# Assessment of learning in english as a foreign language: a phenomenological perspective

## La evaluación de los aprendizajes en inglés como lengua extranjera desde una perspectiva fenomenológica

**Miguel Acevedo Muentes**[1]

## ABSTRACT

Assessment has always played a vital role in foreign language teaching processes. Recently, national and international research has investigated the phenomenon of assessment in the foreign language classroom. This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of assessment of four undergraduate students in the classroom of a private language center in the north of Colombia. This study involves the five steps of Giorgi's method for phenomenological analysis. The data were collected through Semi-structured in-depth interviews and a reflective diary. Five themes emerged from the data: 1) Intentionality and meaning of assessment praxis. 2) A feeling of acceptance and bonding as an added value. 3) The hidden face of assessment, 4)The disdain for the institutional assessment, and 5) A sense of professional integrity.

**Keywords:** Assessment–English as foreign language, phenomenology, education.

## RESUMEN

La evaluación de los aprendizajes siempre ha tenido un rol importante dentro de los procesos peda-gógicos. Recientemente, investigaciones nacionales e internacionales han investigado el fenó-meno de la evaluación en el aula. El objetivo de este estudio fenomenológico fue explorar las experiencias vividas por 4 estudiantes sobre la evaluación en el aula de un centro privado de idiomas ubicado en el norte de Colombia. El estudio involucra los cinco pasos del método de Giorgi para el análisis feno-menológico. Los datos fueron recolectados a través de entrevista semiestructuradas en profundidad y un diario reflexivo. Cinco temas emergieron de los datos: 1) La intencionalidad y el significado de la praxis evaluativa. 2) Sentimiento de aceptación y vinculo como valor agregado. 3) El rostro oculto de la evaluación. 4) El desdén por la evaluación institucional. 5. El sentido de la integralidad profesional.

**Palabras clave:** evaluación, enseñanza y aprendizaje de inglés; fenomenología.

1   Master's Degree in Education, University of Córdoba-Colombia. Bachelor's Degree in Basic Education with emphasis in Humanities English, University of Córdoba-Colombia. University Corporation of the Caribbean. Sincelejo-Sucre. E-mail: miguel.acevedo@cecar.edu.co

## INTRODUCTION

This article reports on a study conducted to investigate students' experiences of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning evaluation in a Language Center located in the North of Colombia. In this sense, the study of experiences in education provides an effective description for the analysis and understanding of phenomena of a pedagogical and didactic nature, in which teachers must have a deep interest that helps to optimise pedagogical activities (Van Manen, 2016). Scriven (1967) proposes two principles of learning assessment: measurement of knowledge as a tool for final assessment, and using assessment as a process to enhance student learning. Additionally, the study employed a transcendental phenomenological research design. The data was gathered through in-depth interviews following Seidman's (2006) method. The analysis revealed five themes, and the study focused on two main research questions. Firstly, what is the students' lived experience regarding the assessment of English as a foreign language learning? Secondly, what factors affect the learning assessment outcomes according to the study participants? The research objective aims to

- Understand students' experiences of learning assessment procedures in English as a foreign language classes.

- Describe the factors that affect the learning evaluation processes from the students' perspective.

The theoretical foundation of this study was grounded in two principles outlined by Scriven (1967). The first principle views evaluation as final tool for measuring knowledge, while the second principle seeks to enhance the learning process. According to the first principle, the main function of evaluation is the continuous improvement of student learning. Therefore, the performance of a student´s results is obtained through different evaluation processes in a given period of time (Hernández et al. 2018). The above statement implies that there is a challenge for both the direct and indirect actors of the evaluation process. Thus, the first principle leads to understanding the evaluation process from different perspectives, overcoming different sociocultural backgrounds, pedagogical, and even technical obstacles that may arise during the process. Otherwise, The second principle bases the evaluation as a tool that aims to give a value judgment, in general terms, to student learning at the end of the teaching process, at a specific moment, or the end of a course by assigning a quantifiable grade (Fulcher, 2013; Weir, 2005). This means the second principle focuses on measurable and quantifiable final products such as exams with quantitative grades and standardized tests (Pacheco et al. 2020; Viñoles, 2013). An example of this is the standardized test that is the main actor within the formal evaluation. It is considered the fundamental axis that establish the achievements and progress of the student in terms of learning, and in this way, the traditional tool for measuring student promotion (Muñoz et al. 2012).

Finally, learning assessment extends beyond standardized testing and includes the analysis of performance during the learning process (López & Bernal, 2009). This evaluation of learning involves two complementary processes (Arias et al. 2012; Dixson & Worrell, 2016). The first phase of evaluation involves tests that check whether the learner has achieved the competencies set out in the study plan after completing a certain learning process. This phase is complemented by continuous evaluation focused on detecting the student's difficulties and progress during the learning process (Arias et al. 2012).

## METHODOLOGY

The qualitative approach is the most appropriate method for examining and comprehending the social or human issues' meanings assigned by individuals (Creswell, 2012). There is a correlation between the research issue presented in this study and the core phenomenon that was examined from a constructivist viewpoint. According Creswell (2016) the constructivist paradigm posits that individuals strive to comprehend their surroundings, and their understanding of the world emerges through subjective interpretations based on their experiences and perceptions. Therefore, qualitative methods are ideal in comprehending students' experiences of foreign language learning evaluations such as English as a Foreign Language (EFL). In this sense, the present study employed a transcendental phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is a qualitative research design that focuses on the study of lived experiences (Aguas, 2014; Moustakas,1994). Phenomenological research seeks to uncover the fundamental nature of the human experience of a particular phenomenon through the detailed descriptions provided by participants (Aguas, 2020; Moustakas, 1994; Mapp 2008).

## Participants

The study included four students enrolled in EFL training courses at a language center situated along the northern coast of Colombia. Eligible participants had to be enrolled in an English training level and experienced in EFL learning assessment. According to Van Manen (2016), phenomenology can be conducted with only one participant. The authors emphasize that the sample size is irrelevant from a probabilistic perspective, as the objective is not to generalize but rather to explore the phenomenon in greater detail (Hernández et al., 2016).

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the participants.

| Participant | Gender | Age | Training time | Role | Level CERF |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| S1 | Female | 22 | 1 semester | Student | A2 |
| S2 | Female | 23 | 1 semester | Student | A2 |
| S3 | Female | 23 | 1 semester | Student | A2 |
| S4 | Female | 30 | 2 semester | Student | B2 |

## Data collection Method

Data were collected through individual semi-structured in-depth interviews with participants (Creswell 2016). They can be adapted to the participants in order to motivate the interlocutor, to clarify concepts, to identify ambiguities and to reduce formalities (Bravo et al., 2013). Therefore, the questions are structured with open-ended prompts that can be adjusted throughout the inquiry process, enabling participants to elaborate more extensively on their personal experiences with the phenomenon. The Seidman (2006) interview structure was adapted for this study. The first interview session established the context of the interviewee's experience, while the second focused on constructing the experience through detailed description of the phenomenon under investigation. The final session prompted participants to reflect on the meaning of the experience. Twelve interviews were conducted, each lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. On the other hand, a reflective journal served as a supplementary tool to the data collection methods. This approach afforded

chances to obtain a more comprehensive depiction of individuals' experiences and behaviors. Additionally, it enabled the researcher to complete bracketing throughout data collection and analysis (Aguas, 2014).

## Data analysis

Data analysis involves identifying and organizing specific information collected by researchers, which is then synthesized to enhance understanding. As Hernández et al. (2016) point out, "the essential action is that we receive unstructured data, to which we provide a structure" (p. 419). In other words, researchers form a deep analysis by transcribing and categorizing this information (Creswell, 2009).

According to the above guidelines, this study utilizes Giorgi's (2012) model for data analysis, which will be explained in the following stages.

**Phase 1: Transcribing interviews and reading protocols:** During this analysis stage, we transcribed 12 audio-recorded interviews with four participants. After completing the transcriptions, we carefully read and studied them to gain an understanding of the participants' perspectives on the learning assessment phenomenon in their English course.

**Phase 2: Significant Phrases Extraction:** As a researcher, we conducted a new reading to identify interview areas that highlight the participants' experiences relating to the investigated phenomenon. This process constituted dividing the significant units gathered from participants' life experiences. The analysis resulted in 67 meaning units.

**Phase 3: Formulating Initial Themes:** This step involved analyzing the most significant statements in response to descriptions of the phenomenon of learning assessment. A new reading of the units of meaning was conducted to formulate initial themes that describe the phenomenon. Imaginative variation was utilized during this analysis.

**Phase 4: Formulation of Final Themes:** The researcher reviewed the initial expressions or themes, identified the most psychologically significant with the aid of free imaginative variation, and synthesized sub-themes to determine the essence of the experience.

**Phase 5: Fundamental Structure:** In this step, the study successfully achieved the essence of the phenomenon as experienced by the participants. The determined essence of the phenomenon constitutes the meaning of the participants' experiences, which aligns with the research findings.

## Findings

Five themes emerged from the data: 1) intentionality and meaning of assessment praxis. 2) A feeling of acceptance and bonding as an added value. 3) The hidden face of assessment, 4) the disdain for the institutional assessment, and 5) a sense of professional integrity. Following Giorgi's (2012) fifth step, the researcher integrated these themes in a narrative manner to establish the conceptual structure of the learning assessment phenomenon.

**Intentionality and meaning of assessment praxis**: This theme discusses the various purposes of evaluation as a means to measure and validate knowledge, strategies that promote and enhance learning through feedback, evaluation as a tool for transforming realities, and an instrument that motivates learning; these meanings become evident from the students' experiences. Similarly, it tackles the practical significance of learning assessment in the classroom. All participating students in the study reported understanding evaluation as a tool that enhances learning.

In accordance with the insights of S1, these experiences are akin to that of learning which enhances our abilities, leaving a lasting impression on us and ultimately enhancing our lives. As a result, I have found that they enrich me in particular. To complement this idea, S3 affirmed the following statement:

> As previously stated in Interview 2, evaluations are crucial as they serve to diagnose whether I have progressed, stayed the same, or regressed in my learning. Therefore, it is essential for me to receive feedback to assess my level and determine my conditions in this course.

Feedback during the evaluation process leads to a substantial increase in students' academic performance. S3 shared, "The evaluation experience provides a learning opportunity as I can recognize my mistakes through feedback and work on improving them for the next midterm."

On the previous topic, S2 stated, "During class, the teacher assigns an activity and then individually corrects and explains the mistakes in a personalized way. This process allows for individual attention and guidance." This statement reinforces the notion of evaluation as a tool to assess student learning and ascertain the effectiveness of the teaching process.

**A feeling of acceptance and bonding as an added value**: The analyzed data reveals that this theme encompasses diverse learning assessment methods that foster acceptance and forge new interpersonal connections among students. Particularly, formative learning assessments are depicted as dynamic, motivating, and trust-building activities. Firstly, the participants demonstrate a widespread acceptance of the evaluation methodology. S2 observes, "The group oral exam has a considerable impact since it allows individuals to agree with their partner, brainstorm ideas, and, consequently, improve idea development, as two heads are better than one." In accordance with S2's comment:

> Evaluating activities has facilitated the creation of new, meaningful interpersonal relationships among peers; "apart from the academic learning experience, I also had the opportunity to meet and develop meaningful relationships with my classmates. These positive interactions have left a lasting impression on me as an individual.

The interpersonal bonds that were formed among students helped to create a supportive and comfortable environment for the evaluation, teaching, and learning process.

Now, exploring the development of interpersonal relationships and their impact on student formation. S4 stated, "Personally, I have experienced significant growth. I have learned to compromise, respect differing opinions, and appreciate the support of those who have become close friends that I see regularly. Overall, this has been an enriching experience with personal benefits."

**The hidden face of assessment:** This topic concerns experiences during the evaluation process that may evoke emotions that do not significantly contribute to the student's education. It discusses experiences that present challenges to the student's development.

S2 expressed it this way:

> We are aware that the written midterm will encompass specific units, but we cannot guarantee the type of questions that may be presented. Furthermore, the questions may differ from what we have anticipated. Respectfully, evaluations are at times based on items that were not covered, and often the final two sections concentrate on book units that require detailed responses in approximately 80 to 90 words.

The evaluation process in the English course creates a sense of insecurity among students. This condition prompts feelings of uncertainty within me."As stated by S2 in their initial interview, "You never know what to expect, it's like a roller coaster ride. Your performance can go either way, and it relies solely on your own efforts.

Referring to the uncertainty caused by the midterm exams, S3 expressed, "but it is a little difficult for me to excel in English because it is a language I don't speak, it is like the first time I see it so much and I might do well or I might do badly". S3 described feeling scared about the future due to evaluation. They explained, "I'm scared about what could happen and how it might affect me. I don't show any signs of being uneasy because that's not who I am, but I'm still afraid. No one knows about my fear, and I don't show it to anyone."

Learning assessments can lead to negative emotions such as frustration, anger, and rage when expectations for results are not met. According to two participants, these emotions can be intense. The S2 said, "The bad results make me feel disappointed, angry, and frustrated. These emotions are not pleasant and can be difficult for me to deal with." For her part, S3 expressed frustration at not achieving expected results and a sense of insecurity and fear despite feeling confident in her English abilities. She strives for good grades in English but finds it challenging.

**The disdain for the institutional assessment:** This theme concerns the growing sentiment of disapproval of the formal evaluation system's implementation and the urgent need for a change in its methodology**.**

S1 indicated it this way:

> Well, my classmates and I have noticed that our teacher teaches us all the necessary topics, but our exams are not designed by her. It feels as though she is not evaluating us, and we are left waiting for feedback from another teacher. If our teacher is teaching us and applying the topics, why should another teacher evaluate us, even if they cover the same content?

In regards to exam design, S3 expressed a concern about the lack of conformity in both the midterm and final exams.

> The teacher, who is not familiar with the students' educational strengths and goals, is responsible for developing or overseeing the exam. It is difficult for the student to accept the exam's design, knowing that the person responsible is not fully aware of their abilities and knowledge pertaining to the subject.

In the second interview, S2 continued with her idea and made a special request. She stated, "I would prefer if the teacher who instructs us also creates the exam based on what she thinks we have learned or what we may be lacking."

She stated:

> I would prefer if the teacher who instructs us also creates the exam based on what she thinks we have learned or what we may be lacking." I would prefer if the teacher who instructs us also creates the exam based on what she thinks we have learned or what we may be lacking. While I understand that exam committees make these decisions, it would be ideal for the teacher to have this responsibility.

**A sense of professional integrity:** Many participants view evaluation as an important tool that contributes significantly to their overall development. From a holistic perspective, evaluation seeks to enhance all dimensions of the individual and their implications in the labor market through evaluative processes. S2 expresses, the evaluation process helps me to reinforce and apply the knowledge I have gained, leading to personal growth and motivation to progress to the next level.

Similarly, S3 said, I saw it as a chance to learn because I like English. I didn't view it as a degree requirement, but rather as an opportunity to gain knowledge. Integral education transforms how individuals perceive their own education. S2 explained this in response to a question during interview 1; No, this does not require compliance as it is an established requirement. However, I may not see it as a personal requirement due to my conflicting schedule and priorities.

On the contrary, S3 perceives his personal growth stemming from the evaluation of learning. As he stated, "The evaluation helps me in a personal sense to mature, it is the driving factor that propels me towards attaining the next level." Affirming the aforementioned statement, S4 stated, "I have personally benefited from this program in a satisfactory and positive manner as I am satisfied with my progress in learning English at a personal level."

For her part, S2 expressed that she has learned a lot in a personal way throughout these months. She has learned to compromise, respect differing opinions, provide support, and value the people who have become her friends.

## Conceptual structure

The themes materialized from the participants' descriptions in the research and highlighted the intentionality, evaluative praxis, and the integral role of evaluation in students' experiences. The evaluation of learning, serving as a tool to improve student learning, guides the continuous enhancement of teaching and learning processes by supporting, validating, and recognizing them. From the participants' experience, the evaluative feedback is clearly demonstrative, contributing significantly to enhancing knowledge performance. It allows for an understanding of the students' learning status and validates the efficacy of the teaching process. This aspect establishes in-class evaluation procedures as a crucial strategy for determining the attainment of proposed learning objectives. It aims for comprehensive development as the ultimate goal of every evaluation process. It is important to distinguish between the experience-based meanings that arise from evaluations and the evaluations themselves, which may elicit feelings of acceptance or disdain towards the evaluative establishment. From the participants' viewpoint, acceptance is emphasized through formative evaluation practices in the classroom that facilitate the forging of interpersonal connections via innovative, practical, and motivating assessment methods. These practices contribute towards disciplinary training and engender confidence and motivation to pursue further learning.

On the contrary, the rejection of institutional evaluation is due to the formal evaluation system. Participants view mid-term and end-of-course tests as not being designed by the head teacher, leading to feelings of rejection and a call for changes to the formal evaluation system. Furthermore, these processes have an unseen aspect that generates insecurity, nerves, and fear due to the uncertainty about the contents to be evaluated. Teachers often do not consider this hidden aspect when carrying out learning assessment processes.

## CONCLUSION

To uncover the experiences of a group of students in relation to the assessment of learning, a descriptive phenomenological design was utilized. This method aided in understanding the students' experiences. Phenomenological approaches have proven useful in educational research for comprehending the assessment of learning in the classroom. The use of a descriptive phenomenological design is recommended, where participant reports are ana-

lyzed to reveal crucial data on factors and processes that were not captured in this study. However, alternative research designs could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied and potentially result in valuable findings.

As a conclusion of this work, the following statements are highlighted:

• Learning assessment is a crucial tool in significantly enhancing student learning, both in the summative and formative contexts.

• Learning assessment is also an innovative and motivational practice for students, particularly in formative assessment processes. Implementing dynamic and innovative teaching methods in the classroom tends to create a motivating learning environment and can even change students' attitudes towards learning and assessment.

• Evaluating learning has a significant impact on overall student development from a holistic perspective, with the goal of enhancing all dimensions of the self and its implications in the job market.

• Based on the students' experiences, formative evaluation serves as a means to foster interpersonal connections.

• The students display a reluctance towards utilizing formal standardized testing, which aligns with the practical issue identified in this study.

Including teachers as study participants is highly recommended. Describing their experiences can result in significant findings that broaden our understanding of the phenomenon. By attributing meaning to the evaluation processes in the classroom and examining their impact on the learning process from a phenomenological viewpoint, this research can yield complementary data. This suggests that expanding the population sample would yield more information. To achieve this, it is recommended to extend the project's timeline.

The student participants demonstrated inadequacies in knowledge and experience when responding to phenomenological interviews. Therefore, arranging pre-interview workshops with the participants could prove beneficial. This would raise their awareness and help them understand the characteristics and objectives associated with a phenomenological interview, limiting these issues, and promoting more comprehensive data collection through interviews.

Additionally, it can be inferred that language assessment plays a crucial role in informing pedagogical practices within language classrooms. Thus, conducting further research on this subject matter can aid in comprehending the intricacies of teaching and learning foreign languages in the American context, ultimately affecting the training processes. Some potential pedagogical issues emerge for future studies. These include evaluating the usefulness and effectiveness of formal assessments in language classrooms, exploring the role of formal assessment in building interpersonal relationships, and examining emotional factors that may impact students' test performance.

## REFERENCES

Aguas, P. P. (2014). *A phenomenological study of key stakeholders' lived experiences while implementing an aligned foreign language curriculum* (Order No. 3647749). Available from Dissertations & Theses @ University of Phoenix; ProQuest Central; ProQuest Central; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1643246775).

Arias, C. I., Maturana, L. M., & Restrepo, M. I. (2012). Evaluación de los aprendizajes en lenguas extranjeras: hacia prácticas justas y democráticas. *Lenguaje, 40*(1), 99-126.

Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Pearson Education, Inc.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage publications.

Díaz-Bravo, L., Torruco-García, U., Martínez-Hernández, M., & Varela-Ruiz, M. (2013). La entrevista, recurso flexible y dinámico. *Investigación en educación médica, 2*(7), 162-167.

Dixson, D. D., & Worrell, F. C. (2016). Formative and summative assessment in the classroom. *Theory into practice, 55*(2), 153-159.

Fulcher, G. (2013). *Practical language testing*. Routledge.

Giorgi, A. (2012). Subjectivity and lifeworld in transcendental phenomenology. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 43*(1), 131-136.

Hernández, A. F. P., Sánchez, C. J. M., Arellano, P. P. A. P., & Whizar, H. M. Y. (2018). Los criterios de evaluación del aprendizaje en la educación superior. *Perspectivas docentes, 28*(63).

Hernández, R., Fernández, C., & Baptista, P. (2016). *Metodología de la investigación. 6ta Edición Sampieri*. Soriano, RR (1991). *Guía para realizar investigaciones sociales*. Plaza y Valdés.

López-Mendoza, A. A., & Bernal-Arandia, R. (2009). Language testing in Colombia: A call for more teacher education and teacher training in language assessment. *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development, 11*(2), 55–70.

Mapp, T. (2008). Understanding phenomenology: The lived experience. *British Journal of Midwifery, 16*(5), 308-311.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage publications.

Muñoz, A. P., Palacio, M., & Escobar, L. (2012). Teachers' beliefs about assessment in an EFL context in Colombia. *Profile Issues in Teachers Professional Development, 14*(1), 143-158.

Pacheco, R. J. P., Miranda, L. C. B., & Enríquez, N. R. O. (2020). El conductismo en la formación de los estudiantes universitarios. *Revista EDUCARE-UPEL-IPB-Segunda Nueva Etapa 2.0, 24*(1), 117-133.

Scriven, M. (1967). The Methodology of Evaluation. En R. W. Tyler, R. M. Gagne, & M. Scriven (Eds.), *Perspectives of Curriculum Evaluation Chicago* (pp. 39-83). Rand McNally.

Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. Teachers college press.

Van Manen, M. (2016). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. Routledge.