

ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE STUDENTS' LEARNING PROGRESS

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***Abstract.** The article highlights the topicality of assessment in the context of promoting learning achievements and students' self-efficacy. The aim of the article is to analyze the sources of literature and stimulate scientific discussion about strategies for assessing students' learning achievements and individual progress, which provide opportunities to develop each student's potential by improving cognitive activity and learning outcomes. The authors of the article analyse the perspectives of assessment of the learning process, systematize theoretical findings on the basic principles and methods of learning assessment improvement, identify and describe the pedagogical potential of diverse assessment strategies.*

***Keywords:** assessment, assessment methods, assessment strategy, learning, student.*

Introduction

There is a rapid reorientation of learning approaches from the reproductive approach to the transformative approach to pedagogical process, which is rightly actualized by the introduction of competence-based learning. Special attention is paid to strategies for assessing students' achievements and progress. Focusing on the competence approach, the change of emphasis in the assessment system has become especially topical: from assessment in grades to assessment of knowledge, skills and also competences in various learning situations. However, it is important to find an answer: how to implement the performance evaluation of students with different learning needs and interests in the practical pedagogical process, increasing self-effectiveness of students' own learning and promoting the development of curiosity and motivation.

Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers of Latvia (November 27, 2018) No. 747 on lower secondary education standards and programs emphasize the topicality of outcome-based methods in the assessment process and the need to adapt assessment to the learning needs of each student, as well as specifies the forms of assessment: formative, diagnostic and summative assessment (Ministru Kabinets, 2018). Scriven (1967) has defined terms: formative and summative

assessment, emphasizing the difference in purpose of these two types of assessment. Summative assessment refers to the student's achievement over a period of time, mainly in the form of tests or exams, while formative assessment is an assessment of students' progress, which is not revealed in grades. Formative assessment promotes cognitive processes, e.g. thinking, knowing, remembering, problem solving, etc. Cognition is not only an information processing process at the individual level, but it is one of the essential mechanisms of psychological development, which promotes and integrates cognitive abilities and thinking; develops problem-solving skills; strengthens analysis and synthesis; facilitates process comparison and evaluation. It should be noted that it is formative assessment that contributes the most to metacognition. Noushad (2008) points out that metacognitive skills combine knowledge and control over thought processes, which in the context of modern education becomes a sustainable basis for personal growth.

The information obtained in the evaluation process is can also be reflected in its documentation, which becomes a productive basis for further planning and implementation of pedagogical activities. The result of summative assessment is a score in points or a grade, which usually expresses a certain quality that is strictly regulated. In turn, formative assessment recording is more flexible and diverse, because facts and pedagogical findings can be documented by expressing them with percentages or points, as well as by providing verbal descriptions according to the levels, etc. Although some of the information obtained in the assessment process is documented, assessment also includes discussions between teachers and students, observations, peer reviews and exchange of views in a variety of situations: these are very important assessment techniques and methods that quite often are not being documented at all.

Assessment is a complex process that takes place in daily pedagogical work, in a close cooperation between students and teachers, assessing the uniqueness of each student and choosing the most appropriate assessment methods. Each child is unique with individual learning needs. Therefore, the need for vertical direction in the development and improvement of assessment strategy should be emphasized: it should start with each student, class, school, moving towards the improvement of the education system at the regional and national level.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) study "Assessment for Learning. Formative Assessment" (OECD/CERI, 2008) emphasizes that information on students' learning outcomes in the assessment process is primarily obtained by the teacher from each student and at the class level, choosing the most effective teaching methods and approaches according to the identified learning needs. At school level, school authorities use the data

collected by each teacher on learning progress and needs to identify strengths and weaknesses at the school level. This is a way how strategies for improving the learning process should be developed. The information is used to develop the national education policy strategies in order to determine general education priorities (OECD/CERI, 2008, 4).

The aim of the article: is to analyse the sources of literature and stimulate scientific discussion about strategies for assessing student`s individual learning progress and needs, which provide opportunities to develop each student's potential by improving cognitive activity and curiosity.

Based on the analysis of the scientific literature, the publication updates and describes the assessment process as an essential part of the learning process, as well as systematizes and describes the preconditions for the implementation of assessment strategies in pedagogical work.

Basic Principles on the Improvement of Assessment Strategies

Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers of Latvia No. 747 define the basic principles of assessment of students' learning achievements. These are: the principle of systematicity; the principle of openness and clarity; the principle of methodological diversity; the principle of inclusion and the principle of growth. The mentioned principles emphasize the need for a regular and substantiated set of assessment activities in a certain order related to planned results to be achieved and performance evaluation criteria known and understood by the student (Ministru Kabinets, 2018).

Clark (2008) emphasizes understanding of the possibilities of improving one's performance and awareness of the goal as the basic principle of evaluation.

Researchers of The Assessment Reform Group (Broadfoot, Dougherty, Gardner, James, Stobart) emphasize assessment as the process of seeking and interpreting evidence used by both: teachers and students to find out to what extent students have mastered the content of the curriculum, where they need to move forward and the best way to get there (The Assessment Reform Group, 2002, 2). Researchers from The Assessment Reform Group have also identified 10 evaluation principles, which are:

- assessment is a part of effective planning of the learning process;
- the focus of assessment is students` learning;
- assessment is the most important part of the lesson;
- assessing students' growth/progress is the most important skill in teachers' professional development;
- assessment promotes motivation;

- assessment promotes student's commitment to learning as well as goal setting;
- assessment helps to identify opportunities for improving the learning process;
- students' self-assessment becomes an integral part of the daily learning process;
- assessment helps to be aware of learning progress;
- positive emotional background is important in the assessment process (The Assessment Reform Group, 2002, 2).

Fisher (2005) emphasizes the influence of emotions on the assessment process. He describes the impact of the assessment process on emotions and the learning process in general: “the idea that it is necessary to ignore the emotional side of life in the learning process is wrong. (..). Children do not have to be turned into insensitive robots that know the price of everything and the value of nothing. Thinking does not flourish in emotional emptiness. (..) Human behaviour is based on various emotions, feelings and passions. We, as well as children, must get rid not of emotions and feelings, but of prejudices and irrational emotions and opinions. The strongest motivation to learn and the development of intelligence are provided by the connection of common sense and emotions” (Fisher, 2005).

Positive emotions, e.g. joy of cognition, promote learning environment in which students are not afraid to leave comfort zones without risking being uncertain about possible negative consequences (Sarasin, 2006). Therefore, it is necessary to avoid any assessment processes with negative emotional background (e.g., fear of underestimation), which highlights the necessity to reduce the emphasis on the importance of summative assessment.

It is essential that not only students and teachers, but also parents accept a shift in emphasis in their attitudes towards assessment, from focusing on assessment in grades (summative assessment) to the assessment of learning progress and awareness of learning needs (formative assessment). The 'creation of an open classroom culture' is the result of this change in attitudes and views. It is a process when students are encouraged to be aware of their personal cognitive growth and the next steps to the achievement of their learning goals (OECD/CERI, 2008, 6), which includes openness to collaboration, exchange of ideas and continuous identification of learning needs. Such assessment promotes thinking skills, personality development, lifelong learning and mutual understanding. It is more important to focus on improving the learning process for particular student and all class in general than identifying particular learning outcomes expressed in grade in the assessment process (Bennett, 2011; Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Perspectives of Evaluation Strategies and Their Characteristics

James (2014) emphasizes three assessment perspectives: technical (I), humanistic (II), and interactionist perspective (human interaction with the environment) (III) (James 2014, 158). The technical perspective (I) is characterized by its validity and the reliability of the data gathered in the assessment process. The humanistic perspective (II) emphasizes the constant variability of the student's learning needs and the applicability of the specific assessment to the student's current learning process, as well as highlights the need for the changing an assessment strategy as soon as it is needed. The interactionist perspective (III) promotes the collective thinking and decision-making of the involved in the learning process, bearing in mind the diversity of interpretation possibilities.

In order to apply the most appropriate assessment methods and techniques to a particular student or class as a whole, all perspectives of assessment must be taken into account, as well as the data gathered during assessment; its interpretation possibilities and effective use of the data in the process of improving students' learning progress. Therefore O'Sullivan & Burce (2014) emphasize the need to develop an assessment strategy that can be used not only to assess knowledge and skills, but also to assess students' competences transferring good practice (O'Sullivan & Burce, 2014).

The study "Assessment for Learning. Formative Assessment" carried out by The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and The Centre for Educational Research (CERI) highlights that in order to improve students' learning, it is vital to use different assessment methods according to students' learning needs, as well as appropriate use of assessment methods to assess students' understanding (OECD/CERI, 2008, 6).

Nagowah, S. & Nagowah, L. (2009) emphasize that assessment is a strategy aimed at improving students' performance and the key benefits of the assessment process are systematic and regular evidence about learning gathered. The teacher can develop an assessment strategy for each student and the class as a whole, assessing students' learning styles and needs, offering different assessment methods and thus gathering diverse evidence of learning outcomes as a result of assessment (Nagowah, S. & Nagowah, L., 2009). While Pietersen (2010) emphasizes that strategy is a set of choices.

An assessment strategy is a set of choices for both the teacher and the student that becomes a part of learning and is constantly leading towards improving the quality of learning. The qualities of successful assessment strategy are: critical evaluation of the learning process, reduction of fragmentation in the assessment process and promotion of thinking about the benefits of learning in a very complex world (Barnett, 2000).

After analysis of theoretical resources (Barnett, 2000, Nagowah, S. & Nagowah, L., 2009; Fisher, 2005; OECD/CERI, 2008), it can be concluded that

the use of a variety of assessment methods are needed for the development of an effective assessment strategy.

Each student's learning performance is different, for example, in written tests, the student's performance might be excellent, but the assessment of the same student's oral performance may be insufficient due to a lack of presentation skills. One student can perfectly remember the correct concrete answers to already prepared questions, but in the real life situations this knowledge may not be applied (Nagowah, S. & Nagowah, L., 2009). Therefore individual assessment methods should be offered to the students who are unable to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in the particular tests or tasks, transferring learning and assessment to new real life situations (OECD/CERI, 2008, 11). Fisher (2005) emphasizes that the disadvantage of some methods in the learning process is that students are hardly given an idea of their learning progress, thus students are not aware of their performance. Nagowah S. & Nagowah, L., (2009) highlights the methods, which can be successfully implemented in the assessment process (see table No.1).

*Table 1 Description of Learning Activities and Assessment Methods
(Nagowah & Nagowah, 2009)*

Assessment method	Teaching / learning activities
Conference	There is an exchange of views between the participants, awareness of the learning outcomes.
Essay	Students analyze, synthesize, and critically evaluate information.
Interview	Conversation with the student, finding out his/her understanding of the topic or the problem. The motivation of a student can also be revealed during the interview.
Learning logs	Students made records of their learning outcomes: discoveries, acquired knowledge, skills and competencies.
Observations	Systematic observation of students in the learning process in different contexts (e.g. face-to-face and online learning), obtaining information on students' learning needs, learning styles, interests and attitudes.
Questions	The answers largely reveal to what extent students have understood the subject matter. Asking questions also promotes idea generation and problem solving skills.
Students' self - evaluation	Self-assessment is a process in which students gather information about their personal learning progress and reflect on it. The student assesses not only his/her knowledge and skills, but also their attitude towards learning.
Tasks for assessment competence	Within the framework of such tasks, students work creatively; apply the knowledge and skills acquired in the learning process in solving real life problems. Such tasks provide students and teachers with important information not only about the learning process, but also about its most important results.

Logins (2018) emphasizes the need to create an e-portfolio (electronic collection of learning evidence), which is especially relevant in the distance learning process.

For any assessment strategies to be applied in the learning process, students should be encouraged to ask themselves questions, finding out: “What information do I need?; Where are the errors/mistakes? or Which facts are missing?. It is also important to evaluate the result of the learning progress (Fisher, 2005, 163). Schmittou (2020) is convinced that assessment cannot be divided only into summative or formative evaluation categories. He emphasizes that the only assessment criteria is a high quality and “unfortunately, too often teachers offer a universal assessment tool for all students”. He highlights that learning is a cyclical process in which the teacher's task is to assess both: the student's learning needs and progress (Schmittou, 2020, 4). There can be other types of assessment defined:

- subjective assessment - Gates (2016) expresses confidence in the effectiveness of subjective assessment in promoting student creativity. Subjective assessment can be implemented if the specific appropriate correct answer/answers are not defined in the task. Such tasks are: essays, presentations, various creative works;
- objective assessment - the student is offered tasks in which answer options have already been provided. In turn, the student chooses the most appropriate answer;
- an 'open book assessment' can be implemented if students can use their notes (done in the lessons) or other sources of information during the test. Students' critical thinking skills and information skills are important for such tests. This type of assessment also reduces the level of anxiety for students, as well as promotes students' learning during the test as well;
- long-term assessment involves the assessment of a set of activities or tasks over a longer period (for example, a month or a semester) rather than at the end of a particular topic. Students receive feedback on their performance over a period of time. In turn, teachers can analyze the effectiveness of teaching materials and evaluate the effectiveness of students' learning strategies;
- oral performance assessment can be done as a part of a student's presentation or oral answers. It aims to assess the students' presentation and communication skills;
- process assessment: students` performance is assessed in a variety of learning activities, while result assessment emphasizes the assessment of learning outcomes (Nagowah, S. & Nagowah,L., 2009, 12-19).

Conclusions

The purpose of students' assessment is to identify their learning needs and progress to define further learning goals. Information on each student's and the whole class' learning outcomes in the assessment process is primarily assessed by the teacher, choosing the most effective teaching methods and assessment strategy types based on identifying strengths and learning needs of the students at the school level for the further development of regional and national education policy strategy as well.

Assessment of students learning performance takes place not only in everyday learning situations at school and purposefully planned tests, but also within various forms of assessment, including writing essays, participating in conferences, making observations, through interviews, asking questions, in the real life situations, etc. There are different forms of documenting learning progress as well, e.g. in 'learning journals' or e-portfolios, etc.

Students' positive emotions, e.g. joy and satisfaction, is one of the basic conditions and operating principles of the learning process. They contribute to personal growth, productivity of the assessment process and its impact on the learning process as a whole. Thus, it is necessary to avoid any negative emotions, for example, fear of some unproductive assessment, which can even stop learning. The development of positive emotions towards learning in the process can be facilitated by changing the attitudes of students, teachers and parents towards assessment: from focusing on assessment in grades to focusing on learning progress and awareness of needs and their further development.

An assessment strategy is an important unit of a teacher's pedagogical activity. It includes a set of assessment methods and types of choices to promote the course of the process. An assessment strategy is a regular set of assessment activities based on learning outcomes, in which evidence is found and interpreted, giving both teachers and students an understanding of the interrelationships and opportunities for improvement in teaching and learning performance.

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