Back to School with Alternative Assessment

Kirti Kapur

Introduction

This article is based on a series of journal entries recounting my experiences and observations during a three month field visit as a teacher educator in Nigam Pratibha Girl's School, Aya Nagar, New Delhi.

"It is not realistic. It would be impossible to give each student feedback on mistakes they make", she offered.

This was Suman's (name changed) comment when I asked her if English students of class V were given feedback on the errors they were making in their homework or exams.

"I can't possibly tell each student where she went wrong," she remarked. "Checking their notebooks is such a time consuming task in itself. Once I return their copies they can see which one of their answers is right or wrong." [1]

This gave me an acute sense of déjà vu; before joining NCERT I had spent close to a decade teaching English language in different kinds of schools—from highbrow, posh, private ones to makeshift huts in villages across India—where such conversations were routine. However, the challenge of being a teacher-educator is to be able to identify such opinions and to transform them into opportunities that make learning a process that can be wondrous for young children.

Using research to identify the absences and gaps in learning situations can prove to be a good starting point to introduce simple teaching-learning techniques that can improve the experience of education without any major investment. During a field survey that I will discuss in the paper, I was able to identify one such opportunity for both students and teachers through the introduction of self-assessment.

New Techniques

"Today, all of you will check your own work", I said to students of class V one day.

I was somewhat amused at the look of incredulity on their faces, wondering if they had heard me correctly. The question that was writ large on their faces was "How?" Her interest piqued, one of the girls piped,

"But how can we check our work?"

I smiled and said, "We will finish reading the lesson, and I will give you three questions. You will answer the questions in the class. After you have written the answers, I will tell you the correct answer, and you will tell me if you have made a mistake or not."

"What do you say?" I asked.

Some of the girls nodded their heads, defining the arc of a circle with their chins. The others looked on with interest. I knew from experience that I had their attention.

We read a passage in class. The questions that followed required the students to complete sentences and fill in the blanks by using words with the appropriate tense. The second exercise involved rearranging sentences to summarize a paragraph.

After the exercises, I wrote the answers on the blackboard. I then asked the students to compare their responses with those on the board, and identify the questions with differing responses. This was followed by a discussion around the mistakes made by them and why using words in the right tense was important. Thereafter, the students corrected their responses on their own, and exchanged their notebooks with a neighbour for a final overview.

Figure 1. Students at the Nigam Pratibha Girl's School, Aya Nagar, attempting a self-evaluation exercise. © Dr Kirti Kapur

For many students, this was the first time that they had seen a conceptual link between:

- Their preparation to write an answer

- Writing an answer

- What happens to the answers when they reach the teacher, and

- The teacher's thought process or reactions to their answers.

It was clear that the students were perceptibly more engaged in the classroom after this exercise.

Besides the students, I was also following the class teacher's reaction to the self-assessment. Suman's face betrayed her astonishment and delight at the sight of the students applying themselves to the process of reviewing their own answers in class. This was a crucial marker of the need for assessment literacy among teachers, teacher educators and administrators. In fact, educationists at all levels of teaching should be equipped to critically evaluate whether their assessment is yielding the desired results and being practiced in the correct spirit. Moreover, is the assessment improving the teaching-learning process, and what kind of assessments do the teachers need to understand?

Traditional Systems

In a traditional assessment process, students answer a question without any immediate feedback from the teacher on what they get correct or wrong. Also, the assessment takes place after a long delay, and is usually carried out by the teacher alone. We can call this the Open Loop Model of Assessment [2]; in this, the frequency and quality of feedback can be greatly improved (see Figure 2). In this model of assessment, typically, the teacher collects answers to multiple questions from all the students (between 40-100) through homework or an examination. On most occasions, the teacher is under severe time pressure to meet deadlines for correcting homework / papers, and finishing the syllabus for a particular subject on time. A paucity of teachers means that one person is responsible for multiple subjects, and ensuring that syllabi for all these subjects is 'finished' before the final examination. The definition of 'finished' varies with each teacher, and this subjectivity is one of the reasons for inconsistencies in learning indicators.
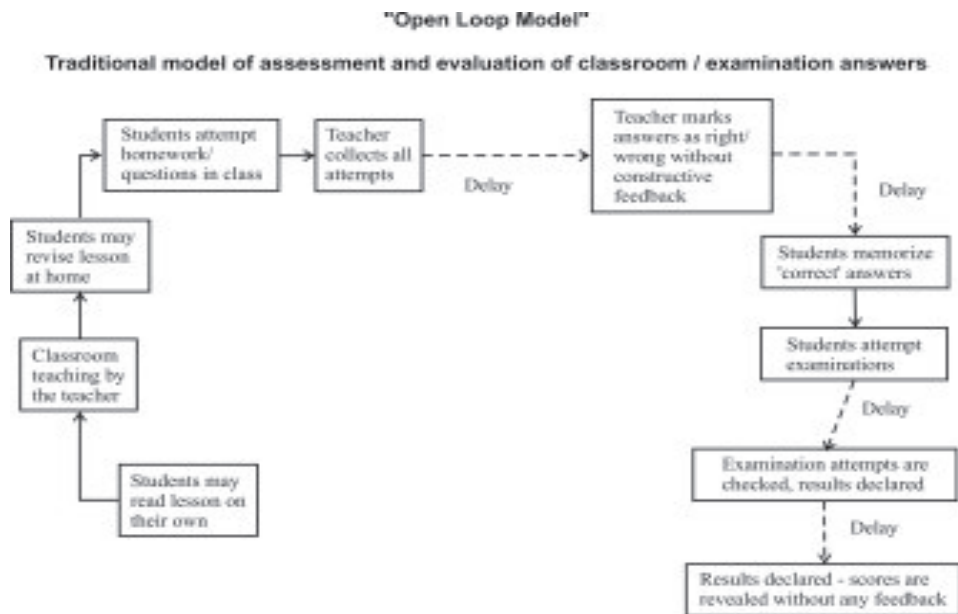
"Open Loop Model"

Traditional model of assessment and evaluation of classroom / examination answers

Figure 2. Open loop model of assessment - Traditional method of evaluating students' answers © Dr Kirti Kapur

Self-assessment, on the other hand allows children to analyse their own answers. In most cases, this happens immediately after the student has answered the question, and her / his answer is still fresh in the memory. More significantly, self-assessment lends itself to a student applying corrective action herself / himself. We can call this the Closed Loop Model of Assessment[3] with a feedback loop that corrects and reinforces learning (see Figure 3).

"Closed Loop Model"

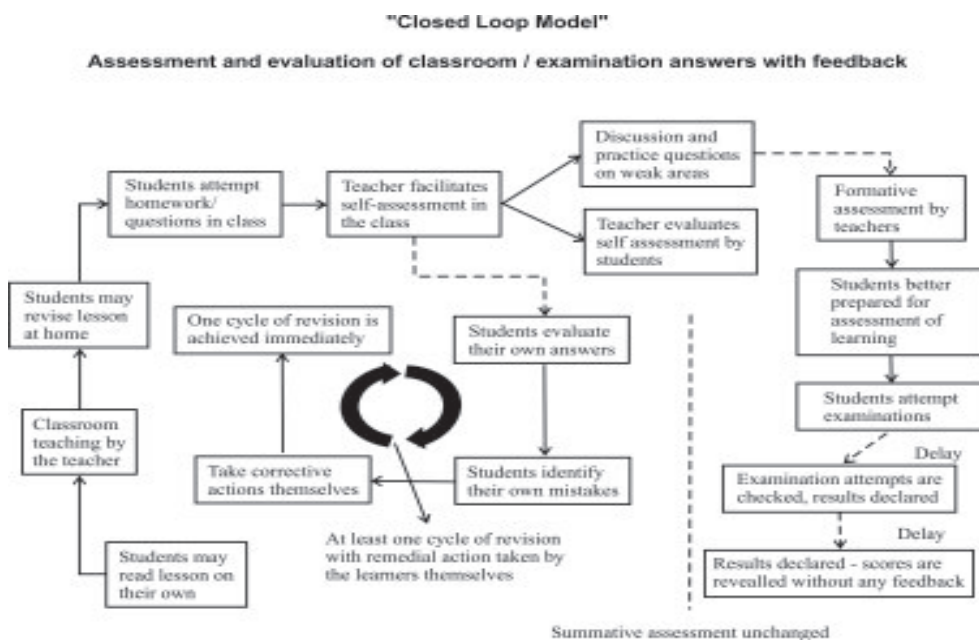**Assessment and evaluation of classroom / examination answers with feedback**

Figure 3. Closed loop model of assessment - Assessment of students' answers with feedback. © Dr Kirti Kapur

As a teacher, the self-assessment exercise allowed me to understand some of the major weaknesses of the students. For instance, after the self-assessment exercises, I knew that the majority of the class could comprehend the lesson, follow the logical progression of the story, and attempt synonyms. However, their application of tenses was weak and required further inputs.

Somewhat surprised by the success of the exercise, Suman gushed, "I have to admit, this method really works. Even Meenu (name changed) was paying attention! Though I must say this too will take up a lot of time. I cannot possibly do this for each exercise and each chapter."

I agreed that considering the numerous demands on a teacher's time, including several administrative duties, it may not be practical for her to do this in every class. However, I also explained to her that if this was done right from the beginning, and often enough, students would be likely to learn faster. Moreover, this could potentially improve their learning experience as well as save time for the teacher. I added, "The trick would be to take up this activity for specific activities, and periodically. This will also allow you to make a real-time evaluation that will help in continuous assessment of the children in your class."

With "…more use of descriptive records of learner development in language and learning which [track] language development along with other curricular abilities" (Rea-Dickins and Rixon, 1997, p. 151), we can enable learners to develop insights into their own progress. Here, the teaching-learning processes focus more on communicative competence rather than mastery of the rules of grammar and linguistic accuracy.

In India, the last decade has witnessed an increase in the teaching of English. Since 2005, we have also seen a notable shift from a structural, teacher-centric approach in teaching to a communicative and inclusive approach. In his article "Assessment of Young Learners", the author K. Shaaban refers to Stevick (1990), Krashen (1982) and Asher (1988) to assert that "…new approaches in teaching EFL/ ESL recognize that affective considerations are of vital importance for the acquisition of a foreign/ second language; they suggest teaching methods and techniques that help learners acquire the language in an anxiety-reduced environment" (Shaaban, 2005, p. 1).

Need for Alternative Models

It is clear that this calls for assessment processes that are humanistic and learner-centred. Traditional paper-pencil tests do not involve the learner holistically in the assessment process. Formative assessment on the other hand, comprises several techniques and activities that ensure learner participation in assessment. Known as alternative assessment, these techniques may be described as, "any method of finding out what a student knows or can do that is intended to show growth and inform instruction and is not a standardized or traditional test" (Pierce and O'Malley, 1992, p. 2).

Formative assessment is indeed a powerful tool in the hands of the teachers for improvement in assessment. According to Popham (2008), "The function of the formative assessment process is to supply evidence that will enhance students' learning" (as cited in Popham 2009). Summative assessment involves using "…evidence when arriving at decisions about already completed instructional events such as the quality of a year's worth of schooling or the effectiveness of a semester-long…course." (as cited in Popham, 2009)

When we assess learners using a variety of tools and methods, we take into consideration the diversity of the learning needs of the students such as their interests, and learning styles. Activities are then designed based on their

learning needs with the aim of nurturing positive aspects rather than just conducting summative evaluation.

Key aspects of alternative assessment are:

- activities and tasks are based on authentic tasks
- there is greater focus on communication rather than on right or wrong answers
- self-assessment and peer assessment are an integral part of alternative assessment

Alternative assessment has scope for dynamic linguistic development. Techniques such as assessment of non-verbal responses, oral responses, written work, presentations, portfolios, projects, interactions between students, student-teacher interactions, self-assessment and peer / group assessment allow students to demonstrate what they can do with language through a range of activities and tasks. Since the environment is non-threatening, it actually helps learners prepare for summative assessments including tests for achievement, surveys and scholarships, etc., by developing their confidence and understanding of the nuances involved in the assessment of what they have learned. When learners are involved in self-assessment, it has a wash back effect and there is space for on-going dialogue between all the stakeholders.

Alternative assessment involves use of authentic activities that are designed around topics or issues relevant to the age, interest, cognitive level as well as context of the students. These tasks have a process approach to language learning and connect learning to real world situations. They require creative use of language rather than simple repetition. According to Campbell et al., alternative assessment views students as enquirers into knowledge, "… who are active, deep learners, collaborating and using higher levels of thinking skill." (as cited in Burger

(2008), p. 33). Testing and evaluation have followed a top down approach. However in today's learner-centred classrooms, teachers need to tap into bottom-up approaches.

However, it is not enough to only train the teachers for these approaches. Learners also need to be prepared for such assessment processes. When assessment is embedded in the teaching learning process, there is a supportive environment in which students feel comfortable. Talking to them about assessment makes them understand the value of assessment, and seeking their ideas involves learners meaningfully in their own education.

Checklists and rubrics are useful devices for self and peer assessment because they provide rationale and criteria for approaching and evaluating tasks. There is scope for reflection, and over time this habit can lead to overall improvements in learning. For example a checklist for a writing task can be:

- Has the main point been addressed in the introduction?
- Does each paragraph start with a topic sentence?
- Is there a connection between paragraphs?
- Is there a concluding paragraph?

Reflecting on the process of writing using a checklist will help students in identifying their strong points, as well as weak areas, irrespective of the topic. Checklists can be used for self-assessment as well. For example self-assessment in a speaking task may include the following:

- Do I have an appropriate quotation to introduce the topic as per the topic?
- Have I put all my points in order?
- Do I have an appropriate conclusion?
- Do I look at the audience while speaking?

Rubrics with a component that assigns levels of performance, e.g. weak, satisfactory, good and very good on various aspects of a task may also be used by the learners for self / peer assessment. The teacher may even change the adjectives as per the task. A sample rubric from the TOEFL internet based test is given as follows:

Score	Task Description
5	An essay at this level largely accomplishes all of the following: • effectively addresses the topic and task • is well organized and well developed, using clearly appropriate explanations, exemplifications, and/or details • displays unity, progression, and coherence • displays consistent facility in the use of language, demonstrating syntactic variety, appropriate word choice, and idiomaticity, though it may have minor lexical or grammatical errors
4	**An essay at this level largely accomplishes all of the following:** • addresses the topic and task well, though some points may not be fully elaborated • is generally well organized and well developed, using appropriate and sufficient explanations, exemplifications, and/or details • displays unity, progression, and coherence, though it may contain occasional redundancy, digression, or unclear connections • displays facility in the use of language demonstrating syntactic variety and range of vocabulary, though it will probably have occasional noticeable minor errors in structure, word form, or use of idiomatic language that do not interfere with meaning
3	**An essay at this level is marked by one or more of the following:** • addresses the topic and task using somewhat developed explanations, exemplifications, and/or details • displays unity, progression, and coherence, though connection of ideas may be occasionally obscured • may demonstrate inconsistent facility in sentence formation and word choice that may result in lack of clarity and occasionally obscure meaning • may display accurate but limited range of syntactic structures and vocabulary
2	**An essay at this level may reveal one or more of the following weaknesses:** • limited development in response to the topic and task • inadequate organization or connection of ideas • inappropriate or insufficient exemplifications, explanations, or details to support or illustrate generalizations in response to the task • a noticeably inappropriate choice of words or word forms • an accumulation of errors in sentence structure and/or usage
1	**An essay at this level is seriously flawed by one or more of the following weaknesses:** • serious disorganization or underdevelopment • little or no detail, or irrelevant specifics, or questionable responsiveness to the task • serious and frequent errors in sentence structure or usage
0	**An essay at this level** merely copies words from the topic, rejects the topic, or is otherwise not connected to the topic, is written in a foreign language, consists of keystroke characters, or is blank.

Figure 4. Independent writing rubrics: Scoring standards. © ETS, 2008
(https://www.ets.org/Media/Tests/.../Integrated_Writing_Rubrics_2008.pd...)

It is evident that qualitative / descriptive feedback is always more educative than just a grade. "Fortunately, the field of evaluation has witnessed a major shift from strictly summative testing tools and procedures to a more humanistic approach using informal assessment techniques that stress formative evaluation." (O'Neil, 1992, p. 14)

Conclusion

In the final analysis, while self-assessment certainly has several benefits, teachers need to be cautious about several things. A few points for consideration are:

1. Some students may respond to self-assessment immediately, while others may require some individual attention to ensure they benefit from the exercise.

2. The teacher cannot use this method with every question. For instance, there will be several types of questions, particularly in literature, where there can be multiple correct answers. Self-assessment would be detrimental in this situation as it prescribes one answer, limiting the student's opportunity to think.

3. Self-assessment is not a panacea for all the challenges of assessment. For instance, self-assessment does not lead to a change in the structure of summative assessment wherein students are not given detailed feedback.

4. In a class that has children with special needs, self-assessment must be adapted to suit the needs of the child.

5. A combination of formative and summative assessment will contribute to a robust and representative form of evaluating progress and curricular outcomes.

In summary, assessment is central to the entire process of teaching and learning and teachers should give opportunities to students to self-assess. Opportunities must also be created for receiving feedback with understanding, self-monitoring, practicing and redoing / re-attempting. After all, "…the ultimate goal of evaluation…[is] to give us the knowledge to be able to reflect upon, discuss, and assist a student's journey…"(Huerta-Macias, 1995, p. 10) and I'm sure Suman would agree!

Footnote

[1] This is one of the many conversations I have had with teachers over the past three months during an on-going field research programme under which faculty from NCERT is sent to government schools across the country.

[2] A term used in Game Theory where all stakeholders do not have access to information that impacts decisions of other players.

[3] A term used in Game Theory where all stakeholders have access to information that impacts decisions of other players; also known as common knowledge.

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Kirti Kapur works in the Department of Education in Languages at the National Council of Educational Research and Training, New Delhi, India. She has 25 years of teaching experience in the areas of English Language and Literature. At NCERT, she has designed curriculum and syllabi, developed textbooks, conducted teacher trainings and research and provided consultancy to national and international institutions.

kkapur07@yahoo.com