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Communicative Evaluation with particular Reference to Self-Evaluation

Introduction: the context

The aim of this paper is to discuss communicative evaluation and self-evaluation, and to describe the work we are doing and have planned in the English Eurocentres.

Eurocentres in England are part of a larger organisation, with its headquarters in Zurich. Eurocentres has schools in several European countries, plus several associated schools in Europe, and one in the States. Each school is devoted to teaching the language and culture of the country in which it is situated to non-natives of any origin aged sixteen or over.

A great number of our students are enrolled on general, non-specialised courses. It is our work in developing courses for them that is the chief concern of this paper, in particular the evaluation of their achievement.

The characteristics of the students

The students on our general courses come from a wide variety of backgrounds, although they are mostly European, and mostly between twenty and twenty-five.

There tend to be a lot of private, individual enrolments. The situation contrives to bring together groups of people who, at first glance and because of their disparate backgrounds, have little in common in terms of needs, except a general desire to «learn English».

We are aware of the heterogeneous nature of our target audience. We are also aware of, and in sympathy with, the necessity to cater for our customers' needs, of which there are two. They are a student's language needs and a student's learning needs.

The levels, assessment and certification project

We set up a project, which we call the Levels, Assessment and Certification Project, with a view to ensuring that the needs of our general language students are met as fully as possible.

Firstly we surveyed students' reasons for learning English, in terms of their motivation and intentions as to what they expected to do with the language. We also probed what particular language tasks they expected to perform. From this we were able to show that there is a large area of shared need among the students making up our audience. Once we had isolated the needs, we classified them and produced a nine-level scale of proficiency, describing growing language proficiency in what the students required under thirteen category headings. This scale has now been used as the basis of a language specification, giving for each level, the tasks students should be able to handle – that is, what they can *do* in English, the setting, topic and the language they would need to do it.

This has provided us with the basis for organising our courses in general English. This basis is task-oriented and language need-oriented.

Evaluation

The question then arises of how to evaluate our students' performance of language tasks. Such evaluation is both for the students' benefit and for ours. The student should have a good idea of how good he is at doing the things he has been learning to do, and we should have an idea, too, both to help the student where we can, and to improve our courses.

We have to evaluate the students' ability to communicate – to use the language in real-life tasks and situations. We have made it explicit that students will be able to do things in English, and we have specified what these things will be. What kind of event will give us the information we need about a student's ability? Will it be a grammar test? Will it be a listening comprehension test with multiple-choice questions to answer? Will it be a reading comprehension test of the same kind? Will it be a written essay?

Whatever test or assessment is given will be one that yields information about the learner's ability to perform the target task. It is clear that a grammar test does not yield this information. It tells you only that the student knows certain things *about* the language, given time and a pencil and paper. It does not tell you anything about his ability to *operate* in the language, doing things with it. Hence, we cannot use such tests to assess students' ability to perform language tasks. It is not so clear that multiple-choice tests of listening do not qualify. In fact, it is the writer's view that we have a lot to learn about assessing students' listening abilities, and that we are probably forced to use instruments such as multiple-choice for want of anything better. As to whether assessing students'

writing skills might be done by way of asking them to write an essay, the answer lies in whether it is itself something that they have a need to do in the language, or whether such an activity yields reliable information about their ability to perform a task they do need to do.

What we have to do is devise assessment procedures that yield information about students' abilities to use the language they need in the context they require it for. The context is a communicative one and it will contain features which characterise communication:

- *information gap;*
- *feedback:* what is said or written to me makes a difference to what is said or written next;
- *choice:* selection from an increasing range of appropriate language to achieve one's objective.

In addition, we have to say in what respects students' performance will vary in such situations. CARROLL[1] has drawn up a list of the variables volved:

- size of text
- complexity of text
- range
- speed
- flexibility
- accuracy
- appropriacy
- independence
- repetition
- hesitation

To these we must add adequate information about the setting in which the language activity is taking place and the respective psychological and social roles of the participants.

A successful communicative evaluation will therefore evaluate a learner's ability to control the above variables in contexts having the three characteristics of information gap, feedback and choice.

In order to be *communicative,* in fact, an evaluation would have to fulfil, according to HARRISON[2], the following conditions:

1 CARROLL, B.J. (1980): *Testing communicative Performance: An Interim Study,* Oxford, Pergamon Press

2 HARRISON, A. (1983): *Communicative Testing: Jam Tomorrow* from *Current Developments in Language Testing* edited by Arthur Hughes and Don Porter, London, Academic Press

- language is used for a purpose beyond itself;
- there is a need to communicate (an information gap);
- it is a complete language task;
- it constitutes an encounter (it progresses and has a point);
- it uses authentic texts and sources.

I have emphasised that we teach whole language tasks – holistic tasks. HARRISON's criteria neatly encapsulate the conditions that must be fulfilled. If you administer some sort of «test» that requires the student simply to fill in the right verb tense, for example, you will gather information not so much about what the student can do with the language, but what he knows about its grammar, or at least what he can do when operating with one variable at a time. You do not find out how well he can use the language to communicate.

What requires emphasis here, then, is communicative evaluation will not comprise (or even include) discrete-point, norm-referenced tests. This is because such testing does not yield the information we require. Such tests, as we have indicated, fail to satisfy the requirements of communicative evaluation, since they lack any context or purpose. They are occasions when, to use HARRISON's phrase, language is not being used for a purpose beyond itself. As such they do not tell you what it is useful to know.

Some means of communicative evaluation – evaluation by doing

The most direct way to find out if someone can do something is to get them to do it. That is precisely what we are aiming for in the communicative evaluations we have tried out so far at our schools. So in our latest courses, where we have been able to apply the model I have advocated in this paper, we incorporate regular communicative assessments in the teaching programme that enable teachers and learners alike to gauge how the learners are progressing.

We start with the setting of objectives – in our case language tasks which the students need to be able to do. The next step is to devise a workable scenario for evaluation.

The following modes of evaluating are used:

Role-plays;
Simulations;
Letter-writing;
Listening and giving an oral account of what you have heard;

Reading and giving an oral account of what you have read;
Listening and reading and giving a written account of what you have heard.

The key things to decide are the particular applications of these. The objective in question will suggest which particular means of evaluation is appropriate. One has also to take into account the relevant topics, settings and roles the instruction has catered for in drawing up one's scenario. There are a number of variations that can be made within the above list. For example, you can test reading and writing together by using the reading task as the trigger for the writing.

Combining tasks into one activity

To take an instance, in an evaluation we did with one group, the problem was to find out how well they could write a letter to a friend, and whether they could write out directions. The obvious thing was to combine these two objectives into one activity. In addition, we wanted to find out something about their reading comprehension, with particular reference to their ability to understand narrative. The evaluation as eventually designed took the following form. In the first place students were given a copy of a letter which, for the sake of argument, they were said to have received from a friend. This letter was carefully written to do two main things. Firstly, to conform to the norms of appropriate language for a friendly letter, and secondly, to contain an account of a terrible journey from the recipient's house to the outskirts of the recipient's town. To check reading comprehension, and to elicit writing from the same source, the students were asked to read the letter, and use the information in it to write a letter to another friend giving him/her directions on how to reach the original recipient's address. There was thus an objective for the writer/reader, viz to extract information from the letter received, and to transmit information to the other friend. Using the original letter as the source for all this led to a transformed version of the information contained in the first letter. This is known as rhetorical transformation.

It can be adapted in various ways. In another evaluation, the technique of reading some information about a journey, and then having to give directions to someone (orally) who wanted to make the same journey was used. It involved a transformation of the information in the original written source into another medium with another function, but with no change of fact.

In neither case did we have to rely on the inventiveness of the student as far as creating incident is concerned. That we did not do this is important, since it is not our job to see how good students are at creative writing or making up facts on the spot.

There is no reason, either, why the basic intentions behind the communicative act elicited by this means, should not be adaptable in numerous ways. Another variation might be to react to a letter giving news of someone's illness. The student can be given further instructions in making the reply, not only to wish the person well, but also to issue invitations to stay and tell the person a little news.

Role-plays and simulations

In the above type of task, we see in embryo the means for an entirely oral evaluation, now well-known, namely, the role-play. In any role-play the participants are given instructions to do certain language tasks, in effect. Sometimes the participants receive role-cards on which they are instructed to advocate certain opinions and adopt certain personalities, in the context of a lengthy discussion in which certain decisions have to be taken, etc. Sometimes all people are asked to do is something very simple, such as book a hotel room or ask for directions to somewhere (and give them). In either case, implicitly or explicitly, the student is being asked to perform a language task. What he or she does will be observable, and capable of evaluation in terms of that task or those tasks being done more or less well. (It is actually another matter – one of design and technology – whether the student's performance in a task is observable in such a way that the performance can be judged.)

The same points could also be made about a close relation of role-plays, namely, simulations. In a simulation, students remain themselves, but carry out some language tasks which they are asked to do, or caused to do by the way things are organised.

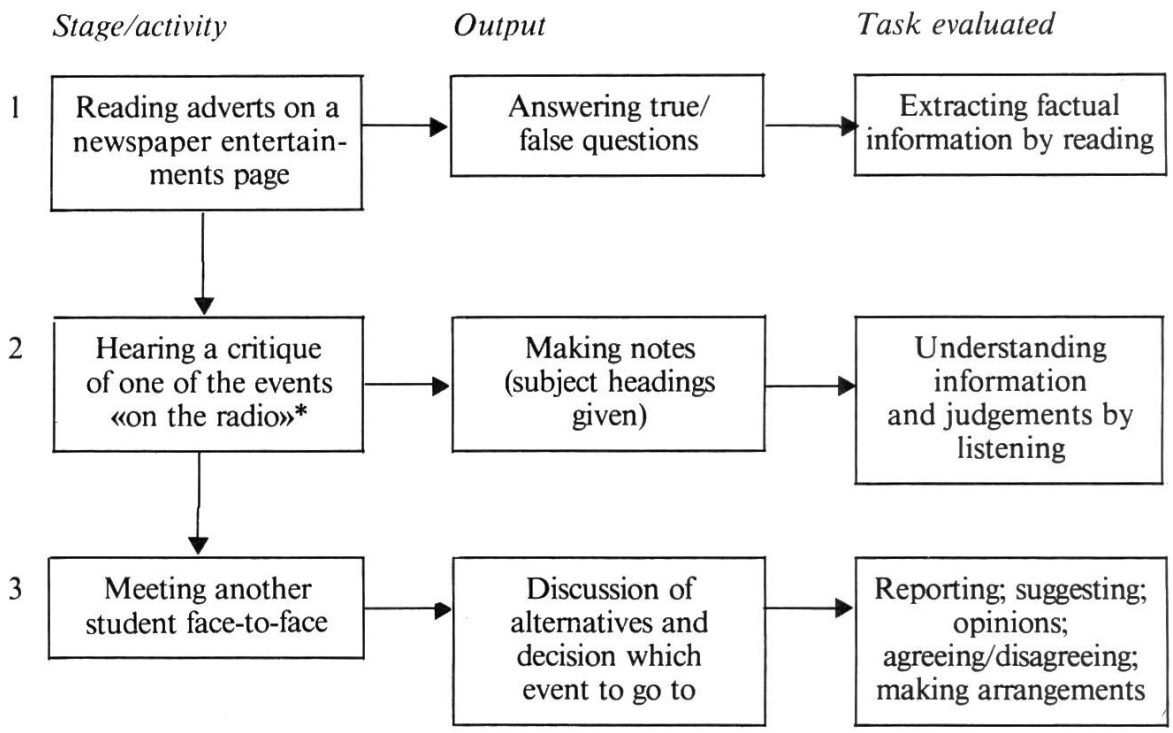
I should like to illustrate a simulation by mentioning two extensive evaluations we worked on during the last academic year as part of our work. We were trying to find ways of evaluating students' communicative ability in all the language skills, which we divided into listening, speaking, reading and writing. Our idea was to integrate all four skills into one extended activity. As I have indicated, we had already integrated reading and writing. On earlier occasions we had attempted to integrate listening and speaking by getting students to listen to a story, and then retell it. This worked as an event, but did not seem very commu-

nicative, since the retelling was done into a microphone (in the language laboratory, actually), but with no interaction. But what we did know as a result of this was whether the students had understood the story. Whether or not they could retell stories into microphones was not a language act that they had a particular need of, so it was not very useful to show that they could do it. However, was there a way, we asked, to turn this into a valid, worthwhile piece of communication? In fact we came up with two versions of two integrated communicative evaluations, thereby covering four levels. I should like to tell you about them, illustrating on the way, the idea of simulation.

Our concern here was to see (i) whether the activity as planned could be undertaken by a class of sixteen, and (ii) whether the resulting student language was capable of being evaluated.

Figure 1 illustrates the structure of the assessment. Authenticity of input was achieved by using genuine advertisements and semi-scripted recorded critiques. Each student participated in three events: (i) reading the adverts, (ii) listening to a broadcast, and (iii) a face-to-face discussion. Each resulted in output which was available to inspection for the purposes of assessment. The student discussions were recorded. On the right of figure 1 the tasks that were assessed are listed.

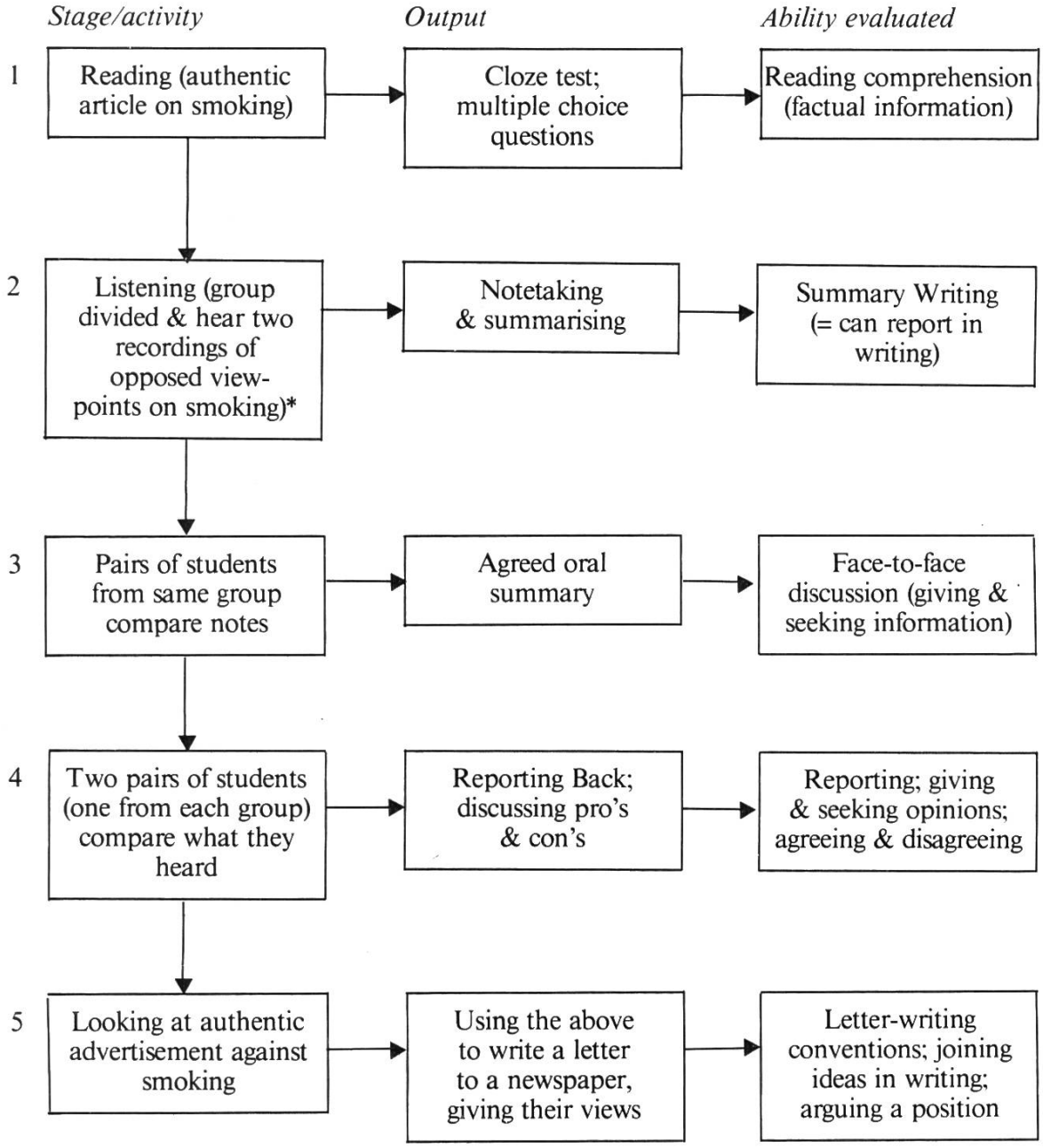
Figure 1: Evaluation: lower (levels 1 & 2)



* In the language laboratory or via headphone distribution boxes and cassette players.

Figure 2 illustrates the assessment we designed at a higher linguistic level. Again we ensured authenticity by the use of genuine newspaper articles and semi-scripted recordings of different opinions. In addition to the three events at the lower level, students doing this assessment also had to write a letter. As in the other assessment, student discussions were recorded for later assessment. It should be pointed out that the whole operation is validated by the relevance of the language tasks to the stu-

Figure 2: Evaluation outline: upper (levels 1 & 2)



* In the language laboratory or via headphone distribution boxes and cassette players.

dents' needs. Any virtues of design in these assessments are nullified if the tasks are not part of the students' needs.

Some pitfalls associated with communicative evaluation

This kind of assessment is relatively new, and is full of pitfalls. These arise quite often from the difficulty one has in changing one's perception of evaluation from what is easy to assess, such as knowledge of grammar, to what ought to be assessed, ie a student's communicative ability in a language task. In the attempt to design an assessment that yields tangible results, some of the ground rules are apt to be broken. Some of the pitfalls are:

- the assessment lacks true information gap;
- students are not motivated to do the task;
- multi-stage assessments can entail the risk of breakdown halfway, meaning students cannot complete them;
- technology can get in the way of performance (eg microphones and video cameras);
- the authentic material involved may assume socio-cultural knowledge the students do not have;
- the design of the assessment fails to produce the required information on each individual (eg a role-play where some students say nothing).

Self-evaluation

Self-evaluation does not necessarily arise from communicative approaches to teaching, although the attention it is receiving now is coincident with it. Self-evaluation arises from a desire to promote autonomy in learning, and for that to happen, the learner must be able to judge his own progress.

We have increasing opportunities for people to go away and learn independently. This is partly a result of a democratisation of instruction, in part a realisation that the teacher and the classroom are only two of a number of possible resources to learning, and in part a response to sensitivity to learners' learning needs.

We are now trying to train learners to develop sensitivity to those aspects of language performance which are important in communication, and to bring the resulting standards to bear on judgments of their

own performance. We are talking about self-evaluation of one's ability to perform language tasks.

Our present work in this area has concentrated so far on helping students to evaluate themselves on fairly simple lines. It is important to realise that the majority of our learners are not among the most gifted. Hence, we have to work quite hard at creating confidence in them that they can be more autonomous, and we have to be careful not to present our learners with ideas that are too complex. With this in mind, when we have asked our students to evaluate themselves we have used such categories as grammar, pronunciation, fluency and general impression, and have asked the learners to rate themselves and each other using the self-evaluation grid in figure 3, or something very like it.

The resulting profile is simple and manageable. It is true that a more delicate or probing analysis would suggest the desirability of using a performance criteria drawn from the ten suggested by CARROLL (loc. cit.) but for students such a set would be far too subtle, even terrifying.

In use, the results of using an earlier and even simpler version of the evaluation grid in figure 3, have produced roughly a 57 per cent agreement between the student's rating of his or her own performance and the teacher's rating. In 38 per cent of cases the student actually rated himself or herself *lower* than the teacher did, and only in 5 per cent of the cases did the students rate themselves higher than the teacher did. This indicates that, provided we accept the parameters to be relevant and well-founded, the student is a good judge of performance. In all cases recorded the students were evaluating their performance in a short role-play in which they had to book a hotel room. Sixteen students were involved.

Figure 3: A self-evaluation grid

			Not very good		Adequate		Good		Very good			
Grammar	inaccurate ←	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 →	accurate
Pronunciation	inaccurate ←	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 →	accurate
Fluency	hesitant ←	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 →	fluent
General impression	unsuccessful ←	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 →	successful
			Not very good		Adequate		Good		Very good			

The students were involved in assessing their own abilities in a *language task,* ie it was a *communicative* evaluation. This is the real point requiring emphasis. Language learners have been evaluating themselves ever since language learning began. But they were not necessarily evaluating their performance of a language task. Quite possibly they were evaluating whether they had said a sentence correctly in isolation, for example. In such cases the ability to *communicate* is not being evaluated either by the students themselves or by the teacher.
teacher.

Self-evaluation entails education of the learner to be less dependent and to develop awareness of those parameters that matter in language learning. It is not a fact that students do have a clear grasp of what matters when they approach language learning, and certainly they have, in general, to be informed of, and even persuaded to embrace, the communicative approach. Many students view language as a set of grammar rules and a vocabulary list. That it is so much more than this, and that it is an instrument, a tool, which one uses to accomplish tasks is not clear to everyone. Yet it is the essential truth that permeates modern language instruction.

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