

Action research in the communicative language classroom: using alternative assessment techniques with efl secondary-school students

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Abstract: The Council of Europe, through the Common European Framework of Reference for Language, Teaching and Assessment (CEFR), has been promoting communicative competence since 2001. This boost has introduced some changes in the teaching-learning process of English as a Foreign Language in Spain: the methodological use of the communicative approach in the classrooms, the practice of the four skills in the class, and the theoretical implications that Gardner's Multiple Intelligences theory has in the planning and design of classroom activities. But, in spite of that, academic results are still not very remarkable and the rates of academic failure are not decreasing since English is still a challenging subject for many Secondary School students. In addition, test evaluation is still the predominant assessment method in most of the schools. The current case study intends to provide the educational community with some results obtained from the implementation of some alternative assessment and evaluation methods in an actual high-school in Spain.

Keywords: EFL; Secondary Education; alternative assessment; Action Research Project.

Resumen: El Consejo de Europa, a través del Marco Común Europeo de Referencia para las Lenguas: Aprendizaje, Enseñanza y Evaluación (MCER), impulsa desde 2001 la competencia comunicativa. Dicho impulso ha introducido cambios en el proceso de enseñanza aprendizaje dentro del aula de inglés como lengua extranjera: el uso metodológico del enfoque comunicativo, la práctica de las cuatro destrezas y las implicaciones que la teoría de las Inteligencias Múltiples de Gardner ha tenido en la planificación y diseño de actividades. Sin embargo, a pesar de ello, no se han producido resultados académicos significativos y los índices de fracaso no se han reducido, dado que el inglés sigue siendo una materia complicada para gran parte del alumnado de Educación Secundaria. Asimismo, la evaluación de pruebas sigue siendo el método de evaluación predominante en la mayoría de las escuelas. El presente estudio de caso pretende compartir los resultados obtenidos con la puesta en práctica en un instituto de España de varios métodos de evaluación alternativos con la comunidad educativa.

Palabras clave: Inglés como Lengua Extranjera; ILE; Educación Secundaria; evaluación alternativa; proyecto de investigación-acción en el aula.

I. Introduction

One of the major reasons motivating the change of the teaching-learning process of Foreign Languages in the last decades in Spain is the establishment of the European Framework of Reference for Languages, as it has greatly influenced not only our linguistic policies but also our teaching practices. With its emphasis on the development of a plurilingual competence, classroom practices focus more and more everyday on the practice of communicative task and projects and, to some extent, less on linguistic activities. But despite these changes test evaluation, which measures the grammar competence and the memory ability of the students to memorize vocabulary, is still the common practice in many educational institutions. This type of education results in the students' lack of motivation and high rates of academic failure, therefore the effectiveness of this kind of evaluation has been questioned in recent years.

In view of this, the current article presents the results and conclusions obtained from the implementation of alternative assessment and evaluation methods. This case study was carried out in a high-school in Galicia, Spain, with the purpose of exploring the impact that implementing different alternative methods and techniques in the classroom could have in the students' academic results. The study was implemented in two classes of 4th year of Compulsory Secondary Education with 43 students aged between 15 and 16, who had a low-intermediate level in English proficiency. The results of the analysis show that the implementation of such alternative methods not only increases the motivation of the student in the language classroom, but also has a positive impact on academic success.

Prior to the discussion of our study, this article briefly considers relevant theoretical notions on evaluation and assessment which are important in our research. Then the methodology and research questions are presented, to be followed by the analysis of the data collected in order to discuss the results which were obtained.

II. Assessment and evaluation

Before presenting the alternative modes in assessment proposed in our project, it is necessary to establish the fundamental difference between assessment and evaluation. For the purpose of this research, we should also define as well what we mean by traditional and alternative assessment.

Very often teachers are not consistent in the terminology they employ to describe the different methods and techniques used in the foreign language class in

order to observe and gather information regarding the achievement of the learning outcomes. In the last decades the focus of this part of the teaching and learning process has changed very much, and particularly since the Common European Framework for Languages has become central in the design of foreign language teaching syllabuses in all our educational institutions. According to McLaren, Madrid and Bueno, the difference between both terms lays mainly on the focus of observation: «Assessment is a general term we use to refer to the set of procedures which are put into practice when gathering information about student's communicative competence or student's language performance achievement» (2005:606). Traditional *testing* is of course one of these practices. When assessing the communicative competence, it can be done throughout the year with *formative* or *continuous assessment*, or at the conclusion of the teaching and learning process, with the *final or summative assessment*. The main aim of assessment is to collect data. Evaluation, in contrast, is a more general concept for it «considers the teaching and learning program as a whole, and seeks to obtain feedback that can serve different purposes for the different agents in education» (2005:609). The Common European Framework similarly follows such distinction in its chapter 9:

Assessment is used in this chapter in the sense of the assessment of the proficiency of the language user. All language tests are a form of assessment, but there are also many forms of assessment (e.g. checklists used in continuous assessment; informal teacher observation) which would not be described as tests. Evaluation is a term which is again broader than assessment. All assessment is a form of evaluation, but in a language programme a number of things are evaluated other than learner proficiency. These may include the effectiveness of particular methods or materials, the kind and quality of discourse actually produced in the programme, learner/teacher satisfaction, teaching effectiveness, etc. This chapter is concerned with assessment, and not with broader issues of programme evaluation. (CEFRL, 2001:177)

In the same line, for the purpose of this research, we are going to focus in assessment by describing the implementation of the different activities designed and used in order to collect information regarding the achievement of the learning outcomes of the students' communicative competence.

III. Traditional and alternative assessment

Another key distinction crucial in this study is the one between alternative and traditional assessment. We should highlight at this point that such distinction is not clear-cut and, in fact, what traditional and alternative assessment and

evaluation mean may differ from one author to the other. For the purpose of this study, traditional evaluation encompasses, traditional assessment tools such as «multiple-choice test, true/false test, short answers and essays» (Dikli, 2003:13) and the use of summative assessment as the main evaluation system. Alternative assessment consists of what the students can do instead of what they are able to recall or to reproduce. (Abbas, 2012: 27)

Despite the fact that it is a common concept in the current educational community, a concrete and indisputable definition which captures all the essence of what alternative method of assessment implicates has not been given yet. Willa Louw (2003) considers it as an amalgam of cognitive, demonstrative and affective methods carried out to evaluate the students. This means that not only the knowledge or the performance of the skills are observed in authentic tasks but also the attitudes and values of the students. As a result, alternative assessment is closely linked to formative assessment because the students' development of the communicative skills must be considered progressively through different methods and techniques. Alternative methods should allow the teacher to assess the students' progress in a non-threatening environment, doing «real tasks» and not just traditional tests, selecting carefully activities suitable for all the different types of learners that are found in the class. Furthermore, alternative assessment must involve the student in his or her learning-process, participating in his or her own evaluation, in his or her peers' assessment and in the teacher's assessment too. (Elliot, 1995)

The list of methods and techniques which alternative assessment encompasses is colossal and endless. Broadly discussed and praised has been the use of portfolio (Nigel Miller, 2012) or the projects among other methods. As for the techniques, they are individual tasks which the teacher may implement in order to assess the students every day in the class. Howard Gardner's (1989)¹ multiple intelligences theory was also considered. From the performance of a text to assess the reading comprehension suitable for a kinesthetic learner to the creation of a comic strip for the assessment of the listening comprehension suitable for a visual-spatial learner, the techniques used should be very diverse in order to assess the different skills through exercises suitable for each of the multiple

1. Gardner defines intelligence as the «capacity to solve problems or to fashion products that are valued in one or more cultural setting» (1989). After a research based on biological and cultural principles, he developed a list of the following intelligences: (1) logical-mathematical intelligence; (2) linguistic intelligence; (3) spatial intelligence; (4) musical intelligence; (5) bodily-kinesthetic intelligence; (6) interpersonal intelligence; and (7) intrapersonal intelligence.

intelligences. Noticeably a qualitative feedback must be given to the students with the help of rubrics, progressive assessment charts and reports.

In the last decades the teaching and learning of Foreign Languages in Spain follows and applies principles from the Communicative or the Task based teaching approaches; therefore, no longer should the focus of assessment be the collection of data regarding the students' learning outcomes in the acquisition of grammar and vocabulary, but the level of proficiency in the four communicative skills and their ability to use the language to perform real tasks. These changes imply a modification in the perspective the students are assessed, from a structural traditional way to a more comprehensive evaluation where other elements are also considered.

IV. Different alternative assessment methods

Alternative assessment encompasses a colossal and endless list of methods and techniques. It is essential to clarify that most of alternative methods are grounded on formative assessment. Some authors state that alternative assessment must be carried out continuously in the class because classroom-based assessment informs immediately teachers and students, as well as parents, of student performance on an ongoing basis (Janisch, Liu & Akrofi, 2007). Learning a foreign language implies to be able to produce and to know the language all the time and not just in a concrete exam. For this reason, students must be assessed in their day a day, in order to properly measure how they use the language in performance and authentic tasks: *«authentic assessment aims to relate the instruction to the real-world experience of the learners»* (2003:14). Along the same lines, Wangsatorntanakhun (1997, in Dikli, 2003) states the term, performance-based assessment, embraces both alternative and authentic assessment.

Before detailing any kind of method, it is crucial to reflect on some aspects which should be taken into consideration to increase the efficiency of alternative evaluation. In that sense, Stephen Elliot (1995) stated the following criteria, which were taken into account in the planning design of our research:

- Selecting assessment tasks that are clearly aligned or connected to what has been taught.
- Sharing the scoring criteria for the assessment task with students prior to working on the task.
- Providing students with clear statements of standards and/or several models of acceptable performances before they attempt a task.
- Encouraging students to complete self-assessments of their performances.
- Interpreting students' performances by comparing them to standards that are developmentally appropriate, as well as to other students' performances.

Some discussions about alternative methods of assessment are currently quite popular within the educational community such as the already common practice of the portfolio or the oral presentations; however their presence in the Spanish secondary educational centres still remains very scarce in comparison to traditional assessment methods.

V. Action research project in a secondary school classroom in Galicia

The following section describes the case study carried out, the research questions, the methodology and activities applied, the data collection and analysis and the conclusions obtained.

1. *Research questions*

The case studied intended to answer the following questions:

- Is it possible to detect student's difficulties through alternative techniques and methods during the normal class?
- Can alternative techniques and methods improve the student's results?
- Is it possible to increase student's motivation through alternative tasks?

2. *Case study*

As it has been mentioned before, the case study was accomplished in a high school from A Coruña (Spain) in two classes from the same level with 20 and 23 students respectively. A great amount of data was collected from all the students through writing samples, recordings and observation. In order to preserve student's privacy, they will be referred in this article by a key code which is formed by the letter A or B according to the classroom and his or her number in the classroom list.

3. *Alternative activities designed*

a) *Project based learning: «Creating a marketing campaign»*

It aimed to assess several elements: the writing skill of the students, the vocabulary learned and the use of the second conditional as the main grammar point as well as the students individual and group work. This mini-project was

especially suitable for the logical, interpersonal, existential and linguistic-verbal intelligences and wanted to teach the students about the work world. The main task was to design a marketing campaign of a product. For this purpose, students had to choose the product and the name, the type of loan they needed, the location of the shop and the promotion campaign through adverts, free samples, etc. Everything had a stipulated cost and they all had a budget they could not exceed. After designing the marketing campaign, they had to write a short text which summarized it.

b) *«Put the words in the correct place»*

This activity was used as a warm-up and introduction of the grammar point and some new vocabulary. The activity consisted of ordering sentences with words that had been misplaced. In this case, instead of using the traditional worksheet or book exercise, the teacher wrote the words in different cards, papers or cardboards. Then, he or she only needed to distribute them among different students who had to stand up and show the word to the rest of the class. Then, the teacher asked one student to give directions to their classmates to form a correct sentence.

c) *«TV contest»*

A «TV contest» was also performed in the classroom, which benefited logical, kinesthetic and verbal intelligences. A power point presentation with the famous *«Who wants to be a millionaire»* template was used while the teacher could observe what each student had learned. Some catchy questions which placed the students in tough situations were used to assess their speaking skill and served personal and existential intelligences. The recordings collected allowed the teacher to assess their spontaneous speaking and to check the use of vocabulary and grammar studied in the unit.

d) *One-word summary*

The activity consisted of a reading exercise related with the topic of the unit: money. The four different texts selected dealt with famous people that teenage liked so they would be more interesting to them. Following the text, there were two words linked to the field of money. Students had to write a sentence explaining the relationship between those words and the text they had just read.

4. *Data collection*

During the implementation of the different activities different methods and techniques were used to collect all the necessary data: observation, analysis of writing samples and audio records. The classroom observation process was kept for its future deeper analysis with the help of a classroom assessment chart. Different aspects observed during the implementation were written down for each of the students in order to draw conclusions regarding their participation, attitude, team work, general achievement and specific problems observed in each task. Furthermore, students were recorded during their speaking performances. The recordings were later transcribed for their analysis. All the data collected were studied and also contrasted with the English teacher and the marks the students had achieved in the previous school term.

5. *Analysis and findings*

The results obtained were very encouraging, both in terms of academic results and attitude and motivation the students showed. In regards to the students' enthusiasm during all the lessons, the results were significantly good. According to the observation carried out in both classes previous to the implementation of this study, students were not very motivated, most of them were distracted and bored during the classes, they did not participate regularly and they used to work individually. However, during the implementation, students showed to be very interested in the activities proposed, most of the students participated actively during all the lessons and they were paying particular attention to the tasks proposed.

All the observation data collected during the lessons in the progressive assessment chart used endorsed the general impressions above mentioned. For instance, it was interesting to see how during the TV contest students were paying full attention to the procedure or how motivated they were. They showed a very healthy competitive spirit and team work skills. The activity was performed in two big teams and in two turns. When one team was participating, the other team was paying attention in complete silence. Team members participated individually as each of them should answer to one question and as a team as they counted on three life savings to support a team member in case he or she needed.

As for the marketing campaign mini-project presented, following Project Based Learning principles, groups were totally absorbed in their products and campaigns as it was checked during the whole monitoring and observation pro-

cess. Group members were debating and discussing about the best choices they could make according to the type of the product, they public they wanted to sell it to, etc. Most of the groups were speaking in English about the difficulty that designing a campaign implies and the great number of aspects that should be taken into account. All the groups respected the budget limitations; they did not want to just choose the cheapest options but the best so they adjusted the budget deciding the aspects they could do some shortcuts in. Such projects contribute not only to the development of the communicative competence, but also play an important role in the context of interdisciplinary learning.

The outcomes in terms of linguistic results were also very encouraging. The writing samples and collected recordings showed the effectiveness the task proposed had in the students' grammar and vocabulary acquisition. The students easily assimilated and produced the structure of the second conditional and they also learned some vocabulary related to the field of money, such as «bankrupt» or «hire» and they could use them in their writings:

*If I had to design the promotion strategy, I would hire Lewis Hamilton
If I were bankrupt...*

The reading comprehension activity allowed the teacher to check the general understanding of the text as well as the students' ability to infer the meaning of a word from the context. For instance, the following writing sample was written by one student who had to relate the world «wealthy» to a text about Forbes richest singers under 30.

«Wealthy» is related to the text because it speaks about the fortune of big artists.

As the example probes, students were able to understand an authentic piece of news and show his/her understanding of the use of the given word. The following example also illustrates both the assimilation of the world «capital» and the comprehension of the text read about how Mark Zuckerberg started Facebook.

«he didn't have enough money to create Facebook and he started from his dormitory with so little capital»

Furthermore, the samples collected also helped in the detection of some students who had specific learning problems. For instance, it was observed that two students had difficulties with irregular verbs when they wrote their sentences using the second conditional. During the monitorization process of the one-word summary, it was also noted that five students had problems to

understand the text mainly because they had an important lack of vocabulary, even simple and basic words were unknown by them. However, some of the students who generally have had problems with the English subject, had great results in the performance of the different activities because of the motivational factor; they remarked that working in groups had helped them, as well as the fact that the tasks proposed included themes they were interested in.

The contest proved to be an excellent tool to assess the assimilation of vocabulary and the structure of the main grammar point, which was grasped by most of the students. It was also interesting to observe the logic reasoning of the students to find the right answer. It was interesting even to see that this type of activity also encouraged self-assessment on the part of the student; for example, one of the quiz questions, «Whatever you do, don't _____ any money to Nick», prompted the following discussion, which showed student's process of self-correction:

Student: I think the right answer is the A [lend].

Teacher: Why?

Student: «lend» and borrow mean «prestar y dejar prestado»... I [am] not sure which one is «prestar» and which one is «dejar prestado»...but[it] is borrow from Nick or lend to Nick, righ?...Yes, I say lend»

The most impressive and encouraging findings were those resulted from the global comparison in the achievement of the learning outcomes between the traditional assessment practiced during the previous term and the actual term with an alternative methodology. In group A, 9 students had failed the subject in the second term. The difficulties which 8 out of these 9 students had were also detected with the alternative methods. After the implementation of our activities, from these 8 learners, 5 obtained great results showing an improvement. As for the rest of the students in the class, they showed the same or better results. The results were also quite significant in group B, where only one student had failed the subject in the previous term, but five only scored 5 points in their final mark. In this case, the analysis showed that seven students had difficulties with some of the skills or content covered, and we could see that all of them improved their results with the alternative activities.

VI. Conclusions

The research suggests that the use of alternative assessment techniques improves the students' academic results and their motivation and attitude towards the classes and the subject. In regards to attitude, practically all the students had

a very positive one towards the activities presented. Even those students who were chattier performed pretty well and could accomplish their tasks properly. Through the observation process, it was observed that students tried to give their best to solve the tasks, showing a great interest and motivation. Obviously, some of the activities worked better than others, but all of them had a general positive result. The activities which required movement were definitely very efficient; it helped students to wake up and activated their brains at the same time they were introduced to new vocabulary and grammar structures.

Collaborative work was also a success. Students helped each other and those with more difficulties improved their academic results. It was also favorable for shy students, who gained confidence by working in small groups or getting the chance to prepare their speech previously with their groups. The observation of the students in the class, in a non-threatening and relaxing environment, definitely helped the learning, improved the results of the students and made them enjoy the lessons.

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