# Effects of Classroom Assessment Practices in a Foreign Language Reading Course[1]

Efectos de las Prácticas de Evaluación en el Salón de Clase de un Curso de Lectura en Lengua Extranjera (LE)

Sergio Alonso Lopera Medina[2*]

*Universidad de Antioquia, Colombia*

## Abstract

This article analyzes the various types of information that alternative assessment and traditional assessment practices provided in an English foreign language (FL) reading course for graduate students at a public university in Medellín, Colombia. This study followed the principles of qualitative research, and a case study was used as a research method. There were five instruments to collect data: questionnaires, observations, tests, focus groups, and the diary of the teacher. Findings suggest that the assessment practices applied in this course helped students and teachers recognize that learning occurred. The assessment practices also helped language practitioners learn more about the teaching and learning processes in FL reading. Conclusions suggest that language practitioners should include both alternative and traditional assessment in order to have a wider picture of the process of teaching and learning.

*Keywords:* Alternative/traditional assessment, foreign language reading

9

Resumen

Este artículo analiza los diferentes tipos de información de las prácticas de evaluación alternativa y la evaluación tradicional que se brindaron en un curso de lectura de inglés como lengua extranjera ofrecido a estudiantes de postgrado en una Universidad pública en Medellín, Colombia. Este estudio siguió los principios de una investigación cualitativa y se utilizó el estudio de caso como método de investigación. Se aplicaron cinco instrumentos para recolectar la información: cuestionarios, observaciones, pruebas, grupos focales y el diario del profesor. Los resultados indican que las prácticas de evaluación aplicadas en este curso ayudaron tanto al profesor como a los estudiantes a reconocer que se generó aprendizaje. Las prácticas de evaluación también ayudaron a los involucrados a aprender más acerca de los procesos de enseñanza/aprendizaje en lectura en (LE). Las conclusiones sugieren que la comunidad educativa debe incluir tanto la evaluación alternativa como la evaluación tradicional para obtener una mirada más amplia de los procesos de enseñanza y aprendizaje.

*Palabras clave:* Evaluación alternativa/tradicional, lectura LE

Resumo

Este artigo analisa os diferentes tipos de informação das práticas de avaliação alternativa e a avaliação tradicional que se ofereceram em um curso de leitura inglês como língua estrangeira oferecida a estudantes de pós-graduação em uma Universidade pública em Medellín, Colômbia. Este estudo seguiu os princípios de uma pesquisa qualitativa e se utilizou o estudo de caso como método de pesquisa. Aplicaram-se cinco instrumentos para recolher a informação: questionários, observações, provas, grupos focais e o diário do professor. Os resultados indicam que as práticas de avaliação aplicadas neste curso ajudaram tanto ao professor quanto aos estudantes a reconhecer que se gerou aprendizado. As práticas de avaliação também ajudaram os envolvidos a aprender mais sobre os processos de ensino/aprendizado em leitura em (LE). As conclusões sugerem que a comunidade educativa deve incluir tanto a avaliação alternativa quanto a avaliação tradicional para obter uma mirada mais ampla dos processos de ensino e aprendizado.

*Palabras chave:* avaliação alternativa/tradicional, leitura LE

10

## Introduction

Assessment is an important part of teaching and learning in classroom settings. Some scholars have seen assessment as testing, but assessment involves a deeper concept in which the learning process is involved (Aebersold & Field, 1997; Alderson, 2000; Frodden, Restrepo, & Maturana, 2004). Davies, Brown, Elder, Hill, Lumley and McNamara (1999) define assessment as "a term often used interchangeably with testing; but also used more broadly to encompass the gathering of language data" (p. 11). This means that assessment is any methodical procedure to gather information about students' learning. Testing, on the other hand, is a method that determines students' abilities to complete a task, but is only one way to assess (for example a multiple choice test). It is worth noting that testing has been the traditional form of evaluating students, also used to make management decisions (Aweiss, 1993). New trends in assessment, such as alternative assessment, incorporate different forms of evaluation such as self-assessment, observation, homework, among others (Aebersold & Field, 1997). Some researchers suggest that taking the best parts of both traditional[3] and alternative assessment in classrooms leads to more effective instruction (Aebersold & Field, 1997; Alderson, 2000).

This article reports the effects of traditional and alternative assessment practices applied in a foreign language reading comprehension course for graduate students at a public university in Medellín, Colombia. This study is derived from a larger study on the effects of face-to-face instruction and web-based instruction in (FL) reading comprehension for graduate students in the same university. The study reported in this paper aims at identifying the effects of classroom (face-to-face) assessment practices on students. The research question that guides the inquiry is "What do classroom assessment practices tell language practitioners about the learning process of a FL reading comprehension course for graduate students?" Findings suggest that the assessment practices applied in this course helped students and teachers recognize that learning occurred.

11

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[3]    Traditional assessment is a conventional method of testing. A quiz, an exam or a standardized test are examples of traditional assessment.

## Literature Review

### Assessment

Shohamy, Inbar-Lourie, and Poehner (2008) state that most researchers pay little attention to what teachers do in their classrooms to assess students. They argue, on the other hand, that much research has been carried out to see the effects of standardized tests because large-scale tests have a greater impact on test-takers' lives as well as institutions. Rea-Dickins (2004) and Rea-Dickins and Gardner (2000) highlight the importance of doing assessment research in classrooms because it guides scholars to make decisions such as promotion, program admission, or learning support services.

Recently, some researchers have begun to integrate classroom-based assessment and teaching in classroom. Nowadays, there is a growing interest about the practices the teacher does in the classroom, and some studies have focused on second and foreign language teaching contexts (Cheng, Rogers, & Hu, 2004; Davison, 2004; Leung, 2004; Muñoz, 2009; Rea-Dickens, 2004; Sánchez & Morrison-Saunders, 2010). These researchers have explored teachers' practices and beliefs related to assessment through surveys and the impact of these assessment practices in external norm-setting and tests. Researchers have also explored the instruments teachers have used in classrooms such as self-assessment, diaries, and peer-assessment.

To illustrate this, Torrance and Pryor (1998) report that language arts teachers in primary schools in England were familiar with different types of assessment practices such as cloze tests or performance assessments, but did not have a clear picture in order to implement assessment activities that would result in student learning. Muñoz (2009) explored the assessment practices teachers had in FL reading, and found that teachers lacked familiarity with alternative assessment. Nevertheless, the author found that teachers used diverse practices in assessing reading comprehension. Quizzes, multiple-choice tests, presentations, class participation, workshops and class attendance are examples of this diversity. He also found that teachers were concerned about verifying the achievement of learning objectives; that is, some teachers expressed the need to implement traditional assessment practices (such as quizzes or final exams) due to the fact that they provide precise information of learning. Finally and due to the fact that teachers lacked familiarity with alternative assessment, Muñoz (2009) found that students also lacked familiarity with assessment practices.

Rea-Dickins (2004) and Brown (2004) highlight the importance of the role of teachers in assessing the learning process of students. The researchers

12

argue that FL teachers can be seen as active agents of assessment in the sense that they usually design and implement assessments. In fact, Rea-Dickins (2004) states that the role of the teacher has two main functions: as a facilitator of students' effort to learn a language, and as a judge of learner performance.

### Reading

Reading is an active process in which there is a dialog between the reader and text. Alyousef (2005) states, "Reading is an interactive process between a reader and a text. The reader should interact dynamically with the text with the intention to understand its message" (p. 14). In order to understand the text, the reader needs to possess two vital elements: linguistic knowledge and background knowledge. Linguistic knowledge involves awareness about the language such as grammar or vocabulary structure. Background knowledge relates to the familiarity the reader has with the reading.

Cassany (2006), González (2000), Grabe and Stoller (2002), and Weir (1993) also argue that reading involves a process of cognition because readers have to predict, memorize information, interpret, pay attention, and make hypotheses when they decode a written message. Cassany (2006) affirms that that FL readers have to make a greater effort because they may face difficulties with grammar, vocabulary or even culture in the readings. That is why the role of the teacher is important in order to guide students to apply some reading strategies.

**Models of reading.** There are two important models or processes for reading: bottom-up processes and top-down. In the first model, readers have to build the text from small units beginning from letters to words, and then from words to sentences (Aebersold & Field, 1997). In the second model, readers have to link the text to their existing knowledge that involves historical, cultural or linguistic elements. Grabe and Stoller (2002) suggest an interactive model that includes both bottom-up and top-down processes as readers need to recognize words quickly, and they also need to activate background knowledge in order to understand the text.

**Reading strategies.** Different authors support the importance of teaching reading strategies to students (Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary, & Robbins, 1999; Hosenfeld, 1979; Janzen, 2001; Mikulecky & Jeffries, 2004; Osorno & Lopera, 2012). Reading strategies help learners apply a task, pay attention to what textual cues they have to focus on, and know what to do when they have troubles (Block, 1986). Teachers can use both simple reading strategies (e.g., previewing or scanning) and complex ones (e.g., inference or summarizing) with students.

13

Janzen (2001, p. 369) proposes five classroom activities to work with reading strategies:

- Explicit discussion of the reading strategies and when to use them

- Demonstration of how to apply a reading strategy (modeling)

- Involvement with the reading in terms of reading aloud and sharing the process while applying the strategies

- Discussion of the activities in the classroom

- Practice with the reading material of the course

Researchers have explored some reading strategies in classrooms, and their conclusion is that they are beneficial for learners (Arismendi, Colorado & Grajales, 2011; Block, 1986; Carrell, 1998; Lopera, 2012; Mikulecky & Jeffries, 2004; Poole, 2009).

**Reading assessment practices.** Reading assessment practices are important because they tell the language teacher what to do in the course. Gersten (1999) suggests that assessment should be aimed at collecting information from students' reading abilities and then teachers should use that information in order to plan and implement classes. Cross and Paris (1987) give three important purposes when implementing reading comprehension assessment:

- Sorting: It helps not only to predict learners' academic success but also to indicate mastery.

- Diagnosing: It helps to gather information in order to make decisions about the learning process.

- Evaluating: It helps to determine the effects of a program.

Teachers can also implement assessment practices in reading in order to enhance fluency, word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, text structure, discourse organization, main ideas, inference, among others (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). Aweiss (1993) asserts that teachers can use different instruments to apply assessment practices, and they vary from unstructured and spontaneous gathering of information during instruction to more formal situations such as structured tests.

14

Aebersold and Field (1997) propose six methods of alternative assessment that aim at students' learning as well as their participation in classrooms for reading comprehension:

- Journals: They can be done in audio or written forms. This helps both teachers and learners monitor the reading comprehension process.

- Portfolios: This may include students' journals, but items such as drafts, homework, exams, or summaries can also be integrated here.

- Homework: This helps students identify what they do not know.

- Observation: This helps the teacher evaluate students' comprehension and participation. The teacher can also observe if students work in groups, in pairs or individually.

- Self-assessment: This helps students be part of the learning process because they reflect on their own practices and achievements.

- Peer-assessment: This guides students to evaluate each other's participation in a given activity.

Finally, some authors support the idea of including both traditional and alternative assessment in the classrooms because readers respond to texts in many different forms (Aebersold & Field, 1997; Alderson, 2000). In fact, Aebersold and Field (1997) encourage "reading teachers to become thoughtful, attentive, reliable assessors, able to use both alternative and traditional assessment measures that are beneficial to all" (p. 167).

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study followed the principles of qualitative research, and a case study was used as a research method (Cresswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Tellis, 1997; Yin, 2003). The study also involved the methodology of an exploratory multiple case study as researchers wanted to identify the effects of classroom assessment on students' reading comprehension. The grounded approach was used when researchers categorized the data (Freeman, 1998).

### Context

The research was carried out at a public university in Medellín, Colombia. In order to be admitted to the second semester of their graduate program, students in specialization programs[4] have to certify reading comprehension in a foreign language. They have two options to certify: taking a proficiency test or attending a classroom course. A research group in teaching and learning

15

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[4]  *Especialización* (specialization) is a graduate program that usually lasts one year. The main objective of these programs is to update students in their academic areas.

languages designed a web-based course in 2007, and this course became a third option.

The reading comprehension course. The course is designed to guide students to use reading strategies in a FL, and aims at developing readers who interact with different types of texts. The name of the course is English reading comprehension for graduate programs (Competencia lectora en inglés para postgrados). It is a 120-hour course with five main units. Table 1 includes a description of the reading comprehension program.

*Table 1.* The reading comprehension program

| Unit | Name | Topics |
|------|------|--------|
| 1 | Word and their meanings | Dictionary use, parts of speech, cognates, affixes, word meaning in context. |
| 2 | Reading strategies | Prediction, skimming, scanning, and graph interpretation. |
| 3 | Development of reading skills | Sentence structure, topic, main idea, and referents |
| 4 | Text organization methods | cause and effect, comparison and contrasts, description, narration, argumentation , and classification and categorization |
| 5 | Critical reading | Fact and opinions, tone, and arguments |

**Participants**

**The teacher.** The teacher holds a Master's degree in teaching foreign languages and has more than ten years of experience teaching reading comprehension for undergraduate and graduate students. He taught the course in Spanish to facilitate students' learning, but the readings and exercises were in English.

16

**The students.** There were 27 students in the course (17 women, 10 men), and only one student withdrew from the course. Age ranged between 20 and 51 years old. All participants were in the first semester of different specializations in the Law Department: Social Security Law, Constitutional Law, Family Law, Administrative Law, and Procedural Law.

### Data Collection Instruments

Four alternative assessment instruments (questionnaires, observations, focus groups, and the diary of the teacher) and one traditional assessment instrument (test) were used to gather data. The objective of each instrument is explained below:

**Questionnaires.** Three questionnaires were administered: evaluation of the course and the teacher, reading strategies and motivation, and self-evaluation. For the purpose of this paper, the self-assessment questionnaire was analyzed in order to see the effects of assessment practices.

**Tests.** There were two types of tests: before (pre-test) and after (post-test) the pedagogical intervention, and different tests for each unit. In the pre-test and post-test, there were two readings in each test with 13 multiple choice questions (questions and readings simulating standardized tests like the TOEFL). Inferencing, scanning, identifying topics and main ideas are some of the topics covered in the tests. The unit tests included short paragraphs on the topic of every unit, and multiple choice as well as open questions.

**Diary of the teacher.** The teacher kept a diary in order to record his observations and reflections about the teaching and learning process in reading (Jeffrey & Hadley, 2002). The teacher wrote an entry for each class. The purpose of this diary was to gain insights from the teacher about the course.

**Observations.** This instrument was used to examine behaviors, interaction, and participation in the classroom (Brown, 2001). Two different members of the research group observed two sessions for each unit, and the observations were recorded using a format designed ad-hoc by the research group.

**Focus group.** At the end of the course, students were invited to have a focus group session in order to discuss the academic experiences in a deeper way. The sessions were guided by the research advisor, and then transcribed. Fourteen students participated.

### Data Analysis Interpretation

Ten researchers participated in the analysis of the data (the research advisor, six teachers, and three undergraduate students). All researchers read and labeled the data individually and then compared some important ideas in groups. After that, they coded the data and constructed categories. Finally, researchers triangulated the information in order to validate data (Freeman, 1998). Researchers translated some excerpts from Spanish to English in order to support findings.

17

## Results

Researchers found the following issues after analyzing the assessment practices applied in the foreign language reading course:

### Self-assessment Questionnaire

The questionnaire asked students about their motivation, reading strategies, the course, and the teacher during the learning process. Students expressed that the course offered different topics to be applied in readings. One theme that emerged from the self-assessment questionnaire was *positive methodology*. Comments by students out of 26 indicated this issue:

> I like the methodology used by the teacher because he is active and clear with his explanations.

> The teacher is quite organized with the course and is quite active.

> The methodology was great.

Twenty students also expressed that they had improved their reading comprehension in the FL, and that they had applied different strategies such as skimming, scanning, previewing, and prediction. One of the students reported, "I have learnt pre-reading strategies: prediction, skimming, scanning."

However, five students reported that one of the main obstacles was the lack of vocabulary when interacting with readings, and the lack of time to practice due to their job duties. Some comments include the following:

> One of the main difficulties I have faced with readings is the vocabulary

> Well, the lack of time to practice

In his diary and in order to support this issue, the teacher also reported that students faced difficulties with the vocabulary, especially at the beginning of the course. In one of his entries, he expressed that students had difficulties with the vocabulary, even when they had the option to use the dictionary. He wrote:

18

> Students had difficulties understanding how English words could have different meanings according to the context they had. Students were used to writing the first meaning they had in the dictionary without further considerations on the context; therefore, students had some difficulties understanding the meaning of words. I didn't plan to have students learning to use the context to understand word meanings in one class; however, I was concerned about students' motivation because this topic was one of the issues students complained about when they said English was a difficult language.

**Tests**

When students took the pre-test, the teacher wrote in his diary that students were nervous, uncomfortable, and worried about the length of the test. He also noted that students had difficulty understanding the readings, completing the test, and that they translated many words into Spanish. This experience contrasts with the post-test, in which students were more comfortable and did not translate as many words as on the first test. The teacher also noted that students understood the readings and applied the reading strategies. Researchers wanted to verify in a quantitative way if students applied reading strategies so they compared statistically the pre- and post-test (the same test was applied). It is worth noting that the quantitative analysis helps support the qualitative one. Table 2 shows the following results:

*Table 2.* Statistical analysis of the pre-test and post-test

| Statistics | Tests | |
|---|---|---|
| | **Pre-test** | **Post-test** |
| Number of participants | 26 | 26 |
| Minimum | 2,000 | 7,000 |
| Maximum | 11,000 | 10,000 |
| Median | 6,000 | 9,000 |
| Mean | 5,654 | 8,885 |
| Variance (n-1) | 5,595 | 0,506 |
| Standard deviation (n-1) | 2,365 | 0,711 |

Statistics support that the effect of the reading comprehension course in English as a foreign language was quite positive as the *mean* increased. This means that the course was effective for students.

The teacher also wrote that in his diary that the students were quite nervous taking the tests for each unit. Students' anxiety was so high that they even asked the teacher if they could take the test with a partner. The teacher also noted that their anxiety was mainly based on the score, and tried to lessen their anxiety. The teacher reported in his diary:

19

They didn't feel very confident to take a test in English, and they still believed it was very difficult; this is why students asked repeatedly to do the test with a classmate, but I told them that it was not possible. I tried to calm down students about the test, by explaining how they would only be asked on the exercises and topics we studied, but students didn't pay attention and were very nervous to take the test. Although students did a very good effort during the exam, they asked

a lot of questions trying to get some approval of their work, so they could be confident of getting a good grade.

Finally, the teacher sometimes asked the students to assess each other after a test of a reading activity. He said the correct answer in front of the whole group and then asked students to correct their peers. This activity helped learners not only to confirm their knowledge but also to take responsibility for their own learning. This issue was validated in the observations.

### Diary of the Teacher

The teacher began the course explaining the objectives, methodology, content, and assessment. The teacher wondered if students had observations regarding the assessment part as they did not suggest or mention anything about it. The teacher said in the diary:

> I explained the assessment methodology and students agreed, as they didn't suggest further changes or disagree. I wonder if they really understood. This was the feeling I had during the class and all the issues I mentioned.

The teacher also reflected on students' issues such as attitude, contact, motivation, confidence, and improvement in reading. For instance, he stated that the close contact with students makes it possible to provide an immediate solution when students face learning problems; he said:

> By getting close to students there is a chance to get to know what students may be able to do during learning, and there is also a chance to provide immediate solutions to learning difficulties.

The teacher also observed that students' attitude was positive and they read for comprehension and not for a score in order to improve their skills, he mentioned:

> Students' attitude is quite positive. They wanted to understand what they were reading. They didn't want to just complete the exercises for obtaining a grade, they really wanted to take the opportunity to improve their English language skills.

Moreover, the teacher stated that students had gained confidence when facing texts in English:

> These students also remark how it is easier for them to face texts in English – not that they are going to understand everything at once – but at least they said they had more elements for understanding.

The teacher noted that students had improved with the process of applying reading strategies and understood the information from the readings, he said:

20

I could notice how students were actually doing a good job on understanding information from different types of text. While I collected information from students' class tasks, I could notice very good answers to the information required.

Finally, the teacher observed that some students showed extrinsic motivation as they had to certify reading in a foreign language in order to be admitted to the second semester of their Law specializations. He argued that some students had taken the proficiency test while attending the reading course in order to accomplish the reading requirement and only one passed it.

At the end, only one student passed the test and he didn't go back to class, he didn't even say good bye. It was quite surprising to realize that after two months of instruction some students were only worried about obtaining the certification, that's it, there is no other interest.

## Observations

At the beginning of the course, researchers observed that students used the dictionaries quite often when they came across an unknown word. At the end of the course, learners did not use the dictionary that much and researchers interpreted this decreased dependence on the dictionary as improvement in reading. The observers and the teacher also noted that students' participation was a constant aspect, and they were willing to do it. Researchers interpreted this issue as a motivation factor in students.

Finally, the teacher corrected class exercises and gave oral feedback to students in some sections of the class. Researchers validated that the teacher applied formative assessment in students.

## Focus Group

During the focus groups, students expressed that the methodology was motivating and that they had learned how to read in a FL. One of the students said, "I now feel more confident to read texts in English and understand more." Another student said that she felt so confident reading that she "started to read in English in the Internet."

On the other hand, some students complained about the requirement to certify a foreign language in order to be registered in the second semester of their graduate program, and suggested removing this requirement. One student said, "We felt pressure due to the requirement to certify a foreign language. It would be a good idea not to be a requirement."

Finally, students questioned the idea of interacting with readings from different topics and suggested that the readings be in the Law area as they were

21

taking a graduate program in Law, one student commented, "It would be nice to interact with readings related to our field."

## Conclusions

Both alternative and traditional assessments were analyzed in a foreign language reading comprehension course in order to see the effects of reading instruction. Findings suggest that the course helped both students and the teacher recognize that learning occurred. The assessment instruments applied in this course also helped language practitioners learn more about the teaching/learning practices in FL reading. In fact, researchers not only noted that students' motivation was mainly extrinsic, as they had to certify reading in a foreign language, but also that students' anxiety was high. Researchers also noted that students faced difficulties with vocabulary. On the other hand, these assessment practices helped to examine learning processes in an objective way. The statistical information analyzed supports the assertion that students improved as the mean increased leading to state that the course was effective to students.

One important element of applying both alternative and traditional assessment is that students are involved in the learning process and they reflect on their own practices and achievements. The call to include learners in the assessment practices is crucial in today's teaching, and this may help scholars to make changes in order to improve ongoing or future teaching practices. Finally, the results of this paper may enlighten scholars to integrate both alternative assessment and traditional assessment in classrooms in order to have a wide picture of the process of teaching and learning languages.

22

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24

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**Author**

*  **Sergio Lopera Medina** holds an MA in linguistics, is a PhD candidate in linguistics and a specialist in teaching foreign languages. He is a full time professor and a research member of EALE (*Enseñanza y Aprendizaje de las Lenguas Extranjeras) at the Universidad de Antioquia*. His research interests are teaching EFL reading comprehension and pragmatics.

25