

The Roles of Assessment in Language Teaching

BY JERROLD FRANK

Long before the first day of class or before a program is proposed, we must decide how we intend to measure outcomes and consider what role assessment will play in instruction. Assessment is how we identify our learners' needs, document their progress, and determine how we are doing as teachers and planners. That being said, how do we know we are doing it right? How do we know that the assessment tools we are using measure what we intend them to? If we are serious about getting the best snapshot of the progress of our learners and the effectiveness of our programs, these are questions that we must continually ask.

Assessment occurs in many contexts and is done for a variety of reasons. The three archive articles chosen for this issue all deal with different aspects of assessment. While they do not answer every question, they should help you consider how you use assessment in your own teaching.

Traditionally, the most common way to measure achievement and proficiency in language learning has been the test. Even though alternative forms of assessment are growing in popularity, most teachers still use this old standby. And while many teachers may be gifted in the classroom, even the best may need some help in constructing reliable test items. In the first article, Grant Henning (1982) outlines twenty common errors in test construction that language teachers should avoid. Henning's article can serve as a checklist for any of us who would like to construct fair and reliable language tests.

In the second article, "Coming to Grips with Progress Testing: Some Guidelines for its Design," Carmen Pérez Basanta (1995) discusses the role of progress testing in the classroom and the importance of matching testing to

instruction. Basanta views testing as a tool that can help teachers identify student strengths and weaknesses and evaluate the effectiveness of their programs. In the article Basanta discusses some theoretical requisites to ensure that teachers design or choose tests that are practical, reliable, and valid.

In recent years much has been made of alternative forms of assessment. Whether we want to include student portfolios or web-based testing in our curricula, our focus should always be on gathering information that reflects how well our students have learned what we tried to teach them. In the third selection, "Purposeful Language Assessment: Selecting the Right Alternative Test," John Norris (2000) provides an outline of the types of questions we need to ask ourselves in order to best match alternative assessment techniques to the appropriate language education contexts.

Assessment is perhaps one of most difficult and important parts of our jobs as teachers. Ideally, it should be seen as a means to help us guide students on their road to learning. No single procedure can meet the needs of all learners and situations, so we need to remember to incorporate a variety of tools to help our students know how they are progressing and to gauge the effectiveness of our own methodology and materials.

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