

Gustavo Córdoba González\*

# Assessment in English Language Classrooms: Constructing and Empowering Meaningful Learning

**Palabras clave:** evaluación-investigación, enseñanza de lenguas, inteligencias múltiples, estilos de aprendizaje, diversidad.

## RESUMEN

El artículo enfoca al estudiante como centro del proceso educativo en lengua extranjera y a la evaluación-investigación como medio para estimular a los y las estudiantes a construir y empoderar su propio aprendizaje. Se analiza brevemente el papel de los métodos y técnicas de evaluación tradicional para llegar a la conclusión de que éstos sirven a la función de transmisión de información pero, por su naturaleza excluyente, dejan de lado procesos más importantes que se deben gestar al interno de la escuela para apoyar cualquier aprendizaje significativo.

Los métodos y técnicas de evaluación-investigación se deben articular con las características de cada estudiante (las diferentes formas en que aprende y percibe el mundo, el bagaje cultural y lingüístico, el género), con el campo de estudio (tanto contenidos preestablecidos de la enseñanza de la lengua, como el aporte que hacen las disciplinas como la lingüística, la sociolingüística, la psicolingüística, la pedagogía, la didáctica) y con la realidad socio-histórica (los grandes retos que demandan de la educación la democracia, la libertad, la equidad, la justicia).

**Key words:** assessment, language teaching, multiple intelligences, learning styles, diversity.

## ABSTRACT

Throughout this paper, and avoiding prescriptions, the role of students is defined as the center of the language teaching-learning process, and assessment as the means for helping students constructing and empowering their own learning. The role of traditional evaluation methods and techniques is shortly analyzed to conclude that these methods and techniques work well for data transmission but, because of their inherent exclusion factor, they cannot get focused on more important processes that have to be motivated at the interior of schools in order to promote meaningful learning.

Assessment methods and techniques integrate individual characteristics (the different ways in which individuals learn and perceive the world, the cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the gender), the subject matter (both established contents from language teaching, the considerations from the fields of linguistics, pedagogy, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, didactics), and the socio-historical reality (the educational challenges that democracy, liberty, equity, and justice demand from education).

There are countries in which the educational system serves for the purpose of certifying the accomplishment or fulfillment of certain requisites which respond to governmental and international policies. Graduating from school, in turn, will allow people to incorporate to labor force in "better" conditions than those who failed in formal schooling. Following this, the evaluation proposals have served as an exclusion-inclusion tool that determines who approves or who does not approve a subject or subjects, on the basis of appraising the quality of learning and knowledge of an individual or of a group of people by examinations.

Evaluation has been construed as testing or exams. In this sense, evaluation and tests have become synonyms, while tests are one –and only one– type of evaluation. Moreover, since behaviorist trends, fully influenced by pragmatism and positivism, placed a big deal of importance to "scientific evaluation", government educational authorities, teachers, students, parents, and many others, totally rely on tests results as a way to demonstrate how well or how poor a student has learned what he or she studied. This has made of tests the most –if not the only– evaluation technique applied in a teaching-learning process.

\* M. Ed, Profesor de Inglés, UCR. Sede de Occidente. guacor@costarricense.cr

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The purpose of this article is to present a series of arguments on favor of assessment; an evaluation process that promotes and helps construct learning in the foreign language classroom on the bases of democracy, justice, liberty and equity. First, the traditional concepts of evaluation and testing are discussed in order to show how they are reduced to measurement which, by no means, help students correct what they are not doing well. Second, assessment is explained and contrasted to some other proposals where the traditional concept of evaluation is hidden. Next, the author supports the idea that if teachers want to change traditional evaluation trends, it is necessary to construct a more participative model for teaching-learning, in which evaluation turns into a systematic gathering of information that will allow students construct their own learning. Finally, there are some assessment methods, techniques, and strategies samples using MEP's "Programa de Estudio Educación Diversificada" objectives for English. At this point, schoolwork, students own characteristics, knowledge, and evaluation are included into an assessment proposal in order to show the way how the socio-historical conditions can be directly related to each other. In this way, evaluation gets a new meaning.

To evaluate is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary of American English (2000:291), as *"To judge or calculate the quality, importance, amount, or value of (something)"*. The Webster's II New Riverside Dictionary; Webber (1984:240), defines the same word as *"1. To determine the value of. 2. To examine carefully: appraise."*

In both cases, evaluation is referred to as a calculation, a judgment, an examination, or a determination of value, the quality, or the importance (of something). The words used in these definitions imply a certain degree of process: in order to examine, to determine, to judge, or to calculate, one has to follow certain steps which suggest more a process than a momentary action.

Moreover, in Zephyr Press (1999:vii), evaluation in education is defined as *"The process of making a value judgment about the worth of something. May or may not be based on measurements or test results."* The use of the word "process" in the definition forcefully refers to periods of time following steps or methods in order to gather information to judge, to value, to calculate, or to determine. On the other hand, the possibility of basing or not such judgments, determinations, examinations, calculations, on test results or measurements, opens the possibility to understand different things depending on

individual believes, definitions, preferences, or assumptions about what education is.

When the teacher's purpose is to "grade" (measure) students, teachers only have to apply tests at certain periods of time during the process. When the teacher's purpose is other than grading students, then, selecting a testing or an evaluation technique or strategy, for a language course, may not result in an easy task.

With regard to evaluating students' work throughout the process, the options for techniques and strategies are wider as functions and purposes they may have. In this case, besides inquiring about the function and purpose of testing and evaluating students, the discussion should be centered around the idea of helping students improve their language abilities, their proficiency and their performance; instead of centering the discussion on the so-frequent teacher-centered questions: What is the best technique? Or What is the most appropriate for "my course and me"? As Hughes (1989:6) warns:

*"...in fact, there is no best test or best technique. A test which proves ideal for one purpose may be quite useless for another; a technique which may work very well in one situation can be entirely inappropriate in another... the assumption that has to be made therefore is that each testing situation is unique and so sets a particular testing problem."*

Those "particular testing problems" arise when teachers face the uniqueness of their students: each individual reacts differently to learning and to evaluation, we all learn in several different ways; thereby, evaluation must consider those differences. Indeed, when selecting a testing technique, decisions should be student-centered and not teacher-centered. That is, a central question when deciding a testing or evaluation technique is how to help students with that technique instead of placing teachers' interests when selecting it.

There is a variety of evaluation techniques and strategies. They have been constructed from different perspectives and not only student-centered. Hughes summarizes testing and evaluation depending on the different functions and purposes they have: (Ibid. 9-19)

**"Diagnostic tests** are used to identify students' strengths and weaknesses. They are intended primarily to ascertain what further teaching is necessary... **Achievement tests** are directly

related to language courses, their purpose being to establish how successful individual students, groups of students, or the courses themselves have been in achieving objectives... **Proficiency tests** are designed to measure people's ability in a language regardless of any training they may have had in that language... **Placement tests** are intended to provide information which will help to place students at the stage... of the teaching programme most appropriate to their abilities... **Direct testing** requires the candidate to perform precisely the skill which we want to measure... **Indirect testing** attempts to measure the ability which *underlie* the skills in which we are interested... **Discrete point tests** refers to the testing of one element at a time, item by item... **Integrative testing** requires the candidate to combine many language elements in the completion of a task... **Norm-referenced tests** relate one candidate's performance to that of another candidates... **Criterion referenced tests'** purpose is to classify people according to whether or not they are able to perform some task or set of tasks satisfactorily... in **Objective testing** no judgment is required on the part of the scorer... in **Subjective testing** judgment is called for... **Communicative language testing** [specific purpose is to measure] the ability to take part in acts of communication... and on the best way to do this."

Practical and technical considerations suggest that evaluators (teachers) must define; who they are going to evaluate (pre school, school, university, Attention Deficit Disorder), how they are going to make the evaluation (oral, written, task), when they are going to apply it (each month, every term), what they are going to evaluate (all material studied, part of it, extra material given during the process, one or more skills), and how or by which means (Communicative language testing, direct or integrative testing). Some other theorists may add why (to reinforce, to accredit, to check), either as the first question or as the last one.

Consequently with the quantity of testing and evaluation kinds, teachers have a variety of options to evaluate (to judge, to calculate, to determine, or to

examine) students' performance, abilities, and capabilities during a learning process, so that they would have a better base for decision-making in order to apply a norm-referenced test<sup>1</sup> at a determined time of a process. Therefore, one should assume that language courses are plenty of different evaluation techniques in order to, on one hand, have a clearer idea about students' performance and language skills, on the other hand, offer students a possibility to improve what they are doing not so well before taking a test.

However, and as a matter of experience easily proved as true, in most cases only a few of those testing and evaluation techniques are used. In some other cases, only norm-referenced tests are applied at the end of a period. Thereby, those tests represent the only "feedback" students have in order to determine how well or how poor they are performing, learning, or studying. According to Briones (1998:47) in norm-referenced tests, "each student's individual result does not indicate which objectives have not been developed adequately... knowing results does not allow the student to establish an individual correction strategy." (translated by the author)

It is true that for some teachers, evaluation of the learning process means just an exam. The reasons for tests to exist is not just a matter of knowing how well students have learned what teachers have taught, but it is also totally related to accreditation and exclusion policies agreed by governments and international organizations<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand,

"Students have made of evaluation a myth: because of it, they qualify teachers, they rank subject matters, and they only perceive the learning process according to the factors related to evaluation... students focus their learning on evaluation: far from being a motivating mechanisms, it does not motivates..." (Álvarez, 1997:124. translated by the author)

Evidently, *measurement*<sup>3</sup> is the most common evaluation procedure in English oral courses and it may not necessarily imply a process. This frequently becomes the most problematic aspect in those courses which, first, reduce testing and evaluation to measurement –assigning grades–. Second, grades may not necessarily represent

1 The norm-referenced test is the most commonly applied evaluation type in the Costa Rican school system. It measures general performance of students in specific subjects; though, it does not work well to examine, measure, or judge students' total range of capabilities or abilities. It serves for the purpose of excluding students from the school system (see Díaz Barriga, in Badilla, L, 1996).  
2 See Badilla; L. (1996).  
3 "A procedure of assigning numbers... to a specified attribute or characteristic of persons in such a way that the numbers describe the degree to which the persons possess the attribute. (in Zephyr Press 1999:vii)

any positive feedback for students; thereby, students may not have any idea about what aspects to improve or how to improve their weaknesses. Third, it results in a **harmful backwash**<sup>4</sup> because when students get various low grades "in a row", their motivation decreases (on the contrary, a few of them are motivated to get a better grade next time). And fourth, because all of the above, and as stated by Puhl (1997:2), "Traditional ways of testing, such as essay or multiple choice exams, can sample only a fraction of what we want to produce". Besides, evaluation –of this type– results in the exclusion of students because their different learning styles, intelligences, abilities, capabilities. Furthermore, cultures<sup>5</sup> are not taken into account and cannot be taken into account in a simple test without resulting in an exaggerated amount of work for the teacher.

As stated before, the possibility of basing or not judgments, determinations, examinations, or calculations, on measurements or test results leads to a wide range of possibilities to select methodologies and techniques, based upon individual assumptions, definitions, preferences, or beliefs about what education is.

The assumption of evaluating students in a way that can help them learn is based upon a desire of change. And more than a desire, this idea is based upon a theoretical framework in which students are of paramount importance in their own learning. Obviously, they are not going to be at school all their lives and they are not going to have a teacher next door every time a problem arises.

As Lafourcade (1998:3-7) comments in the introduction of his book, several experiences have shown that schools with poorer conditions have made a lot of more progress than others which have improved syllabuses, more school days, and have more and better books and teaching materials. He remarks that, in order to solve the problem of quality, "there are more complex processes in the institution to pay attention to" than

having the latest technological advance, the newest teaching approach, or the best books.

In spite of any good intention or careful planning, changes will not come from methodologies or techniques for teaching contents. Evidently, changes have not (and they will not) come from innovations in curricular content or design either. Besides, in most cosmetic proposals evaluation has remained the same –the purpose is still assigning grades, excluding/selecting "worse/better" students– what makes changes unreal. On the contrary, teachers have to develop a deep and thoughtful understanding on such topics as wealth and labor distribution, economic and social inclusion-exclusion, political participation (to name a few<sup>6</sup>), in order to give a base to a more realistic plan for a change.

Accordingly to some more realistic proposals, changes in education outcomes will only be possible if teachers change their mind –they have to learn to teach in a different way and for different purposes<sup>7</sup>–. Consequently, if teaching in a different way, teachers have to evaluate differently too. One of the many different ways that there may be in order to change evaluation, as it is thought in the technological education model, is centered on the discussion about the purpose and function of this –as stated before, schoolwork and evaluation have to be student centered–.

Placing students right at the center of the teaching-learning process<sup>8</sup> means, to a large degree, that they become more active participants, even in the evaluation process. Accordingly, it becomes an imperative for teachers to let students learn to evaluate their own progress as well as to determine when they are not doing things well. On the other hand, when students are more important than contents, then, evaluation cannot just focus on contents but it places more interest in the subjects –the students– and their individualities<sup>9</sup>. As Pérez et al (2000:123) state:

4 "A negative effect of testing on teaching and learning." It can also be positive depending on the technique or strategy used. See: Hughes, 1989:1.

5 An important and inevitable discussion. For relevant and different points of view see: Apple; M. W. (2001, p. 57-64). Olmedo España (comp., 1997). Córdoba; C. (2002).

6 See: Apple; M. W. (1979); Apple; M. W. (1982); Silva, Tomaz Tadeu Da. (1995). Ayuste et al. (1999).

7 One of the most important discussions to start changes is related to the idea we have constructed around what intelligence and knowledge are. Evidently, up to this moment, it is possible to state that "intelligence" and "knowledge", in the school system, are taken like "objects that can be measured". The challenge, in order to start teaching and evaluating in a different way, is to understand them as a social construction which have the purpose of helping human kind change and solve the problems in order to construct a more and true democratic society.

8 The proposal presented here is likely framed as in the "spontaneous approach" –as stated in Porlán; R. (2000)–, although, not as anarchist as in Porlán's book because in this paper proposal there are preplanned objectives, contents, evaluation activities, and learning strategies on the base of teacher's decision. The author of this article considers as non realistic to propose a similar anarchist model for teaching-learning and evaluating, mainly because the Costa Rican public school system, at the moment this lines are being written, is not ready to develop it.

9 For an interesting discussion about "individualities" (diversity) see: Alcudia et al. (2000).

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"For one person, it is not valid to describe the quality of learning in terms of what should be learned as a general rule. Everyone has a personal rhythm, a personal style, interests and expectations and the quality should take into account these considerations". (Translated by the author)

Students' active involvement in the process of learning and evaluating, demands from teachers the design of different techniques, strategies, and tools to provide the most helpful information for them to know about the different tasks they will have to perform (it is not only requiring students to do the things a teacher plans but letting students take their own decisions about how to get organized, and how to perform or develop a task); so to offer them a key to judge their own progress, from the point of view of individual differences as stated by Pérez et al. In this sense, one important side of evaluation has to be sought as tools, strategies, and techniques to inform, to provide, to help, to judge, to determine, to appraise all along the process of learning, in and out the classroom.

Therefore, evaluation strategies and techniques must be used in order to promote learning instead of measuring it. Besides, the more participative the construction of those strategies and techniques, the more conscious students will become about their own role in the classroom and outside of it; negotiating "what students are expected to do" will, somehow, bridge the poisonous strategy of teaching students they have to act as someone else planned they are expected to do.

The discussion presented in the previous pages proves that applying only traditional testing does not help teachers to get to know what students can really do, to what extent they have learned what they are required to do, and to what extent they have gone further from what was taught in class. On the other hand, applying traditional methods or techniques for testing effectively and without excluding students, results in a huge amount of work before and after the test. This results in minimizing effective teaching. Finally, from the application of such testing and evaluation techniques students do not receive any feedback. Thus, if the intention of testing and

evaluating is other than assigning grades, deciding who "passes" or who flunks the course; then, there is a need for an alternative evaluation technique or strategy that can match pedagogical interests, empower students learning, and allow teachers and students to get focussed on paramount aspects that need to be improved or motivated in schools. The process through which more practical, realistic, motivating, and empowering techniques and strategies have to be framed is called **assessment**.

### **Assessment: Helping Students Construct Meaningful Learning.**

Assessment, as evaluation, is differently understood depending on individual beliefs, definitions, preferences, or assumptions about what education is.

Following the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (1996) definition, assessment is a systematic gathering of information about students' performance that enables teachers to monitor their learning, in order to use that information to communicate with students, parents, and others, in order to improve students' learning.

Just by reading these lines one gets the impression that the content is promising for a student-centered process, but the whole proposal is aimed at content and performance standards<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, the application of such concepts as "Authentic Assessment" (activities that have to be performed as in real life<sup>11</sup>) and "Performance Assessment" (student-created products that reflect student's learning<sup>12</sup>) might hinder students' ability to perform according to their own possibilities, likes, preferences, interests, intelligences, learning styles and expectations.

In this case, assessment is yet a matter of teachers' business, students are still the *object* of investigation who are not actively involved in the process, and the assessment techniques and strategies support the idea of a selective school in which students have to demonstrate their abilities to reach curriculum and content standards under teachers guidance.

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10 The concept of standards in the quoted proposal is a synonym as understood in behaviorist tradition, in which every student has to perform a determined, observable, and measurable behavior in spite of any difference in schooling and cultural backgrounds, different intelligences and learning styles, or socio-economical condition, to name a few.

11 The question here goes around social and cultural matters: The assessment is created by teachers and "authorities"; so, what should be a "real-life activity" for a rural school might become certainly different for an urban or private school. This recreates a continuum in socio-economical exclusion/inclusion conditions that contradicts the democracy and equity spirit of opportunities in education. In this sense, see: McLaren; Peter. (1997). Silva; Tomaz Tadeu Da. (1995).

12 The problem with this is basing an evaluation on final products -as norm-referenced tests- and obviating the whole process that a student follows in order to "perform the product". Although these products are created by students, the tasks and the conditions under those products are created are defined by others but by the students themselves.

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From the author's point of view, assessment in education becomes closely related to what Ruiz (2000:18) proposes as "a structured and reflexive process of analysis that allows the comprehension of the... object of study to utter value judgments about it, which supply information to improve the teaching-learning process"<sup>13</sup>, (translated by the author). Moreover, assessment is not only gathering information about **what** students are learning, but **also** gathering information about how students are learning, and about the strategies they use in order to construct their learning, in order to **have** a clearer idea about the **environment**<sup>14</sup> in which learning is taking place. In this case, during the application of assessment, errors and mistakes **have** to be taken as enriching learning experiences for which students and teachers must be **analytical**, at the same time, teachers must avoid measuring-punishing them.

The role of teachers switches from "helping" students get the accommodations to school life, to helping students become aware of their own process of learning, while being thoughtful about the environment in which learning is occurring. Likewise, contents are not the goals per se. The focus of evaluation also switches from contents to more important and more complex processes that take place in the classroom and in the way toward learning.

In this sense, group work; research abilities and strategies; critical thinking; socialization; respect toward others' gender, ethnicity, opinions, language; self-sufficiency and negotiation strategies (determining-testing: own goals, methods, strategies and techniques for a specific purpose, discussing and agreeing about different ways to develop a task); among others, become central processes to develop, at the same time teachers and students are learning about different topics too.

Structuring such strategies and techniques demand from teachers careful and thoughtful planning, getting to know students well, a deep understanding of macro and micro economical and socio-historical conditions and the way in which those aspects are related to the subject matter the professional is teaching, in this case, language.

Following this and avoiding being prescriptive, there are three major "fields of action" in which assessment helps students construct their learning: the individual characteristics, the subject matter, and the economical and socio-historical conditions. The degree of dependency of each of these fields on the others suggests the development of more integrated assessment instruments, techniques, and strategies instead of separated items.

The individual characteristics are those that define the way in which every person learns and perceives the **world**<sup>15</sup>. **Also**, the socio-cultural background<sup>16</sup> which to a large extent influences the other characteristics and determines such aspects as **likes, preferences** and attitudes; the linguistic background which determines and conditions the communication –the way a student might negotiate meaning for every activity in the school–; and the gender which mostly determines the way individuals react toward certain topics or activities in and out the classroom, including turn taking –**who** starts an activity and **who** speaks more in a conversation– **what** topics to talk about, and many others.

The subject matter refers to the skills and the knowledge belonging to the specific field of study. In this case, foreign language skills are to be developed based upon the sociolinguistic, metalinguistic, psycholinguistic, linguistic, didactic and pedagogical considerations. The field of study knowledge is not only referred to as "content" (**both**, the specific topics that meet the Ministerio de Educación Pública demands and expectations, and the specific topics of more student-centered interests and expectations), but also as the way in which language teaching may construct a more critical and communicative society from the perspective of multilingualism.

The economical and socio-historical conditions<sup>17</sup> are those demands that any society needs to fulfill in order to construct democracy, **liberty, equity, and justice** to face globalization in a less disadvantageous social base. To a large extent education has to respond and satisfy those

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13 The proposal is originally done for institutional evaluation. In spite of this, this definition well applies for the purpose of framing assessment as a process to which information and the thoughtful analysis of it will improve the teaching-learning process and more important processes that take place in schools.

14 Environment is meant as the different factors (individual, social, economical, physical, metaphysical, brain, body) that are directly related to learning and the purposes of schools.

15 For a more detailed description of such characteristics, see: Gardner; Howard. (2a Ed.). (1999). Gardner; H. Kornhaber; M. & Wake; W. (2000). Also, there are good samples of assessment for M.I. in Yunian & Ness (1999b). P. 105-129. (though, for this last title be aware of the goals proposed in the USA educational system are based on standards and final products).

16 For an excellent example (though not from Costa Rican schools) about these characteristic, see: Peter Woods & Martyn Hammersley, *compiladores*, 1995.

17 With regard to teaching and evaluating contents and the discussion about taking into consideration the socio-historical conditions, it is a good idea to check: Freire; Paulo. (1973). Alas; Higinio. (1979). Gutiérrez; Francisco. (1984).

demands in a way that the conditions cited above can be constructed. The different ways in which history and economy are interwoven and create social conditions and demands for education, have to be articulated through a thoughtful analysis in which education and knowledge serve for social change, instead of serving for the instruction of a "well-prepared" labor force.

### Assessment Methods, Techniques, and Strategies

As stated before, in order to structure assessment strategies and techniques, teachers' careful and thoughtful analysis of a series of situations that strongly influence education –though not all of them understood as a matter related to teaching– is a must.

Due to the fact that the development of assessment instruments cannot be a prescriptive activity, there is a need for the development of methods of analysis instead of "recipes" for constructing assessment techniques and strategies. In this way, the individual learning styles, the cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the economical and socio-historical conditions and demands, the gender –among others– can be included through more unique, realistic, and integrative methods and techniques.

From the author's point of view, a method<sup>18</sup> is, (in general terms), a series of steps in order to reach an objective. The objective in this case is to help students construct and empower meaningful learning; that is, organize the pedagogical experiences in a way that individuals can live and construct democracy, liberty, equity, and justice as one consequence of the experiences organized in the school. Accordingly, contents, or the pieces of information that some teachers intend to name "knowledge", are no longer the objective but the vehicle to construct more important processes in the school; therefore, assessment should be used to empower and construct them, not to measure or grade them.

But this proposal, and any proposal that seeks a change, faces the problem of lacking the "familiarity factor". This is, people are used to school routines and to school culture; so, it is not easy (and it has never been), to make people familiar to a different, probably new, way of working and evaluating.

As stated by Álvarez (1997:125), "It is observed, in general terms, the concept of evaluation as a grade, as a

final test, and as a quantitative result; meanwhile, evaluation is not perceived as part of the learning process." (translated by the author). Consequently, the application of assessment strategies and techniques has another main objective –as long as constructing meaningful learning– which is to construct a new culture of evaluation; otherwise, assessment forms will be sought as tests or quizzes that will not give any other important result than a grade. The ways toward changing this may be varied and creative according to different communities, schools, teachers, and students, to name a few.

One of the first steps in a methodology for assessment might be a thoughtful analysis of students' "individuality" and of the economical and socio-historical conditions. Among the many methodologies to apply, in the case of the "individuality" analysis; psychology, linguistics and sociology contribute from their different approaches to analyze that "major field of action". In the case of economical and socio-historical conditions: history, economy, anthropology, and sociology make their contribution too. Following this, such a difficult task demands the integration of an interdisciplinary team; e.g.: the language teacher, a social studies teacher, a science teacher, a counselor, a community leader, parents and students, and probably some institutions as IAFA<sup>19</sup>, the Ministerio de la condición de la mujer, PANI<sup>20</sup>, and so on.

Probably, the first image that comes to mind is a "team meeting" but evidently, it is not only difficult to gather all the people but also, it is difficult for a teacher to have time to develop this activity and for parents and community leaders too. But, the idea is that the teacher can join their "voices" through research. Therefore, the research (intended to be a formal activity), should be carried out through conversations, the direct study of problems in the community and in the school, reading and gathering information about the different problems that strike Costa Rican communities, attending community meetings and specialized speeches about the topics among the many possibilities that there may be.

In other words, teachers have to become, if not community activists, at least well informed individuals whose community problems knowledge, perception, and understanding, allow them to take decisions on how to join their language teaching with the reality in which they are working and living.

18 For a more detailed description and wider discussion, see: Buendía Eisman; Leonor et al. (1998). Taylor; S.J. & Bogdan; R. (1987). Juan MI. Delgado y Juan Gutiérrez, coordinadores (SF). Dos Santos Filho; José Camilo. & Sánchez Gamboa; Silvio Ancizar. (1997).

19 IAFA stands for Instituto de Alcoholismo y Farnacodependencia.

20 PANI stands for Patronato Nacional de la Infancia.

Once having identified the different conditions in the community and in the school –positive and problematic ones– it follows the analysis of the way in which the subject matter (language teaching) and the other fields can be articulated. For example, by deciding a community problem, such as drug addiction, teachers have to develop the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> cognitive targets (“Our democratic tradition” and “Career, jobs and lifestyles”<sup>21</sup>) to 10<sup>th</sup> graders, a language teacher can construct a learning experience in which students can have contact with ideas about how our “democratic tradition”; because of many socio-economical reasons as budget limitations and the application of IMF and WB economical policies and demands for our country; segregates groups of young people who cannot find a well-paid job. And also, how the same “democratic tradition” causes, to rich and poor families, different problems which build a base for drug addiction and alcoholism that affect careers, jobs, and their healthy life styles.

In this sense, and just to add one idea about the many ways in which assessment can work, the techniques and strategies will be devoted to, first, help students construct their learning in cognitive, metacognitive, and social terms. Second, and based upon cognitive considerations, assessment will support the analysis of errors or mistakes (in linguistic terms) about the language, avoiding being punitive. Third, assessment will help students realize about their metacognitive processes by supporting the many ways a language has to be practiced or used –not studied– and by helping students identify their positive strategies to practice a language. And fourth, based upon social considerations, assessment will support the discussion and analysis of prejudices, beliefs, and assumptions about –following the example– drug addicts. In this way, assessment will support the deconstruction of socially established stigmas and prejudices.

Assessment techniques and strategies for cognitive construction may vary according to the characteristics of teachers, students, groups, and to the environment. In general terms, and as only one possibility among the many others, one assessment technique can consist of a self and co-evaluation form in which the student and a classmate analyze their oral production following certain rubrics<sup>22</sup> that will enable them to think about the best way

to communicate their ideas, and why what was intended to be communicated failed in its purpose. On the other hand, an assessment strategy might consist of applying different techniques after the lesson, as a homework, say a reaction for a portfolio, a composition to be read the next class.

One assessment strategy for metacognitive construction may be giving students a variety of options (games, readings, songs) to study; at the same time, they have to analyze which one works better than the others for the purpose of learning, say vocabulary. The technique that can be applied along with this strategy might be grouping students according to their “likeness” in preferences of options. Then, let them discuss about the different things they do and work better for learning when they study. At the same time, let them do the same in the class while they write a composition<sup>23</sup> about their process of learning.

A strategy, from the thousands there may be, for assessing social construction can consist of a discussion in English about the ways in which learning –what they learned during the class, unit, or month– has changed or not their minds about prejudices (with spontaneous uses of Spanish for those words they do not know but they need in order to complete their thoughts). Another example is to determine the way in which learning has helped them in the construction of ideas about how to change their lives, to finally develop a realistic plan to: change a situation (school garbage); inform the community about a problem (a pig farm contaminating a river, a hotel company deforesting); attend a community group in order to support it, get more informed and involved in the activities the group organizes, or avoid having drug problems (AA group, church groups). A technique may be to develop a written plan to perform one of the many activities in which knowledge allows them to construct a different world, based upon democracy, liberty, justice, and equity.

In conclusion, the application of assessment techniques in Costa Rican public schools demands from teachers a deeper understanding of those important processes that occur in the school. Thereby, teachers' concern about their subjects should not be focused on contents per se, but they must focus on how to help students

21 Taken from Ministerio de Educación Pública. Programa de estudios Educación Diversificada, Inglés 2001.

22 The idea is to construct rubrics based on such linguistic trends in which language variety is a positive aspect of every society, instead of supporting the imposition of one variety over the others.

23 Compositions can be written in English or Spanish according to students' language abilities and skills. The most important aspect here is to let students think about the way that better suits their learning styles and intelligences, at the same time they can use the language they know and use different forms too.



construct and empower learning, as well as building a road to connect language, economical and socio-historical conditions, and the individuals who are learning. In this sense, assessment becomes an excellent process to help students construct and empower their own learning.

Undoubtedly, the very first task to develop is to change the "evaluation culture" that we—the teachers—have constructed along the years. The opposition to this kind of ideas is enormous from part of the government authorities, some students, most parents, most principals, and many teachers; however, there is always a space for cultural resistance and for the utopia of justice, equity, democracy, and liberty.

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