
POSTER PRESENTATION AND LEARNING LOG: ALTERNATIVES IN
ASSESSMENT AT UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE LEVELS*

ADELAIDE OLIVEIRA**

ABSTRACT

Alternatives in assessment such as poster presentation and learning log have been criticized for not being reliable, valid or practical tools. This article aims at showing how these two types of alternative assessment have been used at both undergraduate and graduate levels to evaluate students' performance successfully by presenting clear scoring criteria guidelines and allowing students to participate in the assessment process as a whole.

KEY WORDS: alternative assessment, poster presentation, learning log.

INTRODUCTION

Every teacher has faced the dilemma of having to see a student fail a course when, in fact, he should not. The passing grade allied to the one-shot test format of assessment has been the norm in most undergraduate and graduate courses. As a result, teachers will hear students complain about the tests and the grades they have achieved as being unfair, and non-representative of what they actually know. Recently, for example, a student of mine changed the theme of his final graduation paper in order to propose a new assessment system for the university. The reason which led him to such change in topic was his frustration with the fact that he had reached the end of his Language Arts course and not a single teacher had offered him a reasonable explanation for adopting the one-shot test as the only option for evaluation. Moreover, he had never found congruence between the questions being asked on

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** Professora da Universidade do Estado da Bahia.

E-mail: ade_aua@terra.com.br

the tests and the content of courses. He always felt that the tests were testing memory rather than actual knowledge. Unfortunately, he is not the only one to feel that way. I am sure many of us can remember tests we took in high school or at university which seemed to measure absolutely nothing. We would study for the test and believe that we knew the subject matter only to find out a few weeks after the test that we could not remember a single word of what we thought we had learned. Therefore, I believe it is high time we, teachers, started to think about other forms of assessment that better fulfill students needs and better answer questions such as “How am I doing?” and “How can I do better?” which are the main queries testing promises to deal with.

As a learner I had always felt much of the same frustration my student feels today, so when I became a teacher, I tried to search for ways of assessing learning that would give me answers to the two questions. As a result, I have been using poster presentation and learning log as alternatives to the one-shot test. In addition, a final paper and in-class activities have also been part of the assessment scheme depending on the content of the course. These multiple measures have given me the opportunity to check both the product and the process of learning in ways that the traditional test has never done.

This article aims at showing that the principles of language assessment, i.e. practicality, validity and reliability, also apply to these types of alternative assessment and which issues should be taken into account when deciding on what assessment task to use in a course. This second argument is based on a proposal by Herman et al. (1992, p. v-vi). Among the issues presented by these authors I have chosen five which I believe best justify the use of alternatives in assessment such as poster presentation and learning log.

1 ALTERNATIVES IN ASSESSMENT: POSTER PRESENTATION AND LEARNING LOG

Alternative assessment is different from traditional testing in that it actually asks students to show what they can do. Students are evaluated

on what they integrate and produce rather than on what they can recall and reproduce. The main goal of alternative assessment is to “gather evidence about how students are approaching, processing, and completing, real life tasks in a particular domain”(GARCÍAS and PEARSON, 1994, p. 357). This means that students must feel that the end result of the task will answer the two questions posed in the introduction: How am I doing? How can I get better?

Bailey (1998) and Brown (2004) contrast traditional and alternative assessment listing their characteristics as a set of opposite poles. Among the concepts shown are: continuity, time, response format, authenticity of tasks, teamwork, contextualization of tasks, amount of feedback, and score interpretation. It is true that by presenting these concepts as opposite poles, for example, one-shot versus continuous, there might be a risk of interpreting everything that is related to traditional as bad and everything that is related to alternative as good. Caution must be taken here so as to understand that in between the two extremes of the continuum there is a gray area which should be taken into account. A poster presentation, for example, is a one-shot type of assessment but it is done in group. The learning log, on the other hand, is a continuous type of assessment but is written individually. So, it is better if we see this set of characteristics as a guideline and choose the best of each side in order to be able to reach the best result possible.

1.1 *Poster presentation*

As it is well known by anyone who has attended a conference, a poster presentation is a way of showing the results of a study that is either finished or is still in progress. The poster should be designed in a way that it speaks for itself so that the reader can understand exactly what the main objective of the research project was and how and what results were obtained. The presenter stands by the poster during the presentation and discusses issues that may be raised by the audience.

Posters are usually hung on the walls during the whole conference but the presentation itself only takes place once or twice during the event.

The idea of the poster presentation was adapted to be used during the courses I teach so that students can show they have read and understood a scientific article chosen from a list given at the beginning of the course. Students select their group members and prepare a poster based on the guidelines shown in Figure 1 below. These guidelines are presented and discussed on the first day of class.

Students are also given the five dimension criteria scale presented in Figure 2 (see the Appendix) so that they know how exactly their presentation will be evaluated.

A poster presentation is different from the traditional oral presentation of articles¹ in the way it is delivered and, most importantly, in the way different types of intelligence can be tapped. Christison (1998, p. 7) presents a taxonomy of activities which address multiple intelligences in the classroom showing how multiple intelligence theory (GARDNER, 1983) can inform teaching and learning. While an oral presentation favors learners who are linguistically and, sometimes, visually intelligent, the poster presentation will also include learners who are kinesthetically intelligent since everyone must walk around throughout the presentation, and the logically intelligent given the connections that are made during the session. In addition, both interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences will be addressed given the cooperative and reflective nature of the presentation.

Therefore, I have not found any drawbacks so far in using poster presentation as an assessment tool.

1.2 *Learning log*

A log is much like a diary or a journal in which students keep track of their learning experiences during the course. According to Genesee and Upshur (1996, p.119), “journals are written conversations

between students and teachers”. Students are asked to write about their learning experiences and provide feedback on these experiences. Among the benefits of keeping a journal, one of the most important is that it gives students the opportunity to become more involved in their own learning process and become aware of this ownership. A learning log is a structured journal so that learners can focus their entries in specific ways. In the courses I teach, students are asked to keep a log throughout the semester and to hand it in every two weeks or so. A discussion is held at the beginning of the course so that students know exactly what is expected and the type of questions they will answer in their logs. As learners hand in their logs, I read their comments and write back to them answering their questions or posing new questions which will help them understand the learning process better. In the case of intensive 30-hour-one-week courses, the logs are handed in at the end of the week and handed back two weeks later with my comments. Learners are encouraged to contact me after receiving their commented logs in order to clarify doubts or simply add any other information they might feel is useful for their learning.

Figure 3 (see the Appendix) presents the questions students are asked to answer in their learning log for the course on second language acquisition I teach at both undergraduate and graduate levels:

Assigning a grade to a learning log might sound contradictory. After all, a learning log is meant to be a reflective tool in which students can self-monitor their achievement. However, the institution requires that students receive at least three numerical grades during the course and I have to adhere to the rules.

Brown (2004, p. 263) presents seven steps for using journals as assessment instruments. One of the steps suggested states that teacher should “carefully specify the criteria for assessing or grading journals.” Therefore, students are given the set of criteria shown in Figure 4 (see the Appendix). Moreover, they will also receive my summative written remarks on what they wrote.

Given the fact that students are used to traditional testing, their initial reaction to these forms of assessment is one of puzzlement. However, the feedback given at the end of the course has always been positive for both learning log and poster presentation.

2 PRACTICALITY, VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

Alternative assessment has come under a severe attack regarding the three pillars which sustain the field of assessment, namely, practicality, reliability and validity. However, “proponents of alternative assessment do not suggest that we overlook these criteria, for any quality assessment must adhere to them” (HUERTA-MACIÁS, 1995, p. 8).

2.1 *Practicality*

Practicality has to do with expenses, time, administration and scoring issues (BROWN, 2004). It is important that an assessment tool, whether it is considered alternative or not, fulfill these requirements if it is to be considered meaningful to both learners and institutions. There is no point in devising an assessment tool that is too time-consuming or that will require expensive material, especially in our public university context.

Both the poster presentation and the learning log are practical tools. They are not expensive to the institution since any photocopies, or paper and pencil are needed. The students are the ones who could complain about this issue but as explained above, the poster can be handwritten and any piece of brown paper will do. As for the learning log, I usually ask students to use any old notebook they might have at home left over from past semesters. All they need is a couple of sheets of paper to keep their notes.

Time is not a problem either. The amount of time spent in a poster presentation may be established according to the school calendar. The same amount of time that would be set aside for a traditional multiple

choice test may be used for the poster presentation. The presentations will take place concurrently, so the amount of time needed will depend mainly on the number of groups in class.

There is no need for hiring extra personnel to administer these two types of assessment. Students are their own assessors and monitors. The teacher is a mere spectator and feedback giver in both situations. While students are standing by their posters and discussing the topic with classmates, the teacher mingles with the group and stands by each poster for ten minutes or so in order to fill out the scoring sheet. The scoring sheet contains the same dimensions and descriptions shown in Figure 2 (in the Appendix). Scoring procedures are clear and objective as will be further discussed in section 3.4.

Brown (2004) argues that practicality is not very high for learning logs but personally I have never had problems with that. Given the fact that students are instructed to write one or maybe two paragraphs in answering each question, the amount of time spent on reading and grading them is not much longer than the time I would spend correcting an open ended test, for example.

2.2 *Validity*

A test is considered valid if it measures what it is supposed to measure. For example, if a student is asked to answer a multiple choice test that requires grammatical judgment in order to be assessed in how well he can speak the language, this test lacks content validity. The task must match the content. The learner should be asked to perform the behavior that is being measured (BROWN, 2004).

According to Huertas-Marcías (1995, p. 9), “alternative assessment presents the best of all worlds in that it looks at actual performance on real-life tasks, such as writing, reading, participation in collaborative work, and doing a demonstration in front of a group”. Both the poster presentation and the learning log are real-life tasks and students can see their achievement through the feedback given by their classmates

and the teacher. This feedback is given after the poster is presented by both the group and the teacher. As for the log it varies according to the type of course: for regular one-semester courses, students turn in their logs every two weeks and a written dialogue is kept between teacher and student throughout. Given the short nature of intensive one-week courses, feedback is delayed for two or three weeks since learners will hand in their logs at the end of the course. Moreover, the content and face validity of the log is high since the log entries are closely interwoven with the course objectives.

2.3 *Reliability*

The reliability of an assessment tool is best understood if we analyze the causes of unreliability. Student-related unreliability is quite familiar to most of us. If a student is ill or anxious or any other psychological factor interferes with his performance on the day of the test, this factor might mask the true score. A teacher may be stricter than another in correcting the test and this will result in rater unreliability. Or even if it is the same teacher and she is having a bad day, for example, she might give a lower grade on a composition. The best solution is to have clear and public criteria which can be discussed with students in order to avoid the usual complaint we hear from students all the time “how come I got a 7 and he got an 8 if our answers are the same?”. The criteria used for assessing the poster presentation and the learning log will be discussed in detail in section 3.4.

Reliability, as well as validity, can be insured by including in the process a clear set of criteria and the triangulation required by qualitative research (HUERTA-MACÍAS, 1995). Thus, when I use poster presentation, students receive an assessment scale which tells them exactly what they have to present and how each item will be graded (see Figure 2 in the Appendix) Besides, the triangulation requirement is fulfilled by asking students who presented the poster at the end of their presentation what they have learned from it; by asking the whole group for a critical view

of the group's presentation and by giving my own evaluation of the whole process.

3 ISSUES TO BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT WHEN CHOOSING ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT TASKS

In addition to adhering to the testing principles discussed above, the design of any kind of assessment system should be informed by elements of instructional practice. Herman, Aschbacher and Winters (1992) present ten key assessment issues which can guide teachers in the use of alternative measures of student achievement. I have chosen to discuss the five issues which have best served to guide my use of poster presentation and learning log as measurement tools of the learning process.

3.1 *There must be congruence between assessment and instructional objectives*

Whether it is a language course or a content course such as Discourse Analysis or Second Language Acquisition, the objectives of the course must be stated clearly so that the outcomes can be assessed fairly and thoroughly. "A clear statement of course objectives can also serve as criterion for students to assess their progress in language learning during a course of instruction" (GENESEE and UPSHUR, 1996, p. 20). Therefore, learners are given a description of the course on the first day of class including goals, methodology, assessment tools and assessment criteria.

The discussion led on the first day of class provides students with a clear idea of what will be expected of them and how they can evaluate their progress. Figure 5 (see the Appendix) shows the objectives for the second language acquisition course and the assessment tools.

Objectives (a) and (c) will be assessed by reading their learning logs; objective (d) will be assessed during the poster presentation;

objective (b) will be assessed through in-class data analysis activities and objective (e) will surface in their final paper.² Therefore, there is a clear match between the objectives and the assessment proposed.

3.2 Both process and product of learning should be examined

Most traditional tests are examples of assessment of product. However, “one of the disturbing things about tests is the extent to which many people accept results uncritically, while other believe that all testing is invidious” (BAILEY, 1998, p. 204).

Many students have rebelled against traditional tests criticizing their validity (“they don’t test what we were taught”) and their reliability (“the teacher wasn’t fair when she graded my test”). This type of testing has also been criticized by applied linguists (BROWN, 2004; BAILEY, 1990; HEATON, 1988) who argue that tests are inauthentic and no feedback is provided to students among other negative aspects.

Learning is a process and should be assessed as such and not as a result of a single product. The learning log seems to fulfill the requirement as an effective assessment tool of the learning process. A log is an account of “one’s thoughts, feelings, reactions, assessments, ideas, or progress toward goals, usually written with little attention to structure, form, and correctness” (BROWN, 2004, p. 260). Students are not evaluated on how well they can write in English but on how well they can reflect on their learning process and can connect theory and practice. The feedback I give students focuses mainly on content rather than on form. Some students do ask for feedback on the latter but this is usually given as I write my own comments on what they wrote.

The process of putting together and presenting the poster is assessed at the end of the presentation. Students sit with the members of their group and discuss the following questions:

- a) What did you learn as a result of this presentation?
- b) How well did the group gel?
- c) How would you evaluate the group performance?

— | |

Their ideas are written down and handed in so that I can compare their evaluation to mine.

3.3 *A match between the task and the outcome is key to effective assessment*

As mentioned in 3.1, given the fact that the objectives are clearly stated in the course description, student outcome always matches the task. The feedback learners have given me regarding both the poster presentation and the learning log show me that these tasks are both meaningful and effective in making it clear to them where they are in their learning process. The excerpts below are comments written by students regarding these assessment tools.

I know that I can not generalize but the poster presentation is a good exercise for me to make the subject easier. If you can do that you learn more and help other students to learn too. (E.)



At least for me the poster presentation worked very well, it is a kind of possibility to dress the knowledge in fantasy and it is a little bit difficult but pleasant. (A.)

At first I was a bit nervous but then I felt relaxed because we were all interacting and discussing our own ideas. I didn't feel on the spotlight. (J.)

In the beginning I thought I hadn't learned anything but as I was writing the log I realized how much of the content stayed. (C.)

What worked well for me was the production of this log. As I told you on the second day, I have been trying to develop my reading and writing abilities and as a result of that ease my learning process of English. (P.)

The people who visited our poster were very interested in discussing about the topic because it is very relevant in our routine as teachers. So, we could conclude that without motivation there is less development in class and we, as teachers, should always help our students to keep their motivation most of the time. (C.)



Their feedback on the tasks has shown me that both types of assessment are successful. The feeling that they have learned something by the end of the course gives them a sense of accomplishment which they might not have had if I had opted to evaluate their knowledge with a test.



3.4 Criteria are critical – without them assessment remains an isolated, episodic activity

Setting criteria for assessing the poster presentation was quite a challenging task. What should be taken into account and how to break it down into a logical set of dimensions that would make sense to students were my main concerns. I had to describe the dimensions for evaluating student performance and write a scale of values to rate those dimensions. This process provided me with the opportunity to review the goals of the course as well as the dimensions required in the presentation of the poster.

According to Herman et al. (1992, p. 45), “criteria are necessary because they help you judge complex, human performance in a reliable, fair and valid manner”. Given the wide range of answers in alternative assessment, tasks must be judged according to the quality and the process of arriving at a complex response. Therefore, we need criteria or scoring guidelines in order to assure reliability and validity.

Scoring criteria must be made public and discussed with students. Public discussion of criteria “informs students during the formative period of instruction, not simply at the end of a unit or course when it is too late to make improvements” (HERMAN et al., 1992, p. 48). It also helps learners to see what is expected of them and the teacher’s perspective on their learning.

The scoring criteria designed for both the poster presentation and the learning log have suffered a number of modifications along the years based on student feedback and my own observation of the tasks. One



change that has been made recently is the number of points assigned to layout. Students disagreed with the two points I had originally planned for this dimension and suggested that it be changed to one. I agreed with their suggestion since this is not an advertising or design course but a course in second language acquisition.

3.5 An assessment system with multiple measures taken over time provides the most comprehensive feedback on student growth

The assessment system I have devised for my courses comprises a poster presentation, a learning log and a final paper.³ The system allows triangulation since various facets of the learning process will be revealed by each one of the assessment tools. In addition, each assessment instrument matches one or more instructional objectives thus providing a clear view of how much students have achieved throughout the course.

The multiple measures adopted allow me to have a reasonable idea of how much was learned and how much of this learning might be actually put into practice in their own classrooms in the future.

CONCLUSION

The challenge of designing an assessment system that is practical, reliable, valid and at the same time is viewed by learners as a reflection of their learning process is paramount. Whether we are dealing with language courses or content courses, learners deserve a chance to assess their own learning and to feel satisfied with the results in the end.

One shot tests and their results should be viewed more critically by all teachers, especially when there is a mismatch between how classes are taught and how students are tested.

Alternative assessment tools such as the poster presentation and the learning log presented in this article can be used in place of more traditional approaches to testing since they attend to both the principles of testing as well as the principle of process evaluation.

Matching instructional objectives to assessment and having clear scoring criteria guidelines eliminate any kind of suspicion one might have in relation to the use of alternative assessment in the classroom.

Alternative assessment “has the power to tell a story” (HUERTA-MACIÁS, 1995, p. 10). It tells the story of how much learners have grown during the course and how much the course has affected this growth. In addition, alternative assessment provides information for other types of decision making such as grading, passing and failing, and above all, areas of the course that need improvement.

All in all, as this paper clearly shows, poster presentations and learning logs have provided evidence to the assumption that they can not only be used as trustworthy instruments for assessing the learning process, but also serve as an invaluable tool for the teacher to reflect on her course goals.

APRESENTAÇÃO DE PÔSTER E DIÁRIO DE APRENDIZAGEM: ALTERNATIVAS NA AVALIAÇÃO DE ALUNOS DA GRADUAÇÃO E PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO

RESUMO

As formas de avaliação alternativas, tais como apresentação de pôster e diários de aprendizagem, têm sido criticadas por não serem instrumentos confiáveis, válidos ou práticos. O objetivo deste artigo é demonstrar como esses dois tipos de avaliação alternativa têm sido usados em cursos de graduação e pós-graduação para avaliar os alunos de forma bem-sucedida, com critérios claros de modo a permitir uma participação no processo de avaliação como um todo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: avaliação alternativa, apresentação de poster, diário de aprendizagem.

NOTAS

- 1 Oral presentations, sometimes denominated ‘seminar’, are often used by university professors as an assessment tool.
- 2 Given the focus of this article only part of the document describing the course was included.

- 3 For the course in second language acquisition, in-class data analysis activities are also part of the assessment.

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APPENDIX

POSTER PRESENTATION GUIDELINES

The article you will read about affective factors in SLA will be presented as a poster. Here are some guidelines to help you organize your presentation.

The Organization of the Room

Posters will be displayed around the room. While two (or more) members of the group stand by the poster to present it and answer questions, the others will walk around visiting the other groups' posters. Members of the group should alternate between standing by the poster and visiting the other presentations.

The Poster Presentation

A poster is a static, visual medium (usually of the paper and board variety) that you use to communicate ideas and messages. The difference between poster and oral presentations is that you should let your poster do most of the 'talking'; that is, the material presented should convey the essence of your message. However, that does not mean that you can disappear to the cafeteria or wherever you want. At least two members of the group have to 'stand-by-your-poster'! Your task as the presenter is to answer questions and provide further details; to bask in praises or suffer difficult questions; and to convince others that what you have done is excellent and worthwhile.

The purpose of poster presentation is not to have boards upon boards of information. Better to hand out a report in that case. You should limit your poster to the size of a flip chart sheet.

The format of the poster presentation

Layout

Your poster must contain the following sections:

- a) The title of the article, the name of the writer(s) and the name of the group members.
- b) A summary of the article.
- c) A summary of your own views on the subject.
- d) A set of questions you would like others to discuss with you.

Presentation

You may find any other creative way of presenting the ideas in the article (role play, activities for the audience to take part in, or whatever you believe will add to the presentation). You shouldn't present everything as if you were giving a lecture.

NOTE: You do not have to spend a lot of money on printing or professional poster making techniques. You may use your imagination to create your poster and use crayons, pictures, or whatever you like.

Figure 1 - Guidelines for the poster presentation

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

Your presentation will be graded according to the criteria scheme below:

Summary of article: 2 points

2 Summary is complete and leaves no important information out. Language is clear, coherent and concise. Writer does not insert his own comments and/or opinion.

1.5 Summary leaves out one of the main points in the article. Language is sometimes confusing or ideas are not always coherent. Writer does not insert his own comments and/or opinion.

1 Summary is too short to the point that the reader has only a very superficial and incomplete idea of what the article is about.

Group view: 2 points

2 Complete; group understood article; opinion is coherent and pertinent.

1.5 Group didn't understand the main point in the article; opinion sometimes incoherent.

1 Too short/vague; reader has no idea what group actually thought of the article.

Discussion questions: 2 points

2 Clear and enough in number to lead to meaningful discussion

1.5 Clear but mainly comprehension/yes-no question.

1 Not enough questions or questions led to little or no discussion.

Layout: 2 points

2 Well designed and easy to read.

1.5 Well designed but left out one of the items (title, summary, etc)

1 Confusing making it difficult to understand message.

Presentation: 2 points

2 All group members participated and seemed to be familiar with topic. Explanation is clear and well prepared. Group included a creative way of presenting the ideas through a role play, activity, etc.

1.5 Not all group members participated although explanation was clear.

1 Presentation given by one member of group only or explanation was not clear enough.

Figure 2 - Assessment criteria for the poster presentation

LEARNING LOG GUIDELINES

Throughout the course you will keep a learning log. At the end of every class session you will answer the following questions in your log:

- a) What did you learn today?
- b) How will you apply this knowledge to your teaching?
- c) What worked well / didn't work well for you in today's class?

Figure 3 - Learning log guidelines

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

Your log is worth 5 points and will be assessed according to the following criteria:

5 points. Student understood the main content of the lesson and can reflect on his learning process making connections between the content and self. Comments show that learner is aware of the applicability of the issues discussed in class.

3 points. Student shows understanding of content but does not always make clear connections between content and self or between theory and practice.

1 point. Log is a mechanical account of what happened during the lesson. There is little awareness of the learning process. Student rarely connects theory and practice.

Figure 4 - Learning log assessment criteria

3. What are the course objectives?

By the end of the course you will:

- (a) have a clearer understanding of the topics which have been addressed by researchers who have studied second language learner development.
- (b) be familiar with some of the techniques used to analyze data
- (c) connect some of the proposed theories with your teaching practice
- (d) be able to read and understand academic articles in SLA.
- (e) be in a position to go on and study specific aspects of second language development.

4. How will you be assessed?

Assessment for the course is in four parts:

- (a) A poster presentation to be held on (date). 10 points
- (b) A learning log to be handed in on (date). 5 points
- (c) A 3,000-word final paper to be handed in on (date). 10 points
- (d) In-class data analysis activities. 5 points

Figure 5 - Course objectives and assessment