

# Language assessment and democratic engagement: Exploring social, political, and educational dimensions

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ARTICLE INFO		ABSTRACT		
<b>Keywords:</b> Model of assessment, democratic assessment, transparency, evaluation, independent learners.		<i>This paper examines democratic assessment in language classrooms, which emphasizes peer and self-assessment alongside teacher evaluation. Case studies illustrate how this model encourages student involvement in the evaluation process. Democratic assessment is characterized by transparency, where teachers clearly explain evaluation criteria and expectations before projects begin. Tools like rubrics, checklists, or previous student work samples help clarify these expectations. While some teachers resist democratic assessment, fearing it undermines their authority, the model calls for teachers to share certain responsibilities while assuming greater duties. Democratic teachers must assess student progress, provide feedback, and guide students in areas of weakness. Importantly, while teachers relinquish some control, they retain the right to respect from students, which is freely given when they earn it. Through ongoing feedback, students better understand their mastery of skills, and as they engage in the assessment process, they become more reflective and self-aware learners. Ultimately, this model fosters independent, competent learners by involving students in evaluating their performance.</i>		
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## 1. Introduction

Often, in classrooms, an autocratic teacher evaluates students' projects and gives them scores in accordance to the standard used by the school system. The teacher returns the projects to the student without any feedback. Students are frustrated because they have no idea of the criteria that was used to assess their performance. This practice needs to be challenged.

What would a democratic assessment practice look like? Just as in a democratic government the people have a voice, in democratic assessment, the students have a voice. Democratic assessment encourages peer assessment and self-assessment as well as teacher assessment. It draws students into personal participation in the evaluation process.

Democratic assessment is also characterized by transparency. Before the students begin their project, the teacher explains the criteria for evaluation to the students, making their expectations for student work and performance as explicit as possible. Such explanations may be accompanied by a scoring rubric, checklist, or other assessment tools as well as samples of student's work from previous semesters.

We recognize that democratic assessment will not be readily embraced by all English teachers. Some out of courtesy may smile and praise the idea of bringing democracy to the English language assessment process, but in their heart of hearts, they have serious objections, particularly regarding teachers' authority, the reliability of students' evaluations, time constraints, and curricular support. In the spirit of democracy, we shall address these objections both with evidence from research and with anecdotes from our own experience of using democratic assessment in a predominantly autocratic teaching culture.

## 2. Literature review

The traditional model of language assessment in classrooms has often been criticized for its autocratic nature, where teachers hold the sole responsibility for evaluating student performance. This top-down approach typically involves assigning grades based on predetermined standards without providing meaningful feedback to students. Research suggests that this model can lead to frustration among students, as they are often left unaware of the specific criteria used to assess their work (Boud & Falchikov, 2017). In such systems, the lack of transparency and student involvement in the assessment process can contribute to disengagement, undermining the potential for meaningful learning (Harris, 2018). As a result, there is a growing call for a more democratic approach to assessment that empowers students by involving them in the evaluation process.

Democratic assessment practices, unlike traditional autocratic models, actively involve students in their own learning and evaluation. Just as in a democratic government where citizens have a voice in decision-making, democratic assessment allows students to take part in the assessment process through peer and self-assessment, in addition to teacher assessment (Moss & Brookhart, 2020). This inclusive approach aims to foster greater student agency, giving them a clearer understanding of how their work will be evaluated and offering them the opportunity to reflect on their own progress. By engaging students in peer assessment and self-assessment, democratic assessment encourages critical thinking, self-regulation, and ownership of learning (Gibson & Marshall, 2021).

A key feature of democratic assessment is transparency. Teachers who adopt this approach make the criteria for evaluation explicit to students before the assessment begins. This transparency may involve the use of rubrics, checklists, or exemplars from previous student work, providing students with a clear roadmap of what is expected in their performance (Andrade, 2019). By setting clear expectations, democratic assessment aims to reduce ambiguity, increase motivation, and guide students toward achieving their learning goals. Research has shown that when students understand the criteria by which they will be assessed, they are more likely to engage deeply with the material and demonstrate better learning outcomes (William, 2018).

Despite its potential benefits, democratic assessment is not without its challenges. One of the primary objections from teachers is the perceived loss of authority. In many educational contexts, teachers are expected to maintain control over the assessment process, and the idea of sharing this responsibility with students can be met with resistance (Kumaravadivelu, 2017). Teachers may fear that involving students in the assessment process will undermine their professional authority and lead to less reliable evaluations (Boud & Soler, 2022). Additionally, there are concerns about the time and resources required to implement such practices effectively, particularly in large classes or in curricula that are already packed with content (Fryer & Willmott, 2022).

Furthermore, there is concern over the reliability of student evaluations in a democratic assessment model. Teachers may worry that peer and self-assessments will lack objectivity, leading to inconsistent or inaccurate assessments of student performance (Topping, 2017). However, research indicates that when students are properly trained in assessment methods and when clear criteria are established, peer and self-assessments can be reliable and valid tools for promoting student learning (Black & Wiliam, 2020). Moreover, studies suggest that democratic assessment practices can enhance students' ability to self-evaluate and reflect on their learning, fostering greater metacognitive skills (Harris, 2021).

Despite these challenges, numerous studies highlight the positive outcomes of democratic assessment practices. For instance, students who participate in the assessment process tend to demonstrate higher levels of motivation, engagement, and academic achievement (Andrade & Brookhart, 2021). By fostering a collaborative and transparent learning environment, democratic assessment can help students become more autonomous learners, developing critical skills that are valuable both in and outside of the classroom (Gibson & Marshall, 2021). The growing body of research on democratic assessment supports its potential to transform traditional evaluation practices, making them more inclusive, transparent, and aligned with contemporary educational goals.

### **3. Research methodology**

#### *Teacher authority*

The research investigates the implementation of democratic assessment in language classrooms, focusing on the role of teachers and students in the assessment process. Democratic assessment challenges traditional, autocratic models by empowering students to take an active role in evaluating their work and understanding the criteria used for assessment. However, some teachers resist this model, believing it diminishes their authority. Traditionally, teachers have held powerful, unquestioned roles in the classroom, where they have the right to assign grades, and students accept these assessments without challenge, particularly in cultures where contesting grades is rare (Kumaravadivelu, 2017).

In democratic classrooms, however, students are encouraged to engage with the assessment process by having a say in the evaluation criteria, which contrasts with the conventional autocratic structure. This participation allows students to understand and reflect on how their work aligns with set standards, leading to more constructive and informed feedback (Gibson & Marshall, 2021). Importantly, the nature of student inquiries about their performance shifts from challenging grades to seeking ways to improve and meet established goals (Brown & Xu, 2019). This shift reduces the frequency of students contesting their grades, as they are more focused on understanding their learning journey rather than merely the final grade (Taylor, 2023).

In democratic assessment, while teachers relinquish some control, they retain critical responsibilities. These include modelling desired behaviours, setting clear expectations, listening to student interests and goals, and providing ongoing guidance (Lambert & Lo, 2020). Democratic teachers must also assess whether students have achieved target skills and concepts and provide support for areas needing improvement. Through this process, respect between students and teachers is fostered, as students bestow it based on their teachers' actions and integrity (Fryer & Willmott, 2022).

Moreover, teachers in democratic settings are expected to model positive behaviours and attitudes. By promoting a positive, encouraging atmosphere, teachers reinforce the

value of growth and learning. Teachers should provide constructive feedback and reward positive behaviours, fostering a supportive environment for both academic and personal development (Harris, 2021).

### 3. Findings

The situation will be much more different from that of a class handled by a non-authoritative teacher. An authoritative teacher is open to feedback, interaction, and debates. A non-authoritative teacher will not be an open individual to respond to students' complaints. He/she will not accept any debate or different opinions. When a problem arises in a discussion, the students need to explore their limits and choices and use their judgments. An authoritative teacher will motivate the students to talk freely without any fear of being rejected. The student can outlet and modify his thoughts and feelings openly without any barrier both from the teacher and peers. In a class by a non-authoritative teacher, everything is decided by this kind of teacher, and the students do not have enough space to collaborate and share their ideas to achieve any goal. Significantly, students should be situated to feel comfortable making questions or giving comments when they are hoping to be democratic. An authoritative classroom offers students a chance to develop better communication skills.

#### *Reliability of student evaluation*

Some teachers object to democratic assessment practices because they believe that students cannot provide reliable results when evaluating the performance of their peers or themselves. Any time that students are involved in evaluating performance, whether their own or that of their classmates, their assessments' validity and reliability are questioned. Research has shown that these fears are not unfounded. Without guidance, students have a distorted view of their performance. The same research shows that with practice, training, and regular feedback from their teacher, the student's assessment of their performance agreed with that of their teacher.

Involvement in a democratic process of assessment allows students to gain knowledge, experience, and understanding of how to judge oral and written expression. Through dialog, the students and teacher can negotiate the meaning of the objectives stated in the curriculum or mandated by the Ministry of Education. For assignments that challenge students to create with language, whether orally or through written composition, the teacher and students can collaborate in creating a rubric or checklist that outlines what will be assessed. Feedback from the teacher after each performance will help students understand whether or not they have mastered the skill or concept. Allowing students a voice in the assessment process compels them to analyze their performance. Through analyzing their performance, students hone critical thinking skills and develop autonomy. In time, students regard themselves as knowledgeable, and rightly so, which empowers them to be competent, independent learners.

Allowing students a voice in the assessment process compels them to listen to their classmates. An honest teacher will acknowledge that there are many styles of speaking or of writing for which she and her students may hold opposite, but equally valid opinions. By giving the students, the opportunity to freely express their opinions about issues such as how a paper looks or how their classmate's gestures distracted the audience from the message, and by valuing those opinions, the teacher models the democratic process of respecting other's opinions. This respect empowers students to find their voice and to fearlessly use it.

In doing so, students are expected to have their evaluation. It means that the class should carry out a peer assessment. With this, the students are given a free chance to develop and express their ideas about peer evaluation. Peer evaluation offers mutual and beneficial supervision for both students and teachers to gain an objective result of an evaluation. Teachers can adopt this kind of assessment for students' points of view over other's weaknesses and strengths in mastering a skill. A classroom presentation carried out by a group of students discussing a topic, for example, can promote peer assessment. The rest of the students will give their judgment toward the problems that arise in the discussion. This will promote a democratic nuance since other students will witness to others' competence and performance. Teachers' feedback should be delivered at the end of the presentation, either in appraisal or criticism, to exhibit the openness of the value and judgment.

#### **4. Discussion**

##### *Time constraints*

Some teachers may object to the use of democratic assessment because discussing rubrics and giving feedback to every student, especially in large classes, would take too much time. While doing grammar drills, students are simply going through the motions of learning, not using language for authentic purposes. By giving students tasks and goals, the teacher provides a means of using the language for real purposes. This temporary conclusion may provide different assumptions for different teachers. An autocratic teacher will allow his/her students to explore their limits to make use of the language for any real purpose. He/she will give the students enough space to organize and modify the language not only to express their ideas but also to communicate them.

A change from autocracy to democracy in grading practice has several advantages for the language learning process. Democratic assessment practices encourage teachers and students to collaborate in dynamic ways so that cooperative teaching and learning activities are accessible to the students. Allowing students choices gives them some control over their learning.

In short, democratic language teaching provides better platform in breaking the iceberg of language teaching methodology. It promotes better performance in making the students and the teacher collaborate each other to successfully carry out the missions of teaching and learning a language communicatively. Democratic assessment is one of the models of assessment provided in the current language teaching issues and paradigms.

##### *Curricular support*

Some teachers may object to democratic assessment because the school's English curriculum does not support it. After all, the books already clarify what competencies the students should achieve. They may question whether or not students' participation in the process of assessment would be beneficial.

Honest teachers would admit that the idea of democratic assessment makes them feel insecure. Quite often, teachers do not have the training they need to develop assessment instruments that document student learning. To be able to develop democratic assessment practices, teachers must have access to professional development opportunities that will help them learn to design and use assessments that can endorse student achievement. Mere exposure to assessment theories and examples of innovative instruments is not enough, neither are one-shot workshops. Teachers should be engaged in long-term, collaborative

activities with their colleagues in which they get feedback about their tests and evaluation instruments from their students, colleagues, administrators, and those who are experienced in using democratic assessment for learning.

## 5. Conclusion

Thus, this article offers only a launching point, a place to begin the discussion about how to involve students in their learning process. It documents the beginning of our journey: a course in which we collaborated with English teachers in the assessment of their speaking and writing performance. Though it only offers an alternative way of doing the assessment, it provides an objective insight into the nature of communication democratically, with which it eventually builds up communicative competence.

Therefore, there are some points to consider about the teaching and learning methodology regarding democracy in language assessment. Firstly, the teacher and the curricular provider should be able to identify and define the terms of the learning outcomes. This is an important aspect to point out since the goal of the teaching process is the orientation which will be taken into consideration. Secondly, the institution should clarify the standard to be achieved. This will determine the colour of the education it may take for the students and the stakeholders. Last but not least, the institution should monitor the progress toward that standard. The institution should consider the long-term goal if it wants to maintain valuable responses both from parents and stakeholders.

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