



Subjectivity in School Assessment: A Source of Ambiguity and Uncertainty

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Abstract: One of the major challenges in educational assessment is the presence of multiple and sometimes-contradictory evaluation criteria. When it comes to measuring students' performance, it is common for various aspects to be considered, each with its own set of evaluation criteria. However, these criteria can sometimes conflict with each other, adding an additional layer of complexity to the assessment process. Monitoring classroom assessment is one of the primary responsibilities of the teacher. It is a task influenced by several factors, such as subjectivity. When grading written assignments, teachers may encounter the issue of ambiguity. In this regard, some assignments may reveal different, incomplete, or difficult-to-understand meanings. Indeed, ambiguity in assessment can have significant consequences and may impact the reliability of results, raising questions about the fairness of the assessment process. To mitigate subjectivity, it is essential to establish clear and precise evaluation criteria. In doing so, the assessment should make a decision to assign an appropriate grade, which can lead to differences in interpretation and scoring.

Keywords: Evaluation, teaching, subjectivity, ambiguity.

La subjectivité en évaluation scolaire : Source d'ambiguïté d'incertitude

Résumé : L'un des défis majeurs de l'évaluation dans un contexte scolaire est la présence de critères d'évaluation multiples et parfois contradictoires. Lorsqu'il s'agit de mesurer les performances des élèves, il est fréquent que plusieurs aspects soient pris en compte, chacun ayant ses propres critères d'évaluation. Cependant, ces critères peuvent parfois être en conflit les uns avec les autres, ce qui ajoute une complexité supplémentaire à l'évaluation. Veiller sur l'évaluation en classe est l'une des principales missions de l'enseignant. Il s'agit d'une tâche liée à plusieurs facteurs comme la subjectivité. Lors de la correction des productions écrites, l'enseignant pourrait faire face au problème de l'ambiguïté. Dans ce sens, certains travaux peuvent révéler des sens différents, incomplets ou difficiles à comprendre. En effet, l'ambiguïté dans l'évaluation peut avoir des conséquences importantes et influencer par-là la fiabilité des résultats et remettre en question l'équité du processus d'évaluation. Pour atténuer la subjectivité, il est essentiel de mettre en place des critères d'évaluation clairs et précis. Dans ce cas, l'évaluation devrait prendre une décision pour attribuer une note appropriée, ce qui peut entraîner des différences d'interprétation et de notation.

Mots-clés : Evaluation, enseignement, subjectivité, ambiguïté.

Introduction

Several meanings characterize the concept of evaluation, allowing it to be approached in different ways. According to the Government of Quebec, the evaluation process can be considered “sometimes as a mere judgment, often as a process of data collection, judgment, and subsequent action.”¹ (Government of Quebec, 1983: 2)

Other researchers link evaluation not only to a simple action but rather to a more complex task as defined by Angers and Baribeau (1987: 79), who, in turn, consider it as a “specific and specialized activity. Evaluating means assessing progress. This activity consists of a set of coordinated actions (data collection, comprehension, judgment) and is performed at the end of learning.”² In this sense, they describe evaluation as a stage for taking stock of a learning journey. This activity is composed of a series of coordinated actions carried out at the end of a learning process. It is worth noting that evaluation distinguishes itself from mere judgment, as it is a complex activity, while judgment is a mental operation (Angers and Baribeau, *Ibid*).

Even after several years, the most recent studies uphold the notion of judgment to define evaluation, as mentioned by Ndao (2023: 94): “Evaluation then consists of making a value judgment about an object, performance, or production³.” This persistence in the definition highlights the conceptual stability and ongoing relevance of the concept of evaluation in various contexts.

When grading written assignments, teachers may assess students' work in different ways. It's not always easy to determine exactly where a production stands on a grading scale, especially when students' responses lack clarity or certainty regarding the meaning or intent of a particular element. In the case of written production, certain linguistic elements appear to yield multiple interpretations, thereby creating real ambiguity. Since Greco-Roman antiquity, the study of ambiguity has garnered sustained interest among linguists and grammarians, who have strived to understand its mechanisms and implications in human communication. According to Apollonius Dyscole, as cited by Lallot (1988: 33), ambiguity, also known as *amphibolia*, refers to “an expression signifying two or more meanings⁴.” In other words, it is a linguistic form whose

¹ Translate by myself « parfois comme un simple jugement, souvent comme un processus de collecte de données, de jugement et d'action conséquente. »

² Translate by myself, une «activité spécifique et spécialisée. Évaluer, c'est faire le point sur un cheminement. Cette activité est composée d'un ensemble d'actes coordonnés (collecte de données, compréhension, jugements) et elle est effectuée au terme d'apprentissage. »

³ Translate by myself « L'évaluation consiste alors à porter un jugement de valeur sur un objet, une performance ou une production. »

⁴ Translate by myself « une expression signifiant deux ou plusieurs sens. »

interpretation can vary depending on its structure or content. This definition underscores the ability of a sentence, word, or grammatical construction to generate a multitude of interpretations, which can lead to confusion or uncertainty in understanding the conveyed message, hence the question of subjectivity.

For example, a production can exhibit both elements of quality and weaknesses, making it difficult to make a final grading decision. This ambiguity can result in variations in the scores given by different teachers, ultimately leading to a subjective evaluation.

In this article, we aim to address the following questions:

How does subjectivity manifest itself in the assessment of written productions?

Is it possible for teachers to adopt transparent evaluation practices with clear criteria?

In this context, we assume that numerical grading remains an imperfect means of measuring learners' performance.

1. To avoid subjectivity in assessment, a challenging mission

In the course of their mission, teachers sometimes encounter written productions that are somewhat difficult to understand or where certain parts reveal multiple interpretations. In the case of spoken communication, the teacher can request immediate explanations to clarify the conveyed ideas. However, in written form, the evaluator is left without any additional explanation, which hinders their understanding of the meaning. In this regard, poor word choices, unexplained and unsupported ideas often leave room for more than one interpretation of meaning.

Evaluation, being a human activity, is often considered unfair by some, as highlighted by Raulin (2017). The concept of fair grading indeed allows room for subjectivity. Obtaining good grades holds particular importance in certain contexts, especially when they serve as decisive criteria for future decisions. Grades can also play a key role in selecting candidates for advanced academic programs, such as graduate studies, or in admission to prestigious higher education institutions. Consequently, the obtained grade can potentially influence not only the educational journey but also the professional opportunities that will be available to the learner.

Despite its significance, many researchers (Piéron, 1934; Gérard, 2002; Raulin, *Ibid*) also address the subjective aspect of evaluation, casting doubt on the existence of a truly fair grade. Regarding the same idea, Merle (2018: 59), for instance, demonstrates that “the abundance of research and their convergence lead to the undeniable conclusion of an impossible unbiased assessment of

students' competencies⁵." In this perspective, Raulin (Ibid: 72) cites Cardinet (1992) who explores "four viewpoints: objectivity in assessments is necessary, it is desired, it is impossible, and it must be rejected⁶." In this sense, it is understandable that we all aspire to an objective and impartial evaluation based on clear and uniform criteria. However, the concept of a fair assessment itself remains complex and sparks debates. The fact that it involves multiple interpretations of students' performances and competencies makes the complete elimination of subjectivity a very challenging task.

In the course of their work, some researchers (Romainville, 2011; Nimier, Online) have shown that conducting evaluations at different times and by different individuals may not necessarily yield the same results. Therefore, it would be desirable for all teachers to grade uniformly, adhering to common criteria. This consequence is aptly justified by Erard (2015: 11) when she affirms that "to be objective, the results or consequences of an evaluation should be the same for all teachers and evaluators⁷." Indeed, the same author (Ibid: 12) draws attention to the fact that evaluation depends not only on the evaluated but also on the evaluator, the one "who analyzes students' performances according to objectives and criteria that they must define⁸." Research in evaluation has highlighted the challenges and limitations faced by a teacher striving for a completely objective assessment. Factors such as evaluators' personal biases, contextual influences, and individual differences among learners make it difficult to achieve an assessment completely free from subjectivity, imparting an ambiguous character to the evaluation activity. This does not mean that evaluation should not be undertaken or that all forms of evaluation are unfair.

It is essential to consider this reality during the evaluation process, ensuring that the evaluation criteria are clear, consistent, and fair. It is also important to provide learners with the necessary resources and support to adequately prepare for assessments, in order to increase their chances of success and thereby reduce the negative impact on their future.

⁵ Translate by myself "l'abondance des recherches ainsi que leur convergence débouchent sur le constat indiscutable d'une impossible évaluation non biaisée des compétences des élèves."

⁶ Translate by myself « quatre points de vue : l'objectivité des évaluations est nécessaire, elle est souhaitée, elle est impossible, et elle doit être rejetée. »

⁷ Translate by myself « pour être objectifs, les résultats ou les conséquences d'une évaluation devraient être les mêmes chez tous les enseignants et évaluateurs. »

⁸ Translate by myself « qui analyse les performances des élèves selon des objectifs et des critères qu'il devra définir. »

2. What to do in the face of subjectivity in assessment?

Starting from the idea that a true grade is impossible (Bonniol and Vial, 2009), it is important to work towards minimizing the factors mentioned earlier and to adopt rigorous assessment approaches while acknowledging that certain forms of subjectivity may persist.

It is essential to note that the conditions under which evaluation activities take place are not always favorable. Therefore, learners often approach these assessments with a high level of stress, which can disrupt their concentration and performance. Indeed, the stress experienced by learners can arise from various factors, such as fear of failure, high expectations, competition with peers, or the fear of disappointing teachers. This stress, felt by learners, can have a negative impact on their ability to mobilize their knowledge and skills during the evaluation.

Furthermore, the allotted time for these assessments is often limited, which adds additional pressure on the learners. Indeed, the restricted time given for the completion of evaluation activities can lead to haste and added stress on the learners. They sometimes feel compelled to respond quickly, which can hinder their in-depth thinking and their ability to produce quality responses.

It is therefore essential to consider these factors when designing and implementing evaluation activities. Measures can be taken to reduce learners' stress, such as creating a supportive assessment environment, providing clear explanations of expectations and evaluation criteria, and allowing sufficient time for task completion. By promoting more favorable assessment conditions, it is possible to mitigate the negative effects of stress and time constraints, thereby enabling learners to demonstrate their true level of competence and promoting a fair and equitable assessment.

On the same issue, Raulin (Op.Cit: 72-73) refers to the report from the General Inspections (IGEN-IGAENR, 2005) which draws attention to:

"The poverty of information on a student's achievements provided by a grade, the confusion induced by equivalent grades that can represent very different student performances. The distortion of the image of student performance due to the allowances allowed by the addition of partial grades⁹."

It's important to note that the grade assigned to a subject at the end is a combination of other grades such as homework and in-class assignments. Furthermore, assigning a numerical grade is part of the educational policy of the

⁹ Translate by myself « La pauvreté des informations sur les acquis d'un élève que donne une note, la confusion induite par des notes équivalentes qui peuvent représenter des performances d'élèves très différentes. La déformation de l'image des performances des élèves, dues aux compensations permises par l'addition de notes partielles. »

country, which is why this practice is far from being contested or changed. In response to this situation, Raulin (Ibid: 77) specifies that "research has not provided fundamental results for several decades to provide scientific evidence of its imperfections and justify the transition to other evaluation tools¹⁰."

For some assessments, the practice of "double correction" is employed, thereby acknowledging the possibility of a discrepancy between the first and second assigned grades, which sometimes justifies the need for a third correction. The grade assigned holds crucial importance in certain cases, as it can determine progression to a higher level or serve as a prerequisite for admission to high school or university. Therefore, the obtained grade can have "consequences on students' academic journey through grade promotion and orientation decisions, and on obtaining diplomas, which is essential for accessing employment¹¹" (Raulin, Ibid: 72). The practice of double correction acknowledges that evaluation can involve a degree of subjectivity or uncertainty, aiming to ensure a more accurate and equitable assessment. By having multiple evaluators independently assess the learner's work, efforts are made to minimize disparities and ensure a more objective grading.

The grading of written productions is often seen by several researchers as an activity prone to both underestimations and overestimations, thereby reinforcing the injustice in the evaluation process. Piéron (Op.Cit) invokes the notion of grade distortion in this context. Indeed, this author highlights certain elements that accompany grading, including the tendency to assess the paper in relation to the learner's own persona and what the teacher knows about them. Likewise, the teacher may associate the evaluation of the paper with their actual expectations of the learner in this activity.

In other words, during grading, it is inevitable that the teacher takes into account various factors that can influence their perception of the learner's paper. This includes their prior knowledge of the learner, their past experience with them, and their individual expectations.

Associating grading with the learner's persona can lead to unintentional biases. For instance, if the teacher holds a favorable opinion of the learner, they may inadvertently overestimate the quality of their written production. Similarly, if they have high expectations for the learner, they might be inclined

¹⁰ Translate by myself « la recherche n'a plus depuis plusieurs décennies de résultats fondamentaux à apporter pour donner les éléments scientifiques prouvant ses imperfections et permettant de justifier le passage à d'autres outils d'évaluation. »

¹¹ Translate by myself « des conséquences sur le parcours scolaire des élèves à travers les décisions de passages de classe et d'orientation, et sur l'obtention des diplômes qui est primordiale dans l'accès à l'emploi. »

to overrate their performance. Conversely, biases or preconceived notions can lead to an underestimation of the learner's paper.

Grading written productions presents the challenge of achieving an objective and fair evaluation. Sometimes, the teacher is confronted with unclear or approximate meaning, and in such cases, they must provide a fair assessment. A sentence may carry different meanings; for example, let's consider these sentences in French:

- a- J'ai acheté des fleurs à ma mère.
- b- J'ai acheté des roses à ma mère.
- c- J'ai acheté un cadeau à ma mère.
- d- Je suis passé par le fleuriste.

The use of the word "roses" in the second sentence brings a more specific connotation compared to the term "fleurs" used in the first sentence. However, it also introduces some imprecision since each of us might think of different types of flowers (such as roses, tulips, etc.). Regarding the third sentence, the use of the word "gift" creates some ambiguity because we don't know precisely what gift is being referred to. By mentioning the destination "flower shop" in the last sentence, the meaning becomes increasingly implicit because we don't know if the subject "I" wants to buy flowers for themselves or for someone else. It's also possible that the florist is a friend, which adds some ambiguity to the interpretation of this sentence. This ambivalence raises questions about the subject's motivations and relationships, leaving room for different possibilities of interpretation.

In this regard, Şovea (2023) refers to various dictionaries to draw attention to the direct relationship that exists between ambiguity and the fact that it is linked to multiple possibilities of interpretation. Indeed, hesitating between two interpretations could affect both comprehension and communication.

It is therefore crucial for the teacher to be aware of these influences and strive to grade in an objective and impartial manner. This can be achieved by establishing clear grading criteria and applying them consistently to all papers, without allowing room for judgments based on prior knowledge of the learner. Additionally, it is important to encourage reflection on grading and promote more balanced assessment practices. For example, the use of detailed and objective grading rubrics can help evaluate learners' written productions more consistently. Furthermore, double grading, where multiple teachers independently assess the papers, can help minimize individual biases.

It is important to establish transparent evaluation processes, train evaluators to be aware of their own practices, and ensure the consistency and

reliability of evaluation criteria. Furthermore, methods such as using multiple independent evaluators, diversifying evaluation tasks, and employing precise evaluation rubrics could help mitigate the effects of subjectivity. Overall, while entirely objective evaluation may be out of reach, it is essential to continue fair assessment practices while being aware of the limitations of the quest for entirely objective assessment. This will promote fair educational decisions and maximize the recognition of learners' skills.

Conclusion

In conclusion, evaluation is a complex process that comes with inherent challenges in the pursuit of entirely objective assessment. Subjectivity, stemming from evaluators, contextual influences, and individual differences among learners, makes achieving completely subjective-free assessment a challenging endeavor. However, it is essential for educators to redouble their efforts by adopting rigorous and equitable assessment approaches.

To achieve this goal, it is important to establish transparent evaluation processes, train evaluators to be aware of their own biases, and validate and test their assessment criteria. Utilizing multiple independent evaluators, diversifying assessment tasks, and using precise assessment rubrics are methods that can help mitigate the effects of subjectivity.

Furthermore, it is crucial to consider the conditions under which evaluation activities take place. High levels of stress among learners and the limited time allocated for assessments can have a detrimental impact on their performance. Therefore, it is necessary to create a supportive evaluation environment, clearly explain expectations and assessment criteria, and provide adequate time for completing the required tasks. By fostering more favorable assessment conditions, it is possible to mitigate the negative effects of stress and time constraints, thus enabling learners to demonstrate their true level of competence.

The concept of fairness in evaluation sparks debates as it allows room for subjectivity. Grading, particularly for written productions, is prone to underestimation and overestimation, further exacerbating the injustice in assessment. Educators must become aware of the influences that can affect their grading, such as prior knowledge of the learner and individual expectations, and strive for objective and impartial correction. The use of clear evaluation criteria, detailed grading rubrics, and double grading can help mitigate individual biases and promote a fairer assessment.

Ultimately, although entirely objective assessment may be a challenging task, educators should continually strive for fair and rigorous assessment

practices, while being aware of the limitations of the quest for entirely objective assessment. This will help promote fair educational decisions and maximize the recognition of learners' skills. By continuously improving assessment processes and adopting thoughtful approaches, it is possible to come closer to a more just, equitable, and relevant assessment for all learners.

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