

## **Using Alternative Assessment Methods in Foreign Language Teaching. Case Study: Alternative Assessment of Business English for University Students**

Sebastian CHIRIMBU\*

**Abstract :** Alternative assessment methods have proven to be a comprehensive tool for testing language learners, especially at university level. As strategies based on the permanent assessment of students' linguistic level, the methods of alternative assessment such as the portfolio or the project, share - due to the amount and the complexity of information they involve - the characteristics of formative and summative evaluation. The present paper aims at sharing the author's experience of using alternative assessment during the Business English course of university students, a type of assessment which, as presumed in the premises of the research, offered the opportunity of quality and comprehensive evaluation not only of the learners' linguistic competence, but also of their communicative competence.

**Keywords:** alternative assessment, communicative competence, formative evaluation, permanent assessment.

### **1. Introduction**

The main purpose of assessment – be it initial, mid-term or final – is a double one: on the one hand to provide learners with a corrective feedback, so that they might know their strong and weak points and on the other hand to rank students in an educational institution according to their performance. This second role of testing, to rank learners, makes the pre-testing activities of the assessor a specific importance, as the format of the test will trigger certain results.

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\* Senior Lecturer, PhD, CCRSE-AEPEEC/USH, Department of Specialized Languages, Romania

Most linguistic tests are based on tasks assessing the student's four main linguistic abilities developed by courses; reading, writing, listening and speaking, or in other words they test grammar, vocabulary, orthography. It is understandable then that students will prepare for obtaining good results in only certain directions of language learning.

The existence of more learning styles should most logically trigger the existence of more different assessment methods and testing formats that might accurately describe the students' progress.

The concept of alternative testing was coined to define all those possible activities which are not formal tests but which can be used for assessing learning performance, as alternatives to the conventional methods of evaluating linguistic progress and performance. Concepts such as alternative assessment, authentic assessment, portfolio-based assessment, holistic assessment, integrative assessment are used with the same value as alternative testing. (Cerghit, 2002).

## **2. The characteristics of alternative assessment**

Alternative testing is a strategy based on the permanent assessment of students' linguistic level, which is why it is also called formative assessment. There are however methods of alternative assessment such as the portfolio or the project which, due to the amount and the complexity of information they involve share the characteristics of formative and summative evaluation, especially if their deadline is the end of the semester or of the academic year.

The idea of a richer assessment framework for students and pupils is not a new one; its advantages were noticed more than eighty decades ago (Tyler, 1935) but it is only recently that it has started to be seen as a correct path and a key tool towards reform in education. Gathering information on the students' linguistic level from educational tasks in which they are involved regularly is, especially at a higher education level an inspired way of testing not only the students' linguistic competence but also their communicative competence, which is, in our opinion, the ultimate goal of any foreign language course.

Studying the very names of the concepts used to define the new type of alternative assessment, there are two characteristics, two terms that are reiterated: performance and authentic, which concentrate in themselves the core characteristics of alternative assessment: performance – that is, the student has to produce a directly or indirectly observable response by means of a product – and authentic, which means

that the nature of the task and the context in which the assessment is made are relevant and represent aspects of real life.

The purposes of the alternative testing methods are considerably wider than those of conventional tests for the very reason that they are themselves much richer and offer a wide range of possibilities.

Alternative testing may include the demonstration of certain abilities by the student, the writing of specific papers, the formulation of answers to open questions. In such activities, it is not only the final product that matters and that can be assessed and graded, but also the very process of reaching the result, which demonstrate the quality and complexity of the learners' process of thinking involved in the formulation of a final answer. The teaching-learning process moves thus to a superior, richer and more reflexive level, a level which encourages critical thinking and reflection.

From the point of view of the communicative approach, conventional or traditional testing are neither authentic nor communicative. And as far as the teaching and learning of foreign languages are concerned this phenomenon is more visible and stronger than in the case of any other academic subject.

Alternative assessment has incontestable advantages over traditional testing methods, as it takes into consideration the learning of each student, as well as each student's cultural background and level of knowledge. The focus is definitely placed on what the students know and can do and not on what they do not know. Therefore, alternative assessment has the clear advantage of emphasizing the student's strong points while minimizing their weak points. More than that, alternative testing offers both the teacher the opportunity not to compare levels and knowledge but to follow a student's evolution individually and in time.

### **3. Types of alternative assessment**

The most widely used types of alternative testing, used in the teaching of foreign languages can be grouped into two categories, according to the actor of the teaching-learning process that has the main role in accomplishing the tasks (Gipps, 1995).

The most important ones are of course the tasks accomplished by the student, such as the portfolio, the diary, the project, the self-assessment, the case study and the investigation. Such activities involve the completion, by the learner, of certain specific stages: planning, research, the making up of the final product. It becomes

obvious then that both the product and the process become equally important and can be assessed by the teacher.

There also tasks accomplished by the teacher and / or by peers: peer assessment, conferencing and the systematic observation of the student's academic activity and behavior.

Alternative assessment methods have a variety of uses and aims; they can be used in the process of training needs analysis and of identifying the best teaching materials to be used, they are also valuable tools in the process of monitoring progress and evaluating the extent to which the course objectives have been reached, and can be used in all kind of foreign language programs, including those in universities of applied sciences (Dejica-Carțiș, A. & D. Dejica-Carțiș, 2013).

#### **4. Advantage of alternative assessment in ESP classes**

There are numerous and obvious reasons why reformed curricula tend to use alternative assessment methods on an ever wider scale in the teaching of foreign languages. First of all, they offer a comprehensive image of the student's overall competence in a foreign language. Secondly – but equally important – they test much more than the students' ability to sit an examination. Also, they change and enrich the student's attitude towards learning and communication patterns and they increase the students' linguistic self-confidence. (Nunan, 1989).

Alternative assessment methods have the great advantage of being context-specific, as they use and adapt those assessment tools that should best reflect the purposes of learning (Taylor, 2003). Other two characteristics that make alternative assessment superior to the traditional one are the facts that it is process-oriented and authentic, based on real life activities (Willis, 1996). Alternative evaluation is very much related to the content of teaching-learning process. Researchers have also noticed further advantages of alternative assessment: it is systematic, dynamic and flexible, managing to build up competences that last in time, as it does not concentrate only on grading and ranking immediate and punctual performance.

A brief contrastive analysis of the two types of assessment nowadays used in the teaching of foreign languages at university level may emphasize the advantages of using permanent alternative assessment methods during the academic year.

## **5. A contrastive view on alternative and traditional testing**

Alternative assessment represents a direct evaluation of the learners' performance by using contexts and tasks similar to those in real life, while traditional testing measures performance indirectly, by checking knowledge and abilities outside their real context of usage. Teachers have the freedom to use alternative evaluation permanently during the academic year while conventional tests are scheduled on certain dates; students' learning process will be therefore fluctuating.

Offering the students the challenge to solve tasks involving a variety of knowledge and abilities, facing ambiguities and unexpected outcomes represents a type of holistic evaluation, while traditional testing, due to its very structure, can only assess "pieces" of knowledge and competences.

Concerning the answers or solutions to the tasks to be solved, there are no such concepts used in the activities involved by alternative assessment; there is no right or wrong answer when drawing up a portfolio or completing a project, the learner being offered the opportunity to progress without fear of providing an incorrect answer.

Alternative assessment activities are complex and open, the teacher playing the role of a partner and collaborator while when administering traditional tests, the teacher has a much narrower role, that of a test generator and examiner.

At the same time, tasks such as a portfolio or a project are formative by their very nature; their purpose extends beyond being assessment tools only, they are ways of learning by doing, of improving the learner's communicative competence, which is so important in ESP teaching.

Tasks such as projects and portfolios offer future assessors and even future employers the opportunity to visualize samples of a student's previous work; therefore, in the case of alternative testing, the measure of a student's competencies and abilities is not given only by a number of grades.

## **6. Case Study**

Our study is based on data and observations collected during the ESP classes for first year Business students. The objective of the research was to demonstrate that an alternative testing method such as a project can trigger superior results in the teaching of English for Specific Purposes than traditional testing. The items to be

taught were the verbs expressing fluctuations (increasing, decreasing, etc) and the prepositions used in combination with such verbs and numerals.

The experimental group consisted of twenty students having an intermediate level of English. The students were introduced to the topic and solved a set of practical activities involving the fluctuation verbs and their corresponding prepositions.

Then, as an assessment activity, the experimental group was given a set of graphs and charts referring to the fluctuation of different economic variables. It is important to mention that the information offered to the student was not only real but also very recent (obtained from the National Institute of Statistics). In teams of two, the students were given the following task: A presumable foreign client willing to invest in our country wants to become a partner of the company you work for. As part of the meeting with this client, your company intends to make a short presentation of how the industry you activate in (e.g. car industry, tourism, food industry, etc) has evolved during the past five years. You and a colleague are in charge with preparing a PowerPoint presentation that will open the meeting. The teacher also provides the students the set of verbs (increase, rise, peak, rocket, decrease, lower, fall, etc) and prepositions (to, by, from... to., etc), they are expected to use in combination with the numeral in the graphs and charts they were given.

As a second task (Task B) of the assessment the students were given two traditional tasks: a fill in exercise where they were supposed to use correctly certain fluctuation verbs according to the context and a translation exercise.

Following their assessment, the group was asked to fill in an assessment form for the two activities (the alternative assessment method and the traditional test consisting of two exercises).

The five questions that made up the assessment form were the following:

1. Which of the two tasks did you consider more challenging?
2. Which of the two tasks did you consider more difficult?
3. Is the task relevant for your use of English as a future professional?
4. Is the task relevant for your overall preparation as a future professional?
5. Is the task related in any way to the specialized subjects that are part of your curriculum?

The answers to these questions were the following:

<i>1. Answer to each question</i>	<i>Task A (alternative assessment)</i>	<i>Task B (traditional assessment)</i>
1. more challenging	100% (20 students)	0 % (no student)
2. more difficult	60 % (12 students)	40 % (8 students)
3. relevant for the level of English	55 % (11 students)	45 % (9 students)
4. relevant for the overall performance	95% (19 students)	(5% (1 student)
5. related to the specialized academic subjects	100 % (20 students)	0% (no student)

The answers offered for the first and the last questions clearly show that learning by doing, learning by simulating real activities is the best way of transmitting knowledge, of building abilities and competencies. The students' feeling that the task is relevant for and related to the other subjects they study increase their sense of linguistic confidence and their openness towards learning a foreign language.

The alternative assessment was not appreciated as a very difficult task comparing to the traditional one and almost equally relevant for the student's level of English. However, the answers to the other questions prove that during an ESP course, the improvement of the linguistic level is only one of the aspects aimed at by students. Gaining linguistic competence is valuable only if doubled by communicative competence, especially in the learning context that we have had in mind: higher education studies.

## **7. Conclusion**

We may conclude that alternative assessment methods are competence oriented and they are based on cognitive abilities and affective learning (Weir, 1990). The interactive nature of modern teaching extends to the assessment stage of learning, turning it into a valuable tool of practicing communication abilities and competences.

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