

Alternative versus Traditional Assessment

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Abstract

Assessment as an integral part of the teaching and learning process, determines whether the goals of education are being met or not. The present article provides an introduction to the 'movement of alternative assessment' (Alderson & Banerjee, 2001) as a worthwhile issue within the field of assessment and language testing. It then proceeds to describe authenticity, compares traditional and alternative assessment, and tries to spot the areas which need more consideration on the part of the teachers and practitioners for a fair approach. If truly applied, authentic assessment can increase achievement by measuring the full range of student abilities.

Keywords: assessment, traditional assessment, alternative assessment, testing

INTRODUCTION

Students do not fully learn what their teachers teach. If they learned what they were taught, there would be no need for assessment. That is because regardless of the way teachers design and implement instruction, what students learn cannot be estimated with any amount of certainty. Assessment therefore is to bridge the gap between learning and teaching. Any student taking any form of learning would be, in one form or another, subject to assessment. Moreover, a well-designed test can act as an engine which finally derives active student learning (Cowen, 2005). Assessment is a topic concerned with district interim tests to everyday classroom pop-quizzes. To grapple with what is the overuse of testing, practitioners must have a clear view of testing as a means of assessment.

Compared to the variant forms of educational theory, assessment theory has been less fully developed. Therefore, principles have been rising from the actual knowledge and practice of the teachers instead of well-rooted theories of testing. Obviously, the more knowledge we gain about the nature of testing and assessment, the more we are able to fill the gaps in relation to students' achievement. Therefore, this article first deals with the notion of assessment and then presents an introduction to alternative assessment. It then discusses the characteristics of alternative assessment which is targeted at a fair and effective assessment approach.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Assessment

Assessment and testing should be set apart. Assessment is an informal gathering of information about the students' state-of-the-art knowledge through various ways of collecting information at various times and in different contexts. Testing, however, is formal and standardized and offers students scoring on the tasks they have performed. Testing is a single-occasion and timed exercise which is considered as the sole criterion through which student learning can be measured. Many scholars nowadays abstain from accepting that there is a single method of gathering data concerning student learning. Testing therefore is seen as just one component of the broader concept of assessment (Kulieke et al., 1990).

Generally speaking, assessment denotes a method of following students' progress through active participation of the learner himself. From one view, three kinds of assessment have been recognized.

Assessment for learning regards learners as unique individuals who learn in idiosyncratic ways. This kind of assessment provides feedback to students and offers a helping hand to teachers to benefit from the information available to streamline instruction. Assessment for learning offers a number of opportunities for students to develop their own skills by making evaluations about their own performances (Race et al, 2005).

Assessment as learning is a way of intensifying students' metacognition. It has an eye on the role of each student as an active connector between assessment and learning. The students are critical assessors as they make sense of information provided and consume it for learning new concepts. It is not possible unless the students make adjustments from what they have just monitored. This process is accompanied by a critical and reflective analysis of their own learning.

Assessment of learning is potentially summative and is to ascertain what the students know in relation to curriculum outcomes. It is for teachers to hopefully make infallible and reasonable decisions.

A reciprocal process, teaching and learning are affected by one another. Therefore, assessment is to deal with what is taught as well as what is learned (Kellough & Kellough, 1999). Assessment is an indispensable part of instruction. People concerned with the educational community ranging from policy makers and administrators to students and their parents hold different viewpoints in relation to the implementation of assessment strategies (Dietel et al, 1991). No agreement has yet been reached for the superiority or the effectiveness of one type of assessment over another (Simonson et al, 2000).

The controversy over different assessment techniques lies at the heart of the purpose of teaching and the desired outcomes. Assessment reform shifts its attention from the

mere use of traditional tests to more authentic methods of testing which are holistically performed by the active participation of the students, their peers and their teachers. This shift is an attempt to distance from the rigid and static tests and to approach more towards real-life tasks implemented in complex real-life situations (Tangdhanakanond, 2006).

Assessment has been an elusive concept and attempts to capture an agreed-up-on definition have excited debates among teachers and practitioners in the field. Agreement has not been yet reached over the best ways to design and administer assessment. Thus it has led to issues of uncertainty in curriculum design policy.

Assessment is an interwoven process. As Mc Alpine (2002) puts it, assessment is a form of communication with a social function identified by a number of criteria. Mc Alpine (2002) also elaborates on formative and summative assessment and regards convergent and divergent assessment as different applications of the formative and summative assessment performing at the ends of the same continuum. Divergent assessment is viewed as an open-ended process aimed at finding what the learners can do. Convergent assessment on the other hand, is to find out what a particular learner knows or is able to perform. If an assessment system is desired to be balanced, the integration of both formative and summative types becomes indispensable.

Summative assessment is carried out at the end of the term primarily to grade students and secondary to present achievement feedback. The purpose of summative assessment is to spot what the students know at a specified point in time. Contrary to popular belief, it is not just confined to standardized state tests but covers district and classroom progress as well. At this level, however, it is more or less an accountability measure as part and parcel of the grading process. A key component of summative assessment is to gauge student learning with regard to content standards.

Black and William (1998) define formative assessment as the activities taken by teachers to provide feedback on what the students have just performed. As they put it, this kind of assessment serves as a core to improve students' achievement. Popham (2008) regards it as a designed plan to adjust the ongoing learning process. Formative assessment benefits from a number of approaches in a vast range of contexts. It's a diagnostic approach which aims at providing meaningful feedback to facilitate students' learning and improve teachers' teaching. Formative assessment is integrated to class practice as part of the instructional process. It would provide teachers and students with the information necessary to adjust teaching and learning. The purpose of these adjustments is to facilitate the achievement of set standards in a given time. This kind of assessment can be equated with feedback which provides teachers and students information about the students' current level of performance and the way forward to progress (Harlen & James, 1997). This claim is realized by adopting adjustments in order to form new learning targets (Shepard, 2008). It is worth mentioning that it is not the instrument but the use of the gathered data and information for the purpose of adjustment that merits the label of formative assessment. It offers immediate evidence in order to accelerate student learning to achieve better outcomes.

Assessment techniques are subject to change as the result of the changes occurring during the learning and teaching process (Rust, 2002). Assessment is not balanced unless it is aligned with learner outcomes through multiple strategies. To put it in a nutshell, no single strategy of assessment is sufficient as each has its own pros and cons. We should keep in mind that a fundamental principle of any kind of assessment is fairness. If a strategy is fair, then reliability and validity are more likely to be guaranteed.

Importance of Assessment

One of the most important tasks facing teachers is assessment. Students' notions about what is worth learning is reflected from teachers' purpose of assessment and how it should be delivered. From one view, a good quality and up-to-standard assessment is one that teaches to the test. Simply speaking, it is concerned with what matters most. If teaching to the goal is the aim, then tests measuring information other than what teachers value would be considered useless (Angelo, 1999). According to the washback effect, assessment is central to the learning experience. Students do not generally spend time on non-assessed academic work. Assessment is a milestone which determines how much time should be spent on what is considered important. In other words, students take cues on what is important and what is not important based on what is assessed. Therefore, if student learning is to be changed, methods of assessment should be changed as well. This claim puts forth real challenges for the faculty members to adopt what is considered authentic assessment. If the learners are to be made ready to deal with ambiguous real-life problems, then they have to be able to demonstrate higher-order thinking abilities.

Assessment and Feedback are both an Integral part of Learning

Assessment and feedback are closely associated and are both an integral part of learning. However, most often teachers are obsessed with test quality rather than tests potentials to enhance student learning. A high quality and well-designed assessment engages students with their own learning, setting aside the obvious advantages of its being a tool of measurement.

Feedback is to enable the students learn about the areas which they have performed well on or can improve up on. It is of paramount importance for feedback to be timely and efficient so as not to disrupt the students' reflective process. However, most often it is the case that feedback is put off to the time when it is not salient to the learners anymore. Students should take advantage of feedback once the task is carried out. A good quality and comprehensive feedback sets a number of advantages as it builds confidence among learners, motivates them to improve learning and helps them to identify both their strengths and weaknesses. It seems that time is ripe for students to view themselves as 'learning consumers'. These learners are more demanding in that they have the proclivity to know about the criteria through which they are judged. They are inclined to be involved in the process of learning through practical and clear feedback. They demand more transparency regarding the instructors' goals to achieve,

relevant activities and criteria for success. This is not made possible unless quality of feedback on learners' past performances is improved and misconceptions are dealt with.

Alternative Assessment

Alternative assessment came into vogue as the effect of testing on curriculum and instruction was visualized (Dietel et al, 19991). Alternative assessment presents new ways of motivating and inspiring learners to explore and exploit dimensions of themselves as well as the world around them. According to learning scientists, while subject matter content recollection is easy to test, critical thinking and creativity is difficult to assess. As they claim, long-term retention of knowledge and information and its transfer is what should be focused on. Alternative assessment offers the teachers a chance to realize their students' weaknesses and strengths in variant situations (Law & Eckes, 1995).

According to Reeves (2000) there are two major approaches in alternative assessment; 1) performance or authentic assessment and, 2) portfolio assessment.

Authentic assessment can be described in terms of two major concepts; 1) performance and, 2) authenticity. The former refers to a student's generation of a response that may be directly and indirectly observed and the latter refers to the nature of the task which presents a real world issue (Elliott, 1995). Bailey (1998) points out the potential benefits of performance tests by referring to their highly contextualized nature. The latter makes a link between instruction and the real world experience of any given learner through meaningful tasks (Simonson et al, 2000). Winking (1997) claims that authenticity of the tasks urges the learners to resort to higher order thinking skills to solve real-life problems.

Alternative assessment also encompasses two major techniques labeled as portfolios and projects. Portfolios involve student work with a display mastery of skill in relation to the task at hand (Kulieke et al, 1990). It is a goal oriented collection of student work which displays students' efforts and progress in a given subject area (Bailey, 1998). In other words, portfolio assignments as part and parcel of a formative assessment emphasize the construction of knowledge for the final product through suitable mechanisms. Portfolios are advantageous in that apart from their being an authentic experience, they replicate processes which require problem-solving approaches. A project is similarly a goal oriented task which is realized in any form of plan development, research proposal and art work which requires learners to use their own skills and strategies to solve a problem (Simonson et al, 2000). However due to its cumulative nature, this kind of assessment calls for more responsibility on the part of the students and more commitment on the part of the teachers (Bailey, 1998). It is laborious on the part of the teacher as it consumes more time and energy to make decisions on the values of the diverse products that the students present (Bailey, 1998).

Traditional versus Alternative Assessment

Language testing, regardless of its purpose, is a key component of every instructional program. Critics, however, have raised serious concerns about the usefulness of various kinds of tests as the primary measure of student achievement (Butterfield et al, 1999).

Adherents of process-oriented curricula consider traditional techniques such as multiple choice tests, true-false statements, fill in the gaps and matching exercises inappropriate for the foreign language classroom curricula. More specifically, they point out the lack of rich, descriptive information about both the product and process of learning in conventional testing methods (Barootchi & Keshavarz, 2002). True-false tests present two choices one of which is true. They are simple indicators of what is understood and offer students a 50% chance of getting the answer correct. As for the matching exercises, the main advantage is that they are compact in terms of space and eliminate, to some extent, the guessing factor. The main disadvantage is that they mainly measure passive vocabulary knowledge but not other complex language skills. Like matching exercises, multiple choice tests present a lesser amount of guessing. These tests are proved especially useful for measuring a wide variety of learning points. However, they are criticized since they are quite dissimilar to real-life language usage. Bailey (1998) also criticizes traditional assessment in that they are inauthentic and indirect. It is one shot, norm-referenced and speed-based. Lew and Eckes (1995) confirm her claims by referring to traditional tests as single-occasion tests which are not informative about the progress of a student or the difficulties he may have experienced while answering the test.

As Genesee and Hamayan (1994) argue, these tests prove to be useful for gathering information regarding students' achievements under specified conditions, but they fail to provide information about students' motivations, their interests and their learning strategies. Moreover, negative criticism has been leveled at the 'washback effects' of the high-stake standardized tests at the curriculum, educational and psychological level.

Standardized tests direct teachers to center attention to only those subjects that are taken account of in the examinations. Therefore, they dominate and direct the whole curriculum (Shepard, 1991). At the educational level, they affect the methodology the teachers use in their classes as they take up various kinds of exam preparation practices at the expense of other didactic activities (Wall, 1996). Moreover, these tests gradually change didactic tools into replicas of the final examination papers (Bailey, 1999). Additionally, they direct students to adopt surface approaches to learning rather than profound ones (Newstead & Findlay, 1997). This process gradually impedes students' reasoning power in the favor of rote memorization (Black & William, 1998). At the psychological level, they affect the students' psychology negatively as the students become the passive recipients of information with no attention to their motivation, interests, efforts and confidence (Broadfoot, 2003).

Interest groups, by recognizing students of diverse educational backgrounds, have called for an adjustment in approaches to assessment. This change is in the favor of a

more culture-sensitive approach which is devoid of the linguistic and cultural preconceived notions found in traditional testing. It is to ensure fairness in educational opportunities for all the students to achieve excellence (Soodak, 2000).

Therefore, a shift of emphasis was observed from the psychometric to alternative approaches of assessment. According to Hamayan (1995), alternative assessment signifies authentic procedures and techniques within the instructional domain which can be integrated into daily classroom activities. Smith (1999) refers to alternative assessment as continuous techniques occurring inside or outside the classroom at different points in time when the subjects are asked to represent their knowledge in different ways. Kohonen (1997) uses the term alternative and authentic assessment interchangeably to refer to the evaluations made which reflect students' learning and achievement as well as their motivations and attitudes. These evaluations are claimed to finally result in an improved instruction.

Alderson and Banerjee (2001) regard alternative assessment formative in function with beneficial washback effects.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Typically, in traditional selected-response assessments students do not generate any language. As thus these tests are most often used to measure receptive skills. They offer a number of advantages as they are quick to administer and score. Moreover, scoring is relatively objective. However, they are disadvantageous in that high quality tests are difficult to construct and these tests fail to check the students' productive language skills.

Traditional assessment has laid an emphasis on tests which are conceived as showing the students' educational abilities. Research has pointed out the failure of traditional tests to capture the multi-dimensional aspects of what students have already learned (Mathies, 2000). There has been a shift of emphasis towards authentic assessment with a focus on a need for the so-called holistic approaches to make judgments on students' performances in the educational environment. Having a criterion-based standard is another factor which distinguishes the two types of assessment. Unlike traditional assessment which compares students' performances against one another, criterion-referenced assessment compares the students' performances against set standards (Tanner, 2001). Authentic assessment moves far beyond rote learning and memorization and involves students to carry out tasks which in one way or another involve them in some sort of problem-solving activities. Authentic assessment puts forward a variant number of engaging tasks for the students in situations which are real world or simulation of real world situations.

As Wiggins (1990) claims, authentic assessment avails students with a wide range of skills and illuminates whether they have gained the ability to construct valid answers to the tasks presented. Moreover, he asserts that this kind of assessment sets a standardized criterion for scoring the tasks at hand by being highly reliable.

Campbell (2000) defines 'authentic assessment' in terms of critical thinking and applied knowledge with validity as a fundamental criterion. Ewing (1998) regards authentic assessment as a meaningful learning experience with the genuine involvement of the students to carry out a project. He moves a number of limitations concerning traditional assessment among which are a) the inflexibility to reduce content and, b) establishing what is already taught. Authentic assessment, in his view, paves the way for a direct measurement of students' achievement on tasks through flexible methods.

Authenticity is to bridge the gap between artificiality and de-contextualization on the one hand and realism on the other (Segers et al, 2003). New modes of assessment are inclined towards the authentic side of the assessment continuum in order to prepare the students for the dynamic tasks of the real society (Bound, 1995).

The concept of authenticity can be explored from two poles-apart angles; the theoretical and the practical angle.

The theoretical approach has given rise to an objective viewpoint within a five dimensional framework. In the set framework, authenticity is the intermingle of five assessment characteristics; a) the social context of assessment, b) the assessment test, c) the physical context where the assessment takes place, d) the output of the assessment and, e) the assessment criteria. It is considered essential for assessment to be contextualized in real life authentic tasks (Birenbaum & Dochy, 1996).

Douchy (2001) considers assessment as a tool through which the application of knowledge to real life situations becomes the core goal. Gielen et al. (2003) go further and assert that an expert level of problem solving is reached only through authentic assessment. Authentic assessment therefore is an attempt to understand learning complexities through exploring a relationship between knowledge and social interaction (Cumming & Maxwell, 1999).

Research has shown that no clear guideline exists to design authentic assessments. This upshot forces one to garnish accessible assessment practices with some real world elements (Cummings & Maxwell, 1999) without an exact portrayal of what these authentic real-life elements are and how they should be implemented.

To shed light on the notion of authenticity, its facets must be exactly recognized and defined.

The practical angle of assessment keeps in check the determining factors of authenticity within the perception of its diverse users. This subjective side of assessment deals with how the assessors and assesses perceive this notion. The assesses perceptions influence the learning process as it characterizes what is worth learning (Struyven et al, 2003). These perceptions, however, are subject to change as a result of the amount of practical experiences students have had and their age. The assessors' perceptions are also developed in relation to what should be included in the curriculum.

Authentic assessment is mainly realized in terms of the opposition between production versus reproduction. It doesn't value assessment as an end but rather as a means to achievement which is meaningful to the learner. In other words, authentic assessment loses meaning without its due diligence to the learning process. Authentic assessment tools come in many different forms such as: a) portfolios, b) group work, c) role plays, d) reflective journals and e) concept maps. Authentic assessment avails a measure of academic growth which is gauged over time to capture the depth of student learning (Morris, 2001).

Proponents of alternative assessment cite a number of advantages for this approach. Among its benefits are:

- Evaluating the process and the product of learning besides other important learning behaviors
- Evaluating and scrutinizing instruction
- Producing momentous results to various stakeholders
- providing a connection to cognitive psychology and other related fields
- Adopting a collaborative approach to learning
- Providing support for students' psychology
- Endorsing autonomous learning

Since alternative assessment is ongoing in nature, it can signify the learners' language proficiency and mirror the developmental processes in the educational environment over time. Thus it becomes possible to focus both on the process and product of learning (Hamayan, 1995). Other than what is just mentioned, Genesee and Upshur (1996) stress the importance of this kind of assessment to avail information on factors such as students' learning strategies and styles, their behavior and their reactions to the course which finally affects student achievement.

Alternative assessment makes a link between assessment and instruction by taking account of a 'feedback loop' which allows instructors to monitor and modify instruction continuously based on what is already assessed. In other words, if the objectives of a set instructional program are met then the process is continued. Otherwise, it is revised (Genesee & Hamayan, 1994).

It is taken for granted that the obtained information from alternative assessment is more informative compared to traditional test scores (Alderson & Banerjee, 2001). It therefore provides advantages to students and their parents as well as the administrators and teachers (Hamayan, 1995). It allows the students to gain a better understanding of their accomplishments and to take more responsibility for their own learning (Hamayan, 1995). Alternative assessment provides teachers with opportunities to record the success or failure of a curriculum which helps to present a better framework for organizing the learners' achievement. Moreover, alternative assessment is claimed to be in congruent with the cognitive psychology framework in that it regards learning to proceed in an uneven pace rather than a linear fashion. Based on this view, it is argued that students should be provided with the opportunities to use

their own strategies to perform the given tasks. It is also stressed that this kind of assessment grants the students enough time to generate rather than choose a response. No doubt, this kind of assessment is a collaborative approach which allows the interaction of students and teachers in the learning process (Barootchi & Keshvarz, 2002). This collaboration in turn enhances students' self-esteem, sense of efficacy and intrinsic learning motivation (Broadfoot, 2003). The learners become active participants in the process of learning by realizing their strength and weaknesses and in setting realistic learning goals (Luoma & Tarnanen, 2003).

A number of concerns are raised about certain features of alternative assessment. Firstly, it is argued that this kind of assessment is more time-consuming and costly for teachers to have a thoughtful analysis of the tests to provide accurate feedback to the learners (Brindley, 2001). Second, teachers must be skillful enough to be able to implement different methods of alternative assessment successfully (Clark & Gipps, 2000). Third, learners also require a great deal of guidelines and supervisions which is not realized if they are accustomed to traditional assessment practices. Forth, this kind of assessment is open to criticism in terms of psychometric qualities of validity, reliability and practicality (Brown & Hudson, 1998). Above all, practitioners have doubts about the possibility of the true application of this kind of assessment to large-scale classes (Worthen, 1993).

Supporters of alternative assessment, on the other hand, challenge the mentioned claims on philosophical grounds. As Huerta-Macias (1995) asserts, alternative assessment gains validity and reliability by the virtue of its close assimilation to the learning and teaching process. According to him, a measure gains trustworthiness if it consists of credibility and auditability. Alternative assessment is indeed valid based on the direct nature of assessment. Consistency is provided support by the auditability of the procedure by the triangulation of the decisions made with varied sources of data among which teachers, students, parents and administrators can be mentioned. Reliability is also reassured as it avoids norming, cultural and linguistic biases inherent in traditional testing methods.

Anyhow, Ewing (1998) is among those who treat the notion of authentic assessment with caution in that he doesn't consider it appropriate in all cases as it may become unrealistic through impractical tasks. As thus, these limitations appeal him to refrain from thoroughly accepting or discarding one method in the favor of another. To secure a fair assessment, we should not rely solely on a single strategy without considering its pitfalls (Tanner, 2001).

We need to ponder over what we are assessing as well as how and why we are assessing it. Rather than getting our students entangled with exams, reports and different kinds of essays we can consider portfolios, posters, reviews, role plays and other variants of assessment techniques. One needs to consider who are the agents undertaking the tests and the best time to assess (Brown & Knight, 1996).

CONCLUSION

A so-called antithetical debate is put forward regarding the most beneficial ways of assessment. While adherents of alternative assessment contend to make the assessment system formative and developmental, advocates of the traditional assessment strive hard to keep the traditional test-based summative system in vogue. We should bear in mind that diverse assessment systems are appropriate for diverse learning projects. Traditional assessment should not completely be discarded as a useless tool with no positive characteristics at all. Among its advantages, the higher reliability, validity and objectivity can be highlighted. It comes especially true for norm reference standardized tests in multiple choice formats (Law & Eckes, 1995). Therefore, there is perhaps not one-size-fits-all measure to make judgments on students' performances.

No form of assessment is devoid of limitations for either the marking staff or the students. Any student taking any form of learning would be, in one form or another, subject to assessment. Care must be taken not to encourage assessment-led instead of learning-led students. An ingenious assessment may trigger student learning (Cowen, 2005). That is why many have abjured from accepting the one-shot formulized device as an appropriate instrument to assess learning (Cole et al, 2000).

Variety in assessment is undoubtedly a virtue. Even for similar learning objectives, there are a number of compelling reasons to evaluate in more than one way in order to ascertain a sound measurement and to maintain the development of a robust understanding (Mazzeo et al, 1993). To ensure assessment fairness in class contexts, students should be able to display their competence under different conditions which work best to their advantage.

We should also bear in mind that good assessment has an eye on students' weaknesses and strengths to ascertain that they have gained the necessary skills and knowledge. In order for this to happen, teachers must be attentive to the diverse ways of assessment and not to rely too heavily on a single method of assessment.

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