of assessment provides a menu of possibilities, rather than any one single method for assessment.

"Progress" is a new evaluation framework brought recently by the Algerian Ministry of higher education and scientific research. Teachers are required to get into a platform in the web and enter marks of tests (either written or oral), participation (interaction in the classroom, answering questions, doing tasks), attendance, (students' absences become take into consideration in assessment), and projectworks. And then a final mark is given to the student (so called TD mark). It is in fact, a mark that includes students' work in the classroom sessions and out of the classroom, for instance, doing projectworks necessitates a personal effort done without teacher help, teacher's guidance is provided instead. Certain tasks students are supposed to do in projectworks such as: gathering information from different sources, interviewing, searching, analyzing, and synthesizing. Certain visible differences between old and new paradigm of assessment in Algerian university appear, in numbers of tests and methods of assessment. Innovatory assessment methods are supposed to be used by teachers (who are supposed to be well-prepared for such dimensions) mainly after a decade of LMD implementation in Algerian university.

2. Method and Material

The present section is devoted to the presentation of the research instruments used in the present research, the participants of the study, and the data analysis procedure.

2. 1 Research Questions and Objectives

Change and innovation in higher education and in all levels are not easy applied. Change in the beginning tends to be resisted because teachers and students alike may not be ready and well-prepared for change. In the light of innovation and change at university, teachers are facing

certain obstacles in assessment within the LMD system (though this system has been implemented at Algerian university for more than a decade).

In this research work, we seek to know about the obstacles EFL teachers are suffering from in assessment within the innovatory forms of assessments (alternative assessment procedures) that have been introduced at the level of Algerian universities. In the present investigation we have tried to give answers to the following research questions:

Q1. How do EFL teachers at Tlemcen University perceive assessment within the LMD system?

Q2. Which obstacles do they face in assessment in the language classroom?

Q3. How can assessment be conducted effectively and successfully by EFL teachers?

As a first hypothesis, assessment has been always considered as a hard task to realize, it is efforts' demanding. Teachers always seek objectivity and students always seek fairness. Second, teachers are facing several difficulties, some of them are related to the availability of materials, others related to the class size and time, and some others related to the nature of the subject to be assessed. Third, suggestions for better assessment will be provided by teachers.

The objective of this study is to shed light on the different constraints of successful assessment EFL teachers are witnessing, the aim is to give a helping hand to the language teachers to overcome these barriers and assess their students effectively, to do so, a case study is conducted at the department of English at Tlemcen university.

2.3 Research Design, Population, and Instruments

The selection of the type of research is based mainly on the nature of the research itself. Assessment is a phenomenon that actually happens inside the class. Nunan (1997) states that ''a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context''(p, 76). Through the use of a case study we have tried to gather data through the following research instruments, first, a questionnaire to 30 EFL teachers in the English department at Tlemcen university; those teachers are chosen because they are better aware of the procedure of assessment. Some of them thought within both the classical and the LMD system and others are new, but have an idea about assessment within the classical system by which they were taught. The questionnaire is chosen as an instrument of research due mainly to the fact that it saves time and effort; one can collect a huge amount of information in a short time. Furthermore, the questionnaire helps in, processing data fast and relatively straightforward. The questions are selected to be mixed (to choose and then justify) and open (to express freely a point of view).

Second a semi-structured interview is conducted with 20 EFL students randomly selected, from first, second; and third years LMD. The way those students perceive assessment, and their opinions towards the overall process of evaluation can provide useful insights to teachers to better plan and monitor tests and exams. The interview is semi-structured, the questions are prepared before but can be modified according to students' answers. This research instrument is selected because it gives students the opportunity to express their perceptions of assessment

procedures and difficulties. The fact that they remain anonymous gives them much more freedom to express themselves openly.

3. Results and Discussion

After conducting the interview with EFL learners at Tlemcen university and after gathering data from questionnaires, it comes the phase of results' interpretation. Data were analyzed through quantitative and qualitative methods, however, students' interview is analyzed in a more quatitative method, unlike teachers' questionnaire which contained many open questions that are analysed qualitatively.

Students were interviewed in the break between sessions; they were ready to answer the questions. The respondents were EFL students randomly selected (1-2-3 years LMD) their age ranges from 21-24 years . Half of the respondents 10 were male and the other half female. Most students seem motivated in learning English, since 85 % said that they enjoy learning English at university. It is assumed that motivation is conducive to better learning and, therefore, better scores in tests and exams. When it comes to a comparison between assessment at secondary education and university most of them 90 % claim that there are certain differences, in both there is continuous evaluation and more than one test in addition to exams, however, a difference lies in the subjects and the modules to be studied, according to them, the level is higher and learning at university is much more specialized, in which there are more analytical questions and less direct and strait forwards questions unlike secondary education. They stated that there is a difference in the number of exams instead of 3 exams per year (each trimester) in secondary school, at university they have just 2 exams (per semester).

The aim of asking them if they used strategies to evaluate their achievement in English learning is to discover whether or not EFL students are capable of using self-assessment strategies. Students' answers show that the teacher is assessing them, and they are incapable to do so (except very few ones). Students then seem reliant on the teacher in assessment, they are not aware of certain strategies for self-evaluation.

The respondents can give a general view about their level in English learning. Few respondents only (8 students) consider themselves good in English learning, while half of the number 10 students thought they were in mid position (average), whereas 2 students admitted their weakness in learning. Their answers did not demonstrate an evaluation or an assessment, the answers reflect perceptions those students have about their level in English learning in general.

Students' answers	Number	percentage
Good	8	40%
average	10	50%
bad	2	10%
Total	20	100%

Table 1: Students' level in English

The respondents were required to give their opinions about the way of assessment, 14 complained and showed dissatisfaction of assessment in certain skills such as listening and speaking, according to most students, there is a lack of transparency of how these skills are tested. In addition to the difficulty they face in writing essays especially in Linguistics and Literature.

As for responsibility in assessment, the majority (15 students) considered the teacher as the responsible for assessing students, and he is better aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and aware as well of the type of tests that suit his students. Very few only (3 students)   claimed that the responsibility is shared, whereas only 2 considered themselves capable to assess their learning through the use of self-assessment strategies. Those students seem much more self-reliant and competent. Details are provided in the table below:

Answers	Number	percentage
Assessment is teacher's responsibility	15	75 %
A shared responsibility between teachers and students	3	15 %
Students can assess their own learning	2	10 %
Total	20	100 %

Table 2: Responsibilities in assessment

It seems that EFL learners are still reliant on the language teacher not only in learning, that is to say, providing knowledge but also in evaluation. In fact, teachers play an important role in assessment, but learners especially at university should be capable to take charge of their learning and bear responsibility even in assessment. Students are asked to give their suggestions for better assessment; the main ones are as follows:

-To take into consideration the level of students and do not ask questions beyond this level .
-To make them aware of the process of evaluation within the LMD since first year along with other issues (TD mark, tests; credits, continuous evaluation, etc.)
-To make them aware of how oral expression is assessed, that is to say, on which criteria teachers based when assessing students performances.
-Transparency in assessment (fairness).

EFL learners' points of view are helpful in clarifying issues about assessment in general, their suggestions are useful to ameliorate the process of evaluation. Teachers' opinions as well are basic in elevating the veil on difficulties in the road of assessment. In fact, the difficulties both are witnessing in assessment cannot be surmounted only after diagnosis.

EFL teachers in the department of English at Tlemcen university were handed a questionnaire, and were given sufficient time to answer the questions. Teachers too showed readiness for contributing in this research. Most of the respondents were female 20 and the rest 10 were male, with an age ranging from 34-58. An open question is provided to teachers to express freely their perception of assessment. Different perceptions were provided, as it was expected, most teachers agreed on the fact that assessment is a complex task, efforts demanding,

and time consuming. Concerning their answers about how they see the LMD evaluation system, in comparison to the classical one, 75% of them claimed that it is effective because it motivates learners and enhances their autonomy. Some of them 25% said that assessment within the classical system seemed direct and easier while within the LMD, it became complex and efforts demanding from teachers. Nevertheless, within the LMD, assessment is based much more on learners' individual work which promotes learners' autonomy and, therefore, promotes the quality of learning in general.

The majority of teachers (the lion's share, 80%) considered assessment as a complex task to deal with, mainly because of the complex dimensions of the process of assessment in language learning. While evaluating the performance of EFL learners in one skill, only some aspects are tested and not the entire skill. Moreover, according to the majority of the respondents, it is a hard task because there is a lack of coordination to decide on criteria to be taken into consideration when evaluating. Novice teachers justified the difficulty they faced in evaluating, by not being aware of percentages given to each module and the number of credits. Furthermore, half of teachers (50%) seemed not satisfied by the way they conducted the process of evaluation and assessment in classrooms, according to them there are certain obstacles, only if they are overcame, assessment will be conducted successfully.

The core question is to state the constraints and the obstacles that hinder assessment, the answers varied from a teacher to another, however, most of them agreed on the following constraints:

-First, the context of language learning is complex, therefore, only one aspect of a skill can be assessed, and that is to say, only a narrow range of competence can be assessed.

-Second, among the obstacles teachers suffered from was the lack of agreed criteria to base on in assessment.

-Third, the class size according to most teachers seriously impacted formative assessment. Yearly, more and more BAC holders come into the English department at Tlemcen university, this rendered the process of evaluation harder, more time assuming, and efforts demanding, even if engaging in new advanced technological types of assessment, this would not be easier in overcrowded classes.

-Fourth, cheating in exams is an omnipresent phenomenon not only at university but in primary, middle and secondary schools. According to teachers, lack of ethics, and lack of teachers vigilance in controlling exams can be the causes, in addition to, the use of advanced means of communication in cheating such as mobile phones.

-Fifth, students are not capable to assess their own learning, according to teachers, students' over reliance on the language teacher is not only in learning but also in evaluation; they were not aware and not trained to use certain learning strategies such as self-assessment.

-Sixth, teachers' incapability of using alternative tools of assessment such as computer

assessment because of certain administrative obstacles, and the size of the class. Some teachers even lack the competence of using instruments for assessing their students in the language laboratory.

3.1 Findings

Statistical analysis has provided the answers to the basic questions, EFL teachers at Tlemcen university consider assessment as a hard task, efforts' demanding, and time consuming. From the results presented above, it was concluded that teachers are facing several difficulties in conducting assessment successfully at university level, some of them are related to the availability of materials, others related to the class size and time, and some others related to the nature of the subject to be assessed. The findings also confirm the necessity of overcoming obstacles and barriers those teachers are suffering from to better assess learners.

After analyzing and interpreting the data obtained from learners' and teachers' answers, certain difficulties and obstacles were identified by the EFL teachers and few by the learners, the findings we have reached are as follows:

1- EFL teachers consider assessment as a complex task, in fact, one of the challenges posed by assessing language as school subject is that the content is so varied and complex. Each mode of 'writing', 'reading', 'speaking 'and 'listening' can be broken down into further areas. The fact that demands several tests in one skill only, and this is hard to be conducted at university level because of the lack of time and materials for innovatory assessment.

2-The evaluation system is not homogeneous, since teachers use different evaluation techniques, there is a lack of coordination to decide on criteria to be taken into account when evaluating. EFL teachers do not agree on criteria to base on in assessment, even in the same subjects, some teachers assess their students differently.

3- EFL teachers proved to be frustrated by the ever increasing number of students in their classes, which ultimately disfavors teachers' commitment to better assessment and evaluation systems. Most teachers believed that huge class size compromises their willingness and readiness to undertake an otherwise challenging formative assessment. Number of computers used in the language laboratory at the English department is not sufficient for all students. The fact that makes teachers put two till four students in one computer to do tasks. So assessment through computers is hard to be conducted.

4- Cheating in exams is a real obstacle in the road of successful and effective assessment, because this phenomenon leads to a lack of academic honesty. Cheating in exams made teachers confused and not aware of the real level of students.

5- EFL teachers shared the opinion that students are incapable to assess their learning, they justify this by a lack of awareness and the inability of students to use strategies of self-assessment. However, these opinions are anecdotal; only based on teachers' observations, and not on empirical evidence. The learners are not trained to use certain learning strategies for self-assessment, that is to say we cannot say they are incapable. Strategies such as self-correction, doing self-study tasks as remedial work for weaknesses in certain skills, self-evaluation, and others are helpful in promoting learner autonomy and effective learning. The fact that leads to better scores in exams.

6-ICT's offer teachers plenty of choices in term of assessment, certain instruments and innovative ways are available, however, the class size impact, and the lack of competence in using such technological devices by some teachers (who are not informed how to do so) are considered real constraints.

7-EFL learners required transparency in assessment, they wanted from teachers to make them aware of criteria that they based on in making judgments, (especially in oral expression). This aspect of transparency makes learners satisfied and motivates them to do better.

3.2 Recommendations for Better Assessment

Assessment at university should be homogeneous, coordination is needed between teachers for better evaluation, at least those teaching the same subjects, when more experienced teachers provide such type of coordination, novice teachers will greatly benefit, and this will facilitate the whole process of evaluation. A session is preferably to be organized, so that, teachers meet and discuss issues related to assessment procedure and exchange experiences.

Emphasizing ongoing assessment and progress is better. Instead of being a stressful experiment, assessment should be part of learning process Macias (1995). As for the class size, there should be a specific number of students per groups that should not be surmounted, in order not to undermine the process of learning, as well as, that of assessment; huge classes are hard to control in exams that leads to cheating.

Cheating can be abolished when exam questions are varied and appealing to the various levels of intelligence that exist in the class, moreover, teachers had better avoid tests that put emphasis on rote learning, they should focus instead on questions that urge students to think, analyze and , therefore, develop their critical thinking. Furthermore, the severe punishment to cheaters can help in eradicating this behavior from schools.

According to most teachers, EFL students are incapable to use self-assessment strategies, in fact, those students are not trained how to use such strategies, in the field of language learning there are certain language learning strategies. Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI) is the best solution to this problem, it is teaching learners how to learn, in other words, teaching learners about the strategies and how to use them for better learning and better assessing themselves. For instance; selective focusing, advanced preparation, repetition, and self-assessment.

Teachers may find it useful to use new tools, instruments, and even procedures of assessment. This wide range of tools help teachers assesses effectively their students' skills and abilities in language learning. They are encouraged to use ICT's in assessment, for instance, in grammar tests and phonetics. As for listening and speaking, plenty of materials are provided such as videos for learning English, pronunciation, listening and repeating.

It is necessary to make assessment fair transparent and then effective. A key concept is embodied in the notion of 'transparency', the view that those being assessed are aware of the criteria which are being used to make judgments about them, and how those judgments are made. Transparency in assessment promotes confidence between teachers and students, and thus, a good classroom atmosphere that maintains effective learning and success. Knowledge of criteria can help performance and improve motivation. For instance, speaking and listening are extremely difficult to assess because, even more than other subjects at university, performance varies. Poor performance in oral work is often related to the nature of the task which has been devised, the atmosphere of the classroom, and of the group rather than the competence of the pupils. The fact that students find difficulties in oral expression is tightly related to ignoring listening; the more they listen the better they will be in speaking. To provide a valid assessment of speaking and listening, evidence needs to be drawn from a variety of situations.

Conclusion

An ideal assessment system would reflect the full complexity of language as school subject, and would motivate learners by giving useful feedback, while also providing other stake-

holders (e.g. policy-makers and teachers) with the information they need. To realize this, certain constraints should be removed first. It is apparent that EFL teachers are in real need of collaboration to set out agreed criteria to base on in evaluation, and in real need also to attempting modern instruments and methods of assessment. Administrative help is required to better deal with the class size impact; cheating in exams ; and the availability of the necessary equipment for assessing students effectively. (SBI) and transparency leads to better and successful assessment as well. Research about assessment will continue attracting attention in language education, not only at university level but in the system of education as a whole. The data collected in this research would provide an incomplete picture of how to make assessment successful in ELT at Algerian university, because this study is based on only one English department at one university only. The selected sample size of 20 students and 30 English teachers might not be able to provide the qualitative data support for any conclusive findings, which may be a representative of the whole Algerian student population. Nevertheless, the results, obtained from the selected sample in this study, can provide some useful insights in helping the language teachers to defeat obstacles they are facing in evaluation and help them to make it successful and effective, so that, the whole process of assessment becomes an enjoyable experience not a burden on both students and teachers.

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