Alternative assessment: Portfolio assessment for young learners[*]

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Abstract

This paper explores and reviews different researchers' views on portfolio assessment and its implications to young learners' assessment. First, it states what portfolio assessment is as an important part of alternative assessment. Then, it describes young learners and the different points of view towards assessing young learners' language development, focusing on writing specially. Later, this paper illustrates some important aspects teachers should take into consideration about using portfolios with children. Finally, the paper discusses the significance of this type of alternative assessment.

El presente escrito explora y revisa las diferentes perspectivas sobre el uso de portafolios de evaluación y sus implicaciones en la evaluación de niños pequeños. Primeramente, se define el término de portafolio como una parte importante de la evaluación alternativa. Luego, describe a los alumnos pequeños y los diferentes puntos de vista sobre la evalación del desarrollo de un idioma, enfocándose especialmente en la escritura. Después, este escrito aborda los aspectos importantes que los maestros deben considerar cuando utilicen los portafolios con los niños. Finalmente, este escrito discute la importancia de este tipo de evalución.

Introduction

In recent years, several forms of alternative assessment have gained a considerable place in the language teaching process. As stated by Huerta-Macías (2002), alternative assessment is a different option of evaluation. According to Kingore (2007), alternative assessment "is more similar to a videotape than a photograph; it is a view over time rather than a moment-in-time snapshot" (p.1).This unorthodox way of assessment requires students to demonstrate what they can do, but the difference from alternative assessment and other types of testing is that in alternative assessment students are evaluated on what they have produced over a period of time, rather than in a single moment. Alternative assessment may include a variety of forms such as performance assessment, authentic assessment, informal assessment, situated assessment, assessment by exhibition, and portfolio assessment (PA henceforth) (García & Pearson, 1994 as cited in Huerta-Macías 2002).

It is the purpose of this paper to explore and review a number of researchers' points of view regarding PA applied to young learners. This review supports its value and challenges the limitations that language teachers may have encountered in traditional tests and the effects in young learners. As Ioannou-Georgiou & Pavlou (2003) point out, traditional tests, although widely accepted and generally considered objective, are not the ideal solution for children. Then, it is the intention of the present paper to expose PA as a healthy, enjoyable alternative to assess young learners.

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[*] This is a refereed article.

What is Portfolio Assessment (PA)?

Portfolios, as defined by Applebee & Langer (1992, as cited in Peñaflorida, 2002) are a cumulative collection of the work students have done. There are several forms of portfolios, but for young learners a language portfolio is a collection of work samples produced by the child over a period of time (Ioannou-Georgiou & Pavlou, 2003). These samples can include written work, drawings, projects, a record of books read, tests results, self-assessment records, and teacher and parent comments. PA is then the assessment based on students' cumulative work. This does not mean, however, that PA should be carried out only once and at the end of a course; actually it should be done along with the process of students' language development, including all the different areas.

In terms of reading and writing specially, portfolios should be developed in such a way that they meet the goals of literacy assessment. According to Farr & Lowe (1991, as cited in Peñaflorida 2002), portfolios should embrace the following characteristics:

- Teachers and students add materials to the portfolio.
- Reflections of both teachers and students are kept in the portfolio.
- Portfolios need to reflect a wide range of students' work and not only those pieces of writing that the teacher or the student consider the best.
- Samples of the students' reading and writing activities are collected in the portfolios, including unfinished projects.

Portfolio Assessment for Young Language Learners

Assessing Young Learners

According to Ioannou-Georgiou & Pavlou (2003), young learners are children aged from six to twelve, and in this case, learning English as a second or as a foreign language. Children in this age group can sometimes be negatively affected by assessment techniques used for older learners. Language teachers should strongly consider that children are different form other groups of learners. For example, Hasselgreen (2005) argues that young learners will frequently need language input and tasks that consider their maturity, and the fact that they constantly require short-term motivation. Moreover, Cameron (2005) mentions that different factors make the assessment of young learners different from the assessment in other language learning situations. These factors are age, content of language learning, methods of teaching, objectives, and learning theories.

According to Shepard, Kagan, & Wirtz (1998, as cited in Kingore 2007), the main purpose of children's assessment is to guide and improve instructional practice while providing a means of understanding how young learners are developing. This issue leads language teachers to seriously consider fairness when assessing young learners. Cameron (2005) points out that assessment plays an important role in the child's learning career. It may determine whether a child chooses to continue or not learning the foreign language and it may affect his or her motivation and interest on it.

Young Learners' Writing

Peñaflorida (2002), states that a typical portfolio contains the student's total writing output to represent his or her overall performance. These samples of students' work allow both teachers and students to assess how much their writing has progressed. As it has been mentioned, young learners' skills at this point are still in the process of development. Regarding to writing, most students aged from six to twelve are still learning the basics of how to write in their native tongue, knowing the grammatical rules, vocabulary, and so forth. A number of comments have appeared with regard to this subject. For instance, Ioannou-Georgiou & Pavlou (2003) argue that writing is considered "the most difficult language skill," since it includes many other elements such as handwriting, spelling, syntax, grammar, paragraphing, ideas, etc. For young learners the most important writing skills are mastering the alphabet, copying, handwriting, spelling, and basic sentence formation. Additionally, Scott & Ytreberg (1990) assert that writing is a long not always easy skill to master. Most of young learners still struggle with the mechanics of writing as well as with thinking about what to write.

Sometimes, language teachers may forget this fact and focus their attention on correcting handwriting, grammar, spelling and punctuation over content, and this may result in children associating writing only with error correction. Scott & Ytreberg (1990) suggest that writing, like all other language activities, should be enjoyable. They also list a number of advantages of having young learners write. These are:

- Writing gives a different physical dimension to the learning process.
- Young learners can express their personality traits through writing.
- When students write, they will naturally reflect on what they write allowing the conscious development of language.
- Many children will be proud of seeing their work in print, feeling satisfied in having the written form of what they wanted to say. No matter the level and the number of errors.

Assessing Young Learners Through Portfolios

The activities used to assess young learners should be good learning activities in themselves. Children's attitudes towards learning English can be severely damaged when it comes time for assessment. Kingore (2007) mentions that the use of norm-referenced tests should be limited, according to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE). Ioannou-Georgiou & Pavlou (2003) propose that assessment should be carried out in a way that protects the positive atmosphere and attitudes towards English and learning in general. Thus, PA is among the methods that Ioannou-Georgiou & Pavlou (2003) propose as a healthy option to assess children.

When applying PA, teachers need to specify a set of criteria in every task defining what the children should be able to do in order to demonstrate their knowledge of the particular features assessed. The assessment criteria should be expressed as actions through which the children demonstrate their development. Thus, after carrying one task for a PA, a teacher will know exactly what each child can or cannot do in terms of the predetermined aims of the activity.

Consequently, language teachers should have clear what the learning goals are. Thus, the value of each lesson will be more explicit and aims will be easier to reach. For instance, Cameron (2005) states that teachers can use a list of questions to plan assessment. In this list, teachers should consider the following issues: purposes and objectives of assessment (i.e. relevant significant content), methods of assessment (i.e. gathering and interpretation of work samples to be assessed, involving students), quality management in assessment (i.e. validity, reliability, and fairness) feedback (i.e. who and how to communicate the outcomes), uses of assessment (i.e. future references obtained from outcomes), and impact of assessment (i.e. washback effects and motivation).

Furthermore, language teachers need to design a sequence for implementing portfolios by prioritizing, organizing, communicating, and integrating (Kingore, 2007).

Prioritize. Language teachers should discuss along with their colleagues and principals about what and how portfolios will be managed in each classroom and in the school. Additionally, they should decide the number and kind of products wanted in portfolios (See Kingore, 2007 for a list of possible discussion questions).

Organize. Organizing involves determining the portfolio containers, storage location, and management procedures. In the same way, teachers need to organize an ongoing schedule for when children's work go home and communicate that schedule to parents.

Communicate. Children, parents, other teachers, and school authorities may benefit a lot by seeing the student's work. A portfolio may serve as the actual proof of the students' development and learning progress. Accordingly, the language teacher should communicate with other teachers and administrators, the children's families and, of course, with the children.

Integrate. Language teachers should make every effort to make portfolios a part of the regular routine in class rather than something extra to do. Also, they should involve children in the filling and management of their portfolio products, set time to give feedback, and integrate portfolios with assessment goals and topic objectives.

Finally, a language teacher could make use of a "generic curriculum" (see Schcolnik, Kol & Abarbanel, 2006). This type of curriculum lists the strategic knowledge that need to be learned. To evaluate children's work, after using PA a language teacher can use this constructivist model because it focuses on reporting what the students did and what the tasks included, not only on what the teacher taught.

Conclusion: What is the significance of a portfolio?

As part of alternative assessment, PA involves a considerable number of benefits for young learners, language teachers, parents, and school administrators. For instance, this record-keeping tool serves also as a concrete evidence of the students' progress. According to Kingore (2007), a portfolio documents a child's achievements and celebrates his or her learning, and it enhances learner autonomy. Additionally, children are motivated when they see for themselves that they

are making progress and their work is resulting in success. This way, Kingore (2007) states that significant advantages result when children review products to decide which to include in their portfolios. Thus, children:

- •Practice decision making.
- •Develop self-assessment skills.
- •Assume responsibility for their learning.
- •Engage in goal setting.
- •Increase their self-esteem and motivation towards learning.

At the end, of course, language teachers' role bringing into play PA will significantly facilitate learners to be better prepared to persist on learning beyond the classroom throughout their lives. The number of advantages mentioned in this paper hopefully will encourage language teachers to implement the use of portfolios and thus make their young learners' language development experience as beneficial and enjoyable as possible.

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