Understanding Ipsative Assessment

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Abstract. This paper deals with the notion of assessment, the need for assessment and understanding various kinds of assessment. It goes on to define the two most common kinds of assessment that we are familiar with in academic contexts and also proposes and argues for a third kind of assessment namely Ipsative assessment, its definition and its benefits.

Introduction

Assessment is the process of documenting, usually in measurable terms, knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs. Assessment is an important component of the learning environment. The information it gives, feed backs into planning and defining the way to teach.

'Assessment in education is the process of gathering, interpreting, recording and using information about pupils' responses to an educational task. At one end of the dimension of formality, the teacher reading a pupil's work or listening to what he or she has to say. At the other end of the dimension, the task may be a written, timed examination which is read and marked according to certain rules and regulations. Thus assessment encompasses responses to regular work as well as to specifically devised tasks.'(Bera, 1992)

Assessments can be classified in many different ways. The most important distinctions are: (1) formative and summative; (2) objective and subjective; (3) referencing (criterion-referenced, norm-referenced, and ipsative); and (4) informal and formal.

For a basic understanding of assessment in the educational context, my endeavour is to talk about the two most common assessment modes namely Norm-referenced assessment and Criterion-referenced assessment that one is familiar with   and then go on to discuss the

advantages of Ipsative Assessment and how this kind of assessment will support and improve the learning outcomes of learners.

Norm-referenced assessment

A norm-referenced test compares a test-taker against his or her peers. This is assessment that is based on comparing the relative performances of students, either by comparing the performances of individual students within the group being tested, or by comparing their performance with that of others of similar age, experience and background. Such assessment may simply involve ranking the students, or may involve scaling their marks or grades so that they fall on a standard distribution of some sort.

Criterion-referenced assessment

A criterion-referenced test measures a test-taker against external criteria. Here, the performance of students or trainees is assessed against pre-determined criteria, without regard to their performance relative to one another. Such assessment generally involves determining whether the student or trainee can carry out specific tasks or activities, within a particular situation or context, and to a set minimum standard. It is normally carried out on a 'pass/fail' basis, or, in modern parlance, on a 'competent/not-yet-competent' basis, with no attempt being made to assign numerical marks to the performance. It's very common to use criterion-referenced tests as computerized assessments because they help us measure competence. If you want to be sure that your employees know the rules, if you want to validate a pilot to fly a plane, or if you want to check that someone has understood training, a criterion-referenced test is usually the way to go.

Ipsative assessment

'ipse' in Latin means for 'self'. Ipsative assessments seek to measure the progress the individual has made relative to their own previous performance. They do not necessarily relate to any external criteria, neither do they make comparisons to the performance of other pupils. Ipsative assessment in an education/learning context compares a test-taker's results against his or her previous results.

Therefore ipsative assessment compares current performance with a previous performance. In this mode of assessment, a person's performance is compared with their own earlier

performance, with a view to determining whether any improvement has been made, or any 'added value' brought about. Such assessment might involve setting a learner the same test prior to and after undertaking a course or unit thereof, keeping track of how a student's average percentage mark or overall grade average changes as they progress through an entire course, or seeing how an athlete's 'personal best' time, distance, etc improves with training. In all cases, however, the benchmark against which any change in performance is measured is the person's own performance -not the performance of other people.

Ipsative assessments are developmental tools; they tell us very little as to the actual capability of the employee/candidate. The results produced indicate the relative strengths and weaknesses of the person being assessed. There is no objective comparison to any other individual. These tools are very useful as team building or as coaching instruments.

Another advantage of ipsative assessment is that it measures progress and development – a test-taker can see if he or she is improving and whether or not he/she is taking advantage of feedback from previous assessments. Using ipsative assessment can help all test-takers improve: A weaker performer will be encouraged by seeing performance improvements over earlier attempts, and a stronger performer can be challenged to do better. This can deal with the risks of the weaker performer becoming demotivated from a poor test result and the strong performer complacent from a good one. Ipsative assessment can be used for objective measures (e.g. did I get a better score?) and also for more subjective measures (e.g. am I more confident about something?).

Some of the possible benefits of Ipsative Assessment are that It improves self-esteem and confidence by rewarding progress (particularly for those who do not achieve high grades)

It might motivate learners to reflect and acton feedback

It gives tutor and students a longitudinal view of assessment

Ipsative feedback can be motivational for distance learners

It contributes to motivation and confidence building

But we also have to acknowledge that there are some disadvantages of Ipsative Assessment They are ineffective as hiring and selection instruments. They lack the credibility sought by most financial or analytically minded members in a given situation.

The challenges for implementing ipsative feedback:

Ipsative feedback is new and needs time to be accepted Students may expect instant higher grades. Scaling up needs the practice to be embedded across a programme and teachers may need development time

Therefore we can conclude that ipsative assessment help and motivate a learner to improve his/her own grades in comparison to his previous scores without the anxiety of being compared to other learners. But it is still at a nascent stage and will require a lot of training and understanding before it can be implemented in our teaching learning environment.

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