

## Elucidating the Assessment Mechanisms under the Learner Centered Approach

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**Abstract:**

The assessment/feedback process is fundamental for the success of the learner centered model; it aims to evaluate the extent in which students have developed the skills, understanding and critical thinking that were intended at the beginning of the learning process. In order for the teacher to conduct a successful assessment process it is imperative to be aware of the best practices and approaches that provide understanding of the knowledge students have acquired and developed. The current research aims at reviewing these approaches and to see how it operates under the learner centered syllabus, in addition to highlighting the positive impact good assessment has on promoting learning.

**Keywords:** Assessment; Approaches; Learner Centered; Syllabus.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Educational reforms anywhere in the world and in the Algerian context in particular are meant to create a better teaching/learning environment for both teachers and students and to develop student's sense of responsibility, to build their competencies and have an integral part in their learning process. The assessment/feedback process is fundamental at this stage, it aims to evaluate the extent in which students have developed the skills, attitudes, understanding and critical thinking that were intended at the beginning of their learning course. Teachers are at the heart of this process; assessment demands large body of knowledge and skills that teachers use to either formally or informally assess their students, the latter according to Harris and McCann (1994) is "a way of collecting information about our students' performance in normal classroom conditions", the former however is held through establishing test conditions (p. 5).

Classroom research essentially focuses on developing teacher's competence and determination to have better awareness about the process of how students learn. Observation, feedback, assessment and experiments are some of the various approaches teachers work with in classroom research. The researcher believes in the necessity of pointing out to the importance of classroom research and its role in polishing teacher's assessment techniques. Cross and Angelo (1988) suggested a model of classroom research grounded on 5 assumptions, the first assumption implies that learning and teaching are in a complementary relationship, in other words student's quality of learning is directly linked to the quality of classroom teaching; thus in order to improve learning it is crucial to upgrade teaching (p.1).

The second assumption is concerned with the formulation of goals, it advocated for the need of teachers to clearly denote their goals and objectives with the aim of developing their teaching techniques in addition to be open to the extensive feedback they will receive regarding the achievement of those goals, this assumption connects teaching goal and assessment approaches together as one; in other words, Cross and Angelo (1988) believe that "each assessment technique has an implied teaching goal...and it also provides information about how well that goal has been accomplished" (p. 2) . The third assumption evokes that for classroom research to be successful in improving the teaching/learning process teachers are required to answer personalized questions on issues in their teaching methods; to put it another way, teachers need to embrace their failure in order to progress (p.2).

The next assumption asserts that classroom research is an intellectually challenging process that boosts teacher's motivation and growth through inquiry (p.3), the fifth and final assumption of Cross and Angelo is that classroom research is a simple, uncomplicated process that can be done "by anyone capable of and dedicated to college teaching" (p.3) they also noted that "the more classroom teachers engage in Classroom Research ,the more sophisticated and knowledgeable they will become about teaching and learning"(p.4). More details and examples of the aforementioned

model of classroom research are pointed out in *Classroom Assessment Techniques. A Handbook for Faculty* (1988), the model will provide teachers with new concepts and guides them on how to build the best teaching environment at the same time develops their assessment skills.

The current paper aims at reviewing the best assessment practices and approaches that operate under the learner centered syllabus and provide understanding of the knowledge students have acquired and developed throughout their learning process, in addition to emphasizing the power assessment has on promoting learning. A common misconception of considering all students to have the same level of understanding and the same learning styles is very common in Algerian schools and universities, accordingly, teachers tend to use the same assessment practices on all students without updating them to accommodate with the new generation of students. It is important for teachers to conduct a thorough classroom research to become more conscious about the fact that test and exam scores are not the sole determinant of student's development and understanding of the materials, it is necessary for the assessment to be a long-term dynamic process that covers all educational aspects in the classroom. The current paper asks the following research question:

1. Which assessment approaches are more suitable for a learner centered syllabus?
2. What is the impact a good assessment practice has on promoting learning?

To reach the aim of the paper, extensive research on approaches to assessment and the learner centered syllabus was conducted in order to identify which assessment methods are considered best in a learner centered environment. The paper is descriptive in nature and provides teachers with insights to reconsider the use of the traditional assessment approaches and move toward the ones known as secondary or alternative approaches.

## **2. The Learner Centered Approach**

Learner's independence and autonomy are one of the key objectives of any educational institution, the work of Boud (1981) described how education and traditional teacher centered approach is responsible for making students dependent learners, most of them depend completely on the instructor to identify what needs to be learned and how. The notions of learner's self-regulation, autonomy and individualism are only introduced with the implementation of the learner centered approach. The model as its name denotes puts the learner at the center of the educational or the teaching/learning process with the teacher as a guide or facilitator of this process.

The difference between the traditional curriculum and a learner centered curriculum is that the latter involves students in the designing process for it is a collaborative effort between the teacher and students, this change in direction was not an easy process because a collaborative negotiated curriculum is managed differently from one that is prescribed by the teacher or teaching institutions (Nunan, 1986 p. 2). Course design in a learner centered approach follows a detailed sequence that begins with assessment (diagnostic assessment) of needs and report of goals and objectives, the teachers or course designers then work on the designing process, the

implementation, assessment and revision processes that should fit the needs of the learners and accomplish the stated objectives. Classroom Assessment in a learner centered curriculum focuses the primary attention of teachers and students on observing and improving learning, rather than on observing and improving teaching.

### 3. Readings of Assessment

#### 3.1 What is Assessment?

Assessment has long been an integral part of the educational process; its successfulness depends greatly on educator's adequate knowledge and awareness of the best practices and approaches that provide understanding of the knowledge students have acquired and developed. Assessment in general has a broad spectrum of definitions ranging according to different purposes and contexts; Rowntree defines assessment as:

... assessment can be thought of as occurring whenever one person, in some kind of interaction, direct or indirect, with another, is conscious of obtaining and interpreting information about the knowledge and understanding, or abilities and attitudes of that other person. To some extent or other it is an attempt to know that person. (1987, p. 4)

On another note, Gibbs and Simpson (as cited in Irons, 2008, p.11) suggest that "assessment is seen to exert a profound influence on student learning: on what students focus their attention on, on how much they study, on their quality of engagement with learning tasks, and, through feedback, on their understanding and future learning". On the whole, assessment is the process of evaluating and measuring learner's educational achievements with the help of different tools or methods.

The desire of evaluating learner's educational achievements has been growing for a long period of time, *Knowing what students know : the Science and Design of Educational Assessment* (2001) is a guidebook published by the National Research Council that focuses on reviewing advances in the cognitive sciences and measurement to explore their implications for improving educational assessment (p.1); Pellegrino, Chudowsky and Glaser (2001, p.1) highlight the goal of educational assessment as: "It seeks to determine how well students are learning and is an integral part of the quest for improved education. It provides feedback to students, educators, parents, policy makers, and the public about the effectiveness of educational services."

The complexity of the process of assessment gives it various purposes for it means different things to different audiences in different situations (Earl, 2003, p. 1). The purpose of assessment is categorized as assessment of learning, assessment for learning and assessment as learning (Earl, 2003), assessment of learning is the traditional type used in schools; it is summative in nature and executed as tests or exams that are done at the end of a unit or a program to certify learning and achievements of students (p. 2). Assessment for learning on the other hand, is formative and offers a different standpoint to the traditional classroom assessment, the process is done at the middle of the learning process rather than at the end with constant help and interaction from the teacher to the students in order to pinpoint learning needs,

Assessment for learning is any assessment for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting students' learning. It thus differs from assessment designed primarily to serve the purposes of accountability, or of ranking, or of certifying competence. An assessment activity can help learning if it provides information to be used as feedback, by teachers, and by their students, in assessing themselves and each other, to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Such assessment becomes 'formative assessment' when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching work to meet learning needs. (Black & Wiliam,1998, p. 2)

The third purpose is assessment as learning that Earl (2003) levels with self-assessment, it occurs when higher education students are responsible for the most part of their learning; as in the Algerian context the LMD system denotes students to be accountable for 80% of their learning with the remaining 20% dedicated to the teacher's involvement either as a mentor or a guide in the learning process. Assessment as learning sees the student's contribution in assessment activities such as peer assessment and self-monitoring of progress as part of the learning process (Black & Wiliam 1998, p.3).

Most of the traditional methods of assessment focus more on testing knowledge and comprehension and ignores the importance of developing and assessing judgments, experienced teachers in the Algerian educational institutes tend to reject the modern assessment strategies and maintain the old fashioned approaches they adopted 10 or 15 years ago, this conception is one of the main reasons why the assessment process in Algeria is challenging. These teachers tend to opt for the summative type of assessment which refers to evaluating learner's performance on a test at the end of the courses, without question this method is essential in the evaluation process, nevertheless it does not necessarily reflect upon the exact level of students understanding mainly because tests intensify anxiety and thus sometimes students' tend to score less than usual, Boud (2006) (as cited in Joughin, 2009) pointed out that "assessment probably provokes more anxiety among students and irritation among staff than any other feature of higher education" (p. 13)

### **3.2 Approaches of Assessment**

Given that assessment is a complex process with numerous definitions and characteristics; it is challenging to set certain forms of assessment as the exclusive types of the process. Researchers have identified different labels of the varieties of assessment; the mostly acknowledged ones are exhibited in dichotomies by McAlpine (2002):

#### **3.2.1 Formal vs Informal Assessment**

Formal assessment begins with students' knowledge that the assignment they are asked to perform is for assessment purposes. The approach follows prescribed tests and exams administered to students to evaluate their learning achievements. This type tends to be summative in nature thus it is associated with increased stress, Harris and McCann (1994, p. 27) underline the misconception both teachers and students have about considering formal tests and exams as something done to someone rather than

something done for someone, they continue to point out that formal assessments should not be considered the sole determinant of students level, this types is created to complete other varieties of assessment.

As its name denotes, informal assessment is a spontaneous and continuous process that occurs without student's awareness. In other words, teachers collect information about student's performance through integrating assessment practices within other tasks in normal classroom settings. This type of assessment according to Harris and McCann (1994, p. 5) is not a replacement for other types of assessment nor should it be considered as an exclusive type but one that works within a larger system with other different forms of assessment. Informal assessment is regarded as a formative and continuous process so it is seen as less threatening and less stressful to students.

### **3.2.2 Formative vs Summative Assessment**

Formative assessment according to Irons (2008, p.7) is any task that provides feedback or feed forward to students about their learning achievements. This form of assessment is perpetual and is designed to provide comments and criticism to students about their learning progress; to help them identify their strengths and enhance their weaknesses. It is not graded thus it tends to be motivating for learners and beneficial for teachers for it helps in labeling what works better for student's development and what doesn't.

For the most part, summative assessment is a graded process that judges learner's performance and it usually occurs at the end of an educational unit or programme; it is the mostly depended on form of assessment in higher education. Unfortunately, students feel a larger amount of pressure and anxiety doing these types of summative activities mostly due to its restricted circumstances, on the other hand, Irons (2008) believes that students are powered and driven by these forms of summative assessment, and the latter "will curb other learning activities such as wider reading, group work and formative activities" (p.10)

### **3.2.3 Continuous vs Final Assessment**

As its name conveys, continuous assessment is a constant activity that occurs throughout different levels of the learning process; it provides a continuous feedback on how students are doing. Scanlan (2012) considers this type of assessment as: "most appropriate when student and/or instructor knowledge of progress or achievement is needed to determine the subsequent progression or sequence of activities." (p. 6)

Final assessment on the whole is perceived to be a kind of summative assessment for both occurs at the end of a learning activity. This form of assessment is not suitable for all sorts of activities; it usually transpires only when learning can be assessed as a single unity not as separated parts.

### **3.2.4 Process vs Product Assessment**

Process assessment follows the methods and procedures of a particular learning activity introduced to students, in other words, teachers assess student's knowledge of the steps of a certain process to determine their understanding. Scanlan (2012) points out: "because it provides more detailed information, process assessment is most useful

when a student is learning a new skill and for providing formative feedback to assist in improving performance.” (p. 7)

Product assessment evaluates the final result of the process. It is used for summative purposes in addition to documenting proficiency or competency in a given skill.

### **3.2.5 Diagnostic Assessment**

Diagnostic assessment is not incorporated in McAlpine’s dichotomies; however it is considered one of the most imperative forms of assessment. Usually referred to as pre-assessment ; this form occurs at the beginning of the learning process to collect data on what the student already know about a specific subject or area. Diagnostic assessment helps teachers and curriculum designers to recognize learner’s strengths and weaknesses, knowledge level, and skillset prior to beginning instruction in order to develop and design an appropriate syllabus that suits their needs.

The aforementioned approaches of assessment are not the exclusive forms of the process, several others are found to be helpful in different situations and for different purposes. To sum up, all assessment techniques are found to assess learning and evaluate student’s progression, in addition to providing teachers and educators with the adequate knowledge to design, develop and amend their syllabus to fit the requirements of students.

## **4. Learning Preferences of Students**

Any attempt to consider applying any assessment approach has to undergo several procedures; one of the most crucial considerations is identifying learning styles and preferences of students. It is imperative to put enough time and effort to distinguish types of students, their capabilities and learning preferences. Only then the teacher can have the proper amount of knowledge to create the suitable instruction in classroom and thus, design an appropriate assessment activity that offers the necessary data about learner’s development and understanding of the course content. Before making the decision of what assessment model to be used it is essential to consider types of learners and their learning styles.

How do people learn? Learning skills or techniques differ from one learner to another from one situation to another and from one objective to another. Fleming’s (1992) VARK learning styles distinguish four main approaches on how to learn best. Visual learning is the first and most common learning style. Relatively 50 to 70 percent of the populace are characterized as “visual learners” (Bersin, 2004, p.32), denoting that these types of learners learn through visualization and prefer to learn through written information, images, graphics, colors among other ocular methods. Visual learning relates effectively to taking notes (color-coding notes), use of graphics and PowerPoint presentations. The second approach that learners prefer to adopt as their learning style is listening to lectures, meaning that they learn best through hearing the information, understanding and memorizing it. According to Bersin (2004, p.32) ‘approximately 20 to 40 percent of the population are characterized as “auditory learners,” with good listening and speaking skills.

Fleming proposed a third approach about learners individual learning styles, reading and writing learners favor information in written texts. Some students would remodel diagrams into written format, others may rewrite lectures in their own style to make it easier to understand, and other individuals would be making lists or arranging

words. Kinesthetic Learners are the fourth and last type of learners in Fleming's VARK learning model, these types of learners prefer to learn through experience and active learning opportunities. According to Bersin (2004, p.33) "A smaller percentage of the population (5 to 20 percent) learns best through touching and doing things. These are people who learn by imitating, trying, holding, and feeling things."

Maintaining a classroom with these types of learners can be challenging in both the processes of course design and assessment, for each have to meet the needs of different learners. Unfortunately, teacher's dependence on the classical assessment strategies is no longer effective for embracing the diverse needs of the students, different approaches to assessment are required at this stage to give better opportunity for both teachers and students to develop.

### **5. Understanding Assessment Approaches under the Learner Centered Curriculum**

During the process of course design, assessment activities intended to measure student's performance and progression of knowledge has two coinciding purposes and the data collected during this process are used for two resolutions. First, it offers the teacher with crucial information he/she needs as curriculum designer, second, it presents him/her with the required base for evaluating each student. In a learner centered model, seeing that course design and assessment methods are closely linked, students and teachers are ought to be involved in the assessment or evaluation process.

In a learner centered teaching model, the teacher is obliged to manage every teaching activity (method, assignment or assessment) according to the context of the course, students and classroom to reflect on whether or not it optimizes student's ability to learn; this reflection is the first and important step to ensure good approach of design, instruction and assessment. Evaluation and assessment according to Nunan (1986) occurs at different levels; the Macro level involves evaluation of the programmes on an administrative perspective, the Micro evaluation however occurs at the classroom level and involves the teacher and learners (p. 2). The major reason for carrying out Micro evaluation and assessment is to uncover the level of learner's progression, if they are not progressing positively the teacher has to work on discovering the reasons and recommending solutions.

For learners to be adequately tested in language proficiency it is important to blend the traditional assessment methods with those that are considered secondary. No one can disagree with the importance of the traditional approaches to assessment being either formal, summative, final or product-oriented judgment on the successfulness of the teaching approach and achieving the intended course objectives. However, implementing a learner centered approach necessitates for the so called alternative assessment practices to be extensively used as primary techniques for assessing the skills, knowledge and identifying strengths and weaknesses of the learners. The assessment process does not rely solely on the teacher, Self-assessment is a major element in the evaluation process, according to Cullen, Harris and Hill (2012) self-

assessment holds two key objectives in a learner centered curriculum; it develops student's self-consciousness , awareness about learning and self-autonomy. (p. 128)

Based on the extensive reading of literature (Gibbs, 1995, 2006; Joughin, 2009 Cullen, Harris and Hill 2012) The current paper advocates for the implementation of diagnostic (Quiz/test, conference interview, posters, mind maps, student surveys), formative (Group projects, portfolios, class discussions, short regular quizzes, virtual classroom), informal, continuous and process assessment techniques in language classrooms for they are perceived as more appropriate for a learner centered approach. The aforementioned techniques (especially diagnostic assessment) help to tell the teacher (and the student) how much they know and don't know about an upcoming topic. This helps to update the teacher's lesson planning, learning objectives, and identify areas that may need more or less time spent on.

Formative, informal and continuous assessment aids teachers in understanding student's learning progress while they teach, and provide them with information necessary to adjust their teaching strategies accordingly. The blend in higher education between the traditional summative and formal assessment with formative, informal approaches will have greater positive impact on the learning environment and offer better learning opportunities for students. This balance in evaluation techniques is a good source of motivation for students that encourages them to be more communicative, responsible and extends ownership of their learning and education (Irons, 2008, p. 8). Some universities tend to exclude formative and continuous assessment from educational courses and only maintain the summative final approaches, learners are inclined to perceive these courses as less important and thus give it less time and effort. In addition, the data collected from the final assessments of these courses does not reflect the exact level of student's development.

Learning proficiency has a strong relationship with assessment approaches; the power the latter have on promoting learning is widely searched and studied (Snyder 1971, Biggs 2003, Bloxham & Boyd 2007). Scholars maintained that implementing a good assessment strategy which suits the context, course objectives and learner's different learning styles have a positive impact on promoting learning. Bloxham & Boyd point out that "the assessment strategy of a particular course influences the approach students adopt towards their learning, how much time they spend on their studies, how widely they study the curriculum, and whether they grasp the key concepts of the subject" (2007, p. 16).

Learners tend to approach learning in two distinct ways, one is the surface approach when student's intention is to cope with the requirements of the task but with little personal engagement or aim to understand the material, such approach usually occurs with courses that are assessed using formal and summative methods. In the deep approach students aim to understand ideas and are intrinsically interested in their studies. One of the motivations behind adopting a deep approach in contrast to the surface one is appropriate assessment strategies "If students perceive that a task

requires memorization and reproduction of facts, then that is what they will do''. (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007, p. 17). Student's approach to learning is highly connected to the design of assessment in higher education and instructors need to pay a great deal in constructing their assessment strategies for the role it takes on promoting learning.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The main conclusion of this paper is refreshing teacher's conception of implementing what is known as secondary assessment strategies as imperative adjustments in the evaluation process in a learner centered curriculum, mixing primary and secondary approaches bear a bigger possibility to promote student's learning. For securing a good teaching/learning environment in the classroom; teachers need to pay attention to learning preferences of students prior to the design of instruction for the lack of this knowledge can lead to poorly designed courses which in turn will lead to poor assessment activities that can't accurately determine learner's level nor understanding. The paper also highlighted the strong relationship between appropriate assessment strategies and student's approaches to learning; on which the former positively impacts learner's choice on which suitable learning approach to be adopted.

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