Assessment Practices in the English and French Component of a Foreign Languages Teacher Education Program[1]

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Abstract

This article reports on part of an evaluative investigation of the academic processes of a Foreign Languages Teacher Education Program. The study focuses on analyzing assessment practices carried out by teachers in English and French courses and the perceptions students and professors have about these practices. Focus groups were implemented for collecting perspectives from teachers and students. Results show that assessment practices are heterogeneous which is due not only to factors identified in literature but also due to important factors depending on particular situations of a public higher education institution in Colombia. Findings are useful for the self-assessment of language programs in order to improve the curriculum.

Key words: assessment practices, evaluation of competences, testing, evaluative research

Resumen
Prácticas evaluativas en el componente de inglés y francés de un programa de licenciatura en lenguas extranjeras
Este artículo es parte de los resultados de una investigación evaluativa que tuvo por objeto de estudio los procesos académicos de una licenciatura en lenguas extranjeras. El estudio se centra en el análisis de las prácticas de evaluación desarrolladas por los profesores en los cursos de inglés y de francés y las percepciones de estudiantes y profesores sobre dichas prácticas. Los resultados

muestran que la heterogeneidad de las prácticas evaluativas se debe, además de las causas ya identificadas en la literatura, a importantes factores que no dependen del conocimiento de los docentes sobre la evaluación y de su deseo de implementarlo. Los resultados son de utilidad en los procesos de autoevaluación con miras a mejorar el currículo de los programas de lenguas.

Palabras clave: prácticas evaluativas, evaluación de competencias, investigación evaluativa.

Résumé

Pratiques d'évaluation dans des cours d'anglais et de français d'un programme de formation d'enseignants de langues étrangères
Cet article fait partie des résultats d'une recherche évaluative portant sur les processus académiques d'un programme de formation d'enseignants de langues étrangères. L'objet d'étude est les pratiques d'évaluation accomplies par les professeurs des cours d'anglais et de français et les perceptions qui ont les professeurs et les étudiants de ces pratiques. Les résultats montrent que la diversité de pratiques d'évaluation est due non seulement à des variables déjà identifiés dans la littérature, mais aussi à des facteurs indépendants des connaissances en évaluation des professeurs et de leur volonté de mettre ces connaissances en œuvre. Les résultats s'avèrent utiles dans des processus d'auto-évaluation pour l'améliorèrent des programmes de formation en langues.

Mots clés : pratiques d'évaluation, évaluation de compétences, recherche évaluative.

Introduction

This article reports on part of a research in evaluation of academic processes in a Foreign Languages Teacher Education Program. This study is framed in evaluative research standing for a systematic process to identify strengths and weaknesses in order to make decisions on transforming and improving the program curriculum. It is situated in the particular context of the Foreign Languages Component, English and French, of the Teacher Education Program in the School of Language Sciences, University of Valle, Colombia, and focuses on the undergraduate experience of assessment. It aims at analyzing assessment practices carried out by teachers in English and French courses done in the first and second phases of the foreign languages component of the Program, by using teachers and students' perspectives to interrogate the assessment praxis in public higher education.

Research in evaluation of assessment practices in the classroom has recently arisen in Colombia. Some scholars have been confining to qualify assessment practices analyzing various aspects, such as assessment instruments used by in-service English and French teachers in general language courses (Frodden, Restrepo & Maturana, 2004), assessment discourse and beliefs of in-service foreign language teachers in a higher education context (Arias & Maturana, 2005; Muñoz, Palacio & Escobar, 2012), teachers' perceptions about language assessment and the way they use language assessments in their classroom at different levels (primary school, secondary school, university, technical institutes or language institutes) (López & Bernal, 2009). Gonzales and Ríos (2010) have accounted for the discourse, the tools and the practices of teachers in planning, designing, and implementing assessment strategies in the French component of a Foreign Languages Teacher Education Program. More recently, Gómez and Hurtado (2012) and Escobar (2012) have analyzed the articulation of methodological and assessment practices in English and French classes in a Foreign Languages Teacher Education Program, from in-service and pre-service teachers' points of view. Despite of different education contexts, the findings of these studies and the current study are very similar, and can be summarized in four points:

1. A confusing coexistence of summative and formative assessment with a tendency towards using summative procedures in the classroom,
2. A lack of clear assessment guidelines and agreement in most language programs,
3. A need for a continuous professional development of teachers, specially, in adequate training in language testing, and
4. A need for Opportunity-to-Learn-Standards (OLS) in Colombia.

It has long been troublesome to teacher educators that despite an intention to do otherwise, in-service teachers tend to teach the way they were taught (Feiman-Nemser, 1983; Lortie, 1975). Our study recognizes that assessment design and practices in the initial stage of teacher education have a critical influence on pre-service teachers' approach to the teaching and learning relationship (Scouller, 1996). Based on findings from previous studies, we suggest that assessment practices in a foreign language teaching program have the potential to have significant impact

on further in-service teachers learning and professional practice. Teacher educators should look for assessment accountability in a sense that we are not only in charge of training pre-service teachers how to design, use, score and interpret language assessments in methodology courses but also we should apply appropriate assessment strategies in our regular foreign language classes to make them model successful assessment practices in their subsequent practice.

Assessment tasks act as a signal to point to what educators and institutes consider most important to learn. Indeed, assessment experiences do not occur in a vacuum. Institutional language, priorities and 'ways of doing things' represent beliefs about the nature of teaching and learning and can both enhance or hinder assessment development. For a range of institutional staff or student-related reasons, a mismatch can exist between what is heralded as critical in the learning and teaching process and what is required for assessment.

Our study indicates that pre-service teachers not only discriminate between course approach and assessment designs which are more likely to contribute to their development as reflective practitioners, they also demonstrate clarity about characteristics of assignments and courses which contribute to this end, in terms of both negative and positive factors. Factors identified by pre-service teachers include expectations related to the awareness of assumptions and presuppositions regarding internal and external factors that affect an assessment process (Gómez & Hurtado, 2012; Escobar, 2012).

Teacher educators recognize the relevance of promoting formative assessment of learning and make the best of it, but some particular situations in our institution classified as internal (lack of teachers, time, updated language laboratory and other physical resources and space, large groups), and external factors (frequent cancellation of classes because of students' riots, meetings, announcement of academic flexibility meaning no assessments during flexibility period) affect a normal course of classes and initial assessment proposal of learning process.

The next section surveys the works related to assessment types and praxis in a foreign language classroom of the public higher education institutions. The methodology section outlines our method for analyzing assessment practices in the Foreign Language Teacher

Education Program. In the results section relevant findings of the study are presented, and in the discussion section these findings are interpreted and compared with what other educators have found.

Review of the literature

Evaluation, assessment, testing

First of all, it is necessary to clarify some terms used in this study. It seems that understanding the differences among *measurement*, *assessment*, *evaluation*, and *testing* is fundamental to the knowledge base of professional teachers and effective teaching. "Assessment" and "evaluation" are terms sometimes used interchangeably and sometimes to denote two different processes, albeit closely related to each other. However, each serves different purposes because each one involves different aspects of teaching and learning.

Evaluation is the process of making judgments based on criteria and evidence: *Evaluation* can be defined as the systematic gathering of information for the purpose of making decisions (Weiss, 1972). According to Nunan (1999: p.85), "evaluation is the collection and interpreting of information about the curriculum." White (1988: p.154) states that "evaluation is concerned not with assessing individual achievements but with making judgments about the curriculum". Evaluation can thus concern a whole range of issues in and beyond language education: lessons, courses, programs, and skills can all be evaluated. Analyzing and combining the different types of information would enable a judgment to be made about the success, or viability, or cost-effectiveness of the course or the program.

It is often said that we assess students and we evaluate instruction. This distinction derives from the use of evaluation research methods to make judgments about the worth of educational activities. The verb "to evaluate" often collocates with words such as: "effectiveness," "institutions", "projects", "programs", "materials", and the verb "to assess", with words such as: "competence", "skills", "abilities", "performance", "aptitude" (Muresan, Heyworth, Mateva & Rose, 2007). In this sense, the focus of assessment is more individual than that of evaluation. Evaluation is a process which deals with information

received as a result of different assessment procedures, therefore, it is often assumed to be a wider concept than assessment. "Assessment occurs when judgments are made about a learner's performance, and entails gathering and organizing information about learners in order to make decisions and judgments about their learning" (Le Grange & Reddy, 1998 p.3).

Tests are just one technique or method of assessment. Carroll (1968 in Bachman, 1990 p.33) provides the following definition of a test: "a psychological or educational test is a procedure designed to elicit certain behavior from which one can make inferences about certain characteristics of an individual." Testing is a particular form of assessment that is concerned with measuring learning through the performance of an individual. As a type of measurement, a test necessarily quantifies characteristics of individuals according to explicit procedures. What distinguishes a test from other type of measurement is that it is designed to obtain a specific sample of behavior (Bachman, 1990). When correctly applied, evaluation, assessment and testing provide tools and procedures for measuring the quality of educational services. Assessment and evaluation are two different but complementary educational processes.

Although assessment and evaluation are used for different reasons, they do have some similar steps: defining areas that will be assessed, specifying criteria to observe in a performance or outcome, collecting and analyzing data, and reporting on findings. The report in these processes is different. In the assessment process, the report includes information about why the performance was as strong or weak as it was, and describes what could be done to improve future performances. In assessment, there is no mention of the actual quality of the performance; only how to make the next performance better. There is no language indicating the level of quality, such as "good," or "terrible". Conversely, in the evaluative report, only information regarding the actual quality of the performance is given. This might be in the form of a grade or a score or an evaluative comment, such as "good work." The purpose of the evaluative report is to report the level of quality and possibly any consequences based on the determined level of quality. It is not used to suggest improvements in future performances.

Assessment types

The capacity to use language in different contexts is commonly known as language proficiency. Bachman (1990 p.4) describes communicative competence as "communicative language ability that involves communicative language use including a dynamic interaction between the situation, the language user, and the discourse, in which communication is something more than a simple transfer of information." Therefore, taking into account the focus of assessment, performance assessment and knowledge assessment should be distinguished.

Performance assessment[2] requires the learner to provide a sample of language in speech or writing in a direct test. Speaking, writing and listening in interaction are assessed by direct methods using criteria grids. Reading is only assessed indirectly by requiring learners to demonstrate evidence of understanding by ticking boxes, finishing sentences, answering questions, etc. *Knowledge assessment* requires the learner to answer questions which can be of a range of different item types in order to provide evidence of the extent of their linguistic knowledge and control. Linguistic knowledge can be assessed either directly through judging the match to criteria or indirectly by interpreting and generalizing from the responses to test questions. A classic direct test is an interview; a classic indirect test is a cloze. Some tests balance the performance assessment with an assessment of knowledge of the language as a system.

Another important criterion to distinguish assessment types is *purpose* (*or function*). According to purpose, there are formative (process-oriented), often referred to as *Assessment for Learning*, and summative (product-oriented) assessments, often referred to as *Assessment of Learning*. *Formative assessment* is an ongoing process of gathering information on the extent of learning on strengths and weaknesses, which the teacher can feed back into their course planning and the actual feedback they give to learners. Formative assessment is often used in a very broad sense so as to include non-quantifiable information from questionnaires and consultations. *Summative assessment* sums up attainment at the end of the course with a grade. It is not necessarily proficiency assessment. Indeed, a lot of summative assessment is norm-referenced, fixed-point, achievement assessment. What makes

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2 The definitions of assessment types are taken from Council of Europe, 2001: 183-188.

any particular assessment formative is not the specific measuring tool employed but how the information gathered from the tool is used. If the teacher uses information from a particular assessment to track learning, give feedback to the students, and adjust instructional strategies in a way intended to further progress toward learning goals, that teacher is engaging in formative assessment. Formative assessment is also characterized by student involvement. If students are not involved in the assessment process, formative assessment is not practiced or implemented to its full effectiveness. Students need to be involved both as assessors of their own learning and as resources to other students. There are numerous strategies teachers can implement to engage students, among them, *self-* and *peer- assessments* that make use of a wide number of practices as records of the students' work and their own perceptions and ratings of how their work improves and develops. Records or *portfolios* could be of different kinds with supports as digital audio or video, paper or online, in which samples of work and a commentary are saved side by side.

Another important distinction is that between fixed-point or final assessment and continuous assessment. *Continuous assessment* is assessment by the teacher and possibly by the learner of class performances, pieces of work and projects throughout the course. The final grade thus reflects the whole course/year/semester. *Fixed point assessment* is when grades are awarded and decisions made on the basis of an examination or other assessment which takes place on a particular day, usually the end of the course or before the beginning of a course, what has happened beforehand is irrelevant; it is what the person can do now that is decisive (Council of Europe, 2001 p.185).

Sometimes, terms *formative assessment* and *continuous assessment* are used interchangeably. They do not mean the same thing, however. Both are carried out on an on-going base while students are actually working through a course or major unit thereof. Both can take a wide range of forms, including oral or written tests, essays, reports, or any particular activity. What makes them different is their purpose. The main purpose of formative assessment is to provide the learners with feedback on how they are doing and thus help them to learn more effectively, whereas the purpose of continuous assessment is to spread and interweave assessment activities throughout the learning process in order to gather

a wide range of evidence of learning. Continuous assessment can be entirely summative, or can take the form of a mixture of formative and summative assessment (Ellington & Earl, 1996).

Although there are many advantages of continuous assessment, if not properly managed, assessment schemes that are claimed to be based on 'continuous assessment' may turn out to be nothing more than a series of tests or 'mini examinations'. If so, such assessments remain 'unnatural' and fail to optimize problem-solving opportunities.

In the context of higher education, Shohamy, Inbar-Lourie and Poehner (2008 p.24) state that teachers' level of experience played a role in how they chose to use various forms of assessment. Experience and formation level of educators may affect a form of using assessment in the classroom. The strategies, such as project-based assessments, peer assessment and self-assessment provide learners with feedback that not necessarily comes from teachers but also from peers, friends and students themselves. As well as monitoring language proficiency, self-assessments provide learners with personalized feedback on the effectiveness of their learning strategies, specific learning methods and learning materials. Learners can use this feedback to evaluate their approach to language learning. In selecting, administering and considering the results of self-assessments learners must necessarily reflect on their goals, strategies and achievements. Self-assessments provide milestones in the ongoing process of reflection that all autonomous learners are engaged in (Gardner, 2000).

Another important concept is that of *classroom assessment*. It is defined as the process of collecting, analyzing, interpreting and reporting information to improve student learning. Classroom assessment serves a number of general purposes: a) diagnosis of students' learning (ability, attributes or achievement); b) formative assessment, the continuous process of gathering information on student progress and c) summative assessment, final reports on student progress in relation to curriculum objectives.

Scholars have conducted many reviews of the research on classroom assessment. Some of the more comprehensive reviews are those by Natriello (1987); Fuchs and Fuchs (1986); Crooks (1988); Bangert-Drowns, Kulik, Kulik and Morgan (1991); Kluger and DeNisi (1996); and Black and William (1998). The reviews lead to many conclusions

that provide insights into effective classroom assessment; however, four generalizations are particularly germane to this study: a) Feedback from classroom assessments should give students a clear picture of their progress on learning goals and how they might improve; b) Feedback from classroom assessments should encourage students to improve; c) Classroom assessment should be formative in nature and d) Formative classroom assessments should be frequent.

Teachers' Perceptions of Assessment Practices

The movement to integrate assessment and teaching (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & William, 2004), and the growing awareness of the centrality of teacher and learner-based assessment in the learning process, have brought about an increased interest in language teachers' perceptions of assessment practices. Most of the existing studies in this area have focused on English language teaching, whether as a Second or a Foreign Language (Brindley, 2001; Davison, 2004; Leung, 2004; Cheng, Rogers & Hu, 2004; Shohamy, 1998). These studies have surveyed teachers' assessment practices and beliefs, and the impact of external norm-setting and tests on these practices. In addition, research has been conducted on the extent to which the use of different assessment tools (e.g., portfolios, self-assessment, projects, and tasks) is incorporated into language learning. Findings on teachers' assessment practices also point to great diversity with regard to assessment practices and beliefs.

The work of Shohamy, Inbar-Lourie, and Poehner (2008) reports on the actual uses and practices of assessing foreign language proficiency. According to them, teachers continue to use mostly traditional forms of assessment such as quizzes and tests. Even when they use more innovative procedures such as portfolios, they tend to focus on traditional language elements such as vocabulary and grammar. In calculating the final grade, written exams contribute the highest percentage to the grade. Thus, while the majority of respondents were critical of conventional testing, tests and quizzes were still the predominant forms of assessment used by teachers for understanding their students' progress, and these were assigned great importance in determining grades. In a similar manner, most teachers advocated communicative or functional definitions of advanced learner proficiency (ALP), but knowledge of grammar and vocabulary continued to be privileged indicators of learners' achievements.

In the Colombian context, Arias and Maturana (2005) have studied foreign language teachers' assessment discourse and practices carried out in two Colombian public universities in general FL courses. It was found that teachers were using the terms "assessing" and "testing" indiscriminately; they also confused the concepts of summative versus formative assessment. As consequence, feedback and self-evaluation were not done rigorously, systematically and continuously. The promotion of students to a superior language level was seen doubtful. Another finding was a lack of consensus between teachers and program administrators about assessment. There was no formal and systematic registration of assessment results. All of these evidence was not been contributing to the quality assessment in the university programs.

López and Bernal (2009) examined teachers' perceptions about language assessment and the way they use language assessment in their classroom. These authors argued that classroom assessment in English teaching in Colombia tends to be more summative than formative. They also have analyzed curricula from 27 undergraduate programs and seven graduate programs aimed at training English language teachers in Colombia, in order to look for information about the number of language assessment courses offered in these programs. It was found that out of 27 undergraduate programs only seven offered a course in evaluation. A segment on language assessment is included in methodology courses of these training programs for teachers.

Additionally, it was found that there seems to be a correlation between language assessment training of teachers and perceptions about language assessment. Trained teachers view assessment positively, as "an integral part of instruction and as a powerful tool to guide the learning process" (López and Bernal, 2009, p.61), whereas teachers with no training (pre-service or in-service) in language assessment have a more negative view of language assessments: "In this view, assessment is simply used as a means to give a grade or to make judgments about the students, but not as a strategy to enhance learning" (p.62). The authors claim that both teachers and prospective teachers need more training in language assessment.

González and Ríos (2010) conducted a research about French evaluation practices in a Foreign Languages Teacher Education Program in a public university to account for the discourse about assessment. First,

it was found that teachers tend to associate formative and summative assessment with qualitative and quantitative aspects respectively. They claim for benefits of quantitative assessment in the first four semesters because of large groups of students, a condition that impedes to apply qualitative assessment of each student. Three out of ten French teachers manifest that they make use of feedback and self-evaluation, characteristic of formative assessment and it is reflected in an item called "nota apreciativa" including attitudes, values, self-evaluation and peer-evaluation. However, these aspects are not defined in the construction of tests or in the set of criteria for students' promotion. The rest of teachers affirm that they use portfolio assessment to control the learning progress. Activities, such as advisory meetings, feedback from a test, group or individual interviews are considered to be part of formative assessment. Although a majority of teachers (70%) claim that assessment activities they implement are part of formative assessment, it was not been evidenced from the analysis of assessment tools; they seem to be based on a continuous control with elements of summative assessment. The researchers claim that a lack of institutional assessment policies is a reason for heterogeneity and impreciseness in assessment practices in the classroom.

Second, it was found, although four communicative skills are evaluated in three levels (beginner, intermediate and advanced), a percentage set to each skill in the final grade is not balanced. It seems to be paradoxical that students' performance in reading comprehension, the least assessed skill in French courses, was superior (15 and 22/25) in the DELF B2 test in comparison with other skills. The students' performance in speaking and written expression was shown intermediate results (10 and 16/25), while the performance in oral comprehension was inferior (8 and 12/25), despite of a teachers' major emphasis on practicing this skill in the French classroom.

González and Ríos (2010) showed that a quantitative rather than a qualitative aspect is prevailed in French teachers' assessment practices, and the formative purpose of assessment is lost:

Although new assessment practices based on competences have been emerging, we continue to privilege assessment which immediate function is to classify, select or punish. This vying for power between teachers and students makes us fail to recognize a true sense of assessment (p.134).

Opportunity to Learn and Assessment

Having clear foreign language learning and teaching standards can only be useful in the educational experience of foreign language learners if these standards are coupled with opportunity-to-learn (OTL) standards and with the availability of authentic assessment. Opportunity to learn (OTL) is one of several important factors impacting student achievement and assessment. It is defined as:

> A standard that provides students with the teachers, materials, facilities, and instructional experiences that will enable them to achieve high standards. Opportunity to learn is what takes place in classrooms that enables students to acquire the knowledge and skills that are expected. OTL can include what is taught, how it is taught, by whom, and with what resources.[3]

Cárdenas and Hernández (2011) review various existing models for OTL standards and the Colombian situation regarding the conditions of education, equity, opportunity and social imbalance. They argue for the need to construct the framework for the improvement of ELT in Colombia, with the contribution of grassroots elements, including teachers, teacher educators and the community of students and parents. Besides, they claim "it is urgent to demand the betterment of conditions for the achievement of goals in the National Bilingual Program (PNB), that is, the assurance of Opportunity to Learn (and teach) Standards, from Colombian educational authorities".(*ibid:* p. 252)

In connection with assessment, Winfield (1987 p.438) notes that "opportunity to learn relates to the provision of adequate and timely instruction of specific content and skills prior to taking a test." She adds that opportunity to learn may be measured by "time spent in reviewing, practicing, or applying a particular concept or by the amount and depth of content covered with particular groups of students" (p.439). Fair and authentic assessment used to measure and improve the quality of education students receive is identified as one of the important components of the OTL standards.

In order to show educational improvement, the assessments used to measure growth must match the content being delivered. Four criteria

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3 Glossary of useful terms. System for Adult and Basic Educational Support, USA: Massachusetts Department of Education, last modified 01/23/2008. Retrieved July, 20, 2012 from http://www.sabes.org/assessment/glossary.htm

must be met in order for an assessment to legitimately measure outcomes: a) the assessment should reflect the curriculum; b) students should have the opportunity to learn the curriculum; c) assessment performance should be sensitive to variation in the quality and content of instruction; and d) on replication, the assessment should produce the same results. (Messick, 1989 p.7) In a time of high-stakes testing, fair and authentic assessment is crucial for the protection of students' rights.

Specifically, research findings suggest, according to Harlen (2007 p.148), teacher educators "involved in initial teacher education and professional development course providers should ensure that courses allow adequate time for":

- Discussion of the different purposes of assessment and the uses made of assessment data;
- Trainee and serving teachers to identify, sample and evaluate different ways of gathering evidence of students' performance;
- Giving experience of generating assessment criteria linked to specific learning goals;
- Considering evidence of bias and other sources of error in assessment and how they can be minimized.

Background

According to the existing curriculum of the Foreign Language Teaching Program in our university students should be able to achieve proficiency in four communicative skills (listening, speaking, writing and reading) in two foreign languages, English and French. These skills are developed through 9 semesters in the Foreign Language Component of the curriculum, divided into three phases: a) English Integrated Skills and French Integrated Skills courses (1-4 semesters), b) English Text Typology and French Text Typology courses (5-7 semesters), and c) English Literature and French Literature courses (8-9 semesters). For the purposes of this study, the assessment practices were evaluated in the first and second phases of the Foreign Language Component, and the assessment practices in courses of the Linguistics, Research and Teaching Methodology Components were not taken into consideration.

Research questions

The aim of the study was to answer the following questions: What are the assessment practices proposed in English and French courses during the first and the second phases in the Foreign Languages Teacher Education Program? What perceptions do professors and students have about classroom assessment during the first and the second phases in the Foreign Languages Teacher Education Program?

Methodology

The study was carried out between August 2010 and May 2012. It is a qualitative, interpretative and evaluative case study, since it aims at understanding the phenomena from the point of view of teachers and students to identify the strong and the weak points of the Foreign Languages Teacher Education Program. The data were collected through a corpus of official documents, discussion sessions with professors and focus groups held with students.

Twenty eight (28) syllabuses of French courses and thirty three (33) syllabuses of English courses (*Habilidades Integradas I, II, III and IV; Tipologías Dicursivas Orales en Inglés / en Francés V, Tipologías Dicursivas Escritas en Inglés /en Francés VI and Composición en Inglés / en Francés VII*), which corresponded to the periods 2000-2010 were analyzed. The analysis of documents was then presented to professors of the French and English sections for discussion. There were three discussion sessions with professors of each section. Professors commented on the results of the corpus analysis and added information about course design, contents, skills, and assessment instruments promoted in the classroom that was not explicit in the syllabuses. Thirty-three students participated in focus groups concerning the English language and forty students in focus groups concerning the French language. By means of content analysis, the opinions of participants about assessment in English and French courses were compared and classified in strengths and weaknesses.

Results

Analysis of the Official Documents

An analysis of the curriculum of English and French subjects' descriptors was made to search information about some assessment guidelines in the Foreign Languages Teacher Education Program. It was found that these documents do not contain any information related to a description of evaluation and assessment processes carried out in the two phases of the Foreign Language Component of the Program. However, the analysis of English and French course syllabuses permitted to identify that professors propose various assessment types and tools for the same course. The most mentioned types are continuous and fixed point assessments, both corresponding to the moment when an assessment occurs. Although continuous assessment is associated with formative assessment because of its relation to a process, it is evident that it contains elements of summative assessment represented by items such as quizzes, workshops, take-home assignments and reports that students develop during foreign language courses. Besides, there are self-evaluation and peer-evaluation in some syllabuses, pointed out as an assessment type according to the assessment agent. Finally, portfolio as a kind of alternative assessment is mentioned in a few syllabuses. A simplified summary of assessment types and tools, quantified in percentage, in the first phase of the foreign language component is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Assessment Types in the First Phase: Foreign Language Integrated Skills Courses, in 1-4 semesters.

Type	Tool	Percentage Distribution	
		English	French
Continuous assessment	Projects, workshops, quizzes, tasks	Up to 54%	10% to 100%
Fixed point assessment	Mid-term exam Final exam	55% to 70%	20% to 40%
Self-evaluation/peer-evaluation	not specified	0%	0%
Alternative assessment	Portafolio	5% to 10%	-

It was shown the percentage distribution between continuous assessment and fixed point assessment varies greatly in the courses of both languages. Although continuous assessment was privileged in French courses, the

percentage given to it tends to reduce its values from 100% to 25% and 10% in recent years. A balance between continuous assessment and fixed point assessment is observed in some English syllabuses, and a greater value is set to fixed point assessment, such as mid-term and final exams, in others. A minor value is set to portfolio assessment proposed in some English syllabuses. Only one teacher assumes a student commitment and participation as criteria to be evaluated.

Four communicative skills are usually distinguished in the first phase, and one skill, listening, reading or writing, depending on a course specialty is emphasized on in fixed point assessment in the second phase of the program studied. A simplified summary of assessment types and tools, quantified in percentage, in the second phase of the foreign language component is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Assessment Types in the Second Phase: Foreign Language Text Typology Courses, in 5-7 semesters.

Type	Tool	Percentage Distribution	
		English	French
Continuous assessment	Projects, reading reports, written texts, workshops, debates, quizzes	80 to 100%	25 to 70%
Fixed point assessment	Mid-term exam Final exam	Up to 20%	20 to 40%
Self-evaluation/peer-eva-luation	Not specified	10%	0%
Alternative assessment	Portfolio or dossier	-	-

It is observed that continuous assessment prevails in the second phase of the foreign language component of the education program. It accounts for different steps of a project work, tasks, reports, and in some cases, quizzes carried out during the courses of the second phase, emphasized on oral comprehension or written production. A minor value is set to mid-term and final exams proposed in most of the syllabuses. Those exams take into account communicative skills assessment, including grammar, vocabulary and linguistic theory.

Continuous assessment is considered by almost all professors, and appears in all course syllabuses in both phases. It is supposed to serve two purposes: formative and summative. Values set to continuous assessment in French courses are fluctuating; this affects the values agreed on the other type of assessment. While portfolio is proposed

in some English syllabuses, this assessment option does not appear in French syllabuses. Similarly, metacognition expressed in self-evaluation and peer-evaluation are considered with a minimum value for a final grade in approximately a half of English syllabuses, but these assessment types do not appear in French syllabuses either.

Remarkably, a presence of formative assessment is noticeable in foreign language syllabuses of the courses of the foreign language component of the teacher education program. Many instruments of alternative assessment, such as projects, tasks, debates, and portfolio, among others, are used in continuous assessment, indeed. A hypothesis could account for this finding: professors make an effort to implement formative assessment that is student-focused, instructionally informative, and outcome-based (Greenstein, 2010), even though there is a strong evidence of summative assessment resulting from adding grades that come from quizzes, mid-term and final exams. The latter ones are due to the institutional requirements to report the final grade of each course in numerical form. It is evident professors are agreed that assessment data should come from a variety of activities, rather than from a single assessment at the end.

Perceptions of the Participants

Assessment Strengths

Both, professors and students admitted the following aspects as strengths in assessment practices in the Foreign Language Component of the education program.

Assessment is used for both purposes: formative and summative, to give students feedback on their learning[4]:

> I use various quizzes to assess different skills during an integrated skills course. I think it is useful to evaluate each skill, and to have a record to show students in which skill they do well or not. (Professor 1)

There is more emphasis in formative assessment than in summative assessment. The value placed on formative assessment data varies among teachers, but it generally is weighted more than summative assessment

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4 All the citations are literal, and were translated from Spanish into English by authors.

data. Formative assessment is supported by a variety of activities: projects, communicative tasks, workshops, debates, among others, taking place during a semester:

> I use a variety of activities with students not only for practicing language but also for language assessment to give them opportunities to show what they can do with the language. (Professor 4)

> Before, I used to apply only mid-term and final exams, now I prefer to use many quizzes, oral presentations or projects that involve different skills. (Professor 11)

Teachers not only evaluate foreign language communicative skills but also use information from a particular assessment to track learning and to give students feedback in order to improve a learner's language ability, and to adjust instructional strategies to further progress towards learning goals:

> For example, I use a process-oriented assessment in my writing course. My students re-write a text many times and share it with their classmates to gather comments and suggestions for improving. Teacher's assessment and peer-evaluation are a common error correction strategy. (Professor 3)

Self-evaluation and peer-evaluation are part of assessment methods used with students. Portfolio assessment is applied in some language courses to develop critical-thinking skills such as analysis and evaluation, and to familiarize them with alternative assessment techniques which likely be used in their further professional practice. Mid-term and final exams, instruments used in summative assessment, are based on the course contents and activities used in a classroom:

> Although I use different assessment activities during a course, I use a final exam that involves all the aspects we have done so far in the classroom. (Professor 11)

> …I always try to assess everything we have been working in the classroom. I cannot assess something that we have not learnt or practiced. (Professor 1)

Assessment Weaknesses

Although some positive aspects about assessment were identified, there were other aspects that are of concern to teachers and students regarding assessment practices in a classroom.

Professors' Points of View

First, professors' comments related to assessment practices in foreign language courses of the education program are presented.

Even though some professors admit that they use assessment for formative purposes, giving feedback and indicating students their strengths and weaknesses in the language learning process, there are other professors that feel skeptical regarding this fact:

> To promote a student from one level to another we give him a final grade but we do not give him something qualitative… a kind of written document that says something like this '…well, watch up, there are problems in your writing. Sometimes, you pronounce this well, and sometimes, you are not aware of this or that aspect…'. We do not do it here… (Professor 3)

A lack of a formal document that describes an assessment system of the foreign language teaching program taking into account foreign language learning goals, phases, communicative skills and competences is evident from these comments:

> …The fact that professors do not have a guide with unified criteria about a language level a student must have to be promoted to the next course affects the grading criteria at the end of a course. (Professor 5)

> …The final grade does not show really what a student is able to do with language. Frequently, students are promoted to the superior levels without knowledge they must have. (Professor 4)

Professor status, workload, large groups have a bearing on developing a formative assessment. Lack of time to give feedback on students' oral and written performance is also mentioned:

But the assessment process is very complicated… First, because we are working with an abstract product, called language. Second, because it takes time to establish assessment criteria related to the program. It depends not only on a teacher but also on the group of teachers […]It is easier to complain 'What is this student doing here? Why was he or she promoted to this course so easily?' It is more difficult to establish assessment criteria. (Professor 4)

You know… each project is different, and needs to be assessed carefully, with details… You need time to design assessment criteria. It is difficult to delimit products and criteria, as well as, to make students aware of a process involved in a project, although it is necessary to raise their consciousness and to teach them to delimit what they want to do as a project. (Professor 8)

Due to the lack of time I decided to use closed question tests, even though I am aware that they do not offer me the information about productive skills such as speaking or writing. (Professor 10)

There are many students in my group. I could not correct all the students individually, and I am far less to assess them qualitatively. (Professor 3)

I consider it is much easier to evaluate written comprehension and production because there are more assessment elements available for a teacher, and their use saves time. However, oral comprehension and expression are difficult because there is not enough time in the classroom to assess each student regularly. In addition, oral expression and interaction demand individual contact with a student, and these skills are open to subjectivity. (Professor 5)

Lack of knowledge on how to put in practice concepts such as peer-evaluation and self-evaluation is highlighted:

I use peer- and self-evaluation in my classes, but I set a minimum value to it to be considered in the final grade… I′d rather use it as a reflection activity for my students. (Professor 11)

We are aware of a need to create rubrics or to establish specific criteria to perform self-, peer- or hetero-evaluation, but we do not know well these concepts… either the responsibility or commitment that it implies for everybody involved in this assessment. (Professor 8)

Sometimes, students performing peer-evaluation are influenced by their personal affections and friendship, so that they do not do it objectively or correctly. (Professor 2)

Continuous assessment does not function with a formative purpose:

Continuous assessment is sometimes distorted and loses its formative purpose when it becomes a punishment mechanism and a sort of attendance control. On the other hand, when an emphasis is done on group activities, it is having an adverse effect on a student's follow-up. (Professor 3)

Students' Points of View

In this part, students' comments related to assessment practices in foreign language courses of the education program are presented.

Continuous assessment does not account for a student actual language proficiency level:

It is supposed… continuous assessment as a formative evaluation should reflect the process and the progress in learning a foreign language… It seems that it does not fulfill its goals when it is merely used to recognize students' effort in performing classroom activities. (Student 5)

Progressive development of language proficiency is not reflected in the evaluation item "continuous assessment", as a consequence it is having an adverse effect on students´ recognition of their strengths and weaknesses. (Student 4)

Formative and summative assessment is not balanced in the program. It should take into account both, process and product:

It is necessary to look for a balance between these two kinds of assessment… because each one has its positive aspects. In a case, a student has not learnt anything or he has not made enough effort, well, it is a specific case but I believe, something personalized should exist, something that would allow to measure skills, positive and negative aspects of each one. (Student 5)

Assessment of skills and contents are not balanced in integrated skills courses in the first phase of the foreign language component:

Listening is principally evaluated in the final exam, and it is only evaluated if the teacher has a tape recorder or has an access to an adequate space to perform listening comprehension evaluation task. The access to the

language laboratory is limited because of the great number of students. (Student 3)

Teachers do not correct students' errors when speaking… Speaking production is rarely evaluated during the semester… Speaking is set with a minor value in assessment in comparison with other skills. (Student 1 and Student 6)

Grammar is evaluated more frequently than other aspects of language. (Student 3)

Cultural aspects are not evaluated in the integrated skills courses. (Student 4)

Assessment in the first phase is less personalized than in the second phase of the foreign language component:

Due to misbalance in the four skills assessment and a lack of more personal assessment in the first phase, we continue making the same errors in superior levels… (Student 6)

… But in superior levels, the courses have a specific emphasis on speaking, listening, reading or writing skills. Each course has a specific focus. The assessment is more personalized… Teachers give feedback on aspects of reading or other skills. (Student 5)

Changes of initial assessment proposal of a course affect the normal development of assessment process:

Although it is agreed with students, an initial assessment proposal is frequently changed during the semester due to students' riots, meetings, and frequent announcement of academic flexibility. (Student 2)

Lack of common assessment criteria among professors of the same level English or French courses:

We do not know clearly the criteria with which professors evaluate us… that determines if a student continues or not in the next level. (Student 2)

Sometimes, it seems English and French professors use different assessment criteria. (Student 3)

Discussion

The results show that assessment practices are heterogeneous not only because of the subjectivity of pedagogical conceptions, beliefs, knowledge, experiences of professors (Gonzales & Ríos, 2010), lack of a common assessment system in the educational program (Arias & Maturana, 2005) or lack of adequate training in language assessment (López & Bernal, 2009), but also because of important external and internal factors affecting the assessment process that do not depend on teachers' assessment knowledge and desire to implement it. Among those factors are lack of full-time language professors, available time for assessing students individually, an updated language laboratory, computer rooms and other physical resources and space, numerous groups in some courses.

On the other side, some external factors, such as frequent cancellation of classes due to students' riots, meetings, announcement of academic flexibility (meaning no assessments during flexibility period) affect the normal course of classes and the initial assessment proposal, despite of students' agreement on assessment changes.

The tendency to differentiate between formative and summative assessment remaining at a theoretical level is not well reflected in actual evaluative practices in the classroom as shown in previous studies (Arias & Maturana, 2005; Estrada, 2009; Gonzales & Ríos, 2010). Our research showed that the problem is not how these two functions of assessment are reflected in the classroom but how to take advantage of a combination of them in the classroom, i.e. how summative assessment information may be used for formative purposes.

In particular, our findings revealed that communicative skills are not assessed proportionately in foreign language integrated skills courses, and the most emphasis of language knowledge assessment is frequently done on grammar. Lack of time, adequate physical resources and lack of knowledge to design assessment criteria and rubrics sometimes make professors privilege traditional assessment techniques such as gap-fill quizzes or multiple choice tests.

Even though some professors of the program recognize the relevance of and apply alternative assessment such as debates, role-plays, portfolio, and peer or self-assessment techniques, there is a need for more

professors' training in assessment as suggested by Muñoz, Palacio and Escobar (2012): "…teachers need to be better equipped through education programs, for implementing a wide repertoire of procedures of assessing students' performance that goes beyond traditional test formats" (p.154).

Among the key elements in providing the opportunity to learn to students, the following components of the OTL standards were identified: clear standards, equitable instructional resources, adequate facilities, high-quality teachers, rigorous curriculum, safe school environment, fair and authentic assessment, and others. Many studies suggest that the OTL components have a positive effect on student learning and achievement (Darling-Hammond, 1990, 1994; Gross, 1993; Kozol, 2000). Our study indicates that not all of these elements are effectively done in the Foreign Languages Teacher Education Program.

Even if this study has potential limitations regarding some sources of data (assessment samples used by professors and direct observation of assessment activities in a classroom have not been considered), the findings have clear implications for the administration of the public higher education institution and the program. One of these implications directly deals with the need to have a common vision of what is intended by a quality assessment. Clear defined benchmarks or standards lead to professional consensus, and established principles and criteria allow making progress in learning. Another implication in the framework of teaching is related to the assessment system. The improvement of the assessment system is more feasible by understanding not only teachers and students' perceptions about evaluation practices, but also by recognizing local conditions in the education institution.

Conclusion

There are many types of assessment according to why, what, when, how and with whom to assess in a learning process. For teachers, it is important to take advantage of a combination of two main functions of assessment, formative and summative, and to know how summative assessment information may be used for formative purposes. So, the main purpose of formative assessment, to give students a clear picture of their progress and how they might improve, will not be lost.

In order to harmonize heterogeneous assessment practices and to give the informed support to teachers and the public domain description of achievements in communicative competence and skills throughout the language courses, an official document describing the assessment system of the Foreign Languages Teacher Education Program must be created. This system should define clearly assessment types, and describe achievements, criteria for communicative skills and competencies, and their application in different stages of learning process. As this study has shown, lack of such a system leads to description of assessment in terms of products and percentage distribution.

It has been evidenced from this study that there is not a clear institutional assessment policy. A process oriented assessment is based on descriptors discriminating communicative skills and competences. The use of these descriptors allows students to realize precisely about their strengths and weaknesses. Well-organized standard-based assessment guidelines mean a better quality for a program. Each educational institution should have an assessment system to account for a program quality and good organization.

We claim that the local conditions of institutions are not always adequately considered in other studies about assessment practices. Factors, such as lack of full-time professors lead to heavy workloads and lack of time to develop effective formative assessment, as well as inadequate physical conditions of facilities and technology resources to work on and assess different communicative skills may lead more directly to unequal access of knowledge. Even though clear standard-based assessment guidelines might be designed in a language program, it does not mean that they will lead to the results policy makers seek and the community expects, unless the supportive conditions be provided in terms of time available for the development of the area and enough educational resources and facilities.

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