Evaluation methods as an effective tool for the development of students’ learning

Blanka Frydrychova Klimova*

University of Hradec Kralove, Faculty of Informatics and Management, Rokitanskeho 62, Hradec Kralove, 50003, Czech Republic

Abstract

Evaluation is a complementary and inseparable part of any educational process. It plays a crucial role in any student’s learning. The purpose of this article is to discuss how different evaluation methods can enhance students’ learning, particularly in the Course of Academic Writing, which is taught as an optional subject at the Faculty of Informatics and Management of the University of Hradec Kralove in the Czech Republic. Firstly, the term evaluation is discussed. Secondly, different evaluation methods used in the course are explored with a special focus on self-reflection essays, which help both the teacher in her work and students in their learning. In addition, students’ authentic pieces of evaluation are used to provide concrete examples.

© 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

Peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of the ERPA Congress 2014.

Keywords: evaluation; students; learning; writing

1. Introduction

Evaluation is an inseparable part of any education process since it plays a crucial role in any student’s learning. The course evaluation is considered to be one of the very valuable tools of teaching and learning because it can provide useful feedback both for teachers and their institution about the quality of education. Moreover, it can reveal its impact on student’s learning and teacher’s practices (Frydrychova Klimova, 2013).

Sometimes evaluation is wrongly understood as an assessment. As Watson (2014) claims, one could look at assessment and evaluation as the journey (assessment) versus the snapshot (evaluation). The assessment requires the gathering of evidence of students’ performance over a period of time to measure their learning and understanding.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +420 493 3332318.
E-mail address: blanka.klimova@uhk.cz.
The evaluation, on the other hand, occurs when a mark is assigned after the completion of a task, test, quiz, lesson or learning activity. A mark on a spelling test will determine if the child can spell the given words and would be seen as an evaluation.

2. Evaluation methods in the course of academic writing

The evaluation can have different forms. There are two main approaches to the course evaluation: informal/personal and formal/institutional. In this article the author discusses just the informal course evaluation methods. In the Course of Academic Writing, which is an optional, one-semester course taught as a blended course at the Faculty of Informatics and Management of the University of Hradec Kralove, the following evaluation methods are used: teacher’s evaluation of students’ essays; course evaluation questionnaires; and course self-reflective essays.

The teacher’s evaluation of students’ essays provides information about student results and their performance as far as their academic writing is concerned. There is usually a final evaluation of five assignments/essays students write during the course. Therefore the teacher can see whether students are making any progress or not and reflect on their work and her teaching practices in order to make necessary changes in learning and teaching strategies. The teacher assesses these assignments every second week and uses analytic scoring. The teacher (the author of this article) follows Bacha (2001) – Jacobs et al. (1981) model. She slightly adapted their model since the Czech learners of English have different language use needs. The most frequent errors for the Czech learners are the use of articles, word order, indirect speech, agreement in subject and predicate, countable versus uncountable nouns, and prepositions. In addition, since the course is also run partly online, students are exposed to double feedback on their essays. Firstly, after submitting their essay via the virtual learning environment Blackboard, they receive from their teacher a general written commentary on their writing performance. Then, at the beginning of the following contact lesson, students once more discuss their errors in class.

Each semester students attending the course are given a course evaluation questionnaire whose feedback can help the course teacher to reflect on her teaching practices and modify them accordingly afterwards if there are such needs. See Appendix A about the course evaluation questionnaire. Overall, students respond very positively; they are usually very satisfied with the course structure, pleasant atmosphere in the class, with the feedback on their written work and the exploitation of each lesson to the maximum. Moreover, they would recommend the course to other students at the faculty because they find it beneficial for their future career.

Probably the most effective method of the course evaluation is a self-reflective essay. The self-reflective essay brings about many advantages, both for the students and the teacher. Generally, the self-reflection is a good way for students to learn about their experience, experiences, learning preferences and think critically about what they have learned. It is also a valuable source for teachers, too, since they can reconsider their teaching methods, strategies or activities.

Thus, when writing the self-reflective essay, students get enriched in the following ways:

- they become aware of their strengths and weaknesses;
- they expand their cognitive skills;
- they increase their metacognitive skills, particularly critically thinking skills;
- they develop their writing skills;
- they become aware of their learning styles;
- it helps students to develop their personality (cf. Pikhart, 2012);
- it might encourage self-motivation or self-directed learning;
- it may make students more responsible for their learning.

However, one also has to bear in mind the drawbacks of the reflective essay writing, which includes the fact that:

- some students can be too critical of teacher’s approaches;
- they may feel uncomfortable about it, or they may not have to reveal all their weaknesses and strengths;
they might be reluctant to do such reflection. (FrydrychovaKlimova, 2013)

In the Course of Academic Writing, students’ self-reflective essays are not included in the final mark. Students are just asked to reflect on what they have learned and experienced in the course in order to help improve the course, including the teacher’s performance in the course. Although the format of the self-reflective essay follows the structure of any other formal essay such as introduction, main part and conclusion, teachers should provide their students with some guidance or scaffolding before they let them write. Appendix B lists some of the guiding questions for writing such a self-reflective essay. The questions were adapted according to Race (2002). Although students’ responses vary, there are some common features. Most students appreciate learning the rules of academic writing such as citing sources, the whole format of formal paper which is completely different from informal English and grammar. Perhaps the most difficult for them is to meet the deadline of each assignment because they usually leave writing the essay till the last moment, academic formalities and some topics students are not so much familiar with. The biggest challenge and also the most difficult seems to be the final assignment which is an article published in Wikipedia. Overall, students find the course very beneficial for those who go and study, for example within the ERASMUS project, abroad; or who want to write their bachelor paper or dissertation in English. They would recommend this course to other students since there is no other subject at the faculty where students could acquire the skill of academic writing. However, some of them think that they should possess a very good command of English before enrolling in this course.

3. Conclusion

Thus, as it results from the discussion described above, any kind of evaluation is a very important and valuable tool of teaching and learning because it provides useful feedback for teachers and in case of the self-reflective essay, it is also a useful tool for learners. As Race (2002) says:

Reflection deepens learning. The act of reflecting is one which causes us to make sense of what we’ve learned, why we learned it, and how that particular increment of learning took place. Moreover, reflection is about linking one increment of learning to the wider perspective of learning – heading towards seeing the bigger picture. Reflection is equally useful when our learning has been unsuccessful – in such cases indeed reflection can often give us insights into what may have gone wrong with our learning, and how on a future occasion we might avoid now-known pitfalls. Most of all, however, it is increasingly recognised that reflection is an important transferable skill, and is much valued by all around us, in employment, as well as in life in general.

Appendix A. The course evaluation questionnaire

Authors Please comment on the overall structure and content of the course.
The most useful activities of the course for me were ..... The feedback provided for my essays was done ..... I find the on-line course ..... because ..... I worked in the on-line course (e.g. every day, ...) ..... In the course I missed ..... I feel that writing essays has improved my ..... What or who motivated you to attend the course (e.g. friends, credits ...) .....? ..... Did you welcome the possibility to have a course once every two weeks or would you prefer to have it every week? ..... Would you recommend the course to other people? My problem in the learning of English is ..... My problem in the learning of writing is ..... What learning strategies do you use when you study? Any further comments? Thank you.
Appendix B. Guiding questions for writing a self-reflective essay

**What** did I actually **achieve** while attending this course? Which were the most difficult parts, and why were they difficult for me? Which were the most straightforward parts, and why did I find these easy?

**How** have I **developed my knowledge and skills**?

What were 3 greatest **challenges** in doing this course?

What was the most **boring or tedious** part of doing this course? What are your recommendations for a possible improvement?

In what way did this course **help me in my future learning** and career?

What **advice** would I give a friend about to enrol in this course?

**What have I learned about myself** while doing this course?

References


