



Workshop D

Alternatives in Language Assessment

Dr Christine Coombe
Dubai Men's College
Higher Colleges of Technology

ABSTRACT

For the past decade, EFL/SL educators have been encouraged to reduce their reliance on traditional, often standardized, multiple-choice and short-answer tests (Gaies, 2002). In fact, teachers readily accept the advantages of infusing performance-based assessment into their curricula. However, the reality of implementing a successful alternative assessment component often proves problematic in large-scale institutions or with large numbers of students. Traditionally, assessment in the world today is relegated to the administration of high-stakes examinations usually at mid and end point through the semester. Because of this approach, many students are often traumatized by assessment and rely on rote learning to pass these exams. These high-stakes, large-scale examinations often focus the student on the “product” rather than the “process” of language learning.

In recent months, educators in many parts of the world are considering the advantages that an alternative assessment component could bring to their assessment programs. The presenter will discuss the implementation of alternative assessment components at institutions in the United Arab Emirates. The main types of alternative assessment (portfolios, reports, presentations, journals, projects etc) will be briefly described. The failures as well as the successes of these initiatives will also be discussed.



Workshop attendees will participate in a variety of different alternative assessment activities. Firstly, they will evaluate and critique evaluation criteria for a written portfolio and apply it to the Malaysian content. Second, they will design a project specifically for their educational context. Thirdly, participants will develop a framework and set of guidelines for a reading and writing portfolio.

Sample project criteria that the presenter has found to be successful will be made available.

WORKSHOP SUMMARY

The workshop began with the facilitator giving the definition of alternative assessment. Alternative assessment is defined as “any form of measurement of what students know and are able to do other than traditional standardised tests.” (Education Week on the Web as cited in Gales, 2002). Alternative forms of assessment include portfolios, projects, journals, presentations, performance-based assessment and other means of testing

Alternative assessment is referred to in literature by various terms such as additional assessment (Alderson, 1999), performance-based, continuous, authentic or informal assessment. However, the most frequently used term, ‘alternative assessment’ is often viewed as being negative. The term implies that it is new when it is already well established in many settings, it is different and it is exempted from requirements of responsible test construction and decision-making (Brown & Hudson, 1998)

Then she listed the cornerstones of assessment. They are as follows:

- Validity
- Reliability
- Usefulness
- Practicality
- Washback

- Authenticity
- Transparency
- Security

She then proceeded by comparing traditional assessment and alternative assessment. The table below shows a comparison between traditional assessment and alternative assessment.

Traditional	Alternative
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - one shot test - indirect tests - inauthentic tests - individual projects - little or no feedback provided to students - usually timed - tasks are decontextualised 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - continuous, longitudinal assessment - direct tests - authentic assessment - group projects - feedback provided to students - untimed exams - tasks are contextualised

The facilitator then provided the reasons for using alternative assessment. The reasons are listed below.

- Based on the realisation that no single assessment approach can accomplish all our goals. The goals can only be achieved through multiple measures assessment
- Alternative assessment is authentic and based on real-life skills
- It requires student to do something with the language
- The emphasis is on student's strength
- Consideration is given to students with different learning styles
- The focus is on documenting student growth

- It reduces our reliance on traditional tests
- It gives students opportunity to show off skills other than language skills
- It directly reflects intended outcomes of a curriculum which leads to students monitoring their own progress and teachers making more informed decisions about students

Alternative assessment has the following characteristics, which is more of a list of positive attributes

- It uses real-world contexts
- It is non-intrusive and extensions of day-to-day classroom activities
- It allows students to be assessed on what they normally do in class
- It focuses on process as well as product
- The tasks represent meaningful, instructional activities
- It taps into higher level thinking and problem solving abilities
- It provide information about both strengths and weaknesses
- It can be multiculturally sensitive when administered properly
- It often has high validity because students are able to solve complex real-life tasks
- It ensures that people, not machines, do the scoring, using human judgement
- It encourages open discourse of standards and rating criteria
- It calls upon teachers to perform new instructional and assessment roles (Aschbacher, 1991; Herman et. Al, 1992; Huerta-Macias, 1994)

There are also some limitations to alternative assessment. The limitations are as follows:

- Most criticisms are centred around resources needed

- Alternative assessment requires more time, money and effort than traditional testing. A large scale alternative assessment is between 3-10 times more costly and 5 times more time-consuming than traditional tests (Semple, 1992 as cited in Gales, 2002)
- Our enthusiasm for innovation sometimes blinds us to quality issues
- Many teachers do not have the formal training to implement this kind of assessment as it is relatively new to the field.
- Alternative assessment is difficult to ensure reliability where inter-rater and intra-rater reliability is a concern.
- Security can be an issue.

Then the facilitator asked the participants to get into groups. In groups, the facilitator asked the participants to discuss potential problem areas in Mrs. Wright's alternative assessment procedures. The participants are asked to suggest the changes she needs to make to ensure that her assessment is valid and reliable. The suggested techniques are portfolios (print and electronic); projects; presentations; reports; case study – portfolio assessment

The following discussion is on different aspects of portfolio assessment; the definition of writing portfolios, the history of portfolio assessment, features of good portfolios, advantages and limitation of portfolio assessment and the importance of reflection in writing portfolios.

Writing portfolios is a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student efforts, progress, achievement and growth in one or more areas (Arter, 1995). It shows evidence of the stages a text has gone through. Good portfolios include student's participation in selecting contents, in choosing criteria for evaluation, and good portfolios also show evidence of student reflection (Paulson, Paulson & Meyer, 1991)

Portfolio assessment first came into prominent discussion around 1986 (Kroll, 1998). Since then, a lot of work has been done in the first language contexts. Now it has become an important part of what is known as ‘alternative assessment.’

There are five features of good portfolios

- Comprehensiveness – potential for determining depth and breath of students’ capabilities
- Predetermined and systematic – all aspects are planned prior to implementation
- Informative – contents are meaningful to teachers, students and all involved
- Tailored – is tailored to the purpose for which it will be used and to classroom objectives
- Authentic – tasks reflect real life contexts (Moya and O’ Mailey, 1994)

The advantages of portfolios are as follows:

- They are reflective of how teachers want to teach writing. They are not a ‘snapshot’ approach. They don’t undermine regular classroom practice and they use ‘process’ approach where students must decide what to write about, develop viewpoint, come up with a research topic, draft and revise and finally submit the final draft.
- They present an authentic picture of student learning (Gomez, 2000).
- They allow opportunities for students to self-correct
- They help identify students with uneven abilities
- They offer richer options for feedback and remediation
- They offer opportunities for teachers to professionally develop

Despite the advantages, there are also some limitations of portfolio assessment, such as:

- There is lack of teacher education (Hamp-Lyons, 1998) as only recent graduates have had any formal training in alternative assessment
- It does not actually translate into a score, for example, how does a 'band' or single digit convert?
- There is a wide variability among tasks which makes it difficult to generalise results
- The control is out of the hands of the testers, thus it becomes a potential threat to reliability
- It is difficult to standardise tasks and testing conditions due to little amount of support given to teachers, the time allowed on drafts and on the use of external sources.
- The evaluation criteria and scoring standards are difficult to develop and implement. Furthermore it is very labour intensive and costly
- Scoring provides a dilemma especially in achieving inter-rater reliability, which requires training and more time consuming

Reflection is an important aspect in writing portfolio and is generally recognised as one of the main benefits of alternative assessment (Gottlieb, 1995; O' Mailey and Valdez Pierce, 1996). Students are asked to think about their needs, goals, weaknesses and strengths in the language. Students are also asked to select their best work and explain why it is valuable to them. Experts in the field of assessment cite that learner reflection is an integral part of any portfolio. Without reflection, the portfolio remains a 'folder of all my papers' (Santhos, 1997).

The facilitators then led the participants into the next activity, the Portfolio activity. The participants were asked to think of their educational context and plan a writing portfolio for use in their classroom. After that, the participants must decide on several factors pertaining to writing portfolios such as

- How many entries or drafts must the students write?
- What will the topics be?
- How will you allow for student participation?
- How will you mark it?

The facilitator ended the activity by providing some recommendations for implementing alternative assessment.

- Start small and use someone else's experience as your guide.
- Develop clear rubrics for marking, which is often more difficult than the task itself, and it is essential to establish benchmarks.
- Estimate the time it will take and then double or triple it.
- Plan as you plan instruction, not as an afterthought.
- Share ideas/experiences with colleagues
- Collect good examples of alternative assessments
- Expect to learn by trial and error
- Accept that the best assessments are developed over time and with repeated use
- Don't give up if your first experience is not as successful as you had hoped.



In conclusion, the facilitator pointed out that alternative assessment is not an educational panacea. It represents some promising assessment procedures replete with both strengths and weaknesses. Its positive potential is tempered by some negative considerations. Lastly, alternative assessment must be undertaken with caution and thoughtfulness for it to fulfil its promise (Moya & O'Mailey, 1994).