Alternative assessment approaches: A semi-systematic literature review in english as a foreign language (efl) classrooms

Enfoques de evaluación alternativos: una revisión bibliográfica semisistemática en las aulas de inglés como lengua extranjera (efl)

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Abstract

Nowadays, alternative assessment approaches in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms are taken seriously due to their potential to foster learner-centered pedagogies and enhance language acquisition. This review examines these methods' implementation, perceptions, and impact in EFL classrooms. By synthesizing the literature, this work aims to identify key alternative assessment practices, such as portfolios and peer evaluations, and analyze their effectiveness in improving language proficiency. This review explores the challenges and positive aspects of these practices, offering insights into their practical implications. Using a semi-systematic approach, relevant articles were selected based on defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, focusing on recent peer-reviewed studies within the EFL context. Results showed that, despite challenges, alternative assessment must be explored and used in EFL classrooms as part of a change in education.

Keywords: alternative assessment; EFL classrooms; learner-centered approaches; English proficiency.
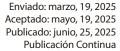
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Resumen

Hoy en día, los enfoques de evaluación alternativos en las aulas de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) se valoran seriamente debido a su potencial para fomentar pedagogías centradas en el alumno y mejorar la adquisición del idioma. Esta revisión examina la implementación, las percepciones y el impacto de estos métodos en las aulas de EFL. Al sintetizar la literatura, este trabajo busca identificar prácticas clave de evaluación alternativas, como portafolios y evaluaciones por pares, y analizar su efectividad para mejorar la competencia lingüística. Esta revisión explora los desafíos y los aspectos positivos de estas prácticas, ofreciendo perspectivas sobre sus implicaciones prácticas. Utilizando un enfoque semisistemático, se seleccionaron artículos relevantes con base en criterios de inclusión y exclusión definidos, centrándose en estudios recientes revisados por pares dentro del contexto de EFL. Los resultados mostraron que, a pesar de los desafíos, la evaluación alternativa debe explorarse y utilizarse en el aula de EFL como parte de un cambio en la educación.

Palabras clave: evaluación alternativa; aulas de EFL; enfoques centrados en el aprendizaje; competencia en inglés.

Introduction

Assessment plays a pivotal role in educational contexts since the value of what is measured is reflected back to the learner, thereby becoming a foundation for additional learning. In other words, when the necessity for improving and perfecting the teaching-learning process arises, it is assessed through formative assessment. The differing views and conceptions explain why different educational systems have distinct perspectives about the nature and implementation of assessment. This is the case of Ecuador and its national education system, in which traditional one-shot, high-stakes written tests are predominant (Guevara-Peñaranda et al., 2024). These tests are used for promoting students to the next grade or certifying their education level. However, such tests present several disadvantages and do little to aid teaching and learning. Current global educational trends promote alternative assessment approaches, including formative assessment.

The English oral and written communicative competences are fundamental for interacting in the twenty-first century, in which the world population is required to hold these competences to face a globalized and interdependent world (Dietel et al., 1991). Consequently, academic policies demand the provision of teaching-learning processes and proper assessment that promote these skills (Pizmony-Levy & Bjorklund, 2018). In this regard, the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) has established a series of parameters to check the correspondence between the competences offered and achieved in the educational process (Cardoso, 2020). The communicative competences correspond to the A1-C2 levels in six-year academic processes, though students need to show some degree of these skills at any level. Moreover, the National Curriculum of Basic General Regime (grades 1-10), oriented with CEFR, sets forth that EFL assessments and evaluations should be aligned to the needed proficiency level at the end of each educational cycle (Llerena & Van Ha, 2022). At first sight, this seems an easy task; however, there are some troubles related to the qualifications of EFL teachers, assessment, and lack of research (Orosz et al., 2021).

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The field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education has witnessed a growing emphasis on alternative assessment approaches, as they provide more comprehensive insights into students' language proficiency compared to traditional assessments such as exams, tests, oral lessons, rubrics, among others (Bernal & Bernal, 2020). Conventional testing methods often fail to capture the full range of linguistic competencies, neglecting individual learner differences and holistic development (Phongsirikul, 2018). In response, alternative assessments such as portfolios (Klenowski, 2000), peer evaluations (Earl & Katz, 2006; Salgado & Espinosa, 2022), and self-assessments have gained traction, aligning with learner-centered and communicative teaching methods (Shamshiri et al., 2023). These methods not only reflect students' ongoing progress but also engage them actively in the evaluation process, offering a more nuanced view of language acquisition (Arter & Spandel, 2005). Traditional methods sometimes are not part of the learning process and cause stress and anxiety, becoming an obstacle for students' learning (Abdullah et al., 2022).

In Ecuador, where educational reforms emphasize the importance of English proficiency, the adoption of alternative assessment practices is increasingly relevant (De Angelis, 2022). However, the literature surrounding these alternative methods within Ecuador's EFL classrooms remains limited (Álvarez & Guevara, 2021). Existing research predominantly centers on traditional testing approaches, while studies exploring the implementation, perceptions, and challenges of alternative assessments in Ecuadorian classrooms are scarce (Burgin & Daniel, 2023; Soto & Espinosa, 2021). Further analysis regarding alternative assessment is needed, particularly on the perceptions of instructors and teachers and its impact on students (Rodríguez et al., 2020; Castro & Argudo, 2024).

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Ecuador and Latin America has mostly emphasized traditional assessment methods throughout the past few decades. Nonetheless, the last adopted National Curriculum has led to a shift towards evaluating students' proficiency in reading, writing, and listening by means of standardized high-stakes exams conducted by government institutions (Sevy-Biloon et al., 2020). This approach to assessment has several limitations, requiring alternatives in evaluation methods (Andrade-Molina et al., 2022), like a focus on certain skills, stress and anxiety, lack of real-world application, and inaccessibility for some students, among others.

Consequently, this literature review focuses on incorporating more flexible, comprehensive, and reliable approaches to analyzing students' language learning and proficiency. This is considered a relevant research issue, as most students' performance evaluations continue to revolve around these types of exams. Furthermore, encouraging and considering alternative assessment methods might prompt teachers to adopt more participative, active, and responsible roles in their practice, in which assessment does not become merely a manner of assigning a grade but rather a means to continually reflect upon and favor student learning (Argudo et al., 2021). It is worth noting as well that analyzing the feasibility of alternative language assessment methods may inform policy

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makers of the importance of implementing such methods, either within institutions or in their curriculum. The following review intends to shed light on the current implementation of applied alternative assessment in English as a Foreign Language classrooms in the Ecuadorian context.

This literature review aims to go deeper into alternative assessments within Ecuador's EFL classrooms and elsewhere. Specifically, this study investigates the types of alternative assessment methods employed, explores the perceptions of teachers and students regarding their effectiveness, and examines the challenges and benefits associated with their implementation. By focusing on these aspects, this review seeks to contribute valuable insights that can guide future pedagogical strategies and inform policy decisions in the Ecuadorian context. On this ground, this literature review focused its analysis around the following research questions: How do teachers and students perceive the effectiveness of alternative assessment methods in evaluating English proficiency?? What are the challenges and benefits of implementing alternative assessment approaches in EFL classrooms? What is the state of alternative assessment approaches being implemented and perceived in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms

Given the early stage of exploration on the issue, the incorporation of new approaches and research from diverse settings and shared experience is deemed vital (Hamayan, 1995). With this purpose in mind, an extensive review was carried out on the context, research limitations and rationale, methods, application of selected papers, advantages and constraints, as well as a final conclusive compilation of information and insights.

Methodology

Data Sources and Strategies

The research topics selected were the following: a) Types of Alternative Assessment: Examination of specific methods such as portfolios, peer evaluations, and performance tasks; b) Perceptions and Effectiveness: Insights on how these assessments affect learning outcomes; and c) Challenges and benefits: Practical considerations of their implementation in EFL contexts.

To conduct this semi-systematic review, a process described by Snyder (2019), was elaborated. The procedure was initiated during the planning phase, where the research questions and objectives were established. A search strategy was also constructed at this stage to enable the review to be as inclusive as possible. In addition, relevant databases were chosen, and search terms were refined as closely as possible to identify only the most relevant studies. The following step was a search and screen, where database searches were performed with the specified search terms, the abstracts, titles, and keywords of the articles found, to select those papers most relevant to the research. Selection criteria were then used to select only studies that fit the criteria. From the

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included articles, relevant information was extracted systematically in the data extraction process. This information involved the nature of the assessments, the methods that had been used, the results that had been presented, and the geographical target groups of the studies. The data was then grouped into thematic series to be more systematic in further analysis. This was followed by the analysis phase that utilized narrative synthesis to elicit patterns, trends, and gaps in the literature. It also emphasized general topics, shared issues in terms of educators' practice, and best practices that were derived from the reviewed studies.

Finally, during the presentation phase, a summary of findings was presented in tables and figures to facilitate comprehension. Whenever possible, descriptive statistics were included to assist with the interpretation of the data. A framework for discussion was formulated, with in-depth discussions of each of the research questions, drawing conclusions, and giving suggestions on the basis of the synthesis. This methodical process guaranteed both a complete and systemic review and presented important contributions to the field of knowledge.

The research considered different sources such as ERIC, Scopus, and Web of Science. The main keywords were: a) alternative assessment methods in EFL, b) non-traditional assessment in English teaching, c) portfolio assessment in language learning, d) peer and self-assessment in EFL, and e) challenges of alternative assessment in EFL. Table 1 shows the different elements of the selection criteria.

Table 1. Selection Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Approach	Alternative assessments in EFL	Articles not associated with EFL or alternative assessments
Publication Date	2019–2024	Articles published before 2019
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed articles	Degree papers, conferences, book chapters, web pages
Language	English	Articles in other languages
Final Selection	The final selection included 16 high-quality articles, narrowing the scope to ensure manageability while maintaining comprehensive coverage.	

Source: own elaboration

Results

The examination of alternative assessment approaches in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms reveals significant trends and findings across three main themes: the types of assessments used, perceptions of their effectiveness, and the practical challenges and benefits associated with their implementation.

Types of Alternative Assessments

One of the tasks of the present study was to get a clear picture of alternative assessments commonly employed in EFL classes, as these tests have been gaining ground as they seem to be a better repertoire to assess language proficiency in ways similar to traditional tests. Some of the discovered artifacts, portfolios, peer reviews, and self-assessments shown in Table 2 can be seen in actual frequency in most studies in technology integration.

Table 2. Types of Alternative Assessments

Assessment Type	Key Features/Focus	Authors/Year
Portfolios	Comprehensive reflection of learner's progress; self-assessment	Wang & He (2020), Tariq et al. (2020)
Peer Evaluations	Collaborative learning; evaluative skills development	Meletiadou (2021) Salgado & Espinosa (2022)
Self-Assessment	Develops learner autonomy; critical for language acquisition	Gist et al. (2021)
Project-based Learning	Real-world task integration with language skills	Tariq et al. (2020)
		Chen (2023)
		De Angelis (2022)
		García et al. (2020)

Source: own elaboration

Portfolios are known to provide an overall view of the learner's progress, and they enable teachers and students to see improvement on various dimensions over time. As claimed by Wang and He (2020), the portfolio is especially valuable in ESL/EFL settings for the purpose of reflection and self-evaluation. Both the above assessments fall under the purview of communicative and learner-centered approaches, which underscore the active role of students in the learning process (Tariq et al., 2020). In the case of Ecuador, the incorporation of portfolios is related to the educational reforms underway in the country, with an emphasis on the promotion of an increasingly inclusive education system more oriented to the learner (García et al., 2020).

Similarly, peer assessments have been reported as a successful strategy in promoting collaborative learning, critical thinking, and peer feedback among students. Peer evaluations support not only the development of students' evaluation capabilities but also their understanding of the evaluation criteria (Meletiadou, 2021). In a communicative competence-oriented context, such as Ecuador (De Angelis, 2022), the peer evaluation system as a means to help students gauge their language learning and improve their performance may play a relevant role in assisting students to assess and improve their language skills with the help of their peers (Chen, 2023). Further, the investigation of Salgado and Espinosa (2022), underscores that peer review enhances language proficiency and collaborative skills, both pivotal in academic and professional life.

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Other alternative assessments, including self-assessment and project-based learning, are also being considered and implemented, as they promote students' ownership and engagement in their learning. Studies by Gist et al. (2021), demonstrate that self-evaluation fosters autonomy, a key factor for language learning. Language skills are integrated into real-world tasks in project-based learning, promoting a deep learning experience (Tariq et al., 2020).

Perceptions and effectiveness

The perceptions of both teachers and students regarding the effectiveness of alternative assessments vary, yet the majority of research points to positive outcomes in terms of both engagement and accuracy in measuring language proficiency. Table 3 shows a summary of studies regarding perceptions and effectiveness linked to alternative assessment.

Table 3. Perceptions and Effectiveness

Stakeholder	Perception/Effectiveness	Authors/Year
Teachers	View assessments as more reflective of real-world language use; positive outcomes on language abilities	Phongsirikul (2018), Burgin & Daniel (2023), Rojas & López (2023)
Students	Find assessments less stressful and more engaging; flexibility in portfolio assessments	Shamshiri et al. (2023), García et al. (2020), Soto & Espinosa (2021)

Source: own elaboration

In general, teachers believe that these assessments better represent the students' language-in-use abilities because they measure some skills not tested by traditional assessments, such as conversational fluency, cooperative tasks, and written production (Phongsirikul, 2018). Research by Afsaneh et al. (2020), also adds to this, in that teachers' positive attitudes relate to professional development provisions concerning skill-building in this type of assessment.

For students, other forms of evaluation, like portfolios and peer assessment, can be considered more engaging and less stressful than normal exams. Portfolio assessment is inherently flexible, worthy of a variety of skills such as writing, speaking, and critical thinking (Shamshiri et al., 2023). In Ecuador, the changes towards communicative and learner-based methods also confirm the receptiveness to these methods, as students value that learning is more important than testing (García et al., 2020).

However, there is an issue that students and teachers still do not completely understand and trust the mechanics of alternative assessments. Some publications have specifically argued that in the absence of a definite framework and training protocol, both may fail to completely understand these techniques (Soto & Espinosa, 2021). Such a concern emphasizes the necessity that teachers

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are trained to carry out those assessments in a valid and reliable way. In this sense, the research of Rojas and López (2023), highlights the importance of workshops and seminars to guide teachers on what to do and how to evaluate to improve their understanding.

Challenges and benefits of implementation

Implementing alternative assessment approaches presents both challenges and benefits. One of the primary challenges identified is the time and resources required to effectively integrate alternative assessments into the curriculum. Table 4 shows a summary of studies that analyze the challenges and benefits of implementing alternative assessment.

Table 4. Challenges and Benefits of Implementation

Challenge/Benefit	Description	Authors/Year
Challenge: Time and Resources	Requires significant time investment for implementation; additional training for students	Burgin & Daniel (2023)
Challenge: Standardization	Subjectivity in evaluation without clear rubrics or guidelines	Soto & Espinosa (2021), Hassan (2022)
Benefit: Learner Autonomy	Encourages students to take an active role in assessment; critical thinking skills	Meletiadou (2021), Shamshiri et al. (2023)
Benefit: Real-world Language Use	More relevant to future communication needs; enhances practical learning	Ahmed et al. (2022), Andrade & Rojas (2021)

Source: own elaboration

Teachers must spend time teaching portfolio completion and peer assessment, and this instruction may demand resources beyond those typically found in the EFL context in Ecuador (Burgin & Daniel, 2023). There is also the issue with standardization when it comes to comparing the different assessments. In contrast to standard tests, subjective judgment in alternative assessments can cause inconsistencies in grading unless clear rubrics with detailed guidelines are in place (Soto & Espinosa, 2021). Hassan's (2022), study also argues that a lack of a clear framework can lead to variation in grading and perceptions of fairness.

The many merits of alternative assessments notwithstanding, it does have its drawbacks. Such techniques encourage learner autonomy (an important element in learning a language) since students play an active role in evaluating their own progress and that of their peers. This participation promotes the development of advanced thinking and higher motivation (Meletiadou, 2021). Moreover, alternative assessments help students to obtain a better understanding of how languages are used in the real world, thus making classroom-based learning more related to learners' future communication needs (Shamshiri et al., 2023). As noted by Ahmed et al. (2022), creating oppor-

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tunities for alternative assessments would help students concentrate on process-oriented learning, not just product-oriented learning, for long-term language learning.

In an EFL setting such as Ecuador, the incorporation of alternative assessments is congruent with the country's educational reform for enhancing English language proficiency (De Angelis, 2022). Ecuador is taking steps toward developing a comprehensive and relevant EFL education system by shifting from a purely grammatical and vocabulary-based evaluation to a communicative competence and practical language use evaluation. As Andrade and Rojas (2021), have pointed out, this move is in line with the worldwide movement towards increased inclusivity and student--centered pedagogies that have been shown to improve language proficiency and decrease learner anxiety.

Discussion

Answering the question "How do teachers and students perceive the effectiveness of alternative assessment methods in evaluating English proficiency?", it is necessary to state that, as the results of this literature review revealed, alternative assessment instruments are being adopted and perceived as more valid in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It is perceived by teachers that these means and methods, portfolios, and peer and self-assessment measure language competences more thoroughly and precisely than testing does. Conventional approaches, which often target standardized assessments, do not fully measure students' language proficiency and may pose stress and anxiety for the learners (Abdullah et al., 2022). While alternative assessments offer a more balanced view of students' progress and a focus on the learner, they comparably align with communicative teaching methods.

Portfolios, especially, are well-known as a powerful force in learning languages because they act as the engine for reflective processes and provide a means of showing the work of the learner in its development. A portfolio enables the student to record their work over time, not only their achievement as individuals but also as student learning (Wang & He, 2020; Tariq et al., 2020). In that sense, in a moment when the Ecuadorian educational system is leaning towards active learner-oriented pedagogies, the use of portfolios can be an opportunity for students to get involved actively in their assessment beyond the limitations of the written exam (García et al., 2020). This approach is increasingly consistent with Ecuador's linguistic education reforms that focus on communicative competence and holistic aspects of language learning (De Angelis, 2022).

Similarly, peer assessments have become an effective way of stimulating collaborative learning and critical thinking. Peer evaluation involves students' self-contained judging of their peers' work and thereby not only refines this particular evaluative skill but also prompts the students to reflect more deeply on their performance (Meletiadou, 2021). Peer assessment has several peda-

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gogical benefits: it improves language skills, increases confidence, and teaches students to work together, skills that they will need for university and the workplace (Salgado & Espinosa, 2022). Regarding EFL classrooms, peer reviews can deepen students' bonds, and learning can be more dynamic and less isolated, which is significant for the acquisition of functional language skills in everyday situations.

Self-assessment also must include new alternative assessment methods, which are effective in the development of learner autonomy. This approach motivates students to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses and become actively involved in their learning. Indeed, research indicates that self-assessment can promote learner awareness of their language ability, fostering a culture of lifelong learning (Gist et al., 2021). Through self-evaluation, students also acquire critical thinking ability, which is essential well beyond language learning. These skills can form the foundation for longer-term language learning, with the focus slowly turning away from completing tasks and towards learning about the learning and becoming more and more self-directed.

With the purpose of discussing the question "What are the challenges and benefits of implementing alternative assessment approaches in EFL classrooms?", it is important to mention that the problem is that the transfer of other forms of assessment is not that easy, and a number of difficulties are involved, which shall be dealt with. One of the major limitations reported in the literature is the time and resources dedicated to the training of teachers and students on the alternative assessment methodologies. The use of portfolios and peer assessment techniques actively involves students in the learning process. It requires continual feedback, thus contributing to the extra time and effort in supporting student work (Burgin & Daniel, 2023). Within the Latin American reality, based on scant resources, the echoes of these problems are, in turn, more acute, which makes it necessary for schools and educational institutions to devote enough time and resources to teachers' professional development around alternative assessment in the academic teaching-learning process.

Furthermore, alternative assessments are inconsistent at times, which can cause irregular grading. Alternative assessments are subjective when being graded; subjectivity plays a role in fairness or unfairness if clear rubrics and evaluations are absent (Soto & Espinosa, 2021). This level of subjectivity is a matter of concern, especially in peer assessment, where students may lack the appropriate knowledge to give positive feedback. They may also be biased in their judgment. The lack of unambiguous and widely accepted criteria with which to assess the value of these techniques may disadvantage these methods and fuel distrust of their efficacy. Educators must be well-trained to use these strategies in a consistent and fair manner. Such a process could be enhanced by creating and using detailed guidelines and rubrics to help align all students and provide clear expectations and assessment criteria for alternative assessments (Hassan, 2022).

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Addressing the last research question, "What is the state of alternative assessment approaches being implemented and perceived in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in Ecuador?" despite the hurdles mentioned in the last paragraph, the current state of the alternative assessment approaches still needs to be discussed. Portfolios, peer and self-assessments, and the right amount of student involvement in the classroom increase the learner's motivation and autonomy (Meletiadou, 2021). They also help a better grip or perspective of language in authentic situations, linking what has been learned in class with real-world situations (Shamshiri et al., 2023). By getting students to think about how they learn rather than just the correct answer, the assessments promote acquiring key language skills to enable genuine communication and purposeful collaboration out of the classroom. In addition, learner autonomy and self-directed learning are emphasized, which supports the ability of students to cultivate a capacity for critical thinking as a need of lifelong learning and self-statement.

Alternative testing can be seen as an integral part of Latin America's and Ecuador's educational reform, intended to improve proficiency in the English language. The move to implement more communicative and learner-centered pedagogies in the classroom is an echo of the movement toward non-traditional forms of assessment that are often considered better adapted to evaluating communicative ability rather than to evaluating rote memorization of grammar and vocabulary (De Angelis, 2011). These changes are part of a larger global movement toward more individualized and context-relevant language teaching and assessment, focused on developing practical language skills that can be used beyond the classroom (Andrade & Rojas, 2021). As these alternative forms of assessment start to take hold within EFL contexts, they serve as a way for the classroom instructor to better serve language development or create a more inclusive and dynamic learning environment.

Conclusion

This semi-systematic review focused on the increasing relevance of other assessment systems to EFL contexts in general and, in particular, those in Latin America and Ecuador. The results reveal that portfolios, peer assessment, and self-assessment provide an inclusive, interactive, and comprehensive approach in contrast to traditional tests. These are seen as alternative approaches that, consistent with the learner-centered pedagogies, foster the development of learner autonomy, critical thinking, and communicative proficiency. In addition, they develop a culture of reflection, real-world relevance, and collaborative learning in the classroom. Although they offer a range of potential advantages, the review also highlights key challenges that will need to be addressed. The major issues are the time and resources consumed by teachers, the absence of professional development and standardized guidelines, and the possibility of subjective marking

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differences. These barriers are particularly relevant in underprivileged EFL contexts like Ecuador, where teacher development and systemic support are not well organized.

Moreover, the study revealed positive attitudes towards alternative assessments among students and teachers, more specifically with respect to lower anxiety and higher motivation. Nevertheless, the acceptance seldom comes without questioning of the methods used, and doubts are frequently raised regarding the reliability and validity of the techniques employed, particularly when there are no established guidelines or rubrics within the institution. This literature review also exposes several significant holes in the extant scholarship. It is important to note that there is a dearth of empirical research, especially in terms of the long-term influence of alternative assessment on language performance and learner achievement. In addition, there is limited evidence about how cultural and institutional factors in Latin America influence the acceptance and attitude regarding these behaviors.

Research going forward should address areas such as the creation and validation of standardized rubrics and training guides, studies investigating the efficacy of these approaches on student achievement, motivation, and retention of content across time, comparative studies of alternative assessment instruments across different ages and population groups, and insights of teachers for alternative assessment strategies and their training requirements, among others.

To conclude, alternative assessment is a feasible way to reform the traditional language evaluation and improve the quality of English teaching. If systematically integrated and supported through institutional policies and professional development, these approaches may be powerful allies for promoting equity, engagement, and communicative competence in EFL classrooms.

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