

AUTONOMY AND ASSESSMENT IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Dr Barry O' Sullivan

Dr Barry O' Sullivan was the first plenary speaker of the second day of the SIG symposium. Barry introduced himself unashamedly as a tester and said there would be a bias towards testing in his talk. Then he promptly went on to balance assessment and (learner) autonomy. Autonomy and assessment are not necessarily opposites. Power is involved, but Barry does not agree that during assessment power is abused, and that learner autonomy automatically empowers the learner. As people are not natural language learners they need direction, and they may actually feel a need to be 'trained towards autonomy.' So in his talk he would like to review briefly the supposed autonomy/assessment dichotomy, to suggest a framework within which the two can be reconciled, and to demonstrate the value of such a framework through examples of current practice.

First, he took a look at assessment needs. In doing so he wished to mix the terms testing and assessment. Barry pointed out that teachers should not make tests, or else they should be trained to make tests. Even classroom tests should be reliable and consistent, meaning they should measure accurately and consistently every time. We also need to have clearly defined constructs. What precisely are we testing? This seems painfully obvious, but, seemingly, to many people it is not. Finally, we need to control the performance conditions under which tests are taken. Again, it doesn't matter if we talk about a big or small test, a general test or a classroom test, performance conditions must be the same for consecutive groups of test-takers.

Next, Barry explored what he called 'the heart of autonomy'. This, he proposed, is a freedom of choice, even if the choice is the choice for more tests rather than for fewer, as some students indicated when they asked. Tests were motivational for them and they thought having a larger number of tests was fairer because one could have a bad day and compensate for it. It is also a freedom to take

decisions, in an assessment context this means: influence of the learner on how learners should be assessed, when they should be assessed and who should do the assessment. In autonomous learning there is of course a stress on the power to decide what to learn and why.

From the research on assessment and autonomy taken together come a number of interesting facts:

- There is a rather consistent high reliability of self-rating of people in language studies
- It has become clear that the question type can affect the results
- Autonomy tends to lead to more long-term language gains

Barry would like to pull assessment and autonomy closer together to have the positive effects of both approaches. We need to start thinking of the learner in different perspectives, not just as a test-taker but also in terms of what he or she brings to the situation. We may think of the learner as a teacher, an evaluator, an assessor and a monitor. The learner as a teacher comes in with his own background knowledge and experiences. Testers have always tried to eliminate this element as much as possible, have regarded it as an irrelevant variable. They have tried to factor out background knowledge of which we now are beginning to realise that it is valuable and we should use it.

The learner as an evaluator (of one's own learning needs and assessment needs) is also ignored. Obviously, in large-scale assessment it is very difficult to implement, maybe we can open the door just a little bit here by offering choices, by creating tests for different levels and purposes.

The learner as assessor brought Barry to an overview of learners assessing themselves in classroom contexts (formative) and as part of a summative examination, of which for instance the DIALANG and ALTE 'Can Do' statements are good recent examples. Barry referred to a project he had led in Japan. The idea was to help new teachers who wanted to teach communicatively to also be able to produce a test score for every student every week (which was asked of them by their administration). The solution is sketched in the illustration below:

Formative Assessment

O Sullivan (1997)

Self & Peer Assessment Project

1997	Self & Peer Assessment using Oral Interview	<p>Students worked in groups of three (or four)</p> <p>Given prompt material & time to prepare own questions</p> <p>Role 1: Candidate & Self-Assessor Role 2: Interviewer & Assessor Role 3: Event Manager(timekeeper) & Assessor</p> <p>Roles switched after each event (so 3 interviews in total)</p> <p>Results</p> <p>Self-ratings consistent but low Agreement between peers very high Agreement between self/peers & teacher also very high</p>
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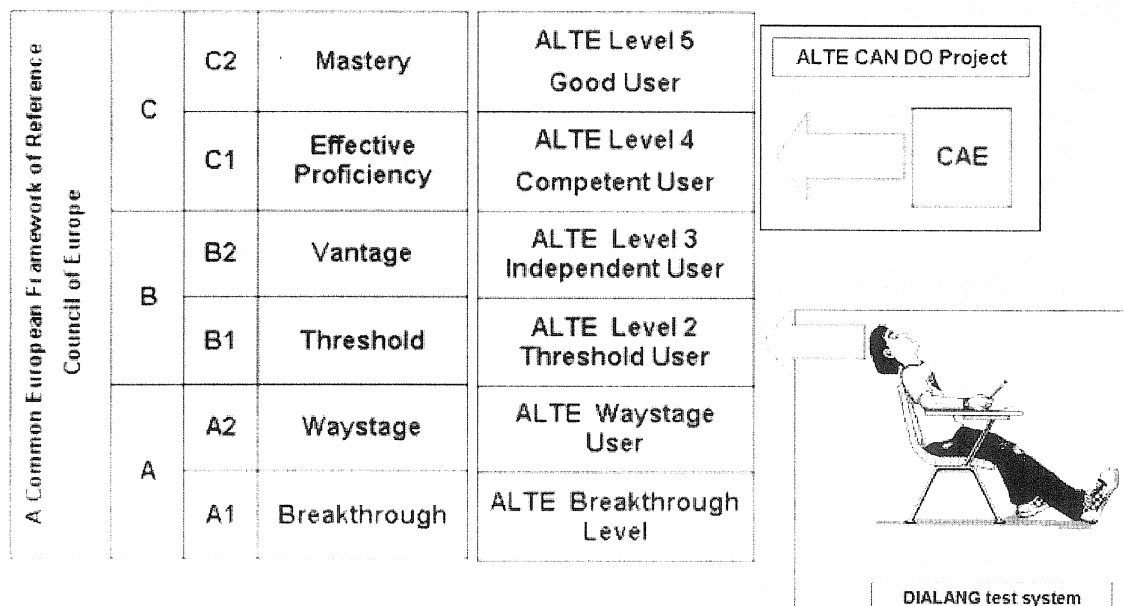
Obviously, the students were trained to do all this. Each interview lasted about 7-8 minutes, at the end of that time, roles were switched. There was a very simple rating scale. At the end of each interview the student rated himself and there was peer-assessment. In the meantime the teacher monitored each interview. Similarities between peer scores and teacher scores were amazingly high. The self-ratings were consistent but low. The approach gave the students a lot more control; they more or less administered the tests.

In this way the independent was actually included into the classroom test.

Barry referred to 'can do' statements which are used in, for instance the DIALANG and ALTE projects. Dialang uses the term 'I can' statements for a series of tests on European languages for European language users. Its aim is primarily to determine a certain level a learner is at at that moment. Beta versions of a number of tests are available on the DIALANG website. ALTE has created a bank of some 400 'Can do' statements in 40 categories. Barry described how the ALTE project tied in with other commonly used levels. The illustration on the next page shows this:

The final part of the plenary concentrated on the learner as monitor. Running out of time, Barry gave a very rapid introduction to the European Language Portfolio. The final plenary speaker on the next day was going to go into this language portfolio in more detail, so Barry could focus on just a few aspects. First he made clear that this portfolio is not a 'soft option'. Ground rules have been established so that it is possible to generalise from this portfolio itself. It is a mix of an assessment tool and a learning tool. Barry showed how the portfolio consists of three parts: a biography, a passport and a dossier. Barry limited himself to the passport. This gives an overview of a person's proficiency in (multiple) languages. It includes a range of assessments. Barry entertained us with a story of his recent visit to Spain when he found out how he could use the portfolio to determine his level (and that his initial self-assessment was off).

How 'Can Do' Questions are used



Rounding off, Barry proposed a profile of the language learner and / or test taker. If the test taker is central (as we say he is, but then we do not live up to it) we should have a clearer idea of what the test-taker is like, in terms of an overall framework. Barry presented a

framework he had been working on, based on many aspects of the test taker. So far, we have not been thinking in terms of an overall framework. This is where language assessment can learn from teaching, and particularly from learner independence. The framework is the final illustration:

Physical/Physiological	Psychological	Experiential
Short term ailments <i>Toothache, cold etc.</i>	Personality	Education
Longer term disabilities <i>Speaking, hearing, vision</i>	Memory	Examination
Age	Cognitive Style	Preparedness
Sex	Affective Schemata	Examination Experience
	Concentration	Communication
	Motivation	Experience
	Emotional state	TL-Country Residence
Language Ability		
Strategic Competence		

O'Sullivan 2002