TRADITIONAL VS. MODERN METHODS OF ASSESSING ENGLISH

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Abstract

The paper *Traditional Vs. Modern Methods of Assessing English* deals with the two types of assessment of a foreign language (English repectively), and tries to answer the question: which of the two assessing methods would be most efficient?

The learning process is a self-adjustment (self-regulation) process, as the informational flow operates in both ways: from the teacher towards the students and the other way around. The last connection is represented by the feedback that, therefore, makes the learning process be not only an adjustment (regulation) process, led by the social factors and conditions and driven through the teacher's personality filter, but also a self-adjusting process, a process of correction, interdependence and conscious direction of the individual flow.

Assessing refers precisely to this stratagem of the learning process which is the reverse connection. A series of information can be obtained by means of assessing, information concerning the results of the learning process, which are received by the teacher through feedback. Due to these results, the teachers are able to adjust or provide the self-adjustment of the learning process, until the final objectives are achieved.

Generally, assessment is concerned with the efficiency of the learning system, considered to be a sub-system of the social one. Therefore, *assessment is the process which decides upon whether the educational system fulfils its functions, i. E. the system's objectives are achieved.*

When it comes to assessing a foreign language, well known methodologists of the last decades of the 20th century, Hubbard, Jones, Thornton and Weeler (1983) consider the following as reasons:

- identification of problem areas for remedial attention;
- giving each student a course grade;
- checking on general progress and obtaining feedback;
- course or syllabus evaluation;
- preparation for public examinations;
- institutional requirement for student promotion;
- measuring what a student knows;
- identification of levels for later group-work;
- reinforcement of learning and student motivation;

On his turn, Penny Ur (1996) considers that assessment may be used as a means to:

- give the teacher information about where the students are at that moment, to help decide what to teach next;
- give the students information about what they know, so that they also have an awareness of what they need to learn or review;

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- assess for some purpose external to current teaching (a final grade for the course, selection);
- motivate students to learn or review specific material;
- get a noisy class to keep quiet and concentrate;
- provide a clear indication that the class has reached a station in 'learning', such as the end of a unit, thus contributing to a sense of structure in the course as a whole;
- get students to make an effort (in doing the test itself), which is likely to lead to better results and a feeling of satisfaction;
- give students tasks which themselves may actually provide useful review or practice, as well as testing;
- provide students with a sense of achievement and progress in their language;

…and the list of reasons could actually continue in the same manner.

The problem of assessment has always been an important one in the process of teaching-learning a foreign language. The 1980s were marked by investigations into the structure of general language proficiency. They witnessed the declining importance of conservative, linguistic models and a developing interest in, and description of, the different competencies that might be involved in using language. (see Bachman 1990, Skenan 1991) In the wake of developments in English language teaching, the last decades of the 20th century have seen a general decline in the prestige of psychometric, statistically driven, approaches to testing. There is far greater concern in the 1990s with validity as opposed to an earlier overriding concern with test reliability. Most noticeable has been the importance given to the wash-back effect of a test on the teaching that precedes that test. There has been in this period a growing interest in the importance of context, in defining performance: in short, a growth of interest in the real-life school of testing. (see Canale 1983, Canale and Swain 1980, Hughes 1989, Morrow 1987, Weir 1993)

But the beginning of the 21st century brought along a new approach in assessing a foreign language. 'In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the application of assessment procedures that are radically different from traditional forms of assessment. More authentic forms of assessment, such as portfolios, interviews, journals, project work and self or peer-assessment have become increasingly common in the ESL classroom. These forms of assessment are more student-centered in that, in addition to being an assessment tool, they provide students with a tool to be more involved in their learning and give them a better sense of control for their own learning. Also, authentic assessment procedures (more popularly known as alternative assessment in some quarters) provide teachers with useful information that can form the basis for improving their instructional plans and practices.

Interest in the use of non-traditional forms of assessment in the classroom reflects the changing paradigm in education in general and in second language teaching in particular. The old paradigm is slowly giving way to the new one:' (Richard, J.C., Renandya, W.A., 335)

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Old Paradigm	New Paradigm
1. focus on language	1. focus on communication
2. teacher-centered	2. learner-centered
3. isolated skills	3. integrated skills
4. emphasis on product	4. emphasis on process
5. one answer, one-way correctness	5. open-ended, multiple solutions
6. tests that test	6. tests that also teach

According to this table, there are notable and obvious differences between the two paradigms; one might even argue that one is everything the other is not. The focus in the case of traditional assessment is on the language and its accuracy, while the nontraditional assessment focuses on the important issue of communication between the members of teaching-learning-assessing process, i.e. the students and the teacher. Yet, if we were to consider who of the two members of this process is actually in the 'spotlight', it is definitely not the teacher, but the student, whose needs have been placed first. The skills are no longer assessed separately, since the new approach involves assessing more than one, isolated skill at a time. On the other hand, it is no longer the process in achieving a product, but the product itself the one the nontraditional assessment is interested in. The traditional assessment dealt with single solutions to certain problems, while the new approach is into multiple, open solutions. Last, but not least, the old paradigm talks about tests that do exactly what they were designed to: i.e. test. But the new, modern paradigm is proud with the tests that do more than just test: they also teach, both the students, to learn from their mistakes and do better at the following tests and the teachers, to improve their abilities and, why not, design better ways of teaching and assessing.

Alternative assessing (a.k.a. performance assessment, situated-or contextualised-assessment, assessment by exhibition) has been referred to as an alternative to standardised, traditional assessment. Alternative assessment differs from the traditional one in that it has students show what they can do. 'Students are evaluated on what they integrate and produce rather than on what they are able to recall and reproduce.' (idem, 339).

It is important to underline that alternative assessment is, indeed, an alternative to traditional one, since

- it does not need a different amount of time to be applied
- it reflects the curriculum since it is based on daily classroom activities
- it provides information on the strengths and weaknesses of the students since the information gathered is based on real-life situations
- it provides a menu of possibilities rather than any one single method of assessment, therefore information is more valuable since it comes from various sources
- it is more multicultural sensitive and free of norm, linguistic and cultural biases

In order for these alternative assessment methods to be applicable, the teachers, who are, most of the times the 'assessment officers' as well, have to be opened to change. This is not an easy thought to cope with, since change is commonly associated with chaos, lack of security. The teachers might find traditional assessment more secure, since it consists in methods and approaches which have been proven to work in time, whereas the modern and alternative ones are still in the process of 'proving themselves'. Yet, the latter

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ones gain field due to the new fashion in teaching, the communicative language teaching approach.

The *communicative language teaching* principles apply to assessing a foreign language just as much as they do in any other fields belonging to the teaching-learning process. This approach in assessment might be said to be characterised by the following features (in no particular order): focus on meaning, contextualisation, realistic discourse processing, use of genuine stimulus material, authentic operations on texts, unpredictable outcomes, interaction based, performance under real psychological conditions, e.g. time pressure and in assessment of performance on a task, judgements made on achievement of communicative purposes.

Most teachers are teaching language for eventual use in real life, for real-life purposes under real-life conditions. The ability to use 'real-life language' will need to be tested. Teachers cannot build into the test *all* the features of real life *all* the time, but they should maximise the involvement of these features.

Therefore, the traditional methods of assessing a foreign language mingle with the modern methods in order to maintain an appropriate equilibrium between the old and the new.

Traditional forms of assessment

According to the traditional assessment, students can be examined through: *off-hand paper, written test paper, independent class-work, homework, oral assessing, tests, quiz.*

Off-hand paper

It is universally known the fact that the off-hand paper (i. E. the unannounced written paper, from the current lesson) is one of the most used form of assessing in classroom. Teachers believe that the off-hand paper is a good way to evaluate the entire class from the current lesson and it has a double target: on one hand, it is intended to check whether all the students study with regularity, and on the other hand, to cover the necessary amount of marks needed. Off-hand papers are also used in order to discover the level of the students' preparedness, the students' power of concentration, the way in which students are able to handle without the help of the teacher as well as some other aims. This is why the number of teachers who use this form of assessing is quite big.

Written test paper

Although used less frequently than the off-hand paper, the written test paper is still another important form of assessing. It is usually used in order to evaluate those objects that are not provided with term papers. The written test paper is different from the off-hand paper, as it is announced in time for the students to be able to prepare themselves for it. Teachers choose to use this kind of assessing in order to discover the way in which students have assimilated the study material, to have students prepared for the entrance exams, to verify the maximum efficiency of the students, as well as other reasons.

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Independent class work

In some of the cases teachers have students work in class independently. Therefore, students are invited to solve some exercises and problems, to draw some tables, pictures, charts, to draw out the main ideas of a story, to summarise a story, to answer to questions.

The problem that arises here is the fact that the teachers usually correct, discuss and record only the best papers, the ones that constitute models for the less good papers. Only a few teachers actually take the students' papers at home in order to correct them.

Homework

The homework is also an independent type of student work, though different from the independent class work, as it has larger objectives and different time, place and information conditions. The intrinsic value of the homework consists in the training of the students' different intellectual capacities in the process of solving the instructive tasks contained by the homework. Homework is considered to be, by some teachers, one form of assessing, even if most of them just check the homework and only a few actually mark it. There are many procedures of checking the students' homework: some of teachers would choose to check all the notebooks once or twice; some teachers prefer checking six to ten copybooks on a homework; some use the direct checking and then read one to three homeworks in the classroom. No matter what checking procedure they choose, no matter whether they choose to mark the homework or not, teachers are aware of the importance of the homework in the teaching system, therefore they have to make sure that the students have a proper attitude towards it.

Oral assessing

Conceived as a form of a dialogue between teacher-student(s), teacher-class, student(s)-student(s), the oral assessing has, besides its intrinsic value, an instructive function. In the process of examining and evaluating what the students have learned, students go through an instruction and auto-instruction operation, i. E. the teachers clarify and correct students' possible wrong assimilated answers, give certain indications towards the using of different memory operations, analyse students' synthesis, systematisation and other abilities, and so on. This is the reason why the oral assessing must not be a mechanical checking and marking operation but a animated activity in which students demonstrate what they have learned, ask for explanations, therefore take part directly to the instruction process.

There are, though, some less positive aspects to this oral assessing technique: the fact that some of the students find themselves in the situation to answer to difficult question, while others answer to less difficult ones; some students simply reproduce the lesson while others have to use information given at different stages in the teaching process in order to elaborate a correct answer, and the examples could continue. In spite of all these and taking into consideration that the number of its positive aspects is greater then the number of its less positive ones, teachers still use this form of assessing the students' knowledge.

Tests

The test is announced in advance and covers a specific unit of instruction, be it part of a lesson or several lessons. In reviewing for a test, students pull together the work of

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several class periods. Classroom tests may be given every two or three week -in some cases, every week. Such tests may be constructed to last the entire class period; in this case optimum learning efficiency requires the teachers to return and discuss the correct test as soon as the class meets again. Some teachers prefer preparing a shorter test so that items may be reviewed rapidly at the end of the same class period.

Quiz

The essence of the quiz is brevity. In contrast to the test, it may be given unannounced. Frequent quizzes encourage students to devote time regularly to their (language) study moreover, the quiz enables the teacher to acquaint students with types of items that can subsequently be used in tests. Students may be told to expect a quiz every period, although on some days the quiz may be omitted. A written or oral quiz may be given at the end of the period (to highlight work done in class).

Alternative forms of assessment

- Portfolio
- Journal entries
- Dialogue journals
- Project work
- Conferencing

Portfolio assessment

Applebee and Langer (Applebee, Langer, 30) define the portfolio as 'the cumulative collection of the work students have done.' The portfolio is the traditional 'writing folder' in which students keep their work, which is to be presented to the teacher at a time fixed in advance. The portfolio is most commonly used when assessing the skill of writing, since it contains papers written by the student on different subjects, or reviews, or research papers, a.o. If necessary, the skill of reading and listening could be assessed by means of portfolio if the students are asked to deliver papers on reading and listening comprehension, but this, involves mostly writing.

Journal entries

They may be used as an informal means of assessment, again, especially in the writing classes. Richards and Renandya (Richards, Renandya, 349) consider that it has some advantages: 'it can be enjoyable, since it gives students free rein to write on any topic at the spur of the moment and it offers students the privacy, freedom and the safety to experiment and develop as a writer.' This is a good means to self assess one's activity, since the student feels secure enough to express his opinions honestly.

Dialogue journals

They are, again, alternative forms of assessment and consist of written conversations between the student and the teacher over a period of time (usually, the duration of the course) having as a goal communicating in writing. It has the advantage that it leads to trust between the teacher and the student and it could be applied as an assessment form to other skills rather than writing: the skills of speaking, listening and reading.

Project work

Such activities have students working on some projects, involving them in doing research on certain subjects. Since it is a project, it takes a larger amount of time and it sends

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students to the library to search for information. This type of assessment could assess the student's ability in writing and reading, and has been used quite commonly lately.

Conferencing

This is ono-to-one conversation between the teacher and the student and it could assess all four types of language skills speaking, writing, listening and reading. Since this form of assessment implies face to face interaction, more care should be taken by the teacher as to the choice of words. Murray (in idem, 352) states some samples of responses to be avoided:

- This is not good!
- Wow! You can write!
- Didn't you learn anything about writing?
- This is great, just great!
- This is a mess, just a mess!
- I've never seen such a bad paper!
- I don't know what I can teach someone who writes like you! (can be used to overprize or ovecriticise)

and also some comments which might stimulate and encourage work:

- What do you plan to work on next?
- Where do you think you get off the track?
- And you said you had no voice. Tell me how you made this draft so different.

Needless to say how important it is for the students to feel confident and pleased with the work done and also to feel encouraged by the teacher's approval. It helps the student to become aware of his abilities and, more importantly, of the self-assessment delicate issue.

Self-assessment

Self-assessment is the type of assessment that should never cease to be performed by the student. The student ought to permanently focus on the information he receives, on the way he receives it, on his ability to prove his knowledge. The student should consider himself to be his own 'first judge' and treat this now position as objectively as possible. In the recent years, portfolios of student performance and products have gained support from teachers, who view them as a way to collect evidence of a student's learning. For many teachers, portfolios are an attractive alternative to more traditional assessment methods. They engage the student in the investigation of a real-world problem by gathering and sharing information, communicating ideas and findings, refining perceptions and creating artifacts.

Laws of assessment (be it traditional or alternative)

The three most important characteristics of a good assessment *are validity, reliability and objectivity*. These abstract nouns may seem rather daunting, but just as it is impossible to play chess without knowing how a knight moves across the board, so it is pointless to try to write tests without the basic understandings of the principles behind them.

The validity of a test

Briefly, the *validity of a test is the extent to which it measures what it is supposed to measure and nothing else*. Every test, whether it be a short, informal classroom test or a public examination, should be as valid as the constructor can make it. The test must aim to

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provide a true measure of the particular skill intended to measure: if a test measures external knowledge and other skills at the same time, it will not be considered a valid test. (Heaton, 159)

The reliability of a test

Another fundamental criterion against which any test has to be judged is its reliability. The reliability of a test is its consistency. In his study Andrew Harrison (Harrison, 10) uses a very interesting plastic comparison: 'there would be little point in trying to measure people's waists with a piece of elastic. What is needed is a piece of measure which stays the same length all the time, so that one's person's waist is known to be eighty-one centimetres and another's ninety-one centimetres.'

Therefore, tests should not be elastic in their measurements: if a student takes a test at the beginning of a test and again at the end, any improvement in his score should be the result of differences in his skills and not inaccuracies in the test. In the same way, it is important that the student's score should be the same (or as nearly as possible the same) whether he takes one version of a test or another (for waist measurements, the same should be obtained whichever tape measure is used), and whether one person marks the test or another (whoever uses the tape measure). Reliability also means the consistency with which a test measures the same thing all the time (the tape measure should be placed so that it goes round people's waists, not round their hips or the waistband of the trousers they are wearing).

How to make tests more reliable (Hughes, 36-42)

Take enough samples of behaviour

Other things being equal, the more items that the tester has on a test, the more reliable that test will be. This seems intuitively right. Using again a plastic comparison. Arthur Hughes writes: 'If we wanted to know how good an archer someone was, we wouldn't rely on the evidence of a single shot at the target. That one shot could be quite unrepresentative of their ability. To be satisfied that we had a really reliable measure of the ability we would want to see a large number of shots at the target.'

The same is true for language testing. It has been demonstrated empirically that the addition of further items will make a test more reliable. Still, though important to make a test long enough to achieve satisfactory reliability, it should not be made so long that the candidates become so bored or tired that the behaviour that they exhibit becomes unrepresentative of their ability. At the same time, it may often be necessary to resist the pressure to make a test shorter than is appropriate. The usual argument for shortening a test is that it is not practical. The answer to this is that accurate information does not come cheaply: if such information is needed, then the price has to be paid. Generally, the more important the decisions based on a test, the longer the test should be.

Do not allow candidates too much freedom

In some kinds of (language) tests there is a tendency to offer candidates a choice of questions and then to allow them a great deal of freedom in the way that they answer the ones that they have chosen. An example would be a test of writing where the candidates are simply given a selection of titles from which to choose. Such a procedure is likely to have a depressing effect on the reliability of the test. The more freedom is given, the greater is likely to be the difference between the performance actually elicited and the performance that would have been elicited if the test had been taken, for instance, a day

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later. Generally, therefore, candidates should not be given a choice and the range over possible answers might vary, should be restricted.

Write unambiguous items

It is essential that candidates should not be presented with items whose meaning is not clear or to which there is an acceptable answer, which the test writer has not anticipated. A. Hughes considers that the best way to arrive to unambiguous items is 'having drafted them, to subject them to the critical scrutiny of colleagues, who should try as hard as they can to find alternative interpretations to the ones intended. If this task is entered into in the right spirit, one of good-natured perversity most of the problems can be identified before the test is administered. Pretesting of the items on a group of people comparable to those for whom the test is intended should reveal the reminder. Where pretesting is not practicable, scores must be on the lookout for patterns of response that indicate that there are problem items.'

Provide clear and explicit instructions

This applies both to written and oral instructions. If it is possible for candidates to misinterpret what they are asked to do, then on some occasions some of them certainly will. It is by no means always the weakest candidates who are misled by ambiguous instructions; indeed, it is often the better candidate who is able to provide the alternative interpretation. A common fault of tests written for the students of a particular teaching institution is the supposition that the students all know what is intended by carelessly worded instructions. Test writers should not rely on the students' power of telepathy to elicit the desired behaviour. Again, the use of colleagues to criticise drafts of instructions (including those which will be spoken) is the best means of avoiding problems. Spoken instructions should always be read from a papered text in order to avoid introducing confusion.

Ensure that tests are well laid out and perfectly legible

Too often, institutional tests are badly typed (or hand-written), have too much text in too small a place and are poorly reproduced. As a result, students are faced with additional tasks which are not the ones meant to measure their language ability. Their variable performance on the unwanted tasks will lower the reliability of a test.

Candidates should be familiar with format and testing techniques

If any aspect of a test is unfamiliar to candidates, they are likely to perform less well than they would do otherwise. For this reason, every effort must be made to ensure that all candidates have the opportunity to learn just what will be required of them. This may mean the distribution of samples (or of past test papers) or at least the provision of practice materials in the case of tests set within teaching instructions.

Provide uniform and non-distracting conditions of administration

The grater the differences between one administration of a test and another, the greater the differences one can expect between a candidate's performance on the two occasions. Great care should be taken to ensure uniformity. For instance, timing should be specified and strictly adhered to; the acoustic conditions should be similar for all administrations of a listening test. Every precaution should be taken to maintain a quiet setting with no distracting sounds or movements.

Make comparison between candidates as direct as possible

This reinforces the suggestion already made that candidates should not be given a choice of items and that they should be limited in the way that they are allowed to respond.

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Scoring the compositions all on one topic will be more reliable than if the candidates are allowed to choose from five topics, as has been the case in some tests.

Provide a detailed scoring key

This should specify acceptable answers and assign points for partially correct responses. For high scorer reliability the key should be as detailed as possible in its assignment of points. It should be the outcome of efforts to anticipate all possible responses and have been subjected to group criticism. (this advice applies only where responses can be classed as partially or totally 'correct', not in the case of composition, for instance)

Train scorers

This is especially important where scoring is most subjective. The scoring of compositions, for example, should not be assigned to anyone who has not learned to score accurately compositions from past administrations. After each administration, patterns of scoring should be analysed. Individuals whose scoring deviates markedly and inconsistently from the norm should not be used again.

Identify candidates by number, not name

Scorers inevitably have expectations of candidates that they know. Except in purely objective testing, this will affect the way that they score. Studies have shown that even where the candidates are unknown to the scorers, the name on a script (or a photograph) will make a significant difference to the scores given. For example, a scorer may be influenced by the gender or nationality of a name into making predictions which can affect the score given. The identification of candidates only by number will reduce such effects.

Employ multiple, independent scoring

As a general rule, all scripts should be cored by at least two independent scorers. Neither scorer should know how the other has scored a test paper. Scores should be recorded on separate score sheets and passed to a third, senior, colleague, who compares the two sets of scores and investigates discrepancies.

The objectivity of a test

It consists in whether the test is biased or not (as it should be).'Even though standardised tests are described as objective the notion of objectivity has been challenged. As humans, we all have biases, whether we are aware of them or not. A standardised test merely represents agreement among a number of people on scoring procedures, format, and/or content for that specific test. In other words, these individuals are not really objective; they just collectively share the same biases. Therefore, in this sense, a standardised test is no more objective than an alternative assessing instrument. (…) there is no reason to consider alternative assessment as being any less objective then traditional testing. (Richards, Renendya, 342)

Test anxiety

Anxiety is generally defined as the mental, emotional, and physical responses people experience when they anticipate that something bad or dangerous is about to happen. People taking a test believe they will lose control and that creates very uncomfortable feelings.

Generally, everybody experiences some level of nervousness or tension before tests or other important events in our lives. A little nervousness can actually help motivate

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the test taker; however, too much of it can become a problem - especially if it interferes with the testee's ability to prepare for and perform on tests. Therefore, as long as it is not excessive, worry serves a useful purpose. It helps testee's mind focus on a current problem or difficulty so he can find an effective solution. Worrying is a problem only when it becomes a block to clear thinking. Then, worry strengthens and perpetuates the anxiety. After a while, constant worrying can turn into a pattern that tends to repeat itself endlessly. Some students, however, have such a difficult time dealing with test anxiety that they may change their major or withdraw from college altogether. Fortunately, in most cases, the consequences aren't so extreme.

The delicate issue of test anxiety is seen in different light when one considers traditional assessment vs. alternative assessment. In the case of the former, the students are more likely to encounter this problem of anxiety, since they are in the not too pleasant position to prove what they have learned, to show how good a memory they have and if they do not deliver the precise answers the teacher is expecting, they might fail. This is where test anxiety comes from. Thus, some students feel mainly physical distress symptoms, such as headaches, nausea, faintness, feeling too hot or too cold, etc., others express more emotion, wanting to cry or laugh too much, or feeling angry or helpless. The major problem of test anxiety, as stated before, is usually its effect on thinking ability; it can cause students to blank out or have racing thoughts that are difficult to control. Although many, if not the vast majority, of students feel some level of anxiety when writing exams, most can cope with that anxiety and bring it down to a manageable level.

Yet, the issue of test anxiety seems to be different when it comes to alternative assessment: students are aware they are supposed to perform, but not based on what they remember from what they were taught. They know they are expected to act, to perform, to be themselves, to prove what they have been studying and working on. They are supposed to make the most of their knowledge in more than one skills; while being evaluated, they are offered the chance to show what they are capable of.

Instead of a conclusion

The alternative approach to assessing a foreign language is, indeed, a new fashion in the teaching-learning process, since it involves many coordinates. Being a process, it is only natural to go through the thorny way of evolution, consequently perform changes more or less easy to cope with. Both the members of this process, the teacher and the students, find it rather difficult to deal with the changes 'imposed' by the new methods of assessment, but, still, they approve to it and support it as they find it to be the natural way to go about. Yet, one should bear in mind that no change is produced overnight and that such a process might need time and patience. In the meantime, an interaction, a blending the two methods, the traditional one and the alternative one could be the best solution.

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