## University students' attitudes towards alternative assessment in FLT

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**Abstract:** This paper describes a small-scale study of newly enrolled university students regarding their views of nontraditional strategies of assessment in foreign language teaching. Taking into account the importance of attitudes to student motivation for learning, as well as contemporary education reform issues related to assessment, the research investigates students' attitudes towards alternative assessment methods, primarily peer, self and portfolio assessment, following a one semester, undergraduate course at University of Banjaluka. Attitudes of students from 3 different faculties - Philology, Philosophy, and Technology, are explored and compared.

The findings reveal that majority of students endorse alternative assessment techniques in FLT, and suggest their implementation in other subjects. This research confirms numerous benefits of alternative assessment application at university level, supporting beliefs of other researchers that using alternative assessment techniques to assess student learning can lead to increased self reflection, higher cognitive skills development, improved intrinsic motivation, creativity, communication, cooperation, integration of language skills and enhanced overall student performance.

In conclusion, benefits for students, teachers and institutions have been summarized, and the use of alternative assessment recommended as an effective supplement, if not replacement, to traditional tests and exams, which will suit the needs of individual students by paying more respect to their personal, linguistic and sociocultural diversity.

**Keywords**: alternative assessment, attitudes, FLT, peer assessment, portfolio, university students

### Introduction

During the last decades of XX and the first decade of the XXI century assessment has become a state-of-the-art topic for teachers, educators, researchers. It has been frequently mentioned in professional publications, workshops, conferences, in-service training, and university courses. The term "assessment" is used in different contexts and means different things to different people. It is perhaps most often understood as testing and grading: scoring quizzes and exams and assigning course grades to students, as a way of informing them about how well they did in the courses. An emerging vision of assessment is that of a dynamic process that continuously yields information about how well they are doing, i.e. student progress toward the achievement of learning goals. This vision of assessment acknowledges that when the information gathered is consistent with learning goals and is used appropriately to inform instruction, it can enhance student learning as well as document it. Rather than being an activity separate from instruction, assessment is growingly being viewed as an integral part of teaching and learning, and not just the culmination of instruction. The current reform movement in educational assessment encourages teachers to think about assessment more broadly than "testing" and using test results to assign grades and rank students.

Alternative assessment is another notion which may imply different things, but most often denotes forms which differ from conventional assessment methods such as tests and exam essay questions. It is compatible with constructivist ideas in that it favours integration of assessment, teaching and learning; the involvement of students as active and informed participants; assessment tasks which are authentic, meaningful and engaging; assessments which mirror realistic contexts, in contrast with the artificial time constraints and limited access to support available in conventional exams; focus on both the process and products of learning; and moves away from single test or exam scores towards a descriptive assessment based on a range of abilities and outcomes (Sambell, McDowell & Brown, 1997). Many alternative assessment techniques have been developed and implemented into educational practice, mainly as a result of new insights into student learning, and as a counterpart to standardized tests, e.g. multiple choice tests and the like. These alternative techniques often refer to peer assessment, self assessment and portfolio assessment, sometimes also to authentic and performance assessment.

Peer assessment (PA) is also a term that may mean many things. A range of situations are encompassed by the term - assessment by other students, self assessment (of oral presentations/viva, of written work, assignments, tests, for marks, for formative/feedback purposes, for participation in group work/derive individual marks on group projects, mark one-on-one, whole class or group marks an individual's performance), peer group assessment or collaborative assessment. PA is found to increase student–student and student–teacher interactions, and can be used to increase learner's understanding of other students' ideas during the learning experience (Falchikov,1995; Sluijsmans et al.,1999). It can increase learners' understanding in the cognitive and metacognitive domains, and develop social and transferable skills (Topping,1998).

Self assessment is nothing new, but in educational context it represents an alternative technique, a way of increasing the role and involvement of students as active participants in making judgements about their own learning (Boud, 1995). It is mostly used for formative assessment in order to foster reflection on one's own learning processes and results (Sluijsmans et al, 1999). If carefully planned and encouraged it can be a springboard for discussion - a comparison between teacher and student self assessed mark can reveal agreement or disagreement in over or underscoring and provide space for dialogue and further student improvement.

Portfolio assessment is an ongoing process involving the student and teacher in selecting samples of student work for inclusion in a collection, the main purpose of which is to show the student's progress. It demonstrates and evidences that students have, or have not, mastered a set of learning objectives during a longer time period. More than folders containing students' homework, they are personalized, longitudinal representations of students' work and efforts. Above all, they are excellent assessment and self-reflective tools. Through selecting optional papers to include in their portfolios students discover their strengths and weaknesses, they see where they are for themselves and increase their metacognitive awareness.

In the new era of assessment, students are supposed to be active, reflective learners, regulating their own learning processes largely on their own and by their individual choices. This then also implies that they should be active assessors, given that learning is inseparable from assessment. Taking into account the well-proven importance of attitudes to student motivation for learning, it could be assumed that their attitudes to assessment, an integral part of learning, are salient issues for all educators and education researchers.

### **Problem Statement**

Academic assessment of students serves two main purposes, formative and summative. The former intends to improve the quality of learning and serves students' learning needs, and the latter is needed for accreditation of knowledge or performance and serves the needs of the society to evaluate the end-result of schooling (Boud, 1990). Boud was one of many who argued that the need for the formative assessment is usually neglected, and alternative assessments should be developed in order to improve student learning. And indeed, contemporary education reforms put forward new rules related to assessment, that insist on constant taking account of students' progress throughout the academic year, enforcing two or more mid-term tests, attendance and participation scores, homework and different activities scores and other kinds of scores. However, in practice, it all too often appears that the whole assessment process boils down to just that - continuous scoring. Both students and teachers seem to endlessly count points, the side effect often being an absurd, detrimental preoccupation with grades and scores, rather than progress and learning. Frequent quizzes and tests throughout the academic year may represent a kind of formative, as well as summative, comment on students' learning and progress, but it does not necessarily need to be that way. If teachers are pressured to complete demanding teaching materials planned by the syllabus and curriculum, prepare, administer, score and correct tests all by themselves all the time, it might be logical to assume that formative assessment and differentiated instruction simply stand in the way. Furthermore, if we take into account big numbers of students per one teacher, it becomes obvious that finding time for formative assessment must be a big issue. Tests are usually administered as planned, but do they guarantee benefits with regard to students' learning and progress? Many studies have shown that tests and grades themselves actually do not significantly improve learning or ensure students' progress (Black and William, 1998).

In recent years of education reform implementation at Banjaluka University (BLU) there has been a continuing overreliance on traditional tests and exams. Assessment practices are still most often limited to pen and paper tests and exams, use of traditional assessment is dominant and little attention is given to alternative assessment. These practices might partly be causes of frequently unsatisfying situation in our academic context. On one hand, there are time and again frustrated students complaining about everlasting tests and exams, workload, low grades, boredom. On the other, there are recurrently frustrated teachers

complaining about countless tests and exams, workload, low students' performance, administrative requirements.

The key question that this research is concerned with, the question for both students and teachers to ask, is: Can alternative assessment application contribute to lessening earlier mentioned burden, boredom and bureaucracy? Given that students are indisputably at the centre of teaching and learning it seemed essential to enquire about their attitudes to alternative assessment first. In some other study, it will be more than relevant to examine teachers' attitudes to alternative assessment as well, and compare the two.

The **purpose** of this study is to identify, describe and compare undergraduate students' attitudes regarding alternative assessment at BLU. Attitudes of students from 3 different faculties have been explored and compared - Faculty of Philosophy, students of English language and literature, Faculty of Philosophy, students of Primary Teacher and Preschool Teacher Education, and Faculty of Technology, students of Graphic and Textile Technology and Design. **Research questions** to start with were:

What are the attitudes of undergraduates students to alternative and traditional assessment methods? What are the attitudes of undergraduates at Faculty of Philosophy to alternative assessment methods? What are the attitudes of undergraduates at Faculty of Philosophy to alternative assessment methods? What are the attitudes of undergraduates at Faculty of Technology to alternative assessment methods? Are there any differences between the attitudes of students from different faculties?

#### Research design

#### Sample

The study was carried out after the first semester of the 2010-2011 academic year, in February 2011, with the participation of 122 newly enrolled students at BLU. Students come from 3 Faculties and 5 Departments - Faculty of Philosophy, Department of English language and literature (66), Faculty of Philosophy, Departments of Primary Teacher Education and Preschool Teacher Education (20), and Faculty of Technology, Departments of Graphic Technology and Textile Technology and Design (36). In the winter term 2010/2011 these students were involved in a range of both traditional and alternative assessment techniques in their English classes. 337

The sample is convenient and not representative of the entire BLU student population. Majority of the students were female, born in Bosnia-Hercegovina and age between 18 and 23. Level of proficiency in English was ranging from A1-C1.

## **Method and instrument**

The study employed a qualitative approach, and a post-course and post-exam questionnaire was used as a data collection instrument. Students' general perceptions of different assessment practices and formats, traditional and alternative, formal and informal, assessment with and without grades, were then analysed and compared. The draft questionnaire had been pretested with fourth year students of English, and also in different forms of midterm and end-of-term self-reflective essays.

The questionnaire *University students' attitudes to assessment in FLT (EGP)* (Appendix1) was given to students of English, while the questionnaire *University students' attitudes to assessment in FLT (ESP)* (Appendix2) was given to students of Primary and Preschool Teacher Education and students of Technology. The questionnaires are the same, open-ended in nature, consisting of 10 questions related to formal and informal, traditional and alternative, forms of assessment the students participated in during the winter term 2010/2011, including final exams in February 2011. The only difference is in question nine, the table providing scaffolding for assessment activities and the only closed-ended question asking for just one answer, where the number of assessment activities is lower for the students of English for Specific Purposes than for the students of English, who do English for General Purposes.

Content analysis and constant comparison method were used for interpreting qualitative data.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>337</sup> This was done to a slightly less extent at Faculties of Philosophy and Technology, not because these students learn English for specific purposes but because the number of classes of English per week is much lower. Students at Faculty of Philology have 8 classes of English weekly (four classes for integrated skills and four for translations L1-L2 and L2-L1) whereas students at the other two faculties have only two classes per week.

## Data collection and procedure

Students were given questionnaires to fill in and clearly explained they were to be used solely for research purposes, their anonymity secured. They were asked to be honest and given as much time as they needed to complete the questionnaire. The language to be used was English, but it was made clear to the students that the interest was in their thoughts and feelings, not at all in their language proficiency. Moreover, they were offered to answer the questions using their mother tongue, if they found it easier.

In the analysis process all the responses were transcribed into a Microsoft Word file, and afterwards analysed in terms of themes related to the study aims.

There are several limitations to this study that have to be highlighted in order to avoid overgeneralisations and misinterpretations of results. First, due to time concerns the study was confined to 1st year students only, and only to students who came to class the day the questionnaire was delivered. Second, due to the open-ended nature of the questionnaire on several occasions it was unclear what students exactly meant, e.g. oral or written peer-assessment, speaking exam or speaking activity class, translation from L1-L2 or L2-L1. Therefore, the results should be interpreted with care and only as an initial insight into views of assessment of the students who participated in the sample. Further studies with the same and broader sample are intended to be performed in the future in order to obtain a more reliable and extensive picture.

## Results - analysis and discussion

On the whole, students seemed very interested in discussing their views of assessment. They answered all questions, often providing detailed reasons for their choices and offering suggestions. There were only seven cases, all in Q9, when an answer was missing. Reasons for preferring some assessment methods to others mostly fall into categories of affect and motivation, language learning and learning in general. Substantial generalizations are impossible since great variability of answers was shown throughout, proving considerable individual differences, but some insight is offered based on frequencies of students' answers, analysed in categories determined by the questions in the questionnaire.

**Personal preferences of assessment activity.** In the first two questions, students expressed their personal assessment favourites, individual **likes and dislikes**, and gave reasons for them. The form of assessment that received the greatest frequency for both EGP (38%) and ESP students (40%) was an alternative form - portfolio. The most frequently mentioned reasons for it being the favourite referred to having enough time for learning, fostering creativity, interesting topics, handiness ('everything in one place'). Findings show that students generally prefer home assignments to timed exam assignments. It is not surprising, taking into consideration exam anxiety and stress. However, there were also students who expressed doubts to reliability of assessing home assignments due to greater possibility of cheating – copying essays from Internet or friends, or using *Google translate*. A third of ESP students disliked traditional assessment form *test*, mostly because they found it boring and stressful.

**Difficulty.** Q3 and Q4 investigated students' opinion of the **difficulty** of assessment practices. The results indicate that some forms are more difficult for individual students than others but generally only small number of students found any of the assessment activities either too hard or too easy. This may imply that the level of difficulty was appropriate for most students. Portfolio was mentioned as the easiest by more than a third of the sample.

**Usefulness.** Next set of questions, Q5 and Q6, examined students' opinion of **usefulness** of assessment practices. ESP students frequently mentioned *portfolio* and *oral exam*, while EGP students showed a great diversity here by regarding very different assessment forms as useful for them. The agreement in the most frequent answers was not higher than 20%. Generally, they found traditional forms, like dictation, essay writing or translation tests, useful. However, peer assessment was also marked as useful by 18% of students.

**Potential for overall language competence assessment.** Q7 asked which assessment activities they feel show best their competence in English and why. The most frequent answer was *oral assessment* (40%), and then writing papers' assessment. Dictations and translations came after speaking and writing, and portfolio and peer assessment were mentioned by only 10 percent of the sample. In ESP group oral exam as best method of showing their competence was mentioned by 52% of the students, and 33% mentioned portfolio.

**Potential for extensive holistic assessment of students – learner screening.** Q8 asked which assessment activities students feel show the teachers what type of student they really are. Similar to the previous question answers, the most frequent answer was *oral exam* – about 40%. This suggests that students value oral communication more highly than written. ESP students mentioned *portfolio* (34%) more often than EGP students (17%) as revealing them as students.

Q9 required from the students to evaluate more precisely each assessment activity undertaken throughout the course and exam, deciding on only one word that best describes each. Results are shown in the tables 1 and 2:

Table1: Students' evaluation of traditional and alternative assessment forms (EGP – English Language and Literature)

FACULTY	FACULTY OF PHILOLOGY												
Assessment Form/Activit	Dict Class	Dict Test	Peer assess o	Peer ass Written	Portfolio activities	Self assessme	Writing at ho Lett	Essays for speak	Translation L2 test	Translation LI test	Timed ex	Oral xamV	Oral examT
Assessment Type/mode	A	T	A	A	A	A	A	A	T	Т	T	T	T
Excellent	5	4	4	4	8	11	4	5	10	6	4	3	12
Interesting	4	5	<u>18</u>	9	<u>18</u>	<u>13</u>	9	<u>15</u>	4	2	<u>19</u>	<u>19</u>	<u>15</u>
Boring	1	2	7	7	5	3	8	14	3	3	4	1	2
Fun	4	0	9	9	12	11	5	6	4	3	3	4	8
Too easy	2	1	0	1	2	0	3	1	1	0	6	3	0
Too hard	3	7	2	2	0	2	2	1	6	15	4	5	5
Helpful	<del>23</del>	10	13	10	9	9	12	14	6	5	8	8	3
Important	7	<mark>23</mark>	2	0	0	6	9	1	<mark>22</mark>	<del>23</del>	11	11	10
Useful	16	10	9	<u>14</u>	6	6	<u>13</u>	6	10	6	4	5	1
Useless	0	1	0	10	3	2	0	3	0	2	1	0	2
Worthless	1	0	1	0	2	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	2
Other plea	0	3	1	0	1	2	0	0	0	1	1	7	6
state		Good stresfi NA	(Little hard)		(good)	(Little hard) NA				(stress ful)	(good	stres 5 NA 2	stres 5 NA 1
Number responses N	66	65	66	66	66	65	66	66	66	66	66	64	65

 $Table 2: \ Students'\ evaluation\ of\ traditional\ and\ alternative\ assessment\ forms\ (ESP\ -\ Technology \& Teacher\ Education)$ 

FACULTY OI	F TECH	NOLOGY and FA	ACULTY OF PI	HILOSOPHY	(TEACHER EI	OUCATION)	
Assessment form/activity	Peer assess oral	Peer ass Written	e Portfolio activities	Writing home	Test -gramma	Oral examV	Oral examT
Assess type	A	A	A	A	T	T	T
Excellent	5	3	10	3	7	10	10
Interesting	9	12	12	1		6	8
Boring	1	4	4	6	3		1

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Fun	12	3	4	7			2
Too easy		1		2			
Too hard	4	3	1		10	3	6
Helpful	6	10	11	14	4	6	4
Important	6	7	6	10	22	17	16
Useful	12	9	5	7	7	12	9
Useless	1	3	2	4	3		
Worthless Other pleas	!	1	1	2		//	
N	56	56	56	56	56	54	56

Generally speaking, students in the sample found alternative assessment either *interesting* and *fun*, or *useful* and *helpful*, whereas traditional assessment mainly *important*. It is obvious from the table that traditional assessment forms, written exams were dominantly qualified as *important*, while less traditional forms like peer-assessment, portfolio and self assessment were most frequently described as *interesting*. It is slightly surprising to note that, contrary to other parts of formal traditional written exam like translations and dictation, students of English found oral exam *interesting*, even *excellent*, more frequently than important. Especially surprising is to see that timed essay, another traditional form of assessment, was mostly qualified as interesting, rather than important.

It is important to note that although majority of students found peer assessment useful and helpful, as well as interesting and fun, there were also almost 20 percent of those who thought written peer assessment was useless. This form of assessment was mainly new to the students, and probably the most demanding of their cognitive and linguistic abilities. The reasons they mentioned to explain their negative attitude to this kind of assessment mainly referred to their incompetence, lack of expertise in language assessment, or sheer insincerity to peers.

In Q10 students were asked which form of assessment was entirely new to them. Almost half of the students said it was *peer assessment*, and immediately after that *portfolio* and *essays for the native speaker*. Findings suggest that majority of students at BLU are not familiar with alternative assessment methods when they start employing them. Only very few say their high school teachers used peer correction, peer comments or portfolio. Instead, the entire assessment process throughout their preuniversity education, i.e. elementary and high school, seems to be heavily teacher dependent.

It was clear from the questionnaire that a great number of students of English expressed positive attitudes to different assessment practices. When asked to say which assessment activities are the least useful, more than a third of students in the sample answered that everything is useful. They show greater awareness of the importance of various kinds of language assessment techniques than students from the other two faculties in the study, especially Faculty of Technology. This may be explained by their better understanding of complex nature of language as such, as well as of language learning and assessment.

It was interesting to note that, on the whole, students often did not make a clear distinction between some assessment and learning activity. They commented portfolio as almost solely a learning activity. This can further imply that they do not differentiate between the two. Such finding further indicates that some students are not aware of certain assessment techniques, thus proving the fact that learning and assessment are indeed, in practice, frequently inseparable.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The main conclusions that can be drawn from the study are that there is no major agreement among students on the best assessment technique that fits all and that students are not indifferent to assessment methods but have strong attitudes towards the ways their knowledge, and more particularly their language competence, is assessed.

This study has also proved that students' perceptions of alternative assessment are to some extent problematic. Students were sometimes contradictory in their attitudes in that despite very positive personal preferences and opinions of alternative assessment activities they frequently viewed traditional, teacher governed, assessment as a more important, valid and reliable indicator of their competence. This indicates a strong social basis of attitudes in foreign language learning and the importance of educational strategies aimed at developing appropriate attitudes toward assessment in general.

In the light of the above conclusions it may be generally recommended that alternative assessment strategies should be given more space in language classrooms, but must be very carefully organized, explained to students and methodically monitored. Students need to be trained and given time to get accustomed to the novelties in assessment. After that, alternative techniques could progressively be given more credit in the overall assessment of students. The development of positive attitudes toward the innovative assessment and learning activities is an important step toward developing more balanced assessment designs in higher education.

Implications for theory are mainly in the confirmed finding that the questions which assessment method is the best and which instruments best reflect student achievement and competence remain unresolved. The purpose of this research was not to establish which method is the best, but to explore students' attitudes towards different assessment practices and obtain deeper insight into experience of assessment from the students' perspectives .

A practical recommendation to teachers would be to employ various methods and also offer students choices regarding assessment, after which teachers could research which assessment their students preferred to engage in. There is no, and probably never will be, one best method for assessing students' knowledge. It is yet another sound reason why many different assessment methods should be employed, including various alternative assessment techniques. It is sensible to vary the weight of alternative assessment marks against traditional assessment marks in the final grade according to context. In the initial stages, when students are not used to the alternatives, it is more feasible to give them less importance in the final mark than after a semester or two of using alternatives as ways of assessment. Some balance between the two ought to be found so that a profile of students' abilities can be reliably assessed, and respect paid to individual personal, linguistic and sociocultural differences.

Recommendations for further study in the area would include a larger and a more diverse population during a longer research period. In future research, attitudes by male and female students could be compared, as well as different age groups and students at different years of study. Teachers' and administrators' attitudes to assessment should also be explored, particularly their readiness to employ and experiment with alternatives to the canon.

All in all, it is not to be forgotten that changes for better or for worse take time to implement, and so does alternative assessment. Teachers need to bear in mind that educating is greatly about raising awareness, broadening horizons, fostering critical and creative thinking, developing whole persons. Some students simply like to be spoon fed. Some teachers enjoy it too. That way is easier for both. However, students need to learn how to feed themselves and they will not learn it unless someone puts a plate of food and a spoon in front of them. What follows may not be pleasing or immediately successful, but is there another way to learn how to eat? Students need to learn the material, but also to make decisions about what they need to know, how they will acquire that knowledge and whether they succeeded in it. If students are to become autonomous learners, better-equipped for life-long learning and improvement, they ought to take greater responsibility for both learning and assessment.

It ought to be reminded that although teachers should be required to design various assessment tasks that efficiently and continuously encourage students' learning and autonomy, the implementation of this policy needs to suggest an optimistic future for teachers, as well as students. It has to be taken into consideration that, while universities have been under increasing pressure to improve the quality of both the teaching and learning of their students, they have also faced diminishing funding, increasing student numbers and fulfilling complicated, time-consuming administrative requirements. Heavy workloads of teachers resulting from these factors unquestionably have implications for assessment methods.

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## **APPENDIX 1**

Sample questionnaire form for EGP students

#### University students' attitudes to assessment in FLT (EGP)

Please answer <u>honestly</u> the following questions related to your experience with <u>Modern English 1</u> course:

- 1 Which assessment activities of the Modern English 1 course do you <u>like</u> the most? Please say why.
- 2 Which assessment activities do you dislike the most? Why?
- 3 Which assessment activities do you think are the <u>hardest</u>? Why?

- 4 Which assessment activities do you think are the easiest? Why?
- 5 Which assessment activities do you think are the most useful? Why?
- 6 Which assessment activities do you think are the least useful? Why?
- 7 Which assessment activities do you feel show best your competence in English? Why?
- 8 Which assessment activities do you feel show the teachers what type of student you really are? Why?

9 Please rate different assessment activities you engaged in using one word that best describes it:

9 I icasc <u>rate</u>	9 Please <u>rate</u> different assessment activities you engaged in using <u>one</u> word that best describes it:												
	Dictation C	Dictation T	Peer ass	Peer ass Written	Portfolio activities	Self assessm	Writing home Lett	Essays for speaker	Translation L1-L2 test	Translation L2-L1 test	Timed ex	Oral examV	Oral examT
Excellent													
Interesting													
Boring													
Fun													
Too easy													
Too hard													
Helpful													
Important													
Useful													
Useless													
Worthless													
Other: pleastate													

10 Which assessment activities were totally new to you and how did you feel about them?

### APPENDIX 2

Sample questionnaire form for ESP students

## University students' attitudes to assessment in FLT (ESP)

## Please answer honestly the following questions related to your experience with English 1 course:

- 1 Which assessment activities of the English 1 course do you like the most? Please say why.
- 2 Which assessment activities do you dislike the most? Why?
- 3 Which assessment activities do you think are the hardest? Why?
- 4 Which assessment activities do you think are the easiest? Why?
- 5 Which assessment activities do you think are the most useful? Why?
- 6 Which assessment activities do you think are the least useful? Why?
- 7 Which assessment activities do you feel show best your competence in English? Why?
- 8 Which assessment activities do you feel show the teachers what type of student you really are? Why?
- 9 Please rate different assessment activities you engaged in using one word that best describes it:

	Peer ass	Peer ass Written	Portfolio activities	Writing	Test -Gr Voc	Oral exam	Oral exam'
Excellent							
Interesting							
Boring							
Fun							
Too easy							
Too hard							

Helpful				
Important				
Useful				
Useless				
Worthless				
Other: please sto				

10 Which assessment activities were <u>totally new</u> to you and how did you feel about them?

If you have any <u>additional comments</u> please write overleaf. Thank you