Performance Tasks as Alternative Assessment for Young EFL Learners: Does Practice Match the Curriculum Proposal?

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the findings of a studywhich investigates performance tasks as a means of alternative assessment for young EFL learners. The study specifically looks into the match between what is proposed by the Primary English Curriculum and what is actually done in classrooms concerning the characteristics, implementation process, and evaluation of these tasks from teachers' point of view. In addition, the opinions of teachers, in relation to whether these tasks have any contribution to language learning are also elicited. 43 young-learner English teachers working in ten schools participated in the study. Data has been collected from questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis. The findings reveal that the intended goals of performance tasks have been moderately achieved, but in certain areas have weaknesses. Overall, the study has produced some implications for practice regarding alternative assessment.

Keywords:
Assessing young EFL learners, alternative assessment, performance tasks

Introduction

In a young language-learner classroom, the teachers' hard work in establishing a motivating atmosphere and positive attitudes towards learning English can be severely damaged when it comes to assessment (McKay, 2006). In other words, wrongly selected assessment tasks, such as traditional paper and pen tests used with older learners can disadvantage some children by affecting them negatively (Pinter, 2009; Rixon, 2010). Smith (1996) and Conner (2008) state that poorly formed and administered paper and pencil tests can have a negative effect on learning since this method can be extremely stressful and lead to losing interest in language learning and use up valuable learning and production time. Moreover, such studies reveal that besides causing high levels of anxiety, traditional tests affect the self-image of children (Smith, 1996). Therefore, children should be evaluated in a stress-reduced environment, if not in a stress-free one, to provide an atmosphere to help children perceive the assessment procedure as an integral component of the learning and teaching process and not as a tool to grade them competitively (Shabaan, 2001; Bejarano and Gordon, 2009). Given the characteristics of young language learners and the way they think and learn, the assessment procedures for them should include methods, which satisfy the following demands (Halliwell, 1992; Shepard, 1994; Vale and Feunteun, 1995; Katz, 1997; Cameron, 2001; Rea-Dickins, 2000; Hasselgreen, 2005; Taylor, 2006; Bejarano and Gordon, 2009):

- Tasks should take into consideration children's physical, social, and cognitive development.

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- Tasks should be appealing to the age and interest of children and all language should be used in everyday context, matching the way in which they process language.

- Many types of assessment should be used, with the pupil's, the parents' and the teacher's perspectives involved.

- Both the tasks and the forms of feedback should underline what they can do instead of what they cannot in order to encourage further learning.

- The pupil should, at least under some circumstances, be given support in carrying out the tasks.

- The activities used in assessment should be good learning practices and serve as a tool to diagnose learning and teaching problems.

- Tasks should be performance-based, requiring students to perform authentic tasks such as giving oral reports, writing essays, cooperative group work, and problem solving.

Using methods that meet the demands of assessing students' language products and processes without the use of tests has come to be known as alternative assessment. Kohonen (1997) provides an all-inclusive definition of alternative assessment as follows:

[It] emphasizes the communicative meaningfulness of evaluation and the commitment to measure that which we value in education. It uses such forms of assessment that reflect student learning, achievement, motivation and attitudes on instructionally-relevant classroom activities ... Its results can be used to improve instruction, based on the knowledge of learner progress. (p.13)

Shabaan (2001, p.8) suggests "...the need for teachers to use a variety of types of alternative assessment, especially non-threatening informal techniques, with young EFL/ESL learners." Some of the most commonly used types or methods are portfolios, conferences, demonstrations, self-assessment, peer-assessment, projects and performance tasks (Cohen, 1994; Ioannou-Georgiou and Pavlou, 2003). Performance tasks (PTs), which are under investigation in this study, refer to assessment that involves either the observation of behaviour in the real world or a simulation of a real life activity (Weigle, 2002) and include the following:

[PTs] represent a set of strategies for the...application of knowledge, skills, and work habits through the performance of tasks that are meaningful and engaging to students.... Good performance assessment tasks are embedded in the important content, skills, and products in any curriculum; they are not an add-on at the end of a unit of study… (but) both an integral part of the learning and an opportunity to assess the quality of student performance (Hibbard, Wagenen, Lewbebel, Waterbury-Wyatt, Shaw, Pelletier, 1996, p. 5-6).

In the settings where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), these tasks are authentic in that they usually require students to demonstrate how they can actively use English to complete a task or solve a problem, and they can be integrated into the instructional process thus providing additional learning experiences for students (Brualdi, 2002).

PTs have been used in young language learner classrooms around Turkey for over eight years. However, controversy still surrounds issues concerning how these tasks are implemented in EFL classrooms and if they serve the aims stated in the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) circulars (Ministry of National Education Circular, No: 19/12/2006; 25/01/2007, 16/04/2009). Therefore, the aim of this study is to shed light, from the teachers' point of view, on whether a match exists between what is proposed by the Primary Education Institutions' Regulation and EFL classroom practice concerning PTs in terms of characteristics, process, and evaluation. In addition, the opinions of teachers in relation to whether PTs have any contribution to language learning are also identified. The following research questions guided the study:

1. Is there a match between the PTs as proposed by the MoNE and the implementation of these tasks in the 5th grade primary EFL classrooms in regard to the tasks' characteristics, the implementation process, and the evaluation of these tasks from the teachers' point of view?

2. What are the opinions of primary EFL teachers about the contribution of PTs to language learning?

Methodology

Setting the Scene

Acting on the belief that "the earlier the better", starting English language instruction in Turkey was first lowered to the 4th grades in 1997 and later in 2013 to 2nd grades of primary education (MoNE, 1997; MoNE, 2013). Following these changes, the MoNE adopted a new English Language Curriculum for primary schools in 2006. The new curriculum differs from the previous one in that more focus is given to the methods, approaches, materials, and assessment suitable for teaching English to young learners. Furthermore, besides traditional pen and paper tests, alternative assessment is encouraged and given a higher degree of importance. Figure 1 is an illustration of this blend:
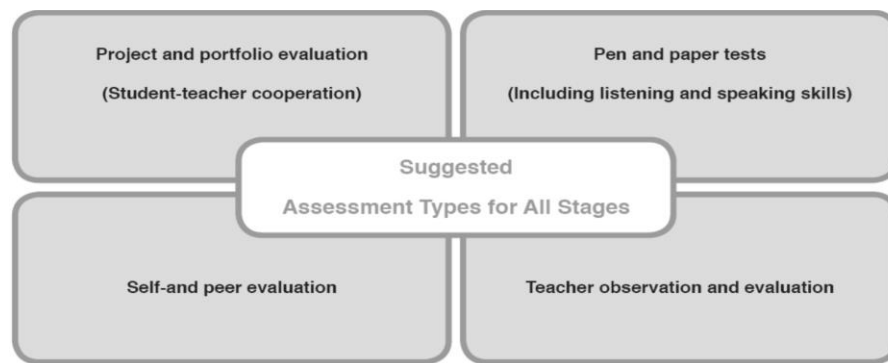
Figure 1. Suggested assessment types by MoNE (MoNE, 2013: XV).

As seen from Figure 1, besides pen and paper tests, alternative assessment methods, such as project, portfolio, self, and peer evaluation in cooperation with teacher observation are encouraged. One of the alternative assessment tools used in young language learner classes is the PTs given to students at least once every term. A detailed examination of the publications (MoNE, 2006; 2008; 2013) and circulars related to PTs (No: 95/2006; 68/2007; 1078/2007; 16251/2007; 443/2008; 14796/2008; 7273/2009) 95/2006; 68/2007; 1078/2007; 16251/2007; 443/2008; 14796/2008; 7273/2009) has generated an outline related to the characteristics, implementation process, evaluation and contribution of PTs to language learning as depicted in Figure 2:
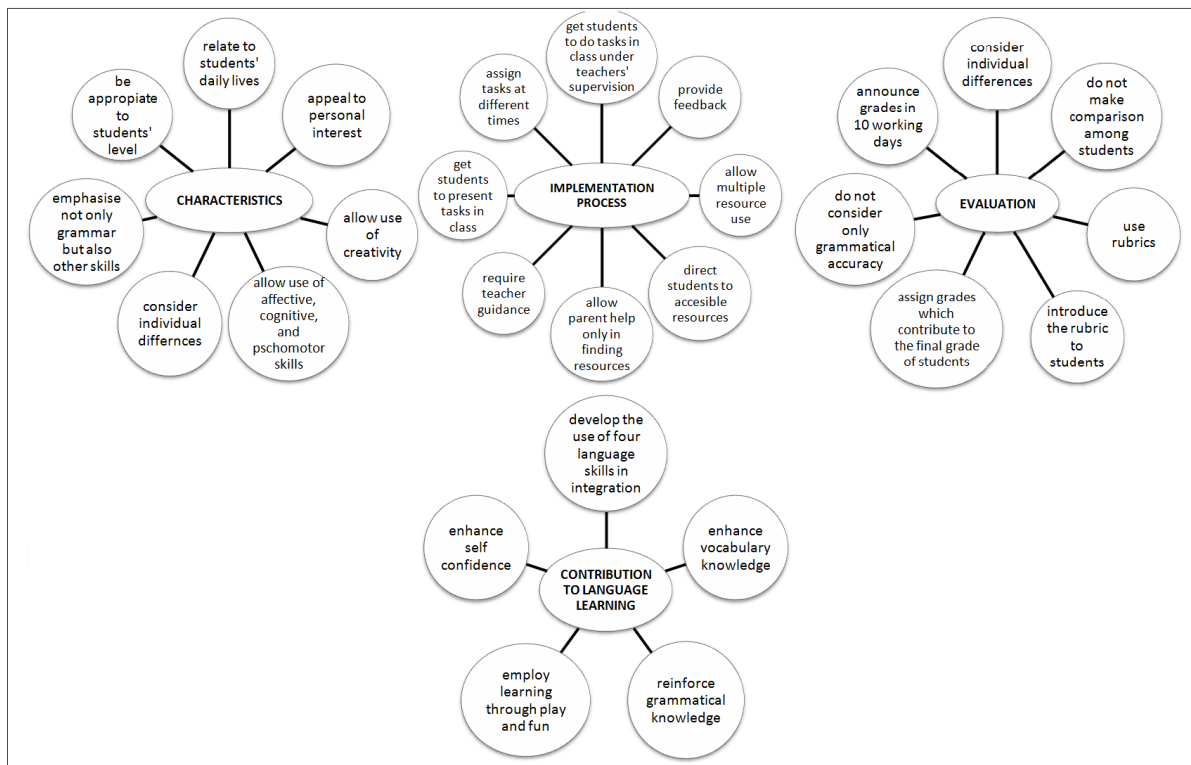
Figure 2. Characteristics, implementation process, and evaluation of PTs.

Figure 2 suggests that the characteristics of PTs to be assigned should be associated with students' daily life, and they should appeal to their personal interests. Next, these tasks should allow room for creativity and for students to use affective, psychomotor and cognitive skills. Moreover, the PTs should be suitable to the students' level and take note of individual differences. Finally, the emphasis in the assigned tasks should not only be on grammar but also on language skills.

Regarding the implementation process, PTs should not be given to all students at the same time due to individual differences in learning. The students should prepare their PTs in class under the teachers' supervision, and receive immediate feedback. Emphasis is placed on doing the research phase outside the classroom. In addition, teachers should give needed guidance to students in finding accessible materials and resources. They should use sources other than the Internet: library, books, magazines, encyclopaedias, films, and TV programs. The role of parents should be limited to helping students find resources for their tasks. Additionally, completed tasks should be presented in class.

The proposal for the evaluation of the PTs is that teachers should not solely consider the product but also the process itself. Moreover, individual differences should be considered in order to make fair judgements about students' performance. The PTs should be evaluated by means of a rubric, which should clearly define the different levels of proficiency. The rubrics should be shared with students before they embark on their tasks. The recommendation is to announce the evaluation results in 10 working days. The marks students receive will affect their final grades for the course.

MoNE also articulates the expected contributions of the PTs to language learning. These tasks should not only develop grammatical and vocabulary knowledge, but also the use of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Other contributions expected are enhancing self-confidence in learning and providing a context that includes learning through play and fun.

Participants

The participants in this study were 43 English teachers working with young learners for at least 10 years from 10 different state primary schools in Adana, Turkey. A cluster random sampling method (Fraenkel and Wallen, 1990) was used. The researcher first selected clusters of schools on random bases, and then included all teachers within these clusters to administer the questionnaires. Interviews were held on a voluntary basis with one teacher from each school. Out of 43 teachers, only 41 were found to have had training on the implementation of PTs.

Data Collection Tools and Analysis

For triangulation purposes, several data collection tools were utilized in order to gather necessary information; to answer the research questions, data were acquired from questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis checklists.

The MoNE promulgations concerning assessment provided guidance in designing the questionnaire. The analysis of the constituents of the description of PTs resulted in four categories: 1) the characteristics of PTs, 2) the implementation process of PTs 3) the evaluation of PTs, 4) the contribution of PTs to language learning. Then, 35 questionnaire statements were derived from the constituents and presented together on a five-likert scale. The following is an example:

Primary Education Regulation	Questionnaire Item
Students' individual differences must be considered while assigning performance tasks.	*I consider my students' individual differences while assigning performance tasks.*

One hundred and eleven teachers, with the same level of students in other cities of Turkey, developed a model for a questionnaire to assess content and language validity. Necessary modifications were made,

and the questionnaires were administered to a group of 43 teachers. The Cronbach-alpha value of the questionnaire was rated at α=0.89, which indicated that the questionnaire had a high level of reliability.

To support data acquired from the questionnaires, interviews were held with 10 volunteering teachers. The teachers were invited to answer questions related to the four aspects of the PTs under question. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was audio-recorded for analysis purposes. To analyse the sample PTs, a document analysis checklist was prepared in a similar manner as the questionnaires to determine the correlation between the characteristics and contributions of these tasks to language learning.

The findings acquired from the questionnaires were analysed utilizing the Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) computer program. Data acquired from the interviews and document analyses were subjected to content analysis. Following Lincoln and Guba (1985), the responses of teachers in the interviews were transcribed verbatim, coded and categorized to discover common themes. Then through repeated readings of the transcript, themes and patterns were found and categorized with their frequency of occurrence. Two researchers separately examined a total of 30 PTs on the basis of a 3 point scale, namely "Yes", "Partly", and "No" to record the content of these tasks. Then, they came together to compare and refine the findings through discussion.

Findings

In line with the purpose of this research, findings are presented in terms of characteristics, implementation process, evaluation of the PTs, and any potential contributions of these tasks to language learning.

Characteristics of PTs

Teachers' views about the characteristics of PTs are presented in Table 1.

As is clearly visible from Table 1, responses of the teachers to item 1 reveal that more than half the teachers believe that the tasks which they assign to students always (32.7%) or mostly (32.7%) require use of creativity. In addition, replies indicate that the PTs always (34.9%) or sometimes (32.6%) require the students to use their cognitive skills. While 37.2% of the teachers think that these tasks always require the students to also use their affective skills, another 37.2% believe that this is sometimes true. Nearly half of the teachers (41.9%) claim that PTs assigned mostly allow for the use of psychomotor skills. More than half (65.1%) state that these tasks are always suitable to the students' level. Less than half of the teachers (48.8%) believe that the PTs are mostly associated with daily life, and 37.2% believe that they are mostly prepared with the consideration of individual differences and interests in learning. Finally, slightly more than half the teachers (53.5%) state that the PTs used sometimes emphasize grammar, while 25.6% claim that these tasks always focus on grammar practice.

To have a deeper understanding of the characteristics of PTs, document analysis was employed. The analysis of 30 sample PTs collected from the participant teachers reveal that half of the tasks analyzed are posters. Two types of classroom rules (do's and don'ts both in English and in Turkish) and grammar rules (e.g. prepositions) accompanied with illustrations are evident in these posters. Bookmarks, the second type of task (five in total), include classroom rules decorated by coloured pencils and stickers. Additionally, four of the PTs are revision sheets focussing on various grammar topics and vocabulary, such as prepositions, occupations, and verbs related to sports. To accomplish these tasks, the students have been asked to write the related words with their translations and illustrations. Calendars (three in total) form another PTs task. Furthermore, two tasks involve computer print-outs, via which students are required to practice spelling through the naming of figures, such as numbers and shapes. Last of all, the remaining task, a vocabulary list, consists of English words and their translations. While some of the illustrations accompanying PTs have been created by the students themselves, some others have been "cut and paste" ones, mostly retrieved from the internet.

The document analysis also yielded results as to the characteristics of PTs. More than half of the analysed PTs require students to use their creativity (56.7%), and psychomotor skills (60.0%). In addition, while half of these tasks (50%) analysed seem to require the students to partly use their cognitive skills, more than half of them (60%) do not allow for the use of affective skills. Finally, all PTs analysed (100.0%) seem to be suitable for students' levels and to be completed in the given time. Finally, none of the PTs have been found to be disconnected from students' daily lives.

Table 1. Teachers' views about the characteristics of PTs

		Always		Mostly		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1	The PTs which I assign require the students to use their creativity.	16	37.2	16	37.2	9	20.9	2	4.7	-	-
2	The PTs which I assign require the students to use cognitive skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and comprehending.	15	34.9	12	27.9	14	32.6	2	4.7	-	-
3	The PTs which I assign require the students to use affective skills such as showing interest, agreeing, and valuing.	16	37.2	9	20.9	16	37.2	2	4.7	-	-
4	The PTs which I assign require the students to use psychomotor skills such as observing, displaying, and demonstrating.	9	20.9	18	41.9	7	16.3	8	18.6	1	2.3
5	The PTs which I assign are suitable to the students' level.	28	65.1	9	20.9	4	9.3	2	4.7	-	-
6	The PTs which I assign can be associated with students' daily life.	16	37.2	21	48.8	3	7.0	3	7.0	-	-
7	I consider my students' individual differences and interests while assigning PTs.	9	20.9	16	37.2	8	18.6	6	14.0	4	9.3
8	In the PTs I assign, the emphasis is on grammar.	-	-	11	25.6	23	53.5	8	18.6	1	2.3

Implementation Process of PTs

The second section of the questionnaire relates to the implementation process of PTs. In Table 2, findings from the questionnaire are presented.

Of the teachers, 48.8% believe that students mostly use the Internet for research during preparation of the tasks. However, 37.2% of the teachers' positions are that the students mostly use sources other than the Internet. More than half state that the students rarely (32.6%) or never (25.6%) have difficulty in finding resources to prepare the given tasks. Moreover, 39.5% of the teachers' responses illustrate that mostly parents help students only in finding resources, while another 39.5% show that parents sometimes prepare these tasks. Other teachers think that parents are rarely or never involved in doing these tasks. Furthermore, 37.2% of the teachers state that the students sometimes prepare the tasks in class under their supervision. 30.2% claim that they rarely do, and 23.3% propose that they never do. Findings from the interviews seem to support this. One of the teachers who requires the students to do the tasks in class under her supervision, for example, justifies her behaviour as follows:

"The students do their tasks in class, because if I give them as homework, parents usually do the tasks for them."

There is also evidence showing that teachers have different reasons for not having students do their PTs in class. The most frequently cited reason is illustrated below:

"Because the class population is too high, I get the less capable students to do the tasks in class under my supervision, but I let the more capable ones do their tasks at home."

More than half of the teachers (55.8%) propose that they mostly provide needed guidance to their students during the preparation of PTs and nearly half (46.5%) claim that they always give feedback to them. More than half (55.8%) of the teachers say that they always assign PTs to all students at the same time. While a few teachers (11.6%) state that they always have their students present these tasks in class, some (20.9%) claim that they mostly do. However, nearly half of them (46.5%) state that doing so is sometimes the case.

Table 2. Teachers' views about the implementation process of PTs

		Always		Mostly		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
		f	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*
1	The students use the internet for research while preparing their PTs.	16	37.2	21	48.8	3	7.0	3	7.0	-	-
2	The students use sources other than the internet (library, books, magazines, encyclopaedias, films, TV programs) for research while preparing their PTs.	9	20.9	16	37.2	8	18.6	6	14.0	4	9.3
3	The students have difficulties in finding sources to prepare their PTs.	3	7.0	4	9.3	11	25.6	14	32.6	11	25.6
4	The parents help the students in finding resources for their PTs.	1	2.3	17	39.5	14	32.6	8	18.6	3	7.0
5	The parents prepare students' PTs for them.	-	-	5	11.6	17	39.5	14	32.6	7	16.3
6	The students prepare their PTs in class under my supervision.	-	-	4	9.3	16	37.2	13	30.2	10	23.3
7	I give the needed guidance to students for their PTs.	12	27.9	24	55.8	4	9.3	2	4.7	1	2.3
8	I give feedback to students about their PTs.	20	46.5	16	37.2	6	14.0	1	2.3	-	-
9	I assign the PTs to all of the students at the same time.	24	55.8	18	41.9	1	2.3	-	-	-	-
10	The students present their PTs in class.	5	11.6	9	20.9	20	46.5	7	16.3	2	4.7

Evaluation of PTs

Table 3 shows the teachers' views in relation to the evaluation of PTs.

The responses of teachers show that very few (9.3%) claim that they always make comparisons between the students while evaluating their PTs. A larger percentage of them state that this is sometimes (34.9%) or never (20.9%) the case.

One teacher commented on why she makes comparisons in the evaluation process:

"Comparisons are always good for creating a competitive classroom environment."

However, another shared her reason for not making comparisons:

"I never compare them with one another because each student is unique in the learning process."

Over more than half claim to always (30.2%) or mostly (37.2%) evaluate these tasks by considering individual differences. A majority of the teachers (76.7%) state that they always give marks to students for their PTs. In addition, more than half of the teachers (55.8%) always evaluate PTs using a rubric and another 51.2% always introduce the rubric to the students while assigning the tasks.

Regarding the use of rubrics, findings obtained from the interviews show that while three teachers claim that they benefit from ready-made rubrics available on the Internet another two say that they prepare their own rubrics. The following remarks illustrate these claims:

"I usually find my rubrics from the internet. There are a lot of different ones which I think are good to evaluate different tasks."

"I prepare my own rubrics because each task has its own characteristics and requires different evaluation criteria."

Another three teachers state that they do not use rubrics at all, and a further two say that they use rubrics in evaluating PTs only because it is a requirement of the Ministry. Below are the remarks made in the interviews:

"I never use rubrics because I have been a teacher for long enough to know what grade a particular task deserves."

"I use rubrics because inspectors ask for them; however, I do not give the grades using these rubrics."

Questionnaire results also show that more than half of the teachers always (53.5%) announce student grades in 10 working days and that these grades always (69.8%) affect students' final grades in the course. Finally, a minority of teachers rarely (16.3%) or never (2.3%) give importance to grammatical accuracy while evaluating PTs, whereas more than half claim that they always (18.6%) or mostly (41.9%) give importance to grammatical accuracy.

Table 3. Teachers' views about the evaluation of PTs

		Always		Mostly		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
		f	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*
1	I evaluate the PTs of the students by comparing them with those of their classmates'.	4	9.3	8	18.6	15	34.9	7	16.3	9	20.9
2	I evaluate the PTs of the students by considering their individual differences.	13	30.2	16	37.2	10	23.3	2	4.7	2	4.7
3	I give marks to students on their PTs.	33	76.7	8	18.6	2	4.7	-	-	-	-
4	I evaluate the PTs with a rubric.	24	55.8	8	18.6	4	9.3	4	9.3	3	7.0
5	I introduce the rubric to the students.	22	51.2	11	25.6	4	9.3	5	11.6	1	2.3
6	I let the students know about their grades in 10 working days.	23	53.5	13	30.2	6	14.0	1	2.3	-	-
7	The PTs affect the final grade of students in English.	30	69.8	8	18.6	4	9.3	1	2.3	-	-
8	I give importance to grammatical accuracy while evaluating the PTs.	8	18.6	18	41.9	9	20.9	7	16.3	1	2.3

Contributions of PTs to Language Learning

Views of the teachers in relation to the potential contribution of PTs to language learning are summarised in Table 4:

Table 4. Teachers' views about the contribution of PTs to language learning

		Always		Mostly		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
		f	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*
1	The students improve their writing skills in English while preparing their PTs.	14	32.6	22	51.2	6	14.0	-	-	1	2.3
2	The students improve their reading skills in English while preparing their PTs.	10	23.3	15	34.9	13	30.2	3	7.0	2	4.7
3	The students improve their speaking skills in English while preparing their PTs.	2	4.7	11	25.6	16	37.2	9	20.9	5	11.6
4	The students improve their listening skills in English while preparing their PTs.	-	-	11	25.6	10	23.3	13	30.2	9	20.9
5	The students use different language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) in integration while preparing their PTs.	4	9.3	11	25.6	17	39.5	6	14.0	5	11.6
6	The students learn new words in English while preparing their PTs.	20	46.5	15	34.9	6	14.0	2	4.7	-	-
7	The students reinforce the grammar rules they have learnt previously while preparing their PTs.	23	53.5	12	27.9	6	14.0	1	2.3	1	2.3
8	The students enjoy dealing with English while preparing their PTs.	11	25.6	17	39.5	12	27.9	-	-	3	7.0
9	The students' self-confidence about English is enhanced through PTs.	16	37.2	13	30.2	10	23.3	3	7.0	1	2.3

While slightly more than half of the teachers (51.2%) believe that students mostly improve their writing skills through PTs, another 32.6% claim that the PTs always help them improve writing skills. As for reading skills, some state that PTs always (23.3%) or mostly (34.9%) help to improve their reading skills. On the other hand, 37.2% of the teachers claim that students sometimes improve their speaking skills while preparing PTs and some others (20.9%) believe this is rarely the case. Slightly more than half hold the idea that PTs rarely (30.2%) or never (20.9%) contribute to students' listening skills. Additionally, teachers' responses show that less than half of the teachers (39.5%) believe that students sometimes use different skills in integration while preparing PTs. In contrast, the majority claim that students always (46.5%) or mostly (34.9%) learn new words while preparing these tasks. A high majority also believe that students always (53.5%) or mostly (27.9%) reinforce the grammar rules learned previously while preparing their PTs. Finally, 39.5% of the teachers' hold the opinion that students mostly enjoy dealing with English while preparing PTs. While 37.2% claim that the students' self-confidence about English is always enhanced through these tasks, another 30.2% believe that this is mostly true.

Findings acquired from the document analysis show that an overwhelming majority of the tasks (93.3%) assigned allow for writing practice mostly at word and phrase level, followed by the contribution to reinforcing grammar (70.0%). On the other hand, neither listening and speaking nor reading has been emphasized in any of the 30 PTs analysed.

Discussion and Conclusion

Results show that the intended goals of PTs in the schools which were included in this study were generally perceived as moderately achieved, which suggests the existence of some learning gains as well as

some problems in this framework. PTs have been a useful practice as evidenced by the reported benefits ranging from the aspects of language, for example, vocabulary improvement and grammar reinforcement to some affective aspects of language learning, such as increased motivation and improved confidence. This result corroborates with the goals of alternative assessment: to improve learners' self-esteem and also enhance motivation and learner involvement (Kohonen, 1997). The problems experienced during these learning/accessing practices appear to stem from the mismatch between what is suggested by the MoNE concerning the PTs and what actually occurs in the young language-learner classrooms.

The findings concerning the PTs questionnaire characteristics and the document analysis show different pictures. The participant teachers claim that the PTs that they assign mostly accord with the features proposed by the MoNE. However, the document analysis reveals that the tasks assigned did not have as much potential to improve cognitive and affective skills as they did psychomotor skills. Developing psychomotor skills appropriate to the age of learners did not go beyond drawing and colouring. While consideration of affective skills seems to be lacking, requiring students to demonstrate lower order thinking skills partly supported cognitive skills. Similarly, the assignment of tasks to make illustrations and decorations allowed room for creativity. In addition, Dietel, Herman, and Knuth (1991) stress that alternative assessment methods should encourage the use of higher-level thinking and/or problem solving skills. Tsagari (2004) agrees, stating that when participating in alternative assessment, learners should engage in the higher-order thinking skills of synthesis and analysis by using the recently acquired knowledge. However, this result does not take place using the PTs under investigation in this study.

The findings also reveal a missing focus on the integration of the four language skills as proposed by the MoNE. Such integration seems to be impossible given the evidence from the document analysis and teachers' views about the contribution of PTs to language learning, which indicates that listening, reading and speaking skills have not been given the needed attention. The ultimate focus in the PTs observed appears to be upon practice in grammar, vocabulary and writing. However, language proficiency is not only the knowledge of structures or vocabulary, but also the use of all language skills effectively (Saricoban and Kuntas, 2010). According to McKay (2006) "effective language assessment builds up children's abilities to use language in the full meaning of the term" (p. 45) and assessment tasks "are concerned with ascertaining young learners' ability to use the language needed to reflect the language use activities in which children engage within a successful language learning environment" (p.47).

The findings demonstrate a mismatch between what MoNE posited and the way teachers implement the PTs. While the MoNE states that these tasks should be done in class under the teacher's supervision, the findings reveal that this is rarely the case because of large classes. The finding relating to the parents' doing the tasks instead of the learners might be attributed to inadequate teacher support during the process for guidance at different levels of preparing these tasks is essential. Research conducted by Bruner with North American parents proves that the aid of adult cognition or a more knowledgeable peer known as scaffolding helps them to get interested in the task, simplifies tasks by breaking them down into smaller steps, keeps children on tasks by reminding them of the goal, pointed out what was important or keeps children from becoming too frustrated, and models the task, including different ways to do the task (Cameron, 2001). Furthermore, strong emphasis is put on the recommendation by the MoNE that PTs given to students should be on different topics and at different times, in consideration with individual students' readiness for development in learning. Yet, the findings indicate that PTs had been assigned to everyone at the same time, suggesting that individual differences and interests have not been taken into account in the process.

The evaluation of the PTs detects another mismatch between what is suggested in the MoNE regulations and what actually has taken place in the schools. Furthermore, evidence acquired shows that as opposed to what is suggested by the MoNE, instead of observing individual differences in performance, teachers have made comparisons among students while evaluating the PTs. This approach to assessment "fails to take into account small individual progress and achievement….comparisons among children are discouraged because individual progress is in focus" (Pinter, 2009, p. 133). Moreover, McKay (2006, p.99) warns that "performance assessment involves teachers and assessors making decisions on performance by checking performance against criteria, rather than by comparing students' performance against the average performance of all learners." Making comparisons can be eliminated through the use of rubrics to evaluate

the tasks. However, the findings from the questionnaires show that only half of the teachers use rubrics although the MoNE encourages them to do so. The other half relies on their experience to evaluate the PTs.

However, the findings provided above do not mean that teachers are to blame for the mismatch. Teachers often receive inadequate preparation in the fundamentals of educational assessment (Cizek, 2000). As the participant teachers had no training on the nature and application of PTs, expecting them to exhibit more effective behaviours with regard to this specific method of alternative assessment is unrealistic. Thus, the findings of this study appear to endorse the need for teacher training geared to equip teachers with special skills required to effectively employ alternative methods of assessment (Clark and Gipps, 2000) both at pre- and in-service level. The implication is that such training should give the teachers the opportunity to enhance their knowledge about preparing alternative assessment tasks, which value both effort and achievement of learners and contributes to their language-learning process. In addition, necessary provision should be made in these training sessions for the teachers to acquire the skills to design rubrics with task specific criteria to enhance and evaluate student learning in relation to intended learning objectives.

In addition, rarely is it the case that teachers critically discuss and reflect on the assessment questions or tasks with colleagues (Black and Wiliam, 1998 cited in Tsagari, 2004). One other implication of this study is that the authorities should encourage cooperation among teachers in schools and provide them with more opportunities to develop criteria for the design and evaluation of alternative assessment tasks. This can be done through organising regular meetings framed as staff development days on which the teachers can discuss and negotiate how different methods of alternative assessment should be implemented in the classroom. These meeting should also encourage the teachers to exchange materials that exemplify various tasks and evaluation criteria. Only then can the mismatch between the ideals of MoNE concerning assessment reform and transforming these ideals into practice in the classrooms be minimised.

A further implication of this study is that through regular meetings with the teachers and school administration, parents should be well-informed about the importance of PTs in the cognitive, affective, and psycho-motor development of their children. In these meetings, the parents should also be informed about the extent of their involvement in and the amount of support that they are expected to give to their children's process of preparing the PTs.

This study has some limitations. The study examined the PTs as part of alternative assessment in young language-learner classrooms in Turkey, so the results cannot be generalized to other settings. Therefore, further studies in different settings with a larger number of participants and sample PTs for analysis, accompanied by classroom observations, are necessary. Future studies should also include the students as participants to investigate their opinions regarding the characteristics, implementation, evaluation of PTs as well as their potential role in improving their language skills. In conclusion, the outcome of research, such as the one reported in this study, can lead future interested researchers in the area to carry out empirical research in the aspects of alternative assessment and to determine how it fits into the complex cycle of teaching and learning.

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