

MAKING MEANINGFUL ASSESSMENTS

Tests, quizzes, homework, worksheets, journals, games, and activities are all tools we use to understand to what depth our students are learning the skills we teach. In teaching, we commonly refer to these tools as assessments, and they are an integral part of teaching and learning.

This month's Teacher's Corner focuses on making and designing meaningful assessments to use in the English language classroom. We will begin the month by examining what makes a meaningful assessment and then offer a series of assessment ideas that you can use and adapt to fit the needs of you and your students.

Considerations in Assessment Design

Test writers consider a number of components when they design large-scale and small-scale assessments. While most teachers are not professional test writers, it is important to recognize and understand the components of appropriate assessments. These include: practicality, validity, reliability, authenticity, and wash back. Let's take a closer look at each of these elements.

Practicality

Practicality refers to the ease of design and use for both teachers and learners (Brown, 2004). Is the assessment easy to give and score? Can the assessment be given and scored within a reasonable amount of time? Occasionally, we are faced with highly detailed assignments or scoring rubrics. On first glance, these assessments seem strong, but when we try to use them we find that they are time-consuming and tedious. Instead, we need give careful attention to the practicality of our assessments in order for them to be considered successful.

Validity

Validity focuses on whether a test accurately measures what it intends to measure. For test writers, validity is by far the most difficult and complicated component to measure. Let's look at an example to see how we might consider validity in a classroom assessment. You and your students have just completed a series of lessons about writing thesis statements. You have spent a lot of time teaching students that each thesis statement must have a topic and a controlling idea. How do we find out if students have learned how to write thesis statements according to our guidelines? One possible assessment is to give learners a topic that is familiar to them and ask them to write a thesis statement about the topic. We must then consider how to score this assessment. We could make the sentence worth three points according to the criteria described in the lessons: a) Is the sentence a complete sentence? b) Is the topic listed? c) Does the writer give a controlling idea? While this may sound simple, it is a valid assessment of writing thesis statements because it measures what has been taught through a similar task.

Reliability

In order to make a strong assessment, we want to see consistency and dependability across testing (Brown, 2004). Consistency points to the idea that every time an assessment is scored or taken, results will be similar when everything else is equal. If two students of similar abilities take a reliable assessment, then they will get similar scores. At the same time, if two teachers separately score a reliable assessment, they will produce similar results. Reliability is easy to maintain in objective assessments with right or wrong answers but can be more difficult in subjective assessments. For example, we know that the simple past tense for *do* is *did*. English language teachers would reliably score *did* as the correct form of simple past for *do*. We might see more variation in teachers scoring student presentations where the potential mistakes and successes

students make are less clearly identifiable. Reliable rubrics can help ease the bias that scorers bring to assessments or that different types of learners bring to unclear tasks, but full reliability is not always possible. Regardless, we must still work toward creating assessments that reliably produce results and relevant feedback.

Authenticity

In terms of authenticity, we are looking at the realistic nature of the assessment. In language teaching and learning, authenticity often comes up in both material and assessment design. As English language teachers, it is important to create realistic or authentic opportunities to practice language. Materials, activities, and assessments are measured in terms of how well they prepare learners to communicate outside the classroom. In test design, authenticity is also important. Will the assessment be an authentic and applicable task or too arbitrary for real-world applications? As teachers, we want authenticity so that our assessments will be as relevant and useful to the learning process as possible.

Washback

Washback is an aspect of testing that plays a larger role in testing and assessment than most of us realize. In washback, we are looking at how much an assessment influences our teaching and our students' learning. When we talk about "teaching to the test," we are talking about washback. Well-designed assessments are viewed as the answer to some of our biggest teaching and learning concerns. As a result, we turn away from innovative and relevant lessons to focus on test-related lessons. In such situations, the test becomes the answer, and we become more attuned to preparing students for a test than providing them with all of the skills they need in order to be successful in the English language classroom. As teachers, we need to take special care not to fold to the demands of a strong assessment, but instead, focus on the language needs and goals of our learners.

References

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

Additional Resources

For additional information about language assessment, check out these resources and many others available on the American English website:

- [Teacher's Corner: Collecting and Using Data](#)
- [American English Webinar: Teaching Today's Learners: Oral Error Correction and Writing Effective Assessments](#)