THE RELEVANCE OF ASSESSING STUDENTS AND TESTING TEXTBOOKS PRIOR SYLLABUS DESIGN

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Abstract: Contemporary teaching takes into consideration every aspect and element that enhances effective learning, therefore, the relevance of effective planning and syllabus design is a matter of discussion worldwide. It is known for a fact that the availability of materials in the region is quite limited and that most likely every English teacher in the region has encountered the case of lacking appropriate materials or even been “handicapped” in free choice due to school or Ministry policies. The issue of flexibility in most cases is an issue that is rarely treated. As teachers, we begin our day with aims and objectives and end it with the self-reflection of the intentions and the accomplishments. Accordingly, it is the same regarding our learners. We want to get better acquainted with their capacities, with their level, with their attitude regarding tasks and activities; we want to know how well students can do in midterms and exams, on tests, oral presentations. We therefore design tools and use instruments that will justify intended outcomes and results. This article will examine two issues which interrelate with one another: the perspective of choosing materials with regard on student assessment and the relevance of authentic materials when good materials lack. The term assessment is regarded as “the gathering and interpreting of information about or evidence of learning… …through assessment we find out whether and to what extent learners are learning the content as set out in the goals and objectives.” (Graves, 2014, p. 60) Accordingly, assessment addresses the following questions: What is the learner supposed to learn/ be able to do? What is evidence of that learning? What kinds of tasks will enable learners to provide that evidence? How will the evidence be evaluated? What will happen with the results? (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) The article will also provide different insights and theories and also discuss the perspectives and benefits of student assessment both prior and during teaching. Also, it will include personal experiences in teaching and the implementation of student assessment tools.

Keywords: assessment, authentic materials, goals and objectives, perspectives, syllabus design etc.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment is today’s means of modifying tomorrow’s instruction.  
Carol Ann Tomlinson

Different elements partake in effective syllabus design, effective instruction and overall satisfaction in teaching, such as: students’ level of proficiency, course book criteria, availability and assessment. Accordingly, checking course book contents and lessons is the beginning of effective design. Moreover, teaching academic content subjects requires choosing comprehensible, up to date material. The thing with planning (theory) and teaching (practice) is just as the similarity of “night and day.” (if there is any) When searching for content materials, teachers normally base their findings on the cover, the title, the authors or even upon a colleague’s impression. They tend to forget that the inner book differs from its cover and that a colleague might have had a different perspective in mind, a different objective etc. by which, the same choices might result in failure. Baldwin (1986) describes this issue as follows: “...tremendous amounts of information and associated terminology are compressed into relatively few pages…and it is not hard to see why so many students consider so many textbooks to be so much drudgery. (1986, p. 323) Another problematic issue regarding textbook assessment and choosing appropriate materials is having little choice (or none). What teachers’ can apply is the use of authentic materials with modification. Brown & Yule (1983) state “it is, in principle, not possible to find material which would interest everyone. It follows that the emphasis should be moved from attempting to provide intrinsically interesting materials, which we have just claimed is generally impossible, to doing interesting things with materials . . . these materials should be chosen, not so much on the basis of their own interest, but for what they can be used to do. (Brown and Yule 1983, p.83). The following article will deal with the issues of learner level assessment, textbook reliability and authentic materials in terms of effective planning and instruction.

STUDENT LEVEL ASSESSMENT

Teachers tend to test students and their achievement from day one. They tend to examine students’ level at the beginning and then see them progress during their FL experience and of course try to help them surpass their
difficulties in content subjects and academic reading. Teachers therefore tend to get better acquainted with learners level of proficiency by assessing them and their capacities as well. The term assessment is regarded as “the gathering and interpreting of information about or evidence of learning…through assessment we find out whether and to what extent learners are learning the content as set out in the goals and objectives.” (Graves, 2014, p. 60) Accordingly, “effective assessments are practical to use and transparent to learners. They are both formative (they provide evidence along the way) and summative (they provide culminating, integrated evidence of learning).” (2014, p. 60) Teachers therefore design tools and use instruments that will justify intended outcomes and results. Sharkey & Cade (2008) describe the procedure of assessment as follows:

The first step in this process was making sure students knew what the learning objectives were, why those objectives were important and then consistently encouraging students to identify and reflect on what they were learning and how they were learning it. The learning objectives, key vocabulary and concepts were posted in a prominent position in the classroom and students became accustomed to referring to them at different points of the day and throughout the week. (2008, p. 186)

The following table is a detailed description of the purposes and benefits of assessment. As you may notice, the advantages and benefits of assessment are important for both the teacher and the learners. First and foremost, teachers identify what needs review, then, after student current level is defined, teachers can monitor further success and accomplishment. Teacher instruction is also “carved” and decisions are made accordingly to students needs either as a group or as individuals. The effectiveness of instruction can also be measured by overall, ongoing assessment. Teachers can distinguish what was effective and what not, and make changes accordingly.

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<th>Table 1. Purpose and benefits of assessment</th>
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<td>Research provides evidence that specific early literacy concepts can predict young students’ later reading achievement (DeBruinParecki, 2004). These reading concepts include letter knowledge, phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency, and comprehension. An effective reading program includes assessments of all of these concepts for several purposes.</td>
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<td>One purpose is to identify skills that need review. Assessment provides teachers with information on what skills students have and have not mastered. It is needed to help teachers know the skill levels of their students, since students have varying experiences and knowledge.</td>
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<td>A second purpose is to monitor student progress. A teacher can learn which students need review before covering additional content and which students are ready to move forward.</td>
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<td>A third purpose is to guide teacher instruction. Through consistent assessment, a teacher can make informed decisions about what instruction is appropriate for each student.</td>
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<td>A fourth purpose is to demonstrate the effectiveness of instruction. The information gained from assessment allows teachers to know if all students are mastering the content covered. It is important for teachers to use instructional time effectively, and this can be done when teachers are knowledgeable about what their students are ready to learn and what they already know. Therefore, the information gained from assessment allows a teacher to create appropriate instruction for their students.</td>
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<td>Additionally, a fifth purpose of assessment is to provide teachers with information on how instruction can be improved.</td>
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IDENTIFYING QUALITY ASSESSMENT CHARACTERISTICS

According to Dean & Schiffbauer (2003), “quality assessment must be multifaceted and meaningful…it should include the following characteristics:

1. Assessments must have both formative (ongoing) and summative (final) components.
2. Students need multiple kinds of assessment.
3. Assessment should be fair and equitable.
4. People other than teachers should be included in the assessment process.
5. Quality assessment uses multiple types of texts, incorporates a variety of strategies and processes, and allows for a variety of responses.
6. Students should be involved in constructing assessments. (2003, pg. 206 - 207)
The overall advantages of students assessment and level proficiency add up to effective planning and autonomous learning. Teachers base their choices upon the suggestions and necessities of their learners and learners benefit from the process. It is therefore highly recommended that teachers consult colleagues, assess students and test course books prior planning.

TEXT SELECTION AND AUTHENTIC TEXTS

In an effective classroom students should not only know what they are doing, they should also know why and how. 

Harry Wong

Apart from all the preparation that needs to be done in advance by teachers, syllabus design and text selection are “descriptors of the path” and the theory that will be further put to practice. Selecting appropriate texts and developing good lesson plans and designs show teachers’ overall intentions, aims and objectives. The manner of how teachers plan and choose materials shows their interest and the degree of how much they know their learners and how much success they want them to achieve. Nuttall (1996) lists three criteria for evaluating texts for reading development: suitability of context, exploitability and readability. (1996, p. 170-176) The teacher must also provide students with predictable material and material that interests them, something that they will be able to “comprehend” or as Eskey (1986) states: “the first concern of any reading teacher is to find, or create, a body of material that his particular students might find interesting to read, and then do everything in his power to make it as comprehensible to them as he can.” (1986, p.4) Since unfortunately in Macedonia, teachers lack such opportunities of finding “good material” and since there is lack of variety of texts to work with, normally the next best thing to do is “create” suitable material for the students. Knowing students needs and interests facilitates the burden: “this task may be challenging, but is often manageable for individual instructors who know the interests of their students” (Anderson, 1999, p. 115) Simply understood, teachers should base reading instruction upon certain goals they wish to achieve, and be able to evaluate what they really achieved at the end: “a healthy combination of these variables provides the teacher with the information necessary to make an informed decision…” (Anderson, 1999, p. 117) Despite taking into consideration all of the above, what the majority of teachers face these days is the “incapability” of choosing “what to do when” This is due to different school policies and the laws that educational ministries “choose the textbook” for them. Not that we are judging laws, however, classroom instruction is different when you are actually facing a class of 40 individuals with different levels, interests and capacities. At times when the materials are not as suitable, there are only two things teachers can manage to do: either create something that will satisfy goals or bring in authentic materials that will “fill in the gaps” that have been concluded. Authentic materials should be understood as material that provide “real-life” situations and that are normally not written for native speakers and not for ESL students. Nuttall (1996) and Wallace (1992) suggest that the selection of materials is vital to reading instruction, and that by authentic texts is meant that the texts have been written for native speakers of the language and not for second language readers. This is more of a fact than a suggestion.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The article in its few pages discussed the issues regarding students level, authentic materials and assessment. It developed the importance of defining the above mentioned factors which help teachers make the right decisions when selecting reading materials and when planning. The overall theory states that: providing students with the autonomy to assess themselves and to reflect on their learning experience, provides us with feedback, insights and suggestions, which will further facilitate the burden of choice and planning. In cases when suitable materials are not available, making flexible lesson plans and syllabuses, with different types of reading materials including authentic materials and literature always helps. Variety of materials and tasks is a must. Teachers must provide students’ with different materials and tasks, use different strategies and approaches, especially when and if the circumstances require for such flexibility.

REFERENCES


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Websites: