

PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENTS

OVERVIEW by Greg Duncan

Conducting performance assessments are an essential part of an effective language learning process. Below you will find an overview to performance assessments and their role in the language classroom today.

A LITTLE STORY

A young teacher for whom you serve as mentor asked you to observe three class periods so that you could give him some feedback on the work that his students are doing. During the first two days of class you noted that students

- participated in several paired activities focused on real life scenarios related to shopping;
- read a couple of blog posts from some teenagers in Madrid about “hip” places to shop for clothes;
- spent a small portion of time focusing on particular grammar features that were needed to carry out the oral and written tasks; and,
- wrote several imaginary reviews about service they received in stores that they “visited” during their speaking activities.

Several times, you heard the teacher tell the students to keep in mind that the test was coming up. At the end of the second day’s visit, the teacher told you that tomorrow would not be a good day to visit because the students would be taking a test. But you wanted to watch the students go through their assessment experience so you said that you would like to return tomorrow anyway. You came back the next day and discovered that the teacher’s assessment was a paper and pencil test that focused mostly on what students knew about the grammar they had learned in the unit along with a section on vocabulary knowledge.

WHY ASSESSMENT?

Good assessment first and foremost should be centered on providing information to the learner about how well he is doing to achieve the goals he is working toward. Assuming that classroom teaching emanates from state and district curriculum that is aligned to the *World Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* (2014), our profession is clear that language learning should be about students acquiring the ability to use language for meaningful purposes in their world.

Assessment, then, serves the function of a mirror for the student—to let him (and his learning coach, the teacher) see

- how well he is doing in reaching the learning goals,
- what he still might need to work on to reach those goals, or
- to what degree he is already exceeding the goals.

The problem that the mentor discovered in the classroom of his mentee was not that students were not receiving standard-informed instruction; it was that the assessment component was not fulfilling its purpose. We can assume, through examining the classroom activities, that the learning goals were about students acquiring the ability to function in the language (various elements of shopping), yet the assessment looked for the wrong thing (the knowledge of language control) and could not, then, provide a true reflection of what the students had learned to do. Teaching and assessing should be mirror images of one another in both content and form. And when that is not the case, assessment cannot achieve its principal purpose of providing the learner with meaningful feedback that enables him to grow and improve.

Performance-based assessment is the term that is often used to describe the kind of assessment that checks for students’ ability to use language in meaningful ways. It is simply a “demonstration” of what the student is able to do at a particular point in the language learning journey. As such, it always aligns with proficiency and learning targets which enable it to serve as that mirror or reflection of what the learner can do, relative to his expected proficiency level and the particular performance objectives (units) and learning targets (lessons) that he encounters.

Another way of thinking about performance-based assessment is as a way of *checking for learning* (similar in concept and sometimes in strategies to *checking for understanding*)—it gives both student and teacher the opportunity to gauge learning against the established goals. Teachers need to check for learning in both formative and summative ways.



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FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Formative assessment happens all the time through the classroom activities or homework assignments that students encounter. Their ability to handle the learning goals is evidenced in the work they do associated with everyday classroom tasks and homework. These tasks need not be graded; they serve as practice for students and are part of the learning process (Chappuis & Chappuis, 2007/2008). They simply let both learner and teacher know where the learner is on the continuum and what he still needs to do.

World language teachers can check for learning in many ways, in fact as many ways as there are learning activities since the result of all activities is evidence of student learning. Getting a bit more concrete, however, Dodge (2009) suggests that formative assessment strategies can be divided into four different types:

Summaries and Reflections

Students reflect on what they have read/learned and make personal connections to that information. They may even focus on meta-cognitive skills they are acquiring. (*Sample activities:* Dry-Erase Boards, Quick Write)

Lists, Charts and Graphic Organizers

Students organize information to facilitate learning and to help make connections. (*Sample activities:* My Top Ten List, Noting What I've Learned)

Visual Representations of Information

Students use the power of visual representations to increase memory and to make connections. (*Sample activities:* Quick Draw, Flip Books)

Collaborative Activities

Students collaborate with classmates to demonstrate and expand their knowledge and ability. (*Sample activities:* Turn and Talk, Find Someone Who ...)

Additionally, activities that simulate real-life* tasks form a captivating way for students to show how well they are equipped to use language for real purposes. These performance-based tasks connect to unit topics and are correlated to expected proficiency levels of students. Typical tasks that one might see in classrooms range from appropriate greetings and leave takings to ordering food in a restaurant to making a purchase in a store to explaining why the service was so unacceptable. For beginning level students, many of their performance-based tasks might take place with the

Sample Formative Assessments



Dry-Erase Boards. Students write responses to a prompt on their dry-erase board and hold up their boards when the teacher gives a signal.



Quick Write. Students take 2-3 minutes to summarize their learning. This provides students not only the opportunity to quantify what they know but also helps them become reflective learners.



My Top Ten List. Students reflect back on what they have learned and determine the top ten things for a unit they now know.



Noting What I've Learned. Students note learning in terms of main ideas and particular details of their learning. This may include the opportunity to illustrate pieces of learning.



Quick Draw. Similar to Quick Write, this activity provides students the opportunity to determine ways to illustrate what they are learning.



Flip Books. Through development of a layered book, students both draw and write about something they have learned.



Turn & Talk. A quick way to turn student attention on themselves by talking with a classmate about a question. Each question is usually only given a minute or two for students to discuss.



Find Someone Who ... Sometimes called a survey, this activity allows students to move around and speak with different classmates as they search for answers to predetermined questions. Students synthesize their results (e.g., oral or written summaries, graphs, charts).

Explications of sample formative assessments (Dodge, 2009)

classroom teacher serving as their partner while students within the Intermediate range of proficiency would more likely share a task with a classmate.

** The term "real-life" or "real-world" is often used to describe performance-based assessment tasks. When tasks are anchored in things one does in "real-life," an immediate relevance is associated with the task, which research shows, is a big motivator for language learners. "Real life" is not confined to those things the learner does at his chronological age; it can be extrapolated to things that are done at any age in the real world.*

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SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT

While formative assessment is more tied to learning while learning is happening, summative assessment is used as the culmination of the learning process on a particular unit or time of study, e.g., semester, year. It serves as an opportunity for both student and teacher to more completely get a picture of what the sum-total result of learning has been. So, summative performance based assessments might combine several learning targets from a unit to form a more comprehensive scenario for the student to experience. Whereas formative performance tasks might have been more finite pieces of a bigger real-life kind of experience, the summative performance assessment will put it all together. A perfect example of this concept is the Integrated Performance Assessment (IPA). Connecting to a theme and to the three modes of communication (Interpretive, Interpersonal, Presentational) there are three assessment tasks that the student experiences.

- (1) The student first gets information from and demonstrates his understanding of an **Interpretive** sample of communication (something he reads, hears or views).
- (2) Second, the student takes the information he gained from the interpretive task and works through an **Interpersonal** task (generally involving listening and speaking within the context of a conversation) with a partner (teacher or classmate).
- (3) Finally, the student synthesizes the pertinent information from both the interpretive and interpersonal tasks to complete a **Presentational** product either in the form of something spoken or written.

The Integrated Performance Assessment concept is a nice and tidy way to envelop a unit's work into a cohesive demonstration of ability at the unit's end.

Integrated Performance Assessments are only one type of summative assessment. Clearly, teachers may decide to write stand-alone interpretive, interpersonal and presentational performance-based tasks that measure the unit's performance objectives. The point of summative performance assessment, whether done through Integrated Performance Assessments or through individual performance-based tasks, is for students to have the opportunity to assemble the unit's learning together and to show themselves and their teachers (their coaches) what they can do and how well they can do it.



Many teachers create their own performance-based assessment tasks, and this is encouraged. There are also collections of tasks that teachers can access for possible use and/or adaptation in their local setting.

When creating performance tasks or when determining if tasks are useful, it is wise to use a set of criteria to measure their effectiveness. Ask these questions when thinking about using a task with your students.

- **Is the task targeted to the appropriate proficiency level?**
- **Is the task based on a real-world scenario?**
- **Is the task interesting?**
- **Is the task logical?**
- **Is the task written in inviting language?**
- **Is the context for the task one that would require the use of the target language?**

Checking that performance tasks meet the above criteria can better ensure optimal use of performance tasks to achieve the purpose of showing students what they are capable of doing with the target language.

A FINAL WORD

Assessment is the way that students find out if they are meeting their goals. It is also the way that teachers (their coaches) find out what they can do to help them. Such a frame of reference about assessment will go a long way in producing happy, motivated language learners who are likely to continue language learning long into their future.

References

- American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (2014). *World readiness standards for language learning*. Alexandria, VA: ACTFL.
- Chappuis, S. & Chappuis, J. (2007/2008, December/January). The best value in formative assessment. *Educational Leadership*, 65, 14-18.
- Dodge, J. (2009). *25 quick formative assessments for a differentiated classroom*. New York: Scholastic.

Sources for Performance-Based Task Collections:



<https://www.georgiastandards.org/Frameworks/Pages/BrowseFrameworks/MLL-PerformanceAssessments.aspx>

Performance assessments for different languages across a range of topics from the Georgia Department of Education



<http://flenj.org/CAPS/toas.shtml>

Thematically Organized Assessments, similar to Integrated Performance Assessments, correlated to proficiency levels and topics from the Consortium for the Assessment of Performance Standards, A Foreign Language Assistance Program grant awarded to the East Brunswick (NJ) Public Schools, the Edison (NJ) Public Schools, the West Orange (NJ) Public Schools, and the West Windsor-Plainsboro (NJ) Public Schools]



<https://www.georgiastandards.org/Frameworks/Pages/BrowseFrameworks/modernlanglatin.aspx>

Thematic units in which at least four performance-based assessment tasks are embedded for each unit from the Georgia Department of Education



<https://onedrive.live.com/?cid=28f7c805d5a3213d&id=28F7C805D5A3213D%21154>

Stand-alone performance-based assessments connected to units of instruction that are associated with specific proficiency targets from the Jefferson County (KY) Public Schools



tinyurl.com/ofla-ipa

Examples of Integrated Performance Assessments from the Ohio Foreign Language Association



www.TELLproject.org/STARTALK

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