EDUCATIONAL VALUES IN ASSESSMENT: A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT COURSE FOR TERTIARY ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN RUSSIA

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Abstract

In recent years, CBE (Competence-Based Education) has been introduced at all levels of education in Russia, which has brought to the forefront the necessity to change approaches to assessment. Now that the new requirements are put forward, teachers need to modify their classroom assessment practices. However, courses on assessment have not traditionally been on the curriculum in teacher-training institutions in Russia, and teachers tend to develop their assessment skills on the job and more often than not habitually focus on assessing knowledge rather than competence-based learning outcomes, often displaying unconscious incompetence in the area of assessment. With a view to bridge this gap, a bespoke professional development course aimed at improving the assessment competence of English-language teachers in tertiary institutions in Russia has been designed and piloted.

The main hypothesis is that a major improvement in planning and assessing students' learning outcomes in the context of competence-based education can be achieved if the teachers are provided with an opportunity to immerse in practical activities to expose them to modern assessment practices, such as assessment for learning and assessment as learning, with the aim to foster teachers' student-centred attitudes in assessment thus providing conditions for implementing a shift in the set of educational values. The professional development course aims at creating favourable conditions for teachers to interiorize new student-centred values in assessment and providing them with an opportunity to engage in project work to practice modern approaches to and methods of assessment, which includes formulating intended learning outcomes with Bloom's active verbs, designing tasks aimed at building specific students' competences, developing and employing criterion-based scoring scales for assessment as well as giving and receiving feedback to and from students.

The analysis of the results displayed by the course participants amounting to above two hundred proved that project work as well as continuous pedagogical reflection ensures building conscious competence in assessment among approximately two-thirds of the course participants, thus substantiating the correctness of the approach in professional development aimed at creating conditions intended to instil new educational values, which leads to employing proper assessment tools in teaching practices. Further research will concentrate on how successful the building of conscious competence in assessment is in terms of whether the participants join the professional development course out of their own accord, thus demonstrating conscious incompetence, or they have been sent to the course by the university management.

Keywords: teaching English as a foreign language, teachers' professional development, educational values, competence assessment.

"Assessment influences people's lives."

S. Bloxham and P. Boyd

"Developing Effective Assessment in Higher Education", 2007 [1]

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Problem Statement

Educational assessment has been defined in many different ways, e.g. Black and William in their seminal work "Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment" term it broadly as "all activities that teachers and students undertake to get information that can be used diagnostically to alter teaching and learning" [2]. With the paradigm shift in global education towards

CBE (Competence-Based Education), teachers' attitudes to and practices of the educational assessment have undergoing fundamental change.

In recent years, CBE has been introduced at all levels of education in Russia as new State Educational Standards have been established in Russia, which proclaim the adoption of competence-based teaching and learning [3]. The new state regulations require the teacher to change their approaches to instruction and assessment so that the curricula emphasize not the amount of course content learned by the students, but rather the developed competences expressed through learning outcomes and demonstrated by students through specific activities. The Standards, although, do not define how teachers should teach to attain the results set, and the local teaching community has started to face multiple challenges – educated in the knowledge-based environment, teachers in Russia more often than not tend to employ instructive methods, concentrate on the content not the learner, and confine their assessment to assessing knowledge in their classroom practices.

This, presumably, occurs due to the low level of assessment literacy, which results from the virtual absence of both pre-service teacher training courses and in-service teacher development programs focusing specifically on assessment. With a view to bridge this gap, a short-term bespoke professional development course aimed at improving the assessment competence of English-language teachers in tertiary institutions in Russia has been designed by the authors, titled "*Organizing the Educational Process in Language for Specific Purposes Course: Planning and Assessing Learning Outcomes*", which was piloted at the Academy for Professional Development of Educators in Moscow, Russia. The course design was based on the assumption that to be competent in assessing students' competences, teachers need to be aware of what modern assessment philosophy is, what is to be assessed at the university level in the competence-based educational paradigm, how it is to be assessed, and why this way and not any other. The aim of the course, thus, was to provide conditions to increase the teachers' competence in assessing students' competences through creating conditions to foster adoption of relevant educational values among the course participants.

1.2   Competence in Assessment

In the Russian pedagogic scholarship tradition, teacher professional competence is often discoursed as a collection of specific competences, while the specific competence in assessment has not until very recently been the subject of research, being habitually only mentioned among other structural components of the general concept of teacher competence. The content of the competence in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes has eluded the attention of the academy.

The key policy document on teachers' competences that was worked out by the Professional Development of Teachers thematic working group of the European Commission and authored by F. Caena, states that competence should be viewed as a holistic concept articulated in knowledge, skills and dispositions and should include broadly defined statements of the characteristics of teachers aiming at providing a common language and understanding of the concept [4].

Western-European theory of education seems to mainly focus on general requirements that an effective teacher should meet [4, 5, 6], and although the specific descriptors of the knowledge, praxis and attitudes to assessment are always present in those lists, the competence in assessing student's competences has not been specified as a separate construct.

American *Standards for Competence in the Educational Assessment* [7] together with the *9 Principles of good practice for assessing student learning* [8] present the most comprehensive policy documents governing the assessment practices and the knowledge, skills and attitudes desirable of a teacher in this area of an educational process.

There has been very little in the way of research or publications for those who need to assess language for professional purposes. Teachers have had to take what has been produced for teaching purposes and seek to convert and adapt it for assessment in LPP (language for professional purposes) [9]. Some examples of regulatory documents in this area are BALEAP Competency Framework for Teachers of English for Academic Purposes [10] and EAQUALS Profiling Grid for Language Teachers [11], where competence in assessment is not defined explicitly, but implicitly referred to in terms of teachers' ability to develop tests, leaving aside other important concerns, such as underlying values and knowledge.

Another important consideration in researching teacher competence in assessment is proving that the desired competence has been built. As P. Boud and N. Falchikov state, "(complex) achievements… are not, epistemologically speaking, measurable" [12, p 77]. The European commission documents [4,

5, 6] when describing the desired level of teacher expertise, refer to descriptors for 1st level degrees and 2nd level degrees in terms of "can-do" statements. In the current research, the *Conscious Competence Ladder* [13] was chosen as a measuring frame, and to confirm the achievement of the level of conscious competence, a set of descriptors for the required knowledge, skills and attitudes has been developed.

For this study, the following components have been singled out in the competence in assessment: knowledge about assessment principles and practices, practical skills exhibited through classroom practices, and attitudes and beliefs underlying the employed assessment practices. All these components have been defined and structured and lists of micro-competences for each component have been developed, which will not be displayed here for the sake of space saved.

Based on the previous research work of the authors, the competence in assessment is defined as a value-based complex construct which governs the process of educational assessment focusing on determining the student-centred learning outcomes and continuously assessing the students' achievements using the competence-oriented professionally authentic tasks and criterion-based assessment tools, and performed in cooperation and dialogue with students providing them with scaffolding in achieving the goals set, in the facilitating environment of critical reflection and transparency [14].

In order to ensure that assessment performed by the teachers really alters teaching and learning, it is essentially important that teachers change their disposition to assessment practices, making it the assessment for learning. Hence, the necessity to provide conditions for such change seems vital.

1.3 Educational Values in Assessment

The paramount importance of values in education cannot be underestimated. B. Larrivee argues that effective teaching involves "tying teaching… decisions to personal beliefs about teaching, learning and development" [15].

Among their "*9 Principles of good practice for assessing student learning*", the American Association for Higher Education positions values as Number One Principle: "The assessment of student learning begins with educational values", and this is the assumption this study is based on. "Educational values should drive not only what we choose to assess but also how we do so. Where questions about educational mission and values are skipped over, assessment threatens to be an exercise in measuring what's easy, rather than a process of improving what we really care about."[7] The key strategies of XXI century pedagogy embrace, on the part of educators, changing curriculum philosophy for learner-centeredness, aiming to obtain clear evidence of learning, and providing effective feedback that moves learners forward through activating students as owners of their own learning. Narrowing down dispositions to include beliefs, attitudes, values and commitment, focused on action; F. Caena stresses that the elusive nature of the criteria for defining and assessing the presence of dispositions prevents them from being clearly defined [3].

In the process of choosing the set of values to be fostered in the proposed professional development course, besides European Commission and the American Association for Higher Education documents, research work by prominent scholars was used. An important consideration to be taken into account was the findings of J. Hattie's meta-analysis on the factors influencing the effectiveness of learning. According to J. Hattie, feedback has the most critical influence on student learning [16]. Furthermore, major guidelines from R. Stiggins' *Assessment Manifesto* [17] were taken into account, namely the shift to criterion-referenced interpretation of results; to formative assessment with descriptions of student performance so that assessments support improvements in student learning. Moreover, the principles of effective classroom assessment developed by R. Marzano [18] were also considered, among them the importance of giving the learners a clear picture of their progress, encouraging their improvement through assessment, and conducting frequent formative assessments and feedback. For more specific tasks, the approaches to formulating competence-based subject-specific learning outcomes were adopted from J. Biggs' SOLO taxonomy (which stands for Structure of the Observed Learning Outcomes) [19] as well as from D. Kennedy's Practical Guide on writing and using learning outcomes [20].

For the purposes of the present study, a rather narrow set of practical values has been focused on, somewhat because of the short-term nature of the course, and, to a greater extent, because values (and attitudes and dispositions) are not only challenging to define, they are difficult to instil: the trainer

in a professional development course can only strive to create favourable atmosphere for their fostering on the part of the course participants.

The following two groups of educational values have been chosen as focal for the course:

- **Commitment to students and students learning**: appreciating the role of assessment as an integral part of the learning-teaching process, thus planning assessment as the first step in curriculum design; ability to clearly formulate the intended learning outcomes on the guidance of the *Common European Framework of Reference* [21], and monitor their achievement through formative assessment using criterion-based instruments and feedback; understanding the importance of building students' transversal competences (e.g. meta-cognition), not just correcting their mistakes in using LPP; thus preparing their students to be autonomous lifelong learners.

- **Commitment to pedagogical reflection** regarding course participants' progress onto the conscious competence in assessment: understanding rationale for reflective practice techniques plus the expected ability and motivation to promote reflective practice among their own students.

1.4   Purpose of the Study

This paper aims to explore the practical effectiveness of the professional development course on assessment. The working hypothesis is that the course participants achieve the level of conscious competence in assessing students' competences if a favourable environment for fostering a defined set of educational values is provided through involving the course participants in collaborative project work followed by reflective practice.

Specifically, the following research questions were to be answered:

1   How do the values that teachers hold in their current assessment practices correlate with the values of competence-based education?

2   Does the offered short-term professional development course in assessment ensure the fostering of the values of competence-based education?

1.5   Limitations of the study

The following limitations were considered in the process and analysing the findings of the study:

1   The study involved practicing tertiary LPP teachers from about 20 institutions of higher learning mainly from Moscow, but also from other regions of the Russian Federation. Different corporate culture of these institutions may have resulted in a bias of the course participants' reactions to the learning environment.

2   The course participants varied in their teaching experience and expertise and no discrimination was made in this perspective.

3   The initial choice of values also created bias, although this seemed unavoidable in the limited course context.

4   The methods of assessing the results of the course were mostly qualitative – discourse analysis of the reflection sheets filled out by the participants was carried out and their participation and contributions to the peer discussions while preparing and presenting the projects was assessed using specific criterion-based scoring scales.

2   METHODOLOGY

2.1   Research Design

The research design clearly falls into two sections – one to answer Research Question 1 and the other to answer Research Question 2.

To find the answer to Research Question 1, a survey was conducted among tertiary teachers of LPP in a Moscow university – Higher School of Economics – to identify how the values that LPP teachers hold in their current assessment practices correlate with the values of competence-based education.

To assess the effectiveness of the proposed course, a piloting study was conducted at the National Academy of Teacher Development in Moscow and its outcomes were analyzed using discourse analysis of the reflection sheets filled out by the participants and their participation and contributions to the peer discussions while preparing and presenting the projects.

2.2 Sample

The sample size for Research Question 1 is 30 participants, for Research Question 2 also 30 from the population of 209.

2.3 Tools

2.3.1 Tools for Research Question 1

Based on the content of each component of the competence in assessment, a questionnaire of 30 questions has been designed, where one third pertained to the values and attitudes the teachers had relating to assessment, one third to what their knowledge and understanding was in terms of competence-based education, and one third to their actual classroom assessment practices.

2.3.2 Tools for Research Question 2

To examine the outcomes of the professional development course "*Organizing the Educational Process in Language for Specific Purposes Course: Planning and Assessing Learning Outcomes*", discourse analysis of the reflection sheets filled out by the participants and their participation and contributions to the peer discussions while preparing and presenting the projects was carried out using specific criterion-based scoring scales.

2.4 Procedures

2.4.1 Procedures for Research Question 1

The survey was done in person, using printed out copies of questionnaires. Out of 30 questions, 29 were to be answered using the Likert scale, and one was a ranking question. The sample was LPP teachers from the Higher School of Economics, Moscow with teaching experience of more than 10 years. Respondents also had to enter the number of years teaching LPP, though it was not considered relevant for the current study.

2.4.2 Procedures for Research Question 2

In conducting the professional development course for tertiary teachers of LPP named "*Organizing the Educational Process in Language for Specific Purposes Course: Planning and Assessing Learning Outcomes*", the researchers, who worked as the trainers of the course, applied the principles of the andragogy – the theory of adult learning, namely that adults learn by doing – through an active practice and participation; their learning focuses on problem solving; experience affects adult learning and they want consideration as equal partners in the process, as well as they want information that will help them improve their working situation, in this case – assessment practices.

The course included topics targeted at creating the participants' awareness of the current issues in assessment and provided opportunities for practicing the learned approaches with particular focus on using formative assessment in classroom practices, including formulating learning outcomes, employing criterion-based assessment scoring scales including giving and receiving feedback from students. In total, there were ten interactive classes with a substantial portion of participants' autonomous work on defining educational goals, developing competence-oriented tasks, and creating criterion-based assessment scoring scales for both assessment as such and for optimizing the feedback exchange with students.

In conducting the course, the overall approach was engaging the course participants in project work (either individual or group – on their choice) that involved formulating learning outcomes for their LPP syllabi in accordance with the State Educational Standard on their students' specialism(s) using active verbs from B. Bloom's taxonomy, designing competence-building tasks to achieve these outcomes and then criteria to assess the completion of these tasks as well as effective ways of providing feedback.

The fostering of the focal values was implicit – through learning by doing, as in the process of project work and group discussions that followed the course, participants developed a clearer understanding of how the process of learning could be improved through assessment. An essential part of the learning process was the sine qua non critical reflection section at the end of each period. The course participants were to reflect on the learning day's experience answering the following questions: "In what particular way has my understanding of assessment and attitude to it changed today? What are the three things I have found most valuable today? What techniques will I employ in the classroom?" Having answered these questions in writing in their own notebooks, they copied the shortened versions to a blank provided by the trainer, editing it if needed. This allowed them both to keep their own reflections for later reference as a reflective journal and furnished the trainer with evidence of their learning, which in total formed a group portfolio that was used for making reasoned judgements about the progress of the group. The final outcome of the course was a developed set of assessment tools ready for classroom use, which was presented to the group and assessed by both peers and trainers according to criteria worked out by the trainers and presented at the beginning of the course.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Findings of research question 1

The analysis of the completed questionnaire has been conducted using independent sample t-test and standard deviation, mean and median have been calculated, which revealed a number of tendencies. The findings indicate that, in terms of values and attitudes, the teachers demonstrate commitment to the traditional approaches in assessment: assessing LPP knowledge rather than skills. The aim of assessment, according to the respondents, is to give a mark, which proves that summative assessment tends to dominate. When asked to rank functions of assessment (out of the following options: diagnostic, controlling, motivating, disciplining and teaching), most teachers place diagnostic and controlling over teaching. As for the second part of the questionnaire, the teachers confess their lack of knowledge of what assessing competences involves, how learning outcomes should be formulated, what criterion-based assessment tools are and how formative assessment is different from summative. In the part relating to their classroom assessment practices, the respondents admit they put more value on linguistic accuracy than on the realization of the communicative task. To sum up, the findings of the research have shown a substantial discrepancy between what teachers perceive as necessary for their assessment practices and what they actually fulfil. Hence, it may be hypothesized that providing teachers with an opportunity to acquire deeper knowledge of contemporary approaches to assessment and take the knowledge on board through practice will increase their own competence in assessment.

3.2 Findings of research question 2

Research question 2 was if the offered short-term professional development course in assessment ensures the fostering of the values of competence-based education. The hypothesis was that a major improvement in planning and assessing students' learning outcomes in the context of competence-based education could be achieved if the teachers were provided with an opportunity to immerse in practical activities to expose them to modern assessment practices, such as assessment for learning and assessment as learning, with the aim to foster teachers' student-centred attitudes in assessment thus providing conditions for implementing a shift in the set of educational values.

As stated above, to determine whether the conducted professional development course managed to accomplish its goal – to facilitate reaching the level of conscious competence in assessment – the Conscious Competence Ladder concept was utilized. A set of descriptors pertaining to the knowledge, skills and attitudes assessing students' competences was compiled and conclusions were drawn on the basis of the criterion-based assessment of the final project as well as discourse analysis of the reflection sheets.

The analysis of the results displayed by the course participants amounting to above two hundred proved that project work as well as continuous pedagogical reflection ensures building conscious competence in assessment among approximately two-thirds of the course participants, thus substantiating the correctness of the approach in professional development aimed at creating conditions intended to instil new educational values, which leads to employing proper assessment tools in teaching practices.

4 CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, the survey conducted in the first part of the study showed an existing need for teacher development in the area of assessment in competence-based educational context, which had a practical outcome in the form of a teacher development course aiming at improving assessment practices in LPP courses in institutions of higher learning in Russia. The course, in its turn, proved effective as its outcomes evidenced that in a learning environment that promotes gaining hands-on experience of implementing competence-based assessment accompanied by continuous reflective practice, the adoption of the relevant educational values is fostered.

In the authors' opinion, solutions to many of the problems that education is currently faced with can be found if formative approach to assessment is consistently pursued. However, to order to start employing new approaches to instruction and assessment, teachers have to build conscious competence in assessment, which will ensure their commitment to students and students learning, i.e. appreciating the role of assessment as an integral part of the learning-teaching process, planning assessment as the first step in curriculum design being able to clearly formulate the intended learning outcomes on the guidance of the Common European Framework of Reference, and to monitor their achievement through formative assessment using criterion-based instruments and feedback; understanding the importance of building students' transversal competences (e.g. meta-cognition), not just correcting their mistakes in using LPP; thus preparing their students to be autonomous lifelong learners. Teachers' commitment to pedagogical reflection, understanding rationale for reflective practice techniques and the expected ability and motivation to promote reflective practice among their own students will also serve a means to the end.

Further research may concentrate on how successful the building of conscious competence in assessment is in terms of whether the participants join the professional development course out of their own accord, thus demonstrating conscious incompetence, or they have been sent to the course by the university management.

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