Teacher Perception About Alternative Assessment and Student Learning

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Introduction

Traditional assessments including true-false, matching, and multiple choice have been dominant in L2 exams because of easy scoring and relatively being objective. However, with the advent of communicative language teaching, alternative assessments including performance tests, portfolios, and self-assessments have become popular and begun to be widely used in ESOL classrooms (Brown & Hudson, 1998). In the area of general educational research, alternative assessment has been further called dynamic assessment. According to Lunt (1993), "there has been increasing interest in the West over the past ten to fifteen years in the development of more 'dynamic' or 'interactive' assessment procedures" (p. 154). In contrast to traditional assessment or static assessment, 'dynamic' assessment has gain prominence recently. Lunt (1993) defines dynamic assessment as follows.

> Dynamic assessment (or mediated or assisted assessment as it is sometimes named) involves a dynamic interaction between tester and learner (testee) with a focus o the *process* rather than the *product* of learning. Common to all forms of dynamic assessment is a notion of prospective rather than retrospective assessment and an emphasis on an understanding of *how* the child learns rather than on *what* the child has already learned. (p. 155, italics original)

Yet, there has been little documentation as to how teachers understand alternative (or dynamic) assessments, how teachers actually use them, and what impact they have on teacher and student learning; especially since the implementation of communicative language teaching proposed in the 1994 government guidelines in Japan.

This paper reports on the second year of the project, which started in a Japanese public high school in April, 2001 (see Sato & Takahashi, 2003). The goal of this project was to further develop students' communication skills throughout six-year English education in junior and high school. In order to show the teacher's view and actions with regard to alternative assessment, this paper focuses on one teacher

(Takahashi). Using multiple data sources including student voices from self-assessment and portfolio, performance tests, and student surveys, the teacher reflects on her practices with particular focus on alternative assessment.

Such a study is expected to offer implications as to how to bridge the gap between theoretical development of assessment and classroom practice. In fact, most recently Savignon (2002) suggested a need for such a research focus. "A critical reflexive analysis of the impact of tests on language teaching practice… would seem a good place to enter into a consideration of how language teaching practices in a given context might be adapted to better meet the communicative needs of the next generation of learners" (p. 211).

Here Takahashi will tell her story, hoping that readers will vicariously participate in her experience and understand the significance of this study.

Context / What happened in 2001

Our school is a public senior high school, where a majority of students would like to go on to universities, junior colleges, and vocational schools. There are two special classes (advanced classes) out of six in each grade level to prepare some students for university entrance exams, but the curriculum and teaching materials are basically the same for advanced classes and general classes.

Our school had been conducting a grammar class under the name of Oral Communication (OC) class twice a week for the first-year students until our school was assigned to experiment with the project to improve students' communicative skills in

2001. It was mainly because we were not sure how to teach OC class. Moreover, we believed grammar was vital for students to prepare for university entrance exams. In regular English classes, the main concern of the teachers was a reading comprehension with emphasis on translation and grammar explanation. Thus, though we had occasionally offered OC class when an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) visited our classroom, we had not put much importance on it.

Then our school was assigned to experiment with the project as mentioned above in 2001, and finally we decided to start having OC class twice a week for the first-year students. We incorporated an oral performance test as an alternative assessment in OC class, though we used to rely only on a term examination as a single assessment criterion. Since this type of assessment was very new to us, we were not sure how and what part of the students' oral performance to assess. Four months later we began to have a weekly meeting to discuss the assessment criteria. We also started to share the problems of our class, which gave us encouragement and confidence in our teaching, and new assessment approach. Surprisingly, students made progress in their performance tests, as we collaborated to set coherent assessment criteria (see Sato & Takahashi, 2003).

After having OC class for one year, students wanted to continue to learn Oral English and to try to participate in more spontaneous English conversation. Then Mr. Sato advised us to introduce the approach used in his university. In this approach writing activities and speaking activities are integrated through interesting topics related to their life. We challenged this innovative approach, with alternative assessment, in Writing class the next year.

Recorded conversation and self-assessment in writing class

Writing class was offered for the second-year students twice a week. The class size was about 20 students, and they wrote and spoke about a topic many times in and outside class. They were also required to keep all the handouts in a file so that they could use them for their portfolio assessment at the end of the school year.

The students in advanced classes covered ten topics and the stu1dents in general classes covered seven topics, following the eight steps listed below:

1) Introducing three questions about a topic
2) Practicing conversation strategies
3) Writing assignment (Homework)
   what you want to say
   vocabulary you want to use for this topic
   three new questions you will ask in the next conversation
4) Peer correction of the composition
5) Timed conversation, changing the partners (3-minute timed conversation and 2-minute summarizing)×3 times
6) Recording: Record the timed conversation on the tape
7) Self-assessment (homework)
   transcription of the recorded conversation
   self-assessment of the recorded conversation, setting the goal for the next conversation
8) Writing assignment (homework)
   Fun essay writing with pictures

In each topic, the students were required to analyze their recorded conversation at home. After transcribing their recorded conversation, they answered the following self-assessment questions: 1) What were three things you said that you are proud of; 2) Find three mistakes you made and how do you correct them? 3) What conversation strategies did you use? 4) What useful expressions did your partner say? 5) What advice do you give to your partner? 6) What is your goal for the next conversation?

> The students found this self-assessment process useful as the students' comments show (all the following were translated from Japanese): Recorded conversation is useful because I can analyze my English. While I'm having a conversation, I don't notice what kind of English I'm using because I am just trying to carry on the conversation. I've never looked closely at my English. I can find what I haven't learned.

> I found recorded conversation was very useful for my study. Without recorded conversation, I would be just satisfied to have a timed conversation without an awkward silence. When I listen to the recorded conversation, I can notice what expressions I can't manage to say or what conversation strategies I cannot use yet. Thus I can set a goal for the next conversation.

> Students could set a specific goal of their own because they can notice what learning stage they are in. Some students seemed to be influenced by their partners.

> My partner used shadowing a lot and I could enjoy talking with her. In the next conversation, I want to use more "shadowing" like her.

My partner used "Let me see." I want to use that expression next time.

Students looked closely at their partner's English when they answered the self-assessment question #4. They realized they had learned many things from their partners.

We had a lot of timed conversation with different partners. I learned many expressions from my friends.

Having a conversation with many friends is very useful. I learned some expressions I'd never used or I'd never think of. Every after the conversation I found something new.

Even if we talked about the same topic many times, I never got bored. When I had a different partner, I got different questions and answers. I had to respond to the different questions and answers, which was difficult but very useful and fun way of learning English.

Moreover, when the students answer the self-assessment question #1, they could compare what they wrote before the conversation with what they talked about in the conversation. They noticed that writing activity was helpful to find vocabulary they needed. Some students wrote:

I usually don't do homework of any subjects but I try to do this writing assignment. I cannot have a conversation if I don't write down my idea beforehand. And I want to enjoy timed conversation with my friends.

I'd never used dictionaries before but I started to use them to find the words to express my idea. I could remember the words I used in my composition because I also used them many times in timed conversation.

At first it was difficult to decide which words were appropriate. Gradually I came to use both Japanese-English dictionary and English-Japanese dictionary and started to read example sentences to find the words I wanted to use. I learned many words when I wrote a composition.

As they came to use more conversation strategies, their timed conversation became more spontaneous. When they analyzed their conversation, they were surprised with what they said in the conversation:

I was very surprised. I told what I'd not prepared. I also stopped memorizing the sentences I wrote in my composition. If I know what I want to say and if I have some vocabulary, I can handle it.

After having conversations with different partners, they could get more ideas about a topic. Thus when the time came to write a fun essay after the recorded conversation, they could write more about a topic than before. Some students wrote:

Conversations help me write more about the topic because I can get more ideas during and after conversations.

I like fun essay writing. I enjoy writing at home. For example, when I wrote a fun essay about the school trip to Okinawa, I wrote more than 30 sentences. I was very surprised.

In this way, students improved both their speaking skills and writing skills through the recorded conversation and self-assessment.

As for the accuracy of the compositions, I didn't correct all the grammatical mistakes they made. As in the self-assessment question #2, I encouraged them to find three mistakes. When they did peer-correction, I also encouraged them to find three mistakes. That is, I emphasized fluency rather than accuracy throughout the year, but in the end, they themselves raised their awareness of grammar, which surprised me. Some students wrote:

> It is still difficult to find mistakes when I do peer correction and analyze the recorded conversation. I want to study more about grammar.

> I didn't know what words to use and how to write at first. Then I started to use dictionary and to read example sentences carefully.

> I came to write longer sentences and longer composition. Next year I want to use relative clause in my writing.

In this new approach, which aimed at integrating writing and speaking activities, students could improve both writing and speaking skills through communicative activities. At first, students were at a loss and failed to have a timed conversation and write a composition. However, once they could notice what they had learned through the self-assessment, they felt a sense of achievement. Then, as they got used to analyzing recorded conversation, they could set a goal and actively engaged in the activities. Therefore, I found it important to recycle the activities of the recorded conversation and self-assessment throughout the year.

Slow learners and portfolio assessment

At the end of the school year in March, the students wrote their semester report as a reflection on their portfolio assessment. When they looked over all the worksheets in a file, they could find their improvement. By reflecting their learning history, students gained confidence in learning English. Slow learners made a little improvement that even I often did not notice in class. For example, I was discouraged to see them fail to have a three-minute conversation even in December, and to see them write only ten sentences spending one period even in December. Then, I started to wonder if this class was helpful for their learning. However, I learned from their semester reports that they did improve in speaking and writing skills, and they gained confidence in learning English. Some students wrote the following comments:

> It was very difficult or almost impossible to have a two-minute conversation even in October. I didn't know how to keep a conversation. It's still difficult to ask new questions but I came to use the conversation strategies more and more.

> I couldn't speak English at all in April, but now I can use the expression "How ya doin'?" to open a conversation, "How 'bout you?" to ask the same question and "Nice talking with you!" to close a conversation. This is a big change for me.

> I didn't know any conversation strategies. But I now use shadowing strategy and it is very helpful to keep a conversation going.

I wrote only five sentences in April and it was difficult. I now can write 10 sentences even if it takes a long time. And I now use a dictionary when I write! This is a big change for me.

Besides the self-assessment and the portfolio assessment, I gave a performance test three times a year after covering several topics. Before the test, students could prepare for the topics, but they don't know which topic they would talk about and who would be their partner until the test starts. So they have a semi-spontaneous conversation. In this performance test, most students in general class failed to have a three-minute conversation in December. However, after writing their semester report, they gained confidence. I was surprised to find that most of them succeeded in having a three–minute conversation in the performance test held in March.

Students survey

The second-year students evaluated their own writing and speaking skills in April, October, and February (This included the other teachers' classes). These evaluations show that they noticed that their speaking and writing skills improved through interacting during speaking and writing activities. For writing skills, as Table 1 shows, the number of the students who felt "I can hardly write what I want to say" decreased from 23% to 4% over ten months. The number of students who felt "I can write what I want to say with grammatical mistakes" increased from 11% to 46%.

Table 1. Writing skills

	I can hardly write what I want to say.	I can write a little of what I want to say.	I can write half of what I want to say.	I can write what I want to say with grammatical mistakes.	I can write what I want to say without any grammatical mistakes.
April	**23%**	45%	21%	**11%**	0%
October	7%	28%	27%	36%	2%
February	**4%**	21%	28%	**46%**	1%

(second-year students)

For speaking skills, the survey was done as to timed conversation. The students had timed conversation based on the writing assignment done as homework, where they described what they wanted to say, vocabulary they wanted for this topic, and three questions. They were encouraged not to look at the writing assignment (the composition) when they had a timed conversation. Table 2 shows the number of the students who felt "I can hardly speak for two minutes" decreased from 32% to 5%. The number of the students who felt "I can speak without compositions for two minutes" increased from 8% to 33%.

Table 2. Speaking skills (two-minute conversation)

	I can hardly speak.	I can speak using compositions.	I can speak without compositions.	I can speak in a loud voice without any compositions.	I can speak with emotion without any compositions.
April	**32%**	58%	**8%**	**2%**	0%
October	**5%**	42%	**33%**	**18%**	2%

(second-year students)

As Table 3 shows, the number of the students who felt "I can hardly speak for three minutes" decreased from 61% to 36%, and those who felt "I can speak without compositions for three minutes" increased from 19% to 40%, and from 6% to 15% for those who felt "I can speak in a loud voice without compositions for three minutes".

Table 3. Speaking skills (three-minute conversation)

	I can hardly speak.	I can speak using compositions.	I can speak without any compositions.	I can speak in a loud voice without any compositions.	I can speak with emotion without any compositions.
October	13%	61%	19%	6%	1%
Feburary	7%	36%	40%	15%	3%

(second-year students)

In summary, students made progress in both speaking and writing skills through constant self-assessment and setting a specific goal for the conversation. Students initially wrote only five to six sentences about a topic and had a conversation for two minutes at the longest, but in the end, students in advanced classes wrote about 20 sentences about a topic, and achieved four to five-minutes conversation. In general classes, students wrote 10 to 15 sentences and had a conversation for three minutes without looking at their compositions.

What I learned about alternative assessment

When they analyzed their recorded conversation, students could notice their learning stage and set a specific goal. They could build a sense of achievement in the next recorded conversation when they found out their improvements. I found this feedback gave them a strong motivation to learn English. What's more, I could notice the learning stage of each student, which was very helpful to set a goal of the class and to decide the class activities. Without the constant self-assessment of students, I would not have noticed their learning stages as well.

In addition, alternative assessment worked well when students could create a learning community in the classroom. At first, students were confused about the new approach. They were very frustrated when they had a timed conversation. They gave up writing a composition easily. However, as they got used to it, they started to enjoy it. One of the main reasons they enjoyed these activities was that they always engaged in interactive speaking and writing activities. When they expressed their ideas, there were always listeners and readers, which made them engaged in the activities enthusiastically. Students noticed that they had learned a lot from their classmates and they enjoyed communicating with their classmates.

> At first I just said the sentences I'd prepared and I didn't enjoy having a conversation at all. It was not a conversation. But as I got used to having a timed conversation, I enjoyed talking with my friends. I tried my best to understand what my partner said. When my partner understood what I said, I was very happy.

> This year I talked with many friends in class. I expressed my ideas and feelings to my friends in conversation. It was fun compared to just giving a speech or performing a role-play.

Furthermore, students were influenced by their peers.

> I remember the timed conversation I had in the first class. I couldn't speak for one minute even if I tried it several times with different partners. But when I saw my partner trying hard to keep up a conversation, I was encouraged. I thought I should not give up. Then I gradually came to use conversation strategies, and I now enjoy talking with many friends.

> I do writing assignment because I like having a conversation with my friends. I also like reading essays of my friends. It's interesting.

Students improved their skills through interacting with others by modeling and supporting one another. They were less excited to interact with the teacher but more excited to interact with other students. Moreover, in advanced classes students could find near-peer role models easily and could help one another in interactive activities. On the other hand, in general classes, it was difficult to find near-peer role models and help one another. Consequently, they did not learn much from one another compared with students in advanced classes. It seems that near-peer role models are critical to create a positive leaning community in classroom (Murphey, 1996; 2001).

Conclusion

This study shows that when assessments are incorporated into teaching, "teachers and students will develop the capacity to monitor and take responsibility for their own learning" (Falk, 2001, p. 138). In the area of second language teaching, Brown (2001) claims that assessment and teaching should be partners by giving the following points (p. 421).

1) Periodic assessments, both formal and informal, can increase motivation as they serve as milestones of student progress.
2) Assessments can spur learners to set goals for themselves.
3) Assessments encourage retention of information through the feedback they give on learners' competence.
4) Assessments can provide a sense of periodic closure to various units and modules of a curriculum.
5) Assessments can encourage students' self-evaluation of their progress.
6) Assessments can promote student autonomy as they confirm areas of strength and areas needing further work.
7) Assessments can aid in evaluating teaching effectiveness.

Furthermore, the study indicates the dynamic process between teaching and learning. Noticing that even slow learners made a little progress through portfolio assessment, Takahashi encouraged them to try three-minute conversation. These students enjoyed interacting with one another through various activities and alternative assessments, and built a collaborative learning community. Shepard (2001) stresses the significance of dynamic assessment (see Lunt, 1993; Poehner & Lantolf, 2003 for dynamic assessment), which would bring about changes in the classroom culture. In short, this study revealed how the teacher's view about alternative assessment changed and what impact alternative assessments had on teacher and student learning, as the teacher tried to integrate assessment and teaching. Future studies will clarify the process of dynamic assessment in different classroom cultures in different school contexts.

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