

Assessment activities as a method of control of foreign language knowledge

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Traditionally, language tests were designed to test the four language skills as separately as possible. For instance, an overall English language proficiency test battery might be made up of five separate skills tests: four multiple-choice tests (grammar, listening comprehension, reading comprehension and vocabulary) and a composition test.

A quick look at the skills from the point of view of channels and modes will indicate that it is not always possible, or indeed desirable, to separate the skills when doing assessment, especially classroom assessment. Each skill can be described in terms of its channel and its mode. Channel refers to the means used to communicate. The two possible channels are the written and the oral. In other words, the message is conveyed by either light waves or sound waves. The two skills involved in the written channel are reading and writing. The two skills involved in the oral channel are listening and speaking.

Mode refers to the direction of communication involved. The two possible modes are the receptive and the productive. In other words, the message is either received (receptive) or sent (productive). The two skills involved in the receptive mode are reading and listening. The two skills involved in the productive mode are writing and speaking. Notice that reading is the receptive written skill, writing is the productive written skill, listening is the receptive oral skill, and speaking is the productive oral skill.

Modes and channels help us separate the characteristics of the four skills in our minds, and such a separation is sometimes useful. The moment you start thinking about real language production or about language assessment, it becomes almost impossible to keep the skills separate. Consider that testers do when they assess reading comprehension ability. Typically, they ask the students to read a passage and answer multiple-choice questions. The students read the passage. They read the questions. Then they select the correct answers by circling it or filling in a little dot on an answer sheet. All of that is at least a little like what people experience in real-life reading, and, at least, no other language skills are involved.

Assessment activities are different from tests in that they are not easily distinguishable from other classroom activities because they are thoroughly integrated into the language teaching and learning processes. In other words, assessment activities do not stand out as different, formal threatening or interruptive. At the same time, assessment activities are different from ordinary classroom activities in that they provide a way of observing or scoring the students'

performances and giving feedback in the form of a score or other information (e.g. notes in the margin, written prose reactions, oral critiques, teacher conferences) that can enlighten the students and teachers about the effectiveness of the language learning and teaching involved.

In each of the assessment activities a great deal belongs to the feedback. But why is feedback so important in the classroom? Our guess that feedback derives its importance from the fact that it is one of the teacher's most powerful tools for shaping how students approach the learning process and for finding out what is going on in the students' minds.

Traditionally, the feedback in classroom assessment settings has come from the teacher's perspective, and you will indeed find that the teachers give feedback in many of these contributions. However, many of these contributions utilize other possible feedback perspectives, including self-assessment, peer assessment, and outsider assessment strategies. Most often, these alternative scoring perspectives are used in conjunction with the teacher's feedback or in pairs, perhaps because the contributors knew intuitively that combining two or more feedback perspectives would increase the reliability (and palatability from the student's perspectives) of the resulting information.

However, what about listening comprehension? Traditionally, testers have presented aural passages to the students via a tape recorder and asked the students to read the responses and select the correct answer. That is, the task mixes listening and reading and does so in a way that is not very similar to any real-life task. How often do you listen to something in real life, then select a written answer? We suppose it happens sometimes, but not often.

Similar problems arise in trying to test writing and speaking. How can you give students a writing prompt without requiring them to read or listen? The answer is that you can't. And how do you get students to speak without giving them some instructions that require them to listen or read in some way. Again the answer is that you don't. And how authentic are writing and speaking tests devised with written prompts or with interview procedures, anyway?

Of course, using prompts or pictures can circumvent some of these problems, but those strategies aren't really like real-life language activities either, all of which suggests that the quest to test pure language skills may have always been a bit quixotic, if not completely impossible.

The other alternative ways of assessment are portfolios, journals, logs and conferences. All these methods are fundamentally different from ordinary paper-and-pencils tests.

Portfolios are collections of students' work selected by students (with the teacher's guidance) to represent their learning experiences. Portfolios usually involve students gathering together samples of their use (such as compositions and video clips) into a folder or box to show to peers, parents, outsiders, and others much in the way an artist gathers paintings in a portfolio to show to prospective clients. Portfolios provide a type personal assessment that is directly

related to the activities going on in the classroom, and they are particularly appropriate for assessing language learning processes. Portfolios may also enhance students' learning, improve their view of the teacher's role in the classroom, and involve everybody in the assessment processes.

Journal assessment activities typically require students to make regular entries in a diary or journal at home or in class. Many variations exist. Journal writing can be used to encourage students to practice writing or assess their writing ability and its growth over time. Journal activities can also be used to collect information on students' views, beliefs, attitudes, and motivations related to the class or program or to the processes involved in learning various language skills.

Logs are somewhat different from portfolios and journals in that they afford students a chance to record experiences with English use outside the classroom. Many details can be logged, including when and where the language was used, what was involved linguistically, and why certain experiences occurred the way they did. Thus a log can document the extent to which students are using the knowledge gained from the classroom in real-world settings.

Conferences usually involve students coming to the teachers' office alone or in groups for brief meetings to get feedback on their work. Conferences can provide personalized assessment that is directly related to the learning going on in the classroom, help students understand their own learning processes and strategies and develop a better self-image, and let teachers elicit specific skills or tasks that students can need to review and afford teachers an opportunity to inform, mold, observe, and gather information about students.

Given recent trends in language teaching go towards task-based syllabuses and toward more practice with authentic communication and language use, it is no surprise that the majority of assessment activities require students to actually do some things with the language. Such assessment activities are often called performance assessment.

Performance assessment should meet four conditions: a) the students should be asked to do something with the language; b) in the process they should be performing some sort of meaningful tasks; c) the tasks should be as authentic as possible; and d) the task must typically be rated and scored by qualified judges. Those four characteristics can serve as a working definition for performance assessment. But why would teachers go to all the trouble of doing performance assessment?

In brief, performance assessment allows teachers to a) assess the students in context that simulate authentic language use, b) compensate for the negative effects of traditional paper-and-pencil tests, and c) promote positive washback by assessing the same language points and activities that students are learning in the everyday classroom.

Unfortunately, several disadvantages of performance assessment must also be overcome, including the facts, that performance assessment can a) take considerable time to administer, b) cause reliability and validity problems, and c) increase the risk of test security breaches. With a little attention, teachers can minimize all of these problems. For instance, the administration time problem can be solved in part by integrating the performance assessment activities right into the class time, just as any other activities are. The problem of reliability that are inherent in the use of raters can be mitigated by selecting only qualified raters, using two or more raters giving the raters clear guidelines, training the raters, retraining them from time to time during the rating process, carefully monitoring the ratings as the raters produce them, and revising all of these steps before doing the ratings in other classes or during other terms. The validity problem can be at least partially overcome by carefully matching the assessment tasks to the sorts of teaching points and learning activities that are going on in the particular course and by assessing the students a number of times throughout the term. Finally, the security problem can be minimized by creating a variety of tasks, with different students performing different tasks, and by setting up conditions so that students who have already performed are unable or, at least, unlikely to communicate the nature of content of the task involved to students who have not yet performed theirs.

Traditionally tests have been administered to each student separately in paper-and-pencil format. However it does not mean that one-by-one testing is the only way to do things. As language teaching practices have begun to change around the world in favor of communicative teaching organized around functions or tasks, pair and group activities have become increasingly common in classroom. That is why many teachers experiment with group work and pair work for doing assessment in their classrooms.

Group work assessment will be defined as any observation or scoring done for the purpose of giving students feedback while those students are working in groups, whether the group work was specifically designed for assessment purposes or occurred naturally for other pedagogical purposes. Similarly, pair work assessment will be defined as any observations or scoring done for the purpose of giving students feedback while those students are working in pairs, whether those pairs were formed for assessment purposes or occurred naturally for other pedagogical reasons.

However, one question remains: Why would teacher want to use these two ways of grouping students for assessment purposes? Group work and pair work assessments are useful because a) they provide opportunities to assess actual language production, b) they match the pedagogical practices going on in the classroom, c) students may feel more relaxed and less threatened when tested in groups or pairs, and d) such assessment can be much more efficient

timewise than other techniques (oral interview conducted individually). Group work or pair work assessment has some disadvantages as well. For instance, scoring and feedback tend to be subjective, a problem that can be minimized by getting multiple rating for each student (as when several teachers rate each student), by getting ratings from multiple perspectives (e. g. from the viewpoints of the students themselves, their peers, and the teacher). By making the guidelines for the scores, by doing specific training and practice in the scoring method, or ideally by using some combinations of these practices.

Literature:

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