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[Home](#) > [English Language Programs](#) > [English Teaching Forum](#) > [Volume 39](#) > [Number 4](#)

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Assessment of Young Learners

Previous Issues

2005
2004
2003
2002
2001
2000
1999
1998
1997
1996
1995
1994
1993

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The last two decades have witnessed a marked increase in the teaching of English as a foreign language at the primary level in many countries (Rixon 1992). This trend has come at a time when the field of EFL/ESL is witnessing a notable shift from structural teaching approaches to communicative, humanistic, and learner-centered approaches. These new approaches in teaching EFL/ESL recognize that affective considerations are of vital importance for the acquisition of a foreign/second language; they suggest teaching methods and techniques that help learners acquire the language in an anxiety-reduced environment (Stevick 1990; Krashen 1982; Asher 1988).

Consequently, the assessment of students' progress and achievement in EFL/ESL classes should be carried out in a manner that does not cause anxiety in the students. As new EFL/ESL curricula have moved in the direction of developing communicative skills through the integration of language and content as well as language skill integration, the traditional paper-and-pencil tests no longer cover the variety of activities and tasks that take place in the elementary classroom. The summative form of testing that permeated the traditional curricula would not be fair to students whose studies are based on communicative activities. Fortunately, the field of evaluation has witnessed a major shift from strictly summative testing tools and procedures to a more humanistic approach using informal assessment techniques that stress formative evaluation (O'Neil 1992).

This article discusses alternative forms of assessment, in particular, personal-response and performance-based assessment, which, in congruence with the learner-centered principles of new methodological approaches, treat assessment as an integral part of teaching culminating in formative evaluation.

Importance of assessment

In all academic settings, assessment is viewed as closely related to instruction. Assessment is needed to help teachers and administrators make decisions about students' linguistic abilities, their placement in appropriate levels, and their achievement. The success of any assessment depends on the effective selection and use of appropriate tools and procedures as well as on the proper interpretation of students' performance. Assessment tools and procedures, in addition to being essential for evaluating students' progress and achievement, also help in evaluating the suitability and effectiveness of the curriculum, the teaching methodology, and the instructional materials.

In the past, assessment tools and procedures were chosen at the level of the Ministry of Education, school district, school administration, or program coordinator. With the advent of learner-centered and communicative teaching methodologies, however, in many settings "control over the collection and interpretation of assessment information has shifted from centralized authority towards the classrooms where assessment occurs on a regular basis" (Fradd and Hudelson 1995:5). This shift gives the classroom teacher a decisive role in assessing students and makes it necessary for the teacher to look for new assessment techniques to evaluate students' achievement and progress.

Alternatives in assessment

The testing tools and procedures discussed in this article are characterized by a deliberate move from traditional formal assessment to a less formal, less quantitative framework. Pierce and O'Malley define alternative assessment as "any method of finding out what a student knows or can do that is intended to show growth and inform instruction and is not a standardized or traditional test" (1992:2). Specifically, alternative ways of assessing students take into account variation in students' needs, interests, and learning styles; and they attempt to integrate assessment and learning activities. Also, they indicate successful performance, highlight positive traits, and provide formative rather than summative evaluation.

Until recently the assessment scene in EFL/ESL classes has been dominated by summative evaluation of learner achievement, focusing on mastery of discrete language points and linguistic accuracy, rather than on communicative competence, with test items typically consisting of matching or gap-filling. Communicative teaching methodology brings with it a considerable emphasis on formative evaluation "with more use of descriptive records of learner development in language and learning which [track] language development along with other curricular abilities" (Rea-Dickins and Rixon 1997:151).

Therefore, assessment becomes a diagnostic tool that provides feedback to the learner and the teacher about the suitability of the curriculum and instructional materials, the effectiveness of the teaching methods, and the strengths and weaknesses of the students. Furthermore, it helps demonstrate to young learners that they are making progress in their linguistic development, which can boost motivation. This encourages students to do more and the teacher to work on refining the process of learning rather than its product.

"Young learners are notoriously poor test takers... [T]he younger the child being evaluated, assessed, or tested, the more errors are made...[and] the greater the risk of assigning false labels to them" (Katz 1997:1). Traditional classroom testing procedures can cause children a great deal of anxiety that affects their language learning as well as their self-image (Smith 1996). Therefore, children need to learn and be evaluated in an anxiety-reduced, if not anxiety-free, environment. This can be achieved if children perceive assessment as an integral component of the learning/teaching process rather than an independent process whose purpose is to pass judgment on their abilities in relation to their classmates.

Using formative assessment can help decrease the level of anxiety generated by concentration on linguistic accuracy and increase students' comfort zone and feeling of success by stressing communicative fluency. Some teachers and researchers call for allowing students to have a say not only in deciding the format of the test but also in deciding its content and the way it is administered. Thus, Mayerhof (1992) suggests allowing students to discuss questions during the test quietly as long as each writes his own answers; of course, she is referring to subjective types of questions. Friel (1989) recommends involving students in suggesting topics for the test or in generating some questions.

Murphy (1994/95) ventures beyond this concept to recommend that students make their own tests. He considers that student made tests are an effective "way to mine students' different perceptions and use them, building upon what a group knows as a whole and getting them to collaborate in their learning" Murphy (1994/1995:12). He suggests the following process: students choose the questions that will go into the test under the guidance of the teacher; a few days later, working in pairs, they ask each other questions during class; later on, the questions are asked again with a new partner to reinforce what is being learned. Students are graded by their partners or by the teacher for the correctness of their answers and for the appropriateness and correctness of their English.

A final characteristic of alternative assessment techniques for young learners is that they are performance-based, requiring students to perform authentic tasks using oral and/or written communication skills. These techniques can include traditional classroom activities, such as giving oral reports and

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writing essays, but they may also involve nontraditional tasks, such as cooperative group work and problem solving. Teachers score the task performances holistically (Shohamy 1995; Wiggins 1989). Student performance should be measured against standards previously discussed in class.

Types of student responses

Brown and Hudson (1998) identified these three types of responses required in most classroom assessment: selected-response (true-false, matching, multiple choice), constructed response (fill-in, short answer, performance), and personal-response (conferences, portfolios, self and peer assessment). At the primary level, assessment should be begin with the use of personal response. As students' proficiency levels increase, teachers can move gradually into constructed response assessment and later into selected-response assessment.

Many techniques of alternative assessment were developed in line with the taxonomy of student response types identified by Krashen and Terrell (1983) and adapted by Olsen (1992), which suggests that there are four stages of language development in FL/SL learners. The first stage is preproduction, in which learners have a silent period and their performance indicators are mostly kinesthetic in nature. During instruction and assessment, teachers may ask students to point, act out, choose, mark, gesture, and follow instructions. The second stage is early speech, in which performance indicators are kinesthetic responses and one- or two-word utterances. During instruction and assessment, teachers ask students to name, number, list, and group words or phrases. The third stage is speech emergence, in which the performance indicators are one and two-word utterances, plus phrases and simple sentences. During instruction and assessment, students are asked to describe, define, recall, retell, summarize, compare, and contrast. The fourth stage is fluency emergence, in which performance indicators are words, phrases, and complete sentences. Students are asked to justify, create, give opinions, debate, defend, analyze, and evaluate (Krashen and Terrell 1983).

Another assessment procedure that is compatible with communicative approaches to FL/SL language teaching is the 3Rs: recognition, replication, and reorganization (Olsen 1996). These three types of responses mirror the four stages of language acquisition of Krashen and Terrell. Thus, recognition requires simple physical responses and short verbal responses. Replication corresponds to early speech and fluency emergence. The last step, reorganization, "can accommodate various levels of language proficiency from 'silent' and 'speech emergence' through 'fluent' stages of Krashen and Terrell's taxonomy as well as articulate, highly verbal responses" (Olsen 1996:16). It requires students to demonstrate the ability to take given information and reorganize it into different formats. Reorganization usually includes tasks that lend themselves to group work, such as creating a time line, an outline, or a semantic map; problem solving; analyzing and reporting the results of a questionnaire; writing up the text of an oral interview; and rewriting a narrative as a dialogue.

Classroom assessment techniques

The following assessment techniques can be used for effective and practical measurements of students' abilities, progress, and achievement in a variety of educational settings.

Nonverbal Responses: At the early stages of learning, before the emergence of speech, children should be instructed and assessed largely through the use of physical performance responses and pictorial products (Tannenbaum 1996). These tasks require simple directions to carry out. As an assessment technique, this type of response may help lower the level of anxiety normally associated with evaluation, as students see it as a natural extension of learning activities. At a later stage, students may perform hands-on tasks. For example, they may be asked to "produce and manipulate drawings, dioramas, models, graphs, and charts" (Tannenbaum 1996:1). This technique fits very well within the Total Physical Response methodology for early language development (Asher 1988).

Oral Interview: Pierce and O'Malley (1992) suggest using visual cues in oral interviews at the early stages of acquisition. Thus a student may be asked to choose pictures to talk about, and the teacher's role is to guide the student by asking questions that require the use of related vocabulary. This technique works well during the early speech and speech emergence stages.

Role-play: This informal assessment technique combines oral performance and physical activity. Children of all ages, when assessed through this technique, feel comfortable and motivated, especially when the activity lends itself to cooperative learning and is seen as a fun way of learning. Kelner (1993) believes that roleplay can be an enjoyable way of informal assessment that could be used effectively within a content-based curriculum. For example, he recommends the use of role play to express mathematical concepts such as fractions, to demonstrate basic concepts in science such as the life cycle, and to represent historical events or literary characters.

Written Narratives: Assessment of the written communicative abilities of children could be achieved through purposeful, authentic tasks, such as writing letters to friends, writing letters to favorite television program characters, and writing and responding to invitations. Young learners enjoy story telling and are usually motivated to listen to stories as well as to tell them. Teachers can take advantage of this interest in stories and have their students write narratives that relate to personal experiences, retell or modify nursery stories and fairy tales, or retell historical events from different perspectives.

Oller (1987) suggests the use of a narrative development technique in an integrated process of teaching and assessment. The first step in the process is to check on how well learners are following the story line. To establish the basic facts, the teachers asks yes-no questions, then the teacher moves on to information questions.

Presentations: Presentations are important for assessment because they can provide a comprehensive record of students' abilities in both oral and written performance. Furthermore, presentations give the teacher some insights into student's interests, work habits, and organizational abilities. Presentations cover a wide range of meaningful activities, including poetry readings, plays, role-plays, dramatizations, and interviews.

Classroom presentations are nowadays becoming more sophisticated as a result of increasing access to educational technology. In many parts of the world, students are becoming more aware of the power of multimedia for communicating information, and they enjoy keeping audio, video, and electronic records of their involvement in class presentations.

Student-Teacher Conferences: Student-teacher conferences, including structured interviews, can be an effective informal way of assessing a student's progress in language learning. Conferences and interviews provide opportunities for one-on-one interactions where the teacher can learn about a student's communicative abilities, emotional and social well-being, attention span, attitudes, pace of learning, and strengths and weaknesses (Smith 1996; Allerson and Grabe 1986).

Conferences can be most effective when they follow focused observations. Observations could be done in class, for example, in cooperative learning groups, or out of class, for example, on the playground. Gomez, Parker, Lara-Alecio, Ochoa, and Gomez, Jr. (1996) have developed an observational instrument for assessing learners' oral performance in naturalistic language settings, which focuses on these seven language abilities: understanding by others, providing information needed by the listener, absence of hesitations, willingness to participate in conversations, self-initiated utterances, accuracy (in grammar, usage, and vocabulary), and topic development.

Tambini (1999) also recommends the use of conferences to assess the oral and written abilities of children. He, too, favors conferences that follow observations and concentrate directly on the learning processes and strategies employed by the student. For assessing oral skills, he suggests that children be evaluated primarily on their ability to understand and communicate with teachers and classmates. In assessment of writing tasks, conferences could be used to discuss drafts of essays and evaluate progress.

Self-Assessment: Young learners may also participate in self-assessment. Although self assessment may seem inappropriate at first, it can yield accurate judgments of students' linguistic abilities, weaknesses and strengths, and improvement (McNamara and Deane 1995). Self-assessment could be done using one of the following two techniques:

K-W-L charts: With this type of chart, individual students provide examples of what they know, what they wonder, what they have learned. K-W-L charts are especially effective when used at the beginning and at the end of a period of study. At the start of a course, the completed charts can help the teacher learn about students' background knowledge and interests. At the end of a course, the charts can help the students reflect on what they have learned as well as gain awareness of their improvements (Tannenbaum 1996).

Learning logs: A learning log is a record of the students' experiences with the use of the English language outside the classroom, including the when and the where of language use and why certain experiences were successful and others weren't. Students may also use logs to comment on what they have studied in class and to record what they have understood and what they haven't (Brown 1998). An advantage of learning logs is that they can contribute to the teacher's understanding of the students' use of metacognitive learning strategies.

Dialogue Journals: These journals are interactive in nature; they take the form of an ongoing written dialogue between teacher and student. Dialogue journals have proven effective and enjoyable for students regardless of their level of proficiency. They are informal and provide a means of free, uncensored expression, enabling students to write without worrying about being corrected (Peyton and Reed 1990). Teachers can also use journals "to collect information on students' views, beliefs, attitudes, and motivation related to a class or program or to the process involved in learning various language skills" (Brown 1998:4). As an assessment technique, dialogue journals can help the teacher assess students' writing ability and improvement over time.

Peer and Group Assessment: Recent trends in EFL/ESL teaching methodology have stressed the need to develop students' ability to work cooperatively with others in groups. For assessment, for example, students can write evaluative, encouraging notes for each member of their team emphasizing their positive contribution to team work. The role of the teacher would be to provide guidance, to explain to the students what they have to evaluate in one another's work, and to help them identify and apply properly the evaluation criteria. At the end of group tasks, if necessary, the teacher can give each student a test to check their individual performance. Proponents of cooperative learning suggest the teacher should give a group grade to help reinforce the merits of group work.

Student Portfolios: The concept of portfolio was borrowed from the field of fine arts where portfolios are used to display the best samples of an artist's work (Brown 1998). The purpose of a portfolio in the context of language teaching is to demonstrate the extent of a student's communicative competence in the target language through samples of oral and written work (Wolf 1989). Student portfolios may be defined as "the use of records of a student's work over time and in a variety of modes to show the depth, breadth, and development of the student's abilities" (Pierce and O'Malley 1992:2). Arter and Spandel argue that portfolios must include "student participation in selection of portfolio content; the guidelines for selection; the criteria for judging merit; and evidence of student reflection" (1992:36). As a systematic collection of a student's work, which may be shown to parents, peers, other teachers, and outside observers, a portfolio requires close cooperation between the teacher and the student in identifying the samples of that student's work to be included. Since portfolios trace a student's progress over time, it is imperative that revisions and drafts be included and that all samples be dated.

As for the contents of portfolios, they should be multi-sourced and include a variety of the written and oral work that illustrates students' efforts, progress, achievements, and even concerns. Therefore, the portfolio of a young EFL/ESL learner might include the following: audiotaped or videotaped recordings, writing samples (such as entries made in journals, logs, and book reports), conference or observation notes, and artwork (such as drawings, charts, and graphs). The portfolio could also include self-assessment checklists (such as K-W-L charts) and anecdotal records. Finally, the portfolio could include samples of the tests and quizzes that are periodically used by teachers as part of assessing the achievement and overall performance of their students in relation to others or to standards.

If portfolios are implemented clearly and systematically as an alternative means of assessment, they have several advantages over traditional forms of assessment (Pierce and O'Malley 1992; Brown and Hudson 1998; Moya and O'Malley 1994). First, they provide the teacher with a detailed picture of a student's language performance in a variety of different tasks. Second, they can enhance students' self image as they participate in the decisions about content and can help them identify their strengths and weakness in the target language. Finally, they integrate teaching and assessment in a continuous process.

Conclusion

This article has emphasized the need for teachers to use a variety of types of alternative assessment, especially non-threatening informal techniques, with young EFL/ESL learners. However, there is no claim that these types of assessment are without shortcomings. Brown and Hudson point out that "performance assessments are relatively difficult to produce and relatively time-consuming to administer.... Reliability may be problematic because of rater inconsistencies, limited number of observations, [and] subjectivity in the scoring process" (1998: 662). For example, in self-assessment, accuracy of perceptions varies from one student to another and is usually affected by language proficiency (Blanche 1988).

Other objections could be raised about informal assessment. However, teachers should not be expected to use techniques of alternative assessment exclusively. Teachers should strive to familiarize their students with all forms of assessment because each form has its merits and uses, as well as its problems and shortcomings.

In most academic settings, it is necessary to test students, sometimes even young ones, in the traditional way with paper-and-pencil tests (e.g., true-false, matching, multiple choice, and cloze). In many cases, decisions will be made about students based on their performance on such tests, for example, in comparisons with students in other schools. One major argument for using alternative techniques with young learners, however, is that official or standardized proficiency examinations usually cannot adequately determine their performance levels. Alternative assessment techniques present a dynamic rather than static picture of their linguistic development.

Many of the assessment techniques discussed in this article can be integrated into daily classroom activities and give a comprehensive picture of the students' abilities, progress, and achievement. Unlike traditional tests that only provide a numerical description of students, these techniques of alternative assessment can document "a story for every student-and what is the ultimate goal of evaluation but to give us the knowledge to be able to reflect upon, discuss, and assist a student's journey through the learning process" (Huerta-Macias 1995:10).

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