

1. INTRODUCTION TO LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT

Luis Alberto Lázaro
Universidad de Alcalá

1.1. Key issues

Assessment is very often regarded negatively by students and teachers alike. Many students feel confusion and anxiety when they are going to be assessed. Some teachers share the very same feelings and are ill at ease when they have to plan and «execute» their assessment programme. Why is this so?



Activity 1

Write two reasons why assessment is generally seen as something negative by students. Then, say whether you also feel uncomfortable with this task and why.

Students:

- 1.
- 2.

Teacher: Yes / No

Because ...

Possible answers:

a) Students do not like assessment when teachers use it as a weapon to repress them, to show who has the power and authority when there are discipline problems.

b) The learning/teaching process and assessment are conceived as two separate activities:

i) Tests take place at the end of the term, when learning has finished, and not during the learning process.

ii) Assessment focusses on only some of the activities done in the classroom. Grammar, writing, reading comprehension and vocabulary is, for instance, what counts in tests, whereas oral communicative activities have taken up much of the time in the course.

iii) Assessment usually implies formal tests given on special occasions rather than collecting information about the students' performance during ordinary classroom activities.

iv) Assessment is seen as a product. This means that teachers have a rigid and theoretical concept of the syllabus, assessing students with the sole intention of checking how they have achieved those unchangeable objectives set at the beginning of the course and focussing their attention on results (=the product). The learning/teaching process is not taken into account.

c) Norm-referenced assessment. This type of assessment is designed to measure how the performance of a student compares with the performance of the rest of the group whose results are given as the norm. Students, then pass or fail according to their position in this comparative list.

d) Teachers use traps to reveal what learners do not know, rather than giving them an opportunity to show what they have learnt.

e) Learners are not involved in the assessment process; they have the feeling that assessment is something that comes *against* them and they act simply as victims of an unfair war.

f) Teachers also find problems, such as too many students to assess, too little time to do it, insufficient materials or technical aids, the pressure of a public examination, etc.

How could we try to eradicate all these negative factors? Some suggestions are put forward in the following paragraphs.

1.2. Why do we assess?

Although most teachers now agree that assessment is a vital part of the language learning and teaching process, we often see that there is not complete unanimity on the reasons why we assess our students' language. In fact, the word «assessment» might have different meanings and connotations in different academic situations. To some teachers it could mean the results of various formal exams or tests the students have taken at different moments of the course; others might see assessment as an institutional requirement for student promotion; and for those who teach C.O.U. or the last year of high school, it could simply be a way of preparing students for an external examination.



Activity 2

Why do we assess? Choose the three most important purposes which apply to your courses.

1. Giving each student a course mark.
2. Measuring what students have learnt.
3. Motivating students and encouraging them to take their learning seriously.
4. Evaluating the syllabus.
5. Identifying specific problems to plan remedial activities.
6. Checking students' progress.
7. Getting students ready for an external examination.
8. Checking my own efficiency as a teacher.
9. Keeping the class under control, especially when I have discipline problems.
10. Giving my students information about their progress.
11. Identifying the level of my students.
12. Other:

Having analysed all the possible answers we can clearly see that the term «assessment» is rather vague and difficult to limit. In fact, all the purposes mentioned above are valid, except perhaps the one which refers to keeping the class under control. It is not a good idea to use assessment as a weapon to control discipline or show authority. There are other more acceptable and efficient ways of dealing with classroom management. Good assessment should be, as far as possible, **non-threatening** to students.

To sum up, we could say that assessment comprises three basic purposes:

a) Checking the students' progress: It should give teachers feedback on their students' performance at different stages of the course.

- **Initial assessment** is done at the beginning of the course and tries to identify the students' particular strengths and weaknesses.
- **Formative assessment** is done throughout the course in order to check the students' progress.
- **Summative assessment** is designed to find out what students can and can not do at the end of the course.

b) Reinforcing the students' learning: It should also be a way of giving students regular feedback so that they are aware of their excellence or their failures. This has very important implications for the students:

- Self-control
- Learning from errors
- Taking their learning seriously

c) Evaluating the teaching/learning process: It should give teachers basic information about how successful the teaching is, so that they can see whether

- the approach is correct,
- the aims of the course are appropriate,
- the materials used are good,
- the assessment itself is done properly.

Having this information, teachers can make the necessary changes before it is too late and plan remedial work for those areas of difficulty encountered by the class.

1.3. What do we assess?

To answer this question we have to look at our syllabus and read the main objectives again. Each type of class might have its own assessment objectives, but the following interrelated areas are usually taken into account:

a) Linguistic skills:

- Pronunciation
- Vocabulary
- Grammar
- Spelling
- Rules of discourse

b) Communicative skills:

- Listening
- Speaking
- Reading
- Writing

What to assess implies not only the degree of accuracy shown in these aspects of language, but also the efficiency of performance. This includes:

- Fluency: facility of task performance.
- Appropriacy: the right language for each particular situation.
- Coherence: logical development of content.
- Range: a wide choice of structures and lexis available.

Another important decision we have to take is what the value of each area is, that is to say, how much emphasis we are going to place on speaking, grammar, or reading comprehension.



Activity 3

*What do you assess in your English courses and in what proportion?
Tick the skills you assess and write the percentage.*

	Skills	%
Pronunciation		
Vocabulary		
Grammar		
Spelling		
Rules of discourse		
Listening		
Speaking		
Reading		
Writing		
Other		

In every school we find different groups of students whose interests and necessities are extremely diverse. Some are mainly keen on speaking the language, others may want to understand their favourite pop singers. But we should comply with the objectives set by the education authorities which emphasize the importance of the communicative strategies, and the spoken word in particular. This does not mean that teachers can not satisfy students' interests when planning and assessing their objectives. On the contrary, students could always have the possibility to choose the activity they prefer from a selection of assessment tasks; after having learnt how to write different types of texts (personal and business letters, descriptive and narrative paragraphs, etc.) students could be given several options when assessing their writing skills, so that they can choose the activity they are interested in.

Variety of tasks and activities which assess all linguistic and communicative skills is also essential to cope with this question of diversity. Not all students learn in the same way or have the same abilities

—some are good at listening, others at reading—, therefore assessment should be carried out in such a varied way as to comprise all possible aptitudes and capacities.

Instead of the «assessment-as-a-product» mentioned as a negative element in the Introduction, we could take a more practical approach to the syllabus so that the course objectives are conceived as a «hypothesis» that can be checked and changed according to the progress of the group. We focus our attention on the process, rather than on the results, taking into account the context of our teaching, and adapting our syllabus to the real needs of our students.

Furthermore, as opposed to norm-referenced assessment, what is usually referred to as «criterion-referenced assessment» is often thought to be more appropriate. In this approach, a student's score is not interpreted with reference to the scores of other students, but to an agreed criterion score. Teachers first establish what skills and proficiencies identified in the course objectives the learners should attain to determine the pass score, and then they measure the students' performance according to this particular standard.

1.4. When do we assess?

It is essential to plan a coherent programme of assessment tasks for every course. Here we have to decide not only when and how often we are going to assess, but to whom, what and how each time.

To avoid the traumatic divorce between assessment and the learning/teaching process we should design a method for continuous and systematic collection of data about our students' performance which is carried out throughout the whole course and not only at the end of specific periods. This would give the necessary feedback to both the learner and the teacher before it is too late to solve the problems. There is no need to insist on this «continuous assessment», a concept that everyone has surely heard about in several seminars and also read in the current legislation, but it is important to remember that it should not be simply understood as a series of formal tests given continuously during a term. This is clearly a false view of «evaluación continua», since another basic element is missing: this continuous assessment should include informal activities done in the ordinary lesson and not only under formal exam conditions. A practical and reasonable

combination of formal and informal assessment carried out in a continuous and systematic way is one of the keys to good assessment.



Activity 4

Think about your assessment programme and decide which of the items you assess formally, informally, or both, and how often you will do that during a term.

Skills	Informally	Formally	How often
Pronunciation			
Vocabulary			
Grammar			
Spelling			
Rules of discourse			
Listening			
Speaking			
Reading			
Writing			
Other			

There is no single programme that can be used by all teachers in all contexts. Each teacher or group of teachers needs to find a suitable scheme for their particular situation.

1.5 How do we assess?

In order to contend with the difficulties that teachers face when they have to decide how to assess their students, it is important that they work closely together as a team. A cooperative approach makes teachers feel more confident and provides them with a variety of resources and techniques.

As we have seen, when planning assessment tasks these groups of teachers should take into account the reason why they assess, the aspects of the language they want to check and when they are going to

do it. But it is also essential that they think about the characteristics of a good assessment task if they want to measure the students' skills more accurately. Students appreciate an extra effort like this, and a better feeling towards our assessment tasks can improve class attitude and even their performance.



Activity 5

Which are the qualities of a «good» assessment task? Write down the three basic rules that you always try to follow:

- 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
-

Here are some general characteristics:

a) **Validity:** An assessment task is valid if it reflects the knowledge and skill you intend to check, if it measures what it claims to be measuring. First, these assessment tasks should be a valid reflection of objectives and classroom activities, and then, they should assess those objectives and nothing else. For instance, a listening test with written multiple-choice options may lack validity if the printed choices are so difficult to read that the exam actually measures reading comprehension as much as it does listening comprehension.

b) **Transparency:** The marking system should be clear and the learner should know this system, as well as the minimum score to pass. You can also be transparent by making sure that the format of the assessment task is well understood and students are familiar with the basic outlines of our assessment.

c) **Feasibility:** Teachers should consider ease of setting, time involved, administering and scoring. A good assessment task should provide a relatively large amount of information in a short period of time and without an inordinate amount of energy expended by the teacher and students. Ideally it should be easy to write, easy and fast to mark, and the students should be able to do it in the time you give them.

d) **Reliability:** This has to do with the consistency of the results of your assessment. A reliable assessment task is one that produces essentially the same results consistently on different occasions when the conditions of the assessment remain the same. There are different factors which affect reliability, such as the criteria used to mark the task or the conditions in which it is administered. Comparability is a complex issue, but at least some effort should be made so that in classes with the same goals, the students' evaluations are at least minimally comparable across classes and across teachers. And even within the same class, there must be a correspondence between the results of formal and informal assessment.

e) **Discrimination:** Assessment should distinguish between good, average and weak performances.

Finally, we should not forget all possibilities for self-assessment and peer-assessment. Students can be involved in the assessment process, analysing their own performance, their progress and their problems, or assessing other students during class activities. Instead of acting as victims of our assessment, they can feel more responsible and motivated if they have something to say about what, when, and how they are going to be assessed.



Activity 6

Think about the following statements and mark each one

- / if you agree
- X if you disagree
- ? if you are undecided

	/	X	?
1. It is a good idea to let students decide when they want to be assessed.			
2. Self-assessment also means that students can correct and mark a test, and the teacher has to take the results into account.			
3. Students are not able to assess their class-mates' oral skills.			
4. It helps to ask students what they have or haven't learnt some days before they sit for an exam.			
5. «I don't let my students set the marking criteria for compositions.»			
6. Only few students learn from the mistakes they have made in tests.			
7. Many students do not like being corrected and marked by other students.			
8. It is a waste of time to ask students to produce their own tests for themselves or other students.			

1.6 Bibliography

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