Evaluation: the hinge on which learner autonomy turns

David Little
Trinity College Dublin

My answers to some of your questions

L’évaluation prend trop de temps aux enseignants, aux dépens de l’accompagnement (modalités d’accompagnement non exploités faute de temps : entretiens-conseil, ateliers méthodologiques, autres ateliers, etc.)

In my view evaluation/assessment should play a fundamental role in all teaching and learning

L’évaluation intermédiaire (de type validé / non validé) est sommative (obligatoire) de fait mais est aussi formative (fait partie de l’accompagnement) dans l’esprit des enseignants : l’étudiant le comprend-t-il ainsi et en profite-t-il vraiment ? Devrait-on obligatoirement scinder les moments d’évaluation formative et sommative ?

Self-assessment, peer assessment, teacher assessment and external/official exams should exist on a continuum and be mutually supporting

Y a-t-il une contradiction fondamentale entre la liberté (de choix) nécessaire au développement de l’autonomie et la contrainte institutionnelle de la notation ?

For me, learner autonomy in formal educational contexts is always framed by institutional considerations, including exams, but those considerations need not be obstacles

Peut-on évaluer l’autonomie ? Laquelle (autonomie langagière, autonomie d’apprentissage) ? Est-ce éthique de le faire d’évaluer l’autonomie ?

In my view evaluation/assessment should focus on learning outcomes, not on the degree of autonomy achieved by the learner


Both, given the ultimate inseparability of teaching/learning and assessment

L’évaluation fait-elle partie de l’apprentissage, est-elle un levier de l’apprentissage ?

Yes and yes!

Quel est le meilleur moment d’évaluation pour l’apprenant ?

In reflective learning evaluation is ever-present (self-assessment, peer and teacher assessment), but summative assessment is probably most useful if it comes at the end of a course/module

Comment conjuguer apprentissage, évaluation et émulation ?

That is the question I will now try to answer

Language learner autonomy and self-assessment

Language learner autonomy: the essentials

- Success in formal learning at any level and in any domain depends on the learner’s active engagement: identity (sense of self, unique complex of knowledge and experience); interaction (engagement in communication, learners share initiative); choice (who determines range? who directs the action?); evaluation (engagement means reflection → evaluation)

- Active engagement is the beginning of learner autonomy as a general pedagogical goal (see, e.g., Alexander 2006, Mercer 2000, Wells 2009)

- Language learner autonomy: target language as channel of learner’s agency

Stimulating reflection

- Five questions (Dam 1995)
  - What are we doing?
  - Why are we doing it?
  - How are we doing it?
  - With what results?
  - What next?

- In my version of language learner autonomy, the skill of self-assessment develops out of reflective interaction in the target language

Tools to support the exercise and development of language learner autonomy (Dam 1995)

- Learner logbooks – record of individual learning
  - Content of lessons
  - Words etc. to be memorized
  - Plans for homework
  - Evaluation of own progress
  - Especially in the early stages, the texts they compose
  - As far as possible in TL

- Posters – stimulate, guide and record learning of class
  - Aims and objectives
  - Plans (lessons, group work)
  - Ideas (useful activities)
  - Things to remember
  - Our own experience (learners’ definitions of good group work)
  - Help (useful expressions)

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, language learner autonomy and self-assessment,

- “Language use, embracing language learning, comprises the actions performed by persons who as individuals and as social agents develop a range of competences, both general and in particular communicative language competences. They draw on the competences at their disposal in various contexts under various conditions and under various constraints to engage in language activities involving language processes to produce and/or receive texts in relation to themes in specific domains, activating those strategies which seem most appropriate for carrying out the tasks to be accomplished. The monitoring of these actions by the participants leads to the reinforcement or modification of their competences” (Council of Europe 2001: 9)

- According to the CEFR, L2 proficiency develops from sustained interaction between the learner’s competences and the communicative tasks whose performance requires him or her to use the target language

- Language use is autonomous behaviour: as a variety of language use, L2 learning should also be rooted in autonomous behaviour

- In the autonomy classroom monitoring begins as a conscious process of self-management; but using the TL as the channel of that explicit monitoring helps to develop the
capacity for involuntary and implicit monitoring that is fundamental to spontaneous/autonomous language use
• In this way, self-assessment becomes a habit of mind and a fully integrated part of L proficiency

**CEFR-based self-assessment and Dam’s five questions: two examples**

• Example 1, B2 reading: “I can quickly scan through long and complex texts on a variety of topics in my field to locate relevant details” (Council of Europe 2011b: 8)
  - What is “my field”?
  - What is an appropriate “variety of topics”?
  - In terms of field and topics, what counts as a “long and complex text”?
  - What count as “relevant details”?
  - Why do we need to answer these questions?
  - What are our current reading skills?
  - What do we need to add in order to achieve B2?
  - How can we best go about developing those additional skills?
  - How will we monitor our progress?
  - Etc., etc.

• Example 2, B2 writing: “I can write clear detailed text on a wide range of subjects relating to my personal, academic or professional interests” (Council of Europe 2011b: 17)
  - What are “my academic and/or professional interests”?
  - What is an appropriate “range of subjects”?
  - How do we define “clear detailed text”?
  - Why do we need clear answers to these questions?
  - What are our current writing skills?
  - What new elements do we need to master in order to achieve B2?
  - How can we best master those elements?
  - How will we know when we have mastered them?
  - Etc., etc.

**Implementing constructive alignment in five steps**

**Step 1: Foundations**
• Define the programme in terms of
  – Content: the body of knowledge that students are required to engage with and master, defined in terms of discipline(s), sub-disciplines, concepts, texts, procedures, etc.
  – Competences: the skills that learners are required to develop in relation to programme content
• Cognitive, metacognitive, interactive, collaborative (Biggs & Tang 2011)
• Language activities and communicative/metacognitive language competences (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001)
• If the programme lasts more than one semester
  – Divide content into appropriate segments
  – Define competences for each segment
  – Pay attention to the various kinds of progression that your division is likely to imply: content, competences, language proficiency

**Step 2: Applying the CEFR**
• Use the levels and scales of the CEFR to determine the L2 capacities students should have (reception, interaction, production)
  – at the beginning of the programme
  – at the end of each segment
  – at the end of the programme
• Be realistic!
  – B2 is an acceptable minimum level of proficiency at the end of a degree programme provided it is appropriately focused

**Step 3: Programme design**
• With the requirements of learner autonomy always in mind, design a programme of teaching and learning that
  – assigns content to large classes, small classes, group work, individual activities
  – explains the relation between these different modes of teaching/learning
  – explains how students are expected to engage with each of them receptively, interactively and productively
• provides additional activities (classes, self-access) to support students who are in danger of falling short

• At each step of programme design, answer these questions:
  – How will students explicitly accept responsibility for their learning?
  – How will they be led to engage reflectively with the learning process?
  – How will self-assessment and peer assessment be built into the dynamic of teaching and learning?

**Step 4: Supporting learner autonomy**

• If we want learner autonomy to be central to students' academic experience, we we must help them to
  – document the learning process
  – manage their own learning
  – engage in self-assessment and peer assessment using criteria that are fully harmonious with the criteria applied in teacher and institutional assessment

• Tools to support these procedures include
  – portfolios and e-portfolios whose structure reflects the structure of the programme in question
  – checklists of “I can” descriptors arranged according to activity and CEFR level (use generic descriptors and interpret them with specific reference to programme content and target competences)

**Step 5: Assessment**

• Design assessment tasks that elicit and display the target competences

• Design rating scales that are fully harmonious with the “I can” checklists, so that there is a clear continuum from self-assessment through peer and teacher assessment to institutional assessment

• Incorporate self-assessment into the reporting of outcomes

• Note that
  – It is not a matter of confirming the accuracy or otherwise of self-assessment but of acknowledging the central role it plays in the teaching/learning process
  – If self-assessment and peer assessment are foundational to teaching and learning, there is no reason why they should lack either validity or reliability (see Dam & Legenhausen 2010)

**Conclusion**

**The argument in a nutshell**

• Evaluation/assessment should be inseparable from learning and teaching

• In autonomous learning, self-assessment, peer assessment, teacher assessment and external/institutional exams should exist on a continuum and be mutually supporting

• This implies a need for constructive alignment of curriculum, teaching/learning and evaluation/assessment

**Four questions for you**

• To what extent do the courses you teach meet the criteria of constructive alignment?

• What role does self-assessment play in your courses? What is the relation between self-assessment and end-of-course exams as regards criteria?

• What instruments do you require/expect your students to use to manage their learning?

• Do your students manage their learning in and through the target language? If not, why not?

**References**


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