Chapter 3 - Alternative Assessments

Evaluating with Alternative Assessments

In the ERIC Digest article "Alternative Assessment and Second Language Study: What and Why?" Charles R. Hancock states "In the 1990's, we have come to realize that new, alternative ways of thinking about learning and assessing learning are needed." Research lead by Gardner, Fodor, Sternberg, Perkins and Gruber has"...shown that creative individuals do not have unique mental modules, but they use what they have in more efficient and flexible ways."

Definitions of Terms

Several terms are used in the discussion of assessments other than traditional assessments. Alternative assessment, authentic assessment, and performance-based assessment are sometimes used " to mean variants of performance assessments that require students to generate rather than choose a response'' (Herman, Aschabacher, and Winters, 1992, p. 2).

Alternative Assessment
Alternative assessment is a blanket term that covers any number of alternatives to standardized tests. While the traditional paper and pencil tests may be effective to assess some of the skills (such as listening), they are not sufficient to assess the productive skills of speaking and writing. The nature of proficiency-oriented language learning calls for a variety of assessment options reflecting the numerous instructional strategies used in the classroom. Authentic assessment, performance-based assessment, and portfolio fall under this category.

Authentic Assessment
Authentic assessment is an alternative assessment, it integrates the assessment of traditional academic content with the knowledge and skills important to lifelong learning using a variety of techniques, including "real world" situations. (McREL Institute, 1993). For an assessment to be authentic, the context, purpose, audience and constraints of the test should connect in some way to real world situations and problems. Tests can be authentic.

Performance-Based Assessment
Performance-based assessment is an alternative assessment, it ``requires students to construct a response, create a product, or demonstrate application of knowledge'' in authentic context (<u>Authentic Assessment for English Language Learners</u>, p. 239). Performance-based assessment requires the development of new assessment tools and scoring rubrics.

Regardless of the terms, these assessments share several commonalties.

1. They are alternative to the traditional testing.
2. They involve some kind of performance or tasks relating to real-life situations.
3. They are process-oriented.

Rationale for Alternative Assessments

Following are some reasons for incorporating alternative assessment in the foreign language classroom.

o To capture complex outcomes. Alternative assessment goes beyond the assessment of knowledge and facts to the more complex goals of assessing and developing life-long skills of creative thinking, problem solving, summarizing, synthesizing, and reflecting. With authentic assessment, products and processes are equally valued.

o To address realistic tasks. With authentic and performance-based assessments, students are involved in tasks, performances, demonstrations, and interviews reflecting everyday situations within realistic and meaningful contexts.

o To include good instructional tools. Assessment and instruction interact on a continuous basis. Assessment can be used to adapt instruction and to provide feedback for monitoring students' learning. Alternative assessment focuses on the students' strengths, therefore enabling the teacher to get a more accurate view of students' achievement, of what they can do, and of what they are trying to do.

o To communicate what we value. Assessment and instruction need to be aligned. If we value oral proficiency but only assess through written tests, students infer that only the written language matters.

o To meet the students' different learning styles. Alternative assessment offers a broad spectrum of assessment possibilities to address the different learning styles. Some students might choose to demonstrate understanding by writing about something while others might prefer to perform, to display visually, or to create a timeline.

o To collaborate and interact with students.

> Even though schools usually focus on students working alone, the real world allows and encourages people to talk, ask questions, get help and receive feedback. Denying students the right to cooperate and collaborate diminishes the authenticity of the achievement.
> How to Assess Authentic Learning, p. xvi.

Kinds of Alternative Assessments

Following is a list of possible alternative
assessments.

- o   Performance-based assessments (projects,
  exhibitions, role playing, experiments and
  demonstrations)
- o Open-ended questions
- o   Writing samples
- o   Interviews
- o   Journals and learning logs
- o   Story of text retelling
- o   Cloze tests
- o   Portfolios
- o Self and peer assessments
- o   Teacher observations
- o   Checklists

Figure 6 - Options for Recording Student Performance

	Definitions	Strengths	Weaknesses
Rubrics	Descriptions of students performance expectations linked to a scale for evaluating the work	Holistic: can provide one rating for a project and validate it with the listed criteria Analytical: can provide feedback on different components	Difficulty to develop a quality rubric
Checklists	List of objectives or behaviors to be observed	Quick to administer	No information on the quality of the performance
Anecdotal Records	Written notes on observation of student performance	Useful insights into the students' learning	Time consuming to enter notes, read and interpret notes. Subjective
Informal (mental) Observations	Mental notes on observation of student performance	Easily conducted	Easily forgotten over time. Difficult to defend to students, parents, and administrato

			rs

Adapted from <u>Student-Centered Classroom Assessment</u>, p. 209

Authentic/Performance-Based Assessments and Criteria

While objective tests are easy to grade, authentic and performance-based assessments require a more subjective judgment on the part of the teachers. Thus, criteria and rubrics need to be developed prior to the students' assignments (see section on rubrics). These criteria define the standards for acceptable performance and can be used for self-assessment, peer evaluation, or teacher evaluation. Wiggins (1994) feels that making the criteria clear and de-mystifying them helps foster self-assessment.

Using Evaluation to Influence Instruction

Activities and assessment are closely linked and at times cannot be separated. Assessment can become part of the learning activity which can be modified to monitor student progress.

> By making assessment part of the learning activity in the classroom, less time is ''lost'' to examinations, and students are being assessed within the meaningful context of an activity or project.
> <u>Practical Assessment in K-8 Language Classes</u>, p. V

Principles of Assessment

The following principles, adapted from the ''Principles of Assessment'' developed during a symposium at the Center for Applied Linguistics, are based on the assumption that the purpose of language instruction is to prepare students to use language with cultural understanding and knowledge in real-life contexts. While these principles were developed for early foreign language learning, they apply to language instruction K-12.

1. The purposes for assessment should be clear. The purposes determine the frequency and types of assessment to be done.

2. Assessment should be tied to curricular practices that are informed by second language theory and research and should support the goals and objectives of the instructional program as determined by the school, the district, and the state.

3. Assessment should be developmentally appropriate.

4. Assessment should reflect student progress along a continuum from simple to progressively more complex tasks. The designed tasks should be curriculum-embedded and part of the teaching/learning process.

5. Assessment should be both formative (to
    continually assess the degree to which short-
    term objectives have been met so that ''fine
    tuning'' can occur with instruction and
    learning) and summative (to assess the degree
    to which final objectives have been met).

6. Assessment should allow students to
    demonstrate their ability to function in a
    variety of cognitively engaging tasks. When
    assessment is performance-oriented, the
    students' work will result in a product,
    written or oral performance, or problem
    solving.

7. Assessment employs a broad range of data-
    gathering methods over time and should be
    based on multiple sources of evidence.
    Multiple sources of evidence allow for
    assessing a student's progress in many areas
    and also take into account the different
    learning styles.

8. Assessment should be conducted regularly and
    frequently.

9. Assessment is authentic in that it reflects
    what students do in the classrooms on a
    regular basis. The relationship between
    instruction and assessment is constant.
    Teachers should assess the effectiveness of
    what they teach and use the results to improve
    instruction.

10. Assessment activities should be contextualized
    and include practical contexts and culturally
    appropriate situations.

11. Assessment should encourage students to
    reflect on their own progress. For this
    reason, it is essential to design assessments
    which are learner-centered and to share
    assessment expectations with students.

12. Assessment results should be reported in a variety of ways depending on the target audience.

13. Educators should use assessment efficiently so that demands on instructional time are reasonable.

14. A wide range of factors should be taken into account when assessing students' language, including their maturation level, learning styles, learning disabilities, physical disabilities, and other characteristics affecting their performance.