

Monitoring Assessments toward the Development of Transformative Learning for Iraqi College Students

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Abstract: Transformational kind of learning has two basic types: instrumental and communicative. Instrumental learning focuses on learning through task-oriented problem solving and determination of cause and effect relationships. Communicative learning, on the other hand, involves how individuals communicate their feelings, needs, and desires. Both kinds of transformational learning have a little outlet in most English Departments in Iraqi universities, where students study for the sake of final exams rather than developing skills that will help them in their real life outside classrooms. The purpose of this article is to investigate the adaptation of such kind of learning in one of the courses taught at the Department of English at the College of Education/Ibn Rushd at the University of Baghdad and describe the assessment model adopted in that course. After an explanation and discussion of the course and the assessment pursued, a suggestive presentation and assessment were provided for one poem which is included in the course in question.

Keywords: Assessments, Development, Transformative Learning

1. Introduction

Assessment is one of the areas which needs more attention in the reality of the university education in Iraq. The main problem relies behind the fact that all instructions aims at the success in the tests and final exams without any concern of the skills that should be rooted inside students and that should be help him/her to deal with real life situations in the best way. To highlight this problem the researcher investigated the gap between classroom teaching, assessment, and students' transformation taking the Department of English at the College of Education/Ibn Rushd as a case for her study. The purpose of this study is to describe one kind of assessment adopted in one of the courses taught at the Department of English and suggesting a way of presenting a text and how to assess it.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Transformative learning

Learning should not only correlate with grades and graduation. Learning “represents the continuing synthesis of internal and external worlds by a mind and brain hungry to have, and make sense of, a variety of experiences” (Keeling, 2009, p.1). College learning in particular should give “access to knowledge about the self as well as the world” (p.1). By providing this access, it will create channels for transformation which help students find new knowledge through activating their abilities to “questioning, changing, or affirming existing perspectives, opinions, priorities, relationships, and even identity” (p.1). When colleges offer such transformative opportunities, students will feel challenged to

test and revise their worldviews. If college educators believe that learning is a tool of rewriting the person and the mind then they can achieve the upper most limit of the learning process and create a generation who can build a communicative community and who can face problems and solve them collaboratively.

Samples (1999) suggests the following aspects of transformative learning:

- 1) **The Participatory Mind:** Following a path suggested by Skolimowski (1994), we explore three models of mind that link the process of evolution as played out by universal design, the way we choose to interact with our environment through the dual dynamics of subjectivity and objectivity and finally to how we acknowledge our unity with all that exists.
- 2) **Nature, Evolution, and Learning:** We examine learning as an evolutionary component of our make-up. Seven characteristic patterns of adaptive evolutionary systems are explored in regard to learning.
- 3) **The Soul and Learning:** In this segment, we consider an evolving perspective that blends spirituality - the quest for unity - and information, knowledge, and wisdom.
- 4) **Transformation:** This section provides a synthesis of the three perspectives cited above (p.93-94).

2.1.1 The Participatory Mind

According to Skolimowski (1994), the human evolutionary mind represents a unity of three configurations of mind: Mind I, Mind II, and Mind III. Each one of them “utilizes “sensitivities” that facilitate engagement and involvement between the individual learner and the world at large” (Samples, 1999, p. 94).

Mind I embodies one’s cultural and intellectual heritage. Mind II is characterized by sensitivities in the functioning of Mind I and those built by the process of evolution. Art, music, moral judgment, poetry, and love are some of the sensitivities of Mind II. Mind III “is the symbiotic interrelatedness of Mind I and Mind II and the greater “reality” created by the union of the two” (p.94). These sensitivities are the ones that should be triggered in the process of teaching in order to motivate the minds of students to learn. Since they are varied from calculation to art and music to reality then teaching should resemble this variety to achieve a fruitful teaching.

2.1.2 Components of Transformative Learning

According to Nemeč (2012), motivation, safety, trust, experience, and dialogue are the main components of transformative learning.

2.1.2.1 Motivation

Instructors should be aware of motivation sources (Miller & Rollnick, 2002) and the psychiatric rehabilitation value of self-determination. Learners need an opportunity to express their concerns, needs, and interests. Teaching should be a response to learner needs “more than as a forced shaping of behavior through mandatory instruction” (Nemeč, 2012, p.478).

2.1.2.2 Safety

Safety is related to “the learners’ expectations of potential consequences of success, self-disclosure, questioning, and risk-taking within the classroom” (Nemec, 2012, p.479). When the instructor is critical about “right” answers students will not cooperate in the teaching/learning process (see, e.g., Velligan, Kern, & Gold, 2006). To create a safe educational environment, instructors should demonstrate understanding of the learners’ contexts and show a great concern to their needs.

2.1.2.3 Trust

Trust is a dual dimension element. Learners need to trust the instructor, and the instructor should trust his/her learner. “Critical humility” (Taylor & Jarecke, 2009, p. 287) should not be misunderstood when it comes to building trust; because it can refer to “a recognition that one has much yet to be learned and that learners have things to teach the teacher” (Nemec, 2012, p.479) or “an appreciation for and confidence in the ability of learners to learn and to teach themselves” (p.479).

2.1.2.4 Experience

Instructors need to be specific about their objectives. This specificity requires careful designing and openness for feedback and self-assessment. Such scaffolding of experiences set the stage for transformation.

2.1.2.5 Dialogue

One of the important components of transformative learning is dialogue because it focuses on examining a dilemma, paradox, conflict, or contradiction. This structured framework for exploration is useful to learners (Reushle & Mitchell, 2009). With dialogue, the instructor’s responsibility is to decide rules for a conversation depending on his/her confidence and experience as well as a careful assessment of learners’ relationships, critical thinking skills, and appreciation of diverse perspectives.

3. Methods

3.1 The Educational Setting

The College of Education is a four years college. The first stage at the English Department represents an introduction and preparation to the upcoming three years. Students have no choice in deciding their courses. The department requires four years of study with a fixed collection of courses and textbooks. It should be noted that education is free in most Iraqi universities. Students can postpone one school year. But if they want to postpone the same year twice they have to be in an emergent circumstances and have to get an approval from the college committee.

Students who enroll in the Department of English will be studying linguistics and literature courses graded in their complexity as they move from one stage to the next. The department follows the British

system; which is why all its textbooks and curriculum are British. In the first year students will study the following courses:

- Introduction to literature: in this course students will be introduced to poetry, prose, and drama.
- Phonetics and phonology: students will study O’Conner’s *Better English Pronunciation* (1967) in which they will be introduced to the sciences of phonetics and phonology and the characteristics of speech sounds and English phonemes.
- Grammar: students will study all tenses of English and their uses in depth in this course. This course will accompany students in all their four years of study with an increased amount of complexity. Quirk and Greenbaum’s *A University Grammar of English* (1973) is used in teaching this course.
- Reading comprehension: in this course, students study a number of passages, answer questions about them, and study some vocabulary and their uses.
- Conversation: a book of fictional conversations is used to teach conversation. Students have to memorize some conversations and vocabulary.
- Computers: this is a practical course in which students study parts of computers and using e-mails and Microsoft Word.
- Democracy and human rights: this is a theoretical course which introduces students to democracy and the United Nations’ acts concerning human rights.
- Educational psychology: a historical background about the development of education over different centuries.
- Arabic: a review course which offers some literary aspects of Arabic language and the biographies of a couple of poets or writers.

For this assessment profile, I’ll choose the literature course. The course is divided into three parts. The first part is dedicated for poetry, figures of speech and poetic devices. Rhyme and tone are explained along with types of poetry. Four poems are to be studied:

- The Daffodils by William Wordsworth
- To — by William Shakespeare
- The Sick Rose by William Blake
- Ozymandias by Shelley

The second part introduces prose, different kinds of prose, and the literary devices students need to recognize – such as plot, setting, characterization... etc. the last part talks about the historical evolving of drama and theatre.

Class duration is 45 minutes. Students meet twice a week for every course. As I mentioned before, the curriculum committee is central; that is why instructors has no freedom in designing courses or changing the curriculum. Every stage in the department consists of four to five classes, with approximately 50 students per class. The first stage usually has more students. Sometimes every class has 70 students. This means that every instructor has about 350 students to teach weekly. This large number creates a real problem because it makes it difficult for teachers to meet the educational needs of every single student, understand all their backgrounds, adapt group or pair work activities, or even monitor good assessments.

3.2 Enrolment

No placement test is required to be enrolled in the Department of English, but instead there are two types of interviews. If the student fails in both then he/she will be transferred into another department which is lower than the one in question.

The first interview deals with personality. Since the department is part of the College of Education, then students are supposed to have teachers' characteristics and tendency. The registration office is responsible for this interview before giving students' the initial offer and sending them to the assigned department. The director of the office will talk to students' individually to assess their self-confidence and then he/she asks students to walk and do some physical acts to check their reaction and aptitude.

The next interview will be conducted at the department by a staff member – usually the coordinator of the department. The professor will start asking the student about what he had studied at high school. Then he/she gives the student a text and asks him/her to read. The interviewer might even ask the student to write a couple of sentences to check his/her writing skills as well.

I think this placement procedures are suitable for this particular educational environment. There are many obstacles to have certain tests (as TOEFL for instance) applied as part of the placement process. The prominent obstacle is that students are not trained for this kind of tests, considering as well that those tests are mostly using American English whereas students study British English. That is to be added to the several administrative obstacles which are not suitable to be mentioned in this context.

3.3 Classroom Test

The instructor conducts two short tests for every section. This means that students will have six short tests in total to have a final score out of 40 to be added to the score of the final exam at the end of the year. I'll describe the tests used for the first part of the course, which is explaining poetry. Because of the large number of students in the class, the instructor has designed two different sets of questions. She has students sit in queues and every queue will have either A or B version of the test. The test consists of two parts. Part *I* asks for the definitions of a number of figures of speech. Students should provide some examples with their definitions as well. In Part *II*, the instructor gives students two stanzas from two different poems (they have to answer only one of them) and asks them to explain the stanza, interpret it, and then tell if it has any figures of speech and why.

Part *I* of the test is reliable because the definitions of figures of speech are fixed. If the teacher gives the same question to the students after a period of time they will give the same answers. This part is also valid since it is designed to measure the content knowledge of students.

Part *II* is valid but less reliable. It has to assess both content and language but there is a great chance of flexibility and creativity when answering it; because students can add their own points of view and feelings which are both liable to change over time. And generally, paragraph writing kind of tests are not

reliable. So, if students are offered the same question after a period of time they might answer it in a different way – which applies to the interpretation section of the question only.

The explanation of the stanza is a valid section of the question. It enables the instructor to measure students' knowledge of grammatical relations of phrases and sentences as well as grammatical categories of words and their stylistic use. The scoring of the test is somehow problematic because it is objective. The objectivity in scoring literature courses tests is a problem because most of their tests are of this kind of essay writing not like other linguistics courses where the instructor can give different valid and reliable tests.

3.4 Preparation Unit

I'll consider activities to teach Ozymandias and how to test it because it will be so long to explain activities needed for a whole test. As far as for the first part of the test, I'll have rhyme, metaphor, and simile. To teach rhyme, I'll prepare slips of papers with words that can be easily rhymed. I'll divide the class in to two teams and give each team a group of the papers. Each team has to challenge the other to give a word that rhymes with the one they choose. The activity will last for 10 minutes. Then in five minutes I'll explain how such rhyming words add music to the poem and show them that by changing the rhymed words in Ozymandias by ones that doesn't rhyme but has the same meaning. Then I'll have them write down the definition of rhyme in their note book with an example from the words they have worked on in the previous activity.

When explaining simile, I'll choose a female (suppose that her name is Rana) student and write the following sentence on the board:

Rana's face is like the moon.

Then I'll ask the students to discuss how her face and the moon is similar. When they say that her face is round like the moon and all the other features that might apply I'll relate what they say to the use and definition of simile. For sure students will remember that example in the test. Then I'll have them work in pairs to write a simile about a person they know comparing him/her to something according to certain characteristic attributed to that person.

When I describe metaphors I'll make sure that students understand the idea of "an image equals another image". I'll describe how we give the characteristics of something to something else but we still understand the real meaning because of the context. I'll give them examples like:

The students are noisy birds today.

Noisy birds, be quiet!

Then I'll state the difference between simile and metaphor linguistically and have students create similes and metaphors of the following group of words:

Man	Snake
Girl	A flower
Mother	Fruitful tree

Then, in Power Point presentation, I'll give an introduction about Ozymandias and how it is based on an Egyptian Pharaoh called Ramesses II. I'll explain how this Pharaoh was a powerful tyrant who ordered building a statue of himself and had the following words inscribed (just like they were quoted in the poem): 'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'

Students should have worked on the explanation of the poem. So, I'll have them discuss their explanation then I'll proceed to the interpretation of the poem. After that, I'll have students identify figures of speech in the poem. At the end I'll have an open discussion about the theme of human power and how the power of time overcomes it. This theme is closely related to students' lives and they can speak about their personal experiences or general experiences and events in their communities. All language skills will be developed in this class and the instructor will know how to test them easily.

In that way, it will be easy for students to answer Part *I* of the test which asks for definitions and examples of rhyme, simile, and metaphor and part *II* which asks for explaining and interpreting stanzas of the poems they have worked on before as well as specifying their figures of speech. In order to raise the validity of the second part, I will provide a rubric at the end of the test specifying what will be measured and how it will be scored.

I used cognitive and social learning strategies (to be honest, till now I couldn't find a way to use metacognitive strategies and I don't believe they will work with SL or FL students!). I used organization: when I had students grouping words, inferencing: when they used the poem to guess the meaning of words, visualization: to understand the meaning of words and phrases, elaboration: the use of new and old information, and cooperation: group and pair work.

The tests I offered to students will show me how they will recall and interpret figures of speech and if they need more explanation of them. The second part will help me assess their overall writing style and if they need some help in developing their writing skills, their analytical abilities and if they need more support in developing those skills, and their content knowledge if they were able to explain the surface meaning and the deep meaning of the stanzas.

4. Conclusion

This paper investigated the construction of the introductory literature course at the Department of English in the College of Education/Ibn Rushd at the University of Baghdad. It suggested a way of presenting a sample poem which is meant to be taught in this course and set the suitable assessments for it. The way of teaching the poem supports the goal of "teaching to plant the root of transformative learning". Unfortunately teaching runs in the path of "teaching for the sake of exams" only in almost all Iraqi educational institutes. That is why the researcher hopes that this research will benefit instructors, educators, curriculum designers, and students as well.

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