LANGUAGE TESTING

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Abstract: *This paper is about new tendencies in the teaching process. Students are supposed to be directed and guided, to ask and repeat things that very often are not relevant to them. The idea of individualized instruction has come as a response to a general outlook that disregarded the student as a potential participant in his own educational process. So, teaching and testing are very closely interrelated, almost inseparably inter-wind. Testing becomes this way a natural extension of classroom activity and it provides the necessary information for further work.*
Key words: *individualized instruction, language testing, teaching process*

For a good period of time it was believed that teaching and testing were two separate domains and that each required completely different skills to such an extent that it took separate persons to work on each, both theoretically and in practice. According to this position, teaching is more or less a pleasant progress towards an idyllic Eden where one will be rewarded with the scenic view of acquired knowledge and skills and testing is surely advancing towards the Valley of Tears where one will sit and count the bruises... as if these were two separate roads.

Far from being two separate roads tearing apart anyone who actually needs to follow both, teaching and testing are very closely interrelated, almost inseparably inter-wind. Testing is a natural extension of classroom activity inasmuch as it provides both the teacher and the learner with the necessary information for further work. "The usefulness of the information derived from a test greatly depends on the amount of care that is taken in its preparation" (Andrew Harrison). If we accept that testing is naturally integrated in the process of learning it follows that there is no other person better placed to write the test than the one who is at the steering wheel of teaching, the teacher himself. A good teacher needs to learn how to relate testing to teaching and learning. Next one needs to have a clear view of why the test is applied in order to select the right content.

The most widely used method for evaluating teaching is the end-of-course questionnaire. The questionnaires arrive too late, however, to benefit the students doing the evaluation. Nor do the questionnaires usually encourage students to give the specific comments an instructor might need either to identify how well students have understood the material or to spot weaknesses in classroom presentation, organization, pacing, and work load. Much more effective are fast feedback activities that take place during the semester. The term fast feedback is derived from management practices but can be applied to instruction (Bateman and Roberts, 1992). Informal sampling of students' comprehension of the subject matter will enable you to gauge how and what students are learning. And informal requests for constructive criticism will help you identify which teaching methods best contribute to your students' understanding of the material.

New tendencies in foreign language instruction, as well as in the teaching process as a whole, are due to the wrongs caused by not involving the learners in the actual teaching

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process. Learners were supposed to be directed and guided, to ask, to repeat and do things that very often were not relevant to them. On the other hand, there is an increased feeling that individual features should be taken into consideration when instruction and education are meant to create real human beings.

The idea of individualized instruction has come as a response to a general outlook that disregarded the learner as a potential participant in his own educational process.

Writing good tests is a trial and error job, all the more frustrating when you know that it is both at your own and your students' expense, however it is not an impossible mission to fulfill.

Here follows a quick recipe for writing tests; it does not compensate for in-depth study of the matter and extensive reading; it only serves as a check list when you embark on the challenging job of testing and it would not hurt a bit to verify before you launch the test unto your students. Ask one of your colleagues to look at the test with this list in mind. Remember, if one of your colleagues has a question, your students will have ten!

So, here is what we should have in mind:

1) Set the **objectives.**

2) Decide what **skills** will be tested through appropriate means.

3) Choose the **content** according to the objectives and the type of test.

4) Set the **format.**

5) Write the **rubrics**, as simple as possible.

6) Prepare the **materials** necessary (test form, answer sheets, listening tape, etc).

7) Decide on a balanced **marking** scheme, descriptors.

Each of these steps is equally important and underestimating one of them would make testing process in itself inefficient or absolutely futile.

Tests should be carefully explained before administering them, but they should not be taught, or no information is supposed to be given during the test.

If tests are not available, when making up a test, one should rely only on elements that are known or should be known. Even if the learners have difficulty in reading and understanding some reading tests, a test might give the students cues of what was wrong where. Achievement tests should be administered regularly, so that the teacher should know exactly the stage his students are, in order to make sure he can pass on to another step. Tests should be relevant as related ones, so that the learner's listening ability, understanding, writing and expressing himself in the foreign language are tested.

Within the process of testing and evaluating, the score or mark the student obtains has a particular role and carries a certain message. Unlike with the other subject matters, in foreign languages the teacher is the only source of information the student has and the teacher is responsible for everything the student does and knows; the student's speaking, understanding ability, as well as his reading skill depend on what is done in the classroom under the teacher's guidance, as he is the only model he has. In this instance, the ability of the teacher to explain the peculiarities of the language, as well as of the civilization and culture it conveys, is of the utmost importance, so that the students should develop not only correct skills, but also objective and critical.

The mark must be used as a re-enforcer.

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TYPES OF TESTS

1. Aptitude tests - tests designed to establish who is (and who is not) likely to be good at learning foreign languages.

2. Placement tests - tests designed to arrange into groups of roughly similar language level.

3. Diagnostic tests - test designed to establish areas of weakness or deficiency, so that future teaching can remedy these areas.

4. Progress tests - tests designed to establish whether learners have mastered the language that has been taught in recent lessons.

5. Achievement tests - tests designed to establish how much of the language syllabus has been learned.

6. Proficiency tests - tests designed to establish whether students have the necessary level and type of language to undertake a task in the future (e.g. a course of study or a job).

Many students will learn whatever is necessary to get the grades they desire. Avoid creating intense competition among students**.** Competition produces anxiety, which can interfere with learning. Reduce students' tendencies to compare themselves to one another. Students are more attentive, display better comprehension, produce more work, and are more favorable to the teaching method when they work cooperatively in groups rather than compete as individuals. Refrain from public criticisms of students' performance and from comments or activities that pit students against each other.

Design tests that encourage the kind of learning you want students to achieve. Your tests on memorizing details, students will focus on memorizing facts. If your tests stress the synthesis and evaluation of information, students will be motivated to practice those skills when they study.

Give students feedback as quickly as possible. Return tests and papers promptly, and reward success publicly and immediately. Give students some indication of how well they have done and how to improve. Rewards can be as simple as saying a student's response was good, with an indication of why it was good, or mentioning the names of contributors: "Cherry's point about pollution really synthesized the ideas we had been discussing."

What are discrete-point tests? What are tests of integrative skills? Discuss their relative advantages and disadvantages. Is the distinction valid?

Spolsky (1975) identifies three stages in the recent history of language testing:

1) The pre-scientific

2) the psychometric-structuralist and

3) the psycho-linguistic-sociolinguistic.

Psychometric-Structuralist Testing : Breaking down the complexities of language into isolated segments. This influences both what is tested and how it is tested.

These ideally reveal the candidate's ability to handle one level of language in terms of one of the 4-skills.

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The disadvantage is that they rest on the assumption that proficiency is quantifiable in this way: The assumption that knowledge of the elements of a language is equal to knowledge of that language. A vital element: the ability to synthesize is missing from an atomistic analysis. Also it is extremely difficult (and probably undesirable!) to construct "pure" test items (i.e. items operating on one level of structure ONLY) other than ones which are extremely trivial in nature.

The clear advantage of Discrete Point Tests = they yield data which is easily quantifiable.

The counting of bits - If language performance is to be described by means of numerical scores, discrete-point testing is helpful. The tasks are unambiguous, the marking introduces no element of capriciousness and a person's final score is clear for all to see. Discrete-point tests can be accurately and objectively marked even by mechanical scanning methods.

More disadvantages: Correct/Incorrect judgements depend on context e.g. certain communities exist where "I be" and "I were" are accepted forms.

RELIABILITY-VALIDITY TENSION: Lado's tests are only objective in terms of actual assessment. In terms of the construction of the test itself and the evaluation of the numerical score yielded, subjective factors pay a big part.

In objective tests, Ss may produce no language at all e.g. MC they only select alternatives. Ability to recognise appropriate forms is deemed sufficient. In subjective testing, the ability to produce the language is crucial.

INTEGRATIVE TESTING - Attempt to assess a learner's capacity to use many bits all at the same time. Integrative tests are often pragmatic in the sense that they set tasks which cause the learner to process sequences of elements in a language that conform to the normal contextual constraints of that language, and which require the learner to relate sequences of linguistic elements via pragmatic mappings to extralinguistic context. Naturalness criteria: Integrative tests: often pragmatic.

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