

CLARIFYING THE ASSESSMENT CHAOS – HELP OFFERED



When we talk about alternative assessment, as we increasingly do because it is in vogue, what do we actually mean? Alternative to what? Is alternative assessment then an alternative to testing which means we throw the tests out? For me, the term 'alternative' elicits this unwanted association. I think we need to consider calling it complementary assessment instead of alternative assessment, because I think it is something we need to use in addition to, to complement one way of assessing learning instead of replacing it completely. I'd like to start by introducing a case to you:

Jean had attended a number of workshops on educational assessment and was encouraged to start applying some of the ideas in her own teaching. Her beliefs regarding assessment and testing had changed recently, and she was now strongly convinced assessment could form and strengthen learning, especially with younger learners in the beginning of their language learning career. Jean was convinced she could use assessment to encourage the learners and change the traditional way of learning for the tests only, an approach which causes so much misery for so many learners.

Jean designed an assessment table based on the following:

- homework (10%)
- writing portfolio (30%)
- group project (20%)
- self/peer-assessment of oral work (20%)
- reading reports (20%)

When Jean proudly presented her assessment table to the principal for approval, she was surprised it was rejected with the comment that "In our school pupils study properly and learn how to take tests". Disappointed Jean left the principal's office, wondering what she should do.

by Kari Smith.

What would you do in such a case? It is clear from the case Jean had not done any field work before she presented her assessment table. Maybe other teachers were working along the same lines or along different lines but she did not know about it. Maybe the principal was ignorant of new approaches in assessment. Suggestions from the audience were to involve the learners in the assessment process (let's say the case is from junior high school) and that parents should be informed. When we want change we have to involve all the stakeholders.

If we look again at the case, who is confused by it? Well, the teacher is, certainly, because she had learnt something new and she was very eager and wanted to have a go at it. The principal was also confused because he was ignorant of (or not convinced of the advantages of) complementary assessment. What needs to be clarified to both is the distinction between external assessment and internal assessment. Confusion often arises when people mix the two things.

External assessment

The most common form for external assessment is that of 'examinations'. They are designed by people who do not know the learners, the classes, or the teaching approach. They are completely external to the teaching/learning context. Standardized criteria are applied. They are the same for everybody taking a certain examination, disregarding the context of teaching. The marking is anonymous, there is complete distance between the marker and the test taker, as there is complete distance between the test designer and the test taker. Usually there is no feedback, you get only a grade, a number or letter. This type of assessment will always be summative, because there is no feedback and the nature of formative assessment means there is always lots of feedback that the learner can continue to work with in order to improve. External standardised tests are designed by testing experts, teachers are not supposed to design, or have the skills to design reliable and valid tests.

Internal assessment

Internal assessment is classroom assessment, often in the form of a test, but I hope to show you that 'testing' is a much wider concept than that what we are used to regard as such. Let's see what alternative classroom tests we can use in our classes.

First of all what takes place here is internal. The assessment task is designed by the teacher, and this teacher will know the class. The teacher will know, for instance, that some learners in this class are going through a difficult period and will take that into consideration. Another difference is that, in internal assessment, I may use various criteria for assessing. Maybe some of my learners have some kind of learning disability. I would take that into consideration when I assess. It is marking by name, or else I would not be able to take such things into consideration. Internal assessment yields lots of informative feedback. The importance of internal assessment may not always be in the grade itself. The importance lies in the feedback: regarding what you know, what your problems are and what can be done in order to make you become a better learner and teacher.

An extensive meta-analysis of various research projects carried out by Black and Wilam (1998) in the United Kingdom led to a paper called *Inside the Black Box*. It was the first paper to really prove that to promote learning, informative feedback as assessment is the type of assessment that helps the learner, especially the weaker learners. Feedback in form of a grade with no information was found to be much less useful to learners in their effort to improve achievements.

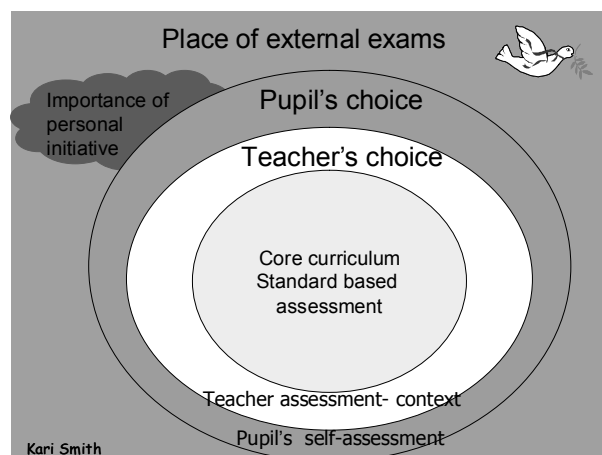
Internal assessment is best done by the teaching experts because the main focus here is teaching. However, this should be, let us say (no need to quibble about exact percentages) 50 % of teaching. In that area it is a top down approach, teachers do not have much autonomy in deciding what to teach, and the learners can certainly not choose what to learn. But as an extension of the core curriculum the teachers choose what they would like to add to the dictated core. If I as a teacher teach something I am excited about, that I am interested in, my teaching becomes much more enthusiastic. And the more enthusiastic I am, the more enthusiastic usually the learners are. That type of teaching and learning cannot be assessed by standardized external tests, because it might differ from teacher to teacher and classroom to classroom. To assess this part of the learning we need teacher assessment, which has to be based on the taught material and the context within which the teaching took place.

There is yet another layer in this 'onion' and that is the layer of the choice of the learners. When they have studied the core, and what their teacher is excited about, they might still express that they would like to know more about the specific topic discussed. That could make up another 20% of the learning load which has to be assessed by learners' self-assessment alongside teacher assessment.

Therefore, teachers should know how to go about it! We must make sure that teachers are taught how to approach internal assessment in their in-service and pre-service courses.

If we combine external and internal assessment, there is an area of overlap, which is preparing for exams. When we prepare students for external exams, the question is: do we need the whole course, the whole year preceding the external exam to prepare our learners? Research shows that that is not necessary. If you teach them what they need to know, in our case knowledge of English, then for the teaching of the techniques of testing, a short testing skill training period is enough. Of course we are often pressurized by students from the very beginning of the course to give them copies of the format of the external test. I would then actually give adult learners copies of the article that shows them, that there is research-based evidence that what they claim is not right.

What is the place of external standardized assessment? An important point in any learning situation is personal initiative. In many learning situations we have removed personal initiative. I agree with the fact that in most learning contexts there would be a pre-decided core curriculum that everybody has to master, and I am actually quite happy that this core curriculum is assessed by using standardised external examinations. By having this layered 'onion' I am allowing for personal initiative. I strongly believe that that kind of internal and intrinsic motivation will be beneficial



for the outcome of the learning in general, that it will also influence how the core material is studied. What are the tools that we can use for internal assessment? First, we need to involve learners in decision making. If you think of the table designed in the example given above, that was a table of the teacher's design. It did not need to have been, she could have involved the learners in designing it and deciding about the various foci or percentages. If we do this, lots of resistance from

learners will disappear. The teacher will no longer be seen as 'on one side' and the learners on the other, they are in this together.

Other tools are self-assessment, portfolio assessment, group assessment and what I call tests dressed different.

Involving learners.

When I assess my students' learning I try to design a profile of their learning. I try to make sure that they are not only assessed in one way. They are assessed by being examined or evaluated, if you wish, on various aspects. A profile could be: attitude, reading assignment, group assignment, research project and test, for instance. Attitude is important, because I do not see that it is only my responsibility that the classroom is a good place to be and a place where we learn well. It is also their responsibility. So I tell them what I would like (to come in on time, to contribute to discussions, to be active in group work and so on) and to make clear we are in this together and it is all included that in the assessment. I do this in any course I teach, even at university, where attitude is even 20% of the course. In my profile I make sure that a learner cannot pass the course only by taking the test. It is, of course essential that the learners know this from the very beginning of the course.

Self-assessment.

When we use self-assessment we should bear in mind that people are not used to assessing themselves. They have to be trained in using accurate and fair self-assessment.

Self-assessment is not an additional skill that I want my learners to be assessed on, however by using self-assessment I add an other assessor to the same project. In doing so I increase the quality and reliability of the assessment, because I have two raters.

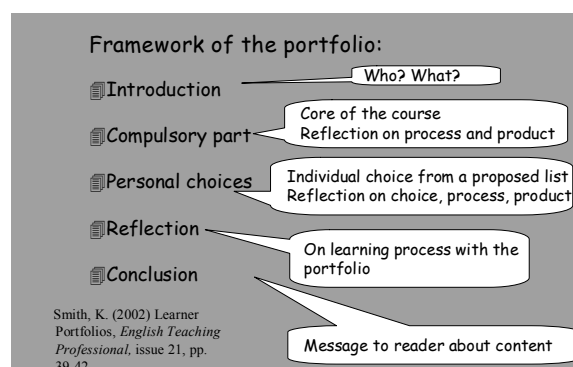
It is important to have the students make choices at a very early stage in the course about what they want to do and to correct their work based on the choices they have made. Not everybody is doing the same type of assignment. They have to be given choices and then to be given the criteria for assessing the choices they have made. It could be homework or class work. I often put them in groups and ask them to work out an assessment key to a project (for instance, homework), and then have them assess their own work based on the criteria on which they agreed.

Another approach could be that the learners decide on the content of their portfolios and assess that content themselves on the basis of very clearly expressed criteria. Then I would assess them, using the same criteria. That is the key to

be self-assessment, that the students know the criteria (and I prefer to involve them in developing of the criteria) so we all use the same criteria when assessing. If not, self-assessment cannot be expected to be either fair or accurate.

Students can also design and correct their own tests. Not every test is equally suited to this, but from time to time they can write the test questions and work out the assessment criteria and they can assess their own performance. Finally, students may also be involved in deciding a course grade.

Framework of the portfolio.



If the reader is interested in a list of what may constitute the framework of a portfolio, I have sketched a comprehensive one in the *English Teaching Professional* magazine issue 21, pp 39-42. For now, I would like to just underline that when you work with a learner portfolio, you have to have a clear framework which needs to be explained to the learners, because if not, they get confused. I prefer to start with an introduction in which the student introduces himself as a learner. Then there is a compulsory part which is the core part of the course discussed above. I want all learners to document the fact that they have mastered the core of the course. Then there are personal choices which lead to their personal initiative, in which they make clear where and why they have gone beyond the core. Next there should be reflection on the portfolio, a self-awareness exercise. This is a must if we want our learners to become independent learners. Finally the conclusion, a message to the reader which relates what the learner wants to tell the reader about her/himself as a language learner.

Research projects.

Research projects encourage learners to formulate questions about the material studied. For example in teaching literature in an advanced course at university we may refer to James Joyce's *Dubliners*. We may ask the learner to formulate a

question to which we will not find the answer immediately in the text. For the story *Eveline* it could be a question about other girls in fiction (in the works of Joyce or elsewhere) in a similar dilemma, the choice she has in staying and helping to support the family or leaving for a new life with her boyfriend. It is a research question they can look into, it leads to collecting information, presenting information and knowledge. It could be done in groups, leading to an oral presentation and it can later be used for oral and written tests.

How to assess a group project? Working in teams is a skill we have to prepare our learners for. So much work today, in real life, is carried out in teams. So we should not turn a blind eye here. What I often do is to have peer assessment on one part of the group work and that is the contribution to the group project. Then there is one teacher assessment on the final product and finally there is self-assessment of what the learner has learned. Only the core, the learning project of the group is the same for everybody, with the same grade. But the peer assessment of the contribution to the final project differs from learner to learner as does the self-assessment of 'what I have learned from working on this project'.

Tests.

Usually, we distinguish five types of test:

- proficiency test
- placement test
- achievement test
- progress test
- diagnostic test.

Each test is used in a certain way to serve its purpose, I would like to point out the differences and the purposes in each case, and make some suggestions as to how to go about them.

A proficiency test may examine proficiency in certain skill, or skills, without relation to previous learning. Is the candidate sufficiently proficient to do a certain job? That means a proficiency test does not have to be related to previous learning. My suggestion here is to ensure 'ecological validity'. This means that the test really tests the real-life situation, the use of language in real life. So an entrance test of English upon entering a British university should really test the kind of English the candidate needs in a British university, and a proficiency test for an air-hostess should test the vocabulary needed in the job.

Placement tests are used to examine the optimal placement of a candidate, to place the candidate at a level, or in a stream. We do this because we want to help the learners. We want to try to adjust the teaching according to their level. Still, we must keep in mind that these placement tests are very

stressful. Therefore, my recommendation is that, first of all, we use more than one test. If the placement is important for the student and we want to do a good job I don't think we can do this all at once. I have found it very useful in my situation, when we place the students at the beginning of the school year to have the following set-up:

First of all, when they come to us, they have a test. But we keep the grade, it's only for us. Then we teach them, in heterogeneous classes for a short period, say two or three weeks, and we teach everybody the same. Then we ask them, after they have been acquainted with the level we require at our school: " what level do you think you should belong to?" And then we give them a new test. If we do this we have the first indication, then we give them all an equal chance to learn something in the new setting and then give them the opportunity to say how they feel about it and then we give them that new test. And the combination of the first test, the self-placement, the re-test and the teachers' subjective feeling after having taught the students some time all go into the decision of where to place a learner. We have found that by doing this so thoroughly we have far fewer mismatches, and I think an element of that is that the students were involved in the decision making and were given more than one chance.

Achievement tests are used to examine learning over a longer period of time. So they cover a large amount of material. Here I suggest that we consider the fact that we teach differently. A colleague and I may teach the same thing to the same age-group or group of learners or level of learners, however we teach differently. So I think the major part of the test should be the same for everybody. But because I am a different teacher I probably emphasize something different from what he or she does. If I do not take that into consideration while I am giving the achievement test I am not being fair to the pupils, because they have not been taught equally. Keep in mind that here we are talking about internal tests here, not about a standardized external test.

Progress tests examine progress over a short period of time and cover a unit, or a topic. Here, I think it is extremely important to make the students realise that they are progressing. So involve them in checking the tests, because they have to get the sense that they have been involved in meaningful learning .

Diagnostic tests examine strengths and weaknesses in the candidate's knowledge and skills. The findings are used for planning future work (for the teacher as well as for the learner). Thus, the purpose is formative. My suggestion

here is not to give marks, but instead lots of information and feedback to the learner.

Take home tests. For example, the students are given a reading exercise. The first question in a take-home test that they are asked is 'Find eight facts about this passage.' Not the facts that I might tell you to mention, but the facts you find while you are reading it. Any facts that come to your mind. Then, things that puzzle you. Things that you do not understand. Things that you are worried about. Then, for instance 'What do you think of the decision that the main character in your text made?' 'What do you think of the use of language?' Thus, the testee shows me what he or she knows and not what I have told him or her what to know. You could also ask about grammatical structures. For instance, work has just been done in class on the present perfect. An assignment could be 'Find examples of the present perfect in this text and give an explanation why it is used here.' Then: words you like, or find difficult, find a sentence- explain the meaning. Questions the learner would like to ask a certain character in the text or a story, and what do you think the character would answer.

Notes to the student here would include:


- Please work alone
- There is not "a correct answer" to the tasks.
- You will not be given a mark.
- You will be provided with feedback which will support your future learning.

I can't give a mark here because there is nothing I can measure. But I learn a lot about my students' learning by eliciting this information and I want to train them so they realize that not everything you do has to be marked by a grade.

Group tests. The students are given individual preparation sheets, which we usually give before tests.. Then, when they come to take the test I will say, 'Okay, will the three of you please take the test together'. I have no idea of which groups they were in beforehand. Then they take the test as a group. They can discuss the test paper as a group, however, they have individual answers and test papers. They would hand them in individually, and what you will see is that not every member of the group will conform to the group decision. So, they are not all the same. Again, I would not do this for every test, but I would do it every now and then so that there is a different kind of test for classroom assessment.

Assessment rubrics. If I am, for example, to assess an oral presentation, it helps to have an assessment rubric. I have to decide from a standard. Here I have three levels of benchmarks,

above core, at core and below core. At core is what I would like every learner to be capable of. Some of my students are above, some of my students are below. On the left-hand side I have the focus points for me assessing listening: good fluency, cohesion, accuracy and right use of vocabulary. And what I do is before I give them the assessment task is to develop the text for this with the students. In groups, let's sit down and decide: "If you have a speaking task, what would you expect? What would be more than you expect and what would be more or less a failure? And then we develop the text with the learners and then I can use it for self-assessment later on. In this way the assessment tool becomes a learning tool. Another suggestion here is to develop these assessment rubrics with your colleagues. Because that really helps you to articulate what you require, what your teaching goals are within a given course. You can

			
Assessment rubrics			
Standards	above core	at core	below core
Criteria			
•fluency			
•cohesion			
•accuracy			
•vocabulary			

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use it for reading, listening for every piece of work your learners are doing. I have found this assessment rubric extremely useful in my own assessment work, but, most importantly, for working with colleagues, working with learners to share ideas.

In this presentation I have tried to explain the current chaos in many teaching/learning contexts. Teachers and administrators are not really aware of the differences between external and internal assessment activities and of when and how to apply each of them. In the last part of the presentation I suggested a number of internal, classroom assessment tasks, with the purpose of offering an assessment repertoire to teachers from which they can choose when they designing internal assessment activities. A teachers' main objective is to support students in their learning, and internal assessment plays an important role in doing just that.

