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ASSESSMENT OF STUDENTS' ACQUIRED SKILLS

The issue of assessing students' acquired skills has always been topical in foreign language teaching. Yet, now greater importance is attached to it in connection with the standardizing of the levels of training that has begun in higher school.

Teaching a foreign language in a technical institution of higher learning (known as Language for Specific Purposes) aims at the formation of future specialists' communicative competence that allows them to use a foreign language as a means of professional and intercultural communication. The university foreign language program is directed at training specialists' mainly practical needs in their future profession. These practical needs are formulated with view of communication, which is understood as profession-oriented training, and presupposes mastering all four types of speech activities on the basis of professional vocabulary. The main characteristic feature of this specific purpose language ability is that "specific purpose background knowledge interacts with language knowledge to produce a communicative performance in specific purpose contexts" [2, p. 33].

Teaching and assessment are two inseparable aspects of teacher's work, and numerous scholars point out that "performance assessment practices are part of any professional culture" [2. p. 172]. The importance of knowledge assessment is stressed by many scholars who regard evaluation "as an essential component of any training program" and emphasize that it helps "determine what and how much program participants have learned" [3, p. 89, 90]. The actual Model Program on the basis of which are designed Foreign Languages Teaching Programmes directly prescribes the availability of the Control Module.

Foreign language monitoring is essential for both a teacher (it helps improve the teaching process, substitute less effective methods for more effective ones, create favourable conditions for improving practical skills) and a trainee (helps each student realize what progress they have made, what their drawbacks are, what material they have to revise). Besides, the right, objective assessment is a stimulus for students' future work. Thus, the success of the whole foreign language teaching process in many respects depends on the thoroughly organized process of evaluating students' knowledge.

This form of evaluating skills is not new for students – it is widely used at foreign language lessons at school. In addition, all applicants who are enrolled at Economics faculty of this university had to take their foreign language exam in the form of centralized testing.

Apart from traditional methods of monitoring, testing is gaining popularity. It is distinguished by greater objectivity and independence from teacher's possible sympathy/antipathy, and a student is protected against a testing person's subjectivism by the test material. Testing has some advantages over traditional forms of evaluating knowledge – it is "a more qualitative and objective means of assessment... more capacious... more volumetrical... more gentle... more humane... more efficient from economic point of view instrument" [1, p. 31-34].

In our work we use tests at different stages of knowledge evaluation. But these tests, as I perceive, do not fully comply with recent scientific data and methodical principles of their compiling, and, as a consequence, cannot give a realistic picture of each student's specific language ability. Test materials that are currently used at our university do not allow in due manner to evaluate those skills which students must acquire in the English course. Their format does not reflect actual target language use characteristics, they are distinguished by a low degree of interactional authenticity as they fail to engage examinees in communicatively purposeful activities. This can partly be because of teachers' relying on computers to correct texts, and because computer scoring is typically limited to such a format as multiple-choice tasks only.

Not always test developers have sufficient enough knowledge in the sphere of pedagogical measurement. And this, in its turn, negatively tells on the quality of tests, exactness and reliability of measurement, as tests, in the first place, must be used to receive a system of objective indices which can allow to get timely information about students' acquisition of the material, take measures, if necessary, to prevent emergent deviations, lagging behind, and organize individual and independent students' work.

A research was carried out whose aim was to investigate the attitude of students and foreign language teachers towards evaluation of linguistic skills by way of testing. The research involved 125 first-year students of Brest State Technical University (who major in Economics) and 16 foreign language instructors of the same institution. The task was to find out if the language instructors' expectations were similar to those of the students'. The respondents were asked to give 'yes' or 'no' answers to the four questions and briefly explain why or why not. The survey included four questions:

1. Is it necessary to assess students' skills during a language course?

2. Is it necessary to assess students' skills in the form of testing during a language course?

3. Is it necessary to assess students' skills after a language course is finished?

4. Is it necessary to assess students' skills in the form of testing after a language course is finished?

This may be considered a flawed survey as the number of respondents hasn't reached several hundred, yet it may be regarded representative enough, because it clearly indicates the learners and instructors' attitude to evaluating learners' acquired skills in general, and employing testing for this purpose, in particular. Percentages of 'yes' and 'no' answers were calculated and are represented in the table below:

Questions	Teachers n = 16	Students n = 125
	'yes' answers (%)	'yes' answers (%)
1	100	60
2	84.4	53.2
3	96.9	67.6
4	46.9	60

The percentage of teachers who believe that overall short-term assessment is necessary is nearly two times as big as that of the students (100% and 60% respectively). When asked if it was necessary to employ tests to assess students' knowledge and skills that were acquired during the course the percentage slightly diminishes, but the discrepancy remains practically the same, about 40%.

The teachers wholeheartedly support the very idea that short-term assessment should be employed. They perceive assessment is an integral part of educational process, and as such it should find its application in the short-term and summative assessments, though the percentage slightly falls to reach 96.9%. The students, on the other hand, demonstrate a noticeable increase from 60% to 67.5%, but they are not so confident as the teachers of the necessity to conduct the either form of assessment, and this gap varies between 4% and 29.3%.

Nearly 84% of the teachers acknowledge testing the best way of doing formative assessment, while only about half the students believe testing to be a useful format for evaluation. About 97% of the teachers interviewed consider summative assessment an important issue, though it shows a slight decrease as compared to the use of testing in formative assessment. Conversely, the percentage of the students who emphasize the importance of summative assessment increases compared to that of formative evaluation. On the part of the students, it is quite natural to employ testing as a suitable way of conducting final assessment, whereas teachers are pessimistic about choosing testing procedures to evaluate students' knowledge and skills after the completion of the course. As the percentage figures show, students demonstrate a relatively high level of belief that testing may serve as a relevant format for summative assessment.

The most important implication of the survey is that in a varying degree testing may be used as a convenient means of arranging assessment procedures, and these expectations are stronger felt in the students' responses. It becomes evident that test developers must select such tasks which may prove most effective and produce the most reliable and valid data that may serve as clear indicators for the stakeholders of the progress that the learners have made, and of the current level of their language skills. Besides, their careful consideration will help to understand if the language course goals have been achieved.

LSP test preparation is not an easy task. One of the obstacles that a test developer must overcome is "the leap from the analysis of the target language use to the specifications of tasks" [2, p. 113]. On this road LSP test developers confront several obstacles : they don't have a detailed knowledge of the specialized subject they are writing a test for, and they lack expertise in the specialized domain of the knowledge that is being

evaluated. LSP testing is regarded as a special form of communicative language testing. Tasks in LSP tests reflect specific language use more than general tests do, and non-linguistic background knowledge plays a more significant role in LSP tests.

Testing always suggests measurement — "if we want to know how well individuals can use language in specific contexts use" we need "a measure that takes into account both their language knowledge and their background knowledge..." [2, p. 292].

There are certain steps that we must take in order to improve the situation in foreign language assessment:

1. define the rationale and framework for assessment;

2. develop appropriate assessment mechanisms;

3. develop programme-specific materials and convert them into appropriate assignments to fit the format of the assessment.

Qualitative and reliable data that come from correctly developed tests will give a teacher an opportunity to manage the process of teaching — will help them see what material is to be revised to achieve maximum level of its acquisition, make conclusions on each student's progress and take methodical decisions as for the organization students' individual work, build their, so to say, subject trajectory. A teacher will get a chance to optimally organize the educational process, intensify and individualize it, make it more flexible which will, undoubtedly, contribute to improving the level and quality of students' knowledge.

Language testing is in no way less important in language education than teaching a language. But it must not be perceived as "simply giving a language test; it is the entire process of test use". Properly developed evaluation materials are to be used "to better inform us on the decisions we make and actions we take in language education" [4, p. 42].

In the long run, properly devised test materials will contribute to improving the quality of language training at our university: graduates will get more profound linguistic profession-oriented knowledge, acquire better skills in the use of a foreign language as a means of professional communication, which will allow them to better adjust to changing employment conditions and meet growing requirements for job seekers.

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