

# ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES IN ESP COURSE AS A WAY FOR MOTIVATING STUDENT LEARNING

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*The role of assessment in enhancing student motivation to learn English for specific purposes is analysed. The research results about student attitudes towards assessment strategies are presented. The assessment types are described. The importance of self-assessment and student involvement into the process of assessment is emphasized.*

## Introduction

The intensive development of science and technology and considerable expansion of business and cultural ties with scientists and businesspersons globally require university graduates to have a corresponding language proficiency level to be able to communicate effectively in everyday, business and professional environments. Therefore, there is a necessity to help students make their learning process more effective, and student motivation should be the key to the successful learning. Much has been done in the classroom to motivate learning. Assessment as a critical part of the students' study process should also help motivate students to learn. According to the credit and transfer system requirements [3] the following types of assessment for university students are a must: continuous, formative and summative.

Besides these conventional types of assessment, it is advisable to implement other methods like peer and self-assessment. Elton states that changing assessment methods could have a positive effect on enhancing student motivation to learn [10]. A key element in successful motivation is to ensure that the students are not overloaded by assessment [18].

When teachers' classroom assessments become an integral part of the instructional process and a central ingredient in their efforts to help students learn, the benefits of assessment for both students and teachers will be boundless [12]. McMillan also discusses the importance of a teacher's ability to integrate assessment and classroom instruction claiming that it gives the teachers clues as to what lessons and level of teaching that may be appropriate [16]. In order for teachers to take full advantage of assessments, they must be open and willing to view them as achievement gauges, student motivators, instructional guides and be responsible for the assessment of their students.

## 1. Motivation as an Incentive for Learning

Motivation is eagerness and willingness to do something without needing to be told or forced to do it [15]. Motivation is a desire to achieve a goal, combined with the energy to work towards that goal. Students who are motivated have a desire to undertake their study and complete the requirements of their course.

Many researchers consider motivation as one of the main elements that determine success in developing a foreign language; it determines the extent of active, personal involvement in language learning [17].

Motivation is characterized by two main types: intrinsic motivation that is described as when students are seeking intellectual stimulation from their studies and extrinsic motivation that is when students are more concerned about their grades or marks and their future employment prospects. Therefore, in order to stimulate interest for a foreign language the teacher should develop in students intrinsic motives relying on their personal experience, outlook, abilities, interests, emotions and feelings revealing what students already know on the topic, finding out their gaps and lacks and arranging a lesson based on students' needs. Besides, it will give a possibility to students to exhibit their knowledge, life experience and ideas got from the previous learning experience and engage their interest. [11].

Elton [10] suggests that intrinsic motivation can be increased by assessment strategies which:

- treat students as individuals;
- expect students to show individuality, originality and creativity;
- allow choices and preferences in their learning;
- allow students to negotiate the means by which they are assessed.

In order to make learning motivating, it must:

- be meaningful;
- be challenging;
- be interesting arousing the intellectual curiosity of the learner;
- be relevant, in that it must contribute to the learner's goals in undertaking the process;
- give the learner an expectation of success;
- produce satisfaction in the learner in having achieved their goals.

## **2. The Role of Materials and Methods in Motivating Students' Learning**

Motivation is also enhanced by the way in which the instructional material is organized. The ESP teaching/learning materials should be relevant to the objectives and outcomes of the lesson/module/syllabus, thus meeting the needs of students.

Materials provide a stimulus to learning. Good materials do not teach: they encourage to learn. Materials need to contain challenging and interesting texts, enjoyable activities that stimulate the learners' thinking capacities, offering opportunities for learners to use their previous knowledge and skills, content which both learner and teacher can cope with.

Materials provide models of correct models of language use. Teachers should always keep in mind that the materials they produce aim at students' better use of the language they have learned.

Effective materials offer a clear, systematic, coherent and flexible enough unit structure to allow for creativity and variety. Variety is essential to practice a number of micro-skills; to introduce a range of activity types; and to vary the type of interaction taking place during the class.

The learning materials are a good motivating factor. Besides using the teacher-generated materials or already existing in textbooks, students working in groups can produce those for the whole class to use. Each group can do a different task. The task of the teacher is to help groups with advice and guidance in the preparation of the exercises. Student-based materials foster group cohesion and a spirit of group solidarity.

The ultimate purpose of learning language is language use. Materials should be written in such a way as to lead to a communicative task in which learners use the content and language skills they have built up through the unit.

The assessment activities or tasks provided by the teacher should contain or reflect characteristics that promote meaningfulness. They are meaningful if they are novel and diverse, and if they promote excitement or pleasure. They should reflect the students' specialist world, have a clear purpose and clear instructions, meet their needs, make students' think and share their opinions and own experiences, and allow to develop their confidence and fluency.

Relevant ESP teaching/learning materials should integrate modern technology with specialist content. They should provide a systematic means for independent self-study and comprise a range of subject specialism-related (e.g. business correspondence and communication, academic writing) materials in order to develop integrated skills. [2].

A key element of using assessment to motivate learning is the effective use of innovative methods.

Different approaches should be used while designing the materials used in ESP classroom:

- skills-based approach where students acquire such skills as generic job-related skills (writing e-mails, CV, letters; giving presentations; socializing etc.), reflection, self-study, self-assessment and self-evaluation;

- communicative approach to teaching/learning a language in order to realise the practical aim of the curriculum, i.e. to facilitate students to use the language in various academic, social and professional contexts.

- learner-centred approach where students have a more active and responsible role, and in which they often need to work together to complete a task;

- task-based approach: role plays, simulations, case studies, projects and oral presentations are to be involved;

- integrated approach for developing macro-skills (reading, listening, spoken interaction, spoken production, and writing).

The methods mentioned above and the requirements for the ESP materials have been applied in the coursebook for mining engineers 'English for Study and Work [11] to meet the needs of ESP students majoring in mining. Each unit of the coursebook module starts with the objectives and expected outcomes. The tasks and activities relate to the course content and students' interests and experiences and are aimed to develop a whole range of competences – language skills and language knowledge, communicative, socio-linguistic, pragmatic, socio-cultural competences and study skills.

### **3. Researching Student Attitudes to Assessment**

The authors being aware of the role of assessment in the study process find it crucial to know the students' opinion on this issue. For the research given, Master students have been chosen as they are more mature and have more experience dealing with assessment. These groups of students are new to the authors; they have not taught them English before.

The research included three steps. First, the students were given two checklists, the former included the following statements about assessment, asking them to express their opinion about whether they agree or disagree:

1. Assessment should help you to learn.
2. Assessment must be consistent with the objectives of the course and what is taught and learnt.
3. Variety in types of assessment allows a range of different learning outcomes to be assessed. It also keeps you interested.
4. You need to understand clearly what is expected of you in assessed tasks.
5. Criteria for assessment should be detailed, transparent and justifiable.
6. You need specific and timely feedback on your work - not just a grade.
7. Too much assessment is unnecessary and may be counter-productive.

The latter focused on main types of assessment. The purpose of that part of the research was to find out which types of assessment students consider very important, important or not important in learning a language. The results are given in table 1.

Finally, the students were given an open question about whether they think assessment can be a good motivating factor in their learning a language or not, and were asked to explain their point of views.

The results of the research showed that the majority of the students agreed with the statements concerning assessment. Most of them stated the fact that if there is no motivation, there is no result. 14 % disagreed with the fact that assessment should help them to learn. They expressed their opinion answering the open question writing that if there is no motivation, assessment will be pointless. Another 14 % of respondents disagreed with the last statement that claimed that too much assessment was unnecessary and might be counter-productive (half of the students who disagreed with statement 1). It is possible to draw the conclusion that intrinsically motivated students do not find assessment as the main factor in their learning a language; it is just an additional one.

*Table 1. Masters Attitudes towards Assessment in ESP Course (in percentage)*

No	Assessment Types	Very important	Important	Not important
1.	Continuous assessment	50	43	7
2.	Formative assessment	36	50	14
3.	Summative assessment	64	14	21
4.	Peer assessment/assessment by others	7	50	43
5.	Self-assessment	71	29	0

The analyses of the data obtained (see table 1) showed that 71 % of the students found self-assessment as the most important type of assessment. They proved that by answering the open question writing that self-assessment could help them to learn. A half of the respondents believed that continuous assessment could help them make progress in learning the language as the teacher focused on student's strengths and weaknesses in order to improve. Compared to formative assessment, continuous assessment, in the students' opinion, provides feedback. In their open answer, the students wrote that if the feedback was constructive, it could encourage them to learn. The authors were surprised by the fact that peer-assessment was the least important type of assessment in learning a foreign language; 43 % of Master students did not trust it. In a further talk, it was clarified that that type of assessment had not been used as an assessment tool; so they did not believe in its effectiveness.

The research showed that there was notable difference in students' attitudes to assessment. Therefore, the main task of the teacher is how to make assessment positive and effective to motivate student learning and, eventually, enhance learning outcomes. What is more, begin using assessment in the first year of studies as a foundational tool to establish student study habits and skills.

#### **4. Assessing Students: What, Why and How**

By assessment we mean consideration of the results of individual learning. According to the National Curriculum for Universities [2] teachers are to assess the students' achievements in mastering the English language in accordance with the specified objectives and the target levels.

Black and Wiliam [4] define assessment broadly to include all activities that teachers and students undertake to get information that can be used analytically to alter teaching and learning. This definition considers assessment as an involved practice. Richard Stiggins describes classroom assessment as the process of gathering evidence of student learning to inform instructional decisions [21]. Teachers must discover, accept and apply this new understanding of classroom assessment to continue to describe achievement and contribute to learning and motivation [21].

Assessment in an ESP course performs the following roles:

- to measure progress;
- to measure achievement/outcomes in terms of knowledge and skills;
- it provides the basis for decisions on whether a student is ready to proceed;
- it enables students to obtain feedback on their learning;
- it helps students to improve their performance;
- it enables staff to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching.

Boud gives a set of criteria to judge assessment [6]. A number of these criteria have a significant impact on motivation and raise the following questions.

- What is the contribution to learning made by the act of the assessment?
- To what extent does the totality of the assessment portray what is important for learning?
- What are the consequences of assessment on student learning?
- Does the assessment encourage learning?

- Are students able to shape their own assessments?
- Does the assessment lead to an outcome which properly indicates the accomplishments of the student?

The common types of assessment mentioned above are continuous, formative, and summative.

Continuous assessment is assessment by the teacher and possibly by the student of class performances, pieces of work and projects throughout the course. This type of assessment implies assessment which is integrated into the course and which contributes in some cumulative way to the assessment at the end of the course. It normally includes a series of focused tasks. Continuous assessment allows more account to be taken of students' creativity and different strengths [7]. All this makes continuous assessment important among a half of the respondents.

Formative assessment refers to assessment that is specifically intended to provide feedback on performance to improve and accelerate learning [18]. Formative assessment takes place as the course is in progress and provides information about how well the students are doing – what they have achieved, what they need to work on, and how well the course is meeting their needs. The key focus of formative investment is on the learner, it answers the question “how am I doing?” instead of “how did I do?” [20]. 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 students. The strength of formative assessment is that it aims to improve learning [7]. That is why most of the respondents consider formative assessment important.

The best formative assessment technique in ESP course is case studies, which is considered an ideal method of inducting students into their professional world. It improves students' motivation to learn a language, develops responsibility, problem-solving skills as well as all the language skills. It is aimed at achieving module learning outcomes [9] and demonstrating developed and strengthened analytical and critical thinking skills. Case studies promote interaction and active learning. Meaningfulness is also promoted when teachers use authentic tasks that place students in meaningful, context-relevant testing situations. Case studies assess the readiness of learners to use their skills in real world contexts. This allows the assessment to focus itself on either the process or the product.

Students are willing to cooperate and they show great enthusiasm to practice when they receive specific feedback on their errors. Such feedback should include specific suggestions for improvement rather than vague comments. Teachers should give students some indication of how well they have done and how to improve. Formative assessment is widely supported as an important part of student development, with feedback being the critical component.

Feedback as a motivating element is a part of the teaching process. Teachers facilitate learning by providing students with important feedback on their learning progress and by helping them identify learning problems [12]. Feedback can be both positive and negative; the experience shows that positive comments influence motivation. Praise builds students' self-confidence, competence, and self-esteem. Negative feedback can lead to a negative class atmosphere. Whenever a teacher identifies a student's weakness, he should make it clear that the comments relate to a particular task or performance, not to the student as a person.

Informative feedback can also enhance intrinsic motivation. For someone to be motivated, usually, a worthwhile, attainable goal is necessary. Typically, the grade or the summative assessment at the end of the term is the extrinsic motivator. Positive feedback can motivate them to greater effort because it makes their goal seem attainable.

Self- and peer-assessments are considered vehicles to improve learning. Self-assessment answers the question "How am I doing?" [13]. It encourages the student to become part of the whole process of language learning, and to be aware of individual progress, so that he/she can think about (goal setting) what needs to be done in the future (planning), and can then reflect on achievement (further self-assessment).

Self-assessment means judgements about a student's own proficiency. It can be an effective compliment to tests and teacher assessment. The main potential for self-assessment is in its use as a tool for motivation and awareness raising: helping students to appreciate their strengths, recognize their weaknesses and orient their learning more effectively [7]. Combining self-assessment with teacher assessment means that the latter can become more effective [13].

The aim of self-assessment is to promote autonomous lifelong learning. The emphasis on self-assessment coincides with the Council of Europe's concern to promote autonomous lifelong learning. The introduction of self-assessment can lead to an open dialogue with students and give teachers a better understanding of students' problems. To develop their learning skills, students use Language Portfolio, which provides grids for self-assessment of language achievement and the setting of personal learning goals. The LP helps to make the language learning process more transparent to students, to help them develop their capacity for reflection and self-assessment, and thus to enable them gradually to assume more responsibility for their own learning [2]. The LP includes the self-assessment grids to identify students' proficiency level. Moreover, the profile of language skills helps students to check their progress at various stages in the learning process. For example at the beginning of a course, at the end of a course, or even in life-long learning [1]. The ESP Curriculum also includes a grid for self-assessment of student language skills for professional needs and a sample of a B2 (Vantage) self-assessment checklist of language skills for professional needs [2].

Self-assessment is essential for a learner who wants to make some kind of judgement about the accuracy and appropriacy of her performance, and also because self-assessment emphasizes the process, rather than the product of learning. None of the respondents thought it unimportant. Harris says that self-assessment is a practical tool that can make students more active and can assist them with the daunting task of learning how to communicate in another language [13]. Dickinson [8] has three reasons for using self-assessment:

1. Assessment leading towards evaluation is an important educational objective in its own right. Training learners in this is beneficial to learning.
2. Self-assessment is a necessary part of self-determination.
3. Self-assessment lessens the assessment burden on the teacher.

To increase interest and motivation and give the students the feeling that they have some control over the decision-making, they should be involved in the development of the assessment programme that will determine their progress in foreign language acquisition. The students suggestions can be incorporated into the decisions of what to include and how and when to use the various components of the assessment rubric. In addition, they can help set personal goals and be given the opportunity to partake in self-assessment. Stiggins remarks that students must take responsibility for developing their own sense of control over their success [21]. Here assessment is viewed as a self-reflective learning tool for students.

Students should be aware of assessment criteria without which teachers can neither teach nor assess the required skills. Some teachers mistakenly believe that they must keep their assessments secret [12]. To increase the value of self-assessment students need to be involved into designing the criteria for assessing. For example, in the module "Oral presentation" students decide individually, in group discussion and then in panel discussion what the criteria are of a good presentation in terms of its organisation, delivery, content, and visuals. Their decisions then are used as the criteria for self-assessment of the presentations conducted in the classroom.

It is advisable to start developing student self- and peer-assessment involvement since the first year of studies. In fact most students find it easier to assess their communicative competence (oral skills) than their mastery of grammar [5], so self-assessment is very useful in the conversation class. This is justified by carrying out self-assessment of students' participation in a professionally oriented discussion. It was simple for them to assess themselves whether they responded appropriately to the speakers' main ideas and attitudes/points of view, but it was rather difficult to assess phonetics and use of grammar.

Summative assessment sums up students' attainment at the end of the course with a grade. It provides information about their overall achievements, i.e. whether they achieved the learning outcomes, and the overall effectiveness of the course. It includes entry/placement test and end-of-course test. The tests designed should encourage the kind of learning the teacher wants students to achieve.

Traditional summative assessment techniques generally take the form of exams, in class tests, and assignments. Such techniques when applied alone can often lead students to "play a strategic game" whereby the learning becomes secondary to completing the task and receiving a grade. Summative assessment rarely includes qualitative feedback, which is a vital aid to personal development [14].

## Conclusions

Assessment is a multifaceted tool at the English teacher's disposal that can promote student involvement in the learning process and encourage foreign language acquisition. There are various ways of assessing students that can encourage their positive involvement in the learning process. There is clear evidence that assessment can motivate learning in the intrinsic sense of stimulating intellectual curiosity. Participating in self- and peer-assessment, students can become effective judges of their own and their peers work, thus, leading to increasing their motivation to learn. Students should be aware of assessment criteria. Moreover, their involvement into designing assessment criteria makes a study process transparent. Peer assessment also motivates improvements in student performance.

Formative assessment is a tool for achieving learning outcomes and it is based on the individuals learning. It contributes in a meaningful way to the achievement of learning outcomes, provides a more positive experience for learners and can also be invaluable for teachers, to see if the lesson aims have been fulfilled and the overall objectives have been met. It also helps to assess student strengths and weaknesses and give a strong indication as to which type of activities students like and dislike. As quality feedback is the key to successful formative assessment and it encourages students to become self-motivated independent learners, teachers should give frequent, early, positive feedback to support students' beliefs that they can do well. Whatever feedback strategy is used, it should help students develop a clear sense of their own progress.

As teachers begin to implement new strategies for using assessment as an instructional device, they will recognize the ability of students to take control of their own success and accept responsibility for their own learning. These empowering feelings will inspire and motivate students toward greater achievement.

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