Participatory Assessment Designing a Learner-driven Test

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Assessment, evaluation, and tests are contested terms in education, where different definitions have been attempted without any achieving consensus. This is possibly one of the reasons why the topic remains interesting and current for teachers whose different views and practices have given rise to innovative approaches where the judgement of learners' performance is much fairer, equitable, and reliable. In this article, assessment is seen as a cycle where evaluations and tests are set up at a particular moment to elicit a behaviour or a performance to measure learners' knowledge, competencies, and skills against a benchmark (Green, 2014). The assessment/test distinction is of no minor importance: the meaning of assessment is more encompassing as it highlights its dynamic nature, characterised by continuity and iteration, allowing for reflection and growth (Fulcher & Davidson, 2007). Assessment is a continuous process where the boundaries between a start and a finish stage are not always clear-cut. Therefore, it becomes necessary to acknowledge that it is impossible to separate assessment from learning since they are complementary and cumulative. Additionally, assessment involves reflection, which is a crucial element of learning, mainly when the punitive part, traditionally associated with the judgement of an assessor based on grades and scores, is removed. The purpose of this article is to argue for the benefits of a participatory approach when designing assessment tasks involving the voice of the learners. This stance follows the premises of dialogic teaching (Alexander, 2008), claiming that learning emerges from the interactions between teachers and learners where participation involves self-determination, exercised by promoting learner agency. As it happens in dialogue, learners and teachers actively engage in conversations and agree on criteria to determine performance as levels of success, with feedback used

developmentally for learners to produce an action plan to improve their language performance.

Literature Review

Assessment and its Purposes

Assessment is a crucial part of education (Falchikov, 2013) and is a source of information for learners concerning their understanding of language facts and the performance of linguistic competencies. The primary purpose of assessment is the identification of learners' strengths and areas for development for future lesson planning or more efficient interventions, ensuring continuous improvement of both teaching and learning (Earl, 2004). Assessment data can be gathered in various ways, such as homework, observations, tasks, or classroom interactions (Arends, 2012). Embedding assessment as a form of classroom-based practice is necessary for teachers to show their learners' progression (Muijs & Reynolds, 2018; Suah & Ong, 2012) and to reflect on their teaching approaches (Tomlinsom, 2010). Teachers partake in a wide range of assessment roles, which can be challenging, as this is not a simple task since assessment depends on its purposes, the knowledge, as well as the language competencies and skills to be assessed (Suah & Ong, 2012).

Over the years, different approaches have been developed to make assessment more manageable. For instance, assessing learners' performance regularly during lessons is known as *formative assessment* (Brookheart, 2018). A distinctive feature of this type of assessment is the use of feedback as a scaffolding mechanism for progression (Black & William, 1998). Some studies (Shepard et al., 2018) have demonstrated that such an approach, which usually focuses on discrete items, results in more extensive learning than testing. Conversely, *summative assessment*, akin to testing, is typically conducted at the end of a learning unit to examine learners' ability, knowledge of a particular topic, or the performance of skills. Summative assessment allows an assessor to gather data and produce a report on progress (Weurlandera et al., 2012) as the learners' performance is awarded a grade. Although traditionally, these two assessment categories have been

presented separately, Harlen (2005) argues that formative and summative assessments are not two distinct types, but they are complementary whilst acknowledging that the literature shows them separately simply because of a difference in purpose. At this stage, it is pertinent to echo Newton's (2007) claim, who argues that assessment goals can be interpreted in many ways, not necessarily restricted to those traditionally associated with scores to determine performance outcomes. Nonetheless, the author indicates that these purposes boil down to three primary levels: judgement, decision, and impact. The judgement level examines the technical aim of an assessment event (Newton, 2007), focusing on the assessment outcome as it produces a judgement through a grade. The decision level focuses on the reviews and actions to support decisions for the promotion or demotion of learners, whilst the impact level ensures that students continue to remain motivated when learning and achieve common ground for a topic or skills. This level provides valuable information for lesson planning and the evaluation of teaching methods.

Earl's (2004) seminal work on types of assessment provides further clarity to the apparent dichotomy between formative and summative assessment by introducing the concepts of *assessment of learning* (AoL), *assessment for learning* (AfL), and *assessment as learning* (AaL). AoL is usually completed at the end of a term, course, or unit, utilising a test or exam that includes various questions based on the material covered over a period of study. AoL is summative since the results are usually in marks or grades based on the correct answers reported to stakeholders, there is little to no feedback, and students cannot gain direction for improvement. The outcome of this type of assessment only shows areas where learners performed well and those that need improvement. This type of assessment dominates the standardised examination systems in English as a foreign language and is externally judged as the most reliable type. However, research carried out to measure the impact of summative assessment on reliability, accuracy, and its advantages seem to be limited (Earl, 2004; Marzano, 2006).

In turn, AfL emphasises formative assessment as it frequently happens from the initial stages of learning (Earl, 2004). It focuses on strengths and weaknesses, helping learners unlock their potential to progress onto the next learning phase. A distinctive feature of this type of assessment is the use of feedback, a dialogue between teacher and learners signposting the subsequent learning and teaching steps to ensure gaps are addressed. AfL requires teachers to use their knowledge and understanding of the students and their contexts to identify particular learning needs. The practice of AfL then requires a considerable amount of pedagogical expertise, as well as subject-specific and curricular knowledge (Ball et al., 2008; Manizade & Mason, 2010). Whilst Black and William (1998) promoted the concept of AfL, Dann (2014), claims that the use of this type of assessment and feedback has led to no improvement or, in some areas, to no improvement at all, worsening the learners' performance.

Lastly, AaL extends the range of formative assessment by emphasising the learners' role in the assessment practice, in other words, their *agency*, which is one of the pillars of participatory pedagogy. It is pertinent to point out that agency is a theoretical construct as it is motivation and intelligence. A classical definition of learner agency indicates that this is "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn 2001, p.112), stressing the situated human nature in sociocultural terms and the role of mediation. However, the definition of agency is not free from nuances since the "capacity to act" is open to different interpretations. For instance, Mercer (2012, p. 42) argues that "whilst an individual's capacity to act is widely accepted as being socio-culturally, contextually and interpersonally mediated, it also needs to be understood in terms of a person's physical, cognitive, affective, and motivational capacities to act." In other words, the main goal of AaL is for learners to become assessors (Earl, 2004) by active use of metacognitive strategies involving monitoring their learning and using feedback to underpin their learning and master skills. This type of assessment prepares learners for interacting with everyday situations outside the confines of a classroom by encouraging them to make their own judgements and decisions (Brookheart, 2018). In the same vein, Shepard et al.,(2018) state that learning that takes a socio-cultural stance and is linked to

students' everyday life leads to higher engagement. However, AaL is a complex interplay of assessment, teaching and learning with the notion that learners must understand their own learning progress and goals through various processes involving cognition and a willingness to be active and engaged. One of the critical features of AfL and AaL is the use of feedback, a mediating tool rooted in the sociocultural theory to ensure that learners become active and take ownership of their learning experience. Jiménez Segura (2015) adds that learners must abandon the passive role of following instructions in a process led by an academic expert (i.e., teachers) and be actively involved in self-regulating their learning. Although this type of assessment practice may prepare students to take responsibility for their learning, this suggests that this type of assessment may only be implemented with "more able students" who have already achieved some self-determination.

"Assessment as learning" as a metacognitive practice

A sociocultural perspective explains that human activity is mediated by tools or artefacts emerging and shaped by the socio-cultural-historical context (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). The educational tradition in the Western world has largely been mediated by the same tools, for example, language, textbooks, and displays, amongst others. By *practice,* Arnseth (2008) means the work of cultural extension and transformation in time. In education, the acquisition of new knowledge and skills provides individuals with opportunities for their self-actualisation and the group to which they belong. In this sense, Lave & Wenger (1991, p. 35) acknowledge that "learning is not merely situated in practice… but [it] is integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world." This, therefore, means that practice involves learning how to problem-solve in the lived-in world, this is, the world as it is experienced in social practice, which is relational and agency-driven, where experiences are developed and challenged in and through social relationships.

Within this perspective, a school and all the social-cultural practices that take place in that setting is seen as a system structure where knowledge

cannot be separated from the context of its use or the situation where it occurs (Brown et al., 1989). These relationships allow the development of metacognition, encompassing two distinct dimensions: the self (individual) and co-regulation (shared cognition). Garrison & Akyol (2013) relate metacognition to the process of inquiry at three levels of *presence*, claiming that:

> Metacognition enhances and refines the inquiry process in a collaborative constructivist learning environment (...). Metacognition is manifested at the convergence of the social, cognitive, and teaching presences in proportions reflective of the nature of the task and the capabilities of the participants. Social presence creates a purposeful environment in which students can have a connection to what others are thinking. Through cognitive presence, students have an increased understanding and awareness of the inquiry process (i.e., metacognition) which, in turn, helps them improve their regulation of cognition (...). Teaching presence (metacognitive awareness) encourages participants to become cognitively aware and develop regulatory skills for self and other's learning. (2013, p. 85)

One of the keywords in the above definition is *presence*, which means *interaction* in the sociocultural theory. An individual is present in a group or a community of practice when interacting with others. It is essential to remind the reader that socio-constructivists claim that learning occurs in two distinct stages: intrapersonal or intramental, and interpersonal or intermental (Vygotsky, 1978). This position is then very relevant to understanding why assessment is a continuous process constructed and negotiated with others through language.

Dialogic Teaching and Participatory Pedagogy

A wide range of research on the interactions between teacher-learners and learners-learners in different language learning settings indicates that teachers tend to dominate exchanges and that most of those interactions are ineffective (Donoso & López, 2020). Most of the time, learners passively listen to the teacher in whole-class sessions or work individually

(Kostadinovska-Stojchevska & Popovikj, 2019). A participatory pedagogy based on dialogue as a tool for teaching and learning is not new (Mercer, 2000; Alexander, 2008). Alexander (2008) claims that in dialogic interactions, learners are exposed to alternative perspectives and required to engage with another person's views in ways that challenge and deepen their own conceptual understandings.

The findings of Blatchford et al.'s study (2006) in the context of social (participatory) pedagogic research into groupings (SPRinG) showed that all the learners were more likely to be involved in tasks when they had a chance to exchange views. Additionally, the number of negative behaviours amongst students was considerably low whilst learner-learner interactions were more productive, and there was less need for teacher support. When the learners worked in groups, lessons tended to be more tasks than person focused. The researchers concluded that a programme like SPRinG encouraged more connectedness amongst learners whilst increasing opportunities for students to learn from one another as a direct result of the type of talk they used, which Wegerif (2008) calls *exploratory*.

Talk as a form of collaboration has been identified as a tool facilitating learning and the views of Bruner (1996), Halliday (1993), Mercer (2000), and Alexander (2008) are of relevance for a participatory pedagogy. Mercer (2000, p. 4) claims that "language is not just a means by which individuals can formulate ideas and communicate them, it is also a means for people to think and learn together." He identifies exploratory talk as one encouraging learning and defines it as:

> … [the type of talk] in which partners engage critically but constructively which each other's ideas. Relevant information is offered for joint consideration. Proposals may be challenged and counter-challenged, but if so reasons are given and alternatives are offered. Agreement is sought on the basis for joint responses. Knowledge is made publicly accountable and reasoning is visible in the talk. (Mercer, 2000, p. 98)

In turn, Wegerif (2008) distinguishes *exploratory talk* from other types of peer talk, such as *cumulative talk*, where the speakers build positively but uncritically on what the others have said, and *disputational talk*, characterised by disagreement and individualised decision-making. Exploratory talk can also be described as an orientation towards shared cognition for reaching consensus, for example, by exploring viewpoints in a group. This is what leads Mercer (2000, p. 8) to use the term *interthinking* to refer to the "joint, coordinated intellectual activity which people regularly accomplish when using language."

The model of participatory pedagogy based on interthinking in Latin America and the Caribbean is not a transient fad. Emerging from the work of Paulo Freire (2006), different models of school management and classroom practices have emerged in many countries in the area. One, in particular, is that of the *Escuela Nueva* (Colbert & Arboleda, 2016) in Colombia, whose set-up fosters the social construction of knowledge through dialogue and interaction. The authors highlight the approach of *Escuela Nueva* by indicating that:

> ...teachers evolve from someone who imparts information or knowledge to someone who becomes a facilitator, interacts with the community, links knowledge with the local context and recognises accomplishments in social behaviour. In turn, a central role is granted to the child's thinking by supporting the construction of knowledge while working in small groups, establishing a direct relationship between learning and the physical and community environment, respecting the different paces and by fostering personal and social development in democratic and autonomous contexts. (Colbert & Arboleda, 2016: 393)

The above is an example of how a primary school within the context of a Spanish-speaking environment uses a participatory approach where teachers and learners position themselves as agents whilst promoting each other's participation through dialogic teaching and learning (Kumpulainen & Lipponen, 2012). The following experience considers a participatory approach

to the design and conduct of an assessment built upon the principles expounded in this literature review.

Applying a Participatory Approach to Assessment Design and Implementation

The breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 severely disrupted long-established educational practices, changing paradigms and ways of imparting guided instruction in times of rapid changes and uncertainty. Most educational organisations had to close and move to an online provision with very little or no experience of the medium. Within this context, 18 commercial aviation pilots had to sit a standardised English examination to gain full accreditation in the industry. The exam, which usually takes place at a designated centre, has five components: technical vocabulary, English for communication, reading comprehension, listening comprehension, and three simulation tasks to assess the candidates' ability to communicate in different scenarios. The exam is equivalent to Level B2/C1 of the European Common Reference for Languages, and, under normal circumstances, each part lasts 60 minutes. The deadline for the exam could not be moved, although the Assessment Board gave each group of candidates some flexibility to meet the assessment criteria. While the methodology was made flexible, the standards, including procedures, such as blind double first and second marking and moderation, remained unchanged.

By the time consultancy was requested, the candidates had gathered *ad hoc* to revise contents and were working in small online groups. Without a clear indication of their current level of performance, it was necessary to understand the nature of the examination, the teaching and learning approach used during training, and details concerning the exam to provide advice. This first action involved a needs analysis followed by the observation of online interactions to produce a catalogue of learning strategies used during the revision phase. This stage also consisted of collecting samples including summaries, vocabulary lists, mind-maps, and multiple scribbles on textbook pages. The next step involved the use of the students' documents

to create a corpus, which alongside the course syllabus, contributed to the identification of the language items and the contexts in which these items were used. The fieldwork was followed by conversations between the consultant and the learners on their learning preferences, using their work during their revision to prompt ideas. The conversations gave learners some space to talk about the language contents of the exam and their feelings towards it, and secondly, it was also an opportunity for the consultant to use the information the participants provided to select different types of test tasks. The analysis of the data only focused on the revision of the course contents and provided additional insight for the selection and gradation of tasks at the level of design. Three different versions of the exam were produced and piloted in five different settings, followed by several iterations until the final version was agreed. An example of how the procedure was put into practice is provided in the vignette section below.

The focus on revision was not arbitrary but followed the premises of peer mediation aligned with the tenets of the socio-constructivist paradigm. According to this view, learners working together can co-construct contexts in which expertise emerges as a feature of the group rather than residing in any given individual in the group (Lantolf, 2000). The sociocultural theory holds that human forms of mental activity arise in our interactions with other members of our culture and the specific experiences we have with the artefacts produced by our ancestors and our contemporaries. When learners revisit knowledge or rehearse competencies in groups, they reorganise different forms of consciousness. Lantolf (2000) argues that:

> This reorganisation occurs as a result of the culture-specific interactions we have with other individuals and with the artefacts constructed and deployed by the culture. These artefacts may be relatively simple physical objects such as paper and pencil used to help us remember what to purchase at the store or to carry out multiple digit arithmetic operations. (p. 79)

The experience of many teachers and learners alike is to underestimate the potential of group revision as a space where dialogue

constructs artefacts to promote and scaffold learning. These artefacts produced during the revision phase were crucial in designing a new exam adapted to an online environment. Following a rigorous process of validation that included pilot testing for quality assurance, the 18 pilots sat the exam entirely designed following their input. As the exam was seen as one single event within the more extensive learning experience, this was followed up with feedback for the learners to produce an action plan where the actions became their learning objectives for the subsequent course.

Feedback was essential in the process of helping learners with the identification of the actions to meet their learning objectives. Recent literature has identified that the critical determining factor in feedback effectiveness is how individual students engage with it (Hattie et al., 2016; Lipnevich et al., 2016; Nicol, 2013). Engagement with feedback involves receiving, perceiving, interpreting, and understanding it and using it in some way to improve learning (Handley et al., 2011; Hargreaves, 2011; Nicol, 2013). However, feedback may lose its potential to influence learning in each of these stages of engagement positively. For example, if learners do not recognise feedback (reception), do not perceive it to be useful (perception), do not understand it (interpretation), or do not have time or opportunity to use it or are unwilling or unable to do so (use), feedback will not influence their learning in any positive way (Brookhart, 2018; Gamlem & Smith, 2013; Havnes et al., 2012). These stages of engagement with feedback should not be seen as a linear process. Instead, they interact as students employ cognitive and affective mechanisms in interaction with the feedback message (Lipnevich et al., 2016; Van der Schaaf et al., 2013). For this reason, the choice of words and the tone of the message were given particular attention for the learners to engage with the feedback. This was achieved by emphasising achievement instead of the knowledge and competencies they did not demonstrate in the exam. As a result, the learners saw the feedback as an opportunity to exchange ideas with their colleagues about their achievements and areas for future development.

Vignette: Including Learners' Voices in Test Design

It is essential to acknowledge the various contexts and practices around assessment in any given region or, sometimes, within one school. However, teachers should not feel constrained by traditional ways of evaluating learners imposed by educational policies or curriculum requirements that largely ignore students' needs. Although there are some excellent alternative forms of assessment such as portfolios, blogs, and documentaries, to mention a few, creativity provides endless opportunities to make tests part of our students' integral learning experience instead of a finished product. Using learners' voices can add to those lesser-known forms of classroom assessment. The experience reported in this article provides an interesting basis for teachers and students to create spaces for collaboration in the design of tests.

Embed opportunities for focused revision during lesson time. Focused revision is characterised by purpose. Therefore, learners must know what aspect of the course content they need to concentrate on, for instance, accuracy, fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, or a combination of all. Keeping the revision focused will enable learners to develop their awareness by searching examples, engaging more actively with the learning resources.

Ask learners to participate in the test design. During instruction, learners probably have had a chance to experience different forms of input and varied tasks. As they reflect aloud on the teaching approaches they have been exposed to, teachers may gain valuable information about the effectiveness of their teaching methodology. They will be able to gauge the most appropriate tasks to capture students' performance at one time. Asking learners about their views will develop a sense of ownership of their learning, resulting in better outcomes.

Ask learners to identify critical items to be included in the exam. This stage attempts to trigger views and opinions about what constitutes an essential item and provides teachers with an opportunity to undertake formative assessment and check how much revision is needed for learners to achieve a good grade. Critical items can be recorded by, for example, asking

learners to write them down on a piece of paper for the teacher to collect. After the compilation has been made, those items are to become the content of the exam.

Involve learners in the development of the assessment criteria. Learners need to know which benchmark teachers use to assess their performance for informative purposes and ensure they understand how their work is graded. Teachers can use some previous assessment criteria as a draft for learners to work in pairs creating rubrics. This task promotes interthinking and adds ownership to the marking process by making it fairer.

Allow learners to engage with feedback. Engagement does not mean just reading a set of teachers' comments but acting upon them. Sometimes learners' failure to engage with feedback is because the statements provided by the teacher are too vague and, therefore, irrelevant. Learning how to give feedback and personalising it may have a different effect, thus prompting learners to action. Modelling how to engage with feedback through action planning is an effective way for learners to know what engagement means.

Give learners time to respond to feedback. Communication is a loop where there is one speaker and a listener who alternate roles. If there is no response to feedback, this means that there is no engagement. By asking learners to identify their learning goals and think about strategies to meet them, they will be exercising their metacognitive skills. Teachers can use those goals to monitor individual learners' performance for formative purposes.

Review language when talking about exams. Comments such as passing or failing an exam are a legacy of traditional views on assessment prevalent in many school settings—the use of this type of language centres on an objectified individual who wears the label of achiever or non-achiever. Participatory pedagogy views all learners with an ability and, as such, is inclusive. Changing the language when talking about exams does not mean avoiding negative words, but it should move teachers to change their

mindsets and their learners' to acknowledge that each student is good at something.

Conclusion

This article has articulated why assessment should be seen as an integral part of the students' learning experience instead of a by-product of teaching. Far from attempting to simplify issues around the complexities of assessment, the example provided here shows how the learners' voices can add to the validity and reliability constructs whilst allowing students to exercise their agency within the framework of participatory pedagogy to promote the learners' sense of ownership of their learning. For teachers, including the students' voices in the design and conduct of assessment may be challenging if they are unfamiliar with a dialogic approach; however, such a challenge is not different from those posed by more traditional forms of evaluation with the added value of enhancing the teaching and learning experience.

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