Examining evaluation system of an English language program in China

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Abstract: In the field of EFL, effective language evaluation is receiving more and more attention. However, in many Chinese EFL situations, the evaluation of language development is still considered to be product-oriented. It is the purpose of this article to examine an evaluation system of an English language program offered by a university in Yunnan Province of China to identify the existing problems and any points which do not conform to the current view of effective language evaluation. For the sake of possible improvements in assessment/evaluation, a method/technique of using portfolios that is not at present used in this program for evaluation/assessment is proposed, and the rationale of introducing this method is discussed.

Key words: examine; language evaluation system; effectiveness; portfolios

1. Introduction

On quality EFL programs in China, a lot of time and efforts are spent on such vital issues as introducing new methodology, revising curricula and teaching materials. In contrast, ensuring that the evaluation of students' progress keeps pace with program development is often perceived to be of second importance, and as a result, tend to be the least understood area of language teaching and learning. As a form of assessment, language testing is still especially influential in many Chinese EFL instructional settings. The language learning is viewed as quantitative increase of knowledge for the target language, and the evaluation of language development is consequently product-oriented. I've worked in the institution field for years, a range of new tools and methods of assessment and evaluation have been introduced in recent years. However, drawing from my experience of being an English teacher for almost 15 years, I would claim that in Chinese educational situations there always exists a mismatch between the planned curriculum and the implemented curriculum. The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to inquire about whether the evaluation procedure in this specified EFL learning situation is appropriate to the prespecified learning objective and be congruent with instruction, what effects evaluation and assessment as an important part of curriculum design upon student learning, and in what ways evaluation inform practice and instructional decisions. For the sake of possible improvements in assessment/evaluation in the future, I shall also propose a method/technique for evaluation/assessment that is not at present used in this program but which I consider could advantageously be introduced.

2. The situation

The specified university is situated in Southern Yunnan Province, China. It is originally known as a teachers' college. The English language program offered by the university equips students with English language knowledge and skills and a basic pedagogical foundation to prepare them for teaching English as a foreign

language in an effective way to meet the varying needs of today's and future society in the developing area of south-west China. The four years' program requires 160 credits, including course credits and internship credits.

Although the courses provided vary in contents from language skill courses such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking, to language knowledge related courses such as British and American Literature, and *A Survey of English-speaking Countries*, which are consistent with one another in the evaluation system, that is primarily recommended by the university instructional development office and revised by English Department for discipline purpose. The evaluation process the program employs to evaluate students' growth and progress in the English language arts include: summative evaluation, diagnostic evaluation, and formative evaluation.

2.1 Summative evaluation

The summative evaluation in this program takes the form of achievement tests and it occurs in the middle and at the end of a school semester. The test paper is designed by the instructors and is administered by the university administration. The teachers are expected to propose an outline of the tests they are going to design at the staff meeting, for example, the purpose of the test, the skills and language points covered in the test, the focus, the format, the criterion, etc. Each proposal is discussed until an agreement is reached. After the test is administered and the test paper are graded, the teachers are required to conduct a self-reflection as to whether the test content is responsive to the teaching content, whether and to what extent the test results reflect students' language development, and what particular problems or difficulties emerge in the test responses. The self-reflection information will be reported in an evaluation form and summit along with the grade report to the English department and the instruction development office respectively. And the students' grades will be passed on from the department to individual students.

2.2 Diagnostic evaluation

Diagnostic evaluation in this program is done informally and continuously. It varies according to different course content. For reading class, for example, it can be a classroom quiz. While for conversation class, it can be a presentation. The purpose is to assess the strengths and weaknesses of students and to make program modifications. It is used for 'diagnosis' rather than 'grading'. The assessment data can be translated into a grade for reporting purposes. The diagnostic evaluation usually contributes a maximum of 15% to students' total score for every specific course. The criteria are made clear to the students at the start of the program.

2.3 Formative evaluation

Formative evaluation is conducted continuously throughout the program. Its purpose is to improve teaching and promote learning and keep both teacher and students aware of the course objectives and the students' progress in meeting those objectives. Two types of formative evaluation are done in this program, which are: teacher's classroom evaluation and student advisors' evaluation.

2.3.1 The classroom performance evaluation

The instructors of different courses in this program are encouraged to notice and keep records of students' classroom performance. The assessment technique utilized to monitor students' language growth and development is classroom observation. The information on students' involvement, their contributions to the class, their interaction with each other, and their attendance are collected and recorded in the teacher's teaching file. And this is one of the sources for the course grading. Usually the classroom performance evaluation will contribute a maximum of 15% to students' total score for the course, and it is made known and understood by students at the start of the course.

2.3.2 Student advisor's evaluation

Another source of the evaluation is from the student advisors. Every 20 students in this program have an academic advisor who is responsible for providing help and consultation with their academic work. The advisor is expected to meet the students regularly and communicate with the students about planning, monitoring, and reflecting of their own studies. For example, at the beginning of a new semester, the advisor will talk with the students about any problems or difficulties they encounter in the previous semester, and help them make a plan for selecting new courses, which are most suitable for their own situations. He/she will recommend students supplementary readings and reading responses are always required. All the collected information is recorded for a later feedback to the class teacher. He/she sometimes guides students carry out academic activities related to their coursework such as speech competition, debate, drama, writing competition for students to demonstrate their learning, and he/she will work with other invited teachers to judge their performance.

3. Existing problems of the evaluation system

He concerned English language program has a framework of incorporating a range of tools and methods of assessment and evaluation into the evaluation of students' progress. It is ongoing and continuous and is based on criterion that students know and understand. It theoretically, if not practical, reflects the learning objectives and instructional decision such as change of course teachers, rewards of excellence in learning, and requirement of remedial courses are often made on the basis of the evaluation. Nevertheless, some practical problems are easily to be identified in the implementation process. In the following part, I shall discuss various issues concerning this specific evaluation system that I think could be improved to become more effective language evaluation.

First of all, the implemented evaluation procedure leaves students the impression that they are the ones who are being evaluated. This will result in some students' reluctance and resistance. Instead of involving interactively and actively in the process of evaluation, they remain to be an "outsider". Compared with the total number of the students, the proportion of the students participating in evaluation-directed activities is small. Many teachers find it hard to evaluate the non-participant students' work — because they are just audience in most cases. Let's take the teachers' classroom evaluation as an example. Many people argue that as the only instrument of classroom performance evaluation, observation does not involve the systematic collection and analysis of observation data and thus it is not as fair and equitable as it should be. There are various reasons attribute to this situation. One is the class size. For a language teacher who is managing a class of over sixty students, it is a tough job to distribute his/her attention to every student. The result is the most valuable information he/she can only get is about the top students and the weak students. For the ones who 'stand' in the middle range, the teacher is most unlikely to notice about. Another point is the context in which the judgment is made. The evaluation is basically congruent with instruction, but since the classroom interaction always follows a "teacher asks — students answer" pattern, it is hard to monitor every individual student's actual performance — they can just join the "chorus" for the whole class hour without showing any evidence of progress. A third point is the cultural norm. For some students, to express their ideas in front of the whole class is an embarrassing thing. When they are engaged in group work, they would let someone else dominant the conversation. So it is hard to tell whether or not they have made improvement.

Secondly, the oversimplified patterns of classroom interaction do not provide multiple opportunities and ways for every student to demonstrate his/her learning. All language teachers have the knowledge that every student, if motivated properly, would show his/her ability in a given area(s). Students who are developed in a

balanced way in terms of all language skills and linguistic knowledge are somehow of rare examples. So if the evaluation is only and always for the small proportion of students, and the rest of the students are denied of the opportunities to demonstrate their learning just because of other factors (e.g. motivation, students' personality, teacher's attitude, etc.), then the evaluation can never be a fair and informative one.

Thirdly, the function of evaluation which is to a great extent influenced by the cultural background determines the evaluation is for finding out weaknesses and problems for instructional purpose. A Chinese old saying can best illustrate this educational belief, which goes as: bitter medicine hurt your mouth but benefit your health. For this reason, the tasks the students are engaged in always do not focus on what they can do, but what they can not do. The average students, as a result, can hardly find their position and "voice" in carrying out the tasks and they would gradually lose interests.

Last but not the least, since the evaluation is not basically built on a systematic analysis and synthesis of the students' development, the only evaluation information eventually transformed to the students are their grades. The students are not provided with a chance to look at notes, comments, or narrations either from the teachers or from the school administration.

4. Possible improvements

The current widely acknowledged innovation that a single dimensional numerous course grade can not and should not represent students' growth and development makes it urgent for us to employ more appropriate and effective evaluation and reporting processes. In view of the above problems, various measures that can be taken to make possible improvement in the assessment/evaluation system are:

4.1 Start with a dialogue between the teachers, the students, the parents, and the school administration to decide on a systematic evaluation system. Make sure all parties involve in the evaluation process understand the function, the objectives, and the procedure of the evaluation. Work out all necessary materials and documents needed for evaluation. For example, observation checklists, sample portfolio, sample anecdotal comments, evaluation forms, sample test paper (formal and informal), rubrics, rating scales, etc.

4.2 Inform the teachers the objectives and the suggested procedure of the evaluation. Encourage them to create more meaningful and productive tasks with which the students can handle within their capability, and on which a fair evaluation can be conducted. Ensure that the teachers care for every of their students and engage positively in interaction, communication, response with the students.

4.3 Arose students' awareness that they can be an active part involving in the process of evaluation. Encourage them to actively and creatively participate in the process of collecting data on their growth, development, and progress against stated learning objectives.

4.4 Keep students informed of current evaluation of their school performance in a clear, accurate, and practical way. In contrast to the traditional approach that the evaluation feedback is officially from the school administration, it can be passed through the student advisor at their regular meeting, or it can reach the students by a letter from the course teacher. Since students respond differently to evaluation, maintaining common, consistent, appropriate standards is vital.

5. Proposing a useful assessment method

Having examined the current situation and the existing problems of this specified English language program,

I believe an introduction of the assessment method of using portfolios could advantageously promote the effectiveness of the evaluation process. The reasons are:

5.1 Portfolios are purposeful collections of students' work that exhibit the individual student's efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas. They provide a holistic view of student learning and a systematic review and analysis of the portfolios can help planning instruction. Portfolios can help teachers capture information or evidence about learning progress which he/she could not obtain from the classroom evaluation so that a more holistic and fair evaluation is likely done to each student.

5.2 The collection involves students in selecting the contents, the criteria for judging merits, and evidence of students' self-reflection, thus can help students become more accountable, more independent, and more responsible for their learning. This is especially significant to many Chinese students who rely too much on formal classroom instruction.

5.3 Portfolios can be an effective way for students, teachers, and parents to observe student progress over a period of time by providing a continuous record of students' language development. If the portfolios are reviewed and shared by teachers and other students in conference together, they can exchange ideas about the merit of a specific piece of work, or the learning strategies they employ in their learning. This can lead to positive effects on interaction with teachers, students, and parents about learning.

5.4 Portfolios can make learning more interesting and exciting. They can help establish student confidence, especially to the introverted students.

5.5 The idea and the experiences of using portfolios can improve the prospective teachers' professional awareness.

6. General guidelines for using portfolios

6.1 As a new assessment method, the implementation of portfolios needs to be planned carefully. Possible influential factors such as students' cultural, social, and linguistic situation need to be considered. An initial negotiation with the students about the goals, the criteria, and the procedure of using portfolios is necessary.

6.2 Inform the students about what to include in their portfolios and how to make the selection. Portfolios can not only include written works (e.g. journals, a piece of writing representing a particular stage of learning, reading responses, notes, or a particular assignment), but also videotapes of oral presentations, and visuals such as graphics, pictures, posters. Instead of owning a single portfolio, students can be encouraged to keep portfolios for different courses. Thus the students can focus more on specific content for each course.

6.3 According to different courses, portfolios can vary in a term-end portfolio and an end-of-year portfolio. The selection can start from the new semester and assembled two weeks before the reporting period.

6.4 The student advisor can arrange a special time regularly — time permitting, once every six weeks, to review students' portfolios and give an immediate feedback to each course teacher. The information can be a valuable source for assessing students' achievement for this specific course. The teachers, in turn, should spend time to comment on students' work.

6.5 Based on a communication with individual student, the teachers need to have easy access to his/her portfolios to see if everything is going on the right track. The students also need to have access to their own portfolios at all times. They should be expected to update their selections from time to time.

6.6 By exchanging ideas with the teachers, the academic advisors, and the peers, the students should have a

clear idea about their goals, choice of contents, and quality of works of their own portfolios and a student self-assessment is expected to be included in their portfolios.

7. Conclusion

A constant review of the language evaluation process benefits both the educational authority and the teachers to become more alert to the real effectiveness of evaluation, and consequently to entail a language program to meet the students' needs and learning styles. In the Chinese English learning context specified in this essay, some practical problems of the seemingly effective evaluation are pointed out and portfolios as an integral part of the teaching and an important part of the assessment and evaluation process as well is proposed. However, just like there is no a single medicine for a certain disease, there is no such a "one fit all" prescribed method to solve the identified problems simply because every classroom is unique. Therefore, teachers should play an active role in both the evaluation planning and the implementation in order to make judgments as to what is/are the most effective way(s) to evaluate their students' progress.

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