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An analysis of ESL teacher educators' current assessment practices

A B S T R A C T Assessment should provide a catalyst for student learning and for reflective teaching practices. Fundamental to the development of appropriate assessment must be a direct link between what is being "taught" and what is being "learned". Assessment is not an end in itself but a vehicle for educational improvement, and should be a fundamental and integral part of any curriculum based on student learning outcomes. The purpose of this paper is to analyse and identify any shortcomings in the current assessment practices of English Second Language teacher educators at a tertiary institution, and to provide recommendations for improving teacher educators', at tertiary institutions, assessment practices. The results indicated a mechanistic additive assessment approach, and a misalignment between teaching, learning and assessment.

Keywords: ESL; assessment; learning outcomes

Introduction

For many years, the main goal of higher education has been to make students knowledgeable within a certain domain. Building a basic knowledge store was the main issue. As society shifts from an industrial age, in which a person could get by with basic reading and arithmetic skills, to an information age, which requires the ability to access, interpret, analyse, and use information for making decisions, the skills and competencies needed to succeed in today's workplace are changing as well (Birenbaum, 1996; Moerkerke, 1996; Dochy, 2001). The goal of higher education has moved towards supporting students to develop into "reflective practitioners" who are able to reflect critically upon their own professional practice (Dochy et al., 1999). According to Shephard (2000), assessment can play a key role in shifting to a learner-centred and outcomes-based approach because it provides important information to both students and teacher educators at all stages of the learning process.

As the assessment movement in higher education converges on student learning as the centre of the educational universe, ideas about what constitutes a high-quality education have shifted

from the traditional view of what teachers provide to a practical concern for what learners actually learn, achieve, and become (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Guskin, 1997; Venter, 2001). Sharpening the focus of higher education onto student learning outcomes goes beyond mere tinkering with traditional structures and methods; it really constitutes a paradigm shift in educational philosophy and practice.

In the traditional 'teacher-centred' model, the focus has been on inputs: the topics to be presented, the sequencing of presentations, and so forth. Oddly, even though tertiary educators are expected to be good lecturers, they are not required to have had any formal training in teaching and learning; expertise in their disciplines is somehow generally considered adequate preparation for a career in tertiary teaching. In addition, even though lecturers are almost universally very interested in promoting student learning, traditional programme organization takes for granted the teacher-centred view of teaching and learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995). Lecturers "teach", generally in the ways that worked best for them as students, and students are at liberty (or their peril) to learn what they can. Although this system has worked fairly well for a long time, research over the last thirty years suggests that we can do much better (English, 1992; Shepard, 2000).

In the "student-centred" or "learner-centred" model, the focus is on outputs: what knowledge have students actually acquired, and what abilities have they actually developed? Implicit in the learner-centred model is the idea that lecturers are facilitators of learning. It is not enough to construct a syllabus and present information; the job of lecturers now involves creating and sustaining an effective learning environment based on a wide range of "best practices" in teaching and learning (Huba & Freed, 2000). The fundamental role of assessment is to provide a complementary methodology for monitoring, confirming, and improving student learning.

Current debates in the field of educational assessment centre on research evidence that suggests assessment, as a regular element in classroom work, holds the key to better learning (Black & William, 1998; Shepard, 2000). Moreover, it is assessment used in the right way, as part of teaching to support and enhance learning that has the most significant impact (Shepard, 2000). Therefore, teachers and researchers in the field of assessment have a strong professional interest in evaluating their own practice in line with current thinking and what constitutes effective educational assessment at the classroom level.

The purpose of this study is, therefore, to analyse and identify any shortcomings in the current assessment practices of English Second Language (ESL) teacher educators at a tertiary institution, and to provide recommendations for improving teacher educators' assessment practices.

Rethinking assessment for learning

According to Segers et al (1999), traditional assessment perspectives (i.e., testing) tend to narrow the learning processes to a consumption process of knowledge provided by the teacher (i.e., the traditional instructional approach). The 'testing culture' typically has the following characteristics: instruction and assessment are considered separate activities, the tests are usually of the paper-and-pencil type, administered in class under time constraints and forbidding the use of helping materials and tools, the nature of the assessment tasks influence the approaches to learning which learners adopt, often to promote surface approaches to learning, testing encourages learners to focus on those topics that are assessed at the expense of those which are not, testing

fosters the one-right-answer mentality, and the test plan, the item writing as well as the development of criteria for evaluating test performance and the scoring process are not usually shared with the students and remain a mystery to them (Magone et al., 1994; Boud, 1995; 2000; Kleinasser *et al.*, 1993; Birenbaum, 1996).

This assessment framework, however, is no longer compatible with teaching or with learning in present-day classrooms (Huba & Freed, 2000; Venter, 2001; Elwood & Klenowski, 2002). Such an assessment framework does not fit with an emergent constructivist paradigm of teaching, learning and assessment. In such a paradigm, the model of learning underpinning assessment changes dramatically. Assessment practice becomes more learner-centred, and teachers' own assessments of students' understanding sit alongside peer and self-assessment as central parts of the social processes 'that mediate the development of intellectual abilities, construction of knowledge and formation of students identities' (Shepard, 2000: 4).

The most fundamental change in our views on assessment is represented by the notion of 'assessment as a tool for learning' (Dochy & McDowell, 1997). The new assessment culture (Birenbaum & Dochy, 1996) strongly emphasizes the integration of instruction and assessment. Students play far more active roles in the assessment of their achievement. The construction of tasks, the development of criteria for the assessment, and the scoring of performance may be shared or negotiated among teachers and students. Students should, therefore, have a voice in the entire planning process of assessment. They should be involved in deciding how and when progress will be measured. They should know what it tells them about their learning and what the teacher educator will use it for. The criteria for evaluation need to be explicit to students, so that they can begin learning how to do it for themselves (Gosselin, 1998; Maxwell & Meiser, 2001).

Thus, assessment is now defined and seen as an integral aspect of the teaching and learning cycle (Biggs, 1996; Hattie & Jaeger, 1998). Rather than being an event that describes students' typical performance at the end of a course or period of learning, it is a fundamental process that describes students' best performance across time and uses a range of methods to capture evidence of best performance. These methods range from tests and examinations, performance assessments such as practical and oral demonstrations of learning, teacher or classroom-based assessment, portfolios of work and student self-assessment (Gipps, 1994). Such assessment is formative in both function and purpose and provides useful feedback to the teacher about how to modify teaching and learning activities.

Instruction, learning and assessment need to be in harmony. In a learning activity, planning and design come together with students' actions. Learning activities occur in the classroom and outside the classroom, when students: study a textbook or other source of information, complete a technology-enhanced activity, work through an assignment, etc. All of these learning activities can become a focus for "classroom assessment". In the classroom, a lecturer may use classroom assessment techniques (CAT) to gather feedback about a single lecture/discussion, to examine students' grasp of key concepts and issues in the discipline, or to solicit students' self-reflective assessments of their progress in a particular unit of study. Feedback from classroom assessment can impact learning in two important ways. First, when the results of a CAT are shared with students, that feedback can assist them in becoming more cognizant of the fact that they are learning, if indeed they are, and to be aware of how they are moving closer, through

the steps of interrelated learning activities, to fulfilling their own intrinsically motivating purposes for learning (Cotton, 1998). This promotes student autonomy and independent learning skills and helps students to become more self-directed in their learning plans and activities (Coombe & Kinney, 1998; Muirhead, 2002). Second, the results of a CAT can help the teacher educator target the upcoming instruction, building on what students know and filling in gaps in knowledge that keep students from progressing.

Many of the assessment activities being considered are not new, but when they are placed in a new framework they take on a new character. Of course, it is not just assessment practices that need to be modified, but learning outcomes and teaching and learning practices as well (Shepard, 2000). It has been convenient to maintain a separation between teaching/learning activities and assessment activities and many of our institutional practices reinforce this distinction (Barr & Tagg, 1995). We have to reshape our thinking if we are to prepare students to be lifelong learners and assessors. Angelo (1999: page 2 of 4) states that:

Assessment techniques are of little use unless and until local academic cultures value self-examination, reflection, and continuous improvement. In general, already existing assessment techniques and methods are more than sufficient to meet the challenges we face. It's the ends toward which, and the ways in which, we use those tools that are the problem.

Analysing ESL teachers' assessment practices

Research methodology

Design

A one-shot cross-sectional survey design was used in this study.

Participants

The participants included all the teacher educators (N=5), four females and one male, within the subject group English in the Faculty of Education Sciences at the North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus). The teacher educators' teaching experience at school level ranged from one to twenty years, while their teaching experience at university level ranged from one to seven years.

Instrumentation

Four data collection techniques were used in this study, namely a questionnaire, classroom observations, interviews and document analysis. The purpose was to triangulate the data in order to get as complete a picture as possible of the current assessment practices of the ESL teacher educators.

a) Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of two sections, namely Section A which focused on the assessment task analysis of the teacher educators, and Section B which focused on questions relating to the assessment practices in their ESL classes. The main aim of the questionnaire was to collect information on the assessment practices within the subject group.

b) Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were held with each of the teacher educators in order to ask follow-

up questions with regard to the assessment practices employed within their ESL communication classes.

c) Observations

Permission was obtained from each of the teacher educators to observe their contact sessions with the students for a period of two weeks. The purpose of the observations was to determine whether there was a correlation between the comments made on the questionnaires, the answers during the interviews, the document analysis, and what actually happened during the contact sessions with regard to assessment. A checklist was used to record the data that was gathered during the class observations.

d) Document analysis

The yearbook of the Faculty of Education Sciences as well as the study guides for the English Communication course was analysed in order to obtain information with regard to the learning outcomes formulated for the English Communication course as well as to obtain information on any assessment-related issues mentioned in the study guides.

Data collection procedure

The teacher educators were asked to complete the questionnaire at the beginning of the second semester of 2003. Individual appointments were scheduled for the interviews with each of the teacher educators. The observations were conducted during the second and third week of the second semester. The documents were analysed after the above-mentioned data had been collected.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics (means and percentages) were used to analyse the data. The data collected during the interviews are reported as narratives.

Results and discussion

An analysis of the ESL teacher educators' tasks indicated that they are responsible for teaching a total of 36 semester modules for both full time and off campus teacher education programmes. Out of the 36 semester modules, 22 of these semester modules cater for in-service, off campus training within two teacher education programmes. The remaining 14 modules cater for pre-service full time training within two additional teacher education programmes.

The 14 full time modules can be divided into three sections, namely Academic English, Subject Didactical Aspects of English and English Communication. For the purpose of this study, the focus is on the full time English Communication course. The English Communication course for pre-service student teachers generally aims to provide the students with the means for developing and extending their use of English as means of communication in the classroom. It is a compulsory 24 credit course (240 notional hours spread over three semesters) with two contact sessions of 45 minutes each per week. Another 45 minute contact session per week is scheduled for group work and projects and this additional contact session is for use by the students; the teacher educators are not present. The method of instruction is a hybrid, eclectic approach, where teaching-learning opportunities are structured around learning outcomes in a holistic fashion.

An analysis of the current assessment practices of teacher educators, within the subject group English in the Faculty of Education Sciences, indicated that the teacher educators spent a total of 1831 hours on assessment of student learning. This assessment of student learning includes the planning and preparation of assessment strategies, the planning of assignments and projects, the setting up of exam papers and memoranda, the marking of assignments, projects and exam papers, and the assessment of student teaching. The results indicated that 702 hours are spent on the assessment of the first-year modules, 589 hours on the second-year modules, 424 hours on the third-year modules, and 116 on the fourth year modules. Figure 1 presents the total hours spent on assessment per year-level.

When an analysis is made of the time the teacher educators spent on the assessment of the English Communication modules, it becomes clear that the assessment of these modules takes up a significant portion of their professional time. The results indicated that out of a total of 702 hours spent on the assessment of all first year modules, 451 hours are spent on the assessment of the first year English Communication module. This represents a percentage of 24.6% of the total hours spent on assessment. Out of a possible total of 589 hours spent on the assessment of all second year modules, 406 hours are devoted to the assessment of the second year English Communication module, which represents a percentage of 22% of the total hours spent on assessment. The number of hours spent on the third year English Communication module adds up to 301 hours out of a total of 424 hours spent on the assessment of all the third year modules. This figure represents 16.4% of the total hours spent on assessment (cf. Figure 2).

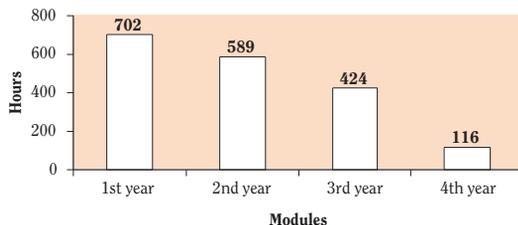


Figure 1: Total hours spent on assessment

When a complete task analysis is made of the teacher educators' full time workload, it becomes clear that the assessment of the English Communication modules still consumes a significant portion of teacher educator time. In total, teacher educators devote 21.3% of their time to the assessment of student learning of the English Communication modules. The results indicated that 8.3% percent of their full time workload is devoted to the assessment of the first year English Communication module, 7.5% of their time is spent on the assessment of the second year English Communication module, and 5.5% of their time is spent on the assessment of the third year module (cf. Figure 3).

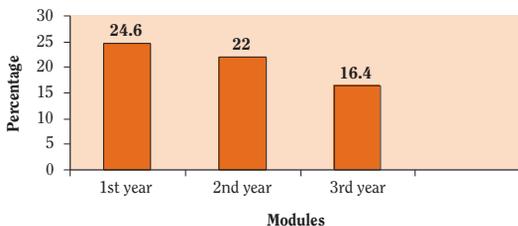


Figure 2: Time spent on assessment of English Communication modules in relation to total time spent on assessment

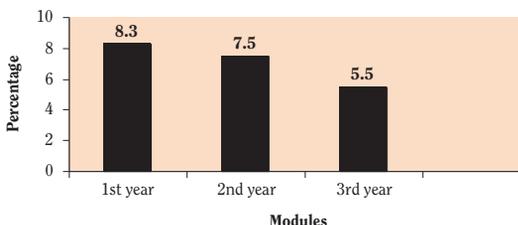


Figure 3: Time spent on assessment of English Communication modules in relation to total time spent on full time workload

An analysis of the Faculty of Education Sciences yearbook and the study guides for the English Communication course at first, second and

third year level indicated that the learning outcomes formulated for the three levels are virtually identical, and merely reveal rephrasing:

Learners should be able to demonstrate knowledge, skills and values regarding English as an international language of communication, with special regard for the role of English as a language of communication in different educational contexts in South Africa. They should demonstrate knowledge, skills and values regarding the role of fluency and accuracy in communication and interact with a variety of texts, interlocutors and the lecturer to demonstrate knowledge, skills and values regarding register, context and appropriateness of communication.

The results also indicated that the English subject group did not have an assessment plan in place; assessment was done on the whim of the lecturer involved in teaching the course. During subject group meetings, assessment and the integration thereof with teaching or with improving students' learning was never a point on the agenda. At the end of a semester, students' are asked to evaluate the course. The feedback received from the students is never used to improve the teaching or learning experience.

Table 1 provides a summary of the current assessment practices of the ESL teacher educators based on their comments made on the questionnaire, during the interviews, observations and the document analysis (i.e., the yearbook and the English Communication study guides).

Assessment conducted by the teacher educators seems to be more teacher-centred than learner-centred. The teacher educators and/or facilitators are mainly responsible for the assessments and there is no evidence of student input as far as the assessment design is concerned. Students have no say or choice in the formulation of intended learning outcomes, assessment criteria and types of products for demonstrating achievement of these learning outcomes. Assessment criteria are seldom communicated explicitly to students from the onset and, therefore, students have little direction when studying and completing assignments. They also have limited opportunities for self-and peer-assessment and in the few cases that it did occur; students received minimal training regarding this issue. The following comments and/or observations were written on the questionnaires and/or made during the interviews and class observations:

"Students are part of the assessment process, but not of the design."

"Due to the nature of classes and set study guides, it is impossible to give students a choice."

"Self-assessment is limited, because students tend to be unrealistic and unfair."

"Since there is no time to assess whether the self-assessment was on target, students do not really benefit from this."

The comments indicate that even though formative assessment techniques are used, the teacher educators still focus on summative issues – students on target with grade. The fact that the assessment should be used to give the students the opportunity to reflect on their work and the degree to which they have mastered a particular skill does not enter into the equation.

Although teacher educators give students ample opportunity to demonstrate competencies in a variety of ways, assessment of these competencies is usually only done at the end of a period of teaching such as mid-term tests and formal exams. During this period, students' portfolios, journals, group projects, audio tapes and tests are marked by teacher educators and/or facilitators

Table 1: An overview of current assessment practices of ESL teacher educators: English Communication course

How learning will be assessed: Assessment measures	Results analysed	By whom	How often and when during the course of a semester: Assessment schedule	Feedback	Process to implement change in teaching-learning process
Portfolios	Rubric	Teacher educators or facilitators (i.e., markers appointed to assist with assessment and accredited by subject group.)	Two per semester. This is usually just before mid-term tests and the semester exams.	None. Mark allocated for grading of written work.	None
Group projects (usually on the reading text prescribed – Harry Potter)	Rubric	Teacher educators or facilitators	One project submitted before semester exam.	None. Mark allocated for grading purposes.	None
Mid-term test	Marks/grades	Teacher educator	One per semester	None. Mark/grade given to student.	None
Semester exam	Marks/grades	Teacher educators	One at the end of the semester	None. Mark/grade given to student.	None
Journals	Rubric	Teacher educators or facilitators	One at the end of the semester	None. Mark/grade used for grading written work.	None
Peer-assessment	Checklist	Group members	One or two per semester	Feedback from peers and lecturer.	None
Oral assessment (recorded on audio tape during contact session; third years only).	Rubric	Teacher educators or facilitators	One or two every fortnight	None. Marking takes place just before mid-term tests and before the semester exam.	None

for grading purposes and students are passed or failed according to how they have mastered the knowledge or the skill. Little attention is paid to processes of learning or student development due to large numbers of assignments and subsequent time constraints. It seems as if the quantity of assignments as well as the fact that all assignments are marked at peak periods impedes the frequency and quality of the assessments conducted. The following comments and/or observations were written on the questionnaires and/or made during the interviews and class observations:

"Progress is monitored through class tests, semester tests, exams, assignments, and oral speeches."

"Portfolios are marked twice in a six week cycle."

"Tape recordings are made for assessment, but usually time runs out to mark it."

"When time allows, worksheets are used apart from assignments."

Due to the fact that assessment is done at the end of a period of teaching, there is limited opportunity for constructive feedback to students. Although they receive traditional methods of feedback such as grades, marks and scores, they seldom know how assessment results were interpreted, why they scored poorly, how to intervene in their own learning and what teacher educators intend to do in response. Some of the teacher educators write comments in portfolios, but due to large classes and time constraints these comments are not as elaborate and informative as they want them to be. Where facilitators are used to do the marking, there is no system in place to obtain feedback from them in order to revise teaching and learning plans where necessary. The following comments and/or observations were written on the questionnaires and/or made during the interviews and class observations:

"I try to generalize errors and comment on them."

"Workload and time remains a problem."

All the teacher educators stated that their assessment was not integrated with their instructional design and was usually added as an extra to the existing scheme of work. The following comments and/or observations were written on the questionnaires and/or made during the interviews and class observations:

"I would like to, but can spend very little time on it."

"I often leave this aspect until I have received assignments."

"The assessment aspect is usually only covered much later in the instruction process."

The analysis of the ESL teacher educators' current assessment practices revealed the following shortcomings:

- A significant percentage of the teacher educators' time is spent on doing mainly 'summative' assessment (i.e., mark allocation) at peak periods (i.e., before mid-term tests and before the semester exams).
- Formative assessment methods/techniques are used for summative purposes.
- There seems to be no alignment between teaching, learning and assessment.
- There is no assessment plan in place within the English subject group; this is evident from not only the documentation but also the fact that there is no alignment between the learning outcomes and the type of assessment method/technique as well as the spacing of the assessment over the semester.
- Students are not involved in the assessment process at all.

- Students are not given timely or constructive feedback to improve their performance or to give them the opportunity to reflect on their learning.

Recommendations for improving assessment practice of teacher educators

In order to meet the learning needs of the 21st century and beyond, teacher educators will need to rethink and plan their assessment practices. An assessment plan for integrating assessment, teaching and learning can be most valuable to teacher educators. Not only will it reduce their uncertainty, but it will also assist them in their assessment decision-making process and enable them to work smarter and not harder.

Figure 4 outlines a developmental model of assessment in which teacher educators progress through clearly defined stages in their planning for and implementation of assessment. The framework is adapted from the work of Angelo and Cross (1993), Huba and Freed (2000) and Rea-Dickens (2001).

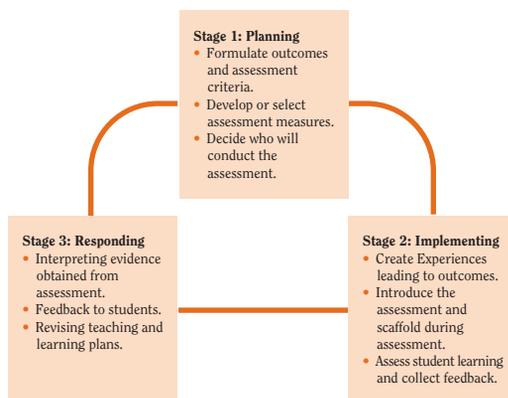


Figure 4: A framework for implementing learner-centred assessment

Each stage in the framework is briefly explained.

Stage 1: Planning assessment

A cardinal rule of assessment is first to describe the desired outcomes (Taylor & Marienau, 1997). Before teacher educators can assess how well their students are learning, they must identify and clarify what they are trying to teach, what students should know, understand, and be able to do with their knowledge when they graduate. Starting with teaching goals allows teacher educators to take a serious look at what they believe is most important to teach, and what they really want students to learn (Angelo & Cross, 1993; Huba & Freed, 2000).

Perhaps the most important role of intended outcomes is to reveal to students the intentions of teacher educators. Sharing outcomes helps students develop a sense of direction as they participate in class, study, and complete assignments. Learning outcomes can also serve as a basis for ongoing self-assessment – students can review the outcomes, asking themselves whether or not they have achieved them (Huba & Freed, 2000: 98).

The second step is the designing or selecting of data gathering measures to assess whether or not intended learning outcomes have been achieved. According to Baker (1994), teacher educators must determine which forms of alternative assessment are most useful for which educational purposes, distinguish among assessment instruments of differing quality and appropriateness, and learn to design assessment methods. The process of designing assessment measures forces teacher educators to come to a thorough understanding of what is really meant by intended learning outcomes. In this step teacher educators thus map out the path by which they will seek an answer to the assessable question and choose the tools that will help them get that answer (Angelo & Cross, 1993; Huba & Freed, 2000).

Effective teacher educators use a variety of methods, some formative and others summative, to determine how much and how well their students are learning. Formative assessment

techniques are not meant for assigning grades and shouldn't take the place of more traditional forms of classroom evaluation. Rather, these formative assessment tools are meant to give teacher educators and students information on learning before and between tests and examinations, therefore, they supplement and complement summative evaluations of learning (Angelo & Cross, 1993).

Although teacher educators act mainly as the designers, managers and interpreters of assessments (Calfee & Masuda, 1997), they are not the only, or even perhaps the most important, evaluators any more (Huba & Freed, 2000). According to Shepard (2000:4), teacher educators' own assessments of students' understanding now sit alongside peer- and self-assessment as central parts of the social processes "that mediate the development of intellectual abilities, construction of knowledge and formation of students' identities". Research reports positive findings concerning the use of self-assessment in educational practice. Students who engage in self-assessment tend to score most highly on tests. Self-assessment, used in most cases to promote the learning of skills and abilities, lead to more reflection of one's own work, a higher standard of outcomes, responsibility for one's own learning and increasing understanding of problem-solving (Dochy *et al.*, 1999; Shepard, 2000).

The following is a practical example of stage 1 planning. Teacher educator A is teaching her English Communication class how to formulate questions on different cognitive levels using Bloom's taxonomy. Table 2 presents an example of what teacher educator A's assessment plan for the above-mentioned lesson could look like.

Table 2: An assessment plan for a lesson

Intended Outcomes	Assessment standards	Assessment measures	Who?
The learner will be able to use and apply Bloom's taxonomy to design factual, interpretive, and evaluative questions and assignments.	The learner will be able to identify and explain question cues for each of the cognitive levels of Bloom's taxonomy.	Get feedback from groups	Teacher educator
	The learner will be able to formulate a question on each of the levels of Bloom's taxonomy using identified question cues.	Learners formulate a question in writing on each of the levels of Bloom's taxonomy and give to peers to assess. Peers use a checklist and give feedback to teacher educator.	Peers Teacher educator
	The learner will be able to set a question paper and work out a memorandum integrating all levels of Bloom's taxonomy.	Use a rubric to mark the question papers and memoranda. Rubric must be given to learners before they design their question papers in order to make them aware of the assessment standards.	Teacher educator

Stage 2: Implementing assessment

If teacher educators expect students to achieve their intended outcomes, they must provide them with opportunities to learn what they need to learn. In this step, teacher educators need to examine what they actually do to teach to the goal they set and what the students are required to do to reach that goal (Angelo & Cross, 1993). They then should direct time and energy away from content presentations toward the development of activities that focus students on their learning and how they will articulate or demonstrate that learning (McCombs & Whisler, 1997).

These tasks should not only actively engage students in creating their own knowledge, but should also respect the diverse talents and learning styles of students. Tasks should be designed in such a way that students can complete them effectively in different ways. There is not just one right answer, but rather students have the opportunity to do excellent work that reflects their own unique way of implementing their abilities and skills (Huba & Freed, 2000; McCombs & Whisler, 1997).

Teacher educators should also provide opportunities for students to work together. According to the Education Commission of the States (1996:8), "students learn better when engaged in a team effort rather than working on their own". As students share with peers what they know and what they are learning, their knowledge and understanding deepen and they progress towards desired learning goals.

According to Huba and Freed (2000), these learning opportunities often extend beyond classroom walls. While teacher educators will have designed the learning experiences and environments that students use, they need *not be present for or participate* in every structured learning activity (Barr & Tagg, 1995).

Introducing the assessment to students is an important step in the process. According to Elwood and Klenowski (2002), it is essential to promote a community of shared understanding of assessment practice. To achieve this, teacher educators should make assessment criteria explicit to students at the onset of the assessment activity. They should take time to go through these criteria with the students, unpacking both the teacher educators' and their understanding of what is meant by the different statements included in grade descriptions.

Criteria in the form of rubrics can be developed by teacher educators or teacher educators and students jointly. Rubrics are like road signs: they allow students to know where they are with respect to where they need to be and how to get there. They allow students to self-assess, self-correct and be more self-reliant (Huba & Freed, 2000; McCombs & Whisler, 1997).

Black and William (1998) state that students should not only be informed on what will be assessed, but also on why they are being assessed. Students are usually pleased that teacher educators might want to evaluate their learning for some other reason than to assign a grade. By announcing to a class that teacher educators want to assess how much and how well they are learning in order to help them learn better, they lower barriers to effective learning set up by the grading system and power structure of the classroom (Angelo & Cross, 1993: 51).

To assist students on how to do the assessment, Alleman and Brophy (1997) suggest that scaffolding during the assessment should be done. Structuring and scaffolding of the activity must be sufficient to enable students to accomplish the primary goal if they invest reasonable

effort in attempting to do so, yet not be so extensive as to nullify the activity's value as a means of accomplishing that goal.

When assessing student learning and collecting feedback data, teacher educators use the assessment technique and assessment criteria previously decided upon to conduct assessment and get specific, comprehensible feedback on the extent to which students are achieving the learning goals and objectives (Angelo & Cross, 1993; Huba & Freed, 2000). For teacher educators to get as much feedback as possible and be able to maximise student learning, the gathering of data should not be limited to a single event, but should rather be an ongoing process (Dreyer & van der Walt, 1998). Table 3 gives an example of how the example assessment plan can be implemented.

Table 3: Implementing the assessment plan

Assessment standards	Creating experiences leading to outcomes	Scaffolding during assessment	Assess student learning and collect feedback
The student will be able to identify and explain question cues for each of the cognitive levels of Bloom's taxonomy.	Give students a list of websites on Bloom's taxonomy to consult. From these websites, they should identify question cues on each level and use dictionaries to explain each of the question cues.	Ask students to compile a list of all the possible question cues in their groups and make sure that they can explain each question cue. The teacher educator will ask several students in a group to give feedback.	Formative assessment. Teacher educator gives immediate feedback.
The student will be able to formulate a question on each of the levels of Bloom's taxonomy using identified question	Students should use the prescribed novel Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone and use the identified question cues to formulate a question on each of the cognitive levels of Bloom's taxonomy for a grade 9 class.	The teacher educator hands out a checklist for the assessment of formulated questions and explains to students how to use it. Students are then asked to exchange their questions and assess their peers using the checklist. The teacher educator will move from group to group and collect feedback.	Formative assessment. Teacher educator and peers give immediate feedback.
The student will be able to set a question paper and work out a memorandum integrating all levels of Bloom's taxonomy.	Students must now use their knowledge of Bloom's and design their own question papers and memoranda in the subject area they specialise in.	The teacher educator hands out rubrics to the students and explain to them the criteria they will be assessed on.	The teacher educator marks question papers and memoranda by means of a rubric and make a list of common errors.

Stage 3: Responding to assessment

When evidence is obtained from an assessment, the next step is to analyse the data. Angelo and Cross (1993) suggest that teacher educators first need to clarify why they are analysing data before deciding how to analyse the data. The original purpose for assessing learning should determine how teacher educators analyse the data. When analysing the data, teacher educators must look at the whole range of student responses, whether it be positive or negative, and then carry out only as much analysis as is useful and reasonable, given the time and energy available.

According to Phye (1997: 37), interpreting the results of assessments may be the most difficult skill to acquire. It is not simply a matter of reporting results but rather explaining what the results mean. Calfee and Masuda (1997: 91) state that interpretation is the task of giving meanings to observations and shaping generalisations for decision-making. It must be embedded in the questions that guide data collection and the evaluation of the evidence. It must connect with the questions that motivated the assessments.

Teacher educators should thus be skilled in administering, scoring and interpreting the results of both summative and formative assessments. If a well-developed assessment is incorrectly administered, poorly scored, or misinterpreted, teacher educators have lost any benefit from the time and effort spent in the development of a valid assessment tool (Phye, 1997: 37).

Traditional methods of offering feedback to learners have largely involved grades, marks and scores, often made meaningful only by comparing one student's performance with another. In a learner-centred approach, the feedback students receive from assessments deal directly with the learning to be acquired, whether it is knowledge or skills. They receive valuable feedback regarding what the assessment results are, how they are interpreted and what teacher educators intend to do in response. In this way, assessment results in feedback that students can use, not only to know how well they are doing, but also to improve their performance (Huba & Freed, 2000; Angelo & Cross, 1993).

Feedback can, however, only enhance student learning when it is acted upon promptly. To the extent possible, teacher educators should provide immediate feedback as they circulate to monitor performance while students are actively engaged in the activity, not just delayed feedback in the form of grades or comments provided at some future time (Alleman & Brophy, 1997).

Assessment serves little purpose unless it leads to actions and decisions. Through discussions of assessment results, teacher educators gain insights into the type of learning occurring in the programme, and are better able to make informed decisions about needed programme changes. Teacher educators understand what students can do well and in what areas they have not succeeded. They raise questions about the design of the curriculum or about the teaching strategies they use. They also develop a better understanding of how to assess learning in a useful manner (Walvoord, Bardes & Denton, 1998; Calfee & Masuda, 1997). At this point the cycle becomes full circle. Table 4 gives an example of how the ESL teacher educators can respond to assessment.

Table 4: Responding to assessment

Assessment standards	Interpreting evidence	Giving feedback to students	Revising teaching/ learning plans
The student will be able to identify and explain question cues for each of the cognitive levels of Bloom's taxonomy.	The teacher educator listens to feedback and evaluates answers as he/she listens to it.	The teacher educator gives immediate feedback.	If it becomes clear that students are not able to identify question cues and explain these, the teacher educator will do a similar exercise with students, but give them more scaffolding and assistance before moving on to the next activity.
The student will be able to formulate a question on each of the levels of Bloom's taxonomy using identified question cues.	Students should use the prescribed novel Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone and use the identified question cues to formulate a question on each of the cognitive levels of Bloom's taxonomy for a grade 9 class.	The teacher educator listens to feedback and evaluates answers as he/she listens to it.	The teacher educator gives immediate feedback. If it becomes clear that students are not able to formulate questions on each of the levels of Bloom's taxonomy, the teacher educator will do a similar exercise with students, but give them more scaffolding and assistance before moving on to the next activity.
The student will be able to set a question paper and work out a memorandum integrating all levels of Bloom's taxonomy.	List all the common errors. Make a note of individual students who still don't understand adjectives.	The teacher educator gives feedback by means of the rubric. He/she indicates to students on the rubric where their weak and strong points are.	The teacher educator gives an enrichment activity to students who have grasped the meaning of formulating questions and a follow-up activity to students who have not.

Conclusion

The results in this study indicate that we should not underestimate the difficulty of linking assessment with learning in practice, despite an extensive literature on the subject. Ecclestone's (2002: 155) study with assessment practices such as self- and peer assessment and portfolios, disappointingly showed that "none of the teachers saw assessment explicitly shaping or affecting learning". One of the most consistently weak areas of assessment practice was the feedback given to the students; the perfunctory nature of feedback, the absence of constructive comment,

particularly for weaker students, and failure to make timely comment so that students could improve their subsequent performances.

One should not be too optimistic about the implementation in practice of the assessment culture. Unfortunately, teacher educators still see assessment as a task to be done after everything else is done. Many teacher educators still think that they can implement learner-centred learning environments without adapting the assessments. A situation where learner-centred learning goes hand in hand with traditional examinations (often directed towards reproduction of knowledge) leads to the 'auto-dissolving prophecy' (Dochy, 2001: 18).

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