

英语专业 “高级英语”

课程教与学之评价

编著◎资谷生



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英语专业“高级英语”课程教与学之评价
**Renewed Practices of Advanced
English Teaching and Learning
for English Majors with
Assessment**

资谷生 编著



中国书籍出版社
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Chapter

1

Introduction

Section 1 Research Issue and Its Context

As is stated by Ramsden (2003, p. 176) “The assessment of students is a serious and often tragic enterprise” and by Boud (1995a, p. 35) that “There is more bad practice and ignorance of significant issues in the area of assessment than in any other aspect of higher education”, assessment and learning are conventionally treated as two rather distinct activities in schools. As far as I am aware, such things are still quite common in Chinese institutions of higher education, especially in the field of English language teaching and learning (Ding, 2009; Huang, 2011). Here conventional practices of assessment involve teachers as assessors so that most Chinese students develop a strong preference for, even a meek reliance on teachers’ assessment and feedback. Unfortunately, those students usually feel too passive and exclusive to evaluate what has been taught and learned, how well students themselves have performed. Quite often, students believe that teachers are arbitrators and they are victims so that they get to cater for the likes and dislikes of their teachers as assessors instead of trying to meet the objective, or the requirement and target of the course under study. It is not uncommon that students try all means, like cue-seeking and/or rote-learning, just to get high marks on tests rather than mastering practical knowledge or learning something for its practical application. Teachers tend to consider assessment according to their own student experiences so as to view assessment in terms of its summative, rather than its formative purpose. This perspective and practice ignores the diagnostic function of assessment and kills students’ enthusiasm for making timely remedial efforts and progress. The introduction and practice of self assessment and peer assessment may correct the misconceptions and make assessment conceptualized as a collaborative process where students share responsibility with peers and teachers.

Moreover, the assessment of English language teaching and learning, especially speaking and writing, is usually interpretive and open-ended, but norm referenced assessment has been long practiced. This practice is actually not quite fair and accountable so that how a final grade is calculated or the criteria for grading a discourse or essay delivered by students are often kept invisible to students. Although the assessment of students’ performance in class and assignment counts in their cumulative scores, feedback is often delayed or ignored. Too much value is attached to the summative assessment by means of achievement test in the form of mid-term



examination and term examination, which provides little feedback but an aggregated score. Such practices are de-motivational to students, even to those who really want to improve their performance, leaving no room or time for students' remedy. Disappointingly, assessments like self, peer, subjective and criterion-referenced assessments have been mostly neglected, though they may prove to be diagnostic, encouraging, formative, beneficial and productive (Boud et al., 1997; Brown, 2004; Ding, 2009; Huang, 2011). So it is high time that we did something to change the misleading situation. This is especially true of *Advanced English* course in YAU.

Advanced English course, including three progressive parts, *Advanced English I*, *Advanced English II* and *Advanced English III*, is a compulsory course for all the third- and fourth-year English major students in a university called YAU in the People's Republic of China. The course lasts for one and a half years with one part for a term respectively. In the past, the assessment for *Advanced English* course in YAU gave more weighting to the term examination (a summative assessment), the result of which made up 70% of the students' overall grade for the course. 20% was given based on students' achievement in the mid-term examination (a semi-formative and semi-summative assessment). Only 10% was accumulated along with students' daily performance. Such a greater priority being given to the summative assessment, students formerly approached their learning strategy as one shortsighted and geared towards incredible achievement in the term examination through highly intensive learning immediately before the approaching examination instead of making daily efforts to gain the desirable accumulation.

Additionally, the examinations used to be composed of duplicated items from the textbook, nearly half being objective items (e. g. multiple choice, true or false statements), resulting in students' rote-learning or surface learning (Ramsden, 2003). In consequence, most students managed to meet a minimal standard to pass the coursework. But even those students who gained high marks in examinations limited their proficiency in relating what they had been taught in class to what they might come across in their daily life, let alone the sub-standard ability of those with lower grades, leading both teachers and students to talk disparagingly about each other for the inefficient or ineffective results achieved despite substantial effort and resources expended.

Furthermore, in our conventional assessment of teaching and learning the *Advanced English* course with the third- and fourth-year English major students in YAU, teachers used to act as active assessors, while students were treated as passive recipients. Still, assessment exerts an impact on students, for assessment shows or implies to students what is important, and affects how students spend their time and energy, even the way they interact with their teachers. The impact, however, can be positive or negative, because good assessment encourages students to adopt deep learning strategy, master and apply what has been taught and learned, while poor assessment misleads students to use surface learning expedient just for getting high marks or passing a course (Boud et al., 1997).

Section 2 Reasons for Choosing the Issue and Its Significance

Enlightened by the viewpoint that changing the form of assessment is an effective way to change students' learning (Witkins et al., 2005), and by the argument that students can manage to be free from the impact of poor teaching but not from the effects of poor assessment (Boud, 1995a), I enriched my knowledge of assessment, especially how to design and carry out self assessment, peer assessment and subjective assessment. In my teaching of Advanced English course with the third- and fourth-year English major undergraduates in YAU, I introduced and conducted self assessment, peer assessment and subjective assessment as supplementary to the normal requirement or summative assessment.

In the reformed assessment system, much more importance (40% of the students' overall grade for the course) was attached to students' finished assignments and assessments through self assessment, peer assessment and subjective assessment, 40% was given to term-examination while mid-term examination still kept 20%. Moreover, all the objective test items previously used in the mid-term and term examinations have been replaced by subjective ones. Moreover, any of the topics covered in each lesson and further studied by students independently with their selected, annotated and reviewed favorite articles, and/or with their compositions of argumentation may be adopted as the topic for writing assessment in the mid-term and term examinations, but in a different writing style and/or with a higher requirement.

The self assessment and peer assessment were employed mainly for students to assess their finished assignments of annotated and reviewed favorite selections, and of argumentative writing on the topics covered in lessons studied jointly in class under the guidance of the teacher. Subjective assessment is used both in students' self assessment and peer assessment, and in the mid-term and term examinations. This practice is theoretically based on the constructive alignment (Biggs, 2003b, p. 11), which states that "A good teaching system aligns teaching method and assessment to the learning activities stated in the objectives, so that all aspects of this system act in accord to support appropriate learning." and it is advisable for assessments to measure what has been learned, and not just what was taught (Race, 1999).

Doing so, I intended to see, throughout my research for this dissertation, the backwash effect of the renewed assessment on my students who are learning the course of Advanced English course. I also attempted to develop my students to become active and skillful assessors rather than passive recipients or participants in the course assessment, which is treated as a part of the process of learning (Boud & Falchikoy, 2006). My assumption is that students may find it helpful to frequently make some reflective self assessment of their own work, regularly carry out some cordial peer assessment of their classmates, and critically practice criterion-based subjective assessment, so that they may make the best of assessment to better their routine learning, and retake their due responsibility for learning the course to improve their general proficiency



more than to get high marks mainly. This assumption is also based on the statement of Earl (2003) that assessment in education is characterized by “of learning, for learning and as learning” (p. 21).

Furthermore, such practices with self assessment and peer assessment may be beneficial to both teachers' teaching and students' learning, especially when they make contribution to formative assessment with large classes. For teachers teaching large classes, it is usually too time-consuming to carefully go through every student's daily work and give timely feedback to all the students. Even if the teachers manage to do as expected, some or many students may still pay more attention to their scores than to their teachers' reviews or corrections. In this case, students' self assessment and peer assessment may save such teachers' time, and these assessments may bring about educational benefits, the practice and development of students' judgement skills (Rust, 2001). At the same time these assessments may contribute to the awareness of and a need for students' professional development and life-long learning.

Over the past two years, self assessment, peer assessment and subjective assessment have been introduced into a reformed assessment of the Advanced English course in the hope of maximizing the positive backwash effect of assessment, minimizing the negative backwash effect on students, and improving the teaching and learning of the course at present and in the future.

Such reformative practices have been implemented for the following reasons:

- Students may become more involved and active in their learning, for the process of assessments is a remarkably valuable learning experience.
- Self assessment may help students engage in critical self reflection, get a clearer perception of effective learning, improve their awareness of how well they have been learning what is required or expected, review and identify their strengths and weaknesses, become more efficient, effective, independent and responsible learners.
- Peer assessment may help students develop a positive understanding of and attitude toward assessments, better students' ability to learn from each other, and motivate students to improve their own performance.

(Race, 2001).

Subjective assessment, though not so statistically consistent or reliable with its generated results as objective assessment (McDaniel, 2014), can still be pragmatically valid, instructive and inspiring if the rationale and the criteria for subjective assessment are reasonable, specific, interpretable and feasible, especially when the subjective assessment is designed as a fit-for-purpose assessment aligning the content and process of the assessment with the objective of the course and its curriculum (Brown, 2004). The practice of subjective assessment encourages students to learn to explore wider knowledge, test more methods, use more creative ideas to answer open-ended questions, discuss about topics or tackle problems (Lambdin & Forseth, 1996). Specific and

reasonable criteria can be used by students to cross-check what they have been doing and how well they have been doing it, and then become highly activated to monitor their learning, diagnose their progress, become more critical thinkers and self-regulatory learners.

The research studying the reformed assessment focuses on its backwash effect on students' learning the Advanced English course, especially the changes of their attitudes towards self assessment, peer assessment and subjective assessment, and their adjustment of learning strategies to meet the requirement of the new practices. This research is valuable because many students in my class have become miserably passive and unwilling to take the ownership of their own learning due to conventionally examination-dominated teaching and learning, excessive training and testing with objectively formatted materials, as stated above. The research is also significant because assessment in education is characterized by "of learning, for learning and as learning" (Earl, 2003, p. 21)

Section 3 Research Questions

I propose to investigate the impact of my renewed assessment practices in *Advanced English* course with the third- and fourth-year English major undergraduates in YAU. My research questions are as follows:

1. What change(s) will the students make with their attitudes towards the self assessment, peer assessment and subjective assessment?
2. How will the students adjust their learning strategies to meet the requirement of the new practices?
3. What backwash effect (both positive and negative) will the reformed assessment make upon students' learning the *Advanced English* course?

Chapter 2

Critique of Literature

This chapter will critically and analytically examine the current literature pertinent to my study focus, the backwash of self assessment, peer assessment and subjective assessment. The chapter will elaborate the concepts and theories involved, as well as considering empirical findings of both gains and losses. Since self assessment, peer assessment and subjective assessment are subordinated to assessment in general, literature on the concept and backwash effect of assessment is to be reviewed first, which is expected to be fundamental and supportive to my critique of the other literature, and to my research design and operation under way.

Section 1 Assessment and Its 'Backwash' Effect

Airasian (1997) defines assessment as a term referring to the process of collecting, synthesizing, and interpreting information to help making decisions.

Boud (1995b) argues that *all* assessments involve two inter-related activities:

- First, is the development of knowledge and an appreciation of the appropriate standards and criteria for meeting those standards which may be applied to any given work.
- Second, is the capacity to make judgements about whether or not the work involved does or does not meet these standards. (p.11)

Black and William (1998) state that assessment can refer to anything from informal observations of student behaviour to formal, large-scale criterion referenced assessments, such as “high-stakes” exams.

Assessment in education includes qualitative descriptions of student performance used to diagnose problems, a teacher's ranking of students, achievement tests used to determine student progress, tests and measures used for research purposes, assigning code numbers to subjects in language research according to native language (Krug, accessed on 16 January, 2011). Assessment in education is characterized by “of learning, for learning and as learning” (Earl, 2003, p. 21), so that students, along with assessment, improve their learning efficiency, competence and performance, which is desirable to my Advanced English course in YAU. According to Walvoord, 2004 (in Zacharis, 2010, p. 61), assessment of student learning refers to “the systematic collection of information about student learning, using the time, knowl-

edge, and resources available, in order to inform decisions about how to improve learning". My study follows Black and Wiliam (1998) in focusing on formative assessment practices, which they define as "encompassing all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged" (p. 7-8). My study also follows Earl (2003) in making assessment "of learning, for learning and as learning" (p. 21).

The backwash effect of assessment is, according to Biggs, Alderson and Wall (1993) and as succinctly described by Biggs (2003a), the influence of assessment on teachers' teaching and students' learning. The influence is significant in that backwash effect can be either beneficial or harmful (Boud et al., 1997; Race 1999; Brown, 2004). Moreover, any language assessment can have positive or/and negative backwash effect on the students and their learning, on the teacher and his or her teaching, even on their mutual performance along (Alderson & Wall, 1993). Biggs (1999) comments that assessment backwash occurs whenever student learning is mostly determined by the assessment tasks and not by the teaching or the topic or objects of the syllabus.

Biggs (2003a), Brown (2004) and Bloxham (2007) state that (1) assessment strongly influences students' learning, including what they learn, when they learn, how much effort they make and what approach they take to their learning, (2) the type of assessment also influences the quality and quantity of learning achieved by students, (3) the timely feedback of assessment is the most important aspect of the assessment process for improving teaching and learning through more supportive and collaborative efforts, and (4) well-designed assessment may be intrinsically motivating for students to adopt deep learning strategies, while poorly designed assessment can lead to students making full use of surface learning. These ideas correspond to the viewpoint held by Morgan and Wyatt-Smith (2000) that assessment carries value-laden message about what kinds of learning are important. The inspiring ideas are really useful and helpful in improving the conventional teaching and learning of Advanced English course in YAU, for some students have little intrinsic motivation for serious learning, and some may be so instrumentally motivational as to learn mainly for passing the painstaking exams.

Brown (2004) states that students can and do ignore our teaching while learning a course, yet most of them have to go through our assessment to meet the requirement and get their expectant credits or qualifications. "The ways we assess our students can really make a difference to how students learn." (Brown, 2004, p. 88), because "assessment is probably the most important thing we teachers can do to help our students learn" (Brown, 2004, p. 81). Moreover, students can perform a variety of assessment tasks in ways (e. g., self assessment and peer assessment) which both save the tutor's time and bring educational benefits, especially the development of their own judgement skills (Rust, 2001). These students' participatory assessments help to make assessments as part of their learning process, and may help students make significant preparation for life and work beyond academia by shifting "emphasis



from the acquisition of knowledge to the acquisition of skills, from product to process, from grading to competence, all these have significant implications for assessment strategies" (Brown et al., 1994, p. 4). These are all positive backwash effects of assessments, which can be achieved if the assessment is aligned to what students are expected to be learning as designed in the curriculum, and if "students perceive that their understanding of the subject is rewarded through the assessment, then 'deep' learning is more likely to take place" (Brown et al., 1994, p. 4).

However, the backwash can become negative "when the assessment determines what and how students learn more than the curriculum does" (Biggs, 2003a, p. 140). Students orient their activities to optimize results on assessments that they think will be carried out so that they make their studies mainly or only for assessment (Ellis, 2007). For instance, objective formats of assessment, like true-false, multiple-choice, matching items from two lists, usually encourage students to memorize many unconnected facts and even guess whatever is expected to be right with game-playing strategies without deeply learning, really understanding or practically applying the knowledge or information, though covering wider range of what is taught and being reliable as ever (Biggs, 2003a).

Race (1999) argues how students treat their learning depends on the nature and formats of assessment. If the assessment is well aligned with the intended outcome of deep learning, the assessment can be used to promote deeper approaches to learning, and to guarantee or even improve the quality of students' learning. Race (1999, p. 70) concludes that "assessment innovations are the best way forward in researching and evaluating the effects of assessment on the two most vital factors involved: the quality of students' learning and the validity of their qualifications." For these reasons it is advisable for teachers in higher education to take full advantage of our assessment and make it positively influence students to adopt effective strategies to efficiently learn what is required as expected. It is significant for teachers to make our assessments fit for the purpose (Brown, 2004). It is also important for us to consider not only what to assess, but when, where, why and how to assess (Brown, 2004) so that we can appropriately encourage students to adopt appropriate approaches (e. g. deep learning, task-based learning, problem-based learning and collaborative learning) to learn what is required. It may even be worthwhile for us to make assessments for learning at the cost of less reliability with open-ended test questions, on the ground that it is still better than making learning just for examinations.

Subjectively formatted tests with open-ended questions and essay writing tasks, though being of less reliability compared with objective tests of multiple choices (McDaniel, 2014), are rewarding by leading students to consistently making efforts to learn rather than relying on rote-learning with the last-minute effort (Sambell et al., 1997, Struyven et al., 2005). Struyven et al. (2005) comments that on multiple-choice tests, students who are trained with multiple-choice tests and expect to take tests of multiple-choice items do not perform quite differently from those who practise and anticipate tests of free-response items. On free-response tests,

those with free response do significantly better than those with multiple choices.

Although self assessment and peer assessment are not always as effective as expected (Brown, 2004), such assessments can be used to help reduce the overloaded work of teachers with large classes and provide more individualised feedback to students than they would get from the teacher alone. According to the estimation of Boud, 1986 (in Biggs, 2003, p. 197) "self / peer assessment can cut the teacher's load by at least one-third." Gibbs, 1999 (in Biggs, 2003, p. 197), "in his 'Case of the Pharmacist', cut marking time for the teacher by 18 hours a week by using peer assessment, ..." Moreover, with the metacognition and practice of self assessment and peer assessment, students may grow more aware of their own learning (Hacker, 1998), become more willing to and able to improve their own learning and support their peers' learning (Klenowski et al., 2006). In the meantime, with their comprehension, application and experience of the assessment criteria, students may verify their conception of and approaches to learning while strategically adjust their learning approach (Scouller and Prosser 1994; Entwistle and Entwistle 1997; Scouller 1998, Gibbs 1992). Biggs (1999) suggests that assessment formats do produce backwash and positive backwash may result from the alignment of assessment format and teaching objective. Studies by Craddock et. al (2009) disclose that the nature of assessment affects students' perception and experience of learning, self and peer assessments, as part of formative assessment, exert a greater effect on students' learning process than summative assessment. In self and peer assessments, students are willing and courageous enough to display their strengths and weaknesses, to offer and accept reciprocal feedbacks, learn from each other and make progress together along. Assessment and feedback are treated as central to learning and to the student's experience (Gibbs, 1992; Thomson and Falchikov, 1998), which makes students more involved in assessing their own and peers' learning process and outcome (Boyd and Cowan, 1985; Biggs, 2003a; Falchikov, 2005; Baty, 2006).

It may be beneficial to treat assessment as a regular self-reflection, a beneficial interaction between students, a mutual learning among peers, and as an effective way to analyze the current performance and to make greater achievement (Boud, 1995b; Boud et al., 1997). Assessment can serve as a tool for developing students' learning while measuring their performance, for assessment in higher education functions as a judgement of students' qualification for the credits or credentials as well as a diagnosis and promotion for their further learning (Boud, 1995a; Boud et al., 1997). This is also in conformity with how Boud (2000) defines sustainable assessment, "... assessment that meets the needs of the present and prepares students to meet their future learning needs".



Gibbs & Simpson (2004) listed 10 conditions under which assessment supports students' learning:

1. Sufficient assessed tasks are provided for students to capture sufficient study time.
2. These tasks are engaged with by students, orienting them to allocate appropriate amounts of time and effort to the most important aspects of the course.
3. Tackling the assessed task engages students in productive learning activity of an appropriate kind.
4. Sufficient feedback is provided, both often enough and in enough detail.
5. The feedback focuses on students' performance, on their learning and on actions under the students' control, rather than on the students themselves and on their characteristics.
6. The feedback is timely in that it is received by students while it still matters to them and in time for them to pay attention to further learning or receive further assistance.
7. Feedback is appropriate to the purpose of the assignment and to its criteria for success.
8. Feedback is appropriate, in relation to students' understanding of what they are supposed to be doing.
9. Feedback is received and attended to.
10. Feedback is acted upon by the student. (p. 12-24)

These ten conditions may serve as a framework for teachers to examine the effectiveness of their own assessment practice, and more importantly, for me to design and carry out my research under way.

Being supportive teachers, we assess students mainly for motivating students to learn more, creating more favorable learning activities or atmosphere, identifying strengths and weaknesses of our teaching by getting timely feedback from students, identifying strengths and weaknesses of students by giving our regular feedback to students, formulating feed-forward for how to improve existent teaching and learning, and to ensure the desirable quality (Brown et al., 1994). Unfortunately, these positive aspects of assessment are not the norm in Advanced English course in YAU. Based on the instructive and enlightening ideas as aggregated and reviewed above, I decided to appraise my assessment of Advanced English course and develop new forms of self assessment, peer assessment and subjective assessment.

Section 2 Self Assessment and Its Backwash Effect upon Students

According to Boud (1991), self-assessment refers to “the involvement of students in i-



identifying standards and/or criteria to apply to their work, and making judgements about the extent to which they have met these criteria and standards.” (p. 5). In other words, self-assessment means the assessment of learners by themselves, which “is usually concerned with the making of judgement about specific aspects of achievement often in ways which are publicly defensible”, with the assessment process being completely open and transparent (Brew, 1999).

Black and William (1998) assert that “self assessment by the student is not an interesting option or luxury; it has to be seen as essential” to the learning process (p. 54-55). In self-assessment, students are encouraged to monitor their own progress by the ongoing checking of their performance against the objectives and learning outcomes of a course, as such students are given more and more responsibility for their own learning (Boud, 1995b). Sedikides (1993) suggests that the self assessment motive will prompt people to seek information to confirm their uncertain self-concept rather than their certain self-concept and at the same time people use self assessment to enhance their certainty of their own self-knowledge.

Munns and Woodward (2006) state that self assessment can have a positive impact on students’ attitudes to their learning because it urges them to take more control over their own learning and helps them to learn about the value of their work. They also warn that grades from self assessment alone, without reasonable feedback for their own improvement, will not naturally bring about such gains, even ego-focused feedback may still become detrimental to students’ learning, especially low-achieving students. So it is quite necessary to provide students with proper training in self assessment, which may cultivate students in their present and lifelong learning (Sadler, 1989). This warning has reminded me of my regular intervention or timely examination of and feedback to my students’ self assessment, especially in the beginning of implementation.

Self assessment can be a comprehensive, systematic, regular and transparent review of students’ own performance to discern clearly their strengths and weaknesses (Race, 2001). With the practice of self assessment, students may make further progress to enhance their strengths and make remedial or adjustable efforts to make up for their weaknesses, in which improvement can be made and culminates in planned improvement actions which are then monitored for progress. In the process of self assessment, students may radically change their original perspective of conventionally tutor assessment with students as victims, and get a critical understanding of how assessment is done (Brew, 1999). These ideas have strengthened my confidence in designing self assessment for Advanced English course in YAU, making assessment “of learning, for learning and as learning” (Earl, 2003, p. 21), and helping my students change their attitude toward self assessment and take a deep learning strategy for Advanced English course.

Self assessment can also be formative and diagnostic. Brew (1999) and Nicol (2010) state that in self assessment, students not only make self evaluation and reflection based on the objective of the subject and personal expectation or needs, but also make contribution to their