The Place of Alternatives in Assessment (Portfolios and Conferencing) in High Schools and Universities of Iran

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Abstract

Today we can see the great tendency of teachers to use alternatives in assessment rather than the traditional assessments. With this background, the purpose of this study is to know the real place of alternatives in assessment especially portfolios and conferencing in Iran educational settings namely high schools and universities, to investigate to what extent our instructors are generally familiar with these two modes, and to understand whether they use these new ways or not. To obtain data for this research, it has been referred to 164 teachers and instructors in different fields of study in different high schools and universities. The researcher used a simple inventory questionnaire, which was prepared by the researcher and the help of one his instructors. The results showed that high school teachers are more familiar with portfolios, but they utilized it less than university instructors, familiarity and use of conferencing in university instructors are also more than high school teachers.

Keywords: alternatives in assessment, portfolios, conferences

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several years, instructors and teachers believed that learners should be educated as a person to be capable of reaching and evaluating knowledge by him/herself, negotiating its truth and validity, and be productive in the learning process. Generally speaking, today's school system and classroom contexts are influenced by the constructivist view more than before. With this philosophy, the roles of teachers and students in the teaching-learning process have been changed. Teachers would be the facilitator in the classrooms and students become the creator of their own knowledge. These dramatic changes in the role of teachers and students affected the assessment process (Vizyak, 1996).

Nowadays there has been a great tendency toward using alternatives in assessment (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Goldestein & Conrad, 1990; Hirvela & Sweetland, 2005; Lynch & Shaw, 2005). This movement tries to have more democratic and task-based ways of evaluation in examining a student's language proficiency (Brown & Hudson 1998; Aschbacher, 1991; Herman, Aschbacher, & Winters, 1992; Huerta-Macías, 1995). Alternatives in assessment methods, evaluating both process and product of learning (Belanoff & Dickson, 1991; Genesee & Hamayan, 1994; Hamayan, 1995), preparing

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appropriate, informative information (Clapham, 2000; Alderson & Banerjee, 2001), stimulating students by making them involve in evaluating process (Broadfoot, 1986; Wolf et al., 1991; Gardnev, 1992; Wiggins, 1993), improving autonomous and self-directed learning (Brindly, 2001), and devising a strong connection between assessment, teaching and learning which is in sharp contrast with traditional ways of evaluating.

As McNamara claims: "This approach stresses the need for assessment to be integrated with the goals of the curriculum and to have a constructive relationship with teaching and learning" (2000). In other words, teaching, learning, and assessment are as an integrated and interdependent chain of an event (Lee, 2007).

The processes that would be used within this paradigm comprised of checklists, journals, logs, videotapes, audiotapes, self-evaluation, teacher observations, portfolios, conferences, diaries, self-assessments, and peer-assessments (Brown & Hudson, 1998). These processes are called "Alternatives in Assessment" (Brown, 2004) as opposed to traditional assessment methods like multiple choice, cloze test, dictation, true/false, short answers tests, etc.

Table (1) introduces the main differences between the two approaches (Brown, 2004, p. 13).

Table1. Traditional and alternative assessment

TRADITIONAL ASSESSMENT	ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT
One shot, standardized exams	Continuous long- term assessment
Timed, multiple- choice format	Untimed, free- response format
Decontextualized test items	Contextualized communicative tasks
Scores suffice for feedback	Individualized feedback and wash back
Norm- referenced scores	Criterion- referenced scores
Focus on the ''right'' answer	Open- ended, creative answers
Summative	Formative
Oriented to product	Oriented to process
Non- interactive performance	Interactive performance
Fosters extrinsic motivation	Fosters intrinsic motivation

Today teachers develop various types of alternatives in assessments like portfolios, conferencing, peer assessment and self-assessment to decrease the use of single traditional assessment. The main problem of traditional assessment is that they only concentrated on learning as a product, while alternatives in assessment consider both product and process. That is why when portfolios introduced it caught great attention from the teachers and educators (Burch, 2000; Hirvela & Sweetland, 2005).

Portfolio, which is one of the ways to assess the students' performance during the learning process, dedicates instructors a great chance to evaluate his/her students' improvement and to see their works. Portfolio is a carefully selected collection of the learner's work that provides clear evidence to the learner, parent, and other assessor of the learner's knowledge, skills, strategies, grasp of concepts, attitudes, and achievement in a given area or areas over a specific time, without facing leaners with the anxiety of being compared with others or taking tests (Vizyak, 1996).

It should have a collection of the learners' best works or best efforts, learner-selected samples of work experiences related to outcomes being assessed, and documents according to the improvement and development toward mastering pre-selected outcomes (Paulson et al., 1991).

To engage students in self-regulatory learning through portfolios there might be certain benefits and pitfalls. Brown (2004, p. 257) categorized potential benefits of portfolios as:

- Foster intrinsic motivation, responsibility, and ownership;

- Promote student-teacher interaction with teacher as facilitator;

- Individualize learning and celebrate the uniqueness of each student;

- Provide tangible evidence of a student's work;

- Facilitate critical thinking self-assessment, and revision process;

- Offer opportunities for collaborative work with peers;

- Permit assessment of multiple dimensions of language learning.

Delayed, superficial entries, lack of enthusiasm, and inability to reflect are some of the main problems that are existed when keeping portfolios (Ghaye & Ghaye, 1998). Another shortcoming is that different people might have different expectations about what makes a good or competent production in teaching (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000). Understanding the concept of portfolio, its intended purpose(s), audience(s), the process to select evidence, to reflect, and to organize strategies are also important in filing up portfolios (Wray, 2007).

Portfolio can comprised of a range of materials like essays, reports, audios or videos, homework assignments, self- and peer-assessment (Brown, 2004). In order to determine portfolio quality, literature experts present a number of evaluation grids, a grading scale with five steps (Van der Horst & McDonalds, 1997):

Poor*:* The learner does not accomplish the task, does not complete the assignment, or shows no understanding of the activity;

Inadequate: The product or evaluation does not satisfy a significant number of criteria, does not accomplish what has been asked, it contains errors, or it has a poor quality;

Fair*:* The product or evaluation meets some criteria and does not contain obvious errors or important omissions;

Good*:* The product or evaluation meets the criteria completely;

Outstanding: All the criteria are met, and the product or evaluation surpasses the assigned task and contains additional, unexpected or outstanding features.

Conferencing, a special kind of purposeful dialogue or negotiation between teachers and learners, can be assumed as a new form of assessing students' uptake in different educational environments. Genesee and Upshur (1996) point out that conferences, involve both teachers and learners meeting each other in an office or classroom to discuss the students' production in their learning process, their weaknesses and strengths.

Genesee and Upshur (1996) argue that conferences are different from other methods of assessment in that "they focus directly on learning process and strategies" (p. 110).

Conferencing is a crucial part of portfolio assessment. It is a "semi-structured face-to-face conversation between a teacher and a student or a small group of students in which work being undertaken is discussed" (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, pp. 105-106).

The advantages of conferencing have been emphasized in the literature (Genesee & Upshur, 1996; Brown, 2004; Besharati, 2004; Firooz zareh, 2006; Heidari, 2009). Brown and Hudson (1998) state that in general, the advantages of conferences are that teachers can use them to:

- Foster student reflection on their own learning process;

- Help students develop better self-images;

- Elicit language performances on particular tasks, skills or other language points;

- Inform, observe, mold and gather information about students (p. 663).

Brown and Hudson (1998) also listed some of possible functions of conferencing:

1. Commenting on drafts of essays, articles, and reports;

2. Reviewing portfolios;

3. Answering to journals;

4. Advising on a student's program;

5. Evaluating a proposal for a project;

6. Giving feedback;

7. Making clear the comprehension of a reading;

8. Investigating ways for promoting performance;

9. Evaluating general improvement in a course.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

 In a study, Elahinia (2004) investigated the assessment of writing through portfolios and achievement test. Her study included two groups, one experimental group which were assessed through portfolios, and one control group that were assessed based on traditional achievement tests. She concluded that not only portfolio has advantages, but also can modify students' negative attitude toward writing.

Nezakatgoo (2005) wanted to examine the value of portfolios as an instrument for students' preparation of micro-level skills for their final examinations. He made a comparison between portfolio-based and non-portfolio-based writing classroom. The finding of the study demonstrated a significant difference between the two groups. The use of portfolios in his class helped to improve students' final examination score and their mastering of the mechanics.

Ghoorchaei, Tavakoli, and Nejad Ansari (2010) explored the impact of portfolio assessment as a process-oriented assessment on Iranian EFL students' writing ability. There was a comparison between two groups; one experimental group that took portfolio as a treatment, and one control group that was taught writing based on traditional approach. The results showed that portfolio assessment enables students learning of writing.

Pezeshki (2010) made a comparative study of e-portfolio, portfolio, and conventional writing classes. In her experiment, there were two experimental groups and one control group. She found that there is no significant difference among these methods considering their effects on Iranian students writing.

To explore the impact of portfolio assessment on writing, Sharifi and Hassaskhah (2011) tried a time series design. In the first half of the semester they utilized a traditional-based teaching and in the second half a portfolio-based teaching. There were five pretests and five posttests. They concluded that there is a close relationship between teaching and testing, and portfolio has a positive effect on students writing ability.

In a research, Besharati (2004) investigated the interplay between Iranian students' listening comprehension and alternatives in assessment (conferencing and self-assessment). During a semester, he considered the influence of self-assessment and conferencing on students listening comprehension skill. There were one experimental group and one control group. Finally, she claims the positive effect of alternatives in assessment on students listening comprehension.

In a study, Firooz Zareh (2006) wanted to know the interplay between Iranian students' reading comprehension and alternative assessments (conferencing and self-assessment). In this research, there were one experimental and one control group. Based on his study alternative assessment had a positive effect on students reading comprehension.

Zarghami (2011) has searched the impact of student generated test and conferencing on Iranian students' grammar acquisition. According to the results that are attained from two experimental groups and one control group, she asserted the inclusion of alternative assessment procedures in assessment and instruction.

Moradan and Hedayati (2012) investigated the impact of portfolios and conferencing techniques on Iranian EFL learners' writing skill. They had two experimental groups and one control group. The participants in the first experimental group were asked to write four paragraphs during the course, assess themselves, and answer a self-assessment checklist. The participants in the second experimental group were asked to take part in four classes and two individual conferences after writing each paragraph. The participants of control group based on the traditional approach just received scores about their writings without any oral and written feedback by the teacher. The results of this study demonstrated the influence of alternatives in assessment techniques on Iranian EFL learners' writing skill. The better performance of the two experimental groups provides support for the alternatives in assessment methods.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1- Are the instructors in high schools and universities familiar with portfolios?

2- Do they use portfolios in the assessment of their students?

3- Are the instructors in high schools and universities familiar with conferences?

4- Do they use conferences in the assessment?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants in this study were in total 164 instructors at different universities and high schools. They were 77 teachers in high schools and 87 instructors at universities teaching in different fields of study. They comprised of both males and females with different ages and years of experience, and academic standing i. e., M.A. and Ph.D.

Instrument

A simple and short Yes/No questionnaire was prepared by the researcher and by the help and guidance of Dr. Rastegar, the instructor of Language Testing at Bahonar university of Kerman. The questionnaire comprised of these four questions:

1- Are the instructors in high schools and universities familiar with portfolios?

2- Do they use portfolios in the assessment of their students?

3- Are the instructors in high schools and universities familiar with conferences?

4- Do they use conferences in the assessment?

The participants read each question and answer them on an answer sheet, which was provided by the researcher. The answer to these four questions is just Yes or No, whether they are familiar or no, whether they use these alternatives in assessment or no.

Procedure

To obtain data for this study, the researcher went to each instructor's office individually and gave him or her the questionnaire to answer. In order to facilitate gathering the data, saving the time, and giving the instructors more insight about these concepts (portfolios and conferencing) and their usages, the researcher along distributing the questionnaire utilized a short explanation.

RESULTS

In this study, 164 participants who comprised of 77 (47%) high school teachers and 87 (53%) instructors at universities took part. After gathering the data, the following results have been attained:

RQ 1: Are the instructors in high schools and universities familiar with portfolios?

Table 2. Portfolios familiarity

	N	Yes	No
High school teachers	77	59(76%)	18(24%)
University instructors	87	54(64%)	33(36%)

The whole number of high school teachers in this research was 77 people. Based on findings, 59(76%) out this number were familiar with portfolios and 18(24%) did not know about them. For university instructors, 54(64%) of participants were acquainted with it, but 33(36%) were not acquainted.

RQ 2: Do they use portfolios in the assessment of their students?

Table 3. Using portfolios

	N	Yes	No
High school teachers	77	31(40%)	46(60%)
University instructors	87	43(49%)	44(51%)

In this study, 31(40%) of teachers used portfolios for assessing their students, but 46(60%) out of total number of teachers did not use portfolios in their evaluation. For university instructors in case of using portfolios in their teaching, we found that 43(49%) of them utilized this method, in contrast 44(51%) did not utilized.

RQ 3: Are the instructors in high schools and universities familiar with conferences?

Table 4. Conferencing familiarity

	N	Yes	No
High school teachers	77	58(75%)	19(25%)
University instructors	87	83(95%)	4(5%)

For conferencing familiarity, 58(75%) of high school teachers were familiar, and 19(25%) were not. Majority of instructors are familiar with this mode of alternatives in assessment and the number that stands for it is 83(95%), while only 4(5%) of them were not familiar with conferencing.

RQ 4: Do they use conferencing in the assessment?

Table 5. Using conferencing

	N	Yes	No
High school teachers	77	34(44%)	43(56%)
University instructors	87	74(85%)	13(15%)

Only 34(44%) used conferencing in their assessing, while 43(56%) didn't use this way of evaluating. The number of instructors who held conferences with their students was 74(85%), and the number of those who did not hold conferences in this study was 13(15%).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the recent years, alternatives in assessment broke the ground in language testing and evaluation. Today in Iran, we can see the trace of alternatives in assessment in elementary

schools, teachers have to provide portfolios for each student, and assess them based on these portfolios, next to it they must hold on conferences with students and with their parents to talk about their children learning status. With this background, the researcher wanted to know the real place of these new methods of assessment (portfolios and conferences) in high schools and universities.

In case of comparison between teachers in high schools and instructors at universities, we found that teachers are more familiar with portfolios than instructors (76% to 64%), but instructors use portfolios more than teachers (49% to 40%). Instructors' familiarity and use of conferencing are more than teachers'; their familiarity is 95%, while teachers' is 75%; the instructors' use of conferencing is 85%, but teachers' is 44%.

 There might be some reasons for teachers and instructors who do not use these new modes of assessing:

1- Teachers in high schools need to take and teach 24 hours a week to complete their timetables. In most cases, it is not possible for them to have just one class, and a specified group of students for a semester, they should select their courses in different schools with different and many students. We could also have the similar case for the instructors at universities, regarding number of students and time allocation to these activities. Thus, it is difficult, burdensome, and time-consuming to provide portfolios for all learners and to hold on conferences with students about their status and learning.

2- Authorities, policy makers, government, stockholders, and those who are in power prescribe for teachers conditions, guidelines, and ways of assessing and give them less opportunity to be creative in evaluating their students.

3- In Iran, when Ministry of Education ordered teachers in elementary schools to implement portfolios as new ways of assessing instead of traditional assessments like summative exams and paper-pencil tests, teachers tended to carry out the former ways, because teachers felt much more comfortable and dominant in handling them, they put less burden on the teachers' shoulders, they were easier to cope with, and took lesser time of the teachers. Thus, we might have the same case in high schools and universities.

4- Next reason might be related to wash back effects and consequential validity of testing on teachers and learners. In our context in Iran, in most entrance exams at all levels we can see the traditional ways of assessing, like standardized tests with multiple-choice format. It might be one reason why most teachers tend to use the traditional ways of evaluation and focus on promoting students' abilities to be more successful in these tests for their future careers and moreover to obtain job.

5- Another reason relates to parents, their wants, and the influence of them on schooling and authorities to respond to their demands. Parents are more familiar with the traditional ways of assessing and can supervise and have better picture of quantitative grades rather than qualitative ones, because they experienced the traditional ways of assessing.

In conclusion, teachers and instructors who are not familiar with these new ways of assessing must be informed and motivated to implement these methods in their

assessing. Although, it takes too much time to prepare portfolios and have conferences with students about their learning status, these modes of assessing will be crucial as a document which indicate the students' academic assessment, show us how much a student know rather than who knows more, help us to respect individual differences, accept them as a whole person with different backgrounds, different needs, personalities, and finally with different attainments in their lives.

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