As teachers at the start of a new school year, we carefully plan our curricula and daily lessons as much as we can before we even meet our students. We want to be prepared for the first day of classes and, if we are lucky, we have some idea of the needs of our students and the demands of the course in terms of levels, skills, and content. More often, we don't have a complete understanding of our students' needs until we see them in the classroom. And even then, it can take us many weeks to fully understand the language learning needs of each learner and the class as a whole. Diagnostic assessments can help us recognize and identify what our students' language learning needs are much earlier in a course.

## JUSTIFICATION FOR DIAGNOSTIC TESTING

Diagnostic testing serves several purposes for teachers and students. Diagnostics can help identify what skills and sub skills teachers need to include in the curriculum. For example, if you give a pronunciation diagnostic and identify that many students are struggling with a particular vowel sound, you can use the information to determine to what extent this particular vowel sound needs to be part of the curriculum.

Diagnostic testing can also give learners information about their own skills and abilities. When students begin a course, they might begin with a vague idea as to what they can and cannot do in terms of language communication. By offering them a diagnostic, teachers are giving students a starting point for their learning path. With this information, teachers can chart a course for the class as a whole while recognizing the needs of particular individuals.

Finally, diagnostic testing prepares teachers for the individual limitations and abilities of language learners. When we have a firmer understanding of each student, we are better prepared to support each

student according to his or her language needs and goals. We are often focused on the successes of the majority of learners, but as teachers we cannot ignore the needs and goals of learners who struggle. Diagnostic testing helps teachers address the needs of all students, those successful and struggling. When teachers know about the individual needs of their learners, they can tailor extra work and attention, through differentiated instruction to meet those individual needs.

## SOURCES FOR DIAGNOSTIC TESTS

Some of us work in programs where diagnostic tests are a part of the education system, but these shouldn't be confused with placement tests. Placement tests are often devised and handled by administrators and teachers, as a way to identify the class appropriate to each learner's abilities. Diagnostic tests are often used once a class has started as a way to target a particular skill that is emphasized in the class (Brown, 2004). And while these two types of tests can provide valuable information to educators, diagnostic tests are focused on more discrete points.

Some examples of diagnostic tests include:

- Pronunciation diagnostic where students individually read a passage aloud. Teachers then make notes as to students' strengths and weaknesses in areas such as: word stress, vowel sounds, intonation, etc.

- Writing diagnostics are given to identify a student's ability in terms of vocabulary, sentence structure, organization of ideas, and grammar usage. A typical writing diagnostic might ask students to write for thirty minutes about any given question. The questions are often written so that most people, in spite of language level, can respond to the idea. For a lower group of learners, an example prompt is, "Write about your hometown," while more advanced learners might be asked to describe a problem in their hometown. Both of these topics are fairly universal

and encourage easy discussion among a majority of learners, so the test's emphasis is on writing

skills and not content knowledge.

These are two examples of assessments that can be prepared and designed by the teacher of the class if

no diagnostic test is available. Other resources for diagnostic testing design are offered below.


## Books

Brown, H. D. (2004). *Language assessment: Principles and classroom practices.* White Plains, NY:

Pearson Longman.

Brown, J. D. (1996). *Testing in language programs.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.


## American English Resources

- Teacher's Corner: Collecting and Using Data

- American English Webinar: Teaching Today's Learners: Oral Error Correction and Writing Effective

  Assessments

- Assessment of Young Learners

- Assessment Literacy: Building a Base for Better Teaching and Learning