



Assessment - Prejudices and problems

Assessment is generally seen as something done to students by teachers. Many students may feel panic and confusion. Tests descend upon them from time to time and have to be "got through". The more able ones may even enjoy these experiences, as they can assert their superiority over the rest of the class. However, many students feel anxious, worried and inadequate. There is often great pressure on them to succeed and if they do not, they become branded as failures.

Unfortunately this competition creates more losers than winners. Many teachers feel little better. Some feel that tests are only useful as a way of motivating students to work harder and virtually all of us feel insecure and uncomfortable when we have to pass or fail students.

Many of these negative attitudes towards assessment come from generalised feeling of a divorce between learning and teaching on the one hand, and assessment on the other. The fundamental reason for this is that assessment often does not feed back into the learning and teaching process.

Firstly assessment is often seen as synonymous with testing. Testing or formal assessment, where test or exam conditions are established, is certainly an important way of assessing learners. However, it is not the only one and both informal assessment and self-assessment are vital. Informal assessment is assessment carried out by the teacher not under special test conditions, but in the normal classroom environment (for example with students helping each other when necessary). Self assessment is that carried out by students themselves of their own progress and problems.

Secondly assessment is seen as something that happens after learning has finished, rather than during the learning process. Tests or exams are often given at the end of term or of a course and they are often regarded as a rather painful but necessary prelude to the holidays. For many learners the information that this assessment gives them about their performance and progress comes much too late to be formative, to feed into their own learning.

An additional drawback of the way assessment is carried out in many classrooms is that it often concentrates on only one part of what has gone on in the classroom. It is easier to test tangible knowledge of grammar for example, than to assess performance at say speaking. An over-reliance on grammar tests gives students the clear message that they have been wasting their time trying to communicate in class. What matters is grammar.

Do you agree?

For further reading:

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