EXPLORING STUDENT PERSPECTIVES OF ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT AT POSTGRADUATE LEVEL STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

The traditional definition of alternative assessment (AA) deals with moving away from multiple choice and restrictive forms of assessment to more creative, instructional, and formative assessment. The value of AA is seen to lie in moving toward a constructivist model of learning where "teaching, learning and assessment" are connected (Anderson, 1998). As shown by McLellen (2004) and Tan (2012), 'alternative assessment' encapsulates many terms such as "performance assessment", "authentic assessment", and "direct assessment". Thus, it is best defined by what it is not, namely assessment that focuses only on the product, output, or a measurement. At the Postgraduate Institute of English (PGIE), traditional assessment of that type is not conducted. Yet, there was a sentiment that the way students were being tested was not conducive and was leading to a greater failure and dropout rate.

In particular, in the sociolinguistics component of the postgraduate (PG) level course "Psycho-socio context of Teaching/ learning English in Sri Lanka", which is part of the teaching English as second language PG course, the examiners of traditional pen and paper examination expressed a general dissatisfaction with the standard and quality of answers given by students. This is in contrast to the examiners of the final project of a course, who discovered a much better and more impressive product. Three needs were identified as necessary for better student progress: a need for a training for students to write academically acceptable answers displaying an understanding of theoretical concepts under examination conditions, a need for balanced assessment that is designed to target students' strengths rather than weaknesses, and a need to facilitate students' discovery of connections between theory and their practice. In addition, it was mooted that, rather than using the traditional teacher-centered transmission approach to teaching, the facilitation of the self-discovery of knowledge and peer teaching that reflect dialogic learning be encouraged through the use of alternative assessment. In effect, that rather than changing the content, the delivery and assessment of the course be altered.

The proposed changes to assessment were seen as a strategy to both improve the quality of the course and the experience of students. Further, it was also seen as an approach to better prepare students for final evaluations and to reduce the failure rate at final evaluations, without compromising the quality of the course.

McLellen (2004) sums up the key benefits of AA as being that it focuses on holistic thinking and problem-solving skills, as opposed to discrete pieces of information and knowledge, and that it directly informs instruction. It is based on the notion that learning is meaningful, reflective, and self-regulated and that there is a 'social dimension' to learning.

The AA in this study is very closely associated with 'formative assessment'. In the context of the study, AA is not a strange innovation as many of the continuous assessments and even some of the final evaluations involve take home assignments/projects, which in itself are considered alternative assessments. However, OBTs and presentations constitute a different type of AA for this particular context. Thus, in that light, a study of student perspectives is useful to assess the value of its implementation in order to identify areas in this AA that could be improved. The main research question of this study was:How do students perceive alternative assessments such as OBT and group presentations in terms of its value for learning, effectiveness, and its drawbacks?

METHODOLOGY

The AA consisted of replacing a solitary assignment with an OBT and a group presentation assignment.

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The main aim of the OBT was to help students hone their critical thinking and cognitive skills under the pressure of time while maintaining a high level of academic expression. The AA aspect of this assessment is that students are given the area of the test and are expected to prepare adequate reference material to be used during the test.

The main aim of the group presentation was to promote learner autonomy, peer teaching, and peer evaluation. The incorporation of peer assessment is supported by Dochy, Segers, and Sluijsmans (1999) who, based on a critical review of research on the use of self, peer, and co-assessment in higher education, concluded that such assessments make students "more responsible and reflective". Eight groups of five to six members were allocated two separate topics. Students were asked to peer evaluate the presentation of the topic for which they did not prepare in order to ensure that students would pay attention to both the topics to be explored through student presentations.

Students were then given a questionnaire with open-ended questions via an online anonymous response feedback site in order to ensure anonymity. The queries in the questionnaire sought their views on the suitability of the assessment for PG level study, their assessment of its positive and negative aspects, and suggestions they had for improving the assessment(s). In total, 16 students responded to the questionnaire out of the 41 students who participated in the assessments.

The data from the questionnaires was qualitatively analysed using thematic coding and categorisation as it consisted of a series of open-ended questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The responses from the data were first categorized to identify positive and negative perspectives. Within these two broad themes, all the comments of the students were grouped and further analysed for emerging themes. The participants' responses to the questions have been analysed and presented according to their responses to the OBT assessment and the presentation assessment.

Overall, students had a positive response to the assessments. Analysis of the data revealed that students felt there were direct academic benefits from the OBT while the positive attitude to presentations included benefits such as "improved presentation skills" and the facilitation of networking among the course mates.

Student response to the OBT Assessment

Student perspectives of the OBT assessment comprised 6 major themes. The themes dealt with: time constraints, the effect of facing an OBT for the first time, how it contributed to learning, the 'fairness' of the assessment method, the role notes played, and preparation for the OBT.

One overarching theme that was repeated in a majority of the responses was that the time given for the OBT was inadequate. It was highlighted that there was insufficient time to refer books and the given time could not be utilized effectively. One response even highlighted that the limited time duration created exam anxiety. It was additionally pointed out that as the given time was so limited, it was not appropriate to have 'citation and references' as a marking criterion.

A more mixed reaction was evident in the responses to facing an OBT for the first time. The main two areas of impact were, firstly, how it made students feel and, secondly, preparation for the OBT (discussed in detail later in this section). While some expressed a sense of excitement at doing an OBT, another stated to being "nervous". A few respondents also stated that because it was the first time they had done an OBT, they were not adequately prepared for it. One student reported the following:

"as some students had never sat an OBT before, there was general discord after the OBT was completed – because what was expected was not outlined". On the other hand, others reported it as "really thrilling", "full of excitement", and that it "piqued" the interest of the student. Thus, it has been very effective in terms of its 'novelty effect' in stimulating interest and motivation in the students.

Another student perspective that emerged from the responses was the 'learning' value of the assessment. Students noted that the OBT helped them to "apply theory", and a number of students

highlighted the fact that they did not have to be limited to 'memorization' and it required real understanding and thinking. In this case, the student emphasized that PG level study should not be about memorization. It was also highlighted that the OBT promoted critical thinking skills as well.

It was also emphasized that this test helped students to 'avoid' plagiarism and that it was perceived as being a 'fair assessment' as it was a way of assessing each student's individual effort, as it was felt that students could get help for take-home assignments.

According to the students, the provision of students being able to take their notes into the exam for the OBT provided both a positive and negative effect. For some it provided a "sense of security", but for another it had been a 'false sense of security' as the time was inadequate for them to refer to the notes and books and that, in that context, the over reliance on notes had meant they had not sufficiently prepared for the test.

The final major theme to emerge from the students' responses to the OBT was the issue of preparation for the OBT. On the one hand, students felt prepared because the specific area of the OBT was given well in time, while others felt unprepared because they did not know what an OBT was like. Some even suggested that practice for OBTs should be provided in the day schools.

Student responses to the group presentation assignment

Responses to the presentation were more detailed and prolific, and had a range of responses, which included both positive and negative comments. Overwhelmingly, the comments reflected students' affective response to working in groups. This dealt with both the advantages and difficulties of group work. The major themes that emerged were the role of peer collaboration in learning, the effect of the assessment on motivation, the extended collegiality effect of the assessment, the perceived benefit for acquiring presentation skills, the practical difficulties and issues with the assignment, and perspectives regarding the contribution of individual members.

Many felt that working in groups helped them to learn more. As one student put it: "everybody can contribute and constructive criticism takes place, and the group goes for the best thing." Another student pointed out that the assessment demanded an ability to read large amounts, but distill the gist of the readings effectively. Many commented on the positive results of peer interaction on the quality of the final product and on individual learning. An important statement that reveals the potential of this assessment is given below:

"It was really an eye opener. I realized where I was in my studies. I compared myself with my peers. It was really helpful to redesign my learning strategies."

On the other hand, a student responded that as the presentation had been divided among group members, there was very little sharing of knowledge within the group.

Students reacted positively to peer evaluation and felt that observing peers' presentations also led them to self-evaluate their own work. However, some observations highlighted that peer marks could be biased and that since peer comments were not distributed to the students themselves, a learning opportunity was lost.

The impact on motivation to complete the assignment is evidenced by such statements as: "intensive study takes place and all work hard because there's competition between groups". Another interesting point made, is that even 'slow learners', who do not like 'tests' in general like this type of assessment.

In relation to further collegial benefits of this assessment, students found that they made new friends who would support them later. It was reported that a good rapport between batch-mates was also developed through the group work assignment.

Many commented on how the task helped them with improving their presentation skills and confidence. However, one student felt that peers/ tutors would be unduly influenced by the presentation itself and not focus sufficiently on the content. Further, one student proposed that as IT skills are needed for the presentation, it can leave students with poor IT skills at a disadvantage.

The practical difficulties with the assignment ranged from the fact that communication between group members was difficult at times due to the geographically-wide distribution of students to the lack of cooperation among group members. Students also noted that dominant personalities at

times produced a detrimental effect on the final presentation. This second issue is, indeed, contentious as one student pointed out "group presentations do not always display the true ability or knowledge of all the group members as sometimes it is the effort of one or two members of the group." Another student felt there should be a mechanism in place to reward individual group members' effort.

One final aspect of the assessment with which some students were unhappy was that they were asked to form their own groups. Some felt that individuals could choose groups where they would not have to do any work. Another felt that this created homogenous groups, especially in relation to 'bright' students and that a learning opportunity is lost.

CONCLUSIONS

The use of OBTs and presentations in a distance learning context can be problematic due to the fact that students had to be physically present at the university for the assessments. However, in this instance, no student highlighted it as being an issue, and instead they overwhelmingly showed that the time given for the test was inadequate and, thus, defeated the purpose of the test. This was clearly a drawback of the practical aspect of the assessment, but not of the assessment itself.

It is clear that from the students' perspective, they had engaged with the OBT in terms of 'thinking' and, thus, confirmed a key benefit of AA. However, in its practical implementation, more guidance could have been provided to students so that they would not feel unprepared as a result of not comprehending the expectations of the assessment.

Students' perspectives revealed that there were many advantages and drawbacks to group work. Among the drawbacks highlighted by students was the fact that every group member may not contribute, that 'weak' or 'domineering' members could have a negative impact on the final presentation, and the practical difficulties of meeting, discussion, and practice. A more serious concern is the value of group tasks when individual members take on discrete aspects of the task and there is very little subsequent discussion. In such a situation, a major benefit of group work, that of co-constructed learning, is completely negated.

Overall, AA at PG level in this study has shown to be effective and has to a greater extent confirmed the premise of existing literature regarding the value of AA. However, for these types of AA to be more successful, student concerns about their implementation, including practical difficulties and mark allocations, needs to be very carefully considered.

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