

Testing and Assessment

LEARNERS COMMONLY FIRST encounter tests when they register for classes. At that time, they are often given a placement test to determine in which level class they should be enrolled. Once they are enrolled, they may be periodically given progress tests to determine the learning gains that they have made. At the end of the term, semester, or year, they are often given an achievement test to determine how well they have learned the class material and if they are ready to move on to the next level of instruction (Harmer, 2007). Furthermore, the instructor may also administer less formal assessments throughout the term to determine how well his or her learners are picking up the material presented in class.

Testing results can also serve purposes other than the reasons mentioned above. “Learner assessment is conducted ... for many reasons—to place learners in appropriate instructional levels, to measure their ongoing progress, to qualify them to enroll in academic or job training programs, to verify program effectiveness, and to demonstrate learner gains in order to justify continued funding for a program” (Burt and Keenan, 1995). There can be many different types of assessments to serve these ends, but they generally can be divided into two categories: formal, standard assessments and informal assessments developed by the teacher.

Formal assessments are often commercially available standardized tests that are developed by a commercial testing organization or sometimes by the program itself. Most commonly, they are used to place learners, determine if learners are eligible to move to the next level of instruction, and to provide data for program funders. The specific assessment used is often mandated by the program or by funders. Some commonly used examples are:

The Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (**CASAS**): A multiple-choice competency-based test that assesses primarily listening and reading skills.

BEST: An assessment that measures both literacy and listening/speaking skills. The oral assessment section is interview-based.

English as a Second Language Oral Assessment (**ESLOA**): An interview-based oral assessment test.

(Burt and Keenan, 1995).

These tests often divide the learners into levels based on the NRS (National Reporting System) guidelines, which provide six learning levels. Recent commercially available textbooks often correlate their chapters to one or more of

the commonly available standardized tests.

Although standardized tests present concrete, quantifiable data, they have several disadvantages. It is often the case that the skills measured by the standardized tests are not congruent with the learners’ goals in taking the classes. It is also often a problem that the tests only assess one aspect of the learner’s language development and try to generalize the results to all four skills. Despite the problems that standard tests create, it is often necessary for the tutor or teacher to be familiar with the standards that the tests measure in order for the students to show progress on the test. On the other hand, care should be taken that passing the test does not become the sole purpose of the instruction (“teaching to the test”).

Informal assessments are usually developed by the teacher, and can be graded more subjectively than the standardized tests. Informal assessments serve to demonstrate to both the learner and the instructor how much of the material the learner has learned. As such, they are valuable guides to learner progress and can enhance motivation. Besides the obvious written tests, there are a huge number of activities that can be used for informal assessment. Here are a few common examples (Van Duzer & Berdan, 1999):

Project-based assignments in which the learners are asked to complete some kind of task, for example, a multi-media presentation. Such tasks are commonly assigned to groups of learners in a cooperative-learning type situation.

Written assignments such as compositions, reports, narratives, etc.

Oral presentations, which the learner often gives in front of the class. These presentations are frequently assessed by the other learners in addition to, or instead of, the teacher.

Portfolios, various examples of the learners’ work which are collected periodically and show the learners’ progress over time.

These assessments are often graded based upon a rubric, which rates the learner based upon different categories, for example an oral presentation might be rated based upon categories such as fluency, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, use of appropriate vocabulary, how well the learner fulfilled the terms of the assignment, etc.

It is important that the learner be regularly assessed, to give both the teacher and the learner an

idea of the progress that they are making. A common practice is to give the learners a standard assessment at both the beginning and ending of each class term, to ensure that they have been placed in the proper level and to provide data to report to the funder. Meanwhile, the teacher gives informal assessments periodically throughout the term to measure gains and ensure that their learners are learning the material. "Assessment is an ongoing process, and no single test can do it all. Adult instructors and learners should use a variety of assessments to determine learning needs, demonstrate progress, and guide instruction" (Office of Vocational and Adult Education 2006).

FURTHER READING:

Online

Burt, Miriam and Keenan, Fran. (1995). *Adult ESL Learner Assessment: Purposes and Tools*. ERIC Digest No. EDO-LE-95-08. Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education. Available from: <http://www.ericdigests.org/1996-2/tools.html>

Van Duzer, C. H. & Berdan, R. "Perspectives on Assessment in Adult ESOL". From *Instruction Review of Adult Learning and Literacy*, Volume 1: Chapter Six, 1999. Available from: <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=521>

Office of Vocational and Adult Education. (2006). *The Adult Learner-Module 2: Orientation and Assessment*. Available from: <http://www.c-pal.net/course/module2>

Print

Harmer, J. (2007). *How to Teach English, new ed.* Essex: Pearson/Longman

Cohen, A. D. "Second Language Testing". In Celce-Murcia, M. ed. (1991). *Teaching English as a Second of Foreign Language*, 2nd ed. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Hughes, A. (1989). *Testing for Language Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Web pages related to specific assessments:

BEST Literacy test

<http://www.cal.org/topics/ta/bestliteracy.html>

CASAS test <https://www.casas.org>

ESLOA test <http://www.newreaderspress.com/Items.aspx?hierId=4090>

Information about the National Reporting Standards (NRS)

<http://www.nrsweb.org>

Activities

Rubistar: Create Rubrics for your Project-Based Learning Activities. <http://rubistar.4teachers.org/index.php>

Tannenbaum, J. (1996). *Practical Ideas on Alternative Assessment for ESL Students*. ERIC Digest ED395500. Washington, DC: ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education. Available from <http://www.ericdigests.org/1997-1/esl.html>

Sawyer, P. Ed. (2001). *Tennessee Adult ESOL Curriculum Resource Book: Section 8, Student Portfolios*. Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Office of Adult Education and The University of Tennessee, Center for Literacy Studies. Available from: http://www.cls.utk.edu/pdf/esol/esol_8.pdf (example of portfolio-based student assessment)

