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Learning-oriented Assessment: Beyond a Marriage of Convenience

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Abstract

This paper aims at examining the effectiveness of students' learning when they are involved in self- and peer-assessment practices as part of a final-year module in Hispanic Studies at University College Dublin. The two research questions that arose are as follows:

- 1) In what way can learners be involved in the development of criteria to be adopted for self- and peer assessment purposes?
- 2) What is the impact of that involvement in their learning?

Birenbaum (1996) states that in the new assessment culture learners are active participants who share responsibility with the teacher in the assessment process. In the light of research literature on self- and peer-assessment practices, a case study was conducted on a final-year undergraduate class (N=20) who entered the module having been exposed to traditional methods of assessment, mainly essay writing and end-of-year written exam papers. Innovative assessment practices were integrated into the teaching and learning process.

The first part of this paper describes how learners were involved in the development of assessment criteria to be adopted in the assessment of their work and in that of their peers. It is followed by an analysis of the impact that such experience had on students' learning, based on the learners' reflections about the process and on a short survey conducted at the end of the module. The findings of the study indicate that such approach to teaching and assessment had a positive impact on students' learning. Benefits arising from integrating assessment into learning include the development of students' ownership of their learning through assessment and a better understanding of the features of different written texts. Some possible shortcomings are also identified. Finally, the pedagogical implications that learning-oriented assessment entails for the teaching of foreign languages to university students are also outlined.

Keywords

Learning through assessment, student-negotiated criteria, reflection on learning.

Introduction

Brown and Glasner (1999) state that assessment has traditionally been associated with teachers making judgements about the performance or work produced by learners. However, Birenbaum (1996) places learners at the centre of the assessment process when she describes the attributes of a new assessment culture, which include students' active participation in the process of assessment, in the development of assessment criteria and in documenting their work through reflections. Attempts to engage students in the process of assessment mean that learning is placed at the centre of assessment (Keppell and Carless, 2006). Joughin (2004) claims that assessment is learning oriented to the extent that the judgement of students' work entails supporting students' learning processes. Promoting learning along with measuring students' achievements are the focus of a learning-oriented approach to assessment where the learning function of assessment is emphasised. The three components of a learning-oriented approach to assessment are:

- the use of assessment tasks that encourage appropriate learning processes;
- the involvement of students in the process of assessing their work, including the development of assessment criteria;
- the effective use of feedback and feedforward.

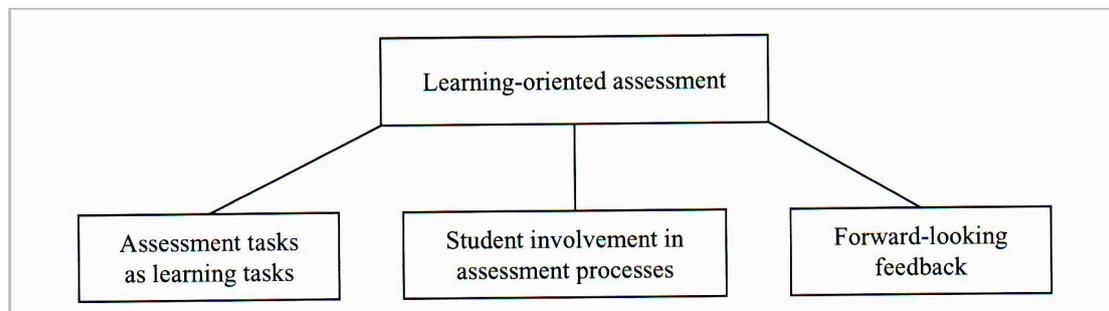


Figure 1. Source: Keppell and Carless, 2006, p.181

Questions often arise about the degree to which students take an active participation in the assessment process, as presented in the learning-oriented framework, rather than being subjected to assessment procedures imposed on them by the lecturers or their institutions. The present study focuses specifically on the second component of the learning-oriented framework; namely the learners' role in negotiating criteria to be adopted to make judgements about their work, and to a lesser extent on the feedforward component.

Studies related to the use of criteria being applied when students are engaged in the assessment of their work, and in the work of their peers, point out that there are different degrees of student engagement. At one end of the spectrum, when students are involved in self- and peer-assessment practices, they are provided with a set of criteria and their task is to rate themselves or their classmates against the criteria provided (Brew, 1999). Greater engagement of the students involves the negotiation of assessment criteria between students and teachers (Jordan, 1999) or when students draw up their criteria for assessment (Falchikow, 1995). The purpose of this paper is to investigate the effect that the involvement of students in negotiating assessment criteria might have on students' learning, in order to contribute to the dissemination of new practices in the assessment of students' learning.

Background

The study undertaken by the researcher involved a group of students participating in a semester-long module, a total of twenty-four teaching hours, at University College Dublin. *Expresión Escrita* is a Final-year level 3 undergraduate option module offered to students of Hispanic Studies. The number of students taking this module is limited to twenty.

The overall aim of this module is to develop the learners' communicative competence in writing Spanish by engaging students in:

- production of a variety of texts written in Spanish;

- participation in self- and peer-assessment of written activities;
- reflection on their learning process.

The teaching methodology adopted promotes students' participation in class, and the teacher is perceived as a facilitator of learning. Spanish is the prescribed language of instruction and assessment in this module, and the target language is used by the learners and by the teacher at all times.

Focusing on the module as a whole is beyond the scope of this paper and the study presented here focuses on the development of assessment criteria to be applied to their written tasks. The process requires students to:

- a) get involved in the development of assessment criteria;
- b) work co-operatively and negotiate among themselves;
- c) apply the agreed criteria to assess the work of their peers;
- d) reflect about their learning.

Methodology

A case study approach was adopted to examine if the involvement of students in the negotiation of assessment criteria had any impact on their learning. The study is based on three sources of data: a) analysis of students' journals, b) the teacher's reflection on how conscious the students were of the criteria adopted and c) a short student survey once the module was completed. The study was not intrusive in that the students were not aware that it was being undertaken until the module was completed, when they were asked to provide the researcher with some data in a short questionnaire. This approach, it is believed, provided a more natural environment in which to conduct the research work. However, one of the limitations of this approach is the subjectivity of the data and its interpretation, given that the teacher of the module was also the researcher carrying out the study. Although the study takes place in a very specific context and focuses on a module that may not be a typical one within the humanities programmes, there are nevertheless principles of general relevance that can be drawn from the study.

The engagement of the students in the development of the assessment criteria was presented as part of a class activity. The class was divided into groups of 4-5 students and each group was given the task to agree on the criteria that they would consider important to apply for the assessment of the written texts that constitute the focus of the module. All the groups reported on the agreed criteria and a discussion with the whole class provided an opportunity to clarify the meaning of the criteria that had arisen from the different groups. A list of assessment characteristics was compiled with the input from all the groups and from the teacher's intervention, to ensure that essential aspects had not been omitted. Such list was distributed to all students. It was adopted by both the teacher and the students as criteria to assess students' work during the duration of the module, and regular references to the agreed criteria were made throughout the semester. Some instances when the criteria developed by students were used include:

- When the teacher returned written work to students during a class, written feedback was provided by the teacher based on the criteria and students were invited to engage in dialogue with the teacher to explore some of the issues arisen from the written feedback.

- Sometimes class time was devoted to peer assessment exercises where students were given anonymous written tasks produced by other students from the class and they have to provide written feedback using the assessment criteria adopted.
- In week 6 a tutorial session was organised between the teacher and each student to discuss their learning progress based on a reflective self-evaluation template completed by each student and on samples of their learning journal.

The feedback offered to students after each written task was completed, either by the teacher or by their classmates, aimed at providing students with ideas on how to improve their writing skills in Spanish and with the opportunity to reflect about their learning by writing a reflective entry in their journals. These activities took place outside the classroom environment. The initial written tasks were considered drafts and together with new versions they constituted part of a portfolio produced by the students at the end of the module. The portfolio was assessed summatively.

The Involvement of Students in the Development of Assessment Criteria

A student survey was conducted at the end of the semester to ascertain the students' views on their participation in negotiating assessment criteria and to identify areas for the improvement of the approach adopted in the teaching of this module in the future. The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions. A total of 20 questionnaires were received.

The table below summarises the quantitative data emerging from the questionnaire.

	%
Previous involvement in negotiating assessment criteria	0
Awareness of the criteria when writing	70
Awareness of the criteria when assessing classmates	75

Table1. Students' experiences in negotiating and using assessment criteria

The first data that arose from the students' survey categorically shows that none of the students (N=20) had been involved in developing or negotiating assessment criteria for any other course/module while at university. These results are interesting considering that those students take around twelve modules/courses in a given academic year and they are in their last year of their undergraduate studies. However, the researcher expected similar results based on her knowledge of assessment practices within the Humanities at the university.

The questionnaire also sought the extent to which students were conscious about the criteria when they were writing their assignments or reflecting about their written texts

returned to them by the teacher, and if they were aware of the assessment criteria when assessing their own work or that of their peers. We take each issue in turn.

Seventy per cent of the students in this group reported that they were conscious of the assessment criteria when they were writing their assignments. The fact that the criteria had been discussed and negotiated in class meant that the students had ownership of the criteria and that fact emerged as the main reason for their awareness. Some students indicated that they consciously used the assessment criteria when they were re-reading the assignment, before submitting it to the teacher. Another student expressed her awareness of the criteria but noted that it did not bother her because she focused on the task at hand, since the criteria was always part of the process. One student noted that using the criteria to improve and correct her own writing was very motivating. Another student stated that he used the criteria more with each new assignment as he understood the criteria better and he was able to improve his writing more. All the students that were conscious of the criteria when writing their assignment were more emphatic about the assessment criteria being a significant feature in their process of reflection. Some pointed out that because reflection was an integral part of the module (i.e. learner's journal), they focused on the assessment criteria when reflecting and reassessing their work.

Thirty per cent of students from the group reported that they did not focus on the assessment criteria when they wrote an assignment. The main reason given for this was that their minds were on the writing itself or on the content of the assignment. Arguably, the content was one of the criteria, so even unconsciously those students were using some elements of the agreed criteria. However, those same students also stated that they were conscious of the criteria when they got their assignments back and they reflected about them in the journal and/or when they were working on strategies to improve their writing.

A significant majority of students, seventy-five per cent, reported that they consciously used the negotiated criteria when they were involved in reading their classmates' assignments. On the whole, they found the exercise very beneficial. One of them specifically said that she had the checklist in her mind and she was able to see where her classmates had done well or made mistakes, and that she learnt much from that. The assessment criteria were also instrumental in students being able to compare and contrast their work with that of their classmates. Several students pointed out that to see the quality of other people's work and to compare both the quality and the quantity gave them an idea of where they stood in relation to others in the class. Some students indicated that the assessment criteria provided them with the tools to assess their classmates' work, but that the peer assessment exercise then became a learning experience for them, as they were more able to pick out good things from their classmates assignments in order to improve their own work. The students who reported that they did not take into account the assessment criteria when assessing their classmates' work indicated that their main focus was on picking up some useful knowledge, such as vocabulary and grammatical tips from their peers in order to improve their own work.

When students made references to the benefits of being involved in the development of assessment criteria, the main themes that emerged were transparency, fairness, a democratic process, opinions being valued and motivation to work hard. Student responses showed that being involved in the development and negotiation of

assessment criteria was highly beneficial because they perceived it as being more democratic than when the criteria are imposed on them and therefore they were happier to co-operate with criteria that they had chosen. The fairness of the exercise was often highlighted in contrast to their experience of other less democratic assessment practices employed by lecturers and teachers. It was pointed out that because the students are the ones being assessed, it is only fair that they have a say in the way assessment is being done. Linked to that point is the idea that students felt that their opinions were valued by lecturers when they were involved in the development of assessment criteria.

'Students are more involved in the course in this way and so, they feel that their opinion is valued'

All the students from the group indicated that being involved in the development and negotiation of assessment criteria helped them to understand what was expected from them, and to be aware of important aspects of the written texts. It also allowed students to know where to concentrate their attention.

'The student has a better idea of what is required and this provides motivation to work towards achieving this'

A further benefit stated by the students was that being involved in the development of criteria helped them to have a personal interest in and connection to the module, making the subject more enjoyable and beneficial. They often linked the issue of having an idea of what was expected with the motivation to work much harder during the duration of the module, rather than cramming all their efforts for an examination. It also motivated them to work harder because they were fully aware of how their work was being assessed.

Most students did not see any drawbacks in being involved in the development of criteria. However, a few concerns were pointed out. One such concern was to ensure that students take the exercise seriously so that the best criteria are adopted. A similar drawback was that the criteria chosen might not be the preferred of all concerned. Another limitation of using the criteria agreed by the group was that no grades were provided in the assessment of their written texts, either by the teacher or by their peers, and one student thought that it made it hard to determine her standard as she was used to getting grades in other modules.

The Impact of Using Agreed Assessment Criteria in Students' Learning

Content analysis carried out on the students' journals and from the teacher's reflection about the module shows the effect that the use of the negotiated criteria had on the students' learning. The analysis focuses on four key findings related to students' self-confidence, self-regulation, collaborative learning and grades achieved.

a. Students' self-regulation

Traditional practices of assessment tend not to encourage learners' autonomy and responsibility for their own learning as much as when students are given a chance to

be involved in some aspects of the assessment process. Davis and Jones (2001) state that the curricula, in the current higher education system in the UK and the Republic of Ireland, seldom address the issue of independent learning. However, there were abundant references in the students' journals that indicate how students' involvement in the development of criteria had positive effects on the way they learn. Excerpts from the students' journals (translated from Spanish into English by the teacher) support that:

'Now I am conscious about what I write, and about the readers of what I write'

'Now I think before I start writing; I imagine that I am the reader and I try to see how I would react'

'I have learnt a lot. It has allowed me to reflect about aspects of learning that I had not thought about before'

b. Students' self-confidence

The involvement of students in the negotiation of assessment criteria may have been a factor in contributing to the enhancement of learners' confidence and self-esteem, as the following statements from the learners confirm:

'At the beginning of the module I could not see myself as a writer. Now I have confidence in myself and in the way I can express myself in Spanish'

'The module has allowed me to develop my confidence and my self-esteem'

'I can transfer what I have learnt in this module to other modules and to other situations outside the university'

c. Collaborative learning

Negotiating assessment criteria was one aspect that prepared the way for students' active participation and collaborative learning throughout the duration of the module. Learners valued the opportunity given to them to take an active role, to work with others and to learn from each other. Building trust between the students, and between students and the teacher, was essential for the success of learners' active participation (Fallows and Chandramohan, 2001).

'Working in pairs or in groups is interesting, you learn a lot from others'

'This module has provided me with the opportunity to work with others (pair and group work), and to learn from others as well as from the teacher'

'It is good to receive feedback from others. You learn a lot from reading and assessing somebody else's work'

'You learn a lot about self- and peer-assessment'

d. Marks achieved

The involvement of students in the development of assessment criteria had significant positive effects on students' learning. A considerable improvement in students' linguistic ability was reported by the students at the end of the module. As it

is to be expected, the quality of students' work at the beginning of the course was significantly lower than what they were able to produce at the end of the course. However, such improvement may have occurred if more traditional assessment practices had been used. A comparative study of marks achieved in *Expresión Escrita* and on a more traditional module show that the majority of the students obtained marks that were slightly higher than those attained in a more traditional type of module (vide Figure 2). However, in one particular case the mark obtained in the *Expresión Escrita* module was significantly lower: 15 per cent in the first case and 40.5 per cent in the more traditional module. An explanation for such a low result is that the student failed to engage in the learning activities during the semester and therefore did not benefit from the feedback on the first drafts of the work that was used to improve the quality of the written tasks. The fact that *Expresión Escrita* took place in semester 1 and the traditional module in semester 2 also make the comparison of marks difficult. Thus, there is not enough evidence to indicate that the marks were significantly better in *Expresión Escrita* than those achieved in a more traditional module.

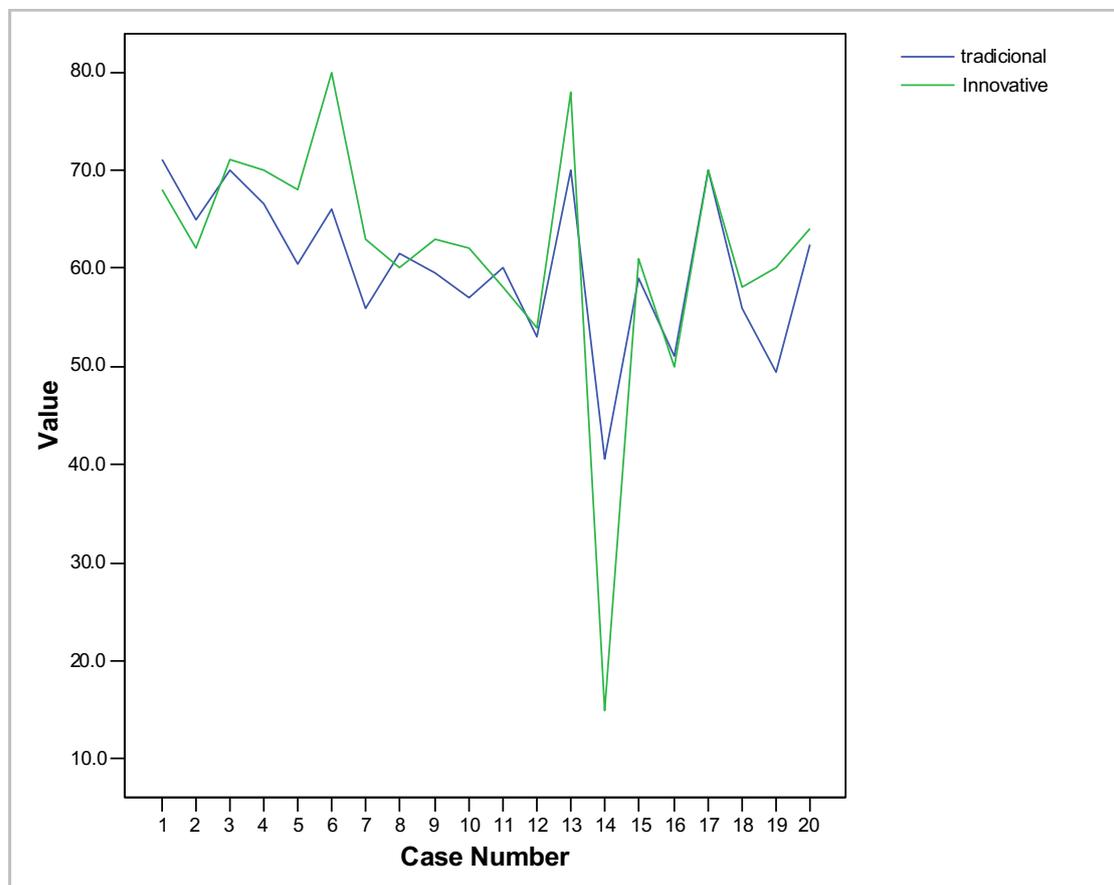


Figure 2. Marks achieved in two modules with different assessment strategies

Conclusion

One of the most significant findings of this study is that the involvement of students in negotiating assessment criteria contributes to the development of students' ownership of their learning (Falchikov, 2005). The fact that they felt that their opinions were valued contributed to them feeling in charge of their learning and increased their motivation to take a more active part in their learning process. Sharing the assessment process with the students was a way of sharing the power

that teachers have with the students (Brew, 1999), offering a more democratic approach, as was pointed out by the students. A balance should be achieved between empowering learners, and the teacher being in control and exercising her knowledge of the subject area by directing students towards achieving the standards envisaged for the module.

The development of assessment criteria among students had a very positive effect in helping them to internalise the criteria, and to become more aware of its features. This resulted in an awareness of features of written texts and in a better understanding of the features of that characterised different written texts. The most significant effect of the assessment criteria by the students was the promotion of reflection on their work and that of their classmates, which was one of the main aims of this module.

The fact that students had to work together to agree on assessment criteria and to negotiate the criteria among themselves was a factor contributing to the development of teamwork and negotiation skills, apart from the fact that they had to use the target language in the negotiation process. Such exercise has the value of promoting teamwork, communication skills and the development of critical and analytical thinking by the students. These are skills that are valued in the work place and that students will probably use soon when they enter the work force.

The negotiated criteria were often used in class when students engaged in peer assessment activities. It provided clear guidelines for students to use when reading the work of their classmates. The learning value of peer assessment exercises was acknowledged by most of the students. They felt that they learnt a lot by reading their classmates' assignments with the help of the agreed criteria. The peer assessment activities became an important element in the students' self-assessment reflection because learners usually compared the standard achieved by other learners against their own (Cassany, 1999; Race et al., 2005). It usually allowed them to assess aspects of their work such as the range of vocabulary, originality, structure, etc, and to use that reflection to produce a written text that incorporated the aspects being raised in their reflection. However, the teacher needs to ensure that the students take on board what they have learnt from reading their classmates' assignments and that they put it into practice.

Involving students in negotiating criteria to assess their own written work and that of their peers may be difficult to implement in a large classroom set up as the process of developing criteria may take too much time. Another limitation that arises from sharing the power of assessment with the students is that the linguistic ability of the learners in the group may be limited and weaker students may not be able to improve their writing if the teacher does not point out to them how to do it. This limitation may not apply to other disciplines where the language used in negotiating the criteria and in applying it to their work is their mother tongue.

Although some students may be in favour of being involved in the process of assessment, this approach has pedagogical implications that need to be considered as it may have detrimental implications for the students that do not get actively involved in the process. The process of teaching, learning and assessment become more integrated, rather than assessment being regarded as an addition to teaching

(Ramsden, 2003). The early intervention of the teacher is crucial to ensure that students participate actively in the process of assessment, as the possibility of cramming at the end of the course does not exist. The process and the product of learning are assessed throughout the duration of the module and it may be the case that learners have nothing to show as evidence of their learning by the end of the course.

Much thought and consideration need to be given to the involvement of students in the process of assessment. It is important that students feel comfortable with their involvement in such a process. It is also important to provide them with feedback that motivates them to improve their learning. When teachers share with students the assessment process, it is necessary to begin by building trust and by creating a relaxed atmosphere where collaborative learning can take place.

This study, based on students' views as stated in a questionnaire, on their reflection upon their learning as is evident in their journals, and on the teachers' analysis of the students' achievement in terms of developing their language competence in written Spanish, demonstrates that involving students in the negotiation of assessment criteria has contributed positively to the enhancement of their learning in a way that complements or offers an alternative to more traditional practices of assessment. Let us conclude this paper with the words of three students who represent the views of the majority of those who took this module last semester:

'It takes time for students to get used to this approach to assessment, but I believe it is a step in the right direction'

'I think that getting students involved in the development of assessment criteria is definitely a good idea'

'This class was undoubtedly the most student-orientated class I have ever been in, in terms of participation and evaluations. We were involved in almost every aspect of the class and this allowed us to feel more attached and involved, and thus want to be there.'

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the students who undertook this module in the first semester of the academic year 2006-07. They provided me with invaluable data to reflect about the module and to write this paper. I thank them for their honesty in revealing themselves throughout the course of the semester, for their trust in me and in each other, and for their eagerness to learn.

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