On Humanistic Approaches in English Literature Testing

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Abstract. By way of documentation retrieval, exemplification and comparison, this paper presents a study of humanistic approaches applied to English Literature Testing It begins with the relation between structural approaches and humanistic approaches, then illustrates student-centered assessment including self-assessment and peer assessment, subjectivity-stressed assessment in form of essay writing, especially story writing in evaluating learners' proficiency and the role of IT (information technology) in assessment. In the process of student-centered assessment, the teacher gives a guidance, under which students can select what they need according to their ability and interest; To treat students more fairly in subjectivity-stressed assessment, the teacher bases his evaluation on the basis of an "or" rather than an "and" relationship; A QQ group is established to promote interaction between the teacher and students and to combine mixed teaching mode---online and offline teaching together. This paper draws the following conclusions: (1) Student-centered assessment can combine students' motivation and their ability very well and reflect the major role in English Literature Testing; (2) Subjectivity-stressed assessment is flexible and can help students to develop their potentialities to the full and get a more fair score; (3) IT can not only promote interaction between a teacher and students in depth and breadth but also speed up the process. Such a study aims to practice the scientific development concept in education: putting students at the center and inspiring their potentialities in an anxiety-reduced environment.

Keywords: Humanistic approaches; English Literature Testing; Assessment

1. Introduction

There is a trend that the field of English as foreign language is witnessing an obvious change from structural teaching approaches to communicative, humanistic approaches and the value of the student-centered approaches has been stressed and publicized by more and more second-language acquisition theorists and researchers. Hamachek [1] provides a concept that "humanistic education starts with the idea that students are different, and strives to help students become more like themselves and less like each other". Stevik [2] attributes failure in language teaching to 'alienation': alienation of learners from materials, from themselves, from the class and from the teacher, and considers humanistic approaches are conducive to eliminating such alienation. Piaget [3] ventures beyond the concept to suggest that the process of learning should be emphasized rather than the result of learning. Those humanistic theories not only influence English teaching, but also have impact on English testing. Application of humanistic approaches to English Literature Testing (ELT) is decided not only by the above-mentioned concepts but also by the following features of the course:

   * The course spans nearly 1, 500 years of English literature history, covers myriad selected readings in the original. To motivate students to catch something within limited time, it sounds reasonable to provide students with an anxiety-reduced environment in which students can select testing materials according to their own interests and purposes.

   * The course teaches students how to understand and appreciate literary works, and the task has more subjectivity than objectivity, which lends itself to learner-oriented ways.

2. Humanistic approaches in English Literature Testing

Before launching into my argument, it will be useful to briefly explain the differences between assessment and test. Assessment differs greatly from test which is a procedure designed to obtain a

specific sample of behavior and to stress objectivity and accuracy. Assessment is defined as "any method of finding out what is intended to show growth and inform instruction and is not a standardized or traditional test" [4]. This way of evaluating learners not only helps teachers, administrators to make decisions about students' linguistic abilities, their placement in appropriate levels, and their achievements, but also provides students with an environment favorable for their learning. Humanism can be best embodied in English Literature testing through student-centered assessment and subjectivity-stressed assessment (2SAs).

3. Student-centered Assessment and Subjectivity-stressed Assessment Assisted by Information Technology.

This part will illustrate 2SAs (student-centered assessment and subjectivity-stressed assessment) and the role of IT (information technology) in assessment.

3.1 Student-centered Assessment. Student-centered assessment mainly includes two forms of assessment: peer assessment and self-assessment. The assessment between peers can motivate their interests and "encourage a knowledge of self". [5] The mutual assessment between learners of different levels can enhance the fluency and "the awareness of the status of their own knowledge on the part of the more proficient partners". [6] Self-assessment sometimes can eliminate prejudice given by others including teachers, and "encourage self-initiation".[5] Murphey even suggests a student-made test and considers it as "effective way to mine students' different perceptions". [7] For example, students can select a problem like translating a Chinese ad: "心动不如行动" into English，and depend on some devices obtained in English Literature teaching for a solution.

Now look at how student-centered assessment is designed and implemented. (1) The teacher gives a macro-direction involving the following aspects: elementary knowledge of English literature such as interpretation of literary terms, appreciation of selected works; comparative analysis of two works in English literature and in Chinese literature; translation of an ad or a piece of literary works either from Chinese to English or from English to Chinese.(2) Under the above mentioned guidance, the students select the different aspects for judgement of their performance according to their ability and interest. Because of reference materials easier to possess, about 70% students chose interpretation of a couple of literary   terms or appreciation of a piece of selected works. Around 20% of them turned to comparative analysis of two writings in Chinese and in English possibly because the difficulty is doubled. Only 10% of them challenged translation of an ad (e.g. Translate the Chinese ad "心动不如行动" into English) according to their ability and interest. All of them turned out to be very active whatever way they took.

3.2 Subjectivity-stressed Assessment. Subjectivity-stressed Assessment has close relation to features of ELT mentioned in introduction part. Some assignments involve analysis of works' theme, characterization etc, and there is greater possibility of different understandings. Subjectivity-stressed assessment allows more space for learners' imagination and encourages their creativity. One of the best ways of subjectivity-stressed assessment is essay writing, especially story writing that relates to personal experience and feelings, and "can have a deep impact on a person's construction of knowledge and self". [8] It's very hard to rate their work because of much more flexibility and freedom in assessment than in test. To better illustrate such characteristics of subjectivity-stressed assessment, it is necessary to make a detailed comparison between marking schemes for TEM (Test for English Majors) composition and those for ELT (English Literature Testing) story writing. Firstly, let's look at the TEM composition rating system which includes the following items and requirements:

  * There is a word limit of about 150 words.

  * The organization of the composition is formulated, and such a composition generally has three paragraphs, each having a topic sentence and several supporting sentences.

  * Grammar including spelling, vocabulary, punctuations, syntax etc. should be correct.

  * The composition should be on the point.

  * Argumentative, expositive ways are often used.

The rating method depends on the above elements and such a test imposes many limits on students so that their creativity is affected. To cope with the test, students have to be trapped in boring imitation and copying. As a result, they can only write this sort of stereotyped composition which cannot really reveal their writing competence.

Now, let's turn to some elements of ELT story writing and find distinctions between them:

* There is no word limit, but the shorter, the better. This can sharpen the characteristics of a story writing.

* The organization of a story or the plot development is not formulated. There are many techniques to be employed such as "stream of consciousness" technique, flashback style.

* One paragraph can have only one sentence, while the other many sentences. The whole story can be woven either through dialogue between characters or through narration.

* Misuse of grammar sometimes is applicable for the purpose of creating characters; good use of informal language like dialect helps to sharpen local color.

* The theme reflected in a story is versatile.

* More writing styles are employed including descriptive narrative, expositive and so on.

The distinction is obvious and manifests clearly subjectivity-stressed assessment is flexible. In this way can students develop their potentialities to the full and a more fair score be got.

The following is a detailed illustration of how subjectivity-stressed assessment is designed and implemented. The teacher asks the students to write a story of sb. To better judge students' capacity for story writing diverse rating criteria are required: (1) how a student develops the plot; (2) how he/she gives a narration; (3) how he / she portrays the character;(4) how well he/she uses English as an effective tool. The teacher can give the student a higher score for a good plot development containing "suspense at the beginning, sudden turning in the middle and surprise at the ending", or a wonderful narration involving such techniques as monologue, dialogue, flashback and etc, or a vivid sketch by using description, narration together with exaggeration, irony, metaphor and so on, or a good mastery of language like slang expressions, dialects, jargons, idiolects. Here an "or" relationship rather than an "and" relationship in judgement enables students to get a fairer mark.

3.3 Information Technology (IT) Applied to English Literature Assessment. IT plays a very important role in English literature assessment. It can not only promote interaction between a teacher and students in depth and breadth, but also speed up the process. An established qq group facilitates student-centered assessment and makes possible a mixed teaching mode both on line and off line. Take the above-mentioned "Translate the Chinese ad '心动不如行动' into English" as an example again. Students are required to post their translations into the class qq group.

Here are a couple of students' answers: (1) Heartbeat as action; (2) Start working now; (3) Doing is better than thinking and some judgements about them from peers: (1) "Heartbeat as action" is against the grammatical rule and doesn't make sense; (2)"Start working now" is good because it sounds vocative; (3)"Doing is better than thinking" is ok, but it would be better if we say "Actions speak louder than words". The teacher evaluates some typical translations and peers' judgements either through uploading his comments to the class qq group or by means of black-boarding them. What's more, the teacher gives an answer---"Actions speak louder than aspirations" for reference and explains some of its merits: (1) It sounds musical and easy to remember; (2) It sounds sweet for use of alliteration and end rhyme.

4. Conclusions

Such a study shows that in the process of student-centered assessment students' difference in ability and interest is considered so that they can build excitement and engagement. An evaluation system based on an "or" relationship rather than an "and" relationship enables students to be more fairly treated in subjectivity-stressed assessment. Application of IT to 2 SAs can not only push interaction between the teacher and students but also speed up the process. In spite of some merits discussed above, 2 SAs (student-centered assessment, subjectivity-stressed assessment) in testing are faulty. Brown and Hudson point out its shortcoming: assessments are relatively difficult to produce and

relatively time-consuming to administer. Reliability may be problematic because of subjectivity in the scoring process". [9] Other objections could be raised about informal assessment, which is less reliable, direct, precise, and objective. With regard to those problems, it is an appropriate suggestion that teachers should not be expected to use assessment exclusively but strives to familiarize their students with all forms of assessment such as students' attendance, preparedness, and in-class & out-of-class discussion. However, the humanistic approaches are potential for they present a dynamic rather than static development.

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