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Social Science

EVALUATING LARGE NUMBERS OF STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL: THE CASE OF ESP COURSES

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ABSTRACT:
THIS PAPER FOCUSES ON THAT PART OF THE EDUCATION PROCESS WHICH IS EQUALLY A TESTAMENT TO THE SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE THE STUDENTS HAVE ACQUIRED DURING A COURSE AND HOW WELL THE TEACHER HAS MANAGED TO TRANSFER INFORMATION (TOGETHER WITH THE LATTER'S ABILITY TO CORRECTLY DESIGN AND IMPLEMENT THE ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE). THUS, THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT THE EVALUATION PROCESS IS BOTH COMPLEX AND DEMANDING FOR BOTH PARTIES INVOLVED, ESPECIALLY IN THE CASE OF LARGE NUMBERS OF STUDENTS. THROUGHOUT THE YEARS, THE BUSINESS ENGLISH COURSES FOR FIRST- AND SECOND-YEAR UNDERGRADUATES AT THE FACULTY OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION IN IAȘI HAVE GONE THROUGH SEVERAL TRANSFORMATIONS, INCLUDING REGULAR UPDATING OF THE STUDY MATERIALS AND MODIFICATIONS TO THE MINIMAL REQUIREMENTS FOR PASSING. HOWEVER, THE FACT THAT THE EVALUATION PROCESS IS 100% ONGOING (AND DIVIDED INTO MULTIPLE COMPONENTS) HAS REMAINED A CONSTANT, WHICH WE FIND PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT IN THE FIELD OF ELT, BUT ALSO CHALLENGING WITH LARGE NUMBERS OF LEARNERS. THEREFORE, THIS ARTICLE WILL PRESENT THE EVALUATION PROCESS AS IT IS NOW AND PROVIDE SOME PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOW IT CAN SUCCESSFULLY BE IMPLEMENTED AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL.

KEY WORDS: EVALUATION, ESP, LARGE NUMBERS OF STUDENTS, UNIVERSITY LEVEL

INTRODUCTION

Evaluation is an integral part of any education process and language teaching makes no exception to the rule. However, in the case of ESP, theorists argue that the same pressures that had led to its development have generated "an equally strong need for a more open and coherent approach to evaluation" [1]. ESP is "accountable teaching," since "ESP sponsors and learners are investors in the ESP course and they want to see a return on their investment of time and/or money" [1]. This is particularly true in the case of those learners attending an ESP intensive training course, either provided in company (in which case the company manager is looking for clear evidence of improved language competence and skills in the employees' work performance) or as part of their personal development journey (which requires financial resources on the learner's part and the need for certification from the course provider). ESP practitioners also emphasize the importance of identifying the learners'

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training gap (which is defined as the difference between their starting level and their target level), "because it provides the means for evaluating training in the short term and for setting the results of training in the context of long-term objectives" [2]. Evaluation is normally done on two levels, one targeted at the learner and the other at the course itself, although the two are not necessarily distinct, since learner evaluation does reflect, at least in part, the effectiveness of the course [1].

Through the introduction of the Common European Framework of Reference [3] and the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning [4] a more standardised assessment system has been adopted across Europe and beyond, including in higher education. But a similar tool is needed when assessing ESP students [5,6], since their needs, as the name suggests, are more specific. Moreover, the large number of learners at university level poses the issue of adopting a standardised assessment system that is valid, reliable and consistent and which can be implemented on a large scale, while also containing a classroom-based, more personalised component that would reflect the specificities of each educational institution. This is one of the problems with commercial tests, because they do not explicitly test the learner in their own specialisation or they are just not suitable for the learning objectives of a particular course [7,8]. Additionally, benchmarking certain components of an ESP course, such as intercultural competence, proves to be more challenging than others, as it is multidisciplinary in nature and more research is needed in order to ensure that language proficiency is assessed at the same level as intercultural competence [9].

We must also acknowledge the fact that assessment is a source of anxiety for students and as a result, traditional tests may act as a trigger. Using alternative assessing methods has been encouraged in recent years, as this allows students to play a more active role in their learning [10], it reduces anxiety and contributes to teaching, learning and assessment coming and working together [11]. Therefore, even when dealing with very large numbers of students, at least one assessment component should involve alternative methods.

PRACTICAL RECCOMENDATIONS

The following tips stem from the practical experience of teaching undergraduate Business English courses at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration in Iași and are meant to encapsulate some key points to be considered when establishing an evaluation procedure at university level. They illustrate the system that has been in place for a few years with very good results and serve as a starting point for any teaching professional who is looking to design an ESP course and put a good evaluation system in place, especially in the case of large education institutions.

1. Using objective testing as the main assessment method

This first point is probably the most obvious when large numbers of students need to be evaluated. Objective testing, especially when there is simply not enough time for the teacher to properly assess each student, provides good results, as long as evaluation is not limited to it. If the necessary equipment and software are available, computer-graded tests certainly make the process swifter and more manageable. Exam results turnaround time is also significantly reduced, there is little room for errors and consequently grade appeals. In the case of language competence, however, it is important to stress the fact that objective testing will only provide limited results, so there should be at least one other assessment method involved, as it will be discussed further.

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2. Combining assessment methods for more relevant results

For the evaluation results to be relevant (that is to illustrate information acquisition and skill development accurately), a combination of formative and summative assessment is more likely to be effective. Moreover, using two or more different assessment tools (such as multiple-choice tests, oral examinations, project-based evaluation etc.) will provide more reliable results. This is called triangulation or 360-degree assessment [8] and, as the names suggest, it is a good way to offer the teacher a wider perspective on the learner's achievements. It is worth mentioning that, given the focus of this paper on evaluating large numbers of students, triangulation might be challenging to implement (more on that below), but it is essential that evaluation is not limited to an end-of-course test, especially in the case of foreign language acquisition.

For reference, there are around 2000 first-year and about 1200 second-year undergraduate students at our faculty that need to be evaluated at the Business English course alone. Consequently, the system that is currently being implemented is the following: both the lecture and seminar components (each representing 50% of the students' final grade for this course) include formative and summative assessment and the final grade consists of four components. The evaluation for the lecture component is divided between a 10% ongoing oral assessment part (based on the students' contribution to each lecture throughout the semester) and a 40% end-of-term written test. The number of students attending the lecture (a two-hour meeting every two weeks) is between 150 and 200, for each specialisation, so it does not allow for much student-teacher interaction. In turn, the seminar component is divided equally between a 25% ongoing oral evaluation component (based on students' contributions to the seminar activities, for which they are graded at the end of each meeting) and a 25% mid-term progress test (fall term) or team presentation (spring term). The number of students assigned to a seminar group is between 25 and 30, which allows the teacher to be able to interact more with each individual. Neither of the four grade components are mandatory, but the minimal final grade for passing the course is 4.5.

This system ensures that course evaluation is diversified, progress is continuously tracked and it encourages attendance and active participation throughout the course. Additionally, having different professors teaching the lecture and seminar ensures greater variety of methods, approaches and more objectivity when it comes to assessment, although it does mean that greater coordination is needed at the end of the term, when all four grade components need to be collected, processed and the results communicated to students.

3. Using a simple, clear and transparent grading system

Choosing a clear and transparent grading system will not only ensure that assessment is conducted more easily, minimising subjectivity as much as possible, but it will also reduce the number of complaints from students and the need for further explanations on the teacher's part. When working with large numbers of learners, it is particularly difficult to manage the evaluation process if the parties involved are unsure about how learning is quantified or how each component of the grade contributes to the final result.

Because the grading system in Romania is based on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest grade possible, and since our faculty is part of the public education system, the final grade for the Business English undergraduate course falls within this interval. Both the lecture-based end-of-term test and the seminar mid-term mentioned above are graded using this system. However, the seminar ongoing oral evaluation is graded differently, which does create slight confusion among first-year students. This particular component (which represents 25% of their final grade) is graded using an eight-point system, similar to the one used in external English language examinations. At the end of each seminar (which is two hours long and takes place every two weeks), the teacher assigns each student a score between 0 and 8 (with eight being the maximum), based on their contribution to the lesson. At the end of the semester, during the last seminar meeting, a group hierarchy is devised based on the number of points accumulated by each student throughout the term. Based on that hierarchy, grades ranging from one to ten are assigned, following intervals of 5 points. For example, if a student has attended and contributed very well to each of the six seminars (out of the seven meetings per semester, one is reserved for the mid-term test or the presentations), he or she would have accumulated the maximum number of points possible, which is 48. Those students who have accumulated between 48 and 44 points will have the grade 10 for this component. Next, the students who have accumulated between 43 and 39 points, will have the grade 9.5 and so on. Each student is informed about how many points they have at the end of each meeting, so that they know where they stand in terms of their potential grade.

This eight-point system has been adopted for the seminar component for a few reasons: a) it is more flexible, eliminating small differences among students; b) it allows students to improve their score over time, with higher chances of a better grade at the end, rather than just calculating the average out of a number of six grades, ranging from 1 to 10; c) it encourages constant attendance and active participation in class activities, while taking some pressure off because it eliminates those low grades that cause anxiety. If a student has a score of 0 or 1 for one seminar, they can improve next time and the final score will get them a higher grade than they would have if the average was calculated traditionally; d) final grades are calculated based on the highest score of each group, which is important in the case of mixed-ability classes. Kereković [12] describes a similar point system when analysing formative assessment and its effect on engineering graduate students' motivation. Based on their answers to a questionnaire, she concludes that both the formative assessment and the point collection system not only contributed to a more favourable learning environment, but also increased student motivation.

Nevertheless, some disadvantages with this system are: a) students take longer to adapt to it, since it is new to them (except maybe for those of them who have the experience of foreign language external examinations); b) the most commonly asked question is "How many points do I need for grade x?" The teacher is unable to provide an exact answer until the end of the course, because the number of points will vary depending on the students' language level and progress and the highest score will be different in each group. However, a final score close to the maximum possible (48 points) will obviously result in a high grade.

With the four grade components and the different grading system implemented for the seminar section, the following point becomes crucial.

4. Communicating the relevant evaluation and grading information to students at the first meeting

This might be obvious, but communicating clearly with students from the very beginning is extremely important, in order to avoid misunderstandings and complaints down the line. With around 150 students attending the first lecture (some of which will not be present for the following ones), the teacher needs to explain what the expectations are for the course and how exactly evaluation and grading will be conducted, answer any questions and also provide a written copy of all the information, for future reference. Additionally, reminding students regularly what their obligations are during the course is a good way to avoid any last-minute issues.

5. Ensuring students have full access to information about their situation/progress at any time

This has been partially touched upon above, but with any evaluation procedure and grading system, students have both the right and the obligation to be informed about their progress and grades at any given time during the course, not just at the end, when final grades are assigned. Electronic grading systems are very useful in this case, but if unavailable, the teacher must take the time to keep learners updated on their situation. In our case, the students are individually informed about their score at the end of each seminar\lecture, and this does not take more than five minutes out of the two-hour class. We have found this to be the best way to ensure that everyone knows where they stand in terms of progress and it also allows for an opportunity to answer questions or offer brief feedback.

6. Allowing time for individual feedback

Of course, informing students about their grade situation is not enough in terms of feedback. Those learners who require further explanations or have questions will likely address the teacher directly during class or indirectly via email or chat messages. Again, it is important for the teacher to take the time to reply as soon as possible and part of the final meeting each semester can be dedicated to providing group and/or individual feedback as well. Moreover, students may use the weekly consultation hours to make similar enquiries, which is a good opportunity for both parties to deliver (extended) feedback and exchange information face to face.

7. Being consistent with the evaluation and grading systems throughout the course(s)

While the evaluation requirements and grading system described above might seem quite complex, it is important to emphasize the fact that consistency is always key when talking about evaluation and assessment. Firstly, the final grade for the majority of the courses at our faculty, regardless of the discipline, has multiple components, including both formative and summative evaluation. Secondly, if referring specifically to the Business English course, the evaluation and grading systems remain unchanged for the four semesters it is being studied, which provides continuity for both the teaching staff and the students and reduces learners' anxiety.

8. Making sure that the entire evaluation process can be easily transferred online

This particular point became extremely important during the COVID-19 global health crisis and the subsequent switch to online education. At the time, this evaluation system was already in place at our faculty, and the only change that occurred was the use of computers to take the written tests, while lectures seminars and student presentations were delivered using an online platform. Of course, human interactions suffered greatly during that time, but the evaluation process went smoothly, which is proof that, should the situation require it, everything can still be done remotely, maintaining quality education standards and valid assessment results.

9. Not allowing exceptions

There will always be situations which might require the teacher to adapt or even modify the rules regarding evaluation and grading due to unforeseen circumstances, such as the students' language competence level not matching the minimum requirements to complete certain tasks, motivated absence due to health issues or extreme weather conditions, changes in regulations at institutional level etc. However, unless the official methodology for such cases is very specific and does not state otherwise, it is strongly recommended not to allow exceptions at an individual level, especially in the case of large numbers of students. This will only lead to (perceived) unfair treatment among students, complaints and sometimes more work for the teacher, since special cases need to be treated separately and followed-up, which requires extra time and effort. Most importantly, making exceptions automatically increases the subjectivity level in evaluation, which is less than desirable. It will only encourage more students to attempt bending the rules and this can be detrimental to the credibility of both the teacher and the institution, since students' final grades are used for further hierarchisation, upon which the student scholarship system in based. Thus, making exceptions when it comes to evaluation and assessment has a ripple effect on the students' academic path.

CONCLUSION

While any evaluation procedure has its limitations and the example provided here is certainly not a one-size-fits-all approach to evaluating large numbers of learners, it is essential to point out that needs analysis and establishing a clear set of learning goals, together with a transparent and consistent system for assessment are key for maintaining a good level of student motivation, course credibility and predictability, which in turn lowers anxiety and contributes to a learning environment that is conducive to structured, well-paced learning alongside easily-manageable testing for teachers. Beyond institutional requirements and hierarchies, the Business English teacher's end goal is to track progress, highlight achievements and improve students' knowledge about the world in general and about the business environment they have chosen to specialise in. This is also what makes ESP special: the fact that it can cater to very specific learning needs, which somehow makes the satisfaction of earning good test results at the end of the course even greater. With large numbers of students, it is critical to find the balance between successfully implementing evaluation procedures and ensuring that the learners' needs are met in terms of having access to and decoding evaluation results.

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