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ASSESSMENT OF THE ESSAY QUESTIONS WITH EXTENDED ANSWER (EQEA)

Abstract

Our long year teaching practice shows that there are weaknesses in the written expression of the students, especially in the way of writing an answer to essay questions with extensive answer. These questions refer to a task that should be elaborated in a written form with a necessity to comply with certain demands in the composition and language. In that way, the basic function of these questions should be followed, i.e. the student choose what he will write and how he will organize his thoughts in a written form.

Weaknesses are also shown in relation to assessment of these questions which is very complex and relevant issue. With these questions teacher measures teaching goals which can not be measured with the objective tests, i.e. that type of goals which refer to the competence of the student to express his thoughts in a written form. In teaching practice essay questions are not being pointed out in a satisfactory level, primarily because the assessment is not an easy and simple process, as well as because there are no exact criteria and indicators for their objective assessment.

This article indicates the basis for posing and writing an answer to an essay question which measures the goals for giving arguments about certain attitude and suggests criteria in order to increase the success and objectivity of assessment of these questions. The article also stresses the insight that despite the criteria for assessing these questions, the subjective factor will be most probably present, i.e. the subjective comprehension of the components which refer to the criterion or the indicator. In that sense, teacher should constantly work on promoting the culture of written expression of the student, on improving the skills to prepare successful essay question with an extensive answer, as well as the skills for its assessment.

Key words: *essay questions, extensive answer, assessment.*

Assessment of the achievements³ of students is a complex process which is a constituent part of teaching. Our long practice shows that, though a significant improvement concerning the assessment has been made⁴, still the assessment of the

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³ The knowledge includes the achievements of students on cognitive, psychomotor and socio-emotional aspect (achievements refer to knowledge, accomplishments, skills and other competences that are gained in the educational process through educational goals which are planned in advance), cf. Kiro, Popovski. (2005). *Dokimologija*, str. 40. Skopje: Kitano

⁴ The projects SEA (Secondary Education Activity) and PEP (Primary Education Project) covered almost all elementary and high schools. The Projects promote various techniques and strategies to improve the assessment, and as a result of that the teaching practice referring the assessment got a new dimension which can be perceived, primarily in implementing the techniques and strategies for formative assessment (assessment that takes place whilst the students are still learning, assessment

process skills (development of critical and creative thinking, competence of students to express themselves in a written form, development of creative skills etc.) is not being stressed enough, primarily because of their complex nature, as well as because of the lack of precise criteria and indicators for their objective assessment⁵.

In this paper the basics for posing and writing EQEA, which measure teaching goals for the competence of student to use arguments in order to defend certain attitude in a written form are pointed and criteria and indicators are proposed with a sole purpose to increase the success and the objectivity during their assessment. In the same time, critic analysis of the proposed criteria and indicators is made and it comes to mind that, even though the criteria and indicators for assessment of EQEA exist, it is most probable that during their assessment the subjective factor is present, i.e. the subjective perception of the criteria and the indicators, exactly because of their imprecision and abstract definition.

EQEA⁶ refer to answers which students should give in a written form. It is especially important always to have in mind their basic function, i.e. student independently chooses the information he will use as an answer to the question and independently chooses the way he will organize this information in a written form⁷.

The great and undisputable significance of these questions concerns the fact that they are used to measure teaching goals from the higher level of knowledge (analysis, synthesis, evaluation) which refer to the competence of student for analyzing, evaluating the information and for their organization in a written form and during that his attitudes, interests, beliefs etc. come to surface. Their weaknesses, besides the mentioned one about the imprecision of the criteria and the indicators, are being connected with the indication that the number of teaching contents which are the object of assessment is relatively small⁸. Our researches show that, still, the number of teaching contents may be relatively bigger and this in the first place, depends on the way that the question is being posed. The successful formulation of EQEA seems like a very easy and simple task - it depends the most on the skills and creativity of the teacher, as well as on the nature of the teaching contents of certain subject.

EQEA in the teaching practice are accepted as synonyms with an essay as a form of written expression, with the written (in the elementary and high school

which improves the learning), cf. Unapreduvanje na ocenivanjeto vo uchilishtata. (2007). Prirachnik - USAID, SEA. Skopje

⁵ cf. V. Janusheva. (2011). Ocenivanje na procesnite veshitini kaj uchenicite. Zbornik na trudovi, Megjunarodna konferencija: Ocenivanje za učenje vo 21 vek, str. 240-246, Skopje

⁶ There are various types of EQEA: EQEA which measure the general competence of student for written expression, EQEA, which, besides the general competence of student in written expression, measures also the knowledge of certain teaching contents (cf. Prirachnik, str. 130), EQEA, which, besides the general competence of student for written expression, measure the knowledge in topics that are very actual in our everyday settings, and which may be connected, but not necessarily with the teaching content. For all types of EQEA there are rules for their posing and for the answer that has to be given, but because of the narrowed space they are not taken into consideration

⁷ cf. V. P. Beshka. (2007). Ocenivanje so testovi na znaenje, str. 63. Skopje: Filozofski fakultet

⁸ cf. V. P. Beshka, str. 63 and Popovski, str. 162

education) and the seminar paper⁹ (in the higher education). They are connected with the subjects Macedonian language and literature and English language, due to the fact that, according to the teaching program for these subjects, written paper are being planned, certainly, due to the fact that students who are about to finish their education take the final exam of these two subjects, and they are obliged to write EQEA. Teachers of other subjects in all levels of education, unjustifiably, think that because of the nature of the subjects they teach, they have no need for EQEA. After all, the changes in the educational process, the demands for using various methods for assessment in order to improve the objectivity in assessment and generally to improve the general competence of student for written expression, enforce the need of EQEA as a constituent part of the activity within all the subjects.

The vocational literature indicates that in the EQEA the teaching contents and goals which are the object of assessment should be involved¹⁰, which is quite difficult for these questions, exactly because of their function. This, according to vocational literature, can be bridged over, to a great extent, with establishing criteria and indicators for assessment of the answer, but further analysis shows that, besides the existence of criteria and indicators, they are not precise and concrete, and as a result of this the assessment process is very difficult.

Directions for writing answer as criteria. Let us assume that student should give an answer to EQEA which offers him to choose between alternatives yes or no for certain topics, i.e. to take attitude for that topic and that he should explain why he has chosen this alternative, i.e., why he stands on this attitude. Teacher can give directions in a form of instruction explaining the way the answer should be organized and what every element of this independently organized written statement (answer), (from structural and content aspect) should include, for example: in the introducing paragraph a general sentence which presents the topic should be written, through 4-5 sentences student approaches the chosen alternative, the linking sentence connects the previous with that what will follow and forms it as a whole, in the three paragraph of the body through various arguments the chosen alternative (attitude) is defended, i.e. is pleaded, the argument are endorsed with examples from various sources, linking words are being used etc.¹¹. For all directions of this instruction, which in fact, represents the criteria for assessment, included in the answer, certain scores are been determined.

A review of the directions for writing as criteria. This type of guidance (instruction) does not guarantee that the student will write the answer successfully

⁹ In this paper the similarities and the differences among these forms of written expression are not being taken into consideration. There is a need for more complex and serious analysis of EQEA in order to claim that the topics of the written and seminar paper that teacher gave to students in every day teaching practice are really EQEA, though it is not disputable that they might be EQEA. Our researches indicate that often in the written and seminar paper, especially those, of pupils / students who show less satisfactory results, EQEA (their formulation, or answer) refer to the lower levels of knowledge, i.e. to reproduction of what has been written in the book and there is no creativity and uniqueness. This indicates that serious attention should be paid to EQEA

¹⁰ cf. Beshka, str. 68

¹¹ cf. V. Janusheva. (2007). Prirachnik po makedonski jazik i literatura za maturalni ispit, str. 44-49. Skopje: Albi.

and that the assessment will be more objective and more efficient. The directions are too general, for instance, there is no precise definition about what the student should understand by general sentence, and no indicators for the different levels of competence for expressing the idea in a written form, from structural and content aspect, are given. Also, all students do not have the same capability to interpret the guidance correctly (and the opportunity that teacher and students may conceive the guidance differently is not excluded), but even if the interpretation is correct, it is clear that every student will choose different information which will be organized in a different way. For example, every student, will certainly write a different general sentence to present the topic (and according to him that sentence will be appropriate to the demands from the guidance), but it is certain that those differently written general sentences, from different teacher, and even from the same teacher will be assessed differently, due to the subjective judgement of the assessor about how proper the general sentence is to the topic.

Components of an example-answer as criteria. Teacher may give students an example of an answer to EQEA on the same or on different topic. The example-answer is, in fact, a written text, for instance, EQEA in which the elements from the previous mentioned directions should be marked. For example, in the introducing paragraph the general sentence will be written in red colour, the 4-5 sentences to approach the chosen alternative will be written in blue colour etc., and in the same time, the scores for the component of the example-answer, which in fact, represents the criteria, will be determined.

A review of the components of an example-answer as criteria. It is obvious that the example-answer could not provide an objective assessment of EQEA. In this case, the example-answer may have a role as an impulse and challenge for the student and as an animator of his critical and creative potential, but on the other hand, it is possible that the student can make a copy of the given answer (replace only the key words that refer to the question that should be answered) and in such case his creativity, his critical thinking and his individual style of writing will not be pointed out. In this example, there is, also, a lack of indicators for the different competence of student to express himself in a written form.

Assessment of EQEA through analytical list for assessment¹². EQEA with lists of this type, are often assessed through the following criteria: structure (organization), content, creativity, comprehensibility, language, general appearance¹³. For each of this criterion the indicators for the different levels of competence of students are given in the list.

Structure (organization). 5 – The answer is organized excellently. The elements of the structure: introduction, main part and conclusion, are clearly distinguished. The logic and the succession of the idea can be followed. The passes

¹² With the previous mentioned projects the lists for analytical assessment of the achievements, (cf. Prirachnik, str. 138-139), have become very popular and in the teaching practice they are made by the teachers. The criteria and the indicators which are listed below are only illustrative. Teacher can, due to his own judgement, increase or decrease the number of the criteria and the indicators

¹³ Due to the limited space only the criteria structure and content are being considered, as well as the indicators to distinguish the different competence of students to produce an independent statement in written form, which refer to grades 5 and 4.

among the organizational tools are used in an effective way. The paragraphs clearly differ from one another. The course and the organization of the writing are smooth; 4 – The answer is organized quite well. The elements of the structure: introduction, main part and conclusion are clearly distinguished. The logic and the succession of almost all ideas can be followed. The passes among the organizational tools are used in a skilled way. Better passes from idea to idea and from paragraph to paragraph are needed. The course and the organization of the writing are smooth, in a large extent.

A review of the criterion organization and its indicators. If we analyze the indicators which should signalize the achievements of students in different levels of competence for written expression, in organization of their ideas in an independent statement (answer), it is obvious that the indicators are not exactly defined and therefore the objective assessment is not possible. For instance, the differences between the grades, in relation to organization, are reduced to the statements: the answer is organized excellently and quite well. In relation to ideas, the difference between the grades is reduced to the statements: all ideas and almost all ideas are logic and successive. In relation to the passes among the organizational tools, it can be seen that the difference between the different levels of competence of the students are shown in the statements: the passes are used in an effective and in skilled way, etc.

It is obvious that besides the existence of the list for analytic assessment of EQEA, it is very difficult to meet the expectation for objective assessment, because the indicators are too abstract and their definition are not precise. Because there are no precise and concrete definitions, both for the teacher and student, about what should one understand by, for example, the statement excellently and quite well organized answer, or by the statement the passes are used in an effective and in skilled way, it is inevitable that the subjective attitude of the assessor will appear, for every assessor may interpret in his own way what is excellent or quite well organization of EQEA, as well as everyone can interpret differently what is effective or skilled way for using the passes among the organizational tools.

Content. 5 – The answer presents remarkable source of information of the topic – plenty of information that are clearly connected with the topic. It contains strong arguments which are supported by concrete examples in all the relevant spots. All of the main elements are being pointed. Cites are used excellently and they are linked with one's own thinking and are successfully fitted in the answer; 4 – The answer contains very good information about the topic. Almost every information is clearly linked to the topic. It contains arguments that are strong enough and that are supported with concrete examples in almost every key spots. Almost every main element is pointed out, but they are not balanced enough. Cites are used very well, they are linked with one's own thinking and they are fitted very well in the answer.

A review of the criterion content and its indicators. Even in this case teacher will face the same difficulty. For instance, the difference between the various levels of competence of students, in relation to information needed for the content, can be perceived in the statements: excellent source of information and very good information. It is understandable that in the assessment process the

subjective attitude of the assessor comes to surface, because, once again, every assessor will interpret in a different way the statements which are indicators of the different competence of students in relation to this criterion. For example, for one assessor excellent source of information can be five arguments that student defends his attitude with, for another the five arguments can be a very good source of information etc.

An additional guidance to the criterion content. Teacher can give an additional guidance in which he will demand, for example, that in each paragraph of the body, three necessary arguments should be declared. In this case, the assessor can really count the number of the arguments, but he could not know in advance how the student will organize them in an independent written form, how he will develop the ideas, how he will connect the paragraphs etc. So, once again, the subjective attitude of the assessor will be present in relation to the organization of the arguments, but also in relation to the fact that the chosen arguments, for him, can simply not be an excellent source of information. It is possible, that another choice of arguments, for another assessor, would be more satisfactory, in relation to richness of information etc.

Teacher can give an additional guidance where, for instance, three arguments are declared, which the student should defend his attitude with. In this case, it is seemingly that the objectivity is satisfied, because here the basic function of the question – student choose the arguments he will take into account when writing his answer to the question, is lost. Let us assume that student will use precisely these three arguments, once again, nobody can predict how the student will organize them, nobody can predict his creativity, his critical thinking etc.

Teacher can give additional criteria, for example, related to the content, i.e.: for every mentioned aspect from the content certain scores will be given (assuming that previously the teacher and the students had talked about these relevant aspects of the content). In this case, the teacher can really see whether the student has mentioned these relevant aspects for the topic, but still, it could not be anticipated how he will organize these relevant aspects for the topic, how he will think about them, in what context he will mention them etc.

The analysis shows that besides the established criteria and indicators for assessment of EQEA, still, their effective, successful and objective assessment is difficult. The assessment is connected with the personal perception of the assessor so his subjective attitude is inevitable. It seems that the request for precise and concrete criteria and indicators can not be realized completely. Only for illustration, in relation to the indicator excellently organized answer, the teacher and student should know which are the components that will show that the answer is excellently organized, or which is the sequence of ideas that is counted as excellent. In relation to the arguments it should be stated which are the arguments that are considered as strong, that are considered as strong enough, what is that considered as an excellent or very good source of information etc. In this sense, the question about how valid the criteria and the indicators will be if every teacher establishes his own criteria for assessing the EQEA arises.

Conclusion

All the analyzed ways for establishing criteria and indicators in order to increase the objectivity in assessment of EQEA, surely, can help to overcome certain weaknesses, but as it is obvious complete objectivity can not be gained. This is a result, primarily of the complex nature of the process skills which are the object of assessment, in this case, the competence of student to give an answer in a written form in which he should use arguments to defend certain attitude on a given topic.

The complex nature of the process skills necessarily entails solid expertise of various other disciplines to which the processes of thinking, solving problems, remembering, analyzing, generalization etc. are connected, i.e. cognition of the developmental psychology, logic, the theories of the person and its motivation etc.¹⁴. This indicates that assessment of EQEA is a very complex and complicated process and that there is still work to be done in order to specify concrete and defined criteria and indicators for increasing the level of objectivity in their assessment.

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¹⁴ cf. Popovski, str. 41