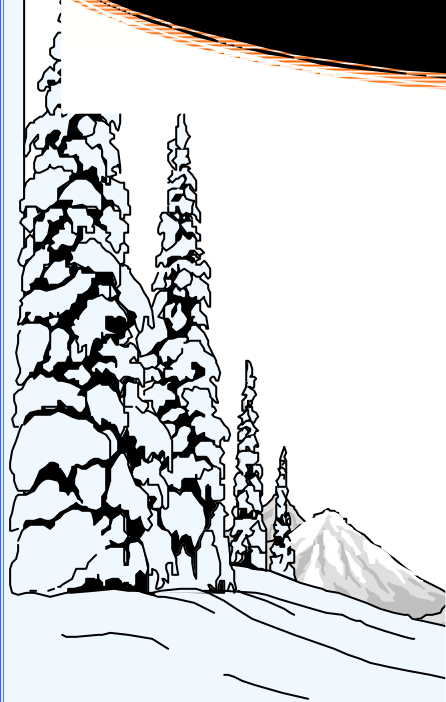
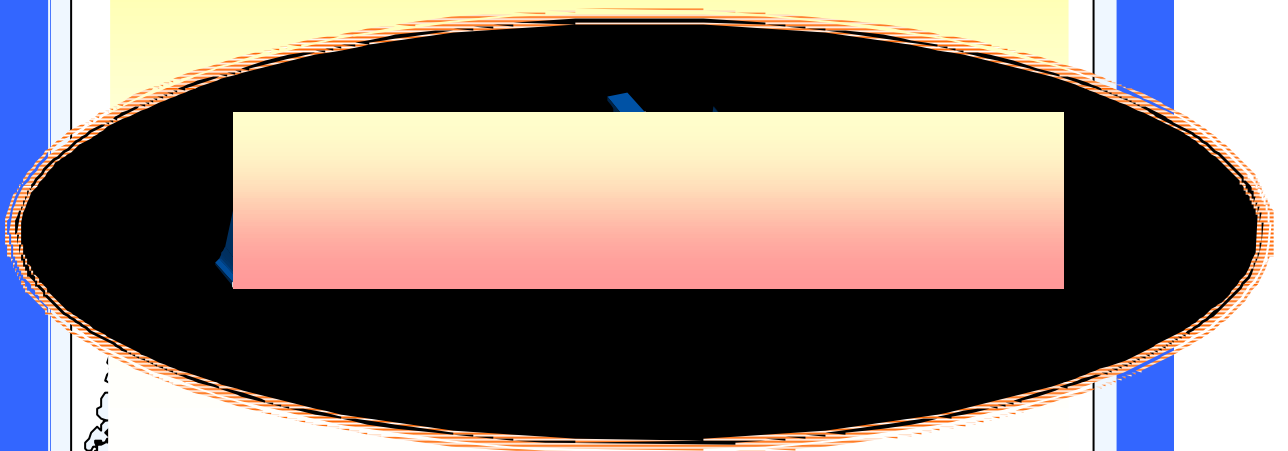


**Republic of Tunisia**  
Ministry of Education

**Monastir Regional Board of Education**  
Academic Year :2001 / 2002



A research paper  
by :

**TOUMI LAFI**

*ELT. Inspector*

« If we wish to discover the truth about an educational system, we must look into its assessment procedures. What student qualities and achievements are actively valued and rewarded by the system? The answer to this question is to be found in what the system requires students to do in order to survive and prosper.”

D. Rowntree (1977)

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## **1/ INTRODUCTION:**

Recent years have witnessed a move away from the heavy use of traditional, judgemental approaches to evaluation towards alternative, more inclusive ways of determining what learners know and can do. Indeed, the field of evaluation has known a major shift from summative testing tools and procedures to a more humanistic approach using informal assessment techniques that stress formative evaluation. But

before considering these alternative modes of assessment let us start by defining the terms: testing, assessment, evaluation and alternative assessment.

## **2/ DEFINING TERMS:**

### **A / Testing:**

Testing is defined as “ any procedure for measuring ability, knowledge or performance.” J. Richards (1999). Dave Allan (1995) defines tests as instruments of evaluation [by] which we try to measure learner performance. They have a physical existence and operate within specific time frames, seeking to make accurate predictions on the basis of relatively small samples of performance in the case of such an enormously complex thing as language. Genesee and Apshur define a test as “ one method of collecting information about something, [it is meant to] elicit observable behaviour from the test taker... Tests yield scores that represent attributes or characteristics of individuals... tests are a form of measurement.” (1996)

From the above definitions, we can gather that testing is a means to assess the learner, an instrument of evaluation used to measure the learner’s performance. Tests are meant to give us a sample of the big picture, just snapshots.

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### **B / (Alternative) Assessment:**

Assessment can be defined as “ the measurement of the ability of a person or the quality or success of a teaching course” J. Richards (1999). Nunan (1990) defines assessment as a set of processes through which we make judgements about a learner’s level of skills and knowledge.

Mc Tighes and Ferrara (1994) view assessment as “the process of gathering and integrating information about learners from various sources to help us understand these students and describe them.” Geoff Brindley

(2001) makes the distinction between formative assessment carried out by teachers during the learning process with the aim of using the results to improve instruction and summative assessment carried out at the end of a course, term or school year –often for purposes of providing aggregated information on programme outcomes to educational authorities.

Pierce and O'Malley define alternative assessment as “any method of finding out what a student knows or can do that is intended to show growth and inform instruction and is not a standardized traditional test.” (1992) Birnbaum (1994) defines alternative assessment as every means used to assess learners which are not standardized exams.

From the preceding definitions, we can infer that assessment is different from testing in that the former is a continuous, on-going process while the latter is limited in a specific time frame.

The purpose of assessment is to provide feedback to the learner and the teacher about strengths and weaknesses during the learning process and to encourage constant improvement.

### **C/ Evaluation:**

As defined by Nunan (1990 ), evaluation is the “ wider process of interpreting data to make judgements about a particular programme or programmes.” It is the process of collecting, analysing and interpreting information about teaching and learning in order to make informed

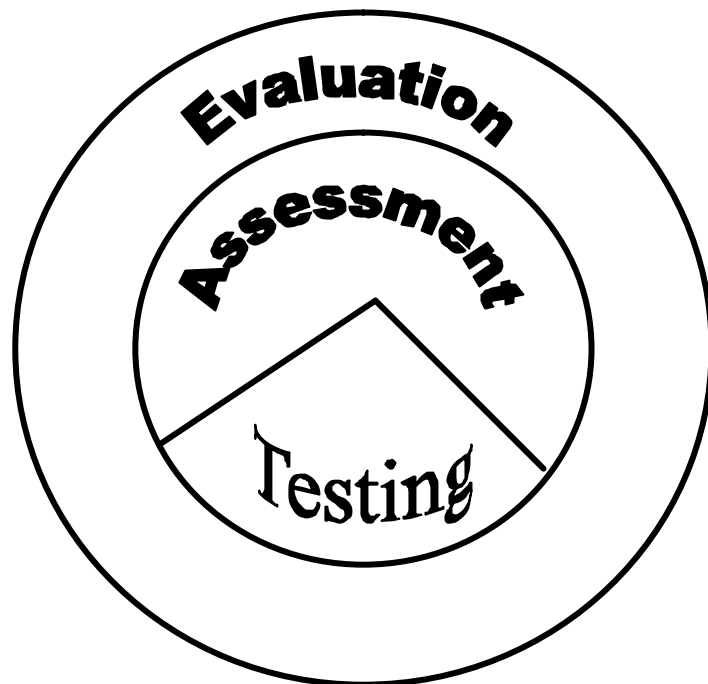
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decisions that enhance student achievement and the success of educational programmes. Evaluation uses both quantitative methods (e.g. tests) and qualitative methods ( e.g. observations) for gathering information. Evaluation can focus on different aspects of teaching and learning respectively, textbooks and instructional materials, student achievement and whole programmes of instruction. It can be undertaken for various reasons.

J. Richards (1999) defines formative evaluation as “ the process of providing information to curriculum developers during the process of a curriculum or a programme, in order to improve it. Formative evaluation is also used in syllabus design and the development of language teaching programmes and materials.

Evaluation is broader in scope than testing or assessment.

The relation between evaluation, testing and assessment can be summarized as follows:



So, evaluation is the umbrella that encompasses testing and assessment. It goes beyond student achievement and language assessment to consider all aspects of teaching and learning and to look at how educational decisions can be informed by the results of alternative modes of assessment.

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### **3/ THE RATIONALE BEHIND THE SHIFT FROM TRADITIONAL TESTING TECHNIQUES TO THE ALTERNATIVE MODES OF ASSESSMENT**

A / The move towards alternative modes of assessment is due to the dissatisfaction with traditional testing techniques because:

- Traditional ways of testing can sample only a fraction of what we want to produce.
- Traditional tests play a judgemental role, not a developmental one: they are used to make judgements about success or failure, to select or exclude . They have little to do with improving the overall quality of language learning and teaching.
- Traditional test are summative and usually designed and administered by people outside the learning process.
- Tests take up a lot of teaching time and are very often not followed up as a basis for future teaching.
- Tests are concerned with the provision of discriminative numerical marks, useless descriptions rather than the provision of formative feedback.
- Tests tend to treat learners as powerless victims rather than active participants in the learning process.
- Tests are teacher-centred.
- Testing has limited time frames; it is a “one shot” event that gives the learner only one chance to show competence.
- The test results may not be a true reflection of what a learner can do; they can tell us about certain aspects of student achievement . They cannot tell us much about the other factors that often figure in foreign language evaluation.

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- Testing is anxiety-generating, and this may affect the test-takers’ learning as well as their self-image. They may also be very demotivating.
- Tests are administered to large groups of students. They are not individualized and cannot be tailored to the needs of individual learners.

- Tests are not always fair as they do not account for individual differences (multiple intelligences / different learning styles, etc...)

B / Alternative forms of assessment seem to be more attractive to teachers and learners because:

- They are in congruence with the learner-centred principles of new methodological approaches since they view the learner as an active agent in the assessment process rather than a powerless victim of the testing techniques.

They put the learner more in control of his/her own learning.

Indeed, students are active participants in assessing their own achievement and in planning how they will study and learn language.

- They treat assessment as an integral part of teaching and learning processes, which are closely related to instruction.
- They are formative and developmental as they are intended to show growth and inform instruction and give a clearer idea about the learners' progress.

They take into account variations in students' needs, interests and learning styles, i.e. they can be individualized: students do not learn in the same way, they cannot, as a result, be assessed in the same fashion.

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- They are on-going and carried out overtime. They provide the learners with opportunities to revise, improve, add, etc...
- They can help decrease the level of anxiety and increases students' comfort zone and feeling of success.
- They are performance-based requiring learners to perform authentic tasks.

- They can be integrated into daily classroom activities and give a comprehensive picture of the students' abilities, progress and achievement.
- They promote learner autonomy and foster learner independence, awareness and learning how to learn skills.

The differences between traditional testing techniques and alternative modes of assessment can be summarized in the two figures below.

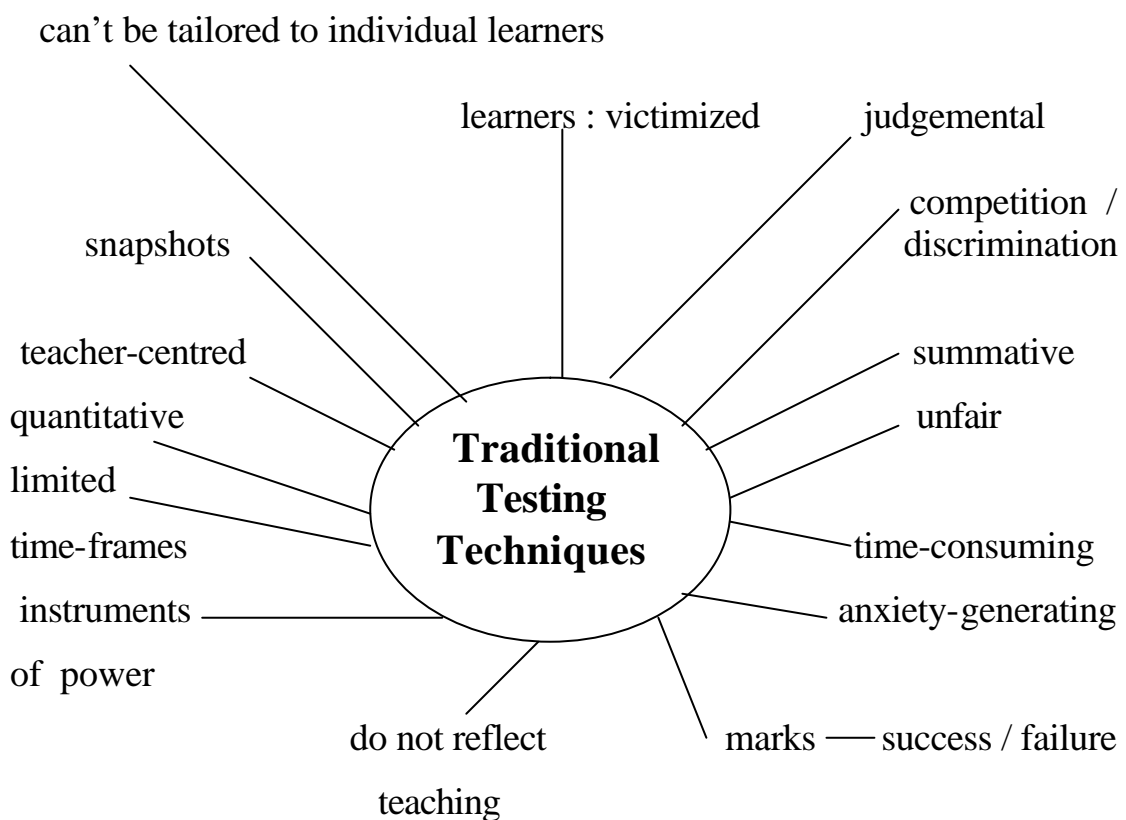
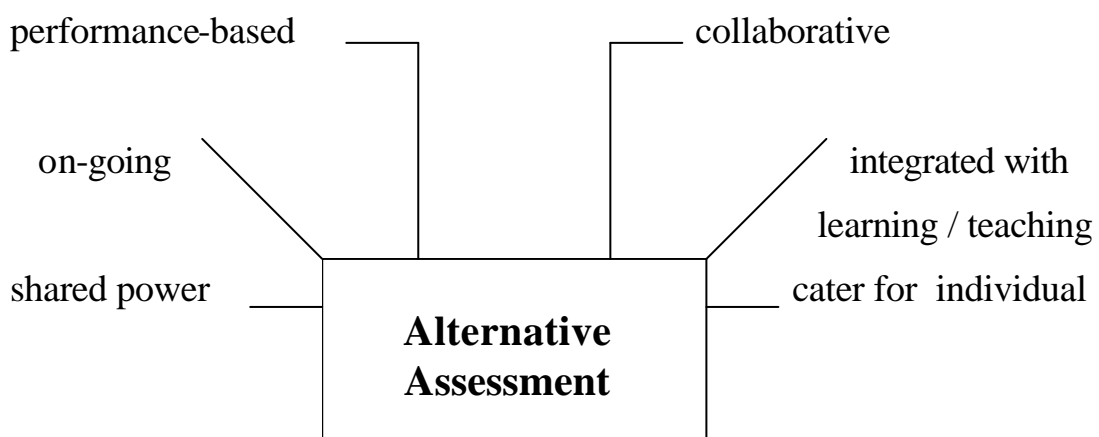


Figure 1: Traditional testing techniques



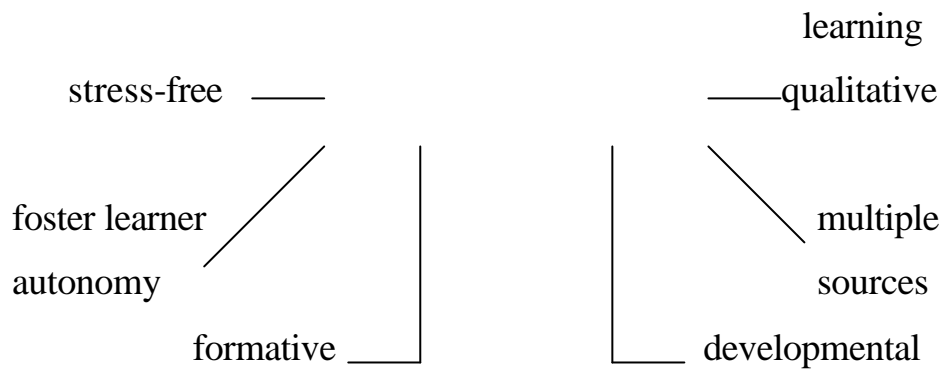


Figure 2: Alternative Forms of assessment

**4/ TOOLS OF ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT:**

“ If I could choose how to assess my students  
I would abolish grades completely...”

A primary school teacher.

“ I had to get rid of the test and find a manner of assessing my students that would on the one hand, give me insight into how they were absorbing the information and the examples given to them in the course, and on the other, give the students the opportunity to explain why they were doing what they were doing.”

A university teacher.

#### **A / Self-Assessment:**

In “the Tunisian Official Programme in the Secondary Education” (1998), the learner is viewed as an intelligent human being capable of playing an active role in his learning. The teacher is described as a facilitator who should create conditions to foster learner independence and develop the learners’ “how-to-learn” skills. The teacher is expected to provide the proper conditions and devise the appropriate tools / criteria to train the learners to assess themselves, reflect on their learning experience and identify their strengths and weaknesses.

Self-appraisal can use a yes-no checklist or have an open-ended format to keep a record of learning achievement.

To be able to perform self-assessment, learners need preparation and guidance and a great deal of practice in order to do it successfully and feel comfortable about it. They must also be able to understand and select

suitable criteria on which to base the assessment and choose a realistic standard against which to measure achievement.

The advantage of self-assessment is that it allows the learner to monitor his own performance in a stress-free setting. It also gives him the feeling of responsibility, self-reliance and this in turn may enhance motivation.

It is worth mentioning that the idea of learner self-appraisal has recently found its way to some of the ELT course books in use in our schools; see for example lessons 10, 15, 23, 31, 36, 42, 49, 55, 59, 65 in “Ahead With English” from 3<sup>rd</sup> year Secondary Education or the “Self-Assessment” task at the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> year Secondary Education course book: “Time For The Future”.

A typical example of a self assessment form may be the following checklist, taken from: Communication Skills Programme for Singapore Airlines, Module 1, The British Council, Singapore, 1991.

<p>My Progress</p> <p>Name: .....</p>
---------------------------------------

Class: .....

	Yes	No	Don't know
I can write more neatly.			
I can read more words using sounds and syllables.			
I can recognize easy words more quickly.			
I can spell more words without help.			
I can find information in a simple reading text.			
I can write a few sentences by myself.			
I can fill in a simple form.			
I feel more confident about my English.			
I like learning English more.			

Another example of an open-ended self-evaluation format is the one taken from FORUM, Vol. 35, N°2 (April 1997).



The results of assessment should be interpreted by learners and teachers and inform decisions concerning future learning and instruction.

“Self-assessment can yield accurate judgements of students’ linguistic abilities, weaknesses, strengths and improvement.”

Mcnamara (1995)

### **B/ Peer-Assessment:**

“ Even quite young children can be led to make constructive comments on others’ work.”

Andy Jackson, in IATEFL Newsletter,  
issue n° 142, 1998

Peer assessment is the process whereby learners respond to and evaluate each other’s performance. It can take many forms: the spoken word, the written word, checklists, non-verbal symbols, numbers along a scale, etc.

Peer assessment helps learners to be reflective and cooperate together towards a common goal: improving the learning process.

In a writing-as-a-process programme, for example, the teacher can invite the pupils to write a first draft individually. The learners then work in pairs or groups and assess each other’s performance in terms of criteria previously agreed upon. Papers are then returned to their initial owners who will work on a second draft, taking into consideration their peers’ remarks / suggestions etc. In this way, a community of learners who collaboratively work together is created. Moreover the learners are left with the responsibility to scaffold and evaluate each others’ learning.

## **C / Journals, Interviews and Conferences:**

\* Journals: (also referred to as interactive diaries or dialogue journals.) These journals are interactive in nature as they consist in written conversations between students and teachers.

Students express themselves and write about their interests, goals, desires, worries etc... The teachers collect student journals on a daily or weekly basis, read them and return them with written comments, feedback or advice. Below is an excerpt from a student's journal and the teacher's comment:

Student: March 24

Thes mone I look at  
a car hit the  
little cat die

Teacher: That is so sad. Did you cry when the car hit the cat ? I know I would have cried – the poor little cat.

(F. Genesee et al. 1997)

Teachers' comments about the learners' performance should not be judgemental. They should focus on meaningful communication and be supportive and only indirectly evaluative ( for example, “ I am not sure what you mean by this; can you say it in another way?”)

Journals are unique as methods for collecting information for evaluation because they are largely under the control of the students. Indeed, students can write whatever they want and however they want in their journals...

Besides providing teachers with opportunities to assess their students and keep record of the learners' writing skills, dialogue journals give students opportunities to use language for genuine communication and enhance

student involvement in and ownership of learning. Dialogue journals also allow the teachers to cater for individual pupils and thus individualize language teaching.

\* Interviews and Student-Teacher Conferences:

Interviews and conferences can be an effective informal way of assessing a student's progress in language learning. They provide opportunity for one-to-one interactions where the teacher can learn about a student's communicative abilities, emotional and social well-being, attention span, attitudes, pace of learning, strengths and weaknesses etc... The teacher can build on the information he collects from interviews and conferences to make decisions about instructional planning. Conferences and interviews can include individual students, several students or even the whole class. They can be conversations about completed work or work in progress. Conferences can give students an opportunity to talk to the teacher in private.

Interviews and conferences permit the teacher to assess the learners' oral skills or discuss drafts of essays and evaluate the learners' progress in a less formal, non-threatening atmosphere.

**D/ Observation in the Classroom:**

Informal observation is an integral part of everyday teaching; indeed, teachers continuously observe their students' language use during formal instruction or while the students are working individually at their desks. Teachers can observe how students respond to and use instructional materials and how they interact during group work.

On the basis of their observations, teachers assess what students have and have not learnt and derive information fundamental to the day-to-day functioning of classrooms. Teachers can then detect changes in student

achievement and make decisions about what should follow.

Teachers should record the results of their observations to keep track of individual students on the whole group's achievement, progress, difficulties, strengths, etc, and think of remedial work if need be.

Below is a sample of a checklist that can be used to assess the learners' productive and receptive oral language skills.

School:			
Student's name:			
Class:			
Date:			
	Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	Excellent
1- Understands simple instructions.			
2- Understands simple sentences.			
3- Understands simple yes/no questions.			
4- Understands plurals.			
5- Understands rapid speech.			
6- Understands meaning of different intonation patterns.			
7- Pronounces vowel sounds correctly.			
8- Uses word stress correctly.			
9- Uses sentence stress correctly.			
10- Gives one word responses.			
11- Produces simple questions.			
12- Gives descriptions. etc...			

E/ **Student portfolio** :

“Assessment is no longer something done to the learners but rather something that they actively contribute to.”

One of the most popular tools of alternative forms of assessment is the portfolio which has recently gained currency among teachers and learners alike. The student portfolio can be defined as a purposeful collection of a learner’s work assembled overtime as a record constituting evidence of this effort, achievement, success and failures.

\* The portfolio is made up of materials the learner judges to be relevant to and illustrative of his or her progress during the course. Pupils are evaluated on the basis of a record of work compiled during the course.

\* The portfolio can have a very specific focus such as writing, or a broad focus that includes all aspects of language development.

\* A portfolio can be a file folder, a box or any durable and expandable multi-sourced container in which the student keeps:

- samples of writing
- lists of books
- book reports
- audio-recordings of speaking samples
- samples of tests
- self- assessment checklists
- samples of projects and artwork
- anything the student thoughtfully chooses to add to it.

A portfolio should be kept in a common, readily accessible area to which the student can have easy access.

The portfolio can be shown to parents, peers, other teachers and outside observers and should be viewed routinely by teachers and students in conference together. Students are thus actively involved in assessment and learning.

\* Benefits of portfolios:

1/ Portfolio assessment promotes learner critical thinking: The learners think about their needs, goals, weaknesses and strengths.

Learner reflection can have a positive washback on instruction. Indeed, teachers can use portfolios to plan instruction that is responsive to students' needs. Teachers should look for recurrent and persistent difficulties and keep a record of them in order to plan remedial work.

2/ Portfolios provide the student, parents, teachers and other educators with opportunities to trace a student's progress over time.

3/ Portfolios can promote greater responsibility and learner involvement in the assessment process. They also promote greater ownership of the learning process.

4/ Portfolios provide a holistic view, a general picture of the learner's language abilities, competences, awareness.

5/ Portfolios provide a continuous, cumulative record of personal development; they are meant to last.

6/ Portfolio assessment promotes a feeling of security; a healthier, non-threatening learning environment is created.

7/ Portfolios provide opportunities for collaborative work between students themselves and between students and teachers.

For portfolios to be used successfully, the students should be involved in all or as much decision making about portfolios as possible. Students should also be involved in the choice of the pieces to be included in their portfolios and informed about the assessment criteria. They should also be encouraged to share their portfolios with other students.

In the Tunisian context, portfolio assessment is used mainly in the primary schools where pupils are encouraged to keep files.

\* Problems with portfolios:

- 1- The use of portfolios as a means of assessment may increase the teacher's workload. Reviewing and responding to portfolios is time-consuming and may not fit into the teacher's routine.
- 2- Portfolios are susceptible to cheating as we can't guarantee that the piece of work included in the portfolio is produced by the pupil himself.
- 3- How can portfolio assessment-which is formative-be used for summative purposes?

The portfolio is a form of continuous assessment which can be used in conjunction with more traditional tests.

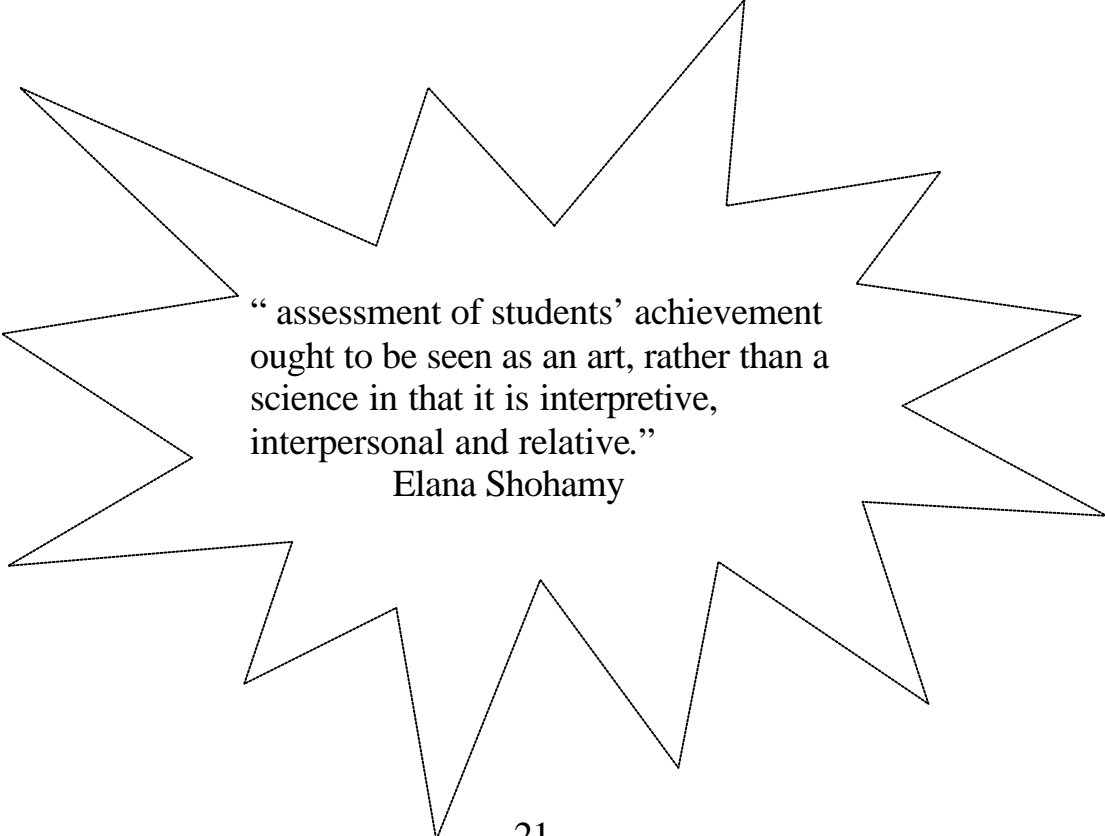
To value the alternative source of information on student progress, the Ministry of Education can consider the possibility of allocating a part of the overall mark (let us say 25 %) to the portfolio and other alternative modes of assessment.

## **5/ CONCLUSION:**

Throughout this research, I have tried to show how we can assess learners without the use of traditional testing techniques. I have also tried to show that since we view learning as a learner-centred process in which the students play a constructive, reflective role, there is no reason why we should not allow them to play an equally important role in assessing their own performance.

Advocating alternative tools of assessment does not mean that teachers are expected to use them exclusively, nor does it mean that there is no place for conventional assessment or testing in the language classroom- as testing can be of great help in collecting information for second language evaluation.

Despite the many advantages of alternative forms of assessment, one cannot pretend that these assessment techniques are without shortcomings, but these shortcomings do not undermine the great merits of these formative, informative and learning-generating tools.



“ assessment of students’ achievement ought to be seen as an art, rather than a science in that it is interpretive, interpersonal and relative.”

Elana Shohamy

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