

Assessing students in English Second Language courses: The role of alternative assessment tools in language instruction

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Abstract

This conceptual paper is an analysis of the role of alternative assessment (AA) tools in English language instruction. AA tools tend to be less formal than traditional testing; they gather information rather than at one point in time; and they are rather formative than summative in nature (Alderson & Banerjee, 2001). There has been increasing criticism of standardized test and examinations and it has brought into question the value of other indirect approaches to language assessment. Research has shown that these approaches provide a wealth of information which can inform a more valid interpretation of standardized test or examination results. The results of this analysis could be useful in informing language instructors, language material developers, language teacher trainers, as well as curriculum designers.

Key Words: alternative assessment tools, English, language instruction, second languages

Introduction

Language assessment is a crucial component of language instruction. It informs stakeholders within the language educational community about the progress that language students have made throughout and at the end of a program. Language assessment can be both formal and informal; it provides information about the language abilities and skills that students have mastered based on a collection of information gathered through multiple ways and methods of assessments at different times and contexts (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010; Dickli, 2003).

Two types of language assessments have emerged: 'traditional assessment' and 'alternative assessment (AA)' (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). The former refers to the methods of assessment which use traditional assessment techniques (TATs) (for example, tests and examinations) which are formal, standardized, where students are given administrative procedures and scoring. The latter refers to methods of assessment (for example, research projects and portfolios) which can be formal and informal, but the information gathered is ongoing and context driven. AA is defined as the practice of gathering information on student performance in order to inform the stakeholders of how well students have mastered the target learning objectives (University of Namibia, 2013). It may be referred to as 'authentic' assessment (Barootchi & Keshavarz, 2002); 'performance' assessment (Bachman & Palmer, 2011); and 'continuous' or 'ongoing' assessment (Reeve, 2000). Researchers and educators tend to use these terms interchangeably, though consistently (Reeve, 2000). In this paper, the term 'alternative assessment' will be used since it tends to be more generic of this concept. Research has promoted the usage of AA in instructions as it plays an integral role in informing decision making in language programs.

Critique of traditional approaches of language assessment

Although the traditional approach of language assessment, which uses traditional testing techniques (TTTs), is preferred in most educational and language programs, educators and critics from various backgrounds have shown quiet a number of concerns about the effectiveness of these techniques in some learning situations (Tsigari, 2004). TTTs tend to require less institutional budget, subjective evaluation and interaction in the process compared to AA techniques (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). Even though, Tsigari (2004) argued that TTTs tend to be incongruent with current practices in the language classrooms, Barootchi and Keshvary (2002) added that it can be challenging for the TTTs alone to inform the language instructors about the process of learning; information needed for formative evaluation and further planning of the teaching and learning strategies might not be easily provided through TTTs. TTTs also

encourage rote learning and hinder critical thinking and reasoning (Tsigari, 2004). In addition, a normative rather than a criterion approach to assessment is used which is reported to be causal of competition among language students instead of promoting personal improvements with the learning objectives.

Types of alternative assessment

AA can be classified in terms of *structured* or *unstructured* assessments. Structured assessment may have distinct outcome which may be grades, issued a score, or marked “complete” or “not complete” (Hamayan, 1995). On the other hand, unstructured assessment may comprise of any activity that can be performed in the jurisdiction of a given institution of learning.

Furthermore, AA can be informed by the *product* or *process* approaches (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). The process approach puts more emphasis on the way the student process the learning content. The performance and behavior of the student towards the learning contents is the centre of assessment. The product approach, however, concentrates on the outcome or final product of the performance or behavior. The assessment is more focused on what the student produces and a grade or scored is likely to be obtained.

According to Hamayan (1995; Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010), the product and process approaches can be used to inform the same type of assessment. Depending on the purpose of assessment, language instructors can therefore use the same type of assessment to assess how students have gone about completing a given task as well as assess the final product or the completed task. Some commonly used AA tools are summarised in Table 1 below (Bachman, & Palmer, 2011; Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010; Hamayan, 1995).

Table 1. Types of Assessment Tools

AA tools	Description and function
Journals	The regular entries that students make in their journals can be used to assess students' language proficiency and perception of the learning process.
Classroom Projects	Projects completed individually or in groups may be used to assess the students' abilities to function in a given curricula areas; both the process and product can be assessed.
Interviews	Interviews with individual or groups of students can be used to assess the product and learning process. It can also enable students to reflect on instruction.
Think aloud protocols	Student can reflect on the process of completing learning tasks.

The role of alternative assessment tools in language instruction

The acknowledgement of the value of alternative assessment in language programs began being considered after some critics (Aschbacher & Winters, 1992; Reeves, 2000; Tsigari, 2004) argued that traditional assessment may not be functional in all language assessment situations. Aschbacher and Winters (1992) argued that assessment should not be used as an end in itself:

Assessment [should provide] information for decision making about what student have learnt, what grades are deserved, whether students should pass on to the next grade, what groups they should be assigned to, what help they need, what areas of classroom instruction need revamping, where the [institution] needs bolstering, and so forth (p. 95).

AA involves a criterion-referenced (CR) orientation. According to Bachman and Palmer (2011), this orientation elicits information about the actual students' language abilities in given real life situations. Based on this orientation, the focus of assessment is directed to whether the students have mastered the learning content or language skills taught in a given language lesson or program. In the end, the learning content, the student, instruction and the learning process are all assessed and evaluated.

In addition, there is limited control of the process of completing the learning task (Alderson & Banerjee, 2003). During the assessment, students are encouraged to be creative and to construct new knowledge through the assessment guidelines. Likewise, in real life situation, students have access to support material (Reeve, 2000). Therefore, it measures the students' final product, and their ability to make use of available human and physical resources to effectively complete the learning task.

Furthermore, Alderson and Banerjee (2003) presented the concept 'washback', which refers to the effect that an assessment has onto the students and teacher/lecturer. Although the wide variety in students' product might cause reliability concerns they still provide positive washback to the learners (Dikli, 2003). AA has great impact on learner behavior towards learning tasks and content. It also has an impact on the methodology used by the language teacher. For example, research have shown that students tend to put more effort on learning tasks which had been more challenging to complete (Finch, 1995). In addition, the teacher may adopt another method of remedially teaching the learning task that appeared difficult to the students.

AA enables language students to apply their knowledge to real life situations. Finch (2002) used the term 'authentic assessment' which is synonymous to AA. He believes that AA techniques feature more authenticity. In addition, they also present high validity (Dikli, 2003) because they use learning tasks which closely parallel real-life writing situations which students may encounter outside the

classroom. However, so far research on assessment validity does not seem to have found any type of assessment that truly achieves its full validity.

AA, which tend to be formative in nature (Alderson & Banerjee, 2001), provides the language teacher with a better understanding of students' progress in a given language course. Since AA is developed in context and over time, the teacher is able to assess the strength and weaknesses of students in different content areas and situations (Dikli, 2003). Additionally, it is found to be flexible as it allows the teacher to play the role of a supervisor, partner and collaborator in the language classroom (Chirimbu, 2013). Its openness and complexity thus enable the teacher to alter the methodology according to the needs of students. Furthermore, students have multiple chances of revising their work, with the guidance of the teacher and their peers, throughout the completion of the learning task.

Nevertheless, AA should therefore not be regarded as replacement but as a complement of TTTs and vice versa. Language teachers, material developers, and curriculum designers are being cautioned that TTTs should not uniformly be seen as tainted while AA "offers salvation to the field of language assessment" (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010, p. 18). TTTs can still continue being valued and used for the functions they provide. According to Brown and Hudson (1998), the legitimate question remains whether there could real be one assessment which, in all case, is the most reliable, has the highest validity, and easiest to score. Hence, they further maintain that:

But the one idea that seems to get lost in the shuffle is that virtually all of the various test types are useful for some purpose, somewhere, sometime. In other words, all of the different types of tests are important to keep because all of the have distinct strength and weaknesses (p. 5).

Adoptability of alternative assessment tools in Namibia

At independence in 1990, Namibia made significant educational reforms to align, first with the changes in the political situation in the country, and second, with the international trends in education (Iipinge & Likando, 2012). The teacher-centred approach was replaced with the learner-centred approach. Teaching methods shifted from traditional methods to more contemporary teaching methods.

However, assessment in Namibian schools remains largely traditional. The education system is primarily examination based. All teaching is geared towards national examinations, the final product, with little focus on the learning process. Even though the *Towards Improving Continuous Assessment in Schools* policy guide (Ministry of Basic Education and Culture [MBEC], 1999) provides guideline on the use of a variety of assessment tools in Namibian schools, it relies largely on traditional assessment, such as tests, essays and letters. One may question the relevance of assessing the latter, when the world has already shifted to using electronic e-mails. The guide is silent on alternative assessment.

Tertiary institutions in Namibia, at least, provide more opportunities for the exploitation of alternative assessment. Continuous assessment constitutes the biggest share of the final mark in subject. The University of Namibia's (UNAM) (2013) Assessment Policy permits the usage of AA in the university programs, as it is stated in the policy that "[i]t does not constrain the development of alternative or additional forms of effective assessment, provided such assessment are consistent with the principles stated in the policy" (p. 3). The University of Namibia and the International University of Management have a ratio of 60% for continuous assessment and 40% of the examination; while the Polytechnic of Namibia has a 50/50 ratio. By giving prominence to continuous assessment, it can be argued that the nature of assessment can be varied to also take into consideration alternative productions, focusing on the learning process and assessing performance as well. It can, however, not be generalised that AA is used in all continuous assessment, as traditional assessment may be used.

Despite the published advocacy for AA, practically, it remains less utilized especially for high stake assessment situations.

Whereas alternative assessment is likely to be more supportive of contemporary learner-centred approaches, its implementation in most Namibian schools might present numerous constraints. The fact that there exists only a limited number of published alternative assessment tools in Namibia (i.e. the Namibian Portfolio for Languages) poses challenges in the consistent and standardised use of AA in different language classrooms and schools, with different teachers. There would thus be a need for targeted teacher training, support and continuous development.

Conclusions

AA allows language teachers to assess the learning process and the product, direct the design of subsequent instructional strategies, as well as enable the students to discover their learning needs. If AA is administered effectively, then, on top of the appropriate use of TTTs, it could enhance the positive outcomes of language programs. The language learning practice could thus be assessed with more authenticity (Bachman & Palmer, 2011). Since there remain concerns of reliability of AA, further research should focus on developing comprehensive frameworks for using AA in both low and high stake assessment situations. It should also explore avenues for an improved reliability in using AA.

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