Alternative Assessment in the ESL Classroom: Why and How?

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ABSTRACT

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF, 2005) makes a clear distinction between knowledge that is fluid and that which is reproduced. The former can never be transferred and must be reconstructed by the learner. For this to happen, learning can no longer be the memorization and reproduction of facts. Unfortunately, in most of the cases in India, academic courses use closed book, memory-based examinations as part of summative assessment, which has focused on the assessment of learning. But there is the necessity to shift the focus from 'assessment of learning' to 'assessment for learning'. In order to make assessment 'a tool for learning', the existing assessment system must be rejuvenated by incorporating alternative assessment techniques. With this aim, the present paper will discuss the possibilities of alternative assessment in the context of the ESL classroom. The aim of the paper is also to justify the relevance of alternative assessment in the language classroom in order to ensure that knowledge is not merely reproduced but applied, synthesized and evaluated.

The Purpose of Assessment - A Generic Review

One of the primary purposes of assessment is to be *summative*. In its summative role, the purpose of assessment is to judge the quality and characteristics of the student and summarize these in a clear and widely acceptable format. Traditionally, the principal mechanism for summative assessment is the end-of-module examination. Students care most about the results of summative assessment, as this has an impact on their employability and prospective earnings.

Assessment also has a *formative* function. In this role, assessment is intimately linked with students' learning processes, helping to guide them in their studies, motivating them, providing feedback on areas of learning requiring further work, and generally promoting the desired learning outcomes. While most assessment is both summative and formative, it is argued that the summative function increasingly predominates in a way that adversely affects student learning.

A Contrastive View on Alternative and Traditional Assessment

Two opposing forces are influencing educational assessment today. On the one hand are the proponents of more and more standardized testing. This view sees the

curriculum as only consisting of a body of knowledge and facts that can easily be transferred from teachers to students. The primary instrument of assessment for this paradigm is the standardized test. Standardized tests attempt to measure the amount of knowledge acquired by a student over a period of time. This view implies that knowledge exists separately from the learner. Therefore, students work to accumulate knowledge rather than to construct it. This belief is grounded in a traditional approach to the educational endeavour based on behaviorist theories. While standardized tests may be easy to administer, easy to score and easy to interpret, they do not provide teachers with all the information they need to make decisions about their students' instructional needs or progress. Additionally, viewing content as the only component of the curriculum is an incomplete and shortsighted position.

The curriculum is made up of four parts: content, process, product, and environment. This view indicates that how students learn, how they demonstrate what they have learned and the circumstances in which they learn are as important as what they learn. This paradigm, based on the constructivist theory, therefore, requires alternative testing to assess student learning. Alternative assessment is a way for 'Assessment *for* Learning', which is a process by which teachers gather information that they will use to make instructional decisions. In this regard, assessment *for* learning is a modality of

constant assessment that enables teachers to adjust their practice so that every student succeeds. On the other hand, assessment *of* learning is a unidirectional process with little room for retrofitting.

Alternative Assessment: Why?

The concept of alternative assessment was coined to define all those possible activities which are not formal tests but which can be used for assessing learning performance, as alternatives to the conventional methods of evaluating linguistic progress and performance. Concepts such as alternative assessment, authentic assessment, portfolio-based assessment, holistic assessment and integrative assessment are used with the same value as alternative testing.

Alternative assessment started being used as a means of educational reform due to the increasing awareness of the influence of testing on curriculum and instruction. According to Bailey (1998), traditional assessments are indirect and inauthentic. She also adds that traditional assessment is standardized and for that reason, they are one-shot, speed-based, and norm-referenced. Such an assessment procedure is decontextualized and they mostly assess only the lower-order thinking skills of the learner. Traditional assessment often focuses on learner's ability to memorize and recall, which are lower-level cognition skills.

Alternative assessments, on the other hand, assess higher-order thinking skills. Students have the opportunity to

demonstrate what they have learned. This type of assessment tools focus on the growth and the performance of the student. That is, if a learner fails to perform a given task at a particular time, s/he still has the opportunity to demonstrate his/her ability at a different time and different situation. Since alternative assessment is developed in context and over time, the teacher has a chance to measure the strengths and weaknesses of the student in a variety of areas and situations.

Language education and assessment should prepare students not just to succeed, but to positively contribute to the world outside the classroom. Do the traditional standardized assessments really prepare students in this direction or do they only assess what is being tested? In language assessment, the employment of traditional standardized tests can hardly measure the student holistically. Consequently, standardized testing often benefits students who perform well in a certain area of language (for example, vocabulary memorization and grammar translation), as well as those who can perform well under time pressure. Therefore, even though this type of testing is usually viewed as objective, the results can be misleading in terms of communicative language competence. Consequently, students with good communicative competence might perform poorly on standardized tests if they lack the memorization skills that these require.

Furthermore, traditional assessment practices often rely on competition as the main motivator, and use a grading system. According to this system, students' grades are assigned based on relative performance in comparison to their classmates' performance. This type of grading puts students in direct competition with their peers. There will always be at least one student who has a lower score than all others, even if that score is quite high when measured against specific performance criteria or standards.

Therefore, it is necessary to re-evaluate traditional assessment practices that rely on individual competition between students as the only motivator. Assessment practices should recognize students as individuals who will grow and learn in different ways, at different times, and evaluate them holistically.

Alternative Assessment: A Few Characteristics

- Proximity to actual language use and performance: Alternative assessment procedures are based on activities that have authentic communicative function rather than ones with little or no intrinsic communicative value. Because these procedures strive for a more direct representation of language use and language behaviour, they tend to be based on actual performance in authentic situations which the learner is likely to encounter in his or her daily life.

- *A holistic view of language:* Alternative assessment procedures are based on the notion that the interrelationships among the various aspects of language, such as phonology, grammar, and vocabulary, cannot be ignored. Also, the four skills of language — listening, speaking, reading, and writing — are seen to be parts of a structurally integrated whole. Through alternative assessment approaches, language can be assessed not so much as structure but rather as a tool for communication and self-expression. Alternative assessment also takes into account the whole learner and his or her social, academic, and physical context.

- *An integrative view of learning:* Alternative assessments attempt to capture the learner's total array of skills and abilities. They are based on the idea that various aspects of a learner's life, both academic (and professional) and personal, are integral to the development of language proficiency and cannot be ignored. Alternative assessment also allows for the integration of various dimensions of learning as they relate to the development of language proficiency. These dimensions include not only processes such as acquiring and integrating knowledge, extending and refining knowledge, and using knowledge meaningfully, but also issues such as varying student attitudes towards learning.

- *Developmental appropriateness:* Alternative assessment procedures set expectations that are appropriate within the cognitive, social, and academic development of the learner. Because it is possible to design assessment that meets individual learners' needs, alternative assessment reveals information about a learner's proficiency in the context of what is relevant to that learner's life and experiences. It also allows for a more valid interpretation of information than that obtained from more traditional standardized tests.

Purposes and Uses of Alternative Assessment

Alternative assessment bears tremendous benefits for all the possible clients of assessment. For students, alternative assessment allows them to see their own accomplishments in terms that they can understand and, consequently, it allows them to assume responsibility for their learning. For teachers, the primary advantage of alternative assessment is that it provides data on their students and their classroom for educational decision-making. In addition, it chronicles the success of the curriculum and provides teachers with a framework for organizing students' work. Traditionally, testing and assessment have been used primarily for the purposes of evaluating the learner. It is only recently that a second purpose is being called for, evaluating instruction. Alternative assessment lends itself well to both
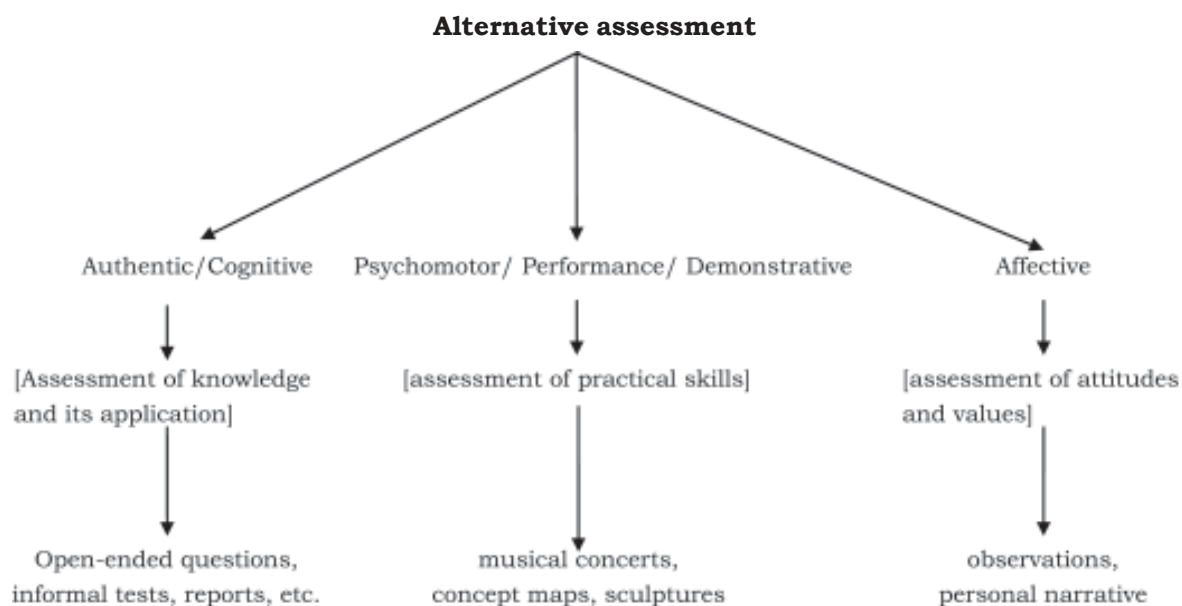
Alternative assessment

Authentic/Cognitive   Psychomotor/ Performance/ Demonstrative   Affective

[Assessment of knowledge
and its application]   [assessment of practical skills]   [assessment of attitudes
and values]

Open-ended questions,
informal tests, reports, etc.   musical concerts,
concept maps, sculptures   observations,
personal narrative

Figure 1: Alternative Assessment

purposes, especially the latter. Moreover, it addresses the cognitive, affective and psychomotor strands of assessment tasks.

Alternative Assessment: How?

According to Simonson et al (2000), there are three approaches in alternative assessment: Authentic assessment, performance-based assessment, and constructivist assessment. Researchers and educators use the term performance-based, alternative, and authentic assessment interchangeably. Alternative assessment strategies include open-ended questions, exhibits, demonstrations, hands-on execution of experiments, portfolios, etc. Some such strategies are briefly discussed below:

▪ **Oral Examination**

Many student activities that are traditionally examined through written reports or essays may alternatively be examined orally in the form of a *viva voce* examination. Potentially, this approach can give a much clearer idea of the depth of students' understanding. There is no scope for plagiarism, and little scope for regurgitation of material, at least in carefully managed interviews. These are also helpful in terms of development of interpersonal skills and interview techniques.

▪ **Portfolios**

The definition of a portfolio indicates that it is merely a container for carrying documents, but in educational circles it refers to a collection of samples of a student's work used to give evidence of progress in learning. Portfolios are an opportunity for students to provide

documentation of their learning activities, ideas and reflections. Portfolios help students take more responsibility for their own learning. By making decisions about what to include in their portfolios, students become knowledge producers rather than knowledge receivers. Thus, portfolios help students construct their own knowledge base (*constructivism*) as opposed to reacting to a teaching stimulus provided by the teacher (*behaviorism*).

- **Conferences**

A peer conference is composed of a group of five to six students who meet together to assess the written work of the group members. Students are to provide help, feedback and ideas to each other in a non-threatening atmosphere, before work is turned in to the teacher for grading.

- **Projects**

With projects, students are often free to choose the topic, title and methodology to be studied. Projects are useful in developing independence, organizational skills, resourcefulness and a sense of ownership over work, and may induce a deeper level of learning.

- **Literature/article review**

This develops a number of research-type skills, encouraging students to source material, use search engines and be able to assimilate large amounts of material and select the most important.

- **Self- and peer assessment**

The basic idea behind self- and peer assessment is to provide mechanisms that help students to evaluate themselves and their work more critically. An ability to assess one's own strengths and weaknesses is an essential life-skill that facilitates personal development whether in study or in the workplace.

- **Testing skills and not simply knowledge**

One of the problems with the traditional type of examination is that questions are so closely related to the material covered in the course and in the textbook that students tend to memorize and reproduce without any deep understanding. An alternative approach involves testing students with questions relating to issues or materials that are not familiar, but which does require the kind of approach to problem solving that is developed in the module.

- **Diaries, Journals, and Writing Folders**

Students should be encouraged to write across the curriculum. Student writings may take several forms. Students may be encouraged to make daily entries summarizing their progress in a particular study in a diary. Many teachers require students to compile a journal that is also known as a learning log. The purpose of writing in learning logs is to have students reflect on what they are learning. Writing folders show the different styles of writing

that students accomplish such as first drafts, current writing, finished drafts, new writing ideas and student reflections on material being studied.

- **Poster Sessions**

A poster session advertises the student's work/research. It combines text and graphics to make a visually pleasing presentation.

- **Open-Book Examinations**

The most immediate result of open-book examinations on students will be that they will stop "mugging" or rote learning. Such examinations focus on a set of intellectual skills, rather than on the information content.

Conclusion

Alternative assessment has incontestable advantages over traditional testing methods, as it takes into consideration the learning of each student, as well as each student's cultural background and level of knowledge. The focus is definitely placed on what the students know and can do and not on what they do not know.

Nevertheless, alternative assessment approaches have yet to come of age. As long as they are referred to as "alternative" or "informal," they maintain their status as non-mainstream in spite of having their effectiveness and value. In this regard, Worthen (1993) identifies a number of major issues for the future of alternative assessment. First, conceptual clarity is needed to ensure consistency in the applications of alternative assessment. Second, until a mechanism for evaluation and self-criticism is established, alternative assessment cannot become a viable force in education. Third, the users of alternative assessment, whether they are teachers or administrators, need to become well versed in issues of assessment and measurement. Fourth, although one of the most significant advantages of alternative assessment is its flexibility and its allowance for diversity, unless some standardization is introduced, the future of alternative assessment for high-stakes decisions is questionable. As he suggests, unless these issues are resolved, alternative assessment cannot reach its full potential in education.

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