

# Alternative Assessment: Its Rationales and Design for EFL College Reading Instruction

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## Abstract

Traditional assessment, which focuses on multiple-choice questions, has long been criticized for many pitfalls because of its ineffectiveness to better prepare students for the demands of the twenty-first century. To respond to the deficits of traditional assessments, new forms of alternative assessments, such as asking students to conducting experiments, undertake library search projects, and compile portfolios of writing, have been developed. The purposes of this article are to discuss the flaws of traditional assessment, the core theories and characteristics underlying alternative assessment, and the procedures for designing alternative assessment. Based on the discussion, the major elements and procedures for designing alternative assessment in EFL college reading instruction are explained to provide teachers with alternative ways to reflect what is being taught and evaluated in order to better support students' learning rather than merely pointing out their inadequacies.

**Keywords:** traditional assessment, alternative assessment, EFL reading instruction

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Along with the ineffectiveness of traditional assessments to better prepare students for the demands of the twenty-first century, educators and the public have advocated new forms of assessments over the last decade. A major goal of schooling is to encourage all students to integrate and apply their knowledge, and to respond critically and find solutions to problems in the complex world of tomorrow. Traditional assessments, however, focus on multiple-choice questions that ask students to merely recall facts from a bulk of knowledge. Such testing systems have strongly influenced both instructors' classroom practice and students' study habits. They both tend to focus on superficial content knowledge and low cognitive demands of tests, rather than on the production of ideas, thoughts, performance, and problem-solving skills [3].

To respond to the deficits of traditional assessments, changes in instruction and assessment practices have been successfully carried out in many classrooms in the United States [9]. Many teachers have designed assessments that ask students to express ideas and solve problems. New forms of alternative assessments, such as asking students to produce video recordings, conducting experiments, undertake library search projects, and compile portfolios of writing, have been developed

However, assessment practice in EFL reading has long focused on traditional written tests, for example, TOEIC and TOFEL tests. The traditional standardized multiple-choice questions may reflect how students grasp the ideas of the texts, but cannot inform instructors how to improve their teaching to help students reach learning goals [4,8]. The purposes of this article are to discuss the flaws of traditional assessment, the core theories and characteristics underlying alternative assessment, and the procedures for designing alternative assessment. Based on the discussion, the major elements and procedures for designing alternative assessment in EFL college reading instruction are explained to provide teachers with



alternative ways to reflect what is being taught and evaluated in order to better support students' learning rather than merely pointing out their inadequacies.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 The Flaws of Traditional Assessment**

Traditional assessment, which often refers to standardized multiple-choice questions or paper-and-pencil testing, has long been criticized for many pitfalls. Firstly, for example, what is tested is what is valued. Unfortunately, the reverse is not found in traditional standardized assessment [3]. To reduce the amount of subjectivity in assessment in order to tinker with institutional arrangements, for example, accountability, governance, and management, and based on Thorndike's associationist theory of learning, where learning is regarded as links between an external stimulus and an internal response [7], traditional assessment tend to be standardized and presented in the form of multiple-choices. As a result, it only develops students' lower levels of learning skills, such as drills, decoding, memorization and facts-recalling. What should be valued in learning such as higher-level thinking and complex problem-solving correspondent to the applications of knowledge and skills in real-life contexts, nevertheless, are ignored. Secondly, traditional assessment does not take students' diversity into account [5]. The procedures of standardizing, by all means, lean toward the mainstream culture without considering low-income and ethnic minority students. Low achievement students who are labeled by the nature of comparison of norm references, moreover, are forced to take remedial instruction. The core theory of aptitude, degrading the value of efforts, unfortunately aggravates their learning motivations and outcomes. Thirdly, traditional assessment can not provide teachers with such specific information as the distinctions between what students have learned and what they have *not* acquired. Consequently, neither can teachers' instruction be improved nor the outcomes of education can be achieved optimally [3].

### **2.2 The Core Theories And Characteristics of Alternative Assessment**

Reacting to the above inabilities of standardized assessment, alternative assessment has been undertaken and becoming popular in educational practices. The advent of alternative assessment, however, is not spontaneous. It has evolved along with some socially, politically, culturally, economically and educationally prominent forces, for example, the changes in educational theories in terms of views of learning and cognition. Associationist theory of learning and inherited intelligence of aptitude are the core theories underlying traditional assessment. The shifts to knowledge-based constructivism, effort-based learning and socializing intelligence, however, called for innovative and alternative assessment [7]. Knowledge-based constructivism claims that learning is interpretive and inferential and involves active processes of reasoning rather than simply accepting what the world shows or tells the learners, as a camera or a tape does. Effort-based learning is contrast to the assumption of inherited intelligence of aptitude. In the former assumption, learning goals are associated with a view of ability as a repertoire of skills continuously incremental through one's efforts. That is, efforts and ability are positively related, and greater effort makes more abilities. Finally, the socializing intelligence contends that learning proceeds through social interaction, such as observation, cooperative participation, and scaffolding. These sound theories and forces, with no doubt, have attributed to the movement and prominence of alternative assessment.

The advantages of alternative assessment are reflected by its core theories and characteristics. It stresses authentic activities, values higher-order learning, esteems students' efforts, and is curriculum-, standard- and rubric-based. Consequently, students have a clearer learning objective; their learning processes are values; *all* students are given the same



learning opportunities; teachers can understand their students better and improve their instruction; curriculum can be consistent with teaching; therefore, for teachers, it is formative in nature in order to authentically and better evaluate students' development and performance; mostly importantly, the whole society can get benefits due to the fact that students can have a better life by applying what they have learned in school to what they are required to do in society.

The benefits of alternative assessment for both students and teachers are suggested from research findings as well. In Ross' study [8], for instance, eight cohorts of foreign language learners (N = 2215) participated in this eight-year longitudinal research. Four early cohorts in a 320-hour, four-semester EFL program were evaluated with mainly traditional end-of-term summative tests. In contrast, four latter cohorts of learners engaged in considerably formative alternative assessment practices. Four research questions were investigated in the study: the comparative reliability of summative and formative assessment products; evidence of parallel changes in achievement differentially influencing proficiency growth; an examination of differential rates of growth in the two contrasted cohorts of learners; direct multivariate tests of differential growth in proficiency controlling for pre-instruction covariates. Analyses of growth curves, added growth ratios, and covariate-adjusted gains showed that formative alternative assessment yielded substantive skill-specific effects on language proficiency growth.

Chang's study [1] mainly investigated the implementation of portfolio assessment in a fifth-grade class at an elementary school. Data included field notes, questionnaires, interviews, student portfolios and research's journal. The findings indicated that the students were able to take more responsibility in their own learning. In addition, they understood that assessment was not limited to traditional paper-and-pencil testing only. Overall, most of the students considered the use of portfolios to be valuable and hoped to continue to use them in the following semester.

### **2.3 Procedures for Constructing Alternative Assessment**

A number of alternative assessment measures such as authentic assessment, portfolio assessment, performance assessment and the like share the above advantages, but each of them has its unique qualities underlying its principles and procedures. Authentic assessment, for example, is "situated in the classroom, designed by the teacher, and used to evaluate student performance within the classroom curriculum context" [5]. The specific strategies can be observation, anecdotal records, error analysis and so on.

To reach the learning objectives, especially the enhancement of metacognitive skills, considered to be critical strategies for reading comprehension [2], alternative assessment is one of the optimal methods to develop such skills as scanning, recognizing topics, skimming, understanding main ideas and the like. Implementing alternative assessment in a class, however, also calls for well-designed strategies and procedures. Here the alternative assessment presented in the paper is developed based on the framework suggested by McMillan [6]. First, learning targets are clearly stated to allow students to know where they will and should head for. Next, learning tasks are the second step to show students what they are required to perform in the class to reach the learning targets. Furthermore, elements such as content and skill targets, description of student activities and resources needed are explained. The final step goes to scoring criteria, rubrics and procedures. The criteria are accompanied with a numerical scale to reflect different levels of performance. After a month of progress, qualified samples will be presented to students as benchmarks so that they can understand and distinguish between the successful works and the ineffective ones. Further explanations and examples were discussed in the following section.



### 3 Application

In this part, major elements and procedures, i.e., learning targets, learning tasks, and scoring rubrics were presented to illustrate how alternative assessment were designed for EFL college reading instruction.

#### 3.1 Course Objectives/Learning Targets

This course, *English Vocabulary and Reading*, is a required class for college students of applied English department. It addresses the cognitive, strategic, motivational and affective dimensions of reading. The emphasis is on improving the actual reading process, meaning construction, metacognitive knowledge and strategies. Specially, class activities involve word identification and vocabulary knowledge, reading attitudes, habits and ownership. That is, students are expected to be able to read, comprehend, interpret, and evaluate written materials (State Goal for Language Arts in Illinois State Board of Education, 1985). Specific standards are stated as follows (adapted from Michigan Reading Association, 1984):

- 1) to read and understand a broad range of texts
- 2) to construct a statement of a central purpose or theme
- 3) to identify main ideas/events and supporting information within and across texts
- 4) to evaluate and react critically to texts
- 5) to integrate information within a text
- 6) to use a variety of strategies and contextual clues to understand texts and recognize vocabulary
- 7) to be aware of contextual factors (e.g., prior knowledge, interest, purpose and comprehension)
- 8) to boost reading speed
- 9) to develop positive reading attitudes and voluntary reading habits
- 10) to evaluate their own progress in English vocabulary and reading proficiencies

#### 3.2 Learning Tasks

To reach the above teaching and learning objectives, four major assessment tasks are constructed and described as follows to correspond to the specific standards:

##### 1) Responses to Expository Texts

The task requires students to work with informational materials and is used to develop growth in reading comprehension and interpretation. Students are asked to write responses to one expository article every week except the last week in the month. To assess students' reading process and understanding, they should write such responses as follows:

- A. Write the theme of each article.
- B. Write the main idea in each paragraph and explain how you get the answers.
- C. Write the supporting ideas in each paragraph.
- D. List new vocabulary and explain how you get the meaning, e.g., by the aid of context clues, prefixes (morphology), or dictionary.
- E. Write a summary of each article within seven sentences.
- F. Write what you have learned from the article including your prior knowledge, interests, difficulties, comprehension and evaluation.
- G. Write the amount of time you spend reading the article.

In the beginning of the first period of the class, students spend 30 minutes discussing their responses with their reading group. At the same time, the instructor joins their discussion and then spends another 30 minutes explaining the article and giving students feedback about their responses. At the end of the semester, students put all the response sheets accompanied with the instructor's feedback (scoring sheets) in an everything portfolio.



## 2) Responses to a Novel

This task is designed to give students opportunities to read a full-length book and narrative written texts; meanwhile, their reading skills for meaning construction and positive attitudes can be enhanced to become a habitual reader. Students are required to select one out of three novels—*Charlotte's Web*, *The Miserable*, and *Phantom of the Opera*, and finish it before the middle of the semester. To respond to the novel, students should write a weekly journal including such feedback as follows:

- A. The theme of the chapters in the novel.
- B. The plot of the novel, i.e., the problem and solution.
- C. The setting of the chapters in the novel.
- D. Major characters in the chapters of the novel.
- E. Major events.
- F. Personal responses such as interests, difficulties, critiques and reflections.
- G. The amount of time you spend reading the novel in this week.

In the class, students spend 20 minutes discussing their responses with the reading group who reads the same novel. At the same time, the instructor joins their discussion and then picks up three students to report and share their novels to the whole class. After they all finish their novels (about the 9<sup>th</sup> week of the semester), the instructor plays one film of the novel in the class, and students put all the response sheets accompanied with the instructor's feedback (scoring sheets) in an everything portfolio.

## 3) Voluntary Reading Logs

This task allows students to read a variety of written texts and cultivate their reading ownership. Students are required to read one reading material every month. At the end of the semester, they should complete reading four written texts. In addition, such reading texts should represent a diverse collection of material from at least three different literary forms, such as magazines, newspapers, textbooks, on-line materials, realia (recipes, menus, manuals), and children books. In the voluntary reading logs, students are asked to provide the following information:

- A. The genre and resource of the text.
- B. The author, title, and the published year or date of the text.
- C. The theme or the purpose of the text.
- D. A summary of the text.
- E. Personal responses such as interests, difficulties, critiques and reflections.
- F. The amount of time and the date you read the text.

In the fourth week of every month, students bring their voluntary reading logs to the class and share with the reading group. At the end of semester, students put all the response logs accompanied with the instructor's feedback (scoring sheets) in an everything portfolio.

## 4) The Showcase Portfolio

Before the semester ends, students are asked to select 10 pieces of responses to make up a showcase portfolio accompanied by 10 sheets of the instructor's feedback indicating if the learning standards are met. The showcase portfolio should include five pieces of responses to expository texts and three pieces of responses to the novel and two voluntary reading logs. In addition, the portfolio is to be prefaced with a summary in which the student discusses his/her accomplishments, analyzes his/her strengths and weakness, and explains why these pieces are selected and how the entries demonstrate his/her progress toward meeting the standards.



### 3.3 Scoring Rubrics/Criteria

After the learning targets and tasks are set up, the final step goes to scoring criteria, rubrics and procedures. The scoring criteria are accompanied with a numerical scale to reflect different levels of performance. For the tasks designed here, three scales are to follow and differentiate students' performance from completely to minimally reaching the learning targets. For example in the task of responses to expository texts, if the student can write the theme of the article correctly and completely, he/she can get 10 points for this learning standard. To have students fully grasp how to reach the learning targets, the teacher should show them qualified samples as benchmarks as assignment models.

The following scoring rubrics are designed for assessing the above four learning tasks:

#### 1) Responses to Expository Texts

Standards	Complete to Minimal		
	A. Write the theme of each article.	10	7
B. Write the main idea in each paragraph and explain how you get the answers.	10	7	3
C. Write the supporting ideas in each paragraph.	10	7	3
D. List new vocabulary and explain how you get the meaning	10	7	3
E. Write a summary of each article within seven sentences.	20	13	6
F. Write what you have learned from each article including your prior knowledge, interests, difficulties, comprehension and evaluation.	35	25	15
G. Write the amount of time you spend reading the article.	5	3	1

#### 2) Responses to a Novel

Standards	Complete to Minimal		
	A. The theme of the chapters in the novel.	10	7
B. The plot of the novel, i.e., the problem and solution.	10	7	3
C. The setting of the chapters in the novel.	10	7	3
D. Major characters in the chapters of the novel.	10	7	3
E. Major events.	20	13	6
F. Personal responses such as interests, difficulties, critiques and reflections.	35	25	15
G. The amount of time you spend reading the novel in this week.	5	3	1



### 3) Voluntary Reading Logs

Standards	Complete to Minimal		
A. The genre and resource of the text.	10	7	3
B. The author, title, and the published year or date of the text.	10	7	3
C. The theme or the purpose of the text.	20	13	6
D. A summary of the text.	20	13	6
E. Personal responses such as interests, difficulties, critiques and reflections.	35	25	15
F. The amount of time and the date you read the text.	5	3	1

### 4) The Showcase Portfolio

Standards	Complete to Minimal		
A. Appropriate selection of 10 pieces from three different tasks with 10 accompanied scoring sheets.	10	7	3
B. A summary of accomplishment in the semester.	20	13	6
C. Analyses of strengths and weakness.	20	13	6
D. Justification of the selection.	20	13	6
E. An explanation of how the entries demonstrate your progress toward meeting the standards.	30	20	10

## 4 Conclusions

The ultimate purposes of employing alternative assessment in an EFL reading classroom are to improve language instruction and correspond to the current reading theory underlying the multi-dimensional functions of reading. However, planning and implementing alternative assessment does not go without problems and concerns [1]. For example, it is very time-consuming for teachers to assess a bunch of reports and assignments. Likewise, it takes much time for students to learn to reflect on their own work. Besides, students' portfolios can become an unfocused collection of many pieces of information. Therefore, implementing alternative assessment in a class calls for well-designed strategies and procedures. Here the alternative assessment presented in the paper is developed based on the framework suggested by McMillan [6], including learning targets, learning tasks, scoring rubrics and providing benchmarks. In addition, a showcase portfolio is included to allow the student to discuss his/her accomplishments and analyze his/her strengths and weakness to avoid the danger of making portfolio learning information an unfocused collection. Throughout the authentic-oriented and performance-based assessment, students' reading proficiencies and motivations are likely to be much more enhanced than traditional assessment can do.



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