

Some Critics on Language Education Assessment

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ABSTRACT

This present study investigates some critics on language education assessment in Slovakia. The article is an outcome from a research survey done in 2014 about the techniques and old bad habits in language assessment. For the research survey, the qualitative approach was adopted: interview with teachers as well as analysis of taken - observed lessons and analysis of the exams collected during research. The data were collected from a non-random sample of five language teachers from three different public schools from different towns in Slovakia. The primary question in the research was *Why do learners receive bad marks from language examinations?* The results of the qualitative research show that both mother tongue - Slovak language teachers as well as English language ones do not practise sufficiently language taught during the class which is the result in the tests used by these teachers. The techniques implemented in testing are different from the techniques used during the learning process. The study findings revealed that the learners hardly success the testing before developing the cognitive process.

KEYWORDS

Assessment; techniques; language; item; young learners; bad marks

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Introduction

Cultural background and old assessment habits

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Slovak – mother tongue is culturally and linguistically completely different from foreign languages as English and French. Slavonic branch of languages uses declensions, conjunctions and a lot of linguistic patterns to be applied in order to write and speak a good Slovak. This influences quite much the way how small learners learn/ acquire Slovak language system (Horvathova & Reid, 2013).

For example, the inflection of adjectives called declension does not exist in English. The individual declensions called cases with three genders (feminine, masculine and neutral) and two numbers (singular and plural) form so called Slovak language case system. Except adjectives, also nouns, pronouns and participles are declined in six cases: nominative (indicates the subject of a sentence), genitive (possession), dative (indicates indirect object), accusative (direct object), locative and instrumental. An adjective pattern “pekný” in order to decline a number of other adjectives of its category uses six cases (Table 1).

Table 1. Six cases of an adjective pattern “pekný”

jednotné číslo			
	mužský rod	ženský rod	stredný rod
N	pekný	pekná	pekné
G	pekného	peknej	pekného
D	peknému	peknej	peknému
A	pekného (živ.) pekný (neživ.)	peknú	pekné
L	(o) peknom	(o) peknej	(o) peknom
I	pekným	peknou	pekným
množné číslo			
	mužský životný rod	mužský neživotný, ženský a stredný rod	
N	pekní	pekné	
G	pekných	pekných	
D	pekným	pekným	
A	pekných	pekné	
L	(o) pekných	(o) pekných	
I	peknými	peknými	

Source: Krajcovicova, Kesselova, Sedlakova & Hirschnerova, 2009, p. 99

The pattern “pekný” is presented on one of the three pages of the textbook certified by Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of Slovak Republic (Table 1) (Krajcovicova, Kesselova, Sedlakova & Hirschnerova, 2009). Further, Slovak adjectives are ranged into three genders: masculine, feminine and neutral according to the gender of the declined noun which follows the adjective. All parts of speech have a lot of particularities and need to be trained and practised mostly in written way (the spoken one is already acquired). This creates a sort of pretext on how teachers of Slovak will teach and on what items

they will focus and what method or techniques they will choose to sufficiently and efficiently practise the taught items.

Review of literature

Evaluation may be a good means for making decisions about pupils' abilities, achievements and improvement. However, the power to change pupils' moods, motivation and interests depends quite a lot on assessment techniques and assessment content (Alderson, 2010). Young learners are sensitive to criticism and lack of success which can affect their performance in a negative way. In accordance to the development of a new system of educational process, the application of new educational technologies includes performance assessment and rating system of learning outcomes and degree of student engagement in learning process (Gutman et al., 2014; Masalimova et al., 2014; Frolova, Kalugina, Artamonova & Boykov, 2016; Sakhieva et al., 2015a,b; Sibgatova et al., 2015).

Success, improvement, abilities and achievements might be measured with several techniques. The very first principle except variety and flexibility (Harmer, 1991, p. 258) which has to be kept is to evaluate what has been taught in the way how it has been taught.

Materials and Methods

In the present study, we concern on the both sides of education assessment: teaching process and evaluation: process of documenting knowledge, skills, its form and content. The first perceived didactic problem was the question: *Why do pupils receive bad marks in Slovak and English language tests?* Three research questions were posed:

Do Slovak teachers of languages evaluate what they have been teaching?

Do Slovak teachers of languages assess by using the same form as they use for practicing items?

What form is preferable when evaluating?

For the research survey (Burton, Brundrett & Jones, 2014), the qualitative approach was adopted: interview with teachers as well as analysis of taken – observed lessons and analysis of the exams collected during research. The data were collected from a non-random sample of five language teachers from three different public schools from different towns in Slovakia. The research participants teach Slovak (mother tongue) and English at primary level. Two of them teach languages as newly qualified teachers while three of them are experienced language teachers. Extracts of lesson analyses are taken from the textbooks used in the class of teachers who take part in this research. Tests are taken from the national educational platform www.zborovna.sk to which all the teachers have access. The research focus was on 10-11 years old young learners who have not yet adopted cognitive processes and should be exposed to the intuitive language learning (oral and more communicative way of learning).

Results

Culturally, teachers of Slovak are used to use explicit (deductive) linguistic approach when presenting new language items. Following the presentation stage, items are practised in closed exercises, dictations or sentences, only sometimes with the communication output. Here is another extract from the

Slovak lesson when learning the pattern “pekný”.

Table 2. Exercises 1-4 with the pattern “pekný”

<p>Vzor pekný</p> <p>Zábavné nákupy</p>
<p>1. Najprv potichu a potom nahlas prečítajte, ako Adriana nakupuje so starou mamou.</p> <p><i>Chceli sme ísť do mesta nakupovať. S mamou nakupujem nerada, pretože zásadne vyberá iba veci, ktoré sú praktické, a teba nudné. Zato nákupy so starou mamou - to je niečo celkom iné! Dá sa nakriatnuť na čokoliek. Raz, keď sme mali kúpiť kabát, priniesli sme domov video, keď sme mali kúpiť prášky na pranie, kúpili sme klieťku I s andulkami. Naposledy zase, keď nás mama poslala po mäso na rezne, kúpila stará mama - parochňu. Úžasnú parochňu s polodlhými gaštranovými vlasmi, ktorá ju o dvadsať rokov omladila a mňa spravila o dvadsať rokov staršou.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Jela Mičochová: Adrianin prvý prípad (úryvok)</i></p>
<p>2. a) Nakupujete aj vy podobne ako Adriana a jej stará mama? b) Čo máte a čo nemáte pri nakupovaní radi? c) Čo to znamená, že stará mama sa dá nakriatnuť na čokoliek? Patrite aj vy k takým ľuďom, čo sa dajú nakriatnuť na čokoliek?</p> <p>3. Otestujte si svoju pamäť. Bez toho, aby ste sa pozerali do textu, odpovedzte na otázky. Svoje odpovede potom porovnajte s textom.</p> <p>a) Ktoré veci sú pre Adrianu praktické? b) Aká bola parochňa, ktorú Adriana a stará mama kúpili namiesto rezňov? c) Akú farbu a dĺžku mali vlasy na parochni?</p> <p>4. a) Ktorým slovným druhom ste pomenovali vlastnosti vecí? b) Ktoré prídavné mená v odpovediach patria k akostným?</p>
<p>Source: Krajcovicova, Kesselova, Sedlakova & Hirschnerova, 2009, p. 98</p>

Four activities (Table 2) that precede the presentation of the item do not have much in common with the pattern “pekný” and are put out of logic in the chapter dedicated to the practice of the item.

Only two activities (Table 3) practise the presented item. The objective of the first one (activity 8) is to find 12 adjectives in newspaper that are declined according to the pattern “pekný”. The following exercise (9) is the dictation.

Table 3. Exercises 8-9 with the pattern “pekný”

<p>8. Z novín, časopisov alebo z letákov vypíšte 12 prídavných mien podľa vzoru pekný, ktoré sa používajú v reklamných textoch. Aké prídavné mená sa v reklame používajú najčastejšie?</p> <p>9. <i>Diktát</i></p> <p>Sestre Karolíne kúpim na dnešné narodeniny glóbus. Prstami sa na ňom dotýkam zelených a hnedých miest. Modrými čiarami sú znázornené rieky. Potom prechádzam na biele miesta. Tam je večný sneh a ľad. Tieto miesta preskúmali odvážni výskumníci. Polárne expedície sú zaujímavé, ale aj nebezpečné.</p>
<p>Source: Krajcovicova, Kesselova, Sedlakova & Hirschnerova, 2009, p. 100</p>

We perceive that this important language item which causes the main problems in written form of speech at pupils' and users' in general, is worked very poorly

in the textbook certified by Ministry of Education. Moreover, if we observe the techniques used to assess the knowledge (Table 4) about Slovak adjectives, we conclude that pupils are confused about the typology of exercises they are not used to and which they do not work during the lesson. Teachers who want to prepare their learners to pass such an exam have to prepare an amount of exercises to be practised in advance. If not, learners fail the exam or obtain bad marks.

As young learners do not train sufficiently the item, and have not yet developed the cognitive processes, this reflects in evaluation, which requires cognitive processing and logic thinking. Learners are not able to apply the rule or they apply it with barriers or do not understand logically the task of the activity. They have difficulty mastering lexical units that form the lexical side of foreign speech and are characterized by a particular semantic and structural properties (Vasbieva, 2015). The reason why pupils receive bad marks from the tests is that teachers do not prepare sufficiently learners during the class.

Table 4. Extract 1 from the formative assessment of the item “pekný” and Slovak adjectives

Školská práca pre 5. ročník základných škôl
PRÍDAVNÉ MENÁ
(transl. School Exam, 5th year primary school, ADJECTIVES)

3. Napiš antonymum k akostným prídavným menám:
(transl. Write antonyms to adjectives)

široký, mäkký, svetlý
.....

4. Utvor synonymá k prídavným menám:
(transl. Form the synonyms)

veselý, odvážny
.....

rozumný, veľký
.....

5. Utvor vztahové prídavné mená od podstatných mien v zátvorke:
(transl. Form the adjectives from the nouns)

(dieťa) kočík, (mesto)
.....

(muž) sako, (deň) režim
.....

(sklo) pohár, (jeseň) hmla
.....

6. Urči druh a gramatické kategórie prídavných mien:
(transl. Determine grammatical categories of adjectives)

		Druh	Rod	Číslo	Pád	Vzor
1.	stretla som staršieho pána					
2.	oproti obchodnému centru					
3.	za bývalými spolužiakmi					
4.	za minulých čias					

7. Napíš slovné spojenie s prídavným menom v zadanom tvare a urči druh + vzor prídavných mien:
(transl. Decline the expression according to the indicated case)

	Slovné spojenie	Správny tvar	Druh	Vzor
1.	podhorská baňa G sg.			
2.	rýchlejšie vozidlo L pl.			
3.	tehlový dom D, pl.			
4.	slávny maliar N pl.			

10. Doplní i, í/ y, ý v prídavných menách:
(transl. Fulfil orthographically correct letters “ i, í/y, ý” in the following adjectives)

chvályhodn_ človek, drz_ zlodeji, s cieľavedom_m správaním, striebrovlas__ starci,

morskoo__ vodo_, lepší zárobok, svetov_ herci, z plav_ch vlasov, s rýdz_m kovom

Source: zborovna.sk

Table 5. Extract 2 from the formative assessment of the item “pekný” and Slovak adjectives

TEST
SJL P 5 Čo už vieme o prídavných menách?
(transl. Slovak language and literature 5th year What do we already know about adjectives?)
✦ 5. Podčiarkni slová s bezchybným pravopisom.
(transl. Underline words with the correct written form)

divé psi, zlí vlci, diví psy, úspešní žiaci, z modrých očí, s milím úsmevom

✦ 6. Slová s chybným pravopisom z 5. úlohy napíš správne.
(transl. Now rewrite correctly the words with incorrect form from the exercise 5.)
✦ 7. Napíš k prídavným menám antonymá.
(transl. Write antonyms to following adjectives.)

denný - rýchly - bojzlivý -

♣ 8. Daj do správneho tvaru:

(transl. Put the expression into the correct form.)

so (slušný) ľudmi,

z (ostrý) slov,

(útlý) chlapci

Source: zborovna.sk

We clearly see that the way of how the research participants assess does not reflect the way of how they teach. No activity for synonyms, antonyms or no transformational exercises during the class, yet, is examined in the test. As we mentioned previously, the pupils' vulnerability and failure lead to demotivation and lack of self-confidence, which is the crucial effect on young learners' development. The linguistic approach not-systematically applied in the classroom does not bring the success when learning items.

Of course, learning / acquiring process between mother tongue and foreign language differs at several levels. Slovak is acquired orally. Only its written form is focused in this study as it became a pretext of choosing linguistic and not communicative approach in the class and in the examinations. Foreign language learning (McKay, 2006) at young learners' should be meant as well in the oral form, stressing a variety of activities such as TPR, role-play, matching, true/false, multiple choice, ordering sentences, poems, songs, descriptions, interviews, fill-in exercises, repetition, dictation, question-answer portfolios, project. But, unfortunately, it is not. Inspired by the teachers of Slovak, teachers of foreign languages adopt the similar linguistic approach to teaching and assessing the foreign language competence and performance (Vasbieva & Kalugina, 2016). However, the foreign language approach seems to be more elaborated.

The lesson plans made by English language teachers are prepared excellently. Young learners have a lot of possibilities to practise the new item. Except the textbook page, there are pages to work on the presented structure in the textbook and the workbook.

The tests follow the same typology of activities as in two books used during the class. Nevertheless, the focus remains on grammar, short answers, and on a good structure use and written form of language. Transformational exercises are used much. The character of assessing is replaced from the communication output on written grammatical output, based on the techniques of the audio-lingual method.

Table 6. Extract 3 of testing "have got"

2. Doplň (+) HAVE GOT/HAS GOT alebo (-) HAVEN'T GOT/HASN'T GOT. (10p)

1. (+) Sue _____ two sisters and one brother.
2. (-) Mr and Mrs West _____ three sons.
3. (+) Tony and I are drummers. We _____ drums at home.
4. (-) Jonathan _____ a skateboard. It's red and blue.
5. (-) The dogs _____ a little house.

6. (+) The baby _____ two teeth.
 7. (+) Moira and Mac _____ a helicopter.
 8. (-) Jim is ill. He _____ a temperature.
 9. (-) My brother _____ a new T-shirt.
 10. (+) I _____ a computer in my room.

Source: zborovna.sk

Table 7. Extract 4 of testing “have got”

Have got (Mat’)

Choose the correct answer. (Vyber správnu odpoveď’).

Otázka č.1: We..... a house. (1 bod)

- a) has got
 b) have got

Otázka č.2: They my address. (1 bod)

- a) has got
 b) have got

Otázka č.3: Martin and Cindy a car. (1 bod)

- a) has got
 b) have got

Otázka č.4: You my keys. (1 bod)

- a) has got
 b) have got

Otázka č.5: My parents an email. (1 bod)

- a) has got
 b) have got

Source: zborovna.sk

At the end of the research, in order to complete the survey, teachers answered the following question.

Researcher: *“Describe how you assess young learners and how you teach them. Choose one language item.”*

According to the interviews, only one teacher from five participants prepares an extra format of activities to get pupils used to the typology of activities in tests. Others do not consider the extra preparation as important. All of the participants declared that in majority, pupils receive bad marks from tests while the memorization of the pattern “pekný” brings good marks.

Participant 1: *“I use textbooks chosen by the institution for which I work. There is especially no time for other activities as we have to do thing prescribed in curriculum plan. The topics are linguistic as well as communicative. I use only the textbooks.*

When I have to check whether the learners learned what we have been doing during the class, I make up the tests.

I think I evaluate what I have been teaching, but it is true that I do not have time to prepare the same typology of activities for the class as I prepare for the test.

I was never thinking about this as a disadvantage when assessing learners.”

Participant 3: *“I have recently passed from teacher-trainee role to the one of a newly qualified teacher. I have to take inspiration in the work of my colleagues and teachers who used to teach me. In the class, I use the textbooks certified by Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of Slovak republic and I think the books are good organised.*

For the evaluation, I use tests created by my colleagues which are posted on zborovna.sk.

I think I evaluate what I have been teaching but it is true I did not consider the fact that young learners did not yet develop cognitive processes and that logical items in the test could make problems. I think I will try to use also during the class as well as during the exams more open exercises in order to get the information. The life is not about the tests but about communication.”

Participant 5: *“I am not experienced teacher and I am really upset about the bad marks I have to give children from English tests. They do not know to speak. They do not know to translate from mother tongue to English, nor vice versa. They refuse to learn new vocabulary. I prepared them several enjoying activities combined with structurally made vocabulary. No way to force them to see English more and learn more.*

I do not use translation during examination.”

Participants 2 and 4 declared using all components of textbooks (also tests created by the same authors of publication) certified by Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of Slovak republic. As experienced teachers of English, they use as well oral form of examination, messages in different situations based upon various communicative contexts. Multiple choice tests are used at the end of each school term.

Discussion

Participants' answers are significant since they open a discussion on the topic of learning activities, on the time used for practising and evaluation of the learned item as well as on the techniques used for effective learning process at young learners' who need to learn language playfully, orally, communicatively. The research questions were posed:

Do Slovak teachers of languages evaluate what they have been teaching?

The data collected suggest that teachers – research participants think teaching the same content as assessing it. The pattern “pekný” was analysed from the point of view of the presentation and practice stage. Bad marks from tests show that working linguistically during the class is not well-done. Tests are better elaborated than learning activities; this affects or does not affect developing of cognitive processes which are a condition in testing. Teachers of English suggest being influenced by teachers of mother tongue which creates mismatch in their preparation and educational process. Unexperienced teachers of English do not prepare extra learning activities for the classroom, they use activities from the textbook pack. Tests are taken from the same pack. Experienced teachers of English as a foreign language declare having a little time to prepare extra activities in order to practice the learned item. They base on textbooks and they prepare own tests to evaluate knowledge and skills. To

sum up the first research question, we state that content which is taught is also examined. Bad marks from tests must relate to another aspect of assessment.

Do Slovak teachers of languages assess by using the same form as they used for practicing items?

From the analysis made during the research, we perceive big differences between the techniques used during the education process and techniques of formative or summative assessment. A mismatch between the learning exercises used in the classroom and evaluation effects the learners' motivation. Pupils' motivation to learning is one of the factors of the educational process effectiveness (Komora & Vyrostekova, 2016). It is well-known that assessment informs instruction. Learners who do not develop cognitive processes during the lessons, cannot perform them in evaluation.

What techniques are used in order to evaluate learner's language competence and performance?

Techniques as vocabulary memorization, translation of sentences, expressions, dictations or aloud reading are the techniques used in majority among teachers of English. They suggest being influenced from teachers of Slovak who in their profession focus on developing writing and orthographic competence of Slovak language – mother tongue, quite different approach to language learning/ acquiring.

What form is preferable when evaluating?

The preferable form is testing the items. Closed types of questions are used in majority of cases. Tests from the teacher's pack are used widely among teachers of English. Slovak teachers of Slovak prepare their test by their own or download tests pre-prepared in zborovna.sk. Tests are downloaded very easily, though teachers do not reflect whether young learners worked in classroom in exactly the same way as they are assessed. This causes the fact that learners do not work at home in the way they are tested, then, they receive bad marks from the tests, and finally, some negative emotions update their demotivation.

The research participants declare the need of a system of assessment which could help teachers to progress and monitor language development. Nowadays, teachers are given too much freedom which causes a lack of systematization or direction in their work. They do not know sometimes whether to focus rather on grammatical system, vocabulary or communication. If they teach three of these, they do not evaluate them. The focus on skills or pronunciation in foreign language teaching disappeared in the class of young learners.

Conclusion

From the analysis and interview with research participants, we have to point out several aspects of assessment. The written form, not oral, of assessment is preferable for young learners'. Classes are held in the way that learners concentrate on the written form of language whether it is a mother tongue or foreign language – English. Learners younger than 12 years are known as those who prefer to learn intuitively, orally with the some aspect on communication and playfulness. This does not occur in the classes of English nor in classes of mother tongue. The approach chosen is a linguistic approach with some negative procedure steps during the classes and evaluation. The accentuated written form in both mother tongue learning/teaching process and English language

learning/teaching process, is viewed as difficult and not properly prepared. This aspect causes bad marks and loss of motivation among Slovak young learners.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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