**Challenges of criteria-based assessment: a study of teachers’ perspectives on the use of success criteria**

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**Abstract**

Criteria-based assessment is one of the educational reforms in Kazakhstan in last decade. It has become a challenge for many educators and teachers. This article represents some challenges teachers encounter and teachers’ perceptions and changes they make after undergoing professional development. The author attempts to study the impact of defining learning objectives and success criteria on teachers’ practices. The results of the study show that teachers are motivated and raised their confidence towards the new form of assessment. Curriculum overload and lack of time and preparation are the issues for further discussion.

**Аннотация**

Критериальное оценивание является одним из образовательных реформ последнего десятилетия в Казахстане. И это стало сложностью для многих учителей. Данная статья представляет некоторые трудности, которые встречают учителя, а также их восприятия и изменения после курсов повышения квалификации. Автор пытается изучить влияние определения целей обучения и критериев успеха на практику учителей. Результаты исследования показывают, что учителя мотивированы и данный процесс поднял их уверенность в оценивании в классе. Объёмная учебная программа и нехватка времени и готовности остаются вопросами дальнейших дискуссий.

**Аннотация**

Критериалды бағалау Қазақстандағы соңғы онжылдықта білім саласындағы маңызды реформалардың бірі. Осы мәселе көптеген білім берушілер мен мұғалімдер үшін күрделі үдеріске айналды. Осы мақала мұғалімдердің біліктілікті арттыру курстарынан кейін өз тәжірибелеріне оқу мақсаттарын енгізудің әсері және олардың көзқарастарының және тәжірибелерінің өзгергендігі жайлы айтылған. Зерттеу нәтижелері мұғалімдердің өз тәжірибелерінде мотивация мен сыныптағы бағалауда сенімділік сынды оң өзгерістердің пайда болғандығын көрсетеді. Ауқымды оқу бағдарламасы, уақыт пен дайындықтың жетіспеушілігі болашақ талқылау мәселелері болып қалуда.

**Keywords:** assessment, learning objectives, success criteria, rubrics, professional development, teacher practice

**Introduction**

The changes in social, economic and political sphere have become dramatic which has been challenging education directly. The relationship between societal economic growth and education is affirmed by policy researchers (Halinger, 2010). Therefore, policy-makers seek for effective reforms in education area to support economic growth. In order to respond to such challenges in 2009 the government of Kazakhstan launched the project of Autonomous Educational Organization “Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools” (NIS) as the flagship for reforming general secondary education. Since then the NIS has been investigating best local and international practice that can be transformed to the context of the country. In fact, two main focuses of the NIS have become the development of new curriculum and assessment system. The suggested curriculum is based on defined learning objectives, whereas the assessment system is founded on criterion-referenced approach with success criteria. The evidence shows that the innovation works effectively in the NIS setting. There is a shortage of fact whether implementing the novelty in state comprehensive schools can produce the similar effect. As the dissemination of the existing practice of the NIS started in April 2015 there is the strategic need in thorough studies in this field.

This article describes the site-based research project in one of the state schools in the countryside. The purpose of the study is to introduce the practice of setting learning objectives and success criteria as well as understand the teachers’ perceptions about changes occurred in their teaching after applying these introductions. The importance of this project is in applying the innovations in the comprehensive school which differs from the NIS in many ways. Namely, the level of support from the government, the procedure of selecting students and teachers, support of teachers’ professional development, and the number of students per class are totally different from the NIS schools. For successful dissemination of the operating system of assessment and curriculum development, it is essential to identify the most effective way. The researchers agree that the main player of any educational reform is a teacher in a classroom. Therefore, this study focuses on understanding how international standards for improving teaching and learning through setting smart learning objectives and applying criterion-referenced assessment can influence teacher practice. Additionally, it is intended to understand how the teachers of the comprehensive school equipped and the provision of an environment for implementing new educational reforms.

Literature Review

Marzano (2007) in his framework about effective instruction described some valuable distinct action steps for teaching. Firstly, it is suggested to clearly understand what learning goals are and distinguish them from learning activities. Secondly, a teacher is strongly advised to write rubrics or scale for each learning goal. Combined with formative assessment, these tools become `powerful weapon` in a teacher’s arsenal (Marzano, 2007).

Two main concerns of this work are learning objectives and success criteria. There are different terms and definitions which can identify and explain a similar process. For example, Moeller et al. (2012) define learning goals as a process of establishing clear and usable targets or objectives. Harden (2002) expands this definition by explaining that objectives should be extensive and detailed. Moreover, he proposes the term learning outcome which is different from learning objective. Banks (2012) uses ‘classroom instructional objectives’ for a purpose, a goal and an outcome for particular courses which addresses a particular classroom activity. Although there is a diversity of terminology, they all describe what should be gained at the end of a lesson. In this article the term learning objectives is used in this meaning.

Minor diversity can be observed in defining success criteria. It is commonly accepted that success criteria are linked to learning objectives and describe what success looks like (NCCA, 2015). Brookhart (2013) suggests the term ‘rubric’ as an equivalent for success criteria and he also connects it to learning objectives. He describes rubric as ‘a coherent set of criteria for students’ work that includes descriptions of levels of performance quality on the criteria’ (Brookhart, 2013, p. 17). Similarly, Marzano (2007) proposes using a scale for each learning goal. It is important to understand that success criteria for close and open ended tasks are constructed differently. For close tasks success criteria can be either outcome based or process based, whereas for open ended tasks they describe level of mastery for every criterion.

Both the setting learning objectives and success criteria play crucial role in improving learning. Marzano (2007) presents the result of the synthesis study done by Lipsey and Wilson in 1993 which examined 204 studies on goal setting the average effect size of which was 0.55. This means that standard deviation was greater for 0.55 in classes where goal settings were effectively implemented. Furthermore, Clarke (2014) points out those success criteria are the key principle while practicing Assessment for Learning, which is found to be one of the most effective tools to enhance learning, as they communicate how a learning objective can be achieved. Similarly, Nick (2007) argues that success criteria are extremely powerful learning tool and serves as a guide for a student.

There are some more benefits of creating success criteria evident in the literature. Andrade (2000) argues that criteria and gradation of quality promotes not only learning but also nourish good thinking. Having communicated advance criteria for a task beforehand, a teacher helps students’ to show high order thinking answers, while gradational quality will inform students in what way students can improve their work. Overall, a prior agreement between a teacher and a student on success criteria can support independent learning, encourage self and peer assessment, make a teacher’s evaluation clear for students (NSW, 2014). Another advocate of communicating success criteria Andrade (2000), explicate that they are easy to use and explain; they make teachers’ expectations obvious; they provide more informative feedback about students’ strengths and areas that need improvement; they support the development of skills and understanding.

Another important issue with using success criteria is that they should comply with the requirements of reliability and validity. Hafner and Hafner (in Andrade and Du, 2005) note that setting success criteria is a valid and reliable tool for peer assessment, as well as is an effective strategy for teaching and learning. More importantly, students do not play ‘guessing game’, what is in teacher’s mind, but know “what is expected” from them. Although criteria based scoring is less reliable than multiple choice testing, Jonsson and Svinglby (2007) in their revision argue that assessing higher order thinking skills is found to be difficult by multiple choice questions, therefore, success criteria is a reliable tool for an evaluation of a student’s performance. On the other hand, the same review reveals that there is not enough evidence to prove the validity of the tool. Brookhard and Chen (2015) support Jonsson and Svinglby, having explained that most studies used one or two methods of gathering validity evidence.

In order to generate effective success criteria, a teacher Andrader (2000) suggest that to create effective success criteria teacher should follow listed steps. Firstly, look at models of students work for differentiating good and weak performances. Secondly, select and list criteria which are important and valid for linked learning objective. Thirdly, articulate levels of quality. Brookhart (2013 p.37) extend this by list of characteristics of criteria used for classroom assessment which are: appropriate, definable, observable, distinct from one another, complete, able to support descriptions along a continuum of quality. Additionally, the author suggesting characteristics of level descriptors: descriptive, clear, cover the whole range of performance distinguishes among levels. Another challenge in implementing success criteria is misconceptions about them. First one is the starts with classification of generalizability, where success criteria can be task specific or generic (Jonnson & Svingby, 2007). It can lead to misunderstanding if generic success criteria would be used for specific task and vice versa. Second, is confusion of success criteria with learning objectives or task (Brookhart, 2013). Third, is using success criteria as list of requirements, when students comply to earn points. This misconception connected with grade-focusing instead of learning-focusing (*ibid.*). Forth one is when success criteria are too specific, or become more scaffolding tool than description of quality.

Currently, teachers are emerged in different professional development programs and courses where they are taught to essential principles of criteria-based assessment and formative assessment. However, these procedures leave teachers in a tight corner with all their misunderstandings and questions around the issue of new form of assessment. Consequently, the government organizes short term courses for teachers in order to study the questions around question skills, understanding the problems of learner and role of giving feedback as one tool of formative assessment.

According to teachers, cascade model of learning does not bring benefits to the teachers’ community and teachers are seeking various ways to gain practical knowledge through attending each other’s lessons and inviting teachers from neighboring villages to share their knowledge.

Kazakhstan aims to become one of the 30 developed countries in the world. For this, new educational reforms have been launched bringing to educational arena the concepts like student-centered learning, integrated curriculum, trilingual education and others (Ministry of Education of RK, 2011). One of the branches of AEO is Center of Excellence. From 2012 this center organized professional development courses with support from Cambridge Faculty of Education. Courses have three directions: basic level-for improving teaching in classroom, main level - promoting teacher-based coaching and mentoring processes, advanced level - for leader teachers who designing school improvement plans and professional networking. These courses make difference in teachers’ attitudes to teaching and learning.

This article is focused on impact of implementing new approaches to teaching through setting learning goals and establishing success criteria. The question is to define how such strategies changes teachers practice. The observations are done in one of the rural schools of Zhambyl Oblast. The school run ordinary curriculum which is implemented in all schools which work under jurisdiction of Ministry of Education.

Rationale and aim for research

As it was mentioned earlier in this article, education can affect economic growth. A place where people generally get their education at now days, is school. However, to what extent does school provide effective influence on achievement of students is open question. Marzano (2003) argue that effective school can make a substantial difference in the achievement. This claim rise another question what is count as effective school. There is no right or wrong answer; effectiveness might depend on different factors such as curriculum, safe environment, procedure of admission, recruitment of teachers, equipment of school and other. However, as proverb says “Teacher is the heart of a school”, the most influential factor of effectiveness is the individual teacher (Marzano, 2007). Effective teacher is one who knows and use appropriate strategies in classroom. One of the strategies is ability to set learning objectives or goals and define success criteria for those goals. The aim of this research is to investigate the impact of this strategy on teaching practice in ordinary rural school. Under the learning goals here employs the SMART framework, which acronym of specific, measurable, achievable, realistic or relevant, and time-based (Wade, 2009). Conducted researches in area of motivation show a positive effect of goal theory on motivation and self-efficacy (Locke and Latham, 2002).

Research design

The study was designed to investigate the impact of defining classroom learning objectives and success criteria on teaching practice. Firstly, we communicated with school administration and explained reasons and aim of the research. Secondly, there were held meetings with teachers to discuss effective classroom strategies. Thirdly, there was organized workshop on setting learning goals and success criteria. Fourthly, participants of the research designed and run one sample lesson using learning goals and success criteria. Fifthly, the interview was conducted with teachers who had performed sample lesson. In this interview teachers shared their experience of new approach. Planed next stage is to design learning goals and success criteria for sequence of lessons, run these lessons and share their experience.

To scrutiny the given study with the focus of teachers’ perspectives the following research questions and sub-questions were developed:

Main research question: What is the impact of defining learning objectives and success criteria on teachers’ practices and planning?

Data collection instruments

Teacher semi-structured questionnaire, focus group interview with teachers, individual interviews with school principal and vice principal were applied as research instruments. The questionnaire compiled four questions of which two were open-ended. Focus group interview with five teachers was guided through discussion and interaction between members. The confidentiality of the given information was assured by the oral consent of teachers as the officiality of the process would bring the discomfort to teachers.

Findings

The case study approach helped to explore teachers’ perspectives and changes through interviews, questionnaires, and observations. We can divide the findings into several categories such as recommendation letters of NIS and NAO, and advantages and difficulties.

Advantages and Difficulties

The new practical approaches teachers implemented in their classroom practice gave different results. If some claimed they were beneficial, others stated that challenges and difficulties occurred. The positive results entail focused teaching, validity of assessment, teacher confidence and motivation. Teachers’ confessed that setting lesson objectives and success criteria makes the learning more focused and students are aware of their own learning. There was an interconnection of learning activities and grading during the lessons.

We have two main categories at the moment: Advantages and Difficulties. Advantages have concepts: focused teaching, validity of assessment, teacher confidence and motivation. Difficulties have next concepts: time consuming for preparation, lack of skills in creating rubrics, overloaded curriculum. Each concept should be linked to quotes and lit review.

Conclusion

The implementation of learning objectives and success criteria on teachers’ practices gave various results. One can think it is easy to go through the professional development courses and apply knowledge in practice; however, the novelties happening in education system are developing chaos in some point. Nevertheless, the given empirical research showed that teachers are ready to undertake changes if facilitation is occurred. The study showed that teachers need more support from the part of more experienced teachers and schools as well as the school administration.

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