

Language Assessment course: Structure, Delivery and Learning Outcomes

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Aimed at developing methods, tools and techniques for delivery and evaluation of an educational module, this article addresses the needs of academicians restructuring, adjusting and altering their curricula to meet European Higher Education Area standards. The paper focuses on two pressing issues – the applicability of and adjustment to European standards in the Russian higher education system. These issues are exemplified by the pilot implementation of a course in Language Assessment at Kazan (Volga region) Federal University (KFU). In the paper the local impact of the course at KFU is viewed at four levels: Reactions, Learning Changes, Behaviour and Results. Impact data collected at KFU include the following: end of session written feedback, pre- and post-course questionnaires, observation in the classroom, interviews, concept maps, teacher portfolios, written assignments, tests/examinations and participant journal entries. Viewed as the first step in conducting a full Student Needs Analysis, the research is intended to inform the design and delivery of Language Assessment courses for graduates majoring in English, Linguistics or Pedagogy elsewhere. The methods, techniques and tools developed by the authors may also be adapted for application to any University course during piloting, or following its introduction.

Keywords: course delivery, evaluation, Language Assessment, Education Standards, diagnostic assessment, formative assessment, EGE, FCE

INTRODUCTION

The implications for the Russian higher education system of joining the Bologna process were fundamental. They have included the implementation of three-level higher vocational education, substantial changes to course content, new methods and approaches and new quality assurance systems. Since 1992 the modernization of the Russian education system has been a matter of public debate: particularly in relation to whether it is preferable to import and reproduce European models or to

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build a reformed and internationally competitive academic infrastructure on established Russian foundations.

The authors of 'The Bologna Process and its Implications for Russia' (2005) argue that 'the Bologna process challenges the Russian state on three levels: the economy, society and culture, and state power'. The second component – culture – is extremely important in the Russian EFL educational context. To many involved in EFL training in the 1990s and even in the 2000s the Bologna changes promised academic mobility, and 'the possibility to increase the international and intercultural knowledge and skills of students and promote research which addresses interdependence (cultural, economical, environmental, political) among nations' (Mayor, 1989). Gradually EFL pedagogy textbooks in Russian Universities were changed and an EFL training was adopted that would be more in line with international practice. What is still lacking, however, is the adoption of current approaches to language assessment. While teaching has been reformed, assessment has largely remained the same.

On the principle that knowledge of school curricula, class management, methodologies, education theories and assessment ought to be embedded in a wider awareness of the impact of educational aims (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Kalayci, 2012; Rathert, 2012), a project was instituted by a Consortium of 17 partners from the Russian Federation in cooperation with the Russian Ministry of Education and Science. The partners included Cambridge University Press Representative Office in Moscow, 14 Russian and 4 EU (Technische Universität Dresden, Germany, University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, the Czech Republic, Southampton Solent University, UK, University of Bedfordshire, UK) Universities. Funding was provided by the European Union TEMPUS programme. Drawing on international models for training in language assessment (Fulcher, 2010; Green, 2013; Hughes, 2003), the project, working under the title of 'Promoting Sustainable Excellence in Testing (ProSET)' set out to address the need for assessment reform and to contribute to the development of the Russian National Qualifications Framework by promoting assessment literacy among school teachers of English. The ProSET consortium developed open-access course materials for training teachers in language testing and assessment, which can be downloaded from www.proset-tempus.net.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The authors of The Bologna Process and its Implications for Russia (2005) argue that

... if one seriously considers the idea that training process should be centered on student and his/her interests, then the main point in evaluation of educational activity should be not training process planning and implementation including content of training plans, content and timing of disciplines, learning progress but *learning outcomes*: knowledge acquired by student, skills acquired in the course of learning disciplines, extension of disciplines in pre-determined field; professional success (at employment and career progress).

It is not the aim of this paper to focus on all the meanings attached to the term 'learning outcomes.' Instead, our intent is to acknowledge the richness but also importance of the term. Learning outcomes are defined by EFL practitioners as 'statements that describe significant and essential learning that learners have achieved, and can reliably demonstrate at the end of a course or program' (Lesch, 1995).' In other words, 'learning outcomes identify what the learner will know and be able to do by the end of a course or program' or 'what people have learnt as a result of an experience.' Learning outcomes refer to observable and measurable

knowledge, skills, attitudes. Learning outcomes are also used to assess the learning which has taken place (Lesch, 1995).

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Data and context

At Kazan Federal University (KFU), pilot versions of the course were taken by 27 undergraduate students majoring in English and Education (Autumn, 2012), 42 undergraduate students (Autumn, 2013), 7 graduates (Spring, 2013). A further 15 graduates signed up for a version of the course delivered by the authors in autumn 2013 at Kzyl Orda State University, Kazakhstan. The students' English language proficiency (assessed using the Quick Oxford Placement Test) varied from B1 to C1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2001). The course was delivered in English alongside courses in Theoretical Linguistics.

The aims of the course were explained to the participants as follows: to introduce the fundamental principles of Language Assessment and to develop skills in the design and validation of testing instruments.

The project partners identified the following challenges:

- the prior lack of any testing and assessment component in teacher training in the Russian Federation
- a lack of know-how among teacher trainers
- a lack of experience among secondary school teachers
- a lack of awareness of principles underlying the design and development of the National English language Test (EGE), used in the Russian Federation for matriculation or school leaving purposes.
- a lack of coordination between universities responsible for teacher training
- equipment and resource shortages (mainly related to the availability of literature on assessment).

It was concluded that the lack of awareness of assessment issues may lead teachers towards inappropriate test preparation activities, which run counter to the inventions of the state secondary school curriculum (see Green, 2014).

Challenges for the first course delivery at the Pre-course Stage at KFU included: differentiating groups of students based on their (1) English language proficiency and (2) individual course goals: formulating goals for different groups of students; identifying the appropriate level of independence for students at a given level.

An additional complicating factor emerged at the very beginning of course delivery, while discussing the topic of standardized testing and the idea of standardizing. The Russian Dictionary (1999) defines two senses of the words 'standartizaciya' (standardizing as a process and a result), 'standartizirovat' (to standardize) as follows: a. making things of the same type all have the same basic features; b. destroying individuality and originality in someone/something, while Cambridge Advanced Dictionary (CAD) registers only the first meaning of the corresponding English verb. The fixed semantic components of the Russian words registered in the Dictionary reflect the dominant views and attitudes of the Russian ethnos towards this particular referent – standardization. The process of making things the same is considered by Russians undesirable and unpleasant, and these constitute a markedly pejorative 'common ground' (Fairclough, 2003). The fixed values surrounding the idea are imposed on individuals and predetermine their textual worlds, discursive practices and identities (De Fina et al, 2006).

At the end of Module 2 after the class on Unit 6 - Standard Setting, the students (27 undergraduates and 15 graduates) participated in a course evaluation survey

developed by KFU Philology Department. The survey included a question on students' changes in views: "Did the course change your views on something? How?" About 97% of the participants answered that they had changed their views on EGE and other standardized tests and had begun viewing them more positively.

The lack of experience in taking different types of international and/or high-stakes exams (IELTS, TOEFL, Cambridge ESOL, EGE) affected the accessibility of a number of Units of Module 1 (Assessing Reading, Listening, Speaking, Writing, Vocabulary and Grammar) and especially Unit 5 of Module 2 (washback, feedback and consequences). The courses also made unfamiliar demands on students in terms of learning style: among minor issues slowing the process of learning down were underdeveloped team work skills and ineffective or slow communication in English.

Tools and techniques

The impact of the course was assessed by the authors at four levels: reactions, learning changes, behaviour, results and include feelings immediately after training, changes in beliefs, knowledge and skills, application of new ideas over time, effect on the organization (KFU).

The collection of the impact data was conducted with the following tools: end of session written feedback, pre- and post-course questionnaires, observation in the classroom, interviews, written assignments, tests/examinations, using a database of over 2,000 files from Autumn, 2012, 2013 and Spring, 2013. As the process of developing, delivering, implementing, and evaluating the course progressed, formal inquiry continued through discussion and questionnaires, interviews, and observation.

All the course participants were asked to provide end of course written feedback to evaluate the content, design, instructor(s), delivery and results and to share recommendations on the improving the course. Aspects of the course were represented by statements, which students rated on a five-point scale: 1 = 'strongly disagree' (the lowest, most negative impression), 3 = 'neither agree nor disagree' (neutral), 5 = 'strongly agree' (the highest, most positive impression).

The pre- and post-course questionnaires designed by the course instructor were aimed at comparing participants' views on the main ideas in language testing (Validity, Standardization, Item Analysis etc.) before and after course delivery and contained predominantly direct questions: e.g. What is the Assessment cycle? What are test specifications? etc. Observation in the classroom, written assignments and progress tests were held by the course instructor throughout the course.

The learner-centered approach practiced during the course delivery demonstrated the use of ongoing inquiry into the effectiveness and appropriateness of the course topics, with resulting information incorporated into the course immediately.

RESULTS

Feelings after training

About 67% of the course trainees answering the question 'What was new in the course you attended?' in the post-course questionnaire wrote that ... 'the subject [assessment] itself was new and useful for my future career of teacher, ... it gives the inside view of the process of marking examination papers and how [the assessment] cycle really works'.

The majority found the language of the course 'quite technical' and testified to their inability at the beginning of the course to follow the ideas in the assigned pre-course reading.

Changes in beliefs

End of session written feedback brought to light the changes the course brought about in the views of the course graduates. The four most important issues (mentioned in 54% of the evaluation sheets) were: 1. 'Tests are to be standardised'. 2. 'Test development should be taught'. 3. 'Tests are to be pragmatic'. 4. 'Tests are to be valid'.

The idea that 'Education managers need to be taught Principles of Language Assessments' was among the most popular in the post-course questionnaires: 47% course graduates chose this option.

Knowledge and skills

Knowledge and Skills acquired by the students were presented and registered on the Unit level. Below is a fragment of a pre-prepared template on Assessing Reading. The Blank format was provided by the Project coordinators and used by Russian partners while delivering the course.

DISCUSSION

When, in 2013, the first course participants reached the point of selecting their Masters dissertation topics three of the fourteen students chose topics related to Language Assessment. By May 2014 all the three graduates had finished their comparative research on different features of Russian *Unified State Exam* (EGE) and *Cambridge English: First* (FCE) Reading test texts.

The tools they applied were: a. Flesch Reading Ease; b. Coh-Metrix. Texts of both English exams – EGE and FCE – demonstrated correspondence to grade 6 and very similar Means of Flesch Reading Ease (EGE Mean is 78.25; Cambridge English First Mean is 71.06) which correspond to band 5 in IELTS scale *MODEST USER*.

They carried out Coh-Metrix analyses on a corpus of 12 texts (6 FCE and 6 EGE) which demonstrated the profiles of the text studied.

Their research showed that EGE and FCE texts are similar in all the parameters applied, though EGE texts selected (and probably adapted to fit the specifications of the test) by Russian item writers have greater narrativity, they are simpler in terms of syntax, but lower in both deep and referential cohesion (suggesting that a reader may face difficulties inferring meanings at the sentence level). In the EGE test, more limited cohesion is balanced by simpler syntax and higher narrativity. The *Flesch Reading Ease* is similar to that found for FCE.

Table 1. Module 1, Unit 4, Assessing Reading (fragment) Learning Outcomes Assessment (Unit level)

Learning Outcomes Assessed	Assessment Method	Description of Assessment Method	Weight %	Submission week (assignments) or length (exam)
analyze pros and cons of different types of tasks and items aimed at <u>assessing reading</u>	project work	group project (3-4 people): design a reading test task for a particular target	10	12
analyse reading requirements and cognitive features as well as grammatical and lexical differences <u>across the levels of the CEFR</u>		group. The test should include a text and at least five tasks targeting different reading processes.	10	12
design items assessing reading at different levels: direct vs indirect tests <u>on reading.</u>		Start with the test specifications.	25	12

Table 2. Comparative study of EGE and FCE Reading Texts

Coh-Metrix	EGE (mean)	FCE (mean)
Narrativity	79 (53-97)	60.5 (38-71)
Syntactic Simplicity	51 (24-80)	31.5 (18-55)
Word Concreteness	61.6 (31-85)	61.5(22-87)
Referential Cohesion	20.1 (6-50)	26.2(7-88)
Deep cohesion	60.6 (19-94)	70.7 (52-86)

This experience suggests that the courses were successful in improving the assessment literacy of the teacher trainees to the extent that some at least were able to engage critically with the national language assessment system and to draw international comparisons.

CONCLUSION

The current lack of a testing and assessment component in teacher training provision in Russia contributes to the absence of transparent, international, educational standards in language learning and assessment in Russia. The impact of the Language Assessment courses in Kazan Federal University piloted in 2012-2014 as part of implementation of ProSET was studied by the authors at four levels (reactions, learning changes, behaviour and results). A number of positive changes were observed in students' views on language assessment.

As a form of educational innovation, the introduction of the new course needed to be managed effectively at the micro-educational level in order to achieve its aims. The authors believe that thoughtfully articulated high-level course objectives helped to set a high and consistent standard of learning and foster students' creativity. Thus, the benefit of articulating clear learning objectives is to identify the appropriate level of independence for students at a given level. The interviews and evaluation sheets applied demonstrated the trainees' enhanced ability to state an independent point of view on different types of exam, including EGE (Unified State Examination in English in RF). Success of Language Assessment course to a great degree depends on the students sharing the idea that standardizing can be positive and that it does not necessarily involve 'destroying individuality and peculiarity'. The course also proved to be valuable for making curricular change decisions, widening students' horizons, opening channels of communication between departments.

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