

# IATEFL Bulgaria

## Newsletter

### **Happy New Year!**

Welcome to the second issue of Modern English Teacher with a Bulgarian Newsletter insert.

We hope you enjoyed the first issue of the Newsletter. We are very keen to receive contributions from you, so do please send your articles or ideas to us as soon as possible. The deadline for inclusion in the April 1994 issue is 28 February 1994.

All the very best for a happy and productive 1994.

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### **Can and should students assess themselves?**

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Experience has shown that students almost always rely on their teachers for assessment. This means that when a moment comes for them to assess their own work, they often find themselves unable to do so.

Last summer I ran a one-month course to train 16 candidates for the entry examination in English at the Institute for Foreign Students (IFS) in Sofia. To make preparation for the exam easier and more effective for each individual, I asked each student to keep a record of his/her progress during the course. Unfortunately, I found that students were not able to assess their knowledge or specify exactly what they had to learn at each point of the course. This led me to ask the question: can these students assess their performance in the different activities and tasks which form part of the examination?

In order to try to answer this question, I decided to use some of the exercises from the book we were using (*Think First Certificate*, Longman, 1991) for self-assessment, and gave students sample tests from *Paper 1, Reading Comprehension* and *Paper 2, Listening Comprehension*. Some difficulties arose in defining the criteria according to which students should assess themselves, and the time we had was limited. Nevertheless, the results (which showed that students either guessed their grades correctly or tended to underestimate themselves) suggested that this would be an interesting area to investigate. Therefore, at the beginning of this school year I started researching the topic more systematically.

### The study

Before I outline my study, I must start by stating that this study is just a pilot study and does not claim to be representative. It is being carried out with only ten people, as I can only do this kind of research with my own group of adult learners. These learners started a six-month intensive course at the Foreign Language Centre (FLC) of the IFS in September 1993; they came to the FLC with some previous knowledge of English but their level was not very high (I would classify it as 'bright false beginner').

We started work using Part One of *English for Bulgarians*. This is considered a predominantly grammar-oriented textbook because the structural grading in it provides the core around which the lexical and thematic progression are developed. 'However, special care has been taken to match the grammatical, functional and thematic progressions, the latter introducing in appropriate stages the most topical situations in which a Bulgarian is likely to need a certain command of English' (Danchev, 1985).

At the end of every week I gave my students a test on an area or skill of the language which they were trying to acquire and asked them to assess their performance. Thus the first week the tasks in the test were connected with listening comprehension (LC); the second week, with grammar (G); the third week, with writing (W); the fourth week, with reading comprehension (RC); and the fifth week, with speaking, or rather, listening and speaking (L-and-S). This was an idea which I came across in *Classroom Testing* (Heaton, 1990) and which appealed to me very much; I therefore thought it might be worth trying out.

The tests I wanted to use were achievement tests. Since a good achievement test 'should reflect the particular approach to learning and teaching that has previously been adopted' (Heaton, 1991), I based my weekly tests on some of the material from *English for Bulgarians*. For the listening comprehension test, for instance, I used one of the Revision texts; for the reading comprehension test, I used a letter from one of the 'B' texts; for the listening and speaking test, I used several topics/situations from a revision lesson, etc.

First, I asked my students to assess themselves according to the most appropriate grades listed on a simple form each week. I tried to keep these grading scales as simple as possible; in fact, I took two of them directly from Heaton's *Classroom Testing* and used them as a model for working out my own grading scales for the other tests. Then, after checking the students' work, I also awarded them a grade. Finally, I compared the grades and discussed the results with the students.

## The results

The numerical results from the comparison are presented in a table – see Appendix. To go back to my question in the title of this paper ‘Can students assess themselves?’, my answer now is definitely ‘yes’. The results show that in over 90 per cent of cases the grades given by the students are the same as those given by the teacher. We have classified -1/+1 differences as ‘the same’ as, if we accept that the students’ assessment is liable to be subjective, it can be argued that the teacher’s is also subjective. Even if we look at the strictly equivalent student’s and teacher’s grades, they represent over 50 per cent of all cases.

The results therefore suggest that students are, to a very large extent, capable of assessing themselves objectively and realistically. However, even in the learner-centred classroom, assessment is still an area in which teachers seem to be reluctant to lose control. Should we allow students into this area? ‘Should students assess themselves?’

## Using self-assessment

The results from my little pilot study show that students can assess themselves reliably enough for the purposes of continuous assessment. If a teacher uses self-assessment a lot, s/he could choose at random an occasion when s/he would not check on the students’ work, but would simply take on trust students’ own assessment of their grades. It would be one of several marks per student throughout the course.

Even if a teacher decides against the use of self-assessment as a means of continuous assessment, there are still many reasons for using it in classroom testing:

- 1 Self-assessment encourages learning and strongly motivates students.
- 2 Self-assessment helps in building up students’ confidence and independence both in their learning and in their use of the language outside the classroom (after classes, when using self-access facilities, after finishing the course, etc.).
- 3 Self-assessment inspires confidence on the part of the students in their teacher and vice versa, something that inevitably exerts a positive effect on the teaching and learning process.
- 4 Self-assessment changes the rather unfavourable attitude in Bulgaria to testing and to assessment.

One of the biggest problems I encountered while working on my study was what assessment criteria to use for each area/skill, and how to formulate them. My interpretation of the results from the listening and speaking test, for example, is that there was something wrong with my criteria because in no other test were students’ grades higher than the teacher’s: all +1 differences appeared in that test. Had the criteria been better, perhaps the students would not have overestimated themselves.

Another difficulty arose from the fact that I limited the grading scale to whole numbers, something which is not always the practice when teachers assess students. I decided that, since this paper does not claim any representativeness,

although limiting the grading scale to whole numbers is not very accurate, I could do it in order to simplify the processing of the data.

Finally, I would like to say that living through all the stages of this study, with all its ups and downs, I felt as motivated, if not more motivated, than my students. As well as diagnosing my students' weaknesses, I was able to diagnose my own weaknesses: in teaching, in making the tests, and in working out the criteria for self-assessment. I became very involved in the process: I empathised with my students, which acted as a motivator for my wanting them to get better results. Developing students' self-assessment was also interesting for me in another respect: it stimulated me to do more for them in the direction of developing them as autonomous learners.

## References

**Danchev, A.**, *English for Bulgarians* (Preface, Naouka i izkoustvo, 1985)

**Heaton, J.B.**, *Classroom Testing* (Longman, Keys to Language Teaching, 1990)

**Heaton, J.B.**, *Writing English Language Tests* (Longman, Handbooks for Language Teachers, 1992)

## Appendix

	LC	G	W	RC	L-S	DIFFERENCES					
	s t d	s t d	s t d	s t d	s t d	0	-1	+1	-2	?	Tot
1	5 6 -1	6 6 0	5 6 -1	6 6 0	5 6 -1	2	3	-	-	-	5
2	4 5 -1	4 4 0	4 4 0	- - -	- - -	2	1	-	-	-	3
3	3 5 -2	5 5 0	2 4 -2	4 5 -1	6 6 0	2	1	-	2	-	5
4	3 4 -1	5 5 0	4 4 0	- - -	5 4+1	2	1	1	-	-	4
5	5 6 -1	5 5 0	4 5 -1	5 6 -1	6 6 0	2	3	-	-	-	5
6	4 5 -1	5 5 0	4 4 0	4 4 0	5 4+1	3	1	1	-	-	5
7	6 6 0	5 5 0	5 5 0	6 6 0	5 6 -1	4	1	-	-	-	5
8	5 5 0	5 5 0	4 4 0	4 5 -1	5 5 0	4	1	-	-	-	5
9	? 5 ?	4 5 -1	4 5 -1	4 5 -1	5 4+1	-	3	1	-	1	5
10	- - -	4 4 0	4 4 0	5 5 0	5 4+1	3	-	1	-	-	1
0	2	9	6	4	3	24					
-1	5	1	3	4	2		15				
+1	-	-	-	-	4			4			
-2	1	-	1	-	-				2		
?	1	-	-	-	-					1	
Total	9	10	10	8	9						46
%						52	33	9	4	2	100
							94		6		

### Key:

LC	-	Listening comprehension
G	-	Grammar
W	-	Writing
RC	-	Reading comprehension
L-S	-	Listening and speaking
s	-	Student's grade
t	-	Teacher's grade
d	-	Difference between the grades