

Impact of Alternative Assessment in Higher Education¹

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Abstract:

*The objective of this paper is to bring to the fore the impact that alternative assessment might have on higher education both in Romania and elsewhere. Literature review is employed in the article in order to distinguish between traditional and alternative assessment, as well as to clearly define the terms proposed: assessment **of** learning, assessment **as** learning, and assessment **for** learning.*

Key words: Alternative assessment, Higher Education, Impact, Foreign languages

In order to find a place on the labor market, students in modern organizations need to gain certain competences, such as self-reflection on their own learning process, or the ability to analyze information and to solve problems.

The need for life-long learning is blooming; achievement of knowledge and abilities cannot be restricted to the initial phase of education, but it is rather a life-long lasting process. According to Dochy and Moerkerke (1997), traditional testing models only partially overlap the purposes related to life-long

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learning: reflexive thinking, self-assessment, critical thinking, problem solving, etc. They need to be accompanied by new methods, more modern ones that should answer these requirements. These methods are included under umbrella terms such as alternative assessment, authentic assessment, holistic assessment or integrative assessment and bear the same value as alternative testing (Cerghit, 2002).

The evolution of education in Romania switched from a pedagogy of listening to a pedagogy of interaction, which meant shifting the stress from knowledge acquisition and reproduction to achievement of competences and abilities at the end of the educational program. Therefore, the assessment process has evolved hand in hand with the whole educational process. Student-oriented education led to teachers' reconsideration of the assessment process. Thus, they introduced complementary assessment methods that actively involve students and motivate them.

Several researches in the field, both in Romania and elsewhere, noticed that the first student year registers the highest numbers of failures of first exams, of stress. Students switch from pre-university assessment, where they are frequently graded, to university assessment, where the result of their work is graded at the end of the semester. This switch is felt like a lack of control and reflects students' lack of metacognitive abilities; although they still fear examination and grading, students consider that increased grading instances might result in more quality in the educational product.

Many teachers consider alternative assessment methods as an important means to get a dynamic image of the development of student linguistic and academic competences. We need to keep in mind from the beginning the main hypothesis of this paper, that is, traditional and alternative assessments does not exclude each other; on the contrary, they are complementary and support each other. Starting from the premise that alternative assessment is useful as formative and

not summative evaluation, we need to mention Hamayan's definition (1995:213), which says, "alternative assessment refers to the procedures and techniques that can be used during instruction and that can also be included in everyday class activities." Obviously, there are also extreme views sustaining that "information from alternative assessment procedures can constitute the *sole* basis for much educational and instructional decision-making" (Damico, 1992), but this does not meet the purpose of our paper. We consider that applying non traditional methods in foreign language classes can be extremely useful, since teaching methods involved in these classes are most of the times non traditional.

Alternative assessments methods represent activities that reveal what the students can achieve at a linguistic level and highlight their strong points and not their weaknesses. Alternative assessment is based on performance, which also puts in the spotlight the idea that the purpose of learning a language is meaningful communication. We mention among the most important traits of alternative assessment the following:

- Assessment is based on authentic tasks that prove student's ability to achieve purposes of communication;
- Both the teacher and the student focus on communication and not on right or wrong answers;
- The student can participate in establishing the criteria for successful achievement of communication tasks;
- The student can have the opportunity to self-assess and peer-assess.

Successful use of alternative assessment depends on student performance; students can thus prove what they can really do with the language they learn. Fortunately, many of the activities in a language class copy real life challenges that can be found in a communication situation.

There are defining criteria of alternative assessment activities: they are process-oriented and authentic. They are also dynamic, flexible and systemic; they need to be used

frequently in class in order to build competences that should last in time. These criteria should follow this red line:

- To be centered on subjects and topics of interest to students;
- To copy real life contexts and communication situations;
- To involve tasks split into stages and problems that require a creative use of language and not sheer repetition;
- To require quality student performance;
- To make students well aware of the assessment criteria and standards;
- To create interaction between assessor (who may be the teacher, a colleague or the student himself or herself) and the assessed;
- To require constant feedback on both sides;
- To allow self-assessment and self-correction.

This red line leads us to the main purpose of alternative evaluation, which is to provide proof of the way students tackle, process and fulfill tasks in a certain field. Switching the focus from comparing students to one another to individual evolution can ease the assessment process by highlighting the strength of the student (what they know) and not the weaknesses (what they don't know). The strengths might include learning style, language efficiency, cultural background, and grades.

Our point of view is that alternative assessment forms students and it is a motivational instrument that makes students more responsible and pro active with respect to their own learning. How? Students' awareness of their successes or failures results in a methodological effort – successes become the basis for improving errors and have a motivational effect as well, and give the self confidence and autonomy, unblocks motivation and develops critical and analytical thinking.

The so-called “movement of alternative assessment” (Alderson & Banerjee, 2001) was prepared by other similar research in the field. Hancock (1994) looks at how the term was understood

by various scholars in the field. In 1993, Yap initiated a project to research several ESL and English for adults programs. Written, portfolio and class assessment proved valid and safe measures to obtain language efficiency. In the same year, Pierce, Swain and Hart suggest that self-assessment was extremely useful for language efficiency. Earlier before these findings, Pavis (1988) had obtained similar results through a diary where students could monitor their own evolution and also identify the problems appeared along the semester. Allwright (1988) reported increased learning quality when control is in the student's hands. These research projects support our hypothesis that the learning process is improved if alternative assessment is engaged in class.

We consider it is worth mentioning that before 1990s, assessment was based on cognitive behaviorist theory, but after the 1990s theorists proposed new alternative assessment methods to establish student evolution (Hancock, 1994). The alternative assessment proposed includes a variety of instruments that can be used or altered, based on the context. According to the literature, these instruments can be: diaries, recordings that present role-plays, audio recordings, self-assessment questionnaires, etc.

One of the most relevant opinions for our hypothesis is found in Huerta-Marcias' article (1995). She says that traditional assessment measures student evolution, but does not provide information as to what the student can actually do in the learnt language. The assessment the author suggests is focused on assessing student's ability to use the language holistically in true-to-life situations and this usually happens over a longer space of time.

It is difficult to find an assessment method that should measure both student's evolution and the success of the subject matter within an institution; that should show students how much they evolved in using their language and that should also make clear to teachers what was actually learnt. Our

hypothesis is that a combination between traditional assessment and alternative assessment might be the answer.

In a 2008 article (Clipa, 2008) we are presented a research done in Romania with respect to real versus desirable time allotted to assessment, to the content teachers assess, and to how often alternative assessment is used. The research covered 139 students in technical, socio-human and teaching areas and the result is that only 30% of school time is dedicated to assessment, which is not enough to make assessment a formative process. The conclusion of the study is that generally teachers use assessment of learning and not assessment for learning. Nevertheless, isolated cases of alternative assessment usage in language classes keep appearing. Most of them are included in ESP classes, where the interactive nature of modern teaching practically invites to alternative, formative assessment.

In order to make a link between assessment and improved higher education we need to reassess assessment. We can notice that there isn't a strong connection between assessment – and we mean assessment *for* learning, a term we will explain later in the paper, and the learning process, which keeps the education system, both in Romania and elsewhere, in a crisis. At a grassroots level, alternative assessment is considered proper for pre-university education; only several methods belonging to alternative assessment are employed in higher education, such as projects or portfolios. In order to find solutions to this situation, we need to rethink the purpose of assessment; that is to give up the idea of getting best results in standardized tests. Instead, we should focus of certain key questions: How can we use assessment so as to help students want to learn? How can we help students feel they can truly learn? What needs to be changed or rather added to the current state of assessment? To really take these questions into account we need to redirect our interest on increased student accountability in the process of learning. Current official priorities in assessment are represented by the need to find

more sophisticated and efficient tests that should generate valid and safe results. This is a good trend, since accuracy in testing is essential, but not enough. We need to maximize the impact that these results can have on students. And this can take place when we apply alternative assessment along the school year in order to help teacher take crucial decisions. The problem appears when teachers no longer have the physical time to gather all these data and to offer a useful feedback, since they are too engaged in either teaching or standardized assessing.

An explanation for this crisis situation can be found in Stiggins (2002), who analyzes the concept of *excellence* in assessment. The strong points of the concept are: establishing acquisition standards, turning these standards in rigorous assessment and teacher accountability for student success, as reflected in the grades. We can infer from here that the purpose of assessment should be informing for decision taking and motivation for learning. Unfortunately, this purpose was embedded in ever complicated standardized testing in the case of pre-university education and excellence in assessment in the case of higher education.

A solution for the assessment crisis can be found in a sensible combination between assessment *of* learning, assessment *as* learning and assessment *for* learning. Several countries outside the European Union, such as Canada or New Zealand, have brought proposals in this respect. European Union commissions on language policies are currently analyzing the possibility of shifting assessment towards learning outcomes and considering assessment *for* learning as a tool for learning. These proposals are based on the idea that assessment can contribute to the development of education if it is used for learning. If, on the one hand, assessment of learning is used as a proof for publicly reported school success, on the other hand, assessment for learning is supposed to help students learn better. Practically, the main difference lies in

the fact that the first assessment determines the state, the level of learning, and the second – promotes better learning.

Teaching, learning and assessment need an integrated approach, which should be included in the formative assessment category. Therefore, assessment of learning, assessment as learning and assessment for learning are all nothing but parallel approaches that help us gather more data with respect to how students learn, but also to how we can improve the process of learning. The principles of assessment for learning and as learning share several strategies: self-assessment and peer-review; strategies for students to monitor and assess their own learning process; feedback to help both teachers and students to establish whether the latter are ready to move to the next step in the educational process or whether they need more learning to consolidate their knowledge, understanding, abilities. And assessment of learning means summative evaluation checking what students know according to the curriculum. Assessment of learning actually helps teachers get the best decisions.

There is a clear-cut delimitation among these three types of assessment. Assessment of learning is the traditional assessment that includes final testing and grading, assessment as learning represents the metacognitive skills that students have to reflect on their own type of learning, level of learning and what strategies they can employ to get better results, and assessment for learning are the strategies provided by teachers as everyday class activities tailored to meet the student-based approach of 21st century education. This latter type of assessment needs deeper analysis, and probably a more frequent application of its principles would lead to higher quality education not only during pre-university years, but also in adult education.

In 2002, the Assessment Reform Group in Cambridge University, the very specialists who proposed the term assessment *for* learning in 1999, drew out ten principles that

are the core of assessment for learning. These imply that assessment should:

- be part of effective planning
- focus on how pupils learn
- be central to classroom practice
- be a key professional skill
- be sensitive and constructive
- foster motivation
- promote understanding of goals and criteria
- help learners know how to improve
- develop the capacity for self-assessment
- recognise all educational achievement

Therefore, evaluation for learning should help student learn better, not just obtain better grades. It reflects the belief that all students can improve their learning. We need not forget that assessment for learning encourages self-assessment and peer-reviewed assessment, based on clearly established criteria.

Assessment for learning requires teachers to use certain materials that should be proof of what students' knowledge, understanding and abilities. It involves both formal and informal assessment activities as part of learning, based on certain learning purposes clearly established. Efficient feedback is the main characteristic of this type of assessment, which motivates students and leads to improved results.

Assessment as learning takes place when students are their own evaluators. Students can monitor their own learning, ask questions and use a series of strategies to establish what they know and what they can do. The most important trait of this type of assessment is that it encourages students to take responsibility for their own leaning. When students reflect on their own way of learning, they gain metacognitive abilities; practically they learn how to learn, they learn how to ask questions regarding this process, they learn to establish – on their own or help by teachers – learning purposes that should lead to their development as students.

And assessment of learning, in other words summative assessment, measures students' abilities based on content standards. It is a measure for accountability and is part of the grading.

In conclusion, we consider that engaging alternative assessment in higher education can be a solution to higher quality education, reflected in: clearly defined accountability – students are also responsible for their learning, higher motivation for learning, increased student self confidence, reduced gap between a very small number of excellent students and a greater mass of weaker learners. And, why not, benefits can be extended to an institutional level by reaching responsibility standards and increased public recognition. These changes in education can be brought by effectively using alternative methods of assessment in higher education, as well as by modifying professional standards for teacher, which should include improved assessment abilities through specific professional development programs. All this in the light of the starting point: we need to strike a balance between traditional assessment, or assessment *of* learning, and alternative assessment, or assessment *for* learning.

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