

EXPLORING POSSIBILITIES FOR ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Recent educational policies that introduce the teaching/learning of a foreign language in elementary school (Ley 115 of February 1994) make it urgent to revise and update evaluation practices and procedures in the foreign language classroom, in an effort to make them agree with everyday classroom practices. With the aim of sharing, informing and guiding English teachers at all levels to make their evaluative practices more consistent with their teaching and their students' learning processes, this paper-workshop will take a look at the different ways of assessing foreign language learning processes, focusing on formative evaluation. We will discuss concepts such as formative, holistic, authentic and alternative assessment. Different techniques for alternative assessment, their strengths and limitations will be discussed, together with their possible formats.

INTRODUCTION

The evaluation of foreign language learning processes is an issue that needs especial consideration, particularly now that these processes start earlier in our students' lives. Methodologies, techniques and activities change to suit our modern times and needs; however, when the times come to evaluate, many teachers resort to "the old ways", the ones their teachers used with them, the ones they feel comfortable with, or the ones which are less time-consuming. Unfortunately, these evaluative practices do not reflect what is happening in the classroom daily.

Assessment of the students' learning needs to be an on-going process, parallel to the teaching process. It needs constant planning, involving students, teachers and parents. It needs to link "old" knowledge and achievements with present tasks and to contribute to strengthen students' security and self-esteem. The focus of assessment does not need to be only the detection and correction of errors and deficiencies; its scope and uses go far beyond that. It can contribute to the understanding of processes, to the determination of strengths, achievements, and unexpected outcomes, to the use of skills which have developed in the learn-

ing processes, to gain insight on the difficulties students experience, on their learning styles and strategies and to explore many other aspects which would contribute to bettering the learning process. Conceived this way, evaluation of foreign language learning processes in grade school, high school and even at higher levels, should be mainly formative. This does not exclude the use of summative evaluation, especially at higher levels where the objectives, the demands of the system and tradition seem to call for it.

Teachers should consider the need of using alternative ways of assessment, within existent possibilities, and to avoid the sole use of traditional, summative ways of evaluating. Although some teachers and some institutions are already using different means of assessment, out of conviction or to suit institutional regulations, still a greater number of teachers stick to tests or quizzes, always resulting in a grade and administered three or four times during the academic year at school, and three times during a semester at university level. Most of the time, even classroom work, pop-quizzes and homework are given a grade, with complete neglect of their potential formative value.

A useful starting point for this paper is the reflection on the concept and characteristics of formative evaluation.

FORMATIVE EVALUATION

Let us consider first the concept and implications of formative evaluation. In 1967, Scriven put forward this term to refer to process evaluation, as opposed to partial or final evaluation of product; this is probably the most acceptable way of evaluating language learning processes, for these processes aim at developing a like for foreign languages, at the appreciation of the cultures associated with them as well as the "actual learning" of the language system and the development and use of language skills. In children, language learning processes also aim at the establishment



of bases for more conscious and more demanding cognitive processes in upper grades.

Language learning processes are better monitored, understood and improved with the use of ongoing evaluation; the use of alternative ways of assessment to paper-and-pen tests allows students and teachers alike to follow their work and introduce the necessary changes, through reinforcement, variety, suppression or any other means they find suitable. This type of evaluation is also referred to as informal assessment or "diagnostic teaching", expression which clearly shows teaching and assessment as a continuous process. Formative evaluation exhibits the following characteristics:

- * It is linked to classroom processes and activities and to the construction of knowledge (analyzing achievements, needs and drawbacks).
- * As a consequence, it is more authentic and natural than traditional ways of evaluation.
- * It is holistic, consistent with the philosophical, pedagogical and methodological principles which characterize teaching and learning in the contexts in which these processes occur.
- * It is student-centered and participatory, involving students as individuals and as peers, teachers and parents; these can analyze their role in their children's learning processes if they are involved in formative evaluation.
- * It is flexible, although it should be planned and have clear goals.
- * It shows achievements, difficulties and deficiencies on the part of the students and on the part of teachers.

Exploring possibilities for alternative...

- * It means constant monitoring of students' work to understand their learning processes, their performance and their potential.
- * It monitors the effectiveness of instruction.
- * It uses self-evaluation as one of the elements of participation.
- * It seeks the reaffirmation, revision, re-orientation and growth of participants in the process and of the process itself.
- * It takes into account unexpected outcomes.
- * It uses a great variety of instruments (tasks, activities and items), always in agreement with what happens in the classroom.
- * It responds better to different learning styles and strategies of the students.

When teachers take formative evaluation into account and use alternative ways of assessment they are making the process more authentic, more democratic and more autonomous. They are also more aware of the integration and consistency between goals and objectives, activities, processes, outcomes and criteria to analyze and judge them.

After they decide to use alternative assessment, teachers have a variety of means or instruments at their command; nevertheless, it should be taken into account that not all methods are appropriate in all situations. Teachers will, among the array of possibilities, choose methods or instruments that best suit their particular teaching situation. It is advisable to use at least two on a permanent basis, especially if one of them is testing. Occasionally, when a new situation requires it, the information they provide can be clarified or complemented by information coming from another source.



SOME POSSIBILITIES FOR ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT

It is now time to describe some methods of alternative assessment, the formats teachers could use to record information, and also to include a brief analysis of possibilities, advantages and limitations.

1. OBSERVATIONS

In observations, the teacher looks into the learning situation and processes of his/her students to collect information, describe and record it and interpret and make inferences from it. This information should be confronted with information from other sources. To be reliable and valuable, observations need to be frequent, systematic and to involve a wide sample of activities.

Teachers observe their students' performance, behavior, interests, strengths and needs. They may observe them in role-plays and simulations, in pair or group work, their attitude and behavior when facing easy or difficult tasks, while confronted with tasks which involve the use of integrated or separate skills, eagerness or aloofness shown for class participation, their behavior when performing and interacting in the classroom or at any other spaces where class activities happen. In summary, students are observed as individuals, in interaction with others and in integration with the environment.

Observation works better when they are systematic and structured; they can be more or less obtrusive. Teachers need to plan observations while planning teaching, trying to make effective and efficient use of time and situations and using a pre-established way to keep records. Teachers would need to have a clearly identified purpose to observe the whole group, a small group or individual students. Also, the frequency of observation should be established and carefully followed. It is very important not to make observation a one-isolated event; it should make a representative sample of good, average and not so good days for students and include

the observation and recording of a variety of activities.

McCormick and James (1985) consider the use of less formal observations in which teachers look at their students' behavior (in the language classroom) in a holistic way and where the focus of the observation is progressively decided. This type of observation may include notes and impressions of the teacher. Formal or less formal, what teachers observe should be rapidly recorded, to avoid omissions due to forgetfulness or distortion of information; checklists or narrative, anecdotal records may be used for this purpose.

Observation provides direct evidence of classroom happenings and of students' interaction; it is especially useful to look into the students' perceptions of daily classroom activities as manifested in their behavior. It can be selective in a positive way, allowing teachers to concentrate on specific behavior or problems. Another advantage of observation is its low cost.

Maybe, the most obvious disadvantage of observation is that it is time-consuming; for the average teacher it may not be very easy to find time to observe his/her students' behavior, to do it unobtrusively and to record the information. Classroom teachers may find it easier, but the reality in our language classrooms is that the language teacher goes from classroom to classroom, hour after hour and does not have much time to observe his/her students. Teachers with large groups could decide to plan less observations within a given period than those with small ones. They could also negotiate with a colleague so they assist each other in observation tasks. Another disadvantage is the possibility of the teacher being too subjective at the time of interpreting and making inferences based on what s/he observed.

Checklists may be the most advisable format to record information obtained through observation because, although it takes time to design them, it is easy to record information at the moment of observing. Nevertheless, anecdotal records may offer more insights for those who have less students or more help from other



teachers. Information can be recorded in separate folders for each student or in a folder for group observation.

2. CONFERENCES

In conferences, the teacher gets together with one or several students to have a conversation or a discussion about their work; the work may be in progress at the moment of the conversation; it may be in progress, as part of a project, or may have already been completed. By means of questions, the teacher makes his/her students explain what they are doing or what they did, the aspects of the work that are (were) easy for them, the difficulties they are experiencing (or experienced), the strategies they are using (or used) to overcome these difficulties, and some other relevant information.

Conferences are especially helpful when the teacher wants to find out more about his/her students' learning processes and about their perceptions of his/her work. S/he can find out, for instance, if many of the students are experiencing the same difficulties or if the work is easy for most of them; if they are using effective strategies; if groups can be created or re-combined, so as to have some students help others. Students may also have interesting insights into classroom activities and suggestions to make them more efficient. Their opinions and reactions can provide the teacher with lots of information about their understanding of the tasks they perform, about how clear the purposes of the tasks are and if the students perceive them as necessary, valid, interesting, etc.

If classes are too large, teachers can take advantage of group work to approach small groups of students. If they can find time to meet with small groups or individual students and if it can be done unobtrusively, teachers could tape conferences and take occasional note of gestures or body language that could be revealing.



As any other type of assessment, conferences need to be planned; if done while a task is in progress, teachers should use teaching tasks that lend themselves to (facilitate) the conference. Also - especially when conferencing with pairs or individual students about work which has already been completed - guidelines in the form of questions or prompts should be prepared in advance, to avoid becoming too spontaneous and diverging from the initial goal. This also ensures uniformity in the information we obtain, when necessary; however, we should not exclude the possibility of exploring other topics that may emerge in conversation. To record information obtained through conferences, tape-recording or narrative (anecdotal) records can be used; this may be kept on individual cards, for individual students, or take the form of a log in which information about different students is recorded. These records can be shared with students and parents.

Conferences can be an excellent tool because, apart from the verbal information which is being obtained, there is a constant flow of non-verbal clues, hesitations, even "slips of the tongue" that provide very relevant insight, which could not be obtained otherwise. Moreover, they offer the opportunity for informal, comfortable interaction between teachers and students. Sometimes, students will want to use their mother tongue in conferences, to be able to express their ideas better and, at some levels, it should be allowed.

The most notorious difficulty that teachers can experience with conferences is that sometimes students do not know what to say because they are not used to introspection; another major drawback of using conferences is time; they may be time-consuming, especially if they are not part of classroom instruction. Again, collaboration from a colleague on a reciprocal basis may help.

3. SELF-ASSESSMENT

Self-assessment is the most participatory and democratic of the possibilities that formative or informal evaluation offer; it is also the



most reflective one. It gives students the opportunity to look into their work critically and constructively, helping them to develop responsibility and some degree of independence. This, of course, needs practice and non-directive guidance, not only with young learners but also with adult students; however, with enough practice and appropriate guidance, students are able to evaluate their work, to be analytic, to be as objective as necessary and to reflect on their strengths, deficiencies and progress. It is important that teachers take students' self assessment into account when a report has to be written, if a grade has to be given or if an important decision is to be made (promotion, for instance). However, it is advisable that other ways of assessment also be used since the entire responsibility of monitoring and judging the processes and outcomes of learning does not depend on the student.

Self-assessment needs to be a permanent process; recording information should be a daily or weekly issue; if not, there is the possibility of forgetting information, overlooking important aspects or remembering things better than they actually were. Teachers should present their students with different methods and formats for recording information; students can make their selection, although it is advisable for the teacher to also choose one (a self-assessment sheet to be completed at the end of each lesson or unit or after each week's work, for example). This way, s/he will have more complete and homogeneous information. There are many possible ways of recording self-assessment information: checklists, self-ratings, continuous assessment cards in which the students complete the information, questionnaires, diaries (logs or journals), response sheets, progress reports, periodical recordings of audiotapes and even computer programs.

The advantages of self-evaluation are evident. Students develop self-confidence, self-reliance and self-awareness while taking an active role in their evaluation, reflecting upon their processes, looking for ways to correct deficiencies and to improve and becoming aware of their strengths. It is usually a very motivating task for students because their viewpoints are taken into account. Last,



but not least, self-evaluation contributes to the development of students' analytic capacity.

A word of caution must be set: students' self-evaluation should not be the only source of information we have or use to determine their progress or their achievement, for several reasons. In the first place, subjectivity of account is, maybe the greatest danger: there is always the possibility that some students try to show the best side of things, hiding their difficulties; other will tend to underestimate their performance and achievements; still others will have difficulties achieving real introspection and analysis. Teachers should remember that the ability to self-evaluate develops with guidance and practice; if both are provided, self-evaluation will prove to be a valid and valuable tool for students and teachers alike.

4. PORTFOLIOS

Portfolio assessment is carried out based on a collection of students' work, representing a good sample of their production and showing different stages of their development. As an assessment tool it can lead to a grade, or to a report, or can be used for decision-making on the part of the teacher. In any case, it is a first-hand indicator of how students' work evolves, showing progress and difficulties and, in general, how language learning processes go.

What a portfolio contains varies according to situations and users; among other things, some students and teachers put samples of students' writing tasks, drawings, cassettes with recordings, reading records, art work related with language work, tests, photographs which are part of project work and videotapes of dramatizations. These contents can be chosen either by students themselves or together with teachers. It is advisable to clip to every piece of work a brief note with the date and a few descriptive lines. These notes may follow a format prepared and photocopied in advance.

We could distinguish several kinds of portfolios:



4.1. *The collection portfolio*, which is not very selective and usually holds all or much of the student's work. Students may include notes about their favorite pieces and a self-evaluation of their work (checklist or journal entries).

4.2. *The display portfolio* or students' showcase. Here, selected samples of the students' work are filed; the selection usually shows the evolution of his/her work and can be shared with others (peers, parents) at conference time or when parents or other visitors come (Open-house). As in the collection portfolio, self-evaluation may be part of it.

4.3. *The assessment portfolio*. It contains not only a selection of the students' work and self-evaluation as in the display portfolio, but also teachers' notes on students' performance (notes from observations, conferences), copies of tests and any other document which may support a report on the student's progress or a grade of his/her performance. In this type of portfolio, teachers could include a title page, a content page and, at the end of the academic period, a conclusion, to facilitate their consultation. Students may include a teacher's evaluation; this will give the teacher a good idea of how his/her students perceive his/her work.

Portfolios can be collected in simple folders, more sophisticated ones, or cardboard boxes; they should be easy to carry and, if kept mostly in the classroom, be in accordance with space available. Portfolios offer great advantages to students and teachers; they also constitute the best example of authentic evaluation. They give students the opportunity to select their best or favorite pieces of work, without competing with their classmates; furthermore, they help students develop a sense of ownership and responsibility in their assessment. Students, teachers and parents can note progress by studying the contents of the portfolio as many times as necessary; when it is time to prepare a report, teachers can easily refer to the portfolio and consult it or show it to parents.

The main disadvantage of portfolios, as well as of other methods

of alternative assessment, is time; the study and analysis of their contents can be very time-consuming, especially for teachers with large groups. It would also require teachers to study them at school, because the size and weight of containers would make it difficult to take them home. Subjectivity is another possible problem: teachers should watch that students do not put in portfolios only their best pieces of work.

5. DIARIES (STUDENTS' JOURNALS)

Journals can be part of self-assessment. Students choose a notebook and enter, preferably on a daily basis, what they have learned, what has been difficult or easy for them, what they have enjoyed most and even their impressions or perceptions on their teacher's work. The teacher can help his/her students with general guidelines on the type of information that could be recorded, to avoid entries which are a description, step by step, of classroom happenings, without any personal involvement or introspection.

Teachers should insist that students write frequently, at least three times a week, so they can easily describe their performance and record their impressions on every aspect. Also, no limits in length should be set; some students will probably start writing long entries, but they will surely reduce their size as work goes on. Another important consideration is for teachers to avoid correcting mistakes when they look at journals. Their comments should be supportive and encouraging; if students' writing is not communicatively successful, the teacher comments could ask for clarification. Genesee and Hamayan (1994: 227) suggest using sentences like "I am not sure what you mean by this; can you say it in another way?". Our comments can also contain the appropriate expression.

Interactive journals are more effective tools for assessment. They are usually called "dialogue journals". Students write about their learning processes and experiences or about any other topic, once



or twice a week, using the foreign language. The teacher collects the diaries, once a week, every ten or fifteen days and has to make sure s/he responds to all of them and, if possible, to all entries. In the process, teachers note how students' writing or language use, in general, improves; this information provides elements for assessment. Teachers should set a specific time after class, once or twice a week, for journal writing.

Diaries and dialogue journals are private documents to be read only by the student and the teacher, unless the students authorize someone else to read them. Teachers should comment on or respond to messages or questions the students include, focusing on meaning, not form. They also should encourage them to write not only about their own work, but also about issues that really interest them. Pictures and drawings can be a part of entries.

Journals are very effective ways of developing and monitoring writing skills, vocabulary and, in general, communicative skills. They motivate students because of their intimate and authentic nature; many of them would express in their journals things they would not probably express orally and in front of the rest of the class. Teachers have constant access to journals and are familiar with their students progress and difficulties. They can plan formal work to practice aspects which are repeatedly found to be problematic in journal writing. Journals are a better learning, teaching and assessment tool in small classes, because responding to them and analyzing the information they contain is time-consuming.

6. ACHIEVEMENT CHARTS

Achievement charts are public ways of record-keeping and assessment. They can take the form of a wall chart or check list in which students record their completion or performance on given tasks; they may tick, write or glue symbols (stars, dots, or any kind of sticker the class decides to use). They will do that, for instance, after reading a story, producing a piece of writing or a drawing, completing a project or a phase of it, mastering specific vocabulary, etc. Achievement charts provide students and teachers with



"panoramic", at-a-glance information of how the class or individuals progress in some activities. They can be challenging and stimulating, fostering cooperation among classmates. Teachers should be careful to praise and encourage students so this public record does not lead to exaggerated and harmful competition.

Of all these possibilities for alternative assessment, teachers would probably find that some are more suitable for our idiosyncrasy or our teaching situation; these elements will enlighten our choice. Some traditional ways of assessment such as tests, quizzes, compositions, oral exams or interviews can also be used with formative purposes; in these cases results or general performance can be discussed in class and grades should not be assigned. Formats like charts and checklists can also be used to record students' interests and shared experiences.

Many of these alternative methods of assessment provide insightful and interesting information and opportunities for classroom and other types of research. It is advisable that teachers using alternative assessment share their experiences with their colleagues in general or group meetings.

CONCLUSIONS

Alternative assessment is more in accordance with the recent philosophical and methodological principles in education because it is participatory and more consistent with classroom work. It empowers both teachers and students, providing them with first-hand evidence and illuminative insight on learning and teaching processes. All this results in better informed decisions and opportunities for improvement of personal learning and teaching processes, classes and programs of study. Of all the existing possibilities, teachers should choose the ones that are most appropriate for their particular situation; they would probably like to use them together with more traditional ways of evaluation. What is essential to realize is that if we want to make of evaluation an integral part of the learning-teaching process, one that is consistent with other parts,



we should emphasize its formative value. The information it provides should be illuminative, and have a beneficial effect on educational processes.

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