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**WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ASSESSMENT PRACTICES AND LEARNING OUTCOMES?**

**1. Introduction**

This paper aims to highlight the importance of learning by creating a transparent relationship between learning and learning outcomes and easier recognition of the quality and quantity of the success of adopted competencies using an assessment that will promote such learning. Often, students are unaware of the competencies they need to acquire and their importance for future careers. We can change that by determining these competencies, which should be connected to existing competencies, and by introducing students to those criteria that they need to achieve. It is important to point out that students will achieve them using assessment as motivation.

Student-centered learning represents an approach to education that focuses on students' interests rather than the interests of others (teachers, administrative workers) involved in the education process. Such learning is contrary to traditional, teacher-centered learning. This approach has many different influences on the design of the curriculum, both in terms of content and the mutual correlation of the subjects studied. Student-centered learning puts students' interests, abilities and learning styles in the foreground and gives the teacher the role of a person who helps achieve learning goals. This type of learning requires students to be active and responsible participants in the learning process.

Learning outcomes are extremely important mainly because of the recognition of students' abilities. Students will not be asked what they studied in a particular subject, but what skills they gained. This approach is essential for completing education and is much more flexible when considering issues related to lifelong learning, non-traditional learning, and other forms of non-formal educational experience. That is why education should be based on learning outcomes, and therefore curricula should be redesigned to reflect such an approach.

Curricula should be based on a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications at state level, which should be comparable and compatible with the European qualification framework. That framework should describe the qualifications, should take into consideration the student's workload, level, learning outcomes, competencies, and the profile to be acquired after completing education. A learning outcomes-based approach to learning and teaching is gaining popularity worldwide.

In this paper, we share research on how foreign language acquisition is evaluated in Bosnia and Herzegovina's secondary schools. We also discuss fundamental concerns concerning students' assessment and its relation to learning outcomes.

## 2. The context

Several curriculum revisions have been implemented in Bosnia and Herzegovina over the past twenty years. Lowering the entry point for learning a foreign language to the primary level was one of the most significant modifications implemented. Since 2016, children from most schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina have started studying their first foreign language, primarily English, as a compulsory subject in first grade at the age of six. As the country has a very specific political system, it is impossible to have the same curriculum at state level. Bosnia and Herzegovina consists of two entities and one district: Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republic of Srpska, and Brčko District. The Federation is further divided into ten cantons. There are twelve ministries of education in the cantons of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republic of Srpska, and the department for education in Brčko District that create educational policies. Educational policies are not created at national level but at the level of entities, cantons, and the district.<sup>1</sup> The research aims to prove that assessment can and should promote student-centered learning, as the relationship between learning and the achievement of competencies should be transparent.

## 3. Research questions

The studies focus on the following research questions:

1. What is the relation between learning and achieving planned learning outcomes?
2. How will the awareness of necessary competencies improve learning?

## 4. Methodology

The data were collected using three tests specifically designed for this study. The initial test for determining student competencies was created based on the existing curriculum and on the basis of relevant methods and approaches. The second test was created on the basis of the adapted plans, work methods, and individual approach for each student. The test was supposed to show whether the necessary conditions are met for further work and whether students have made some progress. The third test was conducted according to the same principle as the first two tests, and it confirmed our hypothesis that there is a close connection between assessment and learning outcomes. The research was conducted during the academic year 2020-21, and 30 students participated in the study. Their teachers were interviewed, and their lesson plans were analyzed with a focus on assessment practices.

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<sup>1</sup> Magill, C. (2010). Education and Fragility in Bosnia and Herzegovina. UNESCO and International Institute for Educational Planning. Retrieved from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001910/191060e.pdf>

## 5. Matching generic and specific competencies with learning outcomes

Competencies represent a dynamic combination of cognitive and metacognitive skills, knowledge and understanding, interpersonal, intellectual, and practical skills, and ethical values. Some competencies are specific to a certain discipline, while others are common to all programs.<sup>2</sup> Competence development is usually cyclical and is an integral part of the program. The TUNING Project's taxonomy of competencies (2007) is mostly used in higher education. This project has influenced the official documents that have served as the roadmap for the convergence process in European nations, which has impacted the Bologna-adapted degree structures, study programs, and ECTS course catalogues.

Cañado groups generic competencies into:<sup>3</sup>

- Instrumental competencies: These include cognitive, methodological, technological, and linguistic skills that ensure the student's fundamental academic growth (for example, the ability to analyze and synthesize, second-language proficiency, fundamental computer skills, and research skills).
- Interpersonal competencies: These pertain to personal qualities and social skills, such as the capacity for initiative, leadership, and collaboration across disciplines.
- Systemic competencies are abilities and skills that deal with entire systems and include knowledge, insight, and sensitivity (e.g., capacity to learn, problem-solving, and decision-taking).  
(which identify those characteristics common across all degrees and domains) (related to each thematic area or field of study).

According to Cañado, generic competencies are divided into:<sup>4</sup>

- Disciplinary knowledge of a particular topic area (e.g., knowledge of English grammar, knowledge of literature in the English language, knowledge of the theoretical and methodological trends in linguistics).
- Academic competencies, or the skills that must be used in a specific field of study, are listed as number seven (e.g., capacity to receive, understand and transmit scientific production in the languages studied, capacity to evaluate bibliography critically and to contextualize it within a theoretical perspective, capacity to identify problems and research topics and evaluate their relevance).
- Professional competencies or expertise in a particular field of work (e.g., capacity to communicate and teach acquired knowledge, capacity to translate texts of different genres, capacity to write reviews).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.azvo.hr/hr/pojmovnik/78-kompetencije>

<sup>3</sup> Cañado 2012. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Isto str. 6–7.

Based on the division into generic and specific competencies required for implementing the curriculum, it is necessary to harmonize both types of competencies with the learning outcomes determined by the curriculum.<sup>5</sup> In order to match the competencies with the learning outcomes, we must determine which are the basic and which are the higher level competencies.

If we divide the framework of critical competencies into three areas, those areas would be:

1. First - the individual needs to know how to use a wide range of tools for effective interaction with the environment, and these tools can be:
  - physical – such as the use of information technology and
  - social and cultural – such as language use.An individual needs to understand that tool very well to be able to adapt it to their own use – to be able to use it interactively.
2. Second – in today’s increasingly connected world, individuals must connect with others, and as they meet different people, they must know how to behave in heterogeneous groups.
3. Third – individuals should take responsibility for managing their own lives, live with the society that surrounds them, and still be independent in their thinking, decisions, and behavior.

These categories, each with its specific focus, are interconnected and form the basis for recognizing and distributing critical competencies. The individual’s need to think and act reflectively is at the center of this competency framework. Reflexivity includes the ability to adopt a standard formula or method of dealing with a situation and the ability to cope with change, learn from experience, think, and work critically.<sup>6</sup>

## 6. Foreign languages in the curriculum

It is claimed that foreign languages are one of the best accomplished parts of the curriculum, based on adequately selected and defined learning outcomes. The more well-chosen the learning outcomes are, the more the student’s learning opportunities and the opportunities for proper evaluation of the student’s work will improve. In selecting the outcome, the most crucial component is the correct evaluation and definition of the necessary initial competencies and the achievement of competencies that will enable the realization of learning outcomes.

Communicative competence, as the ability to exchange information in a foreign language is still the primary goal of learning a foreign language. According to

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<sup>5</sup> Kuzminov et al., 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Hartel & Foegeding, 2004.

Mihaljević Djigunović,<sup>7</sup> there are different definitions of that key term. In most European curricula, the definition from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR 2005) is most often accepted. It is defined in terms of language knowledge and contains three elements: linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competence.

She further claims that each element is defined by its content and ability to use it. CEFR is not considered a component of communicative competence. However, its authors find it essential for communicative language use as well as the so-called strategic competence, which implies the use of strategies when receiving and producing language during interaction and mediation, etc.<sup>8</sup>

Sauvignon<sup>9</sup> points out that reform of objectives, resources, and evaluation is insufficient for language instruction to represent real progress in both theory and classroom practice. Increased chances for preservice and in-service teachers to experiment with and practice strategies for incorporating communicative experiences into their classes for both beginning and advanced learners must be in focus. In this respect, teachers need institutional support, as it is crucial to encourage and sustain teamwork, innovation, and change.

Di Gregorio and Beaton<sup>10</sup> claim that the degree to which solid curriculum design principles are implemented to ensure a fully integrated curriculum in which teaching, learning, and assessment are aligned to provide cumulatively more challenging experiences that are meaningful and motivating for students is a key factor contributing to student engagement (or not).

### **7. The application of learning improvement by creating a transparent relationship between learning and learning outcomes and easier recognition of the quality and quantity of the success of learned competencies in English language classroom**

#### *Creation of an initial test in relation to current competencies of teachers*

In the first phase two teachers were interviewed. The work with the teacher to achieve the necessary competencies for applying the modified curriculum consisted of examining the teacher's views on the influence of professional-pedagogical practice on developing their competencies and ability to perform in the teaching profession. The research aims at the assessment of teachers' views on the influence of professional-pedagogical practice on the development of personal and professional competencies. It also examines the satisfaction of teachers with different professional competencies gained.

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<sup>7</sup> Mihaljević Djigunović 2009, 52.

<sup>8</sup> Bagarić & Mihaljević Djigunović 2007 cited in Mihaljević Djigunović 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Sauvignon 2018, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Di Gregorio and Beaton 2019, 417.

Proposals and suggestions of teachers regarding the organization and execution of professional-pedagogical practice, which would improve the professional training of teachers for the teaching profession, were analyzed. The analysis provides a critical overview and the possibility of making concrete proposals in the direction of the organization and carrying out professional pedagogical practice to improve the professional training of students and future teachers for the teaching profession. That analysis could be the subject of a more serious study.

The teachers expressed dissatisfaction with joint training at the cantonal, federal, and state levels. Dissatisfaction is even more remarkable when it comes to the possibility of having the same educational policies. Organization at the school level, i.e., assets, is much better, while teachers are dissatisfied with the opportunities for training offered by pedagogical institutes.

All these topics should be researched in more detail. Based on that research, conclusions should be drawn on improving teachers' opportunities for organized professional development (in this case, English language teachers).

*Creating an initial test for students to check existing competencies*

Based on the existing curriculum and methods of work in the class, which were created concerning the parameters given in this paper and the knowledge about teachers' competencies, a test was created that served as a starting point for determining students' competencies. After the completed and corrected test, students were interviewed to identify individual competencies and deficiencies that needed to be eliminated.

Working with students to identify individual competencies and deficiencies that need to be eliminated was the most challenging part of the research. The main reason lies in the organization because there was a mediator between the researcher and the student. The mediator was a teacher who, using the instructions they received during our meetings as well as the carefully prepared preparations for the lessons, managed to convey feedback and direct their work as well as the work of the students towards the recognition of individual competencies and deficiencies that need to be eliminated. The reflexive approach was limited to only certain competencies. Some of those specific competencies needed to be changed or improved.

*Development of the curriculum and program of work in order to achieve the necessary competencies for continuing work*

The complete work with the students using methods that arose based on the attitudes of the students or the teacher was a reflective attitude towards the competencies they possess and how these competencies, in their opinion, can be changed. The chosen topics were also the product of the students' and teachers' reflections on their competencies and the possibilities of improving those competencies. Different levels of competencies, as well as different approaches to improving competencies, raised difficulties regarding the development of the curriculum for the period to which the

research referred. The individualization of the approach in order to improve competencies was based on joint work. This work represented the synergy of students' competencies directed by the teacher's instructions and advice. It is important to emphasize that the teacher was already prepared for such an approach by focusing on the improvement of their competencies in the area of reflective approach to student work.

*Creating a second test for students to check the level of newly achieved competencies after intensively focusing on the improvement of competences*

Based on the prepared work plan, methods, and individual approach to each student in the class, a test was compiled that was supposed to show whether the necessary conditions for continuing work using a new level of competence have been achieved. Prior to its creation, interviews with teachers were conducted in which their altered lesson plans were meticulously analyzed.

*Working with students to identify individual competencies and deficiencies that need to be eliminated after the test*

The test results were satisfactory, and the students, based on the experience they gained during the preparation for this test, could continue with a reflective approach to learning, bearing in mind the particular importance of connecting their progress with the entire class. The students had the chance to discuss their work with their peers, which was extremely motivating.

*Development of a monthly plan following the objectives of the research*

The monthly plan, which had to be harmonized with the existing curriculum, except for the approach to work, had no changes in the level of competencies that the students should acquire, but only in the reorganization and systematization of what was based on a reflective approach to learning.

*Work with students according to the adapted plan*

Working with students according to the adapted plan justified the assumption that there is a close connection between assessment and learning outcomes, i.e., it is possible to achieve the necessary competencies if the outcomes foreseen in the curriculum are met.

*The final test to check student competencies and their compliance with the level of learning outcomes in a given time*

The third test was conducted according to the same principle as the first two tests, and it clearly confirmed the assumption that the transparent connection of learning outcomes and necessary competencies to achieve learning outcomes, as well as the shift of focus from teachers to students, enables students to find their way of improving competencies and taking responsibility for their learning.

### **8. Comparison of student test results before and after implementation of the adapted curriculum**

Based on the comparison of tests at the individual level in all aspects of the language and the connection of acquired knowledge with competencies gained, it is evident that the level of knowledge, abilities, possibilities, and desires increased.

After the first test, the results were the following 50% of students whose grade was satisfactory (2), 45% good (3), and 5% unsatisfactory (1). The success after the second test was: 5% very good (4), 19% good (3), 67% Satisfactory (2), and 9% unsatisfactory (1). After the first test, the results were the following: 17% excellent, 31% very good (4), 41% good (3), 10% Satisfactory (2), and 1% unsatisfactory (1).

If we observe competencies as an interaction of knowledge, possibilities, and will, then it can be concluded that the level of competencies has increased. Recognizing the competencies that are necessary in order to master particular material or to acquire specific skills through a thoughtful way of learning allows the student to see the advantages and disadvantages in their way of mastering the ELT materials. It also opened up the possibility of correcting shortcomings and achieving better results. The direct impact of the increase in competencies with the improvement in grades gave a transparent relationship between grades and work, that is, the ability of students to manage their progress and thus increase their motivation to learn and ultimately fulfill the outcomes planned by the curriculum. The multiple effects of the reflective way of learning could be seen in the students' engagement in work and their participation in planning and changing the way of acquiring new knowledge and skills. The student's engagement increased motivation, so the grade became the proof of their achievement at school and also the proof of the student's personal achievement, i. e., a way of expressing their abilities and engagement in presenting themselves and their abilities in their unique way.

### **9. Conclusion**

For the presentation and interpretation of the findings, it is essential to look at the general picture first. The overall results show that all the assessed competencies were strengthened after the reflective practice. However, it is noted that these differences, although statistically significant, are not large. Only those that contributed more significantly, or had a decisive influence on the overall significance of the differences in student assessments of the effects of reflective practice, are singled out. However, it could also lead to the conclusion that more reflective pedagogical practice could contribute to greater pedagogical efficiency. Therefore, it could be concluded that in the entire sample, the following groups of competencies were most strengthened during practice:

- organizational competence,
- interpersonal competencies and
- competence in the role of improving the grade based on one's reflection on learning and the connection of that learning with competencies, i. e., with learning outcomes.

The students appreciated the feedback they received and the comparison of their work with the work of their classmates, participating in group work and leading the group, shaping their learning strategies, planning to learn, recognizing individual differences in their colleagues, and adapting their learning to them, structuring learning at home, asking for help from the teacher in getting to know the appropriate forms and methods of learning.

Di Gregorio and Beaton<sup>11</sup> o point out that students will benefit significantly from “sharing and discussing each other’s work, developing students’ ability to communicate meaningfully in the target language and develop fluency.” Choosing the methods that suit the student the most in practice gives more effective results. Moreover, all this supports the assumption that more such practices would probably increase knowledge, deepen it, and thus improve competencies.

It was confirmed that a properly designed evaluation strategy based on the assumption that a transparent relationship between learning and achieving planned learning outcomes by acquiring certain competencies or improving existing competencies using evaluation as motivation will improve and facilitate the learning process. Research confirmed that introducing students to the necessary competencies, that is, the necessary level of already existing competencies, will improve their learning. If there is a transparent connection between assessment and competence, the level of students’ knowledge about their abilities will increase because the student will understand the progress required for a certain assessment. It is believed that in this way, students assume responsibility for their learning.

### Literature

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<sup>11</sup> Di Gregorio and Beaton 2019. 407.

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### Abstract

The paper discusses the relationship between assessment in teaching English as a foreign language and students' competencies. The data collected by this research show that, in recent times, teachers and students are becoming aware that learning based only on the acquisition of facts will not adequately respond to the challenges they will face in the future. An environment in which the learning outcomes are transparently and directly linked to the students' competencies enables them to take responsibility for their progress, not only during the official period of schooling but also during lifelong learning, which is very important. With this approach, learning outcomes and their connection with the necessary competencies to achieve learning outcomes become the basis for redefining qualifications and curricula in general and professional education. The transparent connection of learning outcomes and necessary competencies to achieve learning outcomes, as well as the shift of focus from teachers to students, enables students to find their way of improving competencies and taking responsibility for their learning. Learning outcomes are best understood by viewing them as a series of valuable processes and opportunities that can be applied in different ways in different areas of teaching and learning. The emphasis is on defining the learning outcomes so that we use the students' experience and pay less attention to the content of the subjects of a specific curriculum. The data from this research indicate that learning outcomes impact assessment if they are adequately linked to competencies. Students can monitor their progress and take responsibility for it. The primary outcome of this research is that assessment aligned with progress in students' competencies and their connection to learning outcomes will certainly improve learning.

*Keywords: Assessment, students' competencies, English language teaching*