

Criterion-Related Assessment for Linguistic Competencies' Development

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Abstract: The article is devoted to the problem of criterion-related assessment for linguistic competencies' development. Linguistic competencies are connected with knowledge of the language itself, its form and meaning, they are integral part of communicative competence. It is impossible to conceive of a person being communicatively competent without being linguistically competent. Like any language-related subject, "Interpretation of Fiction" is aimed at developing students' linguistic competency as an integral part of communicative competency, which is the basis for successful cross-cultural communication. Effective teaching and learning involve modern means of assessment, which are rooted in criterion-based approach. Criterion-related assessment helps students to become caring, knowledgeable, open-minded, principled, reflective, etc. It is one of the pillars of education philosophy and policies which dwells upon two types of assessment: formative and summative. Formative assessment controls the current development of students' skills, summative assessment monitors the level of performance achieved by the students by the end of the course.

Key words: Linguistic competencies • Criterion-related assessment • Competence-based approach
• Grading • Formative and summative assessment • Language

INTRODUCTION

Internationally over the past two decades, higher education institutions and educators have become increasingly committed to making assessment and grading more effective in promoting linguistic competencies' development, to making less mysterious, more open and more explicit the grounds upon which student productions are graded. This has resulted in a strong interest in grading criteria and so-called criterion-related assessment. The theoretical and practical aspects of criterion-related assessment of students' development are exemplified in the article by the course of "Interpretation of Fiction".

Like any language-related subject, "Interpretation of Fiction" is aimed at developing students' linguistic competency as an integral part of communicative competency, which is the basis for successful cross-cultural communication. For the first time the term 'language competency' or 'linguistic competency' was introduced by the American linguist N. Chomsky in the middle of the XX century. According to N. Chomsky,

linguistic competency implied the ability to understand and produce an unlimited number of correct sentences with the help of acquired knowledge of language symbols and rules of their connection. It marked out a person's ability to use the second language in the course of communication.

Linguistic competency is concerned with knowledge of the language itself, its form and meaning. It involves the knowledge of spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary, word formation, grammatical structure, sentence structure and linguistic semantics. In this aspect any learner who is able to list orally and in writing the objects in a bowl, such as an apple, an orange, two bananas and a bunch of grapes, is developing the ability to select a specific vocabulary and knows its pronunciation and graphic forms. A learner who can add prefixes correctly to make the negative equivalents of the words, is developing competency in using word formation rules correctly. A learner who can describe recent events by using the needed tense form is developing grammatical competency. So in these various ways the learner is acquiring linguistic competency in the second language [1].

Linguistic competency is an integral part of communicative competency. It is impossible to conceive of a person being communicatively competent without being linguistically competent. There has been a misconception about communicative language teaching that it does not aim for a high standard of formal correctness. Now it is considered not incompatible to have correctness in the use of rules as an ultimate goal and at the same time to tolerate risk-taking and error in the classroom as part of the process of achieving communicative competency. Thus teaching the language is closely connected with linguistic competency formation as a part of communicative competency through various forms and aids [2].

Studies of literature concerned with the notion of linguistic competency, make it possible to include into it the following:

- Language knowledge about spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary, word formation, grammatical structure, sentence structure and linguistic semantics;
- Language skills (e.g. being able to recognize statements that are correct in terms of grammar and lexis, to decipher language notions, etc.);
- Language abilities to analyse and synthesise language phenomena in the form of rules and language algorithms [3].

As a result, linguistic competency can be considered not only the way to perfect oral communication skills, but also an important means of language development, expanding the linguistic outlook and language cognition on the whole.

The current period is characterized by radical modernization of the Russian educational system, the transition to the new standards of education. The federal state educational standard of higher professional education in Russia is built in the logic of the competence-based approach. The modern educator should be capable of providing flexible, individually-oriented education and upbringing, the formation of competencies required for innovative development of the country, capable to develop the creative abilities of students. He should have fundamentally different means of organization of the educational process if compared with the traditional ones [4].

Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning. The most important aims of assessment are that it should support curricular goals and encourage

appropriate student learning. Assessment process is best described as internal, because the assessment tasks, strategies and tools are designed, developed and applied by lecturers. Lecturers are best placed to assess the work of their students. The assessment model supports the professional judgment of the lecturer in deciding the levels of achievements of individual students.

This system of assessment, known as «criterion-related assessment» is one of the pillars of education philosophy and policies. It is based upon pre-determined criteria that all students should have access to. Assessment criteria are used when the assessment task is open-ended. Each criterion concentrates on a particular skill that students are expected to demonstrate. An assessment objective describes what students should be able to do and assessment criteria describe how well they should be able to do it. Using assessment criteria allows discrimination between different answers and encourages a variety of responses. Each criterion is described by definite descriptors. With the help of such system of assessment, students are about what is expected in a task, an assignment or examination. By having the criteria of assessment on hand, a student doesn't need to guess what he/she needs to do to get good results [5, 6].

It is necessary to underline that criterion-related assessment helps students to become:

- Thinkers (they exercise initiative in applying thinking skills critically and creatively to recognize and approach complex problems and make reasoned, ethical decisions);
- Communicators (they understand and express ideas and information confidently and creatively in more than one language and in a variety of modes of communication. They work effectively and willingly in collaboration with others);
- Principled (they act with integrity and honesty, with a strong sense of fairness, justice and respect for the dignity of the individual, groups and communities. They take responsibility for their own actions and the consequences that accompany them);
- Open-minded (they understand and appreciate their own cultures and personal histories and are open to the perspectives, values and traditions of other individuals and communities. They are accustomed to seeking and evaluating a range of points of view and are willing to grow from the experience);

- Caring (they show empathy, compassion and respect towards the needs and feelings of others. They have a personal commitment to service and act to make a positive difference to the lives of others and to the environment);
- Balanced (they understand the importance of intellectual, physical and emotional balance to achieve personal well-being for themselves and others);
- Reflective (they give thoughtful consideration to their own learning and experience. They are able to assess and understand their strengths and limitations in order to support their learning and personal development) [7].

The arguments for criterion-related grading could, in essence, be expressed by two ideals that have strong educational and ethical underpinnings: 1) students deserve to be graded on the basis of the quality of their work alone, uncontaminated by reference to how other students in the course perform on the same or equivalent tasks and without regard to each student's previous level of performance. These two conditions set criteria-based grading apart from all forms of norm-referencing and self-referencing, but they do not specify how it should be done; 2) at the point of beginning a course of study, students deserve to know the criteria by which judgments will be made about the quality of their work. This has a primarily prospective purpose, which is to enable learners to use the information to shape their work intelligently and appropriately while it is being developed. However, specifying the bases for grading also serves retrospectively in that stated criteria help to provide a rationale for grading judgments after they have been made and the results given back to the students [8].

The broad desirability and benefits of criterion-related assessment and grading lead higher education institutions to develop theoretical concepts of assessment and implement them in the range of educational courses. Herein we will exemplify the theoretical and practical aspects of criterion-related assessment of students' development in the course of "Interpretation of Fiction".

The course "Interpretation of Fiction" presupposes formative and summative assessment types. Formative assessment controls the current development of students' skills via various tasks, discussion activities and essay-writing. Summative assessment monitors the level of performance achieved by the students by the end

of the course. The key product which represents how well students achieve the course objectives is a critical essay [9].

The progress of each student in essay writing is assessed according to the following 5 criteria (in both summative and formative assessment types):

Criterion A	Introduction	4
Criterion B	Content	4
Criterion C	Technical accuracy	4
Criterion D	Personal response	4
Criterion E	Individual style	4
Total		20

Lecturers have to transfer total number of points into 5-grade traditional assessment system for Russian Federation according to the following scheme: 20-17 points: «5»; 16-11 points: «4»; 10-6 points: «3»; 5-0 points: «2».

Criteria and Descriptors

Criteria	Descriptors
A (max 4)	The introduction of a critical essay includes some information about the author of the text under study (landmarks of the writer's biography and creative work, the themes that he/she explored in literary works; peculiarities of the author's style; the context of the literary work the excerpt belongs to).
B (max 4)	The content of the essay should disclose the following aspects (elements of analysis): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short plot summary of the extract, its themes (general and specific), the setting of the events; • Text structure, compositional elements and narrative types; • Characters and means of characterization, the author's attitude to the personages; • Tone and atmosphere of the fragment; • Examining a writer's individual style (the particular combination of literary devices, imagery, rhythmical patterns, structures and vocabulary he/she uses etc. (*stylistic devices should be analysed as the essay unfolds); • The messages of the excerpt/short story/novel.
C (max 4)	Students' analysis should meet the requirement of technical accuracy. There are several points that are considered in this respect: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accurate and varied use of vocabulary (variety of lexical units, use of special phrases for interpretation); • Accurate use of grammar; • Punctuation (correct and appropriate use of full stops, commas, colons, semicolons, quotation marks etc.); • Paragraphing (logical and accurate paragraph building).
D (max 4)	Students are encouraged to evaluate the text under analysis (its social, cultural and historical contexts). They need to show a valid and detailed interpretation of the ideas, thoughts and feelings expressed in the extract, including a considered personal response where appropriate. In formative assessment type (discussion activities) students reflect on their work and the performance of other students.
E (max 4)	Students' analysis should meet the requirement of the development of individual style. There are several points that are considered in this respect:

- Style must be unique-an expression of the way the student sees things;
- Style should be formal (certain things should be avoided-slang, the first person*, abbreviations, etc.);
- The student should avoid the typical mistakes in essay-writing (e.g. inflated sentences, unnecessary repetitions, inappropriate use of clichés, etc.);
- The student should avoid overusing theoretical terms, the knowledge and understanding of theory should be implicit and subtle;
- The elements of analysis should be naturally interwoven in the essay, not standing separately or too obvious;
- The student is encouraged to experiment with essay structure and use the devices of their own.
- * The first person is possible if the student chooses to give his/her evaluation of the text in the final part of an essay

Academic Grading Policy: A student's academic performance in essay writing over a reporting period is measured on a 1-4 scale. In general, in order to attain these grades, the following requirements should be met:

Excellent:

- Student provides a laconic and considerable introduction with valid and significant information about the author's biography, creative work and style; demonstrates an ability to interpret the information, establish intertextual connections and present this knowledge in the context of the literary work under study (Criterion A);
- Student's essay covers all the required elements of analysis (theme(s); setting; summary when appropriate; text structure; narrative type; characters and means of characterization; tone and atmosphere; examining a writer's individual style; message (s), etc.); all the elements are presented in a thorough and essential way (Criterion B);
- Student's analysis entirely meets the requirement of technical accuracy, i.e. student demonstrates varied use of vocabulary, accurate use of grammar, punctuation and paragraphing (Criterion C);
- Student's ability to evaluate and reflect on the text under analysis goes beyond expectations; student's essay contains valid and detailed interpretation of ideas, thoughts and feelings expressed in the extract with independent and consistent personal response where appropriate (Criterion D);
- Student's analysis entirely meets the requirement of the development of individual style, i.e. student's style is unique and formal; student avoids typical mistakes in essay writing; student's understanding

and knowledge of theory is implicit and subtle; the elements of analysis are naturally interwoven in the essay; student experiments with the structure and uses the devices of his/her own (Criterion E).

Good:

- Student provides a laconic and considerable introduction with valid and significant information about the author's biography, creative work and style; demonstrates an ability to interpret the information and relate it to the text under study (Criterion A);
- Student's essay covers all of the required elements of analysis (theme(s); setting; summary when appropriate; text structure; narrative type; characters and means of characterization; tone and atmosphere; examining a writer's individual style; message (s), etc.); the majority of elements are disclosed in a thorough way (Criterion B);
- Student's analysis generally meets the requirement of technical accuracy, i.e. student demonstrates varied use of vocabulary, accurate use of grammar, punctuation and paragraphing; small amount of mistakes is permissible (Criterion C);
- Student demonstrates an ability to evaluate and reflect on the text under analysis; student's essay contains valid and detailed interpretation of ideas, thoughts and feelings expressed in the extract with consistent personal response (on the basis of class discussion) where appropriate (Criterion D);
- Student's analysis generally meets the requirement of the development of individual style, i.e. student's style is unique and formal; student avoids typical mistakes in essay writing; student's understanding and knowledge of theory is implicit and subtle; the elements of analysis are naturally interwoven in the essay (Criterion E).

Satisfactory:

- Student provides a laconic and considerable introduction with valid and significant information about the author's biography, creative work and style (Criterion A);
- Student's essay covers the majority of the required elements of analysis (theme(s); setting; summary when appropriate; narrative type; characters and

means of characterization; examining a writer's individual style; message(s), etc.); some of the elements are disclosed above standard performance, others-below (Criterion B);

- Student's analysis partly meets the requirement of technical accuracy, i.e. student demonstrates adequate use of vocabulary; certain amount of grammar, punctuation mistakes are permissible; student may experience difficulty in paragraphing (e.g. building strong paragraphs, providing the necessary logical connections between paragraphs, etc.) (Criterion C);
- Student demonstrates a limited ability to evaluate and reflect on the text under analysis; student's essay contains superficial interpretation of ideas, thoughts and feelings expressed in the extract with occasional personal response (on the basis of class discussion) (Criterion D);
- Student's analysis partly meets the requirement of the development of individual style, i.e. student's style is formal; student can't avoid typical mistakes in essay writing; student's understanding and knowledge of theory aren't always obvious; the elements of analysis may appear disconnected or separate in the essay (Criterion E).

Poor:

- Student provides an introduction with information about the author's biography, creative work and style; the information appears insufficient or excessive, unnecessary, inconsiderable; student doesn't provide any connection of the introductory information to the rest of the essay (Criterion A);
- Student's essay covers the minority of the required elements of analysis (theme(s); setting; summary when appropriate; narrative type; characters and means of characterization; examining a writer's individual style; message(s), etc.); the elements are disclosed below standard performance or left out (Criterion B);
- Student's analysis hardly meets the requirement of technical accuracy, i.e. student is careless in the use of vocabulary; large amount of grammar, punctuation mistakes are made; student is unaware of paragraphing technique (e.g. building strong paragraphs, providing the necessary logical connections between paragraphs, etc.) (Criterion C);

- Student can't evaluate or reflect on the text under analysis; student's essay contains none or minimum of interpretation of ideas, thoughts and feelings expressed in the extract with no personal response (Criterion D);
- Student's analysis has no individual style, i.e. student makes typical mistakes in essay writing; student's understanding and knowledge of theory are doubtful; many elements of analysis are missing, the ones given appear disconnected or separate in the essay (Criterion E) [10].

CONCLUSION

This system of assessment provides a rationale for grading judgments, promotes the objectivity of the process, equips both students and teachers with the effective tools for formative, summative and self-assessment types. Criteria based assessment and grading reflect the level of students' general professional and field-specific competencies, orient them towards integrated approach to lifelong learning.

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