

Class Size Impact on Formative Assessment in the LMD System

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ملخص:

لقد أعطت الإصلاحات الجديدة التقويم مكانة مميزة لأهميته . ويعتمد نظام ل،م،د على المجهود الفردي للطالب، و يحتاج هذا الأخير أساسا لمنهجية جديدة في التقويم. إن التقويم التكويني هو ضالتنا في ورقة البحث هذه. و بما أن مقاييس بعينها (اللسانيات، التعبير الكتابي، و النحو) يصعب تقويم الطالب فيها فرديا؛ فقد كان لزاما علينا دراسة هذه الظاهرة تكمن المشكلة في التعداد الهائل للطلبة.

سنحاول الإجابة على بضعة أسئلة حول مدى تأثير تعداد الطلبة على عملية التقويم و كذا أفضل المقاربات لتطبيق تعليمات نظام ل.م.د و نعلم أساسا على الاستجابات مع الأساتذة للإحاطة بالموضوع لنخلص إلى أنه كلما تقلص عدد الطلبة تحسنت عملية التقويم .

Abstract :

Testing is a major in the teaching learning process that should be given a special importance especially with the latest reforms as far as higher education in Algeria is concerned. The latter refers to the implementation of the LMD system that is mainly based on the students personal workload. The focus here is on the “ formative assessment “ that is why in some courses such as linguistics, written expression, and grammar, as teachers we face difficulties in testing our students individually; The problem behind our motivation to write this paper is the large number of student per group .

In other works, if we'd like to works according to the LMD principles, the class size stands as a major factor that makes us think seriously about what we are doing in our language classrooms. In fact , this is the case of the department of letters and foreign language at Mohamed Khider University of Biskra over the last four years . The present paper looks for an answer to the following question; to which extent does the class size affect the test design And what should be done to apply the LMD system principles appropriately? We believe that if the number of students per group decreases it will be easy for us as teachers to evaluate our students individually. To reach

our objective from this work, we relied mainly

Introduction

This paper evolves from a powerful claim: Formative Assessment in the LMD system faces a serious challenge that is represented by large class size. We shall proceed with some definitions of key concepts. Afterwards, we shall discuss the EFL context at Mohamed Khider University of Biskra (MKUB). At the core of this paper is the probe on the impact of class size on the Formative Assessment. Due to its nature, the topic follows a common pattern: unstructured interviews with staff with the view of laying out the interplay between staff Formative Assessment and large classes.

1. The LMD: An Overview

The new higher education reform also known as the LMD system was introduced at the English department in 2007. It should be acknowledged that this reform was first introduced in the exact sciences branches at the level of our university (2005). Two years later, it was extended to other branches such as humanities, social sciences, and languages. The LMD system came as a natural process to technological breakthroughs, complex international relations and overlapping of economic interests in the new millennium.

1.1 LMD Objectives

By its very nature, the LMD aims at bridging the gap between book knowledge and the job market demands. In the previous century, job providers made outcries about the inability of graduates from colleges and universities to cope with real challenges posed by real life experiences. Along those lines, the LMD was developed to address these urgent demands. As many as five major goals are set out by the LMD decision makers:

- a. Encouraging and promoting staff and students' mobility
- b. Improving the transparency of qualifications on the job market
- c. Promoting practical knowledge

- d. Restructuring higher education institutions
- e. And adopting a credit system known as the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS)

2. Probe on the Nature of Assessment

The teaching learning process is basically about assessing how much learners have acquired. By the same token, Soled1 (1995, p.1) recognizes that “assessment, testing, and evaluation are everyday occurrences in ... education”. We should acknowledge from the very onset that the following terms: assessment, evaluation, and testing have different connotations and values throughout this paper. In the following section, we attempt to furnish different approaches to the aforementioned concepts, which are alphabetically ordered.

2.1. Assessment

It is interesting to know that the term assessment takes its roots from the Latin word “assidere” which means to sit beside to make calculations. In applied linguistics, it is taken to mean the collection of learners’ behavior such as the process of describing, recording, scoring, and interpreting information as far as the learning process is concerned. In the same vein, Brown 2(2007, p.445) defines assessment as “...an ongoing process that encompasses a much wider domain. Whenever a student responds to a question offers a comment or tries out a new word or structure, the teacher subconsciously makes an assessment of the student performance”. As a final comment, assessment is an indelible process in teaching and learning. Brown and Knight3 (1994) echo “Assessment is at the heart of the student experience”, and the teacher’s experience for the matter.

2.2. Evaluation

By definition, evaluation is about attributing a value to test takers' work. According to Lynch⁴ (1996, p.2) evaluation refers to a systematic attempt to gather information in order to make judgments or decisions. In the glossary of useful terms, the definition appears to be generic as it includes the collection of data on students' work and the value judgment issued by test makers " Evaluation: Both qualitative and quantitative descriptions of pupil behavior plus value judgments concerning the desirability of that behavior. Using collected information (assessments) to make informed decisions about continued instruction, programs, and activities" (sic). According to Davidson (2005, xi)⁵, "Evaluation seems to provide a strategic procedure as it envisages what comes after the collection of data and the value judgment " only evaluation can tell us 'So what?'" . Differently stated, evaluation tells scholars and stakeholders in what way this information is important and worthy in taking and making informed decisions about students' performance, program, and course, etc.

Two aspects clearly characterize the essence of evaluation. According to Scriven⁶ (1991) evaluation has a double foundation:

- (a). merit (intrinsic value of something; or relative excellence of program, person, and object)
- (b). worth (the value of something to an individual, organization, institution; or the extent to whereto a person, program, institution, object that fulfills a need).

2.3. Testing

Testing refers to the systematic procedure for obtaining a sample of student behavior in periodic phases through examination papers usually in a specific place and scheduled planning. Differently stated, testing is the physical realization of the test makers' intentions to collect verifiable data on students under work. Moreover, testing comes to be defined by the Free Dictionary as "A series of questions, problems, or physical responses designed to determine knowledge, intelligence, or ability".

As a final analysis, these three constructs contain one another from most general to the more particular. The figure below illustrates the relationships between the three concepts.

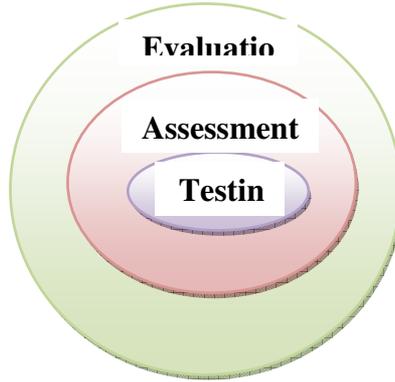


Fig .1: Evaluation, Assessment, Testing Relationships

In this paper, therefore, evaluation includes both assessment and testing, and assessment includes testing. Differently stated, stakeholders proceed from concrete aspects to more abstract aspects of collecting information on students' performance.

2.4. Definitions of Assessment and its Types

Educational assessment seeks to determine how well students are learning and is an integral part of the quest for improved education. It provides feedback to students, educators, parents, policymakers, and the public about the effectiveness of educational services (Pelligrino, Chudowsky, and Glaser 72001, P.1).

Scholars identify three types of assessment:

2.4.1. Summative Assessment (Latin summa: sum/ total): Sawyer 8(2004, P.106) quotes Gipps (1994) who defines summative assessment (SA) an assessment which takes place at the end of a term or course and is used to provide information about how much students have learned and how well a course has worked. According to Avis et al. (2009:170) SA normally leads to an award of qualifications:

grades, diplomas, and certificates. Therefore, SA is basically an assessment of learning (ibid. 171).

2.4.2. Formative Assessment (Latin Formare: to shape/ to mold/ to make): Quoting Gipps, Sawyer also claims that formative assessment (FA) takes place during the course of teaching and is used essentially to feedback into teaching and learning (op.cit.). Avis et al. note that FA is an assessment for learning- it takes place during a course or programme of study, as an integral part of the learning process (op.cit.). Consequently, FA is an assessment for learning (ibid.).

2.4.3 Ipsative Assessment (Latin Ipse: him/herself): Again following in Gipps footsteps, Sawyer defines ipsative assessment (IA) as an assessment in which the student evaluates his/ her performance against his/ her previous performance. Ideally, it continues throughout the professional career.

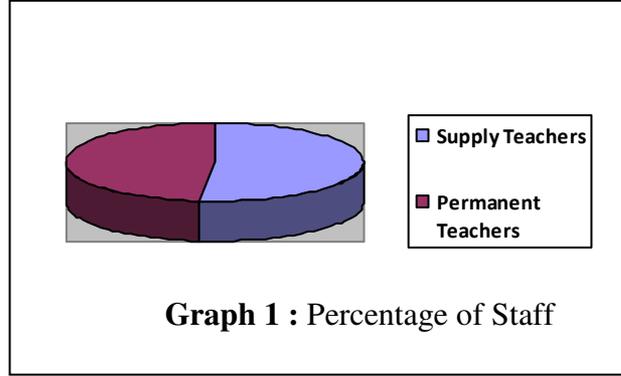
This didactic procedure is very rarely conducted in the English Branch. Intuitively, most teachers do not seem to trust students' evaluation of their own work. Thus, an important procedure that helps students discover their own weaknesses and inconsistencies is overlooked because of some personal and ungrounded fears.

3. EFL Context: Case of MKUB

In this section, we shall expose quantitatively the staff and the students' population of the English Branch at MKUB. This endeavor is premised by the fact that the factors influencing decisions about the type of assessment tools, content of the test, and the value of the students' submitted work depends heavily on the staff' perception of their students and the class size.

3.1. Staff

At the English Branch of MKUB, two types of teachers make up the teaching staff: permanent and supply teachers. While the former constitutes the pivot of the teaching population as it represents 28 out of 58 of the total number of teachers. Thus, they represent 48.27%. The latter, i.e., supply teachers take the lion share of the total number of teachers (30) which means 51.72% as it is illustrated in the chart below.



It should be mentioned that the English Branch relies on graduate students to fill the shortage of the skilled staff.

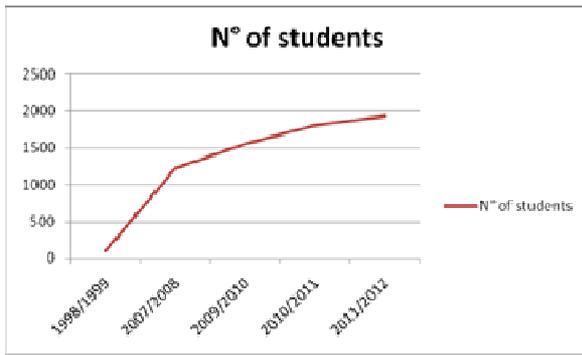
3.2. Students

The English Branch at MKUB has attracted the attention of a large number of students over the years from its establishment in 1998. Noticeably, it should be pointed out that there is a considerable growth of the students' population especially the last six years. Starting from 2007/2008 precisely, i.e., the year of the LMD implementation at the level of our Branch, the number of students is getting higher and higher while on the other hand there is a remarkable shortage of full-time teachers as previously mentioned. As it is demonstrated below, the remarkable increase in students' population starts as from 2007/2008.

School year	1998/1999	2007/2008	2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/2012
N° of students	96	1222	1554	1811	1933

Table 2: Students' population growth

We can account for the increase in students' population for the following reason: both the régime classique and the LMD classes both coexisted until 2012. Again, the growth in the population of the students is graphically represented with the view of providing a clear idea about the rates of students' population increase.



Graph 2: Students' population growth

The graph attests that there is a constant increase in the number of students and that is due to the increase in the number of the new Bachelier.

4. Class Size Impact

In the current section, we intend to probe the impact of class size on formative assessment. This endeavor is premised by the fact that most teachers believe that huge class size compromises their willingness and readiness to undertake an otherwise challenging formative assessment.

4.1. Class Size Impact on Teaching

Decidedly, teachers prove to be frustrated by the ever increasing number of students in their classes, which ultimately disfavors teachers' commitment to better assessment and evaluation systems. Hence, the teaching learning process appears to have lost an essential component that helps classify students

according to their engagement in the learning process. We have judged essential to include a table in which we juxtapose the merits of small class size and demerits of large classes.

Merits of Small classes	Demerits of Large Classes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More teacher involvement in the teaching learning process • Less stress • More teacher attention toward individual learners • Less discipline-related troubles • More time to teacher-student meaningful exchange of input 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of teacher involvement in in-class practices • More teacher stress and frustration • Less time to individual learners and focus on completion of the lesson • More discipline-related challenges • Less time to teacher-student engagement

Table 1: Merits and Demerits of Class Size

As it could be noticed, we have included an equal number of merits and demerits of class size. It is by no way an exhaustive list; the merits of small class size can be longer and the demerits of large classes can be equally longer.

4.2. Class Size Impact on Formative Assessment

Working according to the LMD principles means giving a special focus to the students' personal workload. Indeed, both Decrees 137 and 712 come to emphasize on this aspect particularly as it appears in Article 20 below:

Art 20: L'évaluation de l'étudiant porte, selon le parcours de

formation, sur:

- _ Les enseignants,
- _ Les travaux pratiques,
- _ Les travaux dirigés,
- _ Les sorties sur le terrain,
- _ Les stages pratiques,
- _ Les séminaires,
- _ Le travail personnel.

Moreover, assessing students individually requires specific conditions. The latter includes primarily the number of students per group. In fact, in the case of our Branch, we face a serious problem concerning this issue that refers to the shortage of staff in the first place. Therefore, it is not possible to assess students individually in all courses because of the cogent reason that most of the courses are taught in halls (viz.lectures), if not the number of students per group which in some cases exceeds the norms (namely 60 to 70 students per group). In those conditions, it is quite hard if not impossible to deal with FA.

5. Analysis of the Findings

From the unstructured interviews held with approximately 40% of the teachers of the English Branch at MKUB, we obtained the following:

Question One: Do you think that the class size affects your way of assessing students? How? Please explain.

As far as the question item above is concerned, the interviewed teachers strongly agree with the fact that the class size definitely affects their way of assessing students. They point out that the more students they have the less objective and accurate they assess them. Besides, they assert that they cannot attain all of their objectives. They echo that the large number of students makes it difficult for them to decide about the level of difficulty of the questions as well as the allocation of time and marks. Moreover, they state that if the class size exceeds the norms, it will be quite hard for them to control all students and to supply feedback to every student. Furthermore, they view that assessing students in large classes is time-consuming

and too tiring for them, as they are conscious that little learning takes place because individual attention cannot be given.

Question Two: What are your strategies to evaluate your students individually with the huge number you have in class?

Teaching large classes is a fact that we have to cope with and put up with when it comes to the FA. Indeed, the interviewed teachers argue that it is hard to deal with large classes especially when it is a question of Formative Evaluation but they supplied a variety of strategies that they are using at the present time. Those strategies can be summarized in the following:

- ✓ Encouraging students self and peer assessment
- ✓ Encouraging group work projects
- ✓ Using a variety of short written quizzes at short intervals

Question Three: What do you think is the appropriate way to evaluate students in large classes?

It should be noted that all the teachers are conscious of the difficulties when deciding to evaluate their students in large classes. In the case of our Branch, almost all the groups exceed 45 students, thus the teachers use a variety of techniques which may enable them to be effective in their evaluation. Most of them (60%) emphasize on group work which they view as the most appropriate way of assessing in large classes is dividing the class into small groups so that they gain time and come closer to each student. And still some others think of dividing the activities into 3 main levels: high, average, and low. The latter allows them to determine those students with a poor level, therefore, they will pay special attention to them by assigning extra activities and this enable them to trace any improvement or drawback in the students' performance.

Question Four: What would you recommend to solve this problem, so that to apply the LMD principles appropriately?

The vast majority of the teachers call for class size reduction in the first place. Besides, they suggest using technology in class and at home; in class through online quizzes, and at home through e-mails, blogs or forums. Moreover, they call for group activities and

assignments which are not time-consuming for them when compared to the evaluation of individual tests, and on the other hand they enhance inhibited students to cooperate with their classmates, especially the good ones. Furthermore, they propose hiring more teachers, diversifying activities and assessment methods, and using ipsative assessment. Whereas, only few of the teachers suggest that it is better to address this problem to administrators and pedagogy specialists.

Conclusion

The foregoing article made it clear that class size represents an insurmountable challenge for staff members. This challenge appears to accentuate yearly as more and more BAC holders come into English. Inversely, the staff seems to be increasing very slowly making thus the accommodation of the student influx ever more difficult. Yet another issue that attests to bother staff members is that they are unable to engage meaningfully all the students. In sum, we nurture a quiet hope that more facilities to be built to address this acute issue.

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