Assessment in an Intensive EFL Program

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Introduction

Assessment may be considered in a very broad definition as the purposeful gathering, interpreting, recording, and communicating to stakeholders of information on students' language abilities (Griffin and Nix, 1991). The stakeholders in the program that is described in this article include the learners, teachers, parents, and school administrators. Some of the purposes for assessment in a foreign language program, outlined by Heaton (1990), include:

• Determining how well students' abilities are progressing
• Finding out about learning difficulties and informing students
• Placing students
• Evaluating the effectiveness of the teaching program and of individual teachers
• Monitoring standards
• Informing teaching practices

Within the framework of this understanding of assessment, this article will present the principles on which assessment was based in a successful intensive EFL (English as a foreign language) program and the means of its effective implementation. The account will offer practical ideas that could be implemented in other intensive EFL programs or adapted to fit other particular circumstances. The implications of these measures for non-intensive university EFL instruction will be discussed at the end.

The setting and the English program

The intensive English program was that of a two-year foreign language vocational college in Japan for the period 1988 to 1999. At its peak, the program had an enrollment of about 350 students with 13 full-time native-speaker English teachers. All students in the program were Japanese. They took at least ten class hours per week with the native-speaker English teachers and additional hours with Japanese teachers of English. (As the Japanese teachers of English were under different supervision and employed different teaching approaches and means of assessment, this report will refer solely to the work of the native-speaker teachers.)

The program included courses in the four basic skill areas of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, along with elective courses in specific content areas. Most students entered the school immediately after graduating from high school and the vast majority studied English without a specific purpose. Almost every student's use of
communicative English was limited to the classroom, and after graduation very few in fact would be employed in positions that involved the use of English to any significant degree.

In such a setting, which may be common in many countries, where English is learned as a foreign language for general purposes, educators must address the aims of such instruction. In this regard, Widdowson (as cited in Nunan, 1988) has stated of general purpose English:

> [It] is essentially an educational operation which seeks to provide learners with a general capacity to enable them to cope with undefined eventualities in the future. Here, since there are no definite aims which can determine course content, there has to be recourse to intervening objectives formulated by pedagogic theory. (p. 24)

The program at our school, then, was based on a determined pragmatic and principled need to provide students with meaningful opportunities to formulate and express their thoughts, opinions, and feelings, as well as to relate knowledge and information, on matters within their life experiences and in the society around them. The aim was to enhance their self-awareness and their awareness of Japanese society and culture, so also to widen and deepen their understanding of other peoples and cultures and issues on a global scale. Thereby, students would acquire the cognitive foundation, linguistic capacity, and personal confidence and motivation to engage effectively in communication with non-Japanese if, when and where such situations arose. The instrumental use of English was integral to the growth and development of these learners as mature, thoughtful, responsible young men and women, well prepared to take their places in society, the workplace, and institutions of higher education in Japan or abroad. In addition, of course, it was the foundation for the development of their linguistic proficiency in all the basic skill areas.

**Instructional methodology and course work**

The methodology employed by the teachers to suit these objectives was essentially cooperative learning, which has been succinctly described as:

group learning activity organized so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others. (Olsen and Kagen, as cited in Kluge 1999, p. 17)

In a cooperative learning environment all the learners in small groups are interdependent. They work together to maximize their own learning and that of everyone else in the group. Teachers maximize the opportunity for students to promote each other’s success by helping, assisting, supporting, encouraging, and praising each other’s efforts to learn in face-to-face interaction. To achieve success, students must be taught requisite interpersonal and small group social skills. Group processing, in which the members discuss how the group is functioning, is important in order to evaluate the achievement of their goals and to maintain effective social relationships. (See Johnson and Johnson, 1999.)

This article will describe the manner of assessment that was implemented for the core course entitled “Structure/Conversation” (S/C). It met three days per week in double 50-minute periods, for approximately 180 periods each of the two school years. Each year’s course was taught entirely by one teacher. There were nine S/C classes for each of the two years. Maximum class size was 20 students.

The course was aimed at developing specific proficiencies in:
As Sally Brown reveals to her teacher, assessment of a student's performance or production can be a very complex and problematic matter.

(1) Oral discourse skills and fluency, such as:
- Asking and answering questions
- Initiating and responding to statements
- Initiating and sustaining connected, cohesive, and extended discussion
- Explaining things in detail
- Supporting opinions
- Demonstrating effective integration of language resources
- Employing basic conversation strategies and discourse devices appropriate to a range of circumstances and topics

(2) Structure, including:
- Correct syntactical usage
- Accuracy of expression
- Demonstrating range, control, and flexibility of structures in sustained and coherent usage

(3) Vocabulary use and development

(4) Listening comprehension

The course also sought to advance students' self-confidence, motivation, assumption of responsibility for their own learning, risk-taking, and tolerance of language proficiency limitations.
The textbook for the course was Spectrum: A communicative course in English (Prentice Hall), but the course work was centered on the dozens of lesson units developed by teachers primarily for pair and small group discussion, and other student-centered, interactive work, such as role-playing, information gap activities, short dramatic recitations, and the preparation and presentation of reports to the class.

Initial placement

As many as 180 first-year students were placed in nine classes according to general levels of English proficiency as determined by scores on a placement test for New English course, a text published by ELS. It consisted of 50 multiple choice questions on grammar and 20 for listening comprehension. Although it covered a limited range of language skills in discrete item questions, the overall results were believed to be as accurate and as fair as any other means might have been, including very time consuming oral interviews and/or writing samples.

The results of continuous assessment during the school year and overall student satisfaction over the years with the procedure supported this assertion. Very few students were misplaced beyond a level or two, and the nature of the program meant that there was not a really significant difference for students even in these cases. Nevertheless, at the end of students' first year, on the basis of extensive review of the assessments discussed below, the placement of all students was reevaluated and changes were made for the second year of studies based on their performance and progress.

Principles of assessment

The principles and practices that guided the assessment regime for the intensive EFL program put the learner at the core of the process. We supported Gipps's (1994) assertions that "whenever possible [assessment] must be of a type suitable to and used for the enhancement of good quality learning" (p. 158) and should be "against clear standards, in a low-stakes programme, with constructive feedback and a focus on the individual's own performance in relation to the standard and to his/her own previous performance, rather than comparison with others" (p. 161). Assessment should be done by teachers and integrated with learning. Continuous assessment uses students' regular work rather than formal examinations or standardized tests and the results are used as feedback to help define objectives and encourage learners to take responsibility for their own learning.

Griffin and Nix (1991, pp. 24-26) summarize further some basic properties of an assessment system which we incorporated into our program:

1. Assessments should describe the skills, attitudes and concepts that a student has developed. Obviously these should be related to the curriculum and the instructional objectives.

2. Assessments should provide information about the pupils' needs, strengths and weaknesses...[and] therefore, be analytical or formative in nature.

3. Assessments should describe the student's progress in a fair, relevant and accurate manner...[through] a system of moderation...[by which] sharing experiences and judgments of pupils' achievements with other teachers can help to develop and maintain a common understanding of what could be judged as a standard or appropriate performance.

As Bowler and Parminter (1997) point out, continuous assessment is consistent with a process approach to learning, as in the cooperative learning environment outlined above. It allows for the inclusion of learning habits,
traits, and strategies that we want to encourage in our students. These include: regularly and punctually doing homework, having a positive and enthusiastic attitude, trying hard, using intuition and ingenuity, taking risks, learning from mistakes, and working well on their own as well as with others in pair and group work activities. Our assessment specifically took these learning elements into account.

Bowler and Parminter (1997) advise further that continuous assessment procedures really do not take a lot more time than formal testing procedures.

The way the work comes, though, is different. With continuous assessment you spend less time preparing [and later marking] evaluation materials outside class time, but more time evaluating in class. This is because you are assessing each student a little and often, rather than testing rarely and intensively. (p. 16)

**Implementation of assessment**

In our program we used five assessment techniques during the course of the school year, three in an ongoing continuous manner throughout each semester (continuous assessment, workbook assessment, and moderation), and two only at the end of each semester (oral examination and a “uniform test”).

**Continuous assessment**

Continuous assessment of students in the S/C course was carried out with the many tasks and activities of the regular course work within the context of the rationale for the intensive EFL program discussed earlier. In the cooperative learning environment of the course, with student-centered, interactive tasks, teachers moved from group to group facilitating, modeling, and monitoring individual and group performance and progress toward the goals and objectives that were well-understood by the students through the course of instruction. Feedback was given to individual students and groups in the process of interactive discussions or at a later appropriate time and place, or a summation of observations was presented later to the full class.

Each teacher, in his or her own way, would maintain observation and assessment records throughout the year, the direct documentation that best serves students, teachers, other stakeholders, and the educational program itself. Typically a teacher would enter marks and comments on a self-prepared form that included as assessment items the specific proficiencies the course aimed to develop and the desirable learning traits and strategies mentioned above. With 100-minute class sessions three times a week, a teacher had ample opportunity to focus for considerable time on individual and group performances and, on any given day, selective assessment items. This data was summarized on the end-of-term evaluation report for each student. Teachers in other circumstances with fewer class hours and/or more limited objectives can readily modify this regime to suit their particular situations.

**Workbook assessment**

Exercises with structural and functional language items, practices with accuracy and forms, as well as listening comprehension, were included in the excellent Spectrum workbooks. These would normally be assigned for homework and marked by teachers for additional criterion-referenced assessment data throughout each semester.
Moderation

Moderation in assessment procedures was considered very important in our program and was established and maintained in several ways. Class visits by the academic supervisor were a normal occurrence and other teachers periodically visited colleagues’ classes as well. Of course, some discussion always followed such events. The academic supervisor or the classroom teacher also made it a point to give feedback directly to the students in the classes visited. Each English intensive course class had at least three different teachers, one for each of the program components. All this meant a great deal of daily communication among the teachers, inside and out of the common teachers’ room, on the instructional program and assessments of students. In short, we knew very well the work of every other teacher, and the work of every student in the program was very well known by at least several teachers.

Oral examination

Within this context of common understanding among teachers of standards of performance for the S/C course, usually at the end of each term the teacher would give an oral examination. Most often it consisted of meetings with small groups of students from the class for about 10 to 15 minutes. Students might be given a part of a teacher-prepared discussion unit that had previously been completed in class and their interactive oral skills would be observed, assessed, and appropriately recorded. In effect, it was a short reprise of a class activity in a setting that allowed the teacher greater opportunity to concentrate on the process of students’ interaction and their oral production.

“Uniform test”

At the end of each semester an S/C “uniform test” was taken by all students in the intensive English course. This was prepared by the academic supervisor with consultation with other teachers. It was a criterion-referenced achievement test based on the minimum material from the textbook on which teachers agreed to be required to give instruction and workbook exercises previously done by students. The mostly discrete point items dealt with structural and functional language, vocabulary, and listening comprehension in the form of fill-in and multiple choice answers and cloze exercises. Students’ scores strongly correlated with their continuous assessment marks and the ranking of results was very accurately predictable.

The test score comprised only 20% of a student’s final mark, so it did not at all distort teaching away from the primary objectives discussed earlier, nor did it de-motivate students with low scores. Teachers recognized the nature of the test accentuated lower scores for less proficient, but hard-working students. At the same time, it had a degree of prestige and motivated students to study hard for it by reviewing the limited material from which questions were derived. In short, the nature of test was well understood and it served its intended purposes to see that students kept up with classwork and homework from the text and to satisfy the school administration’s legitimate desire for some “uniform” test for all students.

Evaluation report
At the end of each semester, on a standard evaluation form, a student's marks for the subject were entered for class participation, work assignments, and oral fluency and accuracy, along with an account of attendance, and a final mark recorded. A space for the teacher's comments was provided below and it was expected that he/she would write simple and concise remarks on the student's performance. These forms were sent to the parents and kept on file in the administration office.

**Placement reevaluation**

Finally, at the end of the school year, a thorough review of teachers' assessments of students for all subjects was made for the purpose of re-placement of students in proficiency ranked classes for their second year of studies. The academic supervisor reviewed each student's assessment record with each of his/her teachers. This achieved a very accurate and fair placement of students for the following school year, as confirmed by its widespread positive acceptance by the students and their performance in the new classes.

**Reliability**

Reliability in assessment measurement essentially relates to consistency of pupil performance and consistency in assessing that performance. Students' oral expression, in particular, however, may vary even from day to day in different contexts and from affective factors as well. Continuous assessment allows for such variances in pupil performance and provides a cumulative, overall measure of students' skills and progress during the course of the school year that is more consistent with the complexity of the language learning process and students' stages of proficiency development than just formal paper tests given sparingly over the year. At the same time, other elements of assessment that have been described - workbook exercises, oral exams, uniform tests - add to provide an even more complete picture of pupil performance. Finally, the system of moderation within the program strengthened the consistency among teachers in assessing that performance.

**Conclusion and implications for non-intensive university EFL instruction**

Assessment, then, was an important and integral part of the intensive English program. The effort was made to inform our teaching practices and to have a positive effect on students' learning. We believed firmly that "the expertise and experience of the teacher [is] the most flexible, responsive and sensitive means of assessment available" (Derewianka, 1999, p. 15). Our assessment information covered well performances, products, processes, and personal qualities. We were very mindful of the conclusion stated by Crooks (as cited in Gipps, 1994):

We must ensure that we give appropriate emphasis in our evaluations to the skills, knowledge and attitudes that we perceive to be the most important....Classroom evaluation affects students in many different ways. For instance, it guides their judgment of what is important to learn, affects their motivation and self-perceptions of competence, structures their approaches to and timing of personal study..., consolidates learning, and affects the development of enduring learning strategies and skills. It appears to be one of the most potent forces influencing education. (p. 40)

The teachers hope that our work had such lasting effects. Likewise, it is hoped that the practical approach to assessment that has been outlined in this article, and which worked very successfully in our intensive English
program, offers ideas that could be effectively implemented also in other EFL programs.

In fact, the application of the essential points of the assessment approach described here is particularly relevant as well for non-intensive EFL instruction at universities. In that learning environment usually a course will have only about 13 ninety-minute meetings per semester. Generally this is insufficient time within which students can significantly advance their English language skills and proficiency. In addition, courses usually are open to students of all levels of proficiency and class size may be large, with even 40 or more students enrolled. Often the teacher has had no previous contact with many of the students in the class and will have no more contact with them in future classes. Furthermore, instructors normally function independently of each other even when teaching the same course in different sections. Nevertheless, and indeed precisely because of these factors, some of the features of the assessment regime in the intensive EFL program of a senmon gakkou outlined in this account may be well suited for such a university environment as well.

The assessment procedures are compatible with learner-centered, communicative teaching methodologies in which some form of cooperative learning serves as an instructional model. Underlying such a teaching approach is the principle of the inter-relatedness of assessment and instruction. Continuous assessment is performance-based and “an integral component of the learning/teaching process rather than an independent process whose purpose is to pass judgment on [students’] abilities in relation to their classmates” (Shaaban, 2001b, p. 18).

In university EFL courses students who enroll with lower levels of language proficiency should not in effect be condemned from the start with low marks from traditional paper-and-pencil tests with multiple choice and other such questions that focus on mastery of discrete language points and linguistic accuracy, rather than on communicative competence. Nor should students who enroll with higher levels of language proficiency almost automatically be rewarded with higher course marks from such tests.

Fair, thorough, and effective assessment, which should include consideration of course objectives such as students having positive attitudes toward English and motivation, making effort, and assuming greater independence and responsibility for their learning, requires integration of assessment and learning activities. Indeed, it is “the responsibility of the teacher to provide assessment measures that allow students to show their best performance and ability” (Shaaban, 2001a, p. 3). Working from the English language that students know and content that is within their schemata, teachers expand students’ possibilities with the language and foster confidence, motivation, and self-learning skills, habits, and strategies that will endure beyond the limited frame of time and content of the university course itself. The assessment approach discussed here will support and advance the achievement of these endeavors.

References


