Towards a more global ESOL assessment scheme

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At the end of each term or academic year, teachers often find themselves acting as a judges placing verdicts on students through a single letter or numerical mark: the student grade. All the results of classroom testing, evaluation and assessment are embodied in one symbol that can change the outcome of a student's life. But what does a grade of A, B, C or even more grimly D or F actually mean? This paper presents a possibility of expanding the range of assessment criteria – and grade giving – to include a range of factors.

Some useful concepts

> *"This paper presents a possibility of expanding the range of assessment criteria – and grade giving – to include a range of factors"*

From the theoretical point of view, student grades can be said to represent (1) the sum of all formative and summative assessments teachers give to students in class; (2) a manifestation of expected and desired outcomes, and (3) result from a pre-established evaluation scheme. Teacher grading can be based on one or all of the following: (1) criterion-based evaluations in which students are marked according to their mastery of course content, or (2) normative evaluations in which students are compared with their peers, or (3) competency based factors of how well they demonstrate a list of expected competencies.

Generally content-based assessment tests attempt to measure how much students have learned in each of the four language skills. In most traditional language proficiency assessment schemes, a scalar judgment is usually made along some kind of continuum from zero to native-like proficiency.

On the other hand, in competency-based assessment, teachers generally assess on a yes/no basis. Assessors must usually make binary judgments as to whether or not the learner demonstrates the behaviour specified in the performance criteria. Each of the criteria has to be fulfilled in order for the learner to qualify for the award of competency. In task-based assessment, students are marked according to how much they can demonstrate a given prescribed task.

Each of these criteria have to be fulfilled in order for a learner to qualify for the award of competency, or to merit a grade and earn an academic credit.

A more comprehensive assessment scheme

Given the traits of Japanese students, and the increasing concerns of ESOL teachers to offer fair and effective classroom grading, the following grading scheme is suggested for ESOL classes taught over an academic year:
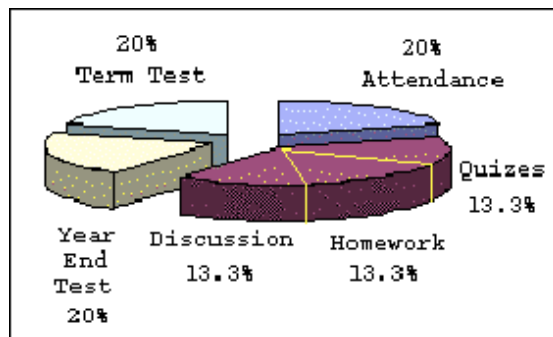

Figure 1. A holistic one-year assessment system for Japanese ESOL university students.

Each student's final grade is based on three areas of classroom performance:

(1) class participation = 40%,
(2) tests   = 40%, and
(3) attendance   = 20%.

The classroom participation sector is further subdivided into quizzes, discussion and homework.

Let us consider a scenario to illustrate this grading system. Imagine two students: S_1 and S_2. Throughout the academic year, S_1 has attended all classes and completed all homework. On the other hand, S_2 has shown up for only two-thirds of total class and done little of the homework. In the final exam, however, S_1 gets a lower score than S_2. Who should get a higher mark? Clearly, S_1 put more effort into the course, even though S_2 performed better in the final exam. One way to compare the performance of these both students is though a comprehensive grading based on the formula in Figure 1. Applying that formula, the students would receive the grades indicated in Table 1:

Table 1. *A comparison of two student grades using a multi-factor formula*

Class Performance:

1. **Quizzes**   (Total)

   S_1:   76 pts.   x 13.3% = 10.1 pts.
   S_2:   80 pts.   x 13.3% = 10.6 pts.

2. **Discussion**   (Total)

   S_1:   90 pts.   x 13.3% = 12.0 pts.
   S_2:   63 pts.   x 13.3% = 8.4 pts.

3. **Homework**   (Total)

   S_1:   87 pts.   x 13.3% = 11.6 pts.
   S_2:   46 pts.   x 13.3% =   6.1 pts.

Term Test:

S_1:   79 pts.   x 20% = 15.8 pts.
S_2:   85 pts.   x 20% = 17.0 pts.

Year End Test:

S_1:   62 pts.   x 20% = 12.4 pts.
S_2:   81 pts.   x 20% = 16.2 pts.

Attendance:

S_1:   95 pts.   X 20% = 19.0 pts.
S_2:   66 pts.   x 20% = 13.2 pts.

Final Grade:

S_1:   80.9 pts --> 81% = B
S_2:   71.5 pts. --> 72% = C

What role should attendance have in an assessment scheme? Often, teachers write in their syllabi "attendance is a must". And so, students come to class without being convinced of the purpose of an obligatory attendance. In the grading system proposed here, students are made aware of the value of being in class, realizing that more absences would mean greater chances of missing on short tests which would ultimately affect a large segment of their grade. In other words, the students are made aware of the fair reasons for class requirements.

Some words of caution

The weighting of the different fields mentioned in the global grading scheme in Figure 1 is arbitrary. Teachers can and must adjust these scales according to individual classroom needs. Although the grading scheme mentioned in Figure 1 cannot measure all aspects of student behaviour, it does measure a more comprehensive range of factors than many ESOL classrooms in Japan generally do.

References

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