

# Introduction: EFL Assessment: Back in Focus

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Assessment is broadly defined as the activities teachers assign to learners to diagnose their learning proficiency or achievement for the purpose of directing and influencing the teaching-learning experience (Cheng, Rogers, & Wang, 2007). It is, hence, an integral part of any formal instructional endeavor. In fact, assessment is an important part of any well-structured educational process. While it is essential for ascertaining the achievement of educational goals and objectives, it is also a vital ingredient for continuing improvement and reform. However, assessing student performance is far from a straightforward process since it cannot be removed from the socio-historical context in which it exists (McNamara, 2000). It is for this reason that, traditionally, assessment has been concerned with the product and with finding weaknesses in student learning, usually at the end of a course (summative assessment). However, recently the emphasis has shifted from the product to the process and to the use of more creative, authentic, and dynamic assessment methods. Continuous or formative assessment is now favored despite the criticism it draws concerning its objectivity. Alternative testing methods, such as portfolios, peer assessment and self-assessment, have also come to the fore with researchers and practitioners now hailing their value for student learning.

The aim of this book, whose context is teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), is to focus on these practices to improve teacher literacy and to demonstrate to teachers and practitioners how they can make the best out of their assessment practices and the knowledge that has accumulated in the field. In addition to focusing on different assessment types such as alternative assessment, dynamic assessment, self-directed assessment, continuous assessment, and outcomes-based assessment, the book explores different assessment methods in skills such as reading, writing, listening and speaking. Furthermore, it attempts to forecast the future of assessment and where such concepts as alternative assessment and

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dynamic assessment are heading. In doing so, it also shows how relatively new teaching methods such as communicative methodology and problem-based learning are reflected in assessment.

The book is in five parts. Part 1, Assessment Literacy, focuses on the education of the language teacher and the role that professional development programs plays to sensitize EFL teachers to core issues such as assessment for learning, teacher professionalism, ethical assessment, and the democratization of assessment. In Part 2, Theoretical Perspectives on Assessment, key issues such as washback, alternative assessment, and problem-based/outcomes based assessment are discussed. Part 3, Skill-area Assessment, presents a variety of assessment systems from the renowned international IELTS to the less known local in-house tests targeting specific skills reaching to the less traveled paths in the form of the validation of new measures. Part 4, Alternative Assessment, is what it says it is. Situated in the transition from a testing to an assessment culture, not only are examples of alternative assessment (e.g., student designed tests, portfolios) given, but also challenges and opportunities relating to students' involvement in AA's design and evaluation are described. In the final part, Future Perspectives on Assessment, the marriage between assessment and technological advances is embedded into a discussion of the grand edifices of cognitive (e.g., validity and reliability) and sociocultural theories (e.g., zone of proximal development). In short, this book brings together assessment, be it summative, formative, continuous, traditional, electronic, alternative, student-designed, teacher-based, for learning, of learning, or as learning, and presents a vivid description of both their connection to theory and their implications to practice.

The second chapter, "Assessment literacy: Beyond teacher practice" by Zineb Djoub examines how ESL/EFL teachers' assessment literacy affects their assessment views and practices. The author uses a survey administered to forty-five EFL/ESL teachers from different schools and institutions worldwide. The results revealed that, during their teaching experience, most participants had never been trained in language assessment. Instead, they received courses as part of their MA program. Hence, they possessed theoretical knowledge about assessment but they received inadequate training in terms of practice. Teachers perceived testing as an event that should neither promote anxiety among students nor establish and exert control over the teaching and learning experience. However, none of the teachers indicated willingness to involve their learners in the assessment process that would help them to reflect on their learning or monitor their progress to decide on how to improve it.

Chapter three, "Kurdish tertiary EFL teachers' assessment literacy in alternative assessments and its influence on the ethicality of their assessments" by Dler Abdullah Ismael, focuses on the link between assessment literacy in alternative assessment and the ethicality of teacher assessment practices using Kurdish English departments as a context for the study. The author examines the level of Kurdish EFL teachers' assessment and testing literacy and their perceptions and understanding of alternative assessment and how that influences their assessment-related practices.

In chapter four, “A critical review of washback studies: Hypothesis and evidence” by Wei Wei, the author examines the current understanding of washback effects in the context of language testing and education from three perspectives: (1) a historical perspective outlining the development of the concept of washback in both general education and language education; (2) a focus on results from empirical investigations to highlight the gaps between hypotheses and evidence; and (3) identification of the areas and directions for future washback studies.

Donald F. Staub’s chapter, “Developing and sustaining outcomes assessment in English as a Foreign Language programs” examines the principles and practices that are believed to be must-haves for successful outcomes assessment in EFL programs. The chapter also includes a discussion of common drawbacks that can result in failure of such principles and practices. Finally, the chapter proposes the distributed leadership model for EFL program leaders who are embarking upon an outcomes assessment process in order to increase the probability of success and the sustainability of their outcomes assessment initiative.

In chapter six, Khadernawaz Khan and Umamaheswara Rao Bontha reflect, based on action research, on outcomes-based assessment in an English language program in Oman. They explore the adherence of assessment to the teaching/learning outcomes of a course, and the implementation of alternative assessments (e.g. writing portfolios, continuous assessments and self-assessments) which are used to overcome the drawbacks produced by traditional paper based tests and exams. Teachers and learners’ perceptions regarding the achievement of the learning outcomes, conventional assessments and alternative assessments are also examined and analyzed.

Chapter seven “Assessment of EFL through the process of problem-based learning” by Melissa Caspary and Diane Boothe applies problem-based learning to EFL assessment in an attempt to meet learner needs and assess their progress. The PBL approach emphasizes assessment tools and models that address unique teaching styles and key competencies which, at the same time, stimulate critical thinking and effective teamwork. The chapter offers practitioners dynamic and creative strategies as well as assessment tools that cater to individual differences and create opportunities for collaboration and group synergy in order to promote and foster EFL academic achievement.

In chapter eight “The perception of assessment as a multilayer dimension in the Armenian EFL classroom”, Marine Arakelyan used questionnaires with open-ended questions administered to students and teachers to gauge participants’ perceptions of the multivoice notion of assessment. This notion views assessment not only as a diagnostic tool, but also as a trigger for new content creation. The author also offers her perceptions of the role ascribed to the practice of assessment in the language learning instructional processes and environment. Prior exposure to assessment in the context of language instruction was a variable the author looked at when examining teachers’ perceptions of assessment. Findings indicated that the views of teachers with previous exposure to assessment were in-line with the notion of ‘assessment for learning’, whereas the views of teachers with no prior exposure to

assessment and students' views indicated assessment and motivation for learners are analogous.

As its title indicates, the ninth chapter, "EFL assessment: Assessment of speaking and listening" by Seetha Jayaraman focuses on the assessment of both speaking and listening skills as the two have often been linked in teaching and assessment. It examines the methods and criteria involved in testing the English speaking and listening proficiency levels of a group of Arabic speaking undergraduate Omani students from the Dhofar region. This is done with the purpose of exploring those methods that suit these students best and help them attain the prescribed outcomes without experiencing high levels of anxiety.

Christopher Morrow's "Assessing entry-level academic literacy with IELTS in the UAE" examines the suitability of IELTS as a linguistic measure of Emirati students' language proficiency. In the chapter, Morrow offers the position that such an exam, with its advanced linguistic demands, is not well-suited for making valid and reliable decisions about the readiness of Arab students to begin college-level studies in English. Hence, he adds his voice to those of other professionals who call for a need to develop a more appropriate means of assessing students including by offering alternative assessment options.

Chapter eleven, "The development, validation and use of a test of word recognition for English learners" by David Coulson and Paul Meara reports on the process the authors used to develop a test of word recognition they called Q\_Lex for EFL learners. In the test, words are hidden in nonsense letter strings which they predicted would slow recognition speed to a level that personal computers can easily measure. The test assesses learners on the basis of native speakers' reaction time norms. The authors describe the development and validation of this assessment tool and the measurement principles underlying it and emphasize the measures they took to improve its reliability. Finally, the chapter describes an experiment with Q\_Lex which the authors conducted to investigate learners' word recognition abilities at different levels of proficiency.

The twelfth chapter "Alternative assessment: Growth, development and future directions" by Vito Reardon traces the growth and development of alternative assessment from a pedagogical perspective. She also examines the direction which alternative assessment has taken in recent years within special education programs, ESL and/or EFL classrooms, and elucidates the belief that this type of assessment is the most-suited to ESL/EFL situations for students with or without speech impairment.

In Jafar Dorri Kafrani and Mohammad Reza Afshari's chapter, "Alternative assessment: student designed test evidence in an Iranian EFL context", 120 junior high school male students were asked to design tests based on two chapters from an English course book they studied. The resulting questions were analyzed in terms of format, skills and sub-skills, and students and their teachers were interviewed. The results showed that students benefited from their tests, and the opportunity helped them to review the two chapters' content in detail. However, results also revealed that students paid inadequate attention to certain key sections of each chapter, and that their test-item formats lacked variety.

In the fourteenth chapter, “From a culture of testing to a culture of assessment: Implementing writing portfolios in a micro context”, Elizabeth Noel clarifies that, in recent years, there has been a focus on the use of portfolios as one form of alternative assessment in assessing college level writing. Despite the challenges associated with the use of portfolios, the author outlines the transformation that happened in the English for Academic Purposes department at the University of Technology and Business (UTB) from a culture of testing to a culture of assessment. The author also describes some of the changes occurring in the micro context of UTB, where portfolio assessment is being implemented to help solve curricular and other challenges.

Chapter fifteen, “An essential tool for continuous assessment: The learning portfolio” by Esra Gun Alayafi and Pinar Gunduz also focuses on the use of portfolios as a mode of continuous assessment. The authors describe the reasons behind using learning portfolios and then explain how their implementation took place at Sabancı University School of Languages (SL) in Turkey. The chapter also evaluates the current practices and procedures associated with the implementation of learning portfolios. The authors conclude by proposing future goals in light of the collected feedback.

The sixteenth chapter, “Believing in the power of the child: Reggio Recognizing the affective” by Nayyer Chandella, asserts that assessment for learning encompasses all factors influencing a student’s learning. To the author, assessment goes beyond being a quantification of test results. Good assessment practices, in her opinion, have to make use of student data to change teaching and learning in a positive way that will enable children to become successful learners and confident individuals. In this chapter, the author reports on a small scale research project based on the Reggio philosophy. She uses her own narrative to describe the Reggio approach to early childhood education and explores aspects of this approach adapted to the Pakistani context, with particular focus on portfolios and documentation as means of assessment.

Tim Murphey’s chapter, “Provoking potentials: Student self-evaluated and socially-mediated testing”, reports on an exploratory study conducted through action research where students are directed to evaluate themselves at two points in time. The author believes that the procedures he explored enlighten students about different aspects of learning and evaluation, and assist teachers in examining different aspects of classroom dynamics and learning potentials. According to the author, student self-evaluation and socially-mediated testing blend learning and assessment and theory with practice.

Priya Mathew, Rahma Al-Mahrooqi and Christopher Denman’s chapter, “Electronic intervention strategies in dynamic assessment in an Omani EFL classroom”, focuses on dynamic assessment (DA) as a method of formal testing and explores its suitability when applied in both electronic and face-to-face encounters. The sample included 12 Omani EFL learners studying in a foundation program who emailed their assignments throughout a semester to their instructor who then returned feedback using a word processor’s review function. Students were then assessed on their ability to incorporate the instructor’s explicit and implicit

feedback. A focus group interview with the students was held and a series of observations were carried out to explore emergent trends associated with DA. The results suggest that mediated electronic forms of DA attuned to participants' ZPD are more useful and conducive to learning than pre-scripted prompts resulting from assessors' guesses about the kinds of intervention learners may require during assessment. The chapter concludes by suggesting that electronic forms of DA can enhance Omani students' learning and, therefore, their application is recommended in the tertiary classroom.

The final chapter, "The Future of E-assessments in the UAE: Students' perspectives" by Racquel Warner features a qualitative study exploring teacher and student perceptions of e-assessment within a private higher education institution (HEI) in the United Arab Emirates. The author used questionnaires and interviews to examine participants' perceptions of virtual learning environments, e-assessment methods on virtual platforms, and the process of giving feedback on performance on e-assessments. The results indicated that most participants benefited in one way or another from e-assessments. However, they were reluctant to express full support for a transition to e-assessments as a sole method of summative evaluation. The study suggests ways of promoting the idea of e-assessment and assures both teachers and students that these new methods can actually increase reliability and validity of testing and hence can be regarded as an improvement over old methods.

With its nineteen chapters, this book is a forum where contributors present their research and innovative ideas and practices on the topic of EFL assessment and, in doing so, encourage renewed debate around the issue. Due to its breadth and variety, this book serves as an excellent reference for EFL teachers, practitioners, researchers and testing and assessment specialists. Each of its nineteen chapters is unique, examining important issues pertinent to assessment and its connection with teaching and learning in EFL contexts.

## References

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