

Using Cooperative Learning to Facilitate Alternative Assessment

ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT IS A USEFUL MEANS OF GATHERING EVIDENCE REGARDING how learners approach, process, and complete real life tasks in the target language. Labels such as *performance*, *authentic*, *informal*, and *situated*, have been used to describe alternative assessment. Despite the different labels, what is common among these types of assessment is that they do not adhere to the traditional testing criteria of objectivity, machine scorability, standardization, or cost-effectiveness (Huerta-Macias 1995).

Alternative assessment uses a wide variety of formats, such as checklists, journals, reading logs, portfolios, videos of role-plays, audio-tapes of discussions, self-evaluation questionnaires, teacher observations, and anecdotal records to assess the performance of students. These formats show what the students can actually do rather than what they are able to recall. Alternative assessment reflects the curriculum being taught and provides information on the strengths and weaknesses of each student. Furthermore, it provides multiple ways of determining the progress of students and can be more culturally sensitive and free of the linguistic and cultural biases inherent in traditional testing (Huerta-Marcias 1995).

Alternative assessment is closely intertwined with classroom instruction. It does not require a separate block of time to be administered because it is based on day-to-day instructional activities. Finally, alternative assessment provides valid and reliable documentation of students' achievement and progress. This is because it utilizes various procedures and formats that provide multiple sources of evidence based on students' products and performance tasks.

There are a number of issues, however, that teachers need to consider when doing alternative assessment. These issues are multifaceted and need to be integrated properly into an ongoing instructional program. They range from the purpose, focus, and setting to the stakes and shareholders of assessment. Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1993) maintain that the purposes of assessment can be diagnostic, formative, or summative, whereas the focus can be the process of learning, the process of instruction, or the outcomes of learning and instruction. Likewise, the setting can be artificial (classroom) or authentic (real world) and the stakes can be low or high, depending upon whether the purposes of assessment are to determine, for example, the students' instructional needs (formative) or their admission to college (summative). Finally, the shareholders of assessment can be students and parents, the teaching staff, the administrators, colleges, and even potential employers.

The issues involved in assessment become even more diversified when we consider the question of what gets assessed and evaluated. For instance, Johnson and Johnson (1996a) maintain that teachers need to measure students' academic abilities, skills, and competencies as well as their attitudes and work habits. This suggests that in conducting alternative assessment, teachers need to integrate assessment procedures into an ongoing instructional program. These procedures will enable teachers to gather and interpret valid and reliable evidence regarding the progress of their students in the cognitive and non-cognitive domains of schooling.

The purpose of this article is to show how cooperative learning can be used to facilitate alternative assessment in the second or foreign language classroom. Cooperative learning is an instructional strategy that utilizes group work to structure classroom interaction. It is based on

the principles of positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face interaction, interpersonal skills, and group processing as means to achieving individual and group goals.

Cooperative assessment activities

The following seven examples of cooperative assessments were selected based on the assumptions that language teaching involves instructional objectives in the linguistic as well as paralinguistic domains and that meeting these objectives requires continuous and performance-based assessment. Likewise, it is assumed that cooperative learning facilitates language assessment given that it provides opportunities for continuous improvement and possibilities for assessing individual and group outcomes in a supportive and stress-reduced environment.

Correcting individual quizzes and homework

This is an activity that enables teachers to save time when correcting individual quizzes and homework assignments. The activity can be used with students at the beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels of language proficiency. The activity is most useful to assess material that lends itself to single right answers, such as language rules and mechanics. It can also be used to assess reading and listening comprehension of ideas that are directly stated in the text, rather than implied. The procedure for this activity is as follows:

1. Assign students to heterogeneous groups of four.
2. Assign each group member a role. Four roles can be used to complete this assessment: runner, explainer, accuracy checker, and reporter. The group runner gets material and takes it to the group. The explainer explains step by step how to complete the homework or answer the quiz correctly. The accuracy checker verifies that the explanation is accurate based on answer keys, textbooks, or class notes. The reporter records the group responses and reports the score of each group member. These roles should be rotated to ensure that all members of the group do an equal amount of running, explaining, checking, and reporting.
3. Ask students to submit their individual quizzes or homework assignments and arrange them in group folders.

4. Have the group runner collect the group folder and hand out the material to the group members.
5. Have the group explainer explain the task and discuss answers, the accuracy checker verify correct answers, and the reporter report the performance of each group member.
6. Finally, have the group runner return the group folder to the teacher and the group members analyze their performance and set goals for further improvement.

Observing students at work

Observing students at work provides valuable information regarding a number of core objectives related to student behavior, for example, work habits, persistence in completing tasks, and development of leadership and social skills. These skills include giving encouragement, respecting others, using a quiet voice, staying in group, and checking for understanding. The procedure of this activity is as follows:

1. Specify exactly what behaviors, actions, or events you need to observe and define them operationally by generating a list of the verbal phrases and nonverbal actions that demonstrate the skills.
2. Devise or use existing observation forms such as those suggested by Johnson and Johnson (1996b). See Appendix 1.
3. Assign students to heterogeneous groups and give them an assignment, such as completing a task sheet, answering comprehension questions, or practicing language rules and mechanics.
4. Move from one group to another and listen to students' explanations and discussions on how to complete the assignment, and fill in the observation form. Assess students' level of understanding and cognitive reasoning, and assess the strategies they use to complete the assignment.
6. Teachers may appoint student observers or ask class visitors to help them. In addition, individual group members may fill out a checklist or questionnaire at the end of this activity to assess how well and how often they performed certain behaviors and mastered certain social skills.

Interviews

Interviews can be very useful in determining students' levels of learning, cognitive reasoning,

and problem-solving abilities. However, interviews require a certain level of proficiency in order for students to express themselves in the target language. As such, this activity may not be applicable at the beginning level of proficiency. The procedure is as follows:

1. Assign students to heterogeneous groups of four or five and give each group a set of questions.
2. Instruct the groups to prepare all members to respond to the questions. Give the groups some classroom time to practice so that all members can answer the questions correctly.
3. Select randomly a student to answer a certain question or a series of questions. Ask follow-up questions if necessary to probe for more information. When the student finishes responding to the question, have other group members add to the answer.
4. Call on other students to answer different questions until all the questions are answered adequately.

Peer composition

This activity enables students to assist each other in generating ideas for writing and incorporating peer feedback in order to improve their written work. The procedure is as follows:

1. Based on instructional objectives, explain the criteria for success in writing, such as punctuation, organization, content, grammar, and word choice.
2. Assign students to cooperative learning pairs and give them a writing assignment.
3. Have student A describe his/her writing plan to student B. Student B takes notes and develops an outline of student A's ideas and gives it to him/her. Reverse roles so that student A prepares an outline for student B.
4. Ask students to research their topics individually. If possible, they can also look for material useful for their partners.
5. Have students write the first paragraph of each composition together, making sure that they have a good start on their compositions. Ask students to finish the writing individually.
6. Have students proofread their partner's composition and make corrections.

7. Have each student revise his/her own paper, then reread and sign their partner's revised paper.
8. Collect and grade the individual papers on the basis of the criteria presented in step 1 as well as the number of errors made by the pair of students. Have the pairs discuss how effectively they worked together, focusing specifically on what they need to emphasize in their next writing assignment.

Oral presentations

This activity is intended to enable students to give group presentations and assess their performance. Working cooperatively in small groups, students prepare an oral presentation together, which they will then give individually to other members of the class. Like the interviews described above, this activity requires a certain level of oral proficiency, and it may not be suitable for beginning level students. The procedure is as follows:

1. Assign students to heterogeneous groups of four with the responsibility that all group members will prepare an oral presentation together on a topic provided by the teacher.
2. Give students time to prepare and rehearse so that all group members are able to give the group's presentation.
3. Divide the class into four sections in different parts of the classroom, and have one member of each group go to each section. In their sections, each student gives their group's presentation to the other students.
4. Provide the audience (the other students) with an evaluation form and have them evaluate each presentation on the basis of whether it was informative, concise, easy to follow, engaging, and well organized.
5. Give a copy of the rating to the presenter and keep a copy for your records.
6. Have the groups reconvene to evaluate how effectively each member made the presentation and provide remedial support for any member who had problems presenting.

Group projects

This activity assesses group assignments and can be applied at all levels of proficiency: The procedure is as follows:

1. Assign students to heterogeneous groups of three or four.

2. Assign each group a project. Depending on their level of proficiency, students could prepare a poster, summarize a chapter, or write a research report.
3. Provide each group with necessary material, set a time limit, and monitor their work.
4. Have students present their group project to the rest of the class.
5. Have students develop relevant evaluation criteria and evaluate the final group projects to determine which is the most original and which is the best overall.

Group Processing

This activity enables each student to assess the quality and quantity of his or her own work habits and those of the other students in the class. These habits include arriving on time, preparedness to learn, and positive attitudes towards self, peers, subject matter, and school. The activity is also an opportunity for students to reflect on their individual performances and the performance of their groups. The procedure is as follows:

1. Assign students to small groups and have them each complete a checklist about their individual work habits. See Appendix 2 for a sample checklist.
2. Ask them to compare their self-ratings with the ratings of their group mates. Ask students to discuss their learning experiences and reflect on the performance of group members in terms of their achievement levels, work habits, and ability to assist others. Have them specify what was most successful and what could be improved for future work.
3. Have students celebrate their success, for example, by planning a class party.


Conclusion

This article has proposed seven cooperative learning activities that can facilitate alternative assessment in the second and foreign language classroom. The activities bring assessment closer to the language course objectives in the cognitive, communicative, and socio-cultural domains. Furthermore, the activities reflect the dynamics of real life situations where, more often than not, success is based on group rather than individual performance.

References

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APPENDICES 1-4

Observation Checklist

APPENDIX 1

[Adapted from Johnson and Johnson (1996b)]

Group members: _____

Behavior	Yes	No	Comments
1. Do students understand the task?			
2. Are students thinking aloud by explaining step by step how to complete the assignment?			
3. Are students challenging each others' reasoning and searching for new information and understanding?			
4. Are students using the social and cognitive skills they are expected to practice in this lesson?			

Persistence Checklist

[Adapted from Johnson and Johnson (1996b)]

Student: _____

Indicators	Observed Frequently	Observed Sometimes	Comments
1. Accesses information			
2. Does not give up			
3. Tries different strategies			
4. Seeks several solutions			
5. Other (specify)			

Social Skills Checklist

[Adapted from Johnson and Johnson (1996b)]

Student: _____ Date: _____ Grade: _____

N = Needs Improvement S = Satisfactory E = Excellent

Facilitates Understanding

- ____ Seeks accuracy (corrects)
- ____ Relates new learning to old
- ____ Helps group recall knowledge
- ____ Checks for understanding

Intellectual Challenge

- ____ Criticizes ideas, not people
- ____ Differentiates members' ideas
- ____ Integrates members' ideas
- ____ Asks for rationale, justification

Shows Cooperative Attitude

- ____ Moves into group quietly
- ____ Stays with group, no wandering
- ____ Uses quiet voice in group work
- ____ Takes turns
- ____ Uses others' names
- ____ Is positive about group work
- ____ Is willing to help others
- ____ Follows directions
- ____ Shows courtesy toward others

Leadership Skills

- ____ Clarifies goals
- ____ Gives direction to group's work
- ____ Contributes ideas, opinions
- ____ Requests others' ideas, opinions
- ____ Summarizes, integrates
- ____ Encourages others' participation
- ____ Supports, gives recognition & praise

Work Habits Checklist

APPENDIX 2

[Adapted from Johnson and Johnson (1996b)]

Student: _____ Date: _____ Grade: _____

N = Needs Improvement S = Satisfactory E = Excellent

	September	December	February	May
Completes work on time				
Uses time in class wisely				
Checks work				
Welcomes challenge				
Is persistent				
Accepts responsibility				
Strives for high quality work				
Asks for help appropriately				
Participates in discussions				
Follows school rules				