Learner autonomy, self-assessment and language tests: towards a new assessment culture

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The development of learner autonomy depends partly on reflective processes in which self-assessment plays a central role. Dam, for example, describes evaluation as "the pivot of learner autonomy", because it looks back at learning that has taken place in order to look forward to the next stage (1995: 49). On the other hand, proponents of learner autonomy are often uncomfortable with the fact that their learners must submit to external tests and exams shaped by principles quite different from those on which their pedagogical practice is based.

The common reference levels of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001) have been widely adopted as a metric against which learning achievement can be measured and language tests compared. On the other hand, the European Language Portfolio (ELP; Little 2002), which was conceived as a companion piece to the CEFR and developed partly to promote the development of learner autonomy, uses "I can" checklists derived from the common reference levels to support goal setting and self-assessment.

For some years now, the critical strand in language testing theory has insisted that testing is not a neutral activity but "a product and agent of cultural, social, political, educational and ideological agendas that shape the lives of individual participants, teachers and learners" (Shohamy 1998, p.332). Arguments that start from this position must sooner or later confront the issue of the learner's role in the assessment process, including his or her contribution to the making of judgements.

Starting from these considerations, my paper will argue that the CEFR and the ELP offer us the means to develop an assessment culture that makes explicit the relation between tests/exams and teaching/learning and accommodates the processes and outcomes of learner self-assessment. I shall illustrate my argument with reference to language learning at university.

References

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