

# ALTERNATIVES IN STUDENT ASSESSMENT FOR THE EFL CLASSROOM

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## INTRODUCTION

To mention the word assessment for many students immediately makes them think of tests. Such tests are “important” and worthy of exam status. In Japan, the word “exam” collocates with “hell” especially for entrance to a high school or university. Classical conditioning develops in the students’ psyche to the point that if a language is to be tested in the traditional manner, the teacher risks killing it as well. The nature of examination hell takes on monumental proportions, to the extent that learning English for the purpose of entering a good school becomes in and of itself a paradigm not just for education, but for life. J. D. Brown of the University of Hawaii at Manoa discusses this paradigm in a social and psychological light. In particular, Brown discusses the effects of the entrance exam system on: adolescent life; the egalitarian roots of the exams; the relationship of the exams to career opportunities; the nature of cram schools and those who attend them due to past failure; the responsibilities involved in making decisions with such exams; and the washback effect of the English language entrance exams on EFL teaching (Brown & Yamashita, 1995a). On the one hand, it might be wise to change the system, but that is unlikely, the careful teacher must incorporate alternative forms of assessment in the EFL classroom in light of their experience in the entrance exam system. This paper will explore

recent releases in the field of assessment and teaching methodology. The first part will consider alternative ways in assessing students, while the second part will consider two teaching scenarios in light of student needs.

### **ASSESSMENT OF STUDENTS: WHO ARE THEY?**

The conditions under which many Japanese students get their start in learning English can be described as Spartan. Spolsky, in 1988, proposed a general theory of second language learning by asking the question, “who learns how much of what language under what conditions” (Spolsky 1988). In this he explores four major areas of influence. 1) the social context of the attitudes to the learner’s social context, positive or negative and the attitudes of the social context towards the learner, positive or negative. 2) The attitudes of alienation and assimilation of the learners towards the people who use the target language and vis versa. 3) Motivation coupled with age, personality and mental capabilities. And 4) learning opportunities, formal and informal. In light of Spolsky’s model, Japanese college students live in a society that has a history of maintaining social distance among non-Japanese people while selectively appropriating foreign influences (H. D. Brown 1980); they learn English in highly formal teacher-centered classroom settings; and the motivation is on personal gain or performance on an entrance exam. Typically, children have to study English to gain entrance to a good school. Once the exams are over and the student is in a university, good or whatever, changes occur. Methods of assessment other than formal testing need to be used in order meet the needs of the students in a university setting, or in other words, since students are no longer preparing for an entrance exam, they need, however, the opportunity to prepare their English skills for life.

When considering the learning opportunities of students, it

might be well to approach this from the perspective of what the students themselves say they would like about what makes a "good" English class. Stephen Ryan (1995) reports that many elements go into the making of a language lesson: the teacher, students, materials, atmosphere, ground rules, physical facilities, supplementary resources, to name a few. In his study, he attempts to understand, from the learners' point of view, what elements are necessary to make the lesson a good one. In addition to asking Japanese university students, he surveyed junior and senior high school students, also students in company classes and technical schools. The task was for the participants to write in detail about the best English lesson they ever had, what was good about it and how it was different from all the rest. The results were surprising in that from such a vast assortment of respondents, the elements of a good language lesson differed very little. In brief, Japanese college students prefer a conversational lesson that is fun, where the teacher is foreign, where they as students are active and videos are used. They enjoy small classes, games, and prefer practical English where the explanations are easy to understand.

Another component of the Spolsky model concerns learner attitude and its effect on motivation. When entrance to a good school is not the motivator, the attitude and motivation of the student changes somewhat. David Greer, 1996, investigated the relationship between motivation and foreign language learning by using the often Gardner and Lambert Orientation Index. Students were surveyed to determine the connection between attitude, motivation, and proficiency. His survey produced useful results thus enabling the teacher to choose textbooks, design supplementary material, and consider to what extent conversational practice of English is needed. The survey asked students to order how they feel about English: "If you could speak English really well: 1. I could write on my resume that I passed a

very difficult proficiency exam; that would really be great; 2. it would really be helpful in learning more about the lifestyles of English speaking people (Americans, British, Australians, etc.); 3. I would be able to make a lot of friends in and out of Japan, with fellow Japanese and people from other countries; 4. it would help me raise my sensitivity toward culture and the finer things in life.” As intended, sentences (2) and (3) reflect an integrative orientation while sentences (1) and (4) show an instrumental one. The difference between these two is that (2) and (3) have a concern that includes other people, while (1) and (4) emphasize personal benefit or gain. The results from his study and my students (see table below) show they want to make friends (3) and then they wish to become more sensitive toward other cultures and the finer things in life (2). It is interesting that the students do not feel that English is useful for occupational purposes not do they really care to much about learning about the lifestyles of the very people whom they wish to befriend.

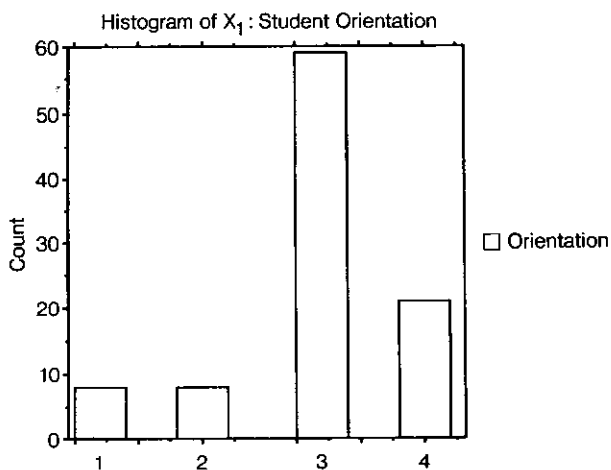


Table 1

## ALTERNATIVES IN STUDENT ASSESSMENT FOR THE EFL CLASSROOM

Given the desire for friendship among English speakers both in and out of Japan, and the secondary desire to seek self-improvement, and the desire for less formal classroom settings, the issue of vocabulary becomes another axis by which to assess students according to Spolsky's model. The extent to which their learning opportunities have enabled them with a context vocabulary aimed at functioning in social settings and competency within an academic environment speak directly to the issue of formal and informal learning experiences that contribute to having an extensive vocabulary. In particular, having an extensive vocabulary for academic studies, and after having decided exactly what vocabulary to focus on (Harlech-Jones, 1983) for making a diagnostic test learners can best benefit from a principled vocabulary development program that uses both direct and indirect teaching methods to assess and expand the learners' vocabulary size, depth, and fluency.

A quick and objective way to assess learners' vocabulary size is to administer Paul Nation's Vocabulary Levels Test for 2,000, 3,000, 5,000, 10,000 and university word levels (Béglar & Hunt 1995). The test measures a word's core meaning and it is based on the General Service List (West, 1953). The test looks like this:

1. original
2. private        ———        first
3. royal         ———         not public
4. slow         ———         all added together
5. sorry
6. total

The six words are from a particular word level (in this case, the 2,000 word level) while the definitions come from higher frequency levels.<sup>1</sup> It is argued that a combination of direct and indirect

approaches will assist learners in acquiring the vocabulary they need in the shortest possible time.

After the vocabulary size has been assessed for each student, then there are many options open to the teacher at this point, all beginning with ensuring that high frequency vocabulary is to be learned receptively and productively. As stated in his book *Teaching & Learning Vocabulary*, I. S. P. Nation states that “there are very strong reasons for a systematic and principled approach to vocabulary by both the teacher and the learners... vocabulary work can be directed toward useful words and can give learners practice in useful skills... there is a wide variety of ways for dealing with vocabulary in foreign or second language learning... vocabulary is... [the] most important element in language learning... [and it] is unavoidable.” (Nation 1990). For instance, in dealing with high frequency words, the teacher might use direct teaching in which words are explained in class and where work is done on exercises to teach the words in order to build up the students’ vocabulary so they may become better producers. There is also direct learning where learners make use of word lists and vocabulary cards, the benefits are that it does not take much time and the learner knows just what he or she is or is not learning. And thirdly the students may learn their vocabulary indirectly through the reading of or listening to carefully selected simplified material; this might include graded readers, news broadcasts in special English, or any other source in which the vocabulary proficiency of non-native speakers is a concern. But after major pedagogical decisions as to what grader reader is best, or how much time to spend on word lists have been made, and once the students are beginning to produce English in its spoken or written form, how can the teacher be of optimal service to each learner with respect to vocabulary?

Teachers need to relate adequately receptive ability to language production in a manner that students will comprehend.

This can happen in the context of form focused instruction with an emphasis on comprehensible input and comprehensible output—the whole time the learner being in charge of his or her propositional content (Krashen, S. D. 1978). Students who have a clearer understanding of where they are and what is expected of them will be more goal oriented in their learning.

All the proposed instruments for student assessment together with the theoretical underpinnings have brought us to the first hour. As for the remaining thirty nine classroom hours, I propose the following two scenarios.

## **PART TWO: TEACHING SCENARIOS**

### **Scenario One: Self-Tracking Progress**

In their book *Alternatives in Second Language Assessment*, Genesee and Upshur introduce evaluation in a three fold manner: that for evaluation to be evaluative and therefore meaningful both to the teacher and the learner it must be composed three elements; information-determining what is needed and how to collect it, interpretation-making sense of it, and making appropriate decisions (Genesee 1994: 7, 9, 10). While each class has its conversational component, I will focus my teaching scenarios on vocabulary acquisition through direct and indirect methods. This raises the level of assessment to consider the extent to which students are independent readers and; how effective are they as writers.

## **SOURCES OF ALTERNATIVE INFORMATION**

As for vocabulary acquisition and reading, an intensive reading component and an extensive reading component as part of the class design fosters an acquisition rich context for learning. The intensive reading component is a time and place for students

not only to learn text attack skills but new lexical items as well. That they are to approach the task by using bottom-up and top-down strategies. A bottom-up strategy would be skimming the text in order to make an outline. This can be followed up by a top-down question that addresses the passage's significance, or the "so-what" of it all. A textbook that meets these demands is *Interactions II A Reading Skills Book* published by McGraw Hill. It lends itself well to such teaching needs in that each of the twelve chapters is divided into four parts which focus on the chapter theme from differing perspectives. Part One of each chapter consists of brief pre-reading exercises, a reading, three different skill-based exercises- "Getting the Main Ideas," "Guessing from Context," "Understanding Reading Structure," and discussion questions that relate the reading to students' lives. Part Two has a lighter reading that lends itself well to skimming, inferring, and separating opinion from fact. Discussion questions follow. Part Three is dedicated to vocabulary and study skills. Part Four includes realia ; a page from a brochure, advertisements, course listings. Students will be expected to scan for information. At this point, the textbook affords many opportunities for the collection of information. In this manner, students are to manage and read texts in English without reverting to Japanese as much as possible. This can be accomplished in two ways, a) by controlling the amount of time that students can spend on a given skimming or scanning task would indicate their proficiency level of processing the text in English, and b) by making an in-house dictionary.

The in-house dictionary is a student produced item and it based on the 2,000 word level. Each student is assigned an appropriate number of words to list and define in both Japanese and easy English. Whereupon the next class they bring their work in multiple copies so that everyone may benefit from each others' effort. From that dictionary, flashcards can be made if necessary.



Through simple observation, a teacher can get a feel for their cooperation in this community-based task by milling about the classroom.

As the class progresses, students are to organize and keep samples of their writing in a portfolio. They will enable the teacher to sample bits of student generated information. A portfolio needs to contain evidence of original materials at various levels of textual interaction. Portfolios are systematic, purposeful collections of students' work. The benefits are many in that they show continuous and cumulative records of students' writing or other work; they remind students that at one time they really improved and; students have a sense of ownership. A portfolio can give the teacher insights about students' learning and such information will be useful in planning future instruction. Students will also be expected to share their work with peers. At this point, evaluation on a per assignment level has left the hands of the teacher and now rests with the students. Via the internet and e-mail, students of a university or of several universities can exchange assignments if their teachers coordinate appropriately.

### **EVALUATION THROUGH INTERPRETATION: ITS TIME AND PLACE**

It is proposed that the students share and interpret their work among people who are not enrolled in college with the hope that this will foster a real world atmosphere, in that the English they study will be can is being used in the real world. It is hoped that the students themselves will develop a clear notion of English as a means of facilitating discussion and sharing ideas. The teacher, then, should see student portfolios as a resource for criteria for assessment where each student decides for him or herself just to what extent they are going to invest themselves in their portfolios. To make such an investment also means working through the text-

book at their own pace either individually or in small groups. In order to organize students into small groups, what is needed is a criteria of achievement that can be agreed to beforehand so that the students to live up to their contractual agreements. This approach may further simulate a real world atmosphere in that students are not just the owners of their work, but architects of their learning. This kind of approach where they are active readers and also writers in a community is a severe departure from the widely held view that the role of the reader is a passive one (Nuttall 1982: 5). The role as a teacher has shifted from one who lectures to one who organizes and enables.

Conferring with the students individually or in small groups at *intermittent intervals* to see how they are doing is necessary since the teacher is no longer at the center of the learning. Such conferencing would ensure a sense of accountability on the students' part, another opportunity for them to interpret their work, and a setting in which there would be a lot of meaning focused interaction between the student and teacher. While there are many kinds of portfolios: best work, work in progress, content, omnibus, and focused portfolios; it is felt that a work in progress and content portfolio would be most appropriate.

#### **HOW THE PORTFOLIO WOULD SERVE THE STUDENT AND THE TEACHER**

Given that the ultimate aim of a progress and content portfolio is to enable them to become independent readers and effective interacting managers of naturally occurring texts it would be wise to have students include evidence of having skimmed a text. A worksheet called "The Skimming Check" could be used in assisting students in that task and the said textbook affords many meaning focused exercises to this end. Skimming is a skill that require selectively reading for information such as the title, the first

and last paragraphs, and just the topic sentences in the in between paragraphs. Provided that the student knows the vocabulary items within that sub-text, then he or she will be able to apply his or her background knowledge and infer meaning.

“The Skimming Check” should contain an outline based on the student’s skimming of the document. In order to outline meaningfully, students have to come to terms with unknown lexical items. This process should activate their background knowledge that you already know and in so doing, two things happen: 1) their existing formal schemata gets instantiated and 2) the text’s content schemata becomes integrated into their formal schemata for building up new schemata. In short, the advantages of having an outline component in a student portfolio are as follows: the student can easily see the significance of parts of the text and; then it is easy for both the student and the teacher to see what schemata is needed for reading. If students have good content schemata, and good formal schemata, that will help them to understand a text. Outlining is important because I have noticed that my Japanese students often have good content schemata but they often do not have the necessary formal schemata. So, teaching the text structure by way of having an outlining component in their portfolio aims to help to students learn about formal schema.

Another component of assessing students’ reading is monitoring their response to the text at hand. This would be for the student to respond to the text by using spoken and or written discourse as to how the text addresses issues in the student’s life and or society. A dialogue journal component to the student portfolio as an out of class activity would give students practice in writing at the point of utterance. Their topics could range from strictly answering the questions in their text with a few sentences, or going beyond the text and its questions so as to think critically, generate ideas, and express personal views. For a dialog journal

component of the portfolio to be effective, it has to be original. The students should have a choice of a topic, generate their own ideas, limit the subject, make a first draft, field responses, make a second draft, and then a final draft. When these steps are carried out among the students themselves and possibly with internet partners, assessment will happen and it will happen without the teacher. The job of the teacher is to construct an overall plan ; to improve reading skills and writing skills. Between the second draft and final draft, the teacher should make marginal comments. For those students who are not ready for such a task, all well and good, their efforts can be praised so as to increase their interest and motivation. Those who disclose that they are ready for carrying out a prolonged and extended writing task beyond the textbook level assignments will self-select themselves by creating a truly original piece of writing in response to their book or topic of interest.

In response to the reality of self-selection, I have found that student-teacher contracting as a result of conferencing to be a useful alternative to the prevalent norm-referenced approach to student assessment. In the early phases of developing a portfolio, the teacher will have a pretty good view of how students are or are not achieving. Based upon that, can be asked students, in the context of a conference, to agree to a set of criteria that they are willing to attain. For many, this is a first for such contracting and naturally they are curious how a grade will be established from such a contract. After explaining that a student teacher-contract is a departure from the classical norm referenced approach to assessing students, that the students themselves are solely responsible for their work, self-improvement, and final grade, they have a real life situation on their hands. To answer their questions about grading, if they minimally meet all aspects of their contractual agreement, then they get a B. If they exceed the mark, then they will be awarded an A. If they fail to live up to their word, then in varying levels they

are affixed with a whatever seems appropriate. Failing grades should be reserved only for those few who willingly produce nothing, who knowingly plagiarize or never attend class. The teacher should never fail students, rather, they fail themselves and that needs to be understood in terms of their self-assessment based on their performance, or more commonly, lack thereof.

In summary, the ways to reach students have included some relevant aspects of alternative forms of students assessment, namely that of portfolios and conferencing with an emphasis on student-teacher contracting. With students working individually at times and in small groups, it is hoped that the students would discover a sense of community and autonomy while learning to become independent readers and self-sustaining writers. But this is only a part of a class. For the other, extensive reading by way of using SRA or the Scientific Research Association's reading laboratory can be utilized to teach vocabulary indirectly.

#### **Scenario Two: SRA as an Extensive Reading Program Component**

Any extensive reading program needs to be interesting, have a high motivation content and it needs to be accessible. Teachers in universities do not have their own classrooms in Japan. Rather, they shuffle about from room to room. While there may be a Language Center, it is often a place for teachers to prepare materials and staff to coordinate curricular affairs, not always a place for students to work and browse. An extensive reading program that works is one that is portable. SRA boxes, 1c, 2a and 2b, fit this need quite well.

There are two main reasons for using SRA for extensive reading: budgetary; it is relatively inexpensive when weighed against computer assisted learning systems and; pedagogical: students can read at their own level and pace. Extensive is only a component to their class, so they have more than just one lesson

a day. It lends itself well to communicative way of learning English from writer to reader. Students typically don't hear English every day, but they can learn get the input they need from reading extensively.

### THE MECHANICS BEHIND SRA

According to Don Parker, the director of SRA, the goals of the program aim to help students develop comprehension, vocabulary, work analysis, and study skills. It seeks to improve reading rate and interest students in reading a vast variety of information to enlarge their general background knowledge of the world by using factual and fictional selections. It also aims to set the learner face to face with the fact they he or she is ultimately responsible for their own education and growth as readers in English, the student is in charge.

SRA works for my students because they differ in how fast they can read as well as in how much they can comprehend. SRA meets the needs of slow, average, and advanced learners by providing a multilevel approach in a single classroom. It offers individualized reading material and instruction for all students. After some orientation, students work independently by scoring their own work and keeping accounts of their progress. The reading materials are organized into a series of color-designated difficulty levels that have a wide range in reading levels. For each box, there are ten levels and in each level there are fifteen cards. Therefore, if a class has fifty students and at least two boxes, there are about three hundred cards ready for immediate use.

### SRA WITHIN AN ALTERNATIVE EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

Many students are tired of English since the English language section on the college entrance exams confirmed their expectations that they are not independent readers. Therefore, it is important

to avoid starting any student with the SRA program at frustration level. Nearly everyone should start well below their proficiency level and then when they are ready, they may move to a more appropriate level.

Interfacing with student progress can happen best in two places: 1) for most story cards, there is a creative writing component that asks students to imagine an alternative ending or some other top-down interpretive task and; 2) during a student-teacher conference, progress charts can be reviewed and new goals can be set. Movement through SRA boxes is largely linear, jumping around should be discouraged.

As for the first item, creative writing, such short essays can be included in the students' progress portfolio. After having read a card, done its short open-book test, then the student can write a creative short essay. The value of such essays is that they show how well the student is able to write in English when his or her schema is fully induced. For students who elect not to write, then, as Krashen would agree, let them help themselves to more input until they so feel motivated enough to produce output.

To make sense of the short essay components, the teacher can look for specific information as to how well student is: 1) comprehending and interacting with the text; 2) how many sentences they feel comfortable generating before stopping and; 3) the richness or depth of their vocabulary. Since progress throughout the SRA boxes is largely a linear affair, students would be encouraged to keep on progressing.

Once a student has out grown SRA, then they are ready for the library to select a book or magazine. That student needs to be just as accountable as the other students who remain in SRA.

## CONCLUSIONS

In summary, once students know what is expected of them,

then most will actually try to attain their goal. It is a sad case when students do not get a chance outside of highly structured test situations to demonstrate their ability. Conferencing can happen during class, by asking for the work of three students and spending about ten minutes a piece with them.

The focus of this paper has been on alternative ways for assessing students in the EFL classroom. Those ways have encouraged improving receptive reading skills by measuring vocabulary size; including an extensive reading program open to all students at their particular reading levels; involving the students through contractual agreements so as to produce written English; teach vocabulary in a direct manner through dictionary making and flashcards; and lastly it is necessary that an appropriate measure be given to students at the outset, such as a TOEIC or TOEFL test so that the test be repeated at set intervals throughout the course or year to mark performance on a repeated measures test.

<sup>1</sup>For a more complete discussion of levels tests and testing, and for a complete set of tests please refer to *Teaching & Learning Vocabulary*, I. S. P. Nation.

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