Thinking Unconventional: Alternative Assessment at Tertiary Level Education in Bangladesh

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Abstract—The contemporary developments in the sphere of teaching English as second language have introduced some significant alternatives to the evaluation and assessment approaches of language classrooms. As a result, educators have started focusing on the implementation of the alternative assessment (AA) to empower their learners. This paper aims to explore the current status of the practice of AA and its effectiveness in tertiary level ESL classroom in Bangladesh by conducting a research among the participating students and teachers. For this paper, researchers will evaluate the strategic outcomes and productiveness of three different tools of AA: portfolio, project-based learning, and oral presentation. They have applied both the qualitative and quantitative approaches for collecting and analyzing the data.

Index Terms— Alternative assessment, portfolio, project-based learning, and oral presentation, Tertiary level education

I. INTRODUCTION

Along with the subsequent development in the field of language teaching, educators have started focusing on the implementation of alternative tools for assessing and evaluating students' performances. Dikli (2003) opined in his article that language assessment has always been different from other disciplines, and this same idea is also applicable for English language classrooms. Moreover, when it comes to teaching English as a second language, the importance of diversity and creativity should get more priority to ensure motivation and to prevent the sense of alienation.

Alternative assessment is the form of evaluation which goes beyond the notions of traditional tests and examinations, and puts emphasis on students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills. At the same time, it stresses the importance of the contextual and authentic use of language instead of keeping the practice of the target language confined within the four walls of the classroom. In a country where English is regarded as the second and/or official language, its application would be more productive because the tools of AA are multi-culturally sensitive (Nasab, 2015). Using more interactive lessons, such as group work and project-based learning we can implement new measures to evaluate learning in nontraditional ways. Furthermore, taking attempts to

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make students communicatively competent and evaluating their gradual development in performance should also be considered as the primary concerns of the language teachers. It is because teachers do not act anymore only as the knowledge dispenser in a classroom. However, they now act as the facilitators whose objective is not only educating the students but also assisting them in building capacities for their future professional development.

In this paper, the researchers tries to shed light upon the use of three different tools of AA (e.g. portfolio, oral presentation, and project-based learning) in the tertiary level ESL classrooms of Bangladesh. The research centers on the ideas and perspectives of both the teachers and learners regarding the implementation of AA. MATH

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Assessment and Testing

Assessment and testing are required to deal with what is taught as well as what is learned (Nasab, 2015). However, the terms 'Assessment' and 'Testing' are often used interchangeably even though testing is just one kind of assessment where assessment is collection of information about what a student knows and what he/she can do. Testing is a very formal and standardized type of assessment where the students sit for a time based exercise on a specific date and the score in that test becomes the criterion using which student learning can be measured (Dikli, 2003).

B. Alternative Assessment

The term is Alternative Assessment, because it is alternative to the highly standardized and often used way of assessment which is 'Testing'. The aim of AA is to overcome the limitations of traditional tests. Traditional testing can cause a great deal of anxiety in the children and it can affect their language learning capability as well as their self-image. Therefore, assessment should be an integral part of the teaching and learning process (Nasab, 2015).

According to Sanders (2001), " This type of assessment is generally one in which students are asked to do something that is an authentic demonstration of what has been learned" (p.63). Unlike traditional testing, both product and process are valued equally in AA. Alternative assessment focuses more on learning instead of teaching. Alternative assessment also focuses on the growth of the students, which allows the students to correct their mistakes if there is any at the beginning (Huba and Freed, 2000).

C. Oral Presentation

Oral presentation is part of performance based assessments which also include other activities like role play, retelling, summarizing, interviews, etc. Another simple definition of oral presentation is "Assessment of learning which is conducted by the spoken word" (Joughin, 2008). Oral presentation also addresses the problems of other forms of assessment. In this regard, Joughin (2008, p.107) said, "People identify themselves with their words whereas the writing separates the knower from the known". Students consider oral assessments more useful than written ones in spite of being nervous.

D. Portfolio

In educational context, portfolio is a "collections of a student's work prepared over a period of time" (McKay, 2006) It can also be described as a collection of students' work and achievements during their academic career (Chen, Yu & Chang, 2007). In a tertiary level ESL setting, the teacher maintains a continuous record of each student and has regular conferences with the students individually to reflect on their performances. A portfolio can include a wide range of materials including but not limited to compositions or other writing projects, audio or video of a project or presentation, graphs and charts, pictures, quiz results, etc. The teachers do not have to be reliant only on their memory to assess a student as their progress can be tracked any time from the portfolios.

E. Project Based Learning

Lee and Lim (2012) argued that the aim of project based learning is to introduce the students to the environment where they will live and perform. The method here follows the real life situations and changes. Therefore, the definition of project based learning has been changing with the changes in the world too. Project based learning is performed in teams. As a result the learners get adept in social, cooperative skills and group cohesiveness which is useful in the real life activities of the current world. Project based learning works as a bridge between using English in real life situations and using English in the class.

F. Vygotsky's Theory of Social Interaction

Vygotsky's theory emphasizes the fundamental role of social interaction for the development of language and communication. The impact of society and culture are central to social development theory as individual's linguistic development cannot be comprehended without the social and cultural context within which the language is embedded. As a result, it is believed that "in a supportive environment, children are able to advance to a higher level of knowledge and performance" (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p.20). He referred to this place as 'Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)'. Project based learning can be considered as a constructivist pedagogy, and its theoretical basis of lies in learner-centered learning, constructivism, and collaborative learning. It also creates opportunities for a learner-centered learning approach that adopts cooperative and collaborative learning

(Milentijevic, Ciric, & Vojinovic, 2008).

G. Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligence

It is important to recognize students' various talents to make them motivated in the classroom, and Gardner's multiple intelligence theory serve this purpose to a great extent. Therefore, AA can be ideal to be incorporated with the application of multiple intelligence in language classrooms. Bas and Beyhan (2010) argued that project based learning creates opportunities for the teachers to incorporate diverse teaching and learning styles into project planning and execution. Gardner's theory talk about diverse capacities of students' intelligence that result in different ways of learning, knowing, and comprehending the world. Gardner's theory presents an alternative definition of intelligence based on a fundamentally different perceptions of mind. "He proposes a pluralistic view of the mind, recognizing many different and discrete facets of cognition and acknowledging that people have different cognitive strengths and contrasting cognitive styles." (Faribi & Derakhashan, 2015, p.64).

H. Process Approach of Writing

Process approach writing has been welcomed and applied by English language teachers because it focuses on the production, reflection, discussion, and reworking on multiple drafts of a paper instead of coming up with the final product in one ago (Sun & Feng, 2009). A common pattern of process approach follows 4-steps of: (a) brainstorming and prewriting, (b) first draft, (c) revisions and editing, and (d) final draft. From this point of view, portfolio can be considered as one of the ideal strategies to apply the process approach of writing because it is the accumulation of students' work, and it consists of the documents that shows their initiatives, effort, progress, and achievement in the learning process over a period of time. Moreover, one of the key elements of portfolios is students' self-assessment. It provides students with a sense of motivation, autonomy, and accomplishment to assess their own needs analysis (Nezakatgoo, 2011).

I. Task-Based Learning

In the process of task based learning (TBL), the primary focus of the lesson is the task itself and how to complete the task. Of course, to successfully complete the task students have to use the right form of language to convey their ideas. Thus, the language becomes an instrument of communication to complete the task. It focuses on students' linguistic and communicative needs by putting them into authentic communicative situations which require the use of all their language resources to deal with the context. In PBL, there is a central topic from which all the activities derive and which drives the project towards a final objective. Moreover, students get plenty of opportunities for sharing their ideas and perspectives, collaborating, and communicating with others. As a result, students get to know the real life use of language while conducting the survey with the help of questionnaire,

interview, or observation. Therefore, it can be said that it brings facts to life by analyzing, deciding, editing, rejecting, and organizing the information (Harmer, 2007).

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Research Questions

i) What is the current status of the use of alternative assessment in Bangladeshi tertiary level English language classes?

ii) How do teachers perceive the implementation of alternative assessment in their English language courses?

iii) How do learners perceive the implementation of alternative assessment in their English language courses?

B. Participants

For the quantitative part of the survey, 27 university teachers and for the qualitative part, 5 university teachers participated. 30 university English language students were chosen for the quantitative survey of this study.

C. Instruments

Teachers' questionnaire was designed using Google Form, and was sent to the teachers to be filled out by them. There were 8 questions based on Likert scale. Students' questionnaires were distributed among them in the class. They were asked to read the questions carefully and pick the answer. Students' questionnaire was also based on Likert scale. Interview was conducted for the teachers. There were five teachers, and they had to explain the answers to justify their responses.

IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Teachers' Interview

Q1. Do you think AA is more productive than traditional assessment? Why or why not?

While responding to the question, participants came up with varied responses. Two of the participants agreed that AA is more fruitful because it is based on formative assessment which also makes it more convenient for the teachers to evaluate students' development. Moreover, this form of assessment serves students' diverse needs and intelligences which help the students become more motivated.

Another participant opined that AA is not necessarily more productive than the traditional approach; it is complementary to AA and the combination of both would rather be more productive. Others argued that the combination would be more productive because our students are more used to the traditional assessment for the existing K-12 education system of Bangla medium institutions.

From the discussion above, it can be inferred that AA is crucial in creation of a classroom where students' various intelligences can be used to ensure active participation of the students. In a country like Bangladesh, majority of the university students come from Bangla medium background, and suddenly they get introduced to the English medium instruction where they cannot use their

L1. In a situation like this, if they will find the opportunity to use their creativity or intelligence, it will ensure them that they can also be a part of the lesson where their potentials also get priority. However, it might not be the solution all the time because there is hardly any use of AA in our schools and colleges. Therefore, the tools of AA should be incorporated with that of traditional assessment to help learners get accustomed to the new style of assessment.

Q2. How does the effectiveness of AA depend on the level of the learners?

Regarding the level of the learners, only one participant said that the success of AA does not depend on the level of the learners. According to this participant, AA is now being used in some Kindergarten with English medium background. Therefore, it is the teachers who needs to be strategic while applying this assessment to receive the optimum outcome.

On the contrary, other four participants agreed that the level of the learners should be considered while implementing AA in the class. Two of them talked about the time that students require to get used to the notions of AA. Learners experience a completely different scenario in the language classes at universities. Another participant argued that the linguistic capacity is also a determiner here because it sometimes requires a minimum linguistic competence which beginners do not have. The last participant talked about the intake capacity of the learners and peer rapport. According to this participant, intake capacity varies from level to level, and that is why teachers should be aware of the fact that whether the students have the ability to ingest the ideas appropriately or not. Moreover, peer connection is also missing among the beginner level learners which is a prerequisite for many AA.

Based on the discussion, different tools of AA can be applied for different level of the learners such as portfolios for beginner, projects for intermediate, and debates for advanced level. Alternative assessment tools focus on initiating approaches, making decisions, self-evaluation, collaborative learning, and authentic use of language which demand minimum linguistic ability which might not be present among the beginner level of students. Furthermore, comprehending these new ideas is also difficult for the students who never experienced such exposure in schools and colleges. Therefore, to apply these techniques in the completion of the tasks need students' linguistic competencies as well as personal growth which can only be supervised by the teachers.

Q3. How much is it convenient and effective for the tertiary level ESL classrooms in Bangladesh?

When participants were asked this question, everyone agreed that there is no doubt regarding the effectiveness of this assessment. They opined that these tools prepare the students to face the challenges in future.

However, they talked about few factors that act as obstacles while implementing these tools of AA. All the five participants mentioned the large number of students

(e.g. language classroom with more than 40 students) as one of the most significant impediments of AA. Two of the participants also mentioned that sometimes the overhead projector, speaker, PC with internet connection needed for this kind of assessment are not available in classrooms. Moreover, one of the participants also talked about the lack of collaboration from the higher authority which influences their decisions of applying AA.

Based on the opinions of the participants, it can be said that undoubtedly it provides opportunities for students to make themselves prepared for the forthcoming real life situations and challenges. Nevertheless, the underlying problem of incorporating these assessment tools arises from the institutions. Because of the persisting top-down authoritative approach of the tertiary level educational institutions, it becomes difficult for the teachers to decide the assessment or evaluation process of their courses; most of the time the "marks distributions" are decided by the higher authority where the teachers do not have any say.

Q4. How does it help the learners acquire practical life skills?

While responding to this question, the participants talked about the improvement of students' interpersonal skills, intrapersonal skills, management skills, and so on. Three of the participants talked about the communicative competence, and how the students get to develop their interpersonal skills while discussing topics with group members and/or interviewing the sample group of population while collecting data for their research projects.

One of the participants also mentioned that AA provided the students with the opportunity to assess and evaluate themselves which make them autonomous learners. Another participant commented on the leadership skills of students that they can acquire from the practice of AA; moreover, time management and decision making skills are also rooted in the leadership skills. Therefore, the acquisition of one single skill serves multiple purposes for the students.

From the above discussion, it can be said that the tools of AA have been designed to meet the real life linguistic and communicative needs of the learners. Classroom is not only meant for the transfer of knowledge, and the teachers are not only meant to be the educator. Teachers should facilitate the teaching and learning process so that the learners can get authentic stimulation to build their capacity. For example, students get to know about social and formal interactions from/for their project works, presentations, they acquire organizational skills while submitting portfolios, and editing and proofreading during the writing process. University can be considered as the practice ground to hone their skills for future professional development and capacity building.

B. Teachers' Questionnaire

The teachers tended to remain very close to the higher side of the 5 point scale of the questionnaire in almost all of the questions. When stated AA ensured formative assessment which is more beneficial the teachers mostly agreed which can be ensured by the mean of 4 (SD=.632) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Teachers' Perspective of Alternative Assessment

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. Alternative assessment ensures formative assessment which is more beneficial	4	.632
2. Alternative assessment brings significant changes in students'	4.185	.557
3. Project based learning opens a new horizon for students to improve their linguistic skills with the help of others/ helps students get authentic input from interacting with others	4.148	.863
4. Project based learning helps students improve their cognitive and analytical skills	4	.960
5. Portfolios present students' gradual linguistic development over a period of time	4.074	.957
6. A process approach is more effective than product approach of writing to evaluate students' composition exercises	3.666	1.358
7. Oral presentations should be made mandatory in ESL classes to hone students' communicative skills	4.407	1.083
8. Oral presentations help introverted students get rid of their shyness	4.074	.997

The teachers agreed to the second statement even more with a mean of 4.185 (SD=.557) where the questionnaire stated that AA brings significant changes in students' linguistic performance. The next statement was about project based learning where it was stated that the students could improve their linguistic skills with the help of other students. The mean here is still high (4.148) with a standard deviation of .863. The other statement about project based learning on whether it improve the students' cognitive skill also received agreement on a similar scale (mean= 4, SD=.960). Firstly, it was stated that portfolios present students' linguistic development over a period of time and the teachers agreed to that statement with a mean of 4.074 (SD=.957). On the other hand, the teachers did not agree as much with the statement that process approach is more effective than product approach of writing as it can be seen in the mean of 3.666 (SD=1.358). The highest number of the teachers agreed to the statement that oral presentations should be made mandatory in ESL classes to hone the students' communicative skills where the mean was 4.407 (SD= 1.083). They also agreed to the statement that oral presentations help introverted students get rid of their shyness with a mean of 4.074 (SD=.997).

The mean of the means in the survey is 4.069, which shows the teachers' positivity towards AA. There were two general questions about the effectiveness of AA as a whole and the responses were very positive. One of the main the reasons behind this tendency might be the negative impacts of traditional tests that makes the overall idea of AA more favorable besides the improvements discovered after implementing various AA techniques.

Both the questions on project based learning had means of over 4 which shows a positive attitude towards this tool among the teachers. In case of portfolios, the teachers agreed on the effectiveness as they are aware of its benefits, the differences might come from the practicality of implementing it. Some universities have more students per section than ideal and that makes it impractical for a teacher to go through each type of composition of each student 3-5 times and that can be a reason behind this divide. The highly positive attitude towards the necessity of oral presentation can be result of the limitations of standardized tests in Bangladesh. The support for the statement on presentation helping to remove shyness was not as strong, which might be related with the students becoming more nervous while presenting as found in Table 2.

C. Students' Questionnaire

The responses of the students were not as similar. When asked about their preference on sitting for the final exams or submitting term papers, the responses were divided although the majority was agreeing with a mean of 3.3 (SD=1.386) as seen in Table 2. In the second question, the students agreed in higher numbers with a mean of 4.4 (SD=.489) where the statement was that receiving feedback from the composition draft is important to improve their writing skill. They also agreed to the fact that portfolios represent their gradual improvement in a course throughout the semester/term. About the statement on surveys helping the students to interact with the people, they agreed with a mean of 4.066 (SD=.628).

Table 2: Students' Perspective of Alternative Assessment

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. I prefer submitting term papers rather than sitting for final exams at the end of the semester	3.3	1.386
2. Receiving feedback from the composition draft are important to improve my writing skill	4.4	.489
3. I think my portfolio represents my gradual improvement in a course throughout the whole semester/term	4	.816
4. Conducting surveys for research project help me interact with people from different parts of the society	4.066	.628
5. I get to know the real life use of language from interacting with these people	3.966	.706
6. There should be oral presentation in every English language course	3.7	1.187
7. Giving oral presentation help me improve the fluency and pronunciation getting rid of my shyness	4.4	.663
8. Giving oral presentation can sometimes create mental pressure for me	3.666	1.135

The mean of their agreements got as low as 3.966 (SD=.706) when it was stated that they learned real life use of language from interacting with the people in those surveys. The mean of the agreements from the students got even lower when the question of introducing oral presentation in all the English language courses were asked. The mean in this case was 3.7 with a standard deviation of 1.187. On the other hand, they agreed to the fact that oral presentation helped them improve the fluency and pronunciation getting rid of their shyness with a mean of

4.4 (SD=.663). Lastly, they agreed with a mean of 3.666 (SD=1.135) to the fact that oral presentation sometimes create mental pressure for them.

The reason behind the students' less centralized answers can be the base of their reasoning, which is less theoretical and more practical unlike those of the teachers in the survey. There was a divide while choosing between assignments and semester (Mean=3.3) which can be caused by their lack of experience of AA techniques. The mean went below 4 again in the statement related to learning real life language from interacting while doing project based learning. This problem can be rooted in the unfamiliarity of the students with this kind of assessment tools. The same reason can be related with their unwillingness to have oral presentation in all the ESL courses which can similarly be connected to the other statement that oral presentation creating mental pressure on the students. The students showed highly positive attitude in all the other statements. It can be inferred that the students have also started to realize the benefits of the AA tools implemented in their ESL courses.

V. CONCLUSION

Almost all the responses point towards the fact that both the teachers and students had mostly positive opinions about all of them, but not all of them had the same kind of support. It was clear from the responses that oral presentations create mental pressure on the students and a possible reason behind that was found in the qualitative discussion. Not having any exposure to AA in the primary and secondary education has been often mentioned as a problem by the teachers. The high number of students per teacher was also mentioned as a problem in the way of implementing portfolios in some institutions. The use of portfolio is rapidly becoming more favorable to use as an assessment instrument. It has become an instrumental and integral part of the evaluation process to introduce an alternative strategy to evaluate and respond to student writing as it has always been in traditional evaluation (Nezakatgoo, 2011). No format of assessment is free of its drawbacks. Each of the formats have their own limitations, but using a combinations of those according to the appropriate skill levels of the students should be preferable to traditional tests in terms of validity and reliability. In fact, assessment is considered to be the key of learning a language (Duncan, 2014)

The findings in this survey aligns with the aims and objectives of assessment, which is desirable from any successful and effective method of assessment. More research can be done on the aspects where the respondents did not agree on their effectiveness or success. On a whole, it

can be inferred that AA in the tertiary level of education in Bangladesh is in a promising state which can be improved upon by addressing the aforementioned issues.

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