Chapter 14

e-Assessment for Learning: Gaining Insight in Language Learning with Online Assessment Environments

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ABSTRACT

This chapter illustrates how e-assessment of oral proficiency in the foreign language can be designed and conducted in ways that enhance the students’ learning experience. Referring to the authors’ experiences with the WebCEF and CEFcult assessment platforms, the chapter shows how a variety of technical functionalities of these two online tools create a supportive environment for a pedagogical approach known as assessment for learning. The discussion focuses on three key principles of the approach: the structural involvement of learners in the assessment process, the elicitation of effective feedback, and the development of self-assessment skills. While documenting the great potential of online assessment environments for gaining insight in language learning, the chapter also points out some of its current limitations and how ongoing research might help to overcome these.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years online or e-assessment of oral language skills has developed with the spread of e-learning and online testing within foreign language teaching and learning. Although much of the assessment done in online environments is assessment of learning, assessment for learning can help motivate students by raising their awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, rather than simply measuring these. In this chapter, it will be illustrated how e-assessment can support assessment for learning with special reference
to two online learning and assessment tools that were co-developed by the authors within the European projects WebCEF (www.webcef.eu) and CEFcult (www.cefcult.eu). WebCEF was primarily concerned with the assessment of oral production with reference to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) while CEFcult added to this the assessment of intercultural competence. The discussion will be set within the context of foreign language courses for non–language majors within higher education, centering on a group of business students in Leuven, Belgium, who are preparing for intercultural encounters in international business.

After introducing Assessment for Learning (AfL) from a conceptual point of view, and setting it within the context of the principles of sound testing, we will provide an overview of the two tools and the most relevant affordances for the purposes of AfL. In the main body of the chapter, we will discuss these with reference to the specific uses made within the courses at the University of Leuven, Belgium, showing how the tools can be used to enhance the learners’ experiences through effective feedback and the development of self-assessment skills. Finally, we will discuss some of the critical issues concerning the tools, as well as suggest directions for future research.

BACKGROUND

(e-)Assessment for Learning

Ample attention has been paid in the last decades to various forms of outcomes-based assessment, or assessment of learning. However, there has been a simultaneous increase of research on process-based assessment, or assessment for learning, which can be defined as ‘any assessment for which the first priority is to serve the purpose of promoting students’ learning’ (Black, et al., 2003, p. 3). Assessment for Learning (henceforth AfL) therefore refers to ‘a set of practices and methodologies that might be used by both teachers and students to understand what students know and are able to do so that instruction and learning can be regulated more effectively’ (Bennett, 2010). As such, it operates within the same framework as closely related approaches known as ‘formative assessment,’ ‘dynamic assessment,’ and ‘assessment as inquiry’ (Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Poehner, 2011). Although often associated with classroom settings, the principles of AfL can also extend to e-assessment (Gikandi, et al., 2011).

There are three fundamental phases in the learning process: 1) identifying goals, 2) establishing where the learner is with respect to those goals, and 3) what the learner needs to do in order to reach them. If we conceptualise learning as “the process whereby students actively construct their own knowledge and skills” (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p. 200), these three phases cannot be exclusively in the hands of the teacher, but need to involve learners themselves. Engaging learners in the assessment process can be a way of increasing their autonomy and encouraging them to take responsibility for their own learning. These are crucial aspects in the context of lifelong learning, and should arguably be a priority of higher education institutions. Learners can be encouraged to engage with this process through a number of different actions, summarised in the following three key principles of AfL (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002; Stiggins, 2005):

- **Student-involved assessment:** That is, an assessment that provides learners “with a clear vision of the learning target from the beginning of the learning, along with samples of strong and weak work so they can see a progression to competence laid out before them” (Stiggins, 2005, p. 1). This involves developing a shared language with which the quality of performance can be described, collaboratively assessing samples performed by learners at different levels of proficiency, and encouraging peer
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