

ENJOYING THE TESTING EXPERIENCE: PROMOTING EFFECTIVE AFFECTIVE LEARNING THROUGH ASSESSMENT

Rachele (secondary school student, Sicily, 2004): ‘I come to school to learn not to be tested.’*

How many times as teachers have we heard a remark like this from our learners? And how many times have we agonised over how to make a course culminating in an exam more interesting, motivating and meaningful to each of our learners – in short a more positive learning experience? As language teachers, we are probably all very aware of the term ‘learner centred teaching’ but perhaps the time has come to also consider ‘learner centred assessment’.

At a recent conference the following issues and question points were raised in workshops with regard to assessment and testing which perhaps reflect this awareness:

- test anxiety *or* test paralysis
- the dog wagging its tail *or* the tail wagging the dog
- a test which leads to success *or* a test which leads to failure
- testing as a directing force *or* as a straitjacket

With the recent shift in assessment from norm-referenced testing to a criteria referenced approach (reflecting the Council of Europe’s Common Framework Scale for Language Proficiency), other trends have also started to emerge which have broadened our view of what constitutes effective assessment with perhaps a shift away from emphasis on what may have been driving forces in test development through the 1980s, i.e. test reliability and validity, to also incorporating other equally valued components in an assessment framework. This development is critical and far-reaching for the classroom as it has implications for how we can integrate effective learner strategies and promote best practice through a principled and relevant approach to assessment valuing what each individual learner brings to the assessment process. It considers assessment as a fundamental, integrated part of the learning programme.

So what are these trends and how can they influence our approach to teaching and learning in the classroom?

- **assessment *for* learning**, i.e. an approach and mode of assessment that supports and provides opportunities for effective learning as part of each individual learner’s learning experience rather than assessment *of* learning as perhaps is more traditionally the case with public examinations. The focus here shifts from an end result to assessment as an integral part of the ongoing learning cycle.
- **competency based assessment**- this is designed to identify the underlying learner competence in use of the language. With this the primary focus is not on the learner’s knowledge of *what* language is, but on *how* s/he applies it to convey their message as effectively as possible.
- **‘real’ use of language** – learners are assessed on their use of language in tasks, situations and contexts which reflect the environment for which they

need and use language in everyday life. Assessment tasks are familiar learning tasks.

- **learner (or learning) centred assessment** – this enables the learner to take responsibility and control of their own assessment. Learners in a typical exam preparation class may feel disempowered, forced to ‘jump through hoops’ in order to achieve their objective of passing the exam. The preparation process is seen as ‘a necessary evil’ to get them through the test but there is not much connection or relationship made with real learning (see Rachele’s comment at the beginning of this article). With this shift to putting the learner in a central position re his/ her assessment, this is reversed and learner motivation becomes an integrated part of the assessment experience.
- **ownership of the assessment process** – the procedure and content of the assessment process is transparent and known, i.e. there are no surprises or unknown aspects to the assessment, and the learner has a decision-making role in the assessment process.

So what is the impact of these assessment principles for the classroom? And how can we use them to help learners develop and sustain a positive, proactive and participative attitude and approach to their own progress/ achievement and assessment of it?

When it is know-how that is being assessed, assessment techniques can directly reflect what is happening in the classroom or in the learning process.

In the period prior to doing the assessment, learners can be given guidance and scope to self-assess or evaluate according to the assessment criteria. This both gives an opportunity for learners to develop self-awareness in respect to their own progress and attainment, and also to set realistic learning objectives and direct their learning on a pathway to success with the assessment telling them how much they know and have achieved rather than how much they don’t know or haven’t much they still need to learn.

Giving learners decision-making control over key aspects of their assessment can be an excellent way to encourage and enable them to take responsibility for their learning and assessment of it. One way you can do this is by allowing each learner to actually select and develop the content of their individual test. In Ireland, this has been done by developing a task-based assessment framework for a public EL test which provides the opportunity for the learner to select their own content and develop it within the parameters of the framework. This has had a significant impact on learner attitude to their own assessment and the data would indicate a strong washback on their motivation and feelings about themselves as language learners.

After receiving their assessment grades and feedback, expressed in a description of what their grade means as well as the actual grade achieved, learners can use this feedback to set their further learning objectives. In this way, the assessment is used to both evaluate what they have achieved but also to consider their future learning objectives and define them according to their feedback.

So what does all this mean for teachers in the classroom? One significant aspect of this is the impact on learner motivation – suddenly the assessment process belongs to the learner, something which s/he can influence, develop and present in an assessment situation according to their particular interests and needs.

Tasks can be identified, such as carrying out a project, reading a book, which are open-ended enough to provide scope for the learner to have various decision-making options. The task development can take as much time and be as wide-ranging as the learner chooses.

This overall approach to learning (and assessment of that learning) incorporates scope for the learners to take as much responsibility for their learning as they choose. This perhaps advocates and reflects a language learner apprenticeship model, i.e. observation, practice, monitoring, self-evaluation in a cyclical process leading to gradual mastery and acquisition. A founding principle is to enable the learner to develop a clear pathway to learning success, not founded on comparison with others, but on the real development of core learning skills and strategies which are going to provide a sound foundation for the further ongoing development and achievement of the learner.

Acknowledgements:

* a comment made by a secondary school student, quoted by Philip Drury at his talk, British Council Venice Conference, 2004

The Irish test referred to is the Test of Interactive English (TIE) – website: www.tie.ie or www.acels.ie

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