

Assessment of English Learning in a Language Teacher Education Program¹

Evaluación del aprendizaje del inglés en un programa de licenciatura en lengua extranjera

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Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a study aimed at characterizing the assessment process in an English Language Teacher Education Program (ELTEP, henceforth) at a Colombian public university. Perceptions of teachers and students, revision of some official documents such as course syllabi and test samples, and class observation were used to respond to the inquiries of this study. Interviews, questionnaires, field diaries, and documentary records were employed to gather information for this qualitative-descriptive study. Data analysis suggests that despite the general guidelines proposed by the institution in terms of assessment of learning, and some good evaluative practices implemented by the professors of the ELTEP, the consolidation of an approach is required; an approach understood as criteria and pedagogical procedures that guide both teachers and students, and one that promotes more formative, fair and democratic assessment.

Keywords: Assessment; English learning; evaluative practices; formative; democratic; fair assessment.

Resumen

El presente estudio tiene como propósito caracterizar el proceso de evaluación del aprendizaje de inglés en un Programa de Licenciatura en Lengua Extranjera de una universidad pública colombiana. Desde un enfoque cualitativo-descriptivo, se indagó sobre las percepciones de los docentes y estudiantes frente a este proceso, se revisaron algunos documentos oficiales como microdiseños y muestras de exámenes, y se observaron algunas clases para responder a las preguntas del presente estudio. Como instrumentos de recolección de datos se utilizaron entrevistas, cuestionarios, diarios de campo, y registros documentales, los cuales permitieron realizar la correspondiente

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triangulación de la información. Una vez recolectada la información, se procedió a su respectivo análisis a través de una metodología de estadística descriptiva y análisis cualitativo con el soporte de un programa informático para la codificación y categorización de la información. Los resultados que arrojó este estudio permiten concluir que a pesar de los lineamientos generales que propone la institución en materia de evaluación de los aprendizajes, y algunas buenas prácticas evaluativas implementadas por los docentes del Programa de Licenciatura en Inglés investigado, se requiere la consolidación de un enfoque, entendido como criterios y procedimientos pedagógicos, que oriente tanto a docentes y estudiantes, y que promueva una evaluación más formativa, justa y democrática.

Palabras clave: evaluación; aprendizaje de inglés; prácticas evaluativas; formativo; democrático; evaluación equitativa

Resumo

O presente estudo tem como propósito caracterizar o processo de avaliação da aprendizagem de inglês em um Programa de Licenciatura em Língua Estrangeira de uma universidade pública colombiana. Desde um enfoque qualitativo-descritivo, indagou-se sobre as percepções dos docentes e estudantes diante deste processo, revisaram-se alguns documentos oficiais como micro desenhos e amostras de provas, e observaram-se algumas aulas para responder as perguntas do presente estudo. Como instrumentos de coleta de dados, utilizaram-se entrevistas, questionários, diários de campo e registros documentais, os quais permitiram realizar a correspondente triangulação da informação. Quando coletada a informação, procedeu-se a sua respectiva análise através de uma metodologia de estatística descritiva e análise qualitativa com o suporte de um programa informático para a codificação e categorização da informação. Os resultados que evidenciou este estudo permitem concluir que apesar dos alinhamentos gerais que propõe a instituição em matéria de avaliação dos aprendizes, e algumas boas práticas avaliativas implementadas pelos docentes do Programa de Licenciatura em Inglês pesquisado, requer-se a consolidação de um enfoque, entendido como critérios e procedimentos pedagógicos, que oriente tanto a docentes e estudantes, e que promova uma avaliação mais formativa, justa e democrática.

Palavras chave: avaliação; aprendizagem de inglês; práticas avaliativas; formativo; democrático; avaliação equitativa

Introduction

In order for the teaching and learning process of a foreign language to be meaningful, and students become proficient users of the L2, many variables have to be taken into consideration. Methodology, materials, time exposure, setting conditions, and evaluation, assessment and testing procedures, among others, are some important aspects that may influence student learning, for better or worse. Regarding assessment, Estevez (1997) states that despite rich theoretical principles on this field, poor assessment practices have been promoted in the educational arena for decades. The results of different studies support the gaps between the theoretical tenets and the real assessment practices carried out in the learning process. Rojas and Artunduaga (2018) found out that, according to English teachers and students' perceptions, learners didn't achieve the expected level in advanced courses, because neither the classwork nor the tests were challenging enough during the basic English classes. In addition, Arias and Maturana (2005) concluded that, even though in some school settings English teachers are trying to follow the educational policies and theoretical guidelines on evaluation, assessment and testing issues, much research should be done in our context. In this regard, Jurado (2015) points out that "one of the causes of the high rates of "school desertion" is related to the pedagogic problems linked to assessment practice" (p.5); he also adds, "The university curricula are rigid and the pedagogy and assessment processes are characterized by a vertical approach" (p5). Therefore, the author believes that open reflection within the framework in research and innovation projects might allow us to analyze the assessment issue in dept. Likewise, López and Bernal, (2009) affirm that "more research is needed on how tests are developed and how all the stakeholders are involved in this process, especially when this research takes into consideration the uniqueness of the Colombian context."(p.12)

Similarly, the assessment process of the L2 in the targeted academic program is not any different from the aforementioned general situation; it has not had a rigorous analysis framed into research experiences. Despite the fact that the higher education institution analyzed, favors formative assessment guidelines from its institutional policies, there are still concerns about how teachers implement those parameters. From our own perspective, we perceive a greater emphasis on the summative assessment rather than on formative assessment procedures. Considering the previous situation, the following objectives were formulated.

- To identify the perceptions that both teachers and students have about the assessment of the English learning process in an ELTEP.
- To describe the assessment criteria and mechanisms commonly used by the teachers of the ELTEP.

- To determine suggestions provided by both students and teachers in regards to the assessment approach and procedures implemented in the ELTEP.

Literature Review

What does evaluation mean?

In English speaking countries, there is a distinction between the terms *testing*, *assessment*, and *evaluation* to refer to the act of evaluating students' learning. Brown (2004) points out that *testing* is about a deliberated application of an assessment instrument formed by a group of structured items that measure the learner's performance in a certain field of knowledge. This process might be influenced by external factors when executing it. Bachman (2004) defines *assessment* as the process of collecting information about something that we want to know, following systematic and substantially founded procedures. The results of this process, which objective is usually to interpret the foreign language skills of the student, could be a grade or a verbal description with some feedback. On the other hand, Baehr (2005) suggests that *evaluation* involves the two concepts mentioned before (assessment and testing) since it takes them as sources of information to draw up valuable judgments and make decisions when facing educational processes.

In this case, we could say that the three concepts contribute in different ways to improve the teaching-learning process. Teachers, in many cases, are confined to measure students' performance quantitatively and tend to underestimate all the information that the assessment process offers; which at the same time, would allow to mold the groups in charge objectively, modify teaching methodologies, maximize the learning and produce changes and action plans. Thomas, Allman and Beech (2004), cited in Herrera and Macías (2015), recognize the relevance of evaluation when they highlight its benefits for teachers and students in different aspects: 1) it provides useful information to improve the pedagogical practice of the teacher; 2) it allows the teacher to monitor the student's learning process and contributes to the improvement of it before the course is finished; 3) it gives the teacher important information about accurate teaching methods for each group of students; 4) it allows students to use the evaluation and the feedback to understand better their learning process; 5) it offers students the opportunity to develop and improve their ability to self-assess and consider evaluation as part of the learning process; 6) it helps students to make decisions on how to acquire knowledge and develop abilities; 7) it helps students to prepare for international examinations, especially if the assessment format is the same one they use in them.

The aforementioned benefits that assessment provides to teachers and learners let us establish the potential impact it has on the teaching and learning

process. In this sense, White (2009) argues “While becoming more assessment literate is of prime importance for a teacher’s professional development, the impact for our students in our classes must also remain a consideration.” (p.21).

Principles of Assessment

Designing and implementing an evaluation is not an easy task, due to the multiple considerations that must be taken into account and the principles that guide it. Several authors have proposed various evaluative principles, in order to facilitate and optimize this process.

First, Brown (2004) proposes *practicality* as a process where tests can be developed within the allotted time; it is easy to administer and has a simple grading system. Similarly, Brown points out that an evaluation ceases to be practical if it takes a long time for the administrator to grade it. On the other hand, Bachman and Palmer (1996), argue, “practicality pertains to the ways in which the test will be implemented, and, to a large degree, whether it will be developed and used at all. That is, for any given situation, if the resources required for implementing the test exceed the resources available, the test will be impractical.”(p.35)

Second, the principle of *reliability*, according to Brown (2004), is presented as the consistency that should be in the results obtained in a test, given in two different moments to the same student or group in similar circumstances. According to the author, different factors should be taken into consideration to determine whether an examination is reliable or not. Reliability can also be affected by variations in the physical or psychological state of the student taking the test, by the errors that an evaluator might make when grading the test, and by factors related to the administration of the test.

A third principle is that of *validity*. Generically, it refers to evaluating what really should be evaluated. For Bachman and Palmer (1996), the validity of the construct corresponds to the relevance and significance of the interpretations made from the results of the test. According to these authors, it is necessary to validate these interpretations by presenting evidence that the test score reflects the linguistic area we want to measure.

Another principle of great relevance in the teaching-learning process of a foreign language is *authenticity*. Teachers must ensure that the language, in lexical and semantic terms and to which the student is exposed, in some way resembles the language used in real second language contexts. To this degree of correspondence that exists between the characteristics of the use of the target language and the tasks that we require the student to do in a test, is what Bachman and Palmer (1996) define as authenticity.

Regarding the principle of *justice* (Shohamy, 2001), it is sought that the procedures used during the evaluation process are appropriate for everyone. This guarantees equity (equal conditions for conducting the test) and transparency of the same. Justice is based on the foundations of impartiality and consistency. That is, the exam administrator must be objective when evaluating and establishing clear evaluation criteria according to the level that we expect students to reach.

The principle of *democracy* can be understood, in the words of Shohamy (2001), and transferred to the field of evaluation in the classroom, in need to develop evaluative practices in “collaboration and cooperation with the evaluated”; in the need to limit the use of evaluations as “instruments of power”; in the need to “take responsibility for the evaluations and their uses” and the need to “protect the rights of those evaluated” (p.376).

Regarding the feedback (washback or impact), Pérez (2007) suggests that it should be opportune and systematic, which implies that from the evaluation, the student should be provided with brief descriptions or critical and stimulating comments on their performance, rather than with ratings. The research results reflected in the literature coincide in pointing out that feedback is the most important part of the entire process due to its enhancing effect on future learning and student performance (Black & William, 1998). According to Pérez (2007), although the feedback is of great importance for the self-regulation of learning, this, in several occasions, is not understood because it is provided long after the work done and the student may no longer be interested.

Pérez (2007) also suggests that a socio-constructivist approach to the feedback process requires students to be actively involved. Sadler (1989), quoted in Rust (2005), identifies three conditions for effective feedback: knowledge of the evaluation criteria, comparison of these with its own work and the action taken to fill the gap between the two. Uncovering these manifestos, Pérez concludes that students should be trained in how to interpret feedback, how to relate it to the characteristics of the work they do and how to improve their work in the future.

Evaluative competences

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Popham (2009) states that assessing the student performance is one of the fundamental tasks for the modern teacher. Being competent in educational evaluation allows the teacher to make accurate and well-founded decisions that contribute to the improvement of the teaching-learning process.

Likewise, Gronlund and Linn (cited in Wang, Wang and Fan, 2011) point out that teachers, who evaluate their pedagogical practices, can initially realize the needs of their students, monitor the learning and teaching processes,

diagnose the difficulties of learning and confirm learning achievements. However, knowledge about evaluation is considered a theoretical construction and a professional capacity that every teacher should have. Different authors have highlighted that unfortunately, not all the teachers are sufficiently qualified in this area to be able to promote appropriate assessment practices within the classroom; in other words, much more training is required to empower teachers to become more assessment literate.

Stiggins (1995) states that the teacher must know what is being evaluated; why it is being evaluated; what the best way to evaluate the skill or knowledge in question is; how to generate good examples of student performance; what could fail in the assessment process; and how to avoid these difficulties when evaluating. Paterno (2001) and Mertler (2004) also explain that the teacher must know the basic principles that underlie evaluative practices, including terminology, development, and use of methodologies and assessment techniques in one specific area, as well as being familiar with the alternatives of traditional measurement of learning. In this sense, White (2009) claims that teachers must be assessment literate to be aware of the effects their decisions may have on the learning outcomes, so that they can design an assessment plan accordingly, to guide the students to develop a deep approach to their learning.

Methodology

Given the nature of this study, a qualitative research approach was followed. According to Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2011), qualitative research seeks to inquire into the quality of a particular activity; it offers a greater emphasis on the holistic description, that is to say, in the detailed description of what happens in a specific activity or situation; or as Merriam (2009) suggests, through qualitative research we are “interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences”(p. 23)

Setting and Participants

The context for this study was a public university in Colombia. A total of 340 students of the English Language Teacher Education Program were part of the population. The study was conducted with a sample of about 160 students who were taking from basic to advanced English courses. Their ages ranged from 18 to 21 years old. Another group of participants were five full-time professors; they taught English in the aforementioned courses. Four of them held a Master degree and the other one a PhD degree.

The target population of the present research, to which we would like to generalize the findings, is constituted by the English degree programs of the country. The accessible population is constituted by the approximately 340 students of the bachelor program in English in question.

The sample was selected from pre-established groups, corresponding to the 16 English groups. The sample of students constitutes 50% of the accessible population and for teachers, it corresponds to all of the teachers of this academic assignment. With the groups already established, ten students were chosen randomly in each of these groups. In other words, we used a simple random sampling from groups already assigned (Simple random sampling/cluster sampling).

Data collection Instruments

Data were collected through an interview, a questionnaire, field notes, and a review of curriculum documents.

Interview to teachers: The purpose was to identify the conceptions, criteria and assessment practices based on the experience of English teachers.

Questionnaire to students: Students answered a structured questionnaire in the digital version, aimed at determining their experiences and perceptions of the English learning assessment process.

Field notes: they were carried out by researchers, who did not get involved in-class activities but remained passive observers. They were kept during classes where assessment processes were being developed. These observations were recorded following semi-structured observation formats, as shown in the following table.

Table 1. Class observation

Date of class observation: _____ English course level: _____

Teacher: _____

Number of lesson: _____ Number of students: _____

Topic: _____

Objectives:

Language functions:

Instructional activities	Student(s) in-class attitude and performance	Classroom conditions/environment	Resources

Additional comments:

Review of Curriculum Documents: This is perhaps the only secondary source of data collection, but it retains great relevance for the research. We reviewed the syllabi of each of the English courses to verify that the assessment criteria for learning were stipulated there, and that they coincided with what was stated by the teachers in the interviews. Table 2 shows the form used to analyze these course syllabi. Likewise, we revised the students’ handbook, the educational project of the program, the educational project of the faculty and the institutional educational project with the purpose of identifying guidelines regarding the evaluation of learning in general and English in particular.

Table 2. *Form to evaluate course syllabi*

PERIODO	CURSO	DOCENTE	HORAS SEMANALES	CRÉDITOS	DEFINICIÓN DE EVALUACIÓN (D.E)		CRITERIOS DE EVALUACION (P.E)						REGLAMENTO EVALUACIÓN (aplazamiento plagio) (R.E)		EVALUACIÓN DE HABILIDADES (E.H)				RÚBRICAS (Rub.)		OBSERVACIONES		
					SI	NO	PRÓPOSITOS DE LA EVALUACIÓN		TIPOS DE EVALUACIÓN (T.E)		INSTRUMENTOS (Inst.)	VALORACIÓN (Porcentaje o puntaje)	SI	NO	SI	NO	SI	NO	SI	NO		SI	NO
							SI	NO	SI	NO													

Analysis of data

We followed a content analysis methodology through which we collected the information; it was then selected, leading to the main topics or categories of data classification to be put in each of the research instruments. These data were coded and processed through the Atlas Ti software for this purpose. The topics and their incidents were presented by literal statements of the participants, as well as graphical representations of the data.

Results

Perceptions of students and teachers in relation to the evaluation of English learning

The students participating in this study are no exception of what Brown (2004) warned us regarding the feeling generated by the evaluation in the apprentices. For the majority of participants (62.97%), the word evaluation alone generates feelings of nervousness or concern. However, despite this emotional burden, most of them express that the evaluation plays a critical role in the English learning process. Some of its main purposes include diagnosing the strengths and abilities of students, monitoring their progress and assigning the respective grade, determining the effectiveness of the teacher's instruction, and providing the society with information about the achievements and levels of student development. Regarding teachers, it is important to note that most of them have a positive attitude towards assessment, considering that it has a positive impact on students and themselves. They assure that the evaluation process allows both the teacher and students to make a diagnosis about how the teaching and learning process evolves, identify weaknesses and strengths, generate opportunities for self-evaluation, and propose actions for improvement.

In regards to the functions of assessment, a significant number of students (65.3%) conceive it as a summative process where the connotation of diagnosis of strengths and weaknesses, and the measurement of knowledge and learning stand out. The following comments support these findings:

“It is a diagnosis of the abilities and strengths of each student.” (EE P2C1)

“It is a process in which the student is shown and challenged to demonstrate what they have learned in class.” (EE P2C52)

The majority of the teachers agreed that the evaluation, as it is a permanent process, has a formative character. Three of the teachers affirm that they implement assessments constantly, fostering evaluative moments other than those established institutionally. The following comment thus supports it:

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“I try to evaluate almost all the classes, anyway, do quizzes, simply pass them to talk, put them to do their role play, make them all kinds of possible evaluation to give them all the opportunities of the case, so they can improve and feel good in an evaluation.”

Regarding assessment principles, for a significant percentage (82.41%) of the students, English evaluations usually inquire about the contents taught, that is, they usually ask for topics studied or skills practiced in class, meeting

in this way the principle of validity. This assertion is ratified by teachers who agreed on the preponderance of validity, by stating that the contents evaluated should correspond to the objectives set for the course.

Likewise, students state that English teachers clearly explain all aspects related to the exam or other tasks that will be evaluated. In terms of environmental conditions, they express that these are appropriate to complete an exam or develop other evaluative activities. These factors contribute to the reliability of the evaluation.

In terms of *Practicality*, a majority of students (80.55%) indicate that the instructions for each of the activities in the evaluations are clear and illustrative. However, regarding the extension of the exams, the percentages are divided between those who believe that the time to answer them is sufficient and those who state that they do not have time to complete the exams. This perception differs from what was expressed by the teachers, who point out that the time allotted for the evaluations is adequate.

Concerning *Authenticity*, for a good number of participants (64.82% of the students and 80% of the teachers) the exercises, dialogues and questions contained in the English assessments are similar to the speeches and interactions that they could face in a real second language context. Likewise, they agree on the fact that the exercises contained in the evaluations are contextualized and relevant.

Most students expressed that the results of the evaluation are very useful for the teacher, for themselves and other members of the academic community (Impact / Feedback). However, there is great neutrality when asking if teachers provide constant and effective feedback. On the other hand, teachers argue that they provide proper feedback in their classes.

Regarding the principles of *Justice* and *Democracy*, 66.67% of students say that teachers are fair at the time of grading exams, but a 51.81% of them state that they do not participate in planning mechanisms for the evaluation. In this regard, the majority of teachers stressed the importance of promoting an evaluation framed in this principle.

Criteria and Mechanisms

In this section, we characterized the means, instruments, approaches and evaluation parameters implemented in the program. For the collection of the information, we reviewed class observation notes, questionnaires, written exams, and course syllabi.

We followed the concepts proposed by Hamodi, López and López (2015) about means and instruments of evaluation. Thus, we have conceived as

means written exams, essays, quizzes, reading and writing controls, portfolios, exhibitions, debates, and role-plays, among others. Likewise, we regard rubrics as assessment instruments.

Means

All of the 40 course syllabi that we reviewed exhibits common criteria such as: thematic units, evaluation strategies, and their corresponding percentages. The unit with the highest weight (80%) is assigned to written exams, three in total during the semester. The remaining (20%) is assigned to a variety of evaluative activities such as presentations, essays, debates, reading of short stories or novels, role plays, among others. Through the survey, both students and teachers did corroborate that teachers implement the means established in the course syllabi as part of the evaluation process.

Instruments

About the use of rubrics, a little more than half (21) of the course syllabi include them; some of them are not clearly defined because they do not describe in detail the activity to be evaluated or the linguistic ability to be assessed. Other syllabi contain rubrics that focus on a single skill, usually writing. Very few specify in their rubrics the skill and activity to be evaluated. This is corroborated in the analysis of some written exams, which do not include anything in this regard either. However, the observations showed the use of the rubric to evaluate the oral ability where each one of the linguistic criteria to be assessed was defined. In the survey conducted by the students, the majority (82%) corroborated that teachers do use rubrics to assess both writing and speaking skills and many others (70%) expressed that these rubrics are made clear and timely.

Approaches and Parameters

Regarding assessment approaches and parameters followed in the program, the findings indicate that teachers generally comply with the requirements established in the course syllabi, particularly when it comes to evaluating the four linguistic skills and language components through formal evaluations. Most exams show that all L2 skills are assessed and integrated. The speaking test usually take place in a separate section and is conducted mainly through interviews, and in pairs to encourage an oral interaction.

In summary, the large percentage assigned to the three written exams would seem to indicate a formal summative assessment approach, whose

constant elements to be assessed are the four linguistic skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing), and the grammar and vocabulary subdomains. Within this approach, some traits of formative evaluation are evident, such as feedback, self-evaluation and co-evaluation, the use of rubrics, without becoming these common characteristics in all courses.

Improvement Alternatives to Strengthen the Assessment of the English Language

These actions are presented within the framework of an improvement proposal that can contribute to strengthening the evaluation process of the L2 in the undergraduate program investigated. A synthesis of the main suggestions made by students and teachers around the following subcategories are presented in the following section.

Concerning the principles of assessment.

Students' suggestions focus on two principles of assessment: authenticity and practicality. With authenticity, one of the most highlighted aspects is the need to contextualize the tasks proposed in the evaluation process or the items that are included in the exams; noting that it is necessary to include activities that encourage the natural use of English, as it is sustained below:

“That these are also taken to real life, for example, doing role plays, rehearsals or things like that because the student will interact much more with the language: taking it to a real-life aspect, not only in a sitting desk filling some questions and that is it.” (EEP41C71)

“Maybe it would be much more productive to practice or teach all the new knowledge in a real scenario, making it a lot more meaningful.” (EEP41C60)

As for practicality, regarding the allocation of time for the development of exams, some of the students point out that appropriate time should be provided, especially to perform the exercises corresponding to reading and writing skills. They express it this way:

“My suggestion would be that in the evaluation processes we are given more time depending on the type of evaluation as well as the topics seen in class.” (EEP41C59)

“That the time to present the exam should be extended. Especially in the writing session.” (EEP41C84)

In relation to evaluation functions.

The formative function of the evaluation allows the student to have clarity about the objectives to be achieved, analyze how the process is evolving, and establish the steps that must be followed to reach the final goal. As for the teacher, this type of evaluation requires them to formulate clear learning objectives, design lessons, and tasks that help students achieve those purposes, and help the teacher formulate their own goals and action plans in order to obtain the expected performance (Brookhart, 2005).

Within the framework of this definition, students and teachers made the following suggestions: First, they highlighted the importance of not focusing on the evaluation only on the three exams; they sustain their position by expressing that if they are evaluated with a variety of activities during the process, this experience will be more significant and at the same time, it will reduce the anxiety caused by taking a final exam that includes all the content studied during the course. The following is one of the various comments that support the aforementioned suggestion:

“I believe that in the evaluation process in our program, the result is more important than the process. The final exam is taken into account more, as the only proof of the learning process than the ones carried out in the process, such as workshops, classwork, essays, journals, etc. I think it is discouraging for the student because there are several factors that affect the evaluation and make the student go wrong.” (EEP4C36)

Finally, some of the participants insist on relating the evaluation to factors that emerge from this process such as frustration, anxiety, demotivation, fear, sorrow, among others. To minimize these factors, apart from the previous suggestions, they believe that different assessment alternatives should be included to allow them to identify their strengths and weaknesses, as suggested below.

“I think the evaluation process is important because it is like a metronome that is setting our pace of learning. However, I believe that you should not give much importance to a grade because it does not always demonstrate the knowledge acquired and it usually frustrates students in their performance. You should try to assess in another way.” (EEP41C79)

About the focus and parameters of the Program.

The assessment process should be conceived by educational institutions and therefore by teachers, as a carefully thought out plan which allows identifying the learning achievements and difficulties presented by the students. In turn, teachers could determine which aspects of teaching merit a rethinking

(Bailey, 1998). Thus, assessment must serve as information source for both the learning and the teaching processes so that teachers and students can make suitable adjustments.

It is then expected that the training programs define the established plan through their course syllabi, where the evaluation criteria and strategies will be specified, focusing not only on summative assessment but also highlighting how to guide the process from the parameters of the formative assessment.

Throughout the analysis of the syllabi and the English exams, students show disagreement with the percentages assigned to the three exams officially established by the program, as it is implied in the following comments:

“Personally, and in a general way, I have noticed certain inconsistencies in terms of the distribution of percentages for each official exam. The percentages on some occasions do not justify the whole process of preparation that the student has had for that exam.” (EEP41C37)

“I believe that the evaluations should not have too much percentage of the grade. Many of the other exercises that they give us require more effort and dedication yet, they are not graded as they should be. Many of them do not have a suitable percentage for each. I believe that teachers should see how much we much effort we are putting into improving and how excited we are to improve every day.” (EEP41C73)

In this sense, some of the participants also state that the final exam, which is usually done within the last week, has the highest weight (30%). Learners also point out that they never receive feedback on the results obtained in this test specifically. This does not allow them to identify the weaknesses on which they must work before starting the next course.

According to some of the students, certain aspects of the evaluation are very rigid and do not consider other variables such as tasks they carry out during the learning process, which are sometimes not considered for grading, and the level of anxiety or stress students may be going through. They consider it necessary to take into account that they are learning a language and that many elements that are involved in its learning process are flexible.

“In the program, they have a good evaluation system. However, there is always evidence where memorization prevails, which means that many students do not obtain good grades due to their level of anxiety and stress.” (EEP4C2)

“The learning process should have more importance than the marks obtained during the exams, since learning through the assessment is much more significant. Sometimes we as students have our anxiety level very high on an exam and this betrays us.” (EEP4C2)

In this regard, Butler and McMunn (2006) state that a teaching approach should focus on the student, which means that the learners must be actively involved in all stages of the learning process, from planning to evaluation. Besides, it is important to point out that this type of approach is based on the parameters established by constructivist pedagogies. These state that the appraisal of learning must be based on the construction and application of information, rather than memorization of what the teacher or the text establishes.

Teachers through the survey and the interview suggest that an assessment committee should be formed to develop assessment policies and guidelines so that all of the teachers are on the same page. They also express the need to define common criteria to apply in all English courses and thus determine if students are achieving the proposed objectives. However, English teachers claim that their autonomy should be respected. (P1, P2, P3, P5)

Based on the teachers' opinion, it is also necessary to promote more training in the area of evaluation and assessment of learning and make students more active participant in assessment-related decisions. This perspective is limited to the presentation of exams and is evident in the opinions of two of the participants:

“More training for teachers and talking to students more often about what evaluation is because they do not know. For them, evaluation is a test, not a process.” (P4)

“That the teachers can have foundations regarding the assessment process, that we have very clear how the processes should be carried out” (P5)

One final factor considered by teachers is the number of students per course. They suggest reducing those large groups because it affects the quality of the feedback that is provided to students. Besides, it is more time consuming, especially when evaluating the skills of writing and speaking. (P1, P3, P4)

Conclusions

The focus of assessment in the academic program investigated is slightly demarcated by some principles established in legal documents such as the Students' conduct book and the University Educational Project. In these two documents, it is established that the evaluation must be permanent, comprehensive, multifaceted and above all these aspects, formative. However, the guidelines, methodologies, procedures or good evaluation practices are not specified in these or any other document.

Likewise, there is no evidence of an approach that determines a conception, principles, purposes, functions, means, and ways of evaluating the learning of English as a foreign language. However, there is unanimity in the evaluation of all domains (reading, listening, speaking and writing) and subdomains (grammar and vocabulary) of English in each of the examinations.

There is agreement on the determination to formally assess students through three exams (two midterms and the final) with a weight of 80% of the final grade of the course. The remaining percentage consists of essays, the review of stories or literary novels, presentations or other tasks proposed autonomously by each teacher. This determination makes the written examination, the most familiar assessment instrument for teachers and students.

However, despite having no clear definition of the assessment approach and methodologies within the program, this study made it possible to identify, on the one hand, some common patterns that enrich the evaluation processes and that can subsequently constitute a basis to define the approach; and on the other hand, some aspects that must be reformulated to improve the evaluation process and, of course, the teaching and learning.

In the first place, although the evaluation generates feelings of nervousness and anxiety in the students, both teachers and students conceive it as a process that must be formative, permanent and far from the paradigm of the grade as the only element of judgment. Both teachers and students hold a favorable view of assessment, considering it essential in the teaching-learning process and beneficial to all participants.

Regarding the principles of evaluation, as stated by Brown (2004) and Bachman and Palmer (1996), it is evident that both formal and informal assessment respond to the objectives proposed for each course, in terms of content and skills to develop, thus favoring the validity of the process. The tendency for justice is evident in the evaluations, in both the grading and the degree of difficulty that the exams entail, according to the level of language proficiency of students in each course. Practicality is reflected in the proper amount of exercises and tasks in the exams, the allocation of time, but still persists some concern regarding the assigned time for writing tasks.

Feedback is focused on grammatical and phonetic notions of the language, but not so emphatically on communication or learning strategies. Hence, metacognitive strategies can add a fundamental value to cognitive processes. Likewise, the lack of effective feedback towards the end of the courses is evident in such a way that learners have clarity about possible actions and strategies to be followed in preparation for the courses in the following academic terms. The use of rubrics, even though evident in some of the evaluations, constitutes a pivotal element of meaningful feedback, and therefore needs to be promoted thoroughly within the academic program.

In general, there is evidence of an effort on the part of teachers to follow evaluative principles that result in greater objectivity and justice, including a variety of exercises within formal examinations such as selection, construction, and personal responses (Brown and Hudson, 1998); but there are no self-evaluative and co-evaluative procedures, which also reinforce the principle of democracy. Gan et al (2018) suggested in their study the need for EFL teachers to be better aware of the value of using self-assessment to support students to become self-regulating learners and take the ownership of their learning (p. 527). Self-evaluation and co-evaluation, as well as the use of alternative means such as portfolios, journals and those based on the use of technologies, oxygenate the hetero-evaluative processes, prevalent in the educational tradition.

In order to consolidate the assessment of English language learning in the program, professional development initiatives should be developed where evaluation criteria can be discussed for teachers and students to decide the methodologies and procedures that promote a comprehensive, formative and multifaceted assessment model. As proposed in Troudi, Coombe, and Al-Hamliy's study (2012), more professional development opportunities allow teachers to capitalize the knowledge and experience they have gained over the course of the years (p. 553).

In summary, the strengths and weaknesses evidenced in each of the constitutive elements of the evaluation process analyzed here should be consolidated in principles, purposes, functions, forms, means, techniques and evaluation instruments, on which teachers and students, as the main actors of the evaluation process, must coincide, thus avoiding surprises, disagreements and injustices.

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