ROLE OF INFORMAL ASSESSMENT
IN IMPROVING STUDENTS’ REFLECTION

S.A. Shilova, O.V. Pavlova

Purpose. The article is devoted to various methods of informal assessment and their potential for developing students’ reflective skills. The authors analyze different theories and approaches to reflective learning in order to design tools for enhancing students’ reflective abilities.

Methodology. The data obtained through the research are evaluated and interpreted on the basis of the descriptive approach. The authors also adopt the reflective-activity approach for designing a set of reflective statements.

Results. The authors study the main features of informal assessment, compare and contrast them with the forms of formal assessment pointing out that new approaches to assessment such as Learning Oriented Assessment (LOA) should be adopted in order to promote learning, motivate students and encourage their autonomy. Special attention is given to feedback as an LOA component, which correlates with the concept of reflective learning. The authors analyze various theories of reflective learning and design a system of reflective statement, which could be used as a means of practical development of students’ reflective abilities.

Practical implications. The results of the research can be applied in teaching practice of various disciplines at higher educational establishments.

Keywords: assessment; informal assessment; learning oriented assessment; feedback; reflection; reflective learning

РОЛЬ НЕФОРМАЛЬНОГО ПЕДАГОГИЧЕСКОГО КОНТРОЛЯ В РАЗВИТИИ РЕФЛЕКСИВНЫХ СПОСОБНОСТЕЙ СТУДЕНТОВ

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Цель. Статья посвящена различным методам неформального контроля и потенциалу их использования для развития рефлексив-
ных способностей студентов высших учебных заведений. Авторы предпринимают анализ различных теорий рефлексивного обучения с целью создания инструмента контроля, направленного на развитие у студентов способностей к рефлексии.

**Методология проведения работы.** Полученные в ходе исследования данные рассматривается и комментируются на основе описательного метода. Для создания системы рефлексивных утверждений авторами в качестве основы применяется рефлексивно-деятельностный подход.

**Результаты.** Авторы рассматривают особенности неформального контроля, сравнивают и сопоставляют их с формами формального контроля, отмечая необходимость обращения к новым подходам к оцениванию с целью мотивации студентов, поддержания стремления к учению и автономности студентов. В качестве примера такого подхода авторы приводят систему ориентированного на обучение контроля. Особое внимание в статье уделяется третьему компоненту системы – обратной связи. Данное понятие коррелирует с идеей рефлексивного обучения. Авторы анализируют различные теории рефлексивного обучения и разрабатывают систему рефлексивных утверждений, которая может быть использована в качестве инструмента развития критических способностей студентов.

**Область применения результатов.** Результаты исследования могут быть применены в практике преподавания различных дисциплин в высших учебных заведениях.

**Ключевые слова:** контроль; неформальный контроль; ориентированный на обучение контроль; обратная связь; рефлексия; рефлексивное обучение

**Introduction**

Educational process consists of several stages, i.e., setting learning goals and outcomes, making suitable tasks, establishing a good classroom rapport with learners, maintaining learners’ and teacher’s interaction during classes and so on. Assessment is one of the crucial stages of
the educational process and it is carried out before learning in order to
diagnose students’ skills and knowledge (e.g. placement/diagnostic tests),
it is undertaken after a part of a course (e.g. progress tests) and it is done
after a term or course (e.g. achievement/summative tests). The problem
is that such forms of assessment just grade without interpretation. But
students need to be better informed about their language, skills, progress,
and attitude to learning etc. in order to solve their learning problems.
Therefore, there is a great need for new forms of reflective assessment
and new methodological approaches which could solve the problem of
dichotomy of formal assessment.

Methodology
The aim of this paper is to study informal assessment, especially its re-
flexive forms, and its use in the educational process, which could respond
to the needs of learners and help teachers in giving feedback to students
about their learning and in developing students’ reflective abilities. This
type of research is a descriptive study based on the review of literature on
informal assessment in general and its reflective forms in particular. Ob-
tained data were evaluated and interpreted by the authors on the basis of
the descriptive approach. The researchers also adopted the reflective-activ-
ity approach in order to create a set of reflective statements which have the
potential to outline the zone of students’ proximal development in several
vectors of reflection and enhance students’ reflective abilities.

Results and discussion
Firstly, let us look at two broad types of assessment: formal and in-
formal. According to the Teaching Knowledge Test Glossary formal
assessment involves such forms of testing that give grades to say how
successful or unsuccessful students have been [19, p. 4]. Most commonly
formal testing does not require the opinion or judgement of the person
marking a test, because such assessment has dichotomic criteria – yes/
no, correct/incorrect, true/false.

While conducting informal assessment, a teacher evaluates students’
success by thinking about their strengths and weaknesses rather than
testing. The teacher makes a subjective judgement about whether the work of students is bad or good. Informal assessment is required to assess compositions, essays, conversations etc. Informal assessment also involves self-assessment and peer assessment. Such forms of assessment can have a set of criteria that describe a learner’s performance and can also have bands or levels to make subjective assessment more reliable.

Opposed to most traditional forms of testing, informal assessments do not have clear-cut right or wrong answers. Rather, there are degrees to which a person is successful or unsuccessful. Thus, teachers need to evaluate the performance in a way that will allow them to take those varying degrees into consideration. This can be accomplished by creating rubrics. A rubric is a rating system by which teachers can determine at what level of proficiency a student is able to perform a task or display knowledge of a concept. With rubrics, teachers can define the different levels of proficiency for each criterion.

Formative assessment unites both formal and informal assessment and is undertaken during a course in order to give learners feedback on their learning and at the same time improve learning process [19, p. 4; 3, p. 347]. A. Salamoura and S. Unsworth call formative assessment «classroom-based assessment» or «assessment for learning», and one of the main functions of such assessment are teachers and learners’ interaction, support and development. They contrast formative assessment with summative assessment and consider the latter «standardized assessment» or «assessment of learning». Summative assessment comes at the end of a period of study; it is linked to a syllabus and designed with validity and reliability [16, p. 3].

A. Salamoura and S. Unsworth argue that students express the need for speaking real language – not classroom language. They want to know what they could do about their language and how to improve their skills outside the classroom. Students consider testing to be a very important part of their educational process which leads them to obtaining a certificate/diploma, but they still need to focus on their learning in order to solve practical tasks of real-life communication [16, pp. 2-3]. That is why there is a great need for new approaches to assessment which could be adopt-
ed to resolve the contradictions between inadequate informative value of formal assessment and inadequate accuracy of informal assessment.

D. Carless (University of Hong Kong) coined the term *Learning-Oriented Assessment* (LOA) in which learning components are more important than measurement ones [10]. This type of assessment *has two purposes* that have been mentioned above as the most essential students’ needs: 1) certification purpose; 2) learning purpose.

LOA has three components. *The first component is assessment tasks as learning tasks.* This means that the tasks meet some requirements, e.g., they should embody the desired learning outcomes, which engages students in deep learning; the tasks should mirror real-world application of the discipline; the tasks should aim to spread students’ attention across the entire period of study. *The second component of LOA is students’ involvement in assessment* which implies self-assessment/evaluation and peer-assessment/evaluation. D. Carless argues that students should be encouraged to elaborate criteria for evaluation. *The third component is feedback* which comes from all the participants of the educational process: teachers, students, peers. It is significant to note that Russian students do not like *peer assessment*, especially *peer correction*, because that makes them feel uncomfortable. Students prefer teacher assessment and correction. Besides, Russian students think that peer assessment and correction can affect their relationship with peers [7, p. 65]. Perhaps, this is typical of Russian culture, not of European or American ones.

According to D. Carless, feedback should be provided in different forms of dialogue rather than monologue [10]. The aim of such feedback is to promote learning, or, more precisely, to motivate students, to encourage their autonomy, to help students to understand what their strengths and weaknesses are, and how they can improve the latter [18, p. 215].

In this paper we would like to focus on the third component of LOA – feedback and its reflective character – because it requires much more elaboration in the context of the Russian educational process.

The English term «feedback» correlates with the Russian term «reflection» in the aspect of awareness (in the psychological field), analysis of learning and its outcomes (in the educational field). [18, p. 7].
Feedback as reflection is consistent with one of the main educational principles, which is activity and consciousness. If a teacher applies this principle, students:

- have an opportunity to comprehend the process of learning deeply and independently;
- understand the aims and expected outcomes;
- can use all types and forms of cognitive activity: analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction, matching and contrasting;
- can interact with their peers to improve learning [5, pp. 296-297].

Among the earliest scientific works on reflective learning there are theories developed by western philosophers and psychologists such as J. Dewey, D. Schön, D. Kolb, G. Gibbs and C. Rodgers. J. Dewey is considered to be the founder of the reflective style of learning. He defined reflection as an «…active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and further conclusions to which it leads» [11, pp. 118].

D. Schön built on J. Dewey’s work and identified two types of reflection: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action [17]. According to D. Schön, reflection-in-action happens during the process of action and includes such stages as

- considering the situation
- deciding how to act
- acting immediately.

Reflection-on-action takes place when the action is over and reflection is undertaken retrospectively by means of reconsidering the situation and thinking about what should be changed and improved.

In 1984, D. Kolb developed a four-stage reflective model, which is known as Kolb’s learning cycle [13]. It highlights reflective practice as a tool to gain conclusions and ideas from an experience. In 2015, in the second edition of “Experiential Learning. Experience as the Source of Learning and Development” D. Kolb refers to his model as “experiential learning cycle” [14]. The model consists of four stages:

- concrete experience
- reflective observation of the new experience
abstract conceptualization
active experimentation.

The aforementioned cyclical model was further developed by G. Gibbs. His cycle includes six clearly defined stages:

description of the experience
feelings and thoughts about the experience
evaluation of the experience, both good and bad
analysis to make sense of the situation
conclusion about what you learned and what you could have done differently
action plan for how you would deal with similar situations in the future [12].

In 2002, in his work “Defining Reflection: Another Look at John Dewey and Reflective thinking” C. Rodgers characterized reflection through the following four criteria:

1. Reflection is a meaning-making process which contributes to deeper understanding and ensures learners’ progress
2. Reflection is a systematic, rigorous, disciplined way of thinking
3. Reflection needs to happen in interaction with others
4. Reflection requires attitudes that value the personal and intellectual growth of oneself and of others [15].

The methodological basis of our study of feedback as reflection is the reflective-activity approach elaborated by Russian psychologist V.K. Zaretskiy [1]. The main concept of this approach is the following: learning is an activity and this activity can be «active» only when a learner acts/learns consciously, when he/she stands in the «subject» position. This «subject» position gives him/her an opportunity to reflect on his/her learning, which includes awareness and then (as a result) modification of the basis, methods, and resources of the learning activity and everything that can contribute to or interfere with this activity [1, p. 12].

We suppose that the English term «autonomy» mentioned by D. Carless correlates with the Russian term «subject position of the learner» in the sense of a leaner being an active and conscious participant of the learning process. V.K. Zaretskiy highlights the active character of reflec-
tion, which corresponds to the main principles of psychological theories of reflective learning and practice developed by the aforementioned western scientists such as J. Dewey, D. Schön, D. Kolb, G. Gibbs and C. Rodgers. V.K. Zaretskiy also argues that the teacher cannot manipulate with their students’ ideas during reflection, the teacher has to support their reflection, being a helper rather than a mentor [1, p. 13]. This also correlates with D. Carless’ idea that feedback should be provided in different forms of dialogue and it also corresponds to the definitions of reflection by I.P. Podlasiy and C. Rodgers, who considered interaction as a necessary condition for reflection.

Although V.K. Zaretskiy and the representatives of his scientific school adopt the reflective-activity approach as assistance in overcoming learning problems of school children, we believe that it is beneficial to take this approach to teaching university students [4, p. 305]. The reason for this statement is the fact that distinctive level of cognitive development in adolescence and adulthood is formal-logical and formal-operational thinking. That means learners are able to master metacognitive skills such as self-control, self-regulation. They are able to master complex intellectual operations of analysis and synthesis, theoretical generalization and abstraction, argumentation and reasoning, identification of causal relationship etc. [8, pp. 464-465].

Z.N. Skrebneva and T.A. Palaguta offer the following classification of reflection:

1) reflection of mood and emotional state
2) reflection of educational materials
3) reflection of learning activity

Reflection can have the following forms:

1) written: questionnaires, charts, essays, reflective letters etc.
2) oral: dialogue (teacher-student, student-student/peer-to-peer), discussion, «round table» [6, p. 9].

V.R. Zaretskiy and his followers claim that the reflective-activity approach to teaching contributes to the development of a learner, which occurs in several vectors:

1) vector of cooperation ability – when a learner is able to communicate, expressing sense, attitude, emotions;
2) **vector of reflection ability** – when a learner is able to answer reflective questions and correlate the ways of his learning activity with its outcomes;

3) **vector of a learner’s position/attitude to his/her learning activity** (this position can be «subjective», «objective», negative and passive);

4) **vector of a learner’s attitude to learning difficulties and mistakes** – when a learner is able to evaluate properly a potential or real learning problem and find a constructive way to solve it;

5) **vector of a learner’s expectations about his/her own capabilities** (self-effectiveness) – when a learner’s self-effectiveness grows in proportion to the growth of his/her achievements and the awareness of the fact that he/she could achieve something effectively because he/she knew how to do it; criticism also grows because the learner realizes what he/she is not able to do, what should be learnt, what should be done to learn this;

6) **vector of educational activity as a cooperative work of a learner/learners and their teacher** where the purpose of the work is overcoming learning difficulties [2, pp. 130-132].

Teaching reflective learning techniques to students is one of the most important teaching aims, as it could promote students’ deep-level learning and the application of critical thinking, thus contributing to students’ further development and future professional success. When creating assessment tasks, teachers should not only aim to evaluate students’ knowledge but also to develop their reflective abilities, which are necessary for objective self-assessment and sustainable self-development [9].

Based on the above, we would like to present some reflective statements, which are divided into groups according to the aforementioned vectors. These statements can be used as the basis for both written and oral reflection and a means of students’ assessment/self-assessment (evaluation of achievements, strengths and weaknesses, mistakes, attitude, ways of learning etc.) within the framework of teaching university students.

Statements that probe cooperation ability
I am normally friendly with the teacher
I am normally friendly with my peers
If I do not like the teacher I will…because (give the reason for your behavior)

If I do not like my peer/peers I will…because (give the reason for your behavior)

I normally ask the teacher to explain the learning material again/to clarify the learning material when I do not understand it

I normally do not ask the teacher to explain the learning material again/to clarify the learning material when I do not understand it because… (give the reason for your behavior)

I like pair work because…
I do not like pair work because…
I consider pair work important because…
After class I can talk to the teacher about my learning difficulties
After class I cannot talk to the teacher about my learning difficulties because…

Statements that probe reflection ability
I normally try to know the purpose of the task I need to do
I normally do tasks without thinking about their purpose because…
I normally read instructions of the task I need to do carefully
I normally read instructions of the task I need to do quickly and inattentively because …
I normally define the type of the task by interpreting its instruction
I normally do not define the type of the task because …
I normally know how much time I need to do a given task
I normally do not know how much time I have to spend on doing a task because …
I normally choose the most appropriate learning strategies for the type of the task I need to do
I do not use any specific learning strategies because …
After doing a task or when the class is over I normally ask myself: «What did I learn today? How did I learn it? What did I learn it for? »

Statements that probe a learner`s position/attitude to his/her learning activity
I am normally active in class because…
I am normally passive in class because…
I normally do my homework carefully because…
I normally/sometimes do my homework quickly and inattentively because…
I normally hand in my assignments on time because…
I normally/sometimes do not hand in my assignments on time because…
I normally try to practice my English outside the classroom (reading books, watching videos, communicating with people etc.) because…
I normally do not practice my English outside the classroom because…
I normally start/take part in a discussion on interesting topics in class because…
I normally do not start/take part in a discussion in class because…
Statements that probe a learner’s attitude to learning difficulties and mistakes
I normally feel upset when I have a lot of mistakes in my assignment because…
I normally do not feel upset when I have a lot of mistakes in my assignment because…
I feel uncomfortable while speaking English because…
I feel comfortable while speaking because…
When my peers are better than me at speaking, listening, doing tests etc. I feel upset/jealous because…
When my peers are better than me at speaking, listening, doing tests etc. I feel comfortable because…
I normally ask the teacher to give feedback on my mistakes because…
I normally do not ask the teacher to give feedback on my mistakes because…
I normally work on my mistakes because…
I think that correction of mistakes is not important because…
Statements that probe a learner’s expectations about his/her own capabilities
I know my strengths and weaknesses, so I can (say what advantage of this knowledge is)…
I am not sure about my strengths and weaknesses, so I need to… (try to find out what exactly you need to do to identify your strengths and weaknesses)
I need to ... (do something) … to improve my … (listening/speaking/writing and other skills)

I set a goal to … (do an amount of particular work) … to improve my … (name a language / learning skill)

Statements that probe educational activity as a cooperative work of a learner/learners and their teacher

I normally ask my teacher about the ways of overcoming my learning difficulties because…

I normally do not ask my teacher about the ways of overcoming my learning difficulties because…

I normally ask some of my peers to help me with my learning difficulties because…

I normally do not ask any of my peers to help me with my learning difficulties because…

I believe that I can overcome my learning difficulties on my own because…

I believe that I cannot overcome my learning difficulties on my own because…

It should be noted that these statements (which can be completed and modified) are the basis for the practical development of students’ reflective abilities and could also be used by their teacher as part of the reflective assessment, which could outline the zone of proximal development (the term was coined by the Russian psychologist L. Vygotsky) where students can overcome their learning difficulties in collaboration with their teacher and peers.

Conclusion

Informal assessment alongside formal assessment is an integral part of the educational process and its general functions are 1) to promote active students’ learning; 2) to overcome their learning difficulties. Learning-oriented assessment (the term was coined by D. Carless) and its components carry out these functions. One of the LOA components is feedback, which can come from a teacher, a student, peers. The English term ‘feedback’ correlates with the Russian term ‘reflection’ in the
aspect of awareness, analysis of learning and its outcomes. The reflective-activity approach is the methodological basis of reflective statements designed to reflect on students’ behavior, attitude, capabilities, feelings etc. These statements can be used as the basis for both written and oral reflection, which could become a part of assessment / self-assessment of a student’s learning and further development. When designing the reflective statements, the vectors of the zone of a student’s proximal development were taken into account. The statements can be completed and modified in accordance with students’ age group and specifics of the subject they learn.

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