

BENEFITS OF ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT IN TEACHING ENGLISH FOR SCHOOL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the problems of teaching English and assessing students. It discusses about the importance of assessment and the description of alternative assessment.

Keywords: assessment, appropriate forms, authentic situations, subsequent implementation, approaches.

Alternative assessment is somewhat of a blanket term that is often used to describe a variety of alternatives to what is popularly considered more “standardized” forms of testing. Alternative assessment largely emerged in response to the perceived inadequacies of more traditional or conventional forms of assessment, and especially to their shortcomings when applied to learners with special needs. Although much of the impetus for early developments in this area may be traced to the United States’ Individuals with Disabilities Education Act enacted in 1990 and reauthorized several times over the coming years, which stipulated that appropriate forms of alternative assessment for learners with disabilities be included in state assessments, the potential usefulness of these developments in incorporating the various intelligences and preferred learning styles of all learners was soon recognized.

Their utility is associated with the fact that alternative assessment encompasses forms of assessment that involve a variety of tasks, all requiring learners to use higher-level thinking skills in real-life or authentic situations. In this way, alternative assessment places assessment at the very heart of instruction.

Brown and Hudson state that alternative assessment has gained a degree of acceptance in the field of TESOL due to the fact that language-testing practices associated with language learning are necessarily different from testing practices predominant in other fields. This situation has arisen from the fact that both the process of English language learning and the assessment of that learning are by their very nature complex, and English language teachers and administrators have traditionally employed a larger variety of assessments to deal with this complexity. However, Brown and Hudson warn that the term alternative assessment itself may carry several negative connotations, which impact upon its acceptability and subsequent implementation in EFL/ESL instruction. These connotations include the

suggestion that such forms of assessment involve completely new procedures, which are untried and not supported by research, and that they do not require rigorous approaches to test construction, implementation, and decision making. For these reasons, the authors recommend using the term alternatives in assessment.¹

Regardless of the name applied to these approaches, alternative assessment can benefit learners and teachers in a variety of ways. For example, according to the North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction, it may capture authentic examples of the achievement of complex outcomes by assessing and evaluating higher-level skills such as problem solving, reflecting, synthesizing, and creative thinking. Alternative assessment can include authentic, performance-based tasks, and demonstrations that are carried out in realistic contexts, while also allowing assessment and instruction to continuously interact and thereby helping teachers to gain a clearer picture of their learners' abilities. Other potential benefits are improving coherence between instruction and assessment, increasing the interaction between learners and teachers, and addressing diverse learning styles. Dikli adds that, because alternative assessments focus on learners' growth over time as opposed to giving us a "snapshot" of learning achievement, they allow flexibility in the timing and implementation of assessment events. This flexibility naturally lessens the stress that learners experience as part of the assessment process, and therefore give us a more accurate record of their skills and abilities.

With a more particular focus on language instruction, Brown and Hudson offer a number of positive characteristics of alternative assessments that are based on the work of authors such as Aschbacher, Herman, Aschbacher, and Winters, and Huerta-Macías. Such characteristics include being non-intrusive, as they are often an extension of everyday classroom activities; employing tasks that are associated with meaningful instructional activities; focusing on both process and product; being sensitive to cultural diversity among learners; encouraging transparency in the expected standards and in the rating criteria; and requiring teachers to engage with new roles in instruction and assessment. Despite this list of potential advantages, however, Dikli states that alternative assessment can also present several disadvantages or challenges that teachers need to be aware of and take appropriate measures to counter—for example, concerns about issues of subjectivity, reliability, and validity and the large investment of the time and energy that these forms of assessment often require from teachers.

Closely associated with these concerns is the matter of their practicality: alternative forms of assessment often are more time consuming and more difficult to implement than conventional testing. In response to these concerns, Quenemoen highlights the importance of ensuring the transparency, integrity, validity, and

¹ Canale M., Swain M. Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Second Language Teaching and Testing// Applied Linguistics. 1980. 1 (1).-Pp. 1-48.

planned improvement of alternative assessments. Transparency is related to the need to understand how various teaching practices are linked to the achievement of learning outcomes and therefore requires that assessment development, implementation, and results are fully open to scrutiny. Closely linked to this point is the integrity of alternative assessments. It is incumbent upon the instructor to achieve a balance between providing learners with an opportunity to demonstrate their skills and knowledge and maintaining sufficient control and structure to ensure the quality of teaching.

Without successfully striking this balance, alternative assessments run the risk of being either too constrictive (and therefore incapable of offering learners and teachers the advantages highlighted above) or so lax in design and implementation that assessment results are more or less meaningless.

Quenemoen points out that validity is associated with the need to carefully examine the effects of alternative assessment over a period of time, so as to ensure that the claims teachers and administrators make on the basis of these assessments are defensible. Here Brown and Hudson maintain that alter-native assessment has an obligation to ensure validity that is no less than conventional assessment. Validity can be achieved by making efforts to design, pilot, analyze, and revise assessment procedures so that they can be studied, demonstrated, and improved. Quenemoen adds that, in order to increase the validity of alternative assessments, it is important to study whether their uses are defensible and their desired outcomes are routinely achieved. This requires not only constant oversight of the development, implementation, and uses of alternative assessments (as stated above), but also collection of high-quality, reliable data and a continuous process of improvement and review based on them.

Pedagogical Implications. Instructors wishing to employ alternative assessments in the EFL/ESL classroom have a responsibility to learners and to the institution in which they are employed to ensure the validity and reliability of their assessments. One way for them to do their part is to be mindful of the concerns highlighted above and of the potential benefits and drawbacks of any forms of alternative assessment they use. Commonly employed alternative assessments in EFL/ESL classrooms are portfolios, journals and diaries, writing folders, teacher observations, peer and teacher–learner conferences, audiovisual recordings, checklists, and self-assessments. However, this list is far from exhaustive and many other forms exist. Worley offers an overview of some of these alternative assessments that can help inform teaching practice. Several forms are discussed below within EFL/ESL contexts.

Within an EFL/ESL context, portfolios often contain samples of learner work that are used as evidence of learning and language development. Worley states that the main benefit of portfolios is to allow learners to make decisions about what information to include as a demonstration of their improvement in English; thus

learners construct their own knowledge rather than merely acting as passive recipients of knowledge. In order to achieve this goal, portfolios should meet a set of conditions, such as permitting individual learners to make meaning, encouraging interaction between learners and their instructors, offering sufficient amounts of time for language development to occur, and taking place in contexts that support reflective thinking. When implementing portfolios as an alternative form of assessment in the language classroom, it is important that learners are given enough freedom to engage in higher-level thinking and problem-solving skills and that the conditions imposed upon them in terms of prescribed content, presentation style, and so on are not overly restrictive. Moreover, portfolios should not be viewed by teachers, learners, administrators, and parents as an easy alternative to more conventional forms of assessment. It is necessary to highlight their importance and value in terms of improving English language abilities and of meeting learning outcomes (these have been already announced to all those concerned).

In audiovisual recordings in the language classroom, the teacher or the learners record the performance of a variety of tasks that require the use of English within authentic or real-life settings. Audiovisual recordings are ideal for keeping the record of learners' speaking and listening skills. They also allow learners to demonstrate a number of higher-order thinking skills and, where appropriate, knowledge of socio-cultural conventions in the target language. Above all, recordings (a) are highly motivating for learners, (b) make it possible for teachers to compare performance at different points in time and easily spot significant developments in language proficiency, and (c) give learners a chance to demonstrate speaking and presentation skills without the pressure of performing in front of a large class.

When implementing audiovisual recording as an alternative assessment, however, teachers should take great care to offer learners the opportunity to perform in real-life contexts; they should therefore not make the situation of the recording too contrived. Moreover, it is important to warn that this form of assessment naturally foregrounds certain kinds of intelligence and hence may advantage certain learners over others. Finally, issues of access to and assumed familiarity with required technology, especially in developing nations or in lower socioeconomic areas, need to be taken into account.²

Worley holds that diaries, journals, and writing folders can be implemented as alternative assessment in a number of different forms: as daily records of learner progress, as more general journals of learners' lives, as records of current issues and news events, as collections of writing samples from across the curriculum, and so on. Diaries, journals, and writing folders encourage learners to reflect upon both what they have learned and how they have learned it, to make links across the curriculum,

² Aschbacher, P. A. (1991). Performance assessment: State activity, interest, and concerns. *Applied Measurement in Education*, 4, 275–88.

and to develop a connection with their instructor that can deepen their relationship while also potentially guiding their future learning. For this to happen, it is important for teachers to make the writing process as stress-free as possible. This can be achieved by not grading individual journal, diary, or folder entries and by letting learners know that the teacher will only read the entries that they would like to share. It is also important for ESL/EFL teachers to let their learners know that their entries are being read, which can be done by adding personal comments to these entries or by discussing them in class or in learner–teacher conferences. It is nonetheless important to let learners know that lack of effort or partially completed entries will not be accepted. Moreover, Worley adds that teachers should expect some resistance to this form of alternative assessment during the early stages of its implementation and must seek to counter it by highlighting the many benefits that these forms can have for language development.

As a form of alternative assessment, conferences are commonly implemented (a) as peer conferences among a small group of learners who meet to discuss and assess the work of a group member before it is submitted to the teacher, or (b) as one-on-one teacher–learner conferences focused primarily on learner achievement in a given area. The former method involves providing learners with the framework or guidelines they need in order to offer advice and feedback on a particular piece of learner work, in a mutually supportive and nonthreatening environment. Peers can discuss any kind of work—essays, assignments, projects, audiovisual presentations, journals, diaries, and so on—with the intention of highlighting its strengths and weaknesses and of suggesting ways in which it can be improved. Peer conferences may discuss how learners can continue to develop their language skills in an area under focus or to build their English language proficiency in general. Learners may also reflect in their portfolios upon their experiences with peer assessment or describe it in their journals or diaries, thereby improving their self-reflection skills.

Teacher–learner conferences may include discussions between the teacher and the learner about the latter’s educational progress; in fact all the forms of alternative assessment that learners have engaged with throughout their EFL/ESL course of studies can be discussed in this way. These forms of assessment allow learners to direct their own learning while applying the knowledge and language skills they have developed in class to a real-life situation of assessment and feedback.

Moreover, they encourage learners to document their linguistic progress with the help of other school and extracurricular activities. It is important, however, that sufficient support is accorded to peer assessors to make peer conferencing effective and encouraging rather than threatening and detrimental to the learner being assessed. In addition, with reference to teacher–learner conferences, the instructor should be aware of the power distance between the two parties (as the teacher is a perceived source of knowledge and authority in the classroom) and of how it may affect learners’ approaches to, and performance during, these conferences. This point

applies especially to traditionally hierarchical societies, such as those found in certain parts of Asia.

It's easy to fall into a routine of assessing learners the same way over and over. But letting learners choose from a menu of assessments can do them a lot of good — and make you a better teacher.

Sure, it takes time to create alternative assessments, but there are tons of resources online that make it easy to borrow ideas from others. Think about your standard summative assessment given at the end of a unit. You don't have to reinvent the wheel: Just get creative with the options you offer, and watch how they ignite your learners' creativity.

You can tap into what interests them to further engage them, even those who are less motivated. Let's say you have a learner who randomly fills in bubbles on multiple-choice tests. What if you give that learner a chance to make a board game, construct a museum exhibit or perform a rap instead? The dreaded word "test" is forgotten when an array of enticing options come into focus.

Learners must still demonstrate knowledge, and they will use and develop other skills as well. You will still be able to collect valuable data by providing clear expectations and rubrics that target your measurable outcomes.

While there's clearly a time for standardized tests (and learners need to prepare for them), you also have an obligation to prepare them for life beyond the classroom. Here are a few of the life skills learners can acquire and strengthen through alternative assessments:

Critical thinking: Giving learners options to use what they've learned to problem-solve and create something develops their ability to think outside of the box, find creative solutions and formulate their own ideas and opinions. Perhaps they have to invent and sell a new, affordable device that addresses climate change. Or, they could have the option of giving a persuasive speech urging skeptical investors (the class) to invest in the type of renewable energy that they believe is best. Either way, those assessments (and many others) would let learners show what they've learned while still having to dig deeper.

Collaboration: Some alternative assessments like performing an infomercial or filming a newscast require learners to work together on creating a script and sharing their ideas and what they've learned. Working with different personalities is part of real life, and compromising and finding creative solutions can help them in the "real world," too.³

Synthesizing information: Learners accustomed to multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank tests often get hyper-focused on knowing the right answers. Yet some

³ *Byram M.* Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence. - Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 1997. -136 p.

struggle at connecting the dots, applying concepts they've learned and articulating their thoughts and opinions on a subject. Let's say those get-it-right-obsessed learners are in your history class. You give them these options for their summative assessment: Write a diary as a historical figure, design a scrapbook from that time period, or create a soundtrack explaining how each song connects to key events from that time period. Suddenly there is no right answer. Learners have to dive into what they've learned and make sense of it all — in an innovative and in-depth way.

At first glance, providing a menu of choices for a summative assessment might seem like little more than extra chores, but it can actually help improve your teaching practice by:

Reducing complaints: Letting learners choose means you don't have to hear them say "not another test." Although traditional assessments collect important data to inform our teaching, you can still collect that data from alternative assessments if they're aligned with your learning outcomes. And, you'll have more fun grading these, and you'll get to see another side of your learners. When you're more motivated, they are, too.

More effectively assessing your learners: Different types of assessments mean you can better gauge learners who have different learning abilities, linguistic challenges and other characteristics that might not reveal themselves on standardized tests. For example, an English learner might score poorly on a short-answer exam about a novel he read, but he might do really well if he could demonstrate his comprehension by drawing a comic strip or creating a collage instead.

Ending on a meaningful note: If you're passionate about what you've been teaching but the whole unit ends with a dry exam, the passion and the importance of it might be dulled or forgotten. Multiple assessment options keep the enthusiasm alive while empowering learners to take over their own learning and demonstrate their understanding in focused, high-quality, unique ways.

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