

# IMPLICATIONS OF IMPLEMENTING ALTERNATIVE

## Implications of Implementing Alternative Assessment in an EFL Context: Some Pedagogical Suggestions for Public Schools in Colombia

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## IMPLICATIONS OF IMPLEMENTING ALTERNATIVE

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IMPLICATIONS OF IMPLEMENTING ALTERNATIVE

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### **Abstract**

Alternative assessment is a movement in language assessment that seeks to complement or replace traditional forms of assessment that may involve true- false or multiple choice items. Using a variety of assessment methods other than traditional paper-and-pencil tests, this approach for assessment gives students an active role in the assessment process, encourages them to demonstrate their competence in the second language, and conceives assessment as an integral part of language teaching and learning. Thus, this paper aims to analyze literature and research on this topic in order to establish the implications of implementing alternative assessment to suggest some recommendations for the development and implementation of alternative assessment methods in an EFL context. It is argued through this paper that the use of alternative assessment can be valuable in Colombian public schools because it is intended to support students' language learning, enhance the development of their language skills and provide varied assessment methods that match communicative methodologies required these days in our EFL setting.

*Keywords:* implications of implementing alternative assessment, alternative assessment methods, EFL context, Colombian public schools.

### **Resumen**

La evaluación alternativa es un movimiento que busca complementar o reemplazar formas tradicionales de evaluación que incluyen el uso de preguntas de opción múltiple y falso y verdadero. Por medio de variados métodos de evaluación distintos a las pruebas de lápiz y papel, este enfoque brinda a los estudiantes un rol activo en el proceso de evaluación, los estimula a demostrar sus competencias en una segunda lengua y concibe la evaluación como una parte integral de la enseñanza-aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera. Por lo tanto, el objetivo de este documento es analizar literatura e investigaciones sobre evaluación alternativa para establecer las implicaciones de su implementación y sugerir algunas recomendaciones para el desarrollo e implementación de métodos de evaluación alternativa en un contexto de inglés como idioma extranjero. A lo largo de este documento se argumenta que el uso de evaluación alternativa puede ser valioso en las escuelas públicas colombianas debido a que esta apoya el aprendizaje del lenguaje, mejora el desarrollo de las habilidades lingüísticas de los estudiantes y ofrece una diversidad de métodos de evaluación que están acordes con metodologías comunicativas que son requeridas por estos días en nuestro contexto de inglés como lengua extranjera.

*Palabras clave:* implicaciones de la implementación de evaluación alternativa, métodos de evaluación alternativa, inglés como idioma extranjero, escuelas públicas colombianas.

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### **Implications of Implementing Alternative Assessment in an EFL Context: Some Pedagogical Suggestions for Public Schools in Colombia**

The assessment process is a vital and integral part of language teaching and learning, and it is “an issue that needs special consideration, particularly now that these processes start earlier in our student’s lives” (Cárdenas, 1997, p. 58). In the field of language assessment, it is common to find teachers who stick to traditional ways of assessment such as tests because they were the ones that their teachers used with them or because they are easier to administer, score and are not time-consuming (Cárdenas, 1997). Despite the fact that traditional testing procedures have certain advantages and can be useful means for assessment, they do not provide complete information on the students’ needs and progress, and most of the times they do not engage students to perform using the foreign language.

As a result of this situation that is commonplace in our setting and similar ones around the world, new ways of assessment have been proposed to overcome some problems related to traditional testing techniques. Those innovative ways of assessment are known by many authors as alternative assessment, a new trend that in language teaching tries to go beyond traditional testing that usually involves the use of traditional paper-and-pencil tests (Brown, 2004). Alternative assessment includes a variety of methods and techniques which encourage the students’ performance in the second language, allow both the teachers and students to follow their progress and linguistic development, engage students in their learning, and provide teachers with a variety of sources to collect information about the strengths and weaknesses of their students, among others. Therefore, alternative assessment can be a coherent way to enhance language assessment in an EFL context since it is in accordance with current language teaching methodologies that focus on assessing the learning process while students use the foreign language.

In view of the importance and the benefits that alternative assessment can bring to our educative settings, the purpose of this research paper is to analyze the implications of implementing alternative assessment in an EFL context in order to establish some pedagogical suggestions about the possible ways to implement alternative assessment methods in public schools in Colombia. For that reason, a review of the most relevant literature related to alternative assessment will be made with the purpose of showing its importance, explaining its characteristics, as well as the benefits and challenges of applying some procedures of alternative assessment in an EFL setting.

In order to achieve the objective, the paper will start with the definitions of evaluation, assessment and testing. Later, the origins, definition and characteristics of alternative assessment together with the methods of alternative assessment will be discussed. Then, a review of practical applications of Alternative assessment in EFL contexts will be made. Next, the implications of incorporating alternative assessment in an EFL context will be analyzed, and afterwards, some pedagogical recommendations to implement alternative assessment in public schools in Colombia will be suggested. Finally, conclusions regarding the topic of this paper will be drawn.

### **Evaluation, Assessment and Testing**

Taking into consideration that first, this research paper will focus on alternative assessment, and second, some teachers in our context seem to use the following terms interchangeably (Sánchez & Obando, 2006), it is essential to have a clear idea of key concepts such as evaluation, assessment and testing so that teachers can make a distinction between these terms and understand their importance, differences and relationships.

First of all, according to Nunan (as cited in Sánchez & Obando, 2006), evaluation is defined as the collection and the interpretation of information about aspects of the curriculum which involve learners, teachers, materials, etc. with the intention of making decisions.

Moreover, Brindley (2001) stresses that evaluation “is concerned with the overall language program and not just with what individual students have learnt” (p. 137). This way evaluation is a general term that covers assessment and tests at the same time.

On the other hand, the term assessment also needs to be defined due to the relationship with the topic of this research paper and its association with evaluation and testing. For Brown (2004), assessment is an ongoing process in the classroom that encompasses a much wider domain than tests. He argues that “whenever a student responds to a question, offers a comment or tries out a new word or structure, the teacher subconsciously makes an assessment of the student’s performance” (p. 4). Besides, this author points out that in the educational practice people interchange this term with testing and might think they are synonymous, but they are not. Brown (2004) contends that tests are part of the larger group of assessment, and assessment is at the same time a subcomponent of evaluation.

In addition to the earlier definitions, Brindley (2001) considers that assessment refers to “a variety of ways of collecting information on a learner's language ability or achievement” (p. 137); this way, it includes the different tools, techniques, and methods used for the collection and interpretation of information about what learners can do and the reasons that contribute to their success or failure. Hancock (1994) adds that assessment is not only a way of monitoring the learning of students from the part of the teachers, but it is also an ongoing process that involves students in monitoring their own performance.

Now that we have a clear idea of what evaluation and assessment imply, it is important to clarify the definition of testing. According to Hancock (1994), a test functions as a monitoring device for learning. For this author tests are given at a particular point in time to "sample" student’s learning, they are commonly kept hidden from test takers and they are usually given a score or grade, and based on those results decisions are made. Finally, Brown (2004) defines a

test as the instrument that teachers use to measure the ability, knowledge or performance of an individual, and he clarifies that they are included in the umbrella term of assessment.

All in all, these definitions allow to see that evaluation, assessment and testing are something that are always going to be found in any educational context and their role is going to be fundamental for the teaching and learning processes. It is essential to notice that testing and tests are just one of the many possibilities for assessing language learners, so there are other means for assessing that need to be considered and used. Moreover, assessment needs to be recognized as a continuous process that is not just concerned with getting scores and grades, involves different means for collecting information about students' learning process, and most importantly has the potential to facilitate and enhance language learning.

### **What is Alternative Assessment?**

As a result of new demands on education, and the different changes in the conceptions of teaching and learning, teachers and theorists have been reconsidering the ways of assessing the learners' progress. Consequently, before starting with the definition of alternative assessment, it is necessary to deal first with some issues behind the trend of alternative assessment so that we can appreciate the significance of such movement for the assessment of a second or foreign language. So let us start dealing with this issue.

### **Origins of Alternative Assessment**

Herman, Aschbacher and Winters (1992) point out that due to societal and educational trends, new forms of assessment gave rise in the educational field. In this sense, the influence of economic tendencies led to school reforms that demanded students to develop skills to work with other people, adapt easily to change, and most importantly, apply the knowledge they acquired rather than just "memorize and regurgitate large bodies of facts" (Herman et al., 1992, p. 14). Likewise, research into cognitive theories of learning brought about important changes in

teaching and learning. Hence, learning started to be seen as an ongoing process, the active role of the learners as well as their different strengths were recognized, and affective factors such as the motivation and the need of acquiring skills for applying knowledge in real-life situations were also acknowledged (Herman et al., 1992). All of those changes and demands in the field of teaching and learning would inevitably request new ways of assessing learners.

Thus, although traditional assessment procedures, associated with traditional testing procedures such as multiple-choice, fill-in-the-gaps, matching, are regarded as easy to create, administer and simple to mark, they have been considered not to be the best and only option for assessing students in the current context, given that their characteristics do not meet all the demands required in the contemporary educational contexts.

In this manner, in the field of ESL and EFL, the development of educational goals towards more complex and higher standards, integrative views of language, and pressure for the development of higher-order skills in students gave rise also to alternative ways of assessment (Hamayan, 1995). This movement emerged when a shift from structural teaching approaches to communicative ones that were more humanistic and focused on the learners was taking place (Shabban, 2005). Thereby, ESL and EFL curricula started focusing on developing communicative competence, integrating language, content and language skills. It is acknowledged therefore that traditional assessment such as paper-and-pencil tests and its summative form of testing are not the best tools for assessing the variety of tasks that take place in courses focused on communicative activities (Shabban, 2005).

For that reason, to respond to the current tendencies of our society and education as well as to the deficits of traditional assessment, educators in different fields such as language teaching and learning have advocated for alternative ways of assessment.

**Definition of Alternative Assessment**

The shortcomings of traditional assessment and other factors addressed above let us see the dissatisfaction with traditional methods of assessment and the need for developing other alternatives that allow assessing language learners in a more effective and fair way in the current educational context. Now, the next issue to be considered in this paper is the definition of alternative assessment according to different authors who have addressed this important topic related to language teaching and learning.

To begin with, some researchers like Huerta-Macías (2002) and Tsagari (2004) claim that there is no single definition of alternative assessment, but there is an agreement in its objectives. Stiggins (cited in O'Malley and Valdez Pierce, 1996) affirms that alternative assessment can refer to “any method of finding out what a student knows or can do, that is intended to show growth and inform instruction and is not a standardized or traditional test” (p. 1). In this way, alternative assessment methods are considered to take into account the particularity of the students’ needs, interest, learning styles, as well as to make the integration of assessment and learning activities possible (Shaaban, 2005).

Additionally, Hancock (1994) points out that in the field of second languages the term “alternative” represents alternatives to the conventional ways of monitoring the language progress of students. Hence, alternative assessment, according to him, “is an ongoing process involving the student and teacher in making judgments about the student's progress in language using non-conventional strategies” (p. 3). Besides, Hamayan (1995) stresses that alternative assessment “refers to procedures and techniques which can be used within the context of instruction and can be easily incorporated into the daily activities of the school or classroom” (p. 213).

Alternative assessment has also been acknowledged as an important source that offers great opportunities for “gaining a dynamic picture of students' academic and linguistic development” (Tannenbaum 1996, p. 1). This author makes the point that alternative assessment can be very useful with ESL and EFL learners because it makes use of some strategies that request learners to display what they can actually do with the language they are learning, so students are assessed based on “what they integrate and produce rather than on what they are able to recall and reproduce” (Huerta-Macías, 2002, p. 339).

There is also a diversity of terms used to refer to the idea of alternative assessment and assessing students' language products and processes without the use of tests; authentic assessment, performance assessment, continuous assessment, on-going assessment (Tzagari, 2004) are some of those labels. Nevertheless, their differences will not be addressed in this paper because of space limitations, and the term alternative assessment will be used throughout this paper because as Tzagari (2004) says “it is more generic than the other terms and it incorporates characteristics of the other commonly-used labels” (p. 7).

### **Characteristics of Alternative Assessment**

Using alternative assessment methods for assessing English language learners can be a way to enhance and facilitate language teaching and learning in the Colombian context since they involve certain characteristics that bring about several benefits for students, teachers, as well as for other people involved in the teaching and learning process.

First of all, instead of making a comparison among students, alternative assessment allows to monitor and document the progress of individual students, and it is sensitive with the students' learning styles, language proficiency, and educational backgrounds (Tannenbaum, 1996).

Another appealing characteristic of alternative assessment is that it allows the evaluation of both the process and product of learning, helps teachers collect information regarding students'

learning strategies as well as their affective and personal factors (Tzagari, 2004). Alternative assessment methods also require the use of higher-order thinking skills and call for a performance or creation, so students are encouraged to make real use of the language they are taught (Tzagari, 2004).

Likewise, alternative assessment methods foster collaborative work since students can collaborate and work together with their peers as well as with their teacher in the development of different tasks. Equally important, they promote autonomous and self-directed learning because students are stimulated to judge their strengths and weaknesses as well as to set goals for learning (Tzagari, 2004).

The variety of alternative assessment methods provides also valuable information that benefits not only teachers, students, but also parents and administrators (Hamayan, 1995). On the one hand, students will be able to understand their achievements and to take responsibility for their own learning; besides, it lets parents get informed about what their children do at school, and teachers collect information that helps them in the decision-making process. Lastly, administrators “can benefit from the clear information about student and teacher attainment over time” (Hamayan, 1995, p. 215).

Brown and Hudson (as cited in Brown, 2004) also claim that alternatives in assessment do not intrude on classroom activities and allow students to be assessed based on their daily basis-work in class. Last but not least, in alternative assessment teachers are recognized as reflective and self-motivated professionals that have the commitment of enhancing students’ learning.

In brief, alternative assessment can be seen as a promising approach for assessing learners in an EFL context since its principles aim at the improvement of assessment practices and, in consequence, of the teaching and learning of an L2. Accordingly, it is advisable that EFL teachers in the Colombian context implement or use other methods to assess, additional to the

traditional testing techniques, with the purpose of obtaining valuable information about the students' progress from varied sources to adjust their teaching practices and enhance students' language learning at the same time.

### **Methods of Alternative Assessment**

When talking about alternative assessment, it can be said that teachers count on different possibilities that can be adapted and adopted for assessing EFL students in our setting. However, teachers have to take into consideration that “not all methods are appropriate in all situations” (Cárdenas, 1997, p. 61). For this reason, in this section some of the most important methods of alternative assessment will be described, and their advantages and limitations will be addressed.

#### **Portfolio**

Tannenbaum (1996) states that “portfolios are used to collect samples of student work over time to track student's development” (p. 3), and they evidence the students' accomplishment and skills (Farrell & Jacobs, 2010). A portfolio is not a mere folder of student work; it implies an ongoing process that involves the student and the teacher in the assessment and learning process (Hanckok, 1994). For that reason, portfolios need to be planned carefully in advance so that teachers and students can benefit from it at the maximum levels.

It is noteworthy to mention that there are certain items of students' work that are expected to be included in a portfolio according to the purposes and users (Cárdenas, 1997). Hence, it is common that portfolios include drafts and final reports of compositions (like essays, book reports and other written samples), project outlines, poetry, graphs, photos, recordings of presentations in audio or video, personal reflections like journals, notes and records of conferences and interviews, tests and quizzes, self- and peer-assessments, and checklists, among others (Tannenbaum, 1996; Cárdenas, 1997; Brown, 2004).

Portfolios are considered innovative pedagogical tools for assessing English language learners as they foster intrinsic motivation and help students develop their sense of responsibility towards assessment and their learning process (Farrell & Jacobs, 2010; Cárdenas, 1997). They encourage students' centeredness (Viáfara & López, 2011), critical thinking and self-assessment (Brown, 2004); besides, portfolios facilitate student- teacher interaction (Brown, 2004), the development of communicative competence (Viáfara & López, 2011), and allow teacher, students and parents to see the student's progress.

However, when working with portfolios a disadvantage that teachers can face has to do with time (Cárdenas, 1997), even more in the Colombian setting since it would take considerable time to analyze and assess the contents of the portfolios, as well as to respond and conference students in large groups.

### **Self- and Peer-assessment**

Self- and peer-assessment are considered the most participatory and democratic tools of alternative assessment (Cárdenas, 1997). Brown (2004) contends that self-assessment is justified theoretically by fundamental principles of second language acquisition such as autonomy and intrinsic motivation development; this author sees that the ability and desire of setting goals, pursuing and monitoring them within and beyond the classroom are fundamental to succeed in language learning (Brown, 2004). On the other hand, peer-assessment is supported by principles of cooperative learning, and facilitates the delivery of input from peers in the assessment process.

Self- and peer-assessment makes it possible students' involvement in the learning and assessments processes, give them the opportunity to judge constructively their work (Cárdenas, 1997), and increase students' motivation and develop their autonomy as learners (Brown, 2004). In a learning context like the Colombian one teachers will be able to encourage students to reach some of the expected goals in education such as the development of their analytic capacity

(Cárdenas, 1997) and the ability of setting their own goals to become life-long learners (Farrell & Jacobs, 2010). All in all, allowing students to self-assess and develop peer-assessment will let students know that they are responsible for their own learning.

Nevertheless, with these methods of assessment there is also the threat of subjectivity from the part of the students since some of them will show only their good things while hiding their difficulties, while others will tend to underestimate their work. Besides, for some students it might be difficult to achieve “real introspection and analysis” (Cárdenas, 1997, p. 67).

For those reasons, language teachers have to take into account that self- and peer-assessment require constant practice and guidance from their part, even with adult learners (Cárdenas, 1997). Brown (2004) suggests that to avoid subjectivity, it is necessary to provide clear criteria which will facilitate students’ objective self- and peer assessment, as well as include this method of assessment in different tasks such as “journal reflection, written feedback from the teacher, conferencing with the teacher, or any combination of the above” (Brown, 2004, p. 277).

### **Journals**

Another popular alternative in assessment is the journal. Brown (2004) states that “a journal is a log (or “account”) of one’s thoughts, feelings, reactions, assessment, ideas, or progress toward goals” (p. 260). Usually when writing a journal little attention is given to form or correctness, so learners can write without the pressure that their thoughts will be judged later. For Brown (2004), journals can be written for different purposes such as grammar journals, responses to readings, self-assessment reflections, and as diaries of attitudes, feelings, and other affective factors.

Taking into consideration that students in an EFL context lack opportunities for practicing their foreign language outside the classroom, teachers in the Colombian setting should consider journals as way to practice the L2. For instance, teachers and students may use dialogue journals

which will involve them in a mutual interaction and will facilitate that students write about their learning process, their experiences, and so on; then, the teacher collects the journals and writes a response (Cárdenas, 1997).

Considering our context, journals can help teachers become more familiar with the students' learning process, their affective states, and they will be able to address more easily their needs in the learning process (Brown, 2004). Moreover, journals can be useful tools to monitor and to develop writing skills, vocabulary and communicative skills (Cárdenas, 1997). This author also claims that journals can be motivating for students because they can be a means to express things that they would not probably express openly in front of the classroom.

However, journal as an alternative assessment can be a challenging way of assessing large groups like those in Colombian classrooms considering that responding and analyzing them can be very time-consuming (Cárdenas, 1997).

### **Conferences and interviews**

Conferences involve the teacher and one or more students with the aim of having a conversation or discussion regarding what they are doing or what they did, the things that they found either easy or difficult, as well as the strategies they are using for overcoming the difficulties (Cárdenas, 1997). In consequence, the teacher can provide feedback on the real and specific needs of the students (Brown, 2004). Colombian English teachers may implement conferences in their classrooms for “commenting on drafts of essays and reports, advising on a student's plan for an oral presentation, giving feedback on the results of performance on a test, clarifying understanding of a reading”, among others (Brown, 2004, p. 265).

When dealing with conferences it is necessary to address interviews as one special kind of conference (Brown, 2004). According to Brown (2004), an interview is “a context in which a teacher interviews a student for a designated assessment purpose” (p. 165). Language teachers

could use interviews for assessing the student's oral production, for assessing their own performance, and for requesting information about a course.

By means of conferences, including interviews, teachers have the advantage of becoming acquainted with the student's communicative abilities, their attitudes and emotional states, their pace of learning, and their strengths and weaknesses (Shaaban, 2005). On the other hand, one outstanding drawback of conferences and interviews has to do with time because like most of the alternative methods they are time-consuming (Cárdenas, 1997; Brown, 2004).

### **Performance-based Assessment**

Performance-based assessment is considered to be "one of the primary traits of the many available alternatives to assessment" (Brown, 2004, p. 655), and it includes tasks that involve productive and directly observable skills like speaking and writing. Thus, in performance-based assessment students are asked to create a response or a product that integrates the language skills, make use of higher-order thinking skills, and integrate assessment with instruction (Pierce, 2002).

Performance-based assessment tasks will allow teachers in the Colombian context to take a step forward in their assessment practices since, instead of focusing on memorization and recall of information, teachers will ask students to demonstrate and do something with the L2. Therefore, by means of performance-based assessment, feedback about students' strengths and weaknesses as well as descriptive information about the teaching and learning process will be facilitated (Pierce, 2002) which can be more effective and useful to redirect and enhance language instruction.

There are a variety of performance-based assessment tasks to choose from and that teachers can adapt and use in their classroom to suit their particular needs. Pierce (2002), following the classification of McTighe and Ferrara (1998), considers three categories of performance-based assessment: products, performances, or process-oriented assessments. First,

performance-based assessment as products requires an outcome result of their application of knowledge; they include tasks such as writing samples, projects, and portfolios. Second, tasks that require a performance and ask students to apply “their knowledge and skills under the direct observation of the teacher” (Pierce, 2002, p. 2); hence, some common examples of performance tasks embrace oral reports, skits and role-plays, demonstrations, and debates. Third, process-oriented assessments are those that focus on the student’s motivation, thinking and reasoning processes. Here are included think-alouds, checklists or surveys, as well as self- assessment, and individual or pair conferences.

As can be noted, alternative methods of assessment are diverse and numerous and all of them display the characteristics of a more fair and beneficial assessment for EFL language learners. Hence, EFL teachers in Colombia who are conscious that a language test at the end of the term cannot assess everything, may start adapting and using different kinds of assessment like the ones presented in this paper taking into account their particular settings, the goals of their class and the needs of their students. In the end, most of the methods of alternative assessment detailed earlier will allow teachers to reach some of the long-expected goals that cannot be met with traditional assessment techniques.

So far, some definitions related with evaluation, assessment and testing, along with the definition and characteristics of alternative assessment have been discussed. In addition, the methods of alternative assessment have also been described. Now it is time to address some studies related with the implementation of alternative assessment in EFL contexts.

### **Review of Practical Applications of Alternative Assessment in EFL Contexts**

The implementation of alternative assessment might be more effective if we take a look at some studies that have been carried out in EFL contexts and have applied some of the methods previously described in this paper. Therefore, in this section of the paper, some selected studies

which explore the implementation of different alternative assessment methods in EFL contexts will be revisited. The focus will particularly be on the possible traits that allowed researchers to successfully implement alternative assessment methods in EFL settings. Although some of the following studies may not embrace the reality of Colombian public schools, their results and conclusions will help enlighten our understanding on the possibilities and challenges of implementing some methods of alternative assessment in our real language learning context.

Muñoz and Álvarez (2007) conducted research on the correlation between students' oral self-assessment and teachers' assessment, as well as the students' perceptions toward self-assessment. In this study, 94 college students and five teachers of a language center in a private university in Colombia were involved. Teachers who participated in the project were trained to conduct self-assessment with their students; then, they developed a training session with them on how to self-assess their oral performance using a self-assessment form and a scoring instrument that contained the criteria to self-assess their oral activities.

In the results of this study, Muñoz and Álvarez (2007) emphasize that students were able to self-assess with accuracy and they had positive attitudes toward the practice of self-assessment; besides, self-assessment helped them reflect on their own learning and identify study strategies. According to the authors, the success of the implementation of self-assessment was mainly due to the immediate feedback from the part of the teacher, the training sessions, as well as the criteria and the tools to self-assess. The authors emphasize that the precision of the scoring instrument was also linked with the objectivity in the students' self-assessment.

However, they also realized that some students found it difficult to assess some aspects of their oral performance; consequently, the authors suggest that it was necessary to have clearer descriptors so that learners can understand them easily. In the same token, the majority of the students considered that the teachers were objective in the assessment whereas some of them

considered themselves as not objective ones. Muñoz & Álvarez (2007) consider that it may reflect cultural bias from the part of the students related to ideas of the traditional role of teachers as the only ones in charge of assessment; hence, they suggest that the continuous practice of self-assessment will create confident and motivated students in self-assessment activities.

A similar project related with the implementation of self-assessment as an alternative assessment in an EFL context was carried out by Baniabdelrahman (2010) in the EFL setting of Jordan. Baniabdelrahman (2010) investigated the effect of self-assessment on the English reading performance of Eleventh grade students in Jordan. The sample consisted of four Grade 11 sections that were assigned to a control group wherein they received traditional assessment and an experimental group where they received self-assessment as a treatment.

This study revealed that self-assessment influenced positively the performance of reading in English and facilitated the students' learning; hence, this alternative assessment method provided more opportunities for improvement in contrast to traditional assessment since it was found that students in the experimental group progressed more in comparison to the ones of the control group. Baniabdelrahman (2010) also recognizes that self-assessment involved students in a continuous participation, helped them to direct their own learning, and increased their motivation. According to this researcher, the positive results of this study are due to the students' active involvement fostered through the instruments used to self-assess and understand the readings, and he recommends that students should receive training regarding self-assessment so that it can have positive effects when implemented.

Some studies regarding peer-assessment have also been implemented in other countries. Peng (2010), for instance, focused on oral presentations and investigated the students' attitudes towards peer-assessment and the score correlations between teacher assessment and students'

peer-assessment in a University setting in Taiwan. The participants of this study were students of two different classes with different proficiency levels who were taught by the same teacher.

The data collected through surveys and interviews suggest that students in both groups had positive attitudes towards peer-assessment since they regarded that this alternative method of assessment increased their motivation, their participation, the interaction between students and teacher, as well as offered more opportunities to speak English. Moreover, it was also found a close correlation between the students' peer-assessment and teacher assessment in both groups of students.

Nevertheless, Peng (2010) reports that carrying out peer-assessment within large classes is very time-consuming; hence, he recommends that few assessment criteria should be used in order to save time under those conditions. Finally, this author contends that peer-assessment is a feasible alternative to assess EFL students since it involves and empowers them in the assessment process and encourages teachers to use diverse assessment methods.

In the Colombian setting, Viáfara and López (2011) report their experiences on the implementation of portfolios in three different Universities and discuss the way students perceive the process of implementing portfolios in contexts like English for Specific Purposes courses, an undergraduate academic literacy course, and a teaching practicum course.

In their findings, they acknowledge that portfolios involve students in a continuous process of reflection since they were “constantly monitoring what they learned, how they learned and what factors contributed to their learning” (Viáfara & López, 2011, p. 125). They also recognize that using portfolios required moving from a summative approach to evaluate to a formative one which is more focused on the process of learning. Autonomous work was also promoted through portfolios since students were encouraged and able to plan the portfolio

development (Viáfara & López, 2011), and they acknowledged that their motivation increased as a result of their perception of progress.

Nevertheless, it was challenging for some students to detail their achievements and weaknesses as well as to find out the factors that led to those results (Viáfara & López, 2011). Similarly, their close relationships and their inexperience in identifying problems caused a limited delivery of feedback to their peers. As a result, the authors suggest that clearer and specific guidelines and allowing more than one student in the peer-assessing of portfolio will help overcome those problems.

Nunes (2004), like Viáfara and López (2011), conducted research on portfolio with a group of 10<sup>th</sup> grade students in a high school in Portugal in a period of one year. In her study, the author explored how students' reflections through portfolios help the teacher make informed decisions regarding the teaching and learning process and provide at the same time a learning experience which involves students in the process of learning. Nunes (2004) started by introducing portfolios to the students, she explained the aims as well as the contents of it, and stressed the importance of including reflections on everything that could be important for their learning process.

Regarding the first results of her study, it was found that students did not include reflections in the different pieces included in the portfolio. Thus, Nunes (2004) sees that students were not used to think about their learning, regardless of all the years they had attended high school. Consequently, as a way of helping students, the author used questionnaires related to the learning process and devoted some time to teach explicitly learning strategies to solve specific tasks. The author claims that “after a somewhat weak beginning in portfolio development, in which silence and chaos reigned, in the end, the students' voices began to be heard” (Nunes, 2004, p.329).

Despite the difficulties in the first stage of the project, the author concludes that the use of portfolio helped students monitor their learning, involved them in the learning process and developed their autonomy as learners. Besides, portfolios in an EFL setting made it possible for the teacher to adopt a more learner-centered practice based on the student's preferences, styles, dispositions, and learning strategies, as well as facilitated the integration of assessment, teaching and learning (Nunes, 2004).

In a further study, Moradan and Hedayati (2011) investigated the impact of alternative assessment methods such as portfolios and conferences on writing skills of 92 Iranian EFL students at University. The researchers compared three groups assigned randomly to two experimental groups and one control group who had to write 4 paragraphs. The first experimental group developed a portfolio with 4 paragraphs that included self-assessment. The second one was involved in 4 group conferences and 2 individual conferences after they wrote each paragraph. The students in the control group were involved in a traditional approach for assessing and just received their scored papers with comments regarding grammar and spelling errors.

Based on the information provided in a written paragraph that the three groups developed as a post-test after the different treatments, Moradan and Hedayati (2011) concluded that although the experimental groups were close to each other in their written performances, there was a considerable difference in the written performances of the experimental groups in comparison with that of the control group. According to the authors, the reasons of such result have to do with the feedback that students receive from the teacher. They emphasize that whereas students who worked with portfolios and conferencing assessment received feedback from their teachers, students in the control groups were just given a score that did not help them improve their writing. Moreover, students in the experimental groups were involved in the process of learning, so they had the opportunity to self-assess, reflect and check their progress as well as

communicate it to their teacher. This continuous engagement of the students from the part of the teacher motivated them to learn and improve their writing skills. Additionally, the authors consider that with the integration of teaching, learning and assessment, the “assessment tool becomes a kind of learning tool that helps students to learn and improve their writing skill” (Moradan & Hedayati, 2011, p. 16).

Finally, Baleghizadeh & Zarghami (2012) conducted a research project with 42 Iranian intermediate EFL students who were involved in different careers at University and were taking a course named General English I. In their study, the authors explored the impact of conferencing assessment on grammar learning and the students’ attitudes toward grammar learning. There were two groups taught by the same teacher, one experimental group that received four individual and four whole class conferences as treatment, and a control group that was taught the same grammatical topics but did not receive conferencing assessment. In both groups, Baleghizadeh & Zarghami (2012) analyzed a grammar test and an attitude questionnaire regarding formal grammar learning that was administered both at the beginning and at the end of the course.

The result of the study revealed that implementing conferencing assessment helped students in their grammar learning process. The authors found out that the participants in the experimental group outperformed participants in the control group on the post-test and they showed more improvement regarding grammar learning. Additionally, students in the experimental group who received conferencing assessment changed positively their attitudes towards grammar learning. The authors attribute those positive results to the fact that conferences allowed teacher to communicate directly with students so they were able to facilitate students’ learning by helping them identify their strengths and weaknesses and by giving appropriate feedback.

As the previous studies have shown, research on the implementation of alternative assessment has generated a great deal of positive results in different EFL contexts around the world which offers support for the variety of alternative assessment methods.

One noteworthy aspect that is prominent in the studies is the fact that alternative assessment methods displayed more positive outcomes for language learning when contrasted with traditional assessment. Although traditional assessment methods were useful and generated positive results, it could be noticed that after implementing alternative methods of assessment language learning was enhanced and students tended to show significant improvement that outperformed students in control groups who just received traditional assessment. In this manner, implementing alternative assessment methods facilitated the development of the students' ability to monitor and reflect on their process of learning, and fostered students' intrinsic motivation, which results in the strengthening of their autonomy as learners. In like manner, alternative assessment methods offered opportunities for practicing English, made it possible the integration of teaching, learning and assessment, and changed students' negative views regarding the assessment process.

Regarding the requirements that were vital to overcome some issues and were crucial for the successful implementation of the different methods of assessment, it can be noticed some factors such as the training to conduct particular assessment tasks, the use of clear criteria and accurate assessment instruments, as well as the constant guidance from the part of teacher. Likewise, it was suggested that the continuous practice of some methods of assessment is essential for their mastering within the EFL language classroom.

In terms of the role of the teacher in the different research studies, it was one of a facilitator of the learning and assessment processes who was in charge of guiding, monitoring and encouraging a continuous interaction with students. On the other hand, students are perceived

as active learners who are continuously involved in the assessment tasks. This way, alternative assessment implied the adoption of a learner-centered practice that takes into account student's particularities and needs, focus on the formative aspect of assessment and is oriented towards the process as well as the products.

Last but not least, it can be said that bringing alternative assessment to our educational context will definitely enhance the teaching, learning and assessment processes of an L2 in our EFL setting, and teachers as well as students will have varied assessment methods and tasks that will bring additional benefits to those found in traditional assessment techniques.

In this section of the paper a review of some applications of alternative assessment in EFL context were analyzed. The next section addresses the implications of implementing alternative assessment in EFL classrooms.

### **Implications of Implementing Alternative Assessment in an EFL Context**

Taking into consideration that Colombian schools have changed the direction in language instruction towards the use of communicative methodologies that call for learning a foreign language for communicative purposes, the need of assessment procedures that are in agreement with that goal is obvious here. For this reason, teachers who conduct language assessment focusing only on traditional forms of testing may see that they possibly work well for certain aspects, but they have to recognize that they are not the most suitable tools for assessing the performance of communicative language skills that are required nowadays. Accordingly, alternative assessment methods such as portfolios, journals, and so on, are more appropriate means to assess students within the current context since most of them require that students use and apply the foreign language in different situations and offer additional advantages for the teaching and learning process that are difficult to accomplish using traditional assessment.

However, it is essential to highlight that alternative assessment represents a profound

change for any context, and therefore, it might be challenging for Colombian language teachers, even more when they mainly prefer to use traditional assessment, tend to focus their assessment practices on summative assessment, and just provide students with a grade as the only way of feedback (López & Bernal, 2009). Under those circumstances, EFL teachers in the Colombian context need to be prepared to face new issues and challenges when they implement alternative assessment in their classrooms. Regarding the challenges of alternative assessment in EFL contexts different authors consider that the following points are recurrent and might have positive or negative effects on the implementation of alternative assessment.

One of the first issues that may influence the success or failure of the implementation of alternative assessment in EFL settings is that of teacher education and training. Existing research shows that teachers who do not receive an adequate amount of pre- and in-service training in language assessment tend to have a negative view of language assessment, do not consider the assessment process as an integral part of instruction, and are not likely to use multiple assessment methods like those of alternative assessment (López & Bernal, 2009; Yang, 2008).

Under these circumstances, preparation on teaching methodology coupled with language assessment training must be provided to EFL teachers. Therefore, undergraduate courses in ELT programs are responsible for developing the knowledge base of prospective language teachers (López & Bernal, 2009; Çetin, 2011) as well as for providing instruction regarding communicative teaching methodology and assessment strategies that are in accordance with its principles. Likewise, in-service language teacher training may include courses and workshops that provide language teachers with principles, techniques, and strategies regarding alternative assessment so that they can deepen their knowledge (Yang, 2008), and in this manner, apply it in their classrooms in order to create a variety of valid and reliable assessment methods with the potential to enhance the teaching and learning process.

Equally important, teachers should share their experiences regarding assessment with their colleagues, as well as keep in touch with scholars to share knowledge and to get the support to solve problems (Yang, 2008). This researcher interestingly recommends that school administrators may also develop an on-line resource center in which teachers can download and review assessment resources and materials.

Then, time constrain is considered to be another recurrent obstacle when implementing alternative assessment methods. Different authors contend that alternative assessment methods are considered to be time consuming, and in some cases language teachers may need additional time both inside and outside the class (Çetin, 2011).

To address this issue, O'Malley and Valdez Pierce (1996) point out that teachers have to consider alternative assessment methods as something integrated with instruction rather than something that requires extra time away from instruction. As a case in point, when working with portfolios, teachers can plan their schedules and use some of the classroom tasks as means of assessment; this way they avoid portfolios turn in extra tasks that will require additional time of their daily agenda. These authors stress that as a teacher “you need to make time for assessment, just as you make time for instructional activities” (p. 51).

These researchers also recommend other ways to lessen time demands when using alternative assessment. First, language teachers may assess students while they work in small groups; accordingly, they could be assessed by their performance as a group and by the quality of their work. Another practical idea to make room for assessment is to assess students in “staggered cycles”. In this manner, in the context of large classes like those of Colombian public schools, language teachers may consider assessing two or three students per class until assessing the complete group. Continuing with O'Malley and Valdez Pierce's suggestions (1996), language teachers can make the most of self-assessment, since once that students have learned how to

conduct self-assessment by means of using a set of criteria, teachers can encourage them to carry it out with little assistance. In that case, teachers may then check students' self-assessment regularly and use the remaining time to assess other issues. Last but not least, Çetin (2011) recommends it is essential to create consistent routines since alternative assessment methods are more effective when students become familiar with them by means of repetition and consistency of tasks.

Additionally, some teachers' worries are also related with the high demands on both language abilities and complex thinking skills in the performance of some alternative assessment methods (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996; Çetin, 2011). However, this issue can be addressed by providing appropriate assistance that may include modeling, visuals, as well as by decreasing the demands on language in the tasks (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996).

Another way to handle concerns related with assessment of tasks that are thought to be highly language-dependent, is to provide students with different means to respond (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996). For instance, according to the characteristics of the class and their proficiency level in English, EFL teachers may assess students allowing them to give short answers in their responses or to make a semantic map in texts (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996). Similarly, students at the stage of preproduction of language may be allowed to use nonverbal assessment responses such as physical demonstrations (pointing, using gestures) and pictorial products like drawings, graphs, charts, etc. (Tannenbaum, 1996).

In addition, oral interviews with students at early stages of language learning can be carried out using visual cues such as pictures (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996), so students are encouraged to talk while teachers ask questions that require students to elicit specific vocabulary (Shaaban, 2005). These tasks, that are in agreement with methodologies like Total Physical

Response, are not so complex to carry out and it is more likely that students find them more appealing since they are a “natural extension of learning activities” (Shaaban, 2005, p. 37).

Teachers may also decide if it is more practical to include assessment tasks in which they work more and contain less challenges for students in terms of cognitive and language abilities such as providing them instructions and training (Çetin , 2011). However, this author stresses that the more students work, and the more challenging the task is, as the case of portfolios and peer-assessment, the more cognitive impact the task will have.

Equally important, the classroom context can be another issue of concern since it plays an important role in the decisions that are made when implementing alternative assessment (Çetin, 2011). Thus, some of the outstanding problems of Colombian public schools such as teaching to large classes, the scarcity of resources and materials, and the limited time devoted to foreign language teaching (Cárdenas, 2007; Sánchez & Obando, 2008) may represent obstacles and new challenges for applying some methods of alternative assessment.

For that reason, language teachers have to be well-versed regarding the different alternative assessment methods and strategies, as well as they have to be familiar with the reality of their own context (Lenski, Ehlers-Zavala, Daniel, and Sun-Irminger, 2006). This way before planning assessment, it is recommended that teachers be acquainted with the curriculum of their programs in order to know if it is sensitive with the students’ needs, what the resources available are, and what the institution’s expectations are (Lenski et al., 2006). Afterwards, it is vital to plan lessons carefully in advance, as well as plan assessment as you plan instruction. In this fashion, teachers will be able to take into consideration aspects such as class profile, class size, classroom management issues, availability of materials, and the physical environment of the class; this will facilitate making appropriate decisions in the context they teach, and maybe they will realize that some assessment methods and tasks will be more feasible than others.

Finally, when implementing alternative assessment, the lack of support to teachers can be another obstacle that may hinder its positive effects. Therefore, instead of starting this endeavor alone, it is suggested that language teachers count on the support of their colleagues, administrators as well as of students' parents if possible (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996). By doing this, their first attempts with alternative assessment will be facilitated because they will be able to share their successful experiences as well as to examine those areas that need to be strengthened.

Definitely, alternative assessment, like any other novelty in language teaching, is not absent from shortcomings, and its implementation has to be carried out taking into account particular issues. Thus, EFL teachers in the Colombian contexts have to be able to make principled decisions which suitably address some of the possible concerns previously mentioned, and in this way increase the positive outcomes of alternative assessment.

A caveat is needed here. Alternative assessment methods are not called to replace traditional assessment methods, but to complement them. Research and different studies have reported that alternative assessment offers significant benefits for the learning and assessment processes of English language learners in both ESL and EFL contexts; hence, they are said to make the assessment process more formative, link assessment with the teaching and learning processes, and offer a broader and creative assessment process, among others (Anderson, 1998). Nevertheless, it is also claimed that more research is needed so that the bases of alternative assessment methods and its underlying theory continue strengthening more and more (López and Bernal, 2009; Tsagari, 2004; Çetin, 2011).

Teachers who are looking forward to implementing alternative assessment in an EFL context, or are already implementing it, have to remember that patience is needed when embracing new methods of assessment, since going beyond traditional assessment methods and

moving toward alternative assessment involves a process of change (Anderson, 1998) which may be a challenging experience for some teachers, but not impossible to accomplish.

In this section of the research paper the constraints that teachers can find when applying alternative assessment in an EFL setting like Colombia were addressed, and some suggestions to overcome those limitations were also provided. Next, some pedagogical suggestions for the implementation of alternative assessment in an EFL context will be proposed.

### **Pedagogical Suggestions to Implement Alternative Assessment in Public Schools in Colombia**

Based on the literature review and the characteristics of our context, the model to create and implement alternative assessment suggested by O'Malley and Valdez Pierce (1996) can contribute to an easy implementation of the different alternatives in assessment in our EFL context. Therefore, based on that model, some steps to develop and implement alternative assessment methods are presented. They have been adapted to the characteristics and needs of most public schools in Colombia, but further changes can be done to these procedures so that they can suit the particular needs of EFL settings.

Firstly, language teachers can begin by creating a team. As mentioned before in this paper, teachers should start in the path towards alternative assessment having the support of colleagues, administrators and parents preferably, so that in a constant process of involvement and participation they share and discuss its importance, know the purposes of alternative assessment and its role within instruction and school. Therefore, if it is possible, find at least an assessment partner to share experiences, ideas and ways to overcome possible difficulties together.

Secondly, delimit the purposes of alternative assessment. Language teachers have to recognize to what extent alternative assessment is going to complement the information gathered

by other means of assessment such as traditional tests. Hence, Colombian teachers may use some of the alternatives in assessment to monitor students' performances, to assess the process and product in one academic period, etc. Whatever the purpose may be, they must guarantee the ultimate goal of assessment that is the improvement of teaching and learning.

Thirdly, objectives must be specified. Working with their assessment team, teachers have to decide which objectives will be assessed by means of alternative assessment and differentiate those which can be easily assessed using conventional tests. These objectives can be taken from curriculum frameworks and professional standards (O'Malley and Valdez Pierce, 1996), so Colombian teachers may use those developed by the National Ministry of Education in the area of English. Moreover, it will also be of great help to have a well-organized syllabus (Sánchez & Obando, 2006) so that you can establish with no trouble which objectives are going to be assessed with alternative assessment. It would be good to involve students in this process.

Next, gather and make a collection of alternative assessment samples. Search good examples that are in agreement with the objectives you chose and with the assessment method you want. Hence, books, articles, workshops, conferences on alternative assessment can be valuable sources to collect varied models of assessment methods and other tools such as scoring rubrics and checklists that are useful for the assessment process. These samples are intended to provide EFL teachers with different ideas that can be adapted to their contexts.

Then, adapt assessment examples or create new ones. Experts point out that to start creating new alternative assessment methods without examples for reference or without the support from others can turn that experience in a burden (O'Malley and Valdez Pierce, 1996). Accordingly, with the help and ideas of the assessment team or partner, it will be easier to begin following other people's examples and modifying everything you consider necessary in them so that they suit their requirements and the particularities of your public school.

Trying out the assessment methods is the next step. Give students considerable time to develop and complete the tasks, since the idea is that both teachers and students feel comfortable with the assessment method. Equally important, teachers have to pay attention to the difficulties students have while performing the task as well as to their perceptions; this will allow to make modifications for improvement later.

Subsequently, reflect on and evaluate the assessment methods. Teachers must ask themselves if the assessment task worked, what should be done in a different way, if it is worth using this method again, and if it was beneficial for the students' learning process. Then, with their colleagues, teachers should share their experiences in terms of the positive aspects, the difficulties as well as the student's perceptions regarding the alternative assessment method. Next, modify again everything you consider necessary in the assessment task and try it once again; then see if the results are better or need further improvement.

Last but not least, EFL teachers have to commit themselves to carry out a continuous professional development related with alternative assessment. This should not be seen just as one step within the implementation of alternative assessment, but as something integral and continuous in this process. Therefore, whenever possible, teacher education and training on alternative assessment may involve attending conferences, workshops, or reading articles and literature that deal with this topic; staff meetings at school can also be an opportunity for sharing ideas and experiences regarding alternative assessment. Lastly, try to get help from teachers who have started using alternative assessment or from university expert teachers on education that can facilitate the planning and implementation of alternative assessment.

### **Conclusions**

Over the last few decades, alternative assessment has been the focus of interest of researchers and practitioners concerned with enhancing the learning and assessment processes in

both ESL and EFL contexts. Hence, given the fundamental role of assessment in the learning process, alternative assessment methods have been the center of theoretical and empirical work that have demonstrated successful results related with strengthening and improvement of language teaching and learning.

Alternative assessment offers different options for assessing language learners in a context where the teaching of English has shifted from traditional approaches to communicative ones that stress the need of developing students' communicative competence, as it is the case of Colombia. Under these circumstances, EFL teachers have to be aware of the need of assessing the way they teach, and in such context, it will imply to make use of communicative teaching methodology and assessment methods that match each other. Re-evaluating how teachers teach in the current context will certainly lead them to use teaching and assessment methods that correspondingly require constant communication in the L2, resemble real-like situations and are student-centered.

Definitely, implementing alternative assessment in an EFL context will broaden the teachers' repertoire for assessing students' communicative abilities which will contribute positively to have a more comprehensive view of their communicative skills and proficiency. Likewise, this may facilitate to turn the assessment process from something tedious, threatening, and disconnected from the learning and teaching process, into a creative and exciting tool that influence positively those processes. It is worth mentioning that alternative assessment methods in EFL contexts will enhance student's motivation and their autonomy as learners since they will participate actively in authentic tasks that promote the integration of language skills, empower their intrinsic motivation and foster their desire for learning.

Additionally, alternative assessment methods will increase students' opportunities for using English in tasks that resemble real-life situations, and challenge them to use higher order

thinking skills and construct meaning, in contrast to more traditional means of assessment that have a tendency to focus on memorization of information and overlook language performance. In other words, EFL students will notice the importance of developing skills in the L2 that will help them through their lives and not just for the day the assessment task is taking place.

Nevertheless, a word of caution is valid here. A call for alternative assessment in the Colombian EFL contexts does not imply that language teachers have to use either alternative or traditional assessment exclusively since setting “traditional testing and alternatives against each other is counterproductive” (Brown, 2004, p.279), and it is undeniable that traditional assessment procedures have also certain benefits and uses. Therefore, EFL teachers in our contexts may balance the use of traditional and alternative assessment taking into account the purpose of assessment as well as the students’ needs and the particularities of their settings.

Moreover, because of the underlying characteristics of alternative assessment methods joined with the teaching and learning conditions of EFL classrooms in Colombia, alternative assessment and its implementation is an attractive and challenging approach for assessing language learners. In such context, it is essential to emphasize the importance of adopting and adapting creatively the different assessment methods to the particularities of our educational contexts in order to offer students innovative and more pleasant ways of assessment. Equally important, just as students need to be supported and encouraged with alternative assessment, so will teachers need support from colleagues, administrators, and parents if possible, so that they persist with their commitment of integrating new teaching and assessment practices to their classrooms and in this way enhance language teaching and learning.

Going beyond traditional assessment in language teaching may not be an easy task in an EFL context like ours, since changes imply a process and processes do not happen overnight. Nonetheless, despite the possible limitations, creative and concerned language teachers may see

that with their continuous commitment and work, undertaking alternative assessment in our EFL context will be worth the effort since the benefits are going to override the limitations, and it will help us to turn language teaching and learning into a more pleasant and successful experience despite all the well-known challenges.

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