Speaking Assessment in the Communicative Language Learning Classroom

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This action research paper explores the assessment procedures of a communicative language learning (CLL) classroom led by a native-English speaking teacher. It seeks to highlight the importance of integrating ongoing, formative assessment procedures to which students become goal-oriented via clear, communicative, and achievable learning objectives. The paper embraces the perspective of sociocultural theory in order to draw attention to the significance of providing students with scaffolding, support, and the creation of a positive social environment in order to achieve those goals. The paper is designed to serve as a counter-script to the commonly-employed, one-away, high-stakes examinations which commonly have little to do with oral language production—instead serving primarily as a means of attaining the institutionalized goal of ensuring the existence of disparities among student grades. This paper seeks to demonstrate that a focus on student learning and the creation of opportunities for all students to experience communicative successes need not be undermined by such institutional goals. It also seeks to emphasize the intimate nature of the relationships between communicative activity, teacher support and scaffolding, and ongoing, formative assessment.

Key words: assessment, evaluation, communicative language learning, university

I. Introduction

Over the past two decades, much attention has been drawn to the challenges associated with the successful implementation of communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches in Korea. Variables such as passive
learning histories, cultural norms, and the wash-back effects associated with standardized tests are commonly identified as barriers to the success of CLT. Seldom, however, are the relationships between the processes of student assessment and their communicative performances explored. This is as matter of great concern, especially considering that assessments commonly determine the students’ goal-orientations and drive the learning process (Leont’ev, 1978).

Even the most well-intended of language teachers can have their efforts thwarted by the initial resistance of university students who, following years of rigorous preparation for the non-communicative College Scholastic Aptitude Test (CSAT), have not yet operationalized the basics of English language communication skills (Choi, 2008). Thus, it should be anticipated that students will require substantial scaffolding and support in order to adjust to the CLL classroom. Furthermore, students require time and opportunity to forge meaningful social relationships with their often unfamiliar peers and teacher (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). Failure to create such an environment predictably have devastating effects on the students’ willingness to endure the inevitable discomforts which accompany the shift towards a participation-based, communicatively-driven learning environment.

This paper aims to stimulate academic dialogue among teachers in the Korean post-secondary context with respect to the processes of assessing students’ speaking performances. It seeks to draw attention to the intimate nature of the relationship between assessment, human actions, and collaborative group activities. It also seeks to emphasize the need for teachers and institutions alike to fully embrace processes of praxis as a means of developing assessment procedures—a stark contrast to commonly employed, one-size-fits-all, generic, paper-based examinations. Accordingly, it is hoped that educators will review this paper critically, taking from it ideas that may work in their own teaching contexts, and perhaps conducting their own practitioner-based research to advance the current dialogue in productive and constructive directions. By generating ideas, sharing them,