Teaching strategies – 4 Using learner assessment for speaking tasks

September 2006

This strategy sheet on alternative assessment has resulted from a research project to develop teacher understanding of assessment within the AMEP. It provides perspectives on the subject from the point of view of several AMEP teachers, who give examples of how and where informal assessment practices can be integrated with the teaching program.

Context

Learner assessment is frequently mentioned in assessment discussion but is rarely used in the classroom, possibly because of genuine fears about its effectiveness. Yet a brief reflection on the matter will reveal that it is not such an unusual happening. Successful learners routinely monitor and assess their own language learning and progress (self-assessment). They also observe the language interactions of their peers to pick up new ideas, to identify mistakes to avoid, or to compare their own abilities with those of fellow learners (peer assessment).

In the classroom, **self-assessment** is any language assessment that requires learners to judge their own language abilities or performance in casual conversations, while **peer assessment** requires learners to judge the language skills of other learners.

Self and peer assessments have a range of potential advantages. For example, they can:

- be integrated into teaching and learning processes
- provide personalised assessments for each learner
- involve learners in assessing learning
- foster learner reflection on how learners learn
- encourage greater learner autonomy
- increase learner motivation.

Issues

Although AMEP teachers normally use formal assessment, the curriculum makes it clear that more informal methods are also recognised as being useful supplements.

> A final judgment must be made by the teacher but learners can also be involved in making judgments about their own progress by seeking comment from the teacher as well as by their own peers.
>
> (*CSWE Curriculum*, Introduction, p 13)

Although concerns remain about the validity of self and peer assessments in high status contexts, they can provide a valuable source of additional information for teacher assessments of learner achievement. More importantly, including these techniques in learning programs makes key learning strategies of successful learners explicit and available to all learners.

Many teachers also state concerns about the suitability and practicality of these alternative assessment strategies. Teachers give voice to such concerns as:

> I don't know what to do.
>
> I have no time to do it anyway.
>
> My students aren't used to collaborating.
>
> The students will think that it isn't fair.

This strategies sheet describes actual examples of alternative assessment in action in four different AMEP classes, in the belief that within these examples teachers will find answers to questions about the how, when and why of peer and self-assessment of speaking tasks that will suit their own teaching style and settings.

Strategies

Learner assessment of casual conversation

To achieve the maximum benefit, self and peer assessments are best introduced through structured activities based on the use of explicit criteria that learners can identify, practise and then assess. Learners, whether assessing their own efforts or those of peers, can be directed to observe, analyse and give feedback about:

- the presence or absence of language features
- the strategies used to achieve certain purposes
- communication problems.

In practice, learners in the casual conversation

classroom require criteria on which to assess their own and peer performance in casual conversation. Banks, one of the AMEP teachers on this project concluded from his experience with alternative assessment practices that *a casual conversation does indeed have predictable stages, language functions and specific language structures that can be used to describe its performance. These stages, functions and language structures can be taught to learners, can be practised formally, and can form the performance criteria for their assessment.*

For his project, Banks devised the conversation outline shown below in Figure 1 both to provide guidance for learners and as a basis for their self and peer assessment strategies.

BEGIN	Greetings
	Talk about something general,
	eg something around you, the weather,
	ask for information, ask a small favour
CONTINUE	Ask questions
	Answer questions
	Give feedback
	Ask for clarification
	Change topics
	Tell stories
	Have a discussion –
	opinions, agree, disagree
	Take turns
FINISH	Must go
	Say why
	Meet again
	Say goodbye

Figure 1: Outline of a model casual conversation

This outline is the basis of more specific worksheets for student use in their self-assessments and peer assessments. These worksheets provide guidance for learners on the general characteristics that they should consider when assessing their own or peers' achievements in conversations. Similarly, the worksheets highlight specific discourse organisation and language features.

An example of a self-assessment worksheet is included as Figure 2. With small alterations, the same framework can be used as a worksheet for peer assessment as well as for teacher assessment.

One of the hurdles often faced with the use of self and peer assessment is learner resistance. Teachers can make these assessments more acceptable to learners by providing a conversation outline, by teaching and practising the language structures and functions required for its use, and finally by making it explicit that the presence or absence of items practised will also be the foundation of teacher as well as self and peer assessment.

With structured practice based on the evidence of presence or absence of elements explicitly stated, self and peer assessments commonly match teacher assessments. The process of observing, listening and analysing in order to assess also assists learners to better monitor their own speaking.

Learner assessment of a complex exchange

Peer assessment as an alternative to teacher assessment requires a significant amount of explicit teacher input. Specifically, learners require high levels of support to first become familiar with assessment criteria or checklists and then substantial opportunities to use the assessment tool in practice situations before applying it in formal assessment settings. Learners must also be convinced, by participation in moderating sessions, that their peers are all assessing them fairly on the presence or absence of the stated criteria, not on other factors such as friendships.

Figure 3 is an example of a peer assessment tool used by the learners.

Peer assessment needs to be introduced to learners in ways that are appropriate to their language skills. For example, with a group of learners in the range ISLPR 1+ to 2 a possible introduction could be:

- Discuss forms of assessment (diagnostic, formative, summative).
- Introduce the concept of peer assessment.
- Explain the process of peer assessment.
- Practise using the assessment tool in a number of role-play combinations.
- Analyse data collected from practice sessions.
- Conduct formal peer assessments.

Designing checklists – Two different approaches tell the same story

1 Integrated into the course

Learner assessment of negotiation in an oral transaction to obtain information.

Training for peer assessment was central to this teaching unit on the formation and intonation of 'Wh' and Yes/No questions. During the peer assessment sessions all students reviewed student tapes with the help of several different checklists. During the unit, these underwent transformation as follows:

Checklist 1: A comprehensive checklist covering all question forms and appropriate intonations. Learners found it too broad and unrelated to any context.

Worksheet: Self-assessment of conversation

Worksheet: Self-assessment of conversation

Your name _____ Date _____

Today I talked with _____ (Partner's name)

Part 1: My conversation in general

Think about the conversation you have just had and circle a number on each line to show how much you agree or disagree.

I felt happy and interested.	Disagree	1	2	3	4	Agree
Our conversation was interesting.	Disagree	1	2	3	4	Agree
I liked talking to that person.	Disagree	1	2	3	4	Agree
I understood what my partner was saying.	Disagree	1	2	3	4	Agree
My partner understood me.	Disagree	1	2	3	4	Agree
We talked for a long time.	Disagree	1	2	3	4	Agree
I want to talk to that person again.	Disagree	1	2	3	4	Agree
I think my conversation was successful.	Disagree	1	2	3	4	Agree

Part 2: My conversation skills

Listen to yourself having a conversation on video or audio and place a tick (✓) in the box that you think shows how well you think you can do. Add a comment if you want.

Skills	Not very well	OK	Well	Very well	Comment
I can begin a conversation • give greetings • talk about general topics					
I can ask and answer questions					
I can give feedback					
I can ask for clarification					
I can change topics					
I can tell stories					
I can have a discussion • give greetings • agree and disagree					
I can finish a conversation					
I can use the correct verb tenses					
I can find the words I need					

Figure 2: Example of a self-assessed worksheet

Can negotiate a complex/problematic spoken exchange

Candidate name:

Performance criteria	Sub-criteria	Results
Can use appropriate stages to negotiate an exchange	a. Opens b. Makes request and states purpose c. Acknowledges/recognises a problem d. Gives reasons/argues as required e. Asks or answers a questions as required f. Asks for clarification and repetition as required (especially if there is confusion) g. Checks and gives feedback as required h. Closes	
OVERALL RESULTS **C** = Competent **NYC** = Not Yet Competent **NA** = Not applicable	i. Uses appropriate structures (eg modals, interrogatives, appropriate level of formality) as required	

Figure 3: Example of a peer assessment tool

Checklist 2: A 'Wh' checklist covering only these question words one by one and relating them to context. A sample of this list is shown below.

Performance criteria	Write Yes/No
1 Use 'what' to ask about the times the library opens.	
2 Use 'when' to ask about when the next course starts.	
3 Use 'how much' to ask about course fees.	
4 Use 'where' to ask about places, eg to find the library.	

Checklists 3 and 4: Word order and intonation lists along the same lines as Checklist 2 were used later by students.

Students' work on all the checklists was included in their student portfolios for the unit.

The values of this peer assessment activity were reported as follows:

- Helps students to monitor their own strengths and weaknesses

- Encourages students' self-directedness

- Strengthens student-teacher relations

- Promotes more equitable and fair assessment

- Gives practice in discussing language

- Develops natural conversation contexts

2   Used as an add-on feature

This peer assessment was limited to one small group experiment, which took place as an add-on feature to a learning unit on question forms.

The three students involved assessed actual and not taped performances according to the following pattern:

Learner 1: Asked questions about train timetables using a cue sheet.

Learner 2: Answered the questions using a cue sheet.

Learner 3: Assessed performances using a teacher-devised student checklist.

Teacher: Assessed performances using another checklist.

Description of these two checklists

Student checklist: Students awarded one of the three following grades:

Very Good:	Used question words/verbs
Good:	Used question words
More Study:	No question words/verbs

Teacher checklist: A more detailed and objective list, measuring question words, verbs and syntax.

The results when student work was checked against tapes revealed that:

- student skill and confidence improved over time;

- assessments using the student checklist were inconsistent;

- assessments improved when students used a simpler, yet still detailed version of the teacher's checklist.

This second approach, though quite different, supports the view that checklists need to specify precise behaviours. Only then can important outcomes emerge, such as learner understanding of the task and learner motivation/ confidence in completing the task.

Integrating alternative assessment strategies

This section draws on the ideas presented in the four examples to suggest answers to teachers' concerns about peer/self-assessment highlighted in the introduction.

I don't know what to do

These examples from AMEP classrooms show that alternative forms of assessment can be included in the teaching program at different points and with differing degrees of intensity. There is no need to devise entirely new programs. Essentially, it is important to spend some extra time, at least at the beginning, in designing student-friendly checklists that are specific to the task in hand. Of course the length and requirements included in checklists will vary considerably with the level, for example, with Level 1 there might be only one or two things to check.

I have no time to do it anyway

Finding adequate time to introduce alternative assessment within courses was identified as a very real obstacle by most of the teachers in the project. On the other hand, the teachers concluded that self and peer assessment delivered benefits for learners and teachers. Staged introduction of self or peer assessment across a centre could bring familiarity and benefit both to learners and teachers, as well as reduce time spent on introducing the concepts to learners. However, individual teachers interested in the potential of self or peer assessment should be encouraged by the examples because they demonstrate that time spent on preparing, practising and using alternative assessments reduces the amount of teacher-time required for other teacher assessments.

My students aren't used to collaborating

When teachers first meet a class, time may certainly need to be spent in promoting the benefits of a

collaborative and communicative classroom. When teachers cultivate the general understanding that learners learn by participating, questioning, making mistakes, sharing insights and recognising the contributions of others, then the ground is prepared for the introduction of peer assessment. However, it is clear that steps taken to use informal assessment are an effective and practical way to boost collaboration and communication among students. The classroom examples also show that with structured support from teachers, learners can gradually develop the attitudes and skills necessary to make thoughtful, sensitive and fair assessments of their own and other learners' achievements.

The students will think that it isn't fair

Fairness is an important issue in assessment. Many learners come from educational contexts where fairness equates with teacher-centred decision making. The best strategy for AMEP teachers is to acknowledge this first and go on to explain that a more rounded and fairer view of each student's ability is obtained when assessment is based on several opinions as well as a number of assessments over time.

The classroom investigations prompted several teachers to note that after becoming familiar with the procedure, a great deal of similarity emerged between student and teacher assessments. Furthermore, by participating in assessments, the learners had made greater gains than if the entire process had been left to the teacher alone.

Conclusion

Judgments about the language and non-language "benefits of informal assessment practices for both teachers and students have been highlighted throughout this information sheet. When properly explained, introduced and managed, alternative assessment methods can bring considerable benefit. This has been shown in terms not only of achieving learning outcomes, but also of improving teacher-student relationships, class atmosphere and inter-student collaboration, as well as positive change in student confidence, self-esteem and study habits.

Not only does the introduction of peer assessment as part of formal assessment processes provide additional information to support teacher assessment, but it has the added advantage of generating opportunities for 'real' language interaction among students.

Useful resources

Brown, J., & Hudson, T. (1993). What kind of alternative? Examining alternative assessment. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(4).

Genesee, F., & Upshur, J. (2000). *Classroom-based evaluation in second language education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hamayan, E. (1995). Approaches to alternative assessment. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 15, 212–226.

Rea-Dickins, P. (2001). Mirror, mirror on the wall: identifying processes of classroom assessment. *Language Testing*, 18(4), 429–462.

Shohamy, E. (2001). Democratic assessment as an alternative. *Language Testing*, 18(4), 373–391.