

Language Teaching and Language Testing: a way and ways to make appropriate connections

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Finalizado: Columbus, 2005-10-10 / Revisado: 2005-12-05 / Aceptado: 2006-02-06

Resumen

LA ENSEÑANZA Y LA EVALUACIÓN DE LA LENGUA: FORMAS DE ESTABLECER CONEXIONES APROPIADAS

En este artículo se discute la relación pedagógica entre la enseñanza de idiomas extranjeros y/o segundas lenguas y su evaluación. El autor desarrolla su exposición en torno a distintas formas de evaluación que contribuyen a establecer la conexión entre enseñanza, aprendizaje y evaluación. Presenta ejemplos concretos sobre cómo evaluar el lenguaje hablado mediante la aplicación de la Entrevista de Suficiencia Oral (Oral Proficiency Interview), el uso de los portafolios y las rúbricas para valorar la suficiencia escrita. El artículo se basa en estudios llevados a cabo en los Estados Unidos durante las últimas décadas y relacionados con la enseñanza de la competencia comunicativa, los estándares nacionales para lenguas extranjeras y los principios generales de evaluación aplicados a cualquier disciplina académica, y que pueden ser aplicados a la enseñanza de lenguas. Finalmente, el autor cita el siguiente proverbio africano: «Comienza donde estás, pero no te quedes allí», cuyo mensaje es un estímulo hacia la búsqueda del aprendizaje como crecimiento personal para toda la vida.

Palabras clave: Evaluación formativa, evaluación sumativa, enseñanza, lenguas extranjeras/segundas lenguas.

Abstract

This article addresses the pedagogical principle of connecting the way [or ways] foreign and second languages are taught with the ways they are evaluated or tested. The author poses that this important connection can be made by providing concrete instructional applications including spoken language, through the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), portfolios and rubrics for assessing students' writing proficiency. The article is based on studies conducted in the US during the past few decades. These are related to communicative language teaching, the national foreign language standards, and general testing principles applicable to any academic discipline; however, they can also be applied for language instruction and testing worldwide. The author quotes a wide known African proverb that says, «start where you are but do not stay there,» to encourage life long learning and growth.

Key words: Assessment, teaching, testing, foreign/second languages.

Résumé

ENSEIGNEMENT ET ÉVALUATION DES LANGUES: DES FAÇONS POUR FAIRE DES CONNEXIONS APPROPRIÉES

Cet article discute la relation pédagogique entre la forme ou les formes d'enseigner les idiomes étrangers et / ou les langues secondes et la manière comment ceux-ci sont évalués. L'auteur développe son exposé autour des différentes formes d'établir cette liaison si importante en présentant, à manière d'illustration, des exemples concrets de comment évaluer le langage parlé à travers l'application de l'Entrevue Orale de Capacité (Oral Proficiency Interview) et l'utilisation des dossiers et des rubriques pour évaluer la capacité écrite. L'article est fondé sur des études menées aux Etats-Unis pendant les dernières décades concernant l'enseignement de la compétence communicative, les standards nationaux pour les langues étrangères et les principes générales d'évaluation appliqués à n'importe quelle discipline académique mais, en tenant compte que les principes pour les langues secondes et les exemples donnés sont primordiales pour l'enseignement de toutes les langues. Nous incluons une courte liste de références actualisées lesquelles peuvent donner par la suite, une précieuse information. L'auteur insiste auprès des lecteurs à suivre le proverbe africain suivant: « commence où tu es, mais ne reste pas là » dont le message positif motive à la recherche de l'apprentissage comme croissance de chaque jour.

Mots-clés: évaluation formativa, évaluation sommative, enseignement, langues étrangères, langues secondes.

1. Introduction

This essay is written from the perspective of an experienced American foreign language educator who has worked in the field of language teaching, testing and assessment for more than 25 years. It is designed to provide readers with insight about a major trend in the field of language testing during the past few decades, namely linking the *ways we teach* foreign and second languages with the *ways we test* our students. So, readers may find the article informative whether they are novice or experienced language instructors. The author requests that, as a reader, you «start where you are but don't stay there,» an African proverb from Zambia which means that one should always remain open to new developing new perspectives.

Historically speaking, language teaching, including English as a foreign language, has seen an emphasis on communicative language teaching methods since the early 1970's when the term communicative competence was first introduced to the language teaching profession by Dell Hymes. Since that time teachers have attempted to incorporate real world language usage in their classes and in their instructional materials, especially in adolescent and adult language instruction. However, language testing has not kept up with communicative instructional practices.

2. Real world use of languages

Often students express a desire to communicate in authentic language, meaning they want to hear and use language outside of the language classroom. It has probably been the case for most readers of this essay that your students want to be able to use English for functional purposes. They may want to order food in a restaurant, understand telephone answering machine messages, send an e-mail message to a friend or acquaintance, make travel reservations, listen to music, or read a written note from an English-speaking person. As language educators, we can often motivate our students by including activities in our classrooms that have real world applications. Indeed this type of focus often helps use convince the students that they are making

progress in trying to become proficient in their new language, even though they may still be making numerous errors in pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary usage.

One of the interesting challenges for many language teachers is that the real world classroom activities that we utilize are often not included in the textbooks, although that has changed a lot in the last few decades. The dilemma becomes how to test the students if these types of topics, functions, and tasks are not integrated into our textbooks and commercial testing programs. Another typical dilemma is often how to evaluate our students' progress in terms of their functional ability in English (as a foreign language). And, of course, these types of dilemmas lead us naturally to the question of the purposes of classroom language testing.

3. Purposes for language learning and language testing

Given the variety of foreign language classrooms, the diversity of student reasons for enrolling in language classes, the choices language instructors make in terms of textbooks and other instructional materials they wish to use in their teaching, and the relatively new tool of the Internet as an instructional resource, it goes without saying that the purposes of language testing are numerous. Sometimes, language teachers choose to test students via periodic quizzes and tests of achievement. At other times, instructors assess students' language proficiency [i.e., their global ability to use the foreign or second language], perhaps at the end of several years of language study. At other times, language teachers use tests for placement and diagnostic reasons and other purposes. Shohamy (2001) wrote a wonderful book about the power that tests can exert in the lives of students. She offers a lot of case studies in her book about students who have been impacted by the results of test scores. She reports that no matter what the teacher's purpose for the language test may be, students are sometimes devastated by the results of tests. And this is particularly true of so called «high stakes» tests such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) that is required for international students who want to enter English-speaking colleges

and universities in the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and other countries.

So, tests can have a wash back effect, which means that they may result in instructional programs or teaching practices changing to reflect the test contents because language teachers want their students to do well on high stakes tests for many different reasons. In some respects, standardized test can be expected to have an indirect effect on what language teachers teach and sometimes even how they teach the foreign language. As an experienced language educator, the author of this essay accepts the inevitability of the wash back effect of major tests, even those given at the end of the term by the instructor because we are sometimes obligated to «teach to the test.» However, once this inevitability is accepted, foreign language teachers often advocate for an even more important outcome than passing the test. They often teach their students to become autonomous language learners, meaning we want students to become independent learners so they continue to learn the language long after they have completed formal language study. The familiar adage is «teach a person to fish and he can

eat for a lifetime, but if you give him a fish every time he is hungry, he will not become independent.» The same is true of foreign language learners...we have to help them to become autonomous language learners, and testing can play a role in this important teaching. This takes us nicely to the meaning of tests versus assessments.

4. Testing versus Assessment

A major paradigm shift has occurred in testing in the past few decades and that is to ask language teachers to include both tests (given at a single point in time) and assessments (continuous, ongoing evaluation) in language programs. Wiggins (1994) raised excellent questions about assessment that is designed to improve performance not just audit it. He asked, for example, «What kinds of challenges would be of most value to the students (and to the teachers concerning the abilities of their students)? How will the results of this test be used to help students know their strengths and weaknesses on essential tasks? What kind of evaluating will provide the best kinds of incentives and aims, thus enabling

Table 1

Traditional versus the current ways of evaluating student knowledge and skills in language education

Tests	Assessments
1) Usually announced so students can prepare for them	1) Usually unannounced because the purpose is to informally check on student progress
2) Are often achievement checks on a unit of instruction (e.g., a chapter test, a semester exam)	2) Are typically designed to check student progress informally (purpose is to see what students need to have re-taught or need to practice more)
3) Are mainly designed to result in a grade or test score	3) Many times - informal and de-emphasize the grade or test score
4) Occur at a single time and place	4) Are often ongoing and continuous
5) Typical test item formats include multiple choice, correct answers, and other ways of evaluating students	5) May include the use of rubrics easily scored, sometimes discrete
6) Often not contextualized	6) Usually contextualized

SOURCE: HANCOCK, 2006

students to raise their own standards? (p. 70). The following table illustrates some of the traditional versus the current ways of viewing evaluating student knowledge and skills in language education:

5. Some Ways of Integrating Teaching and Testing in Foreign Language Classrooms

In the past few decades, the emphasis on communicative language teaching has continued to be encouraged by the language teaching profession worldwide. Perhaps one of the reasons for the popularity of this approach is that student often expect to be able to use the second or foreign language that they student for functional purposes. Students often want to be able to use the language to leave or listen to a telephone message on an answering machine. Or, they want to be able to read and write e-mail messages to friends and acquaintances. So, if these are the types of communicative outcomes students want to achieve, it makes sense to provide classroom and other external opportunities for them practice these tasks. Textbooks and teacher-designed instructional strategies have increasingly been emphasizing communicative competence. And, therefore, the instructional programs in language classrooms worldwide tend to focus on these types of activities.

This article advocates an increased emphasis on aligning teaching approaches and content with related testing and assessment approaches. In other words, we ought to integrate classroom language teaching and testing approaches. Let's take a concrete example of how this might work in a language classroom. We can take the case of a hypothetical college classroom in which students are learning to listen, speak, read, and write English [or any other modern foreign language]. Their instructor provides both direct instruction in which students are taught rules of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, some of the basic areas of most foreign language classes all over the globe. Let's also assume that the instructor is seeking ways to increase opportunities to link her/his teaching program to his/her testing program for the students.

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign

Languages (ACTFL) has a popular set of Oral Proficiency Guidelines that instructors may use to evaluate their students' oral performances. ACTFL advocates the use of the Oral Proficiency interview (OPI), a strategy in which an instructor can interact with students in an interview format to rate the students of a scale from Novice, Intermediate, Advance, to Superior proficiency. It is a relatively easy to use scale, but it requires some degree of basic training for effective use.

The interview lasts approximately 20-25 minutes of either face-to-face interaction or via the telephone and must contain the following parts:

- Warm-Up (designed for psychological purposes to relax the student)
- Level Check (designed to determine the proficiency level — Novice, etc.)
- Probe (designed to see if the student can perform at a higher proficiency level)
- Role Play (designed to provide a short context for interactive language use)
- Wind-Down (designed to relax the student at the end of the interview)

A language teacher who wishes to use this ACTFL OPI technique on a regular basis would be well advised to see training beyond what this article can provide. However, the intent of including the OPI in this publication is to encourage its use. Further information in the form of responses to frequently asked questions about is available from ACTFL's website <http://www.languageTesting.com> This web site contains excellent information to help instructors learn about the ACTFL OPI interview from a student's point of view. Some of the questions include: What is the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview? How is the interview structured? What happens during the interview? Will I only be required to answer questions? And what are the best strategies for success on the OPI?

Continuing with the typical OPI, an instructor would include a short role-play situation such as the following to provide an opportunity for the student to engage in a bit of sustained conversation with the instructor. Two different sample role-play situations are presented below as concrete examples of situations that an instructor might include in an OPI, depending, of course, on the student's level of

language proficiency. The first one is simple and the second is more complex.

- Role Play 1: Pretend that a friend has asked you to go to the movies and that you agree to go. Later, another friend asks you to go to a movie that you would much rather watch. Call the first friend and explain why you can't go with that friend and that maybe you can go another day.
- Role Play 2: Pretend that you are in a band or musical singing group. Explain that you are going to miss rehearsal for the third time in two weeks. The director wants to talk to you about your absences. Explain the situation and convince the director not to dismiss you from the group.

These two role-plays are not equal in level of difficulty for a second language learner. The second one is more challenging for the student because it involves both narration and a higher functional in use of language to convince. Nevertheless, both role-plays provide opportunities for the language student to practice using language in context in a situation that is realistic, meaning it could happen in real life. In other words, students are presented with an opportunity to use language to communicate with someone [e.g., their instructor or interviewer in the case of an OPI] in situations that reflect real world use of language. The goal is to determine if the student can handle a simulated real-life situation.

Perhaps the reader is able to see this type of role-playing as an example of a context-base communicative language task, particularly if it is used in conjunction with an oral proficiency interview. The link with instruction is that students would practice the interview strategies such as answering questions and role playing in the instructional part of the program (i.e., the classroom) and then have an opportunity to demonstrate their proficiency in a simulated interview with their instructor or another interviewer.

One well-known American assessment expert, Grant Wiggins, has called this type of testing to be a test worth taking. He argues that many classroom tests are problem-solving tasks that do not resemble the types of real-world tests that are taken once students complete their studies. Certainly, that cannot be said for assessments like the OPI because it includes many typical interview strategies required

in real interviews for jobs, business, personal relationships, and everyday conversations. The point is that the OPI links communicative teaching with communicative testing in a very transparent way.

Another way of integrating teaching and testing is the use of portfolios and scoring rubrics that are very popular in the field of composition instruction. Many first and second language instructors use portfolios, for example, to provide opportunities for students to show samples of their academic work and its development in a portfolio. In the language classroom, this technique is very valuable because students are empowered to make decisions about which samples of their work to include and also to write reflective comments about why they chose to include certain samples of their work and judgments about their own skill development over the course of the academic term. Rubrics, especially those developed in cooperatively between the instructor and the students, are a means of sharing the power invested in the instructor with the students.

In one class, the author recently used the following rubric for evaluating an essay that was part of a larger portfolio. It is included (Table 2) here as an example of how to connect language teaching and testing. This rubric was adapted from a similar one in *New Ways of Classroom Assessment* (1998).

The above assessment provided an opportunity for both the instructor and students to work together in determining the criteria to be used in evaluating the language student's essay. It also provided excellent opportunities for empowering the students (Shohamy, 2001) and developing their autonomy as language learners. In this way, second language learners participate actively in judging their own writing with input from the instructor. This way also demonstrates a strategy for linking language teaching and testing by softening the artificial, sometimes hard, boundaries that exist between teaching and testing in second language classes where teachers are proficient the language and students are not.

A relatively novel way of linking teaching and testing in a language program is to focus on what is called the called Five Cs: Communication, Communities, Cultures, Comparisons, and Connections. These are the priorities of the national

Table 2
 Essay Rubrics

	Excellent				Fair
1.- Is the topic clearly identified? Comment:	5	4	3	2	1
2.- Is there unit of ideas? Comment:	5	4	3	2	1
3.- Is there coherence? Comment:	5	4	3	2	1
4.- Does the style of writing match the task? Comment:	5	4	3	2	1
5.- Is language used appropriately? Comment:	5	4	3	2	1
6.- What did you like about this essay? (Question addressed to the instructor)					
7.- What did you dislike about this essay? (Question addressed to the instructor)					

SOURCE: ADAPTED COMPOSITION RUBRIC. HANCOCK, 2005

foreign language standards (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996). They are a way of organizing language instruction around «big ideas» and concepts. They serve as a way of linking second language learning to the uses of foreign and second language study beyond the language classroom. While it is fairly clear what each of these terms means in language education, a brief explanation is, nevertheless, presented below to make the case for using the Five Cs as a way of linking the way foreign language is taught to the way it is tested.

Communication - a common reason why students worldwide study foreign and second languages, that is, to learn to communicate. For example, many students these days want to communicate with their peers via e-mail and text messages. However, they may also need to learn to communicate for business or career purposes using a more formal variety of the foreign language.

Communities - real languages are used in real

communities for people to be able to communicate with each other, even though the Internet and other technology has made global communication much more facile that it has ever been in history. For example, families communicate regularly with each other verbally and non-verbally on a regular basis. When exchange students have the opportunity to participate in family stay experiences, they seem to pick up so much more than the rules of pronunciation of a language or its vocabulary; they seem to develop proficiency in a naturalistic way.

Cultures – a concept that is very complex and has many different meanings, but in the context of the Five Cs, it refers mainly to the life styles, mores, beliefs, and habits of people who share not only a language (e.g., Spanish) but who also share deeper values. In languages like Spanish with more than twenty different countries where it is spoken and many different cultures within each country and English with its many variations in countries as different as the Australia, England, New Zealand,

Nigeria, and the U.S.A, it is clear why this is a complex concept. Any yet, language instructors worldwide share the view that culture is intricately related to language and therefore cannot be avoided when a foreign language is taught.

Comparisons - related to culture, this concept means that language learners, almost without exception, tend to make comparisons between their L1 and their L2 during the language program and even after completing language study; its is, therefore, perhaps useful for language instructors to help students make appropriate connection and avoid unhelpful ones in their language study. For example, many novice language learners make comments like, but they way they in native speakers language pronounce certain sounds is strange, or they way their grammar works is weird, etc. Most language instructors typically try to convince their students that making judgmental comparisons is sometimes not helpful when trying to develop proficiency in a language.

Connections – a concept that is related to learning theory in which it is often helpful for instructors to help students make connections with their prior knowledge, life experiences, and how they process information when they are trying to learn something new like a foreign language. For example, some language instructors help student to make connections between two aspects of the foreign language (e.g., preterito and imperfecto in Spanish or the complexities of spelling in English with such words *a through, though, and thought*). The «C» means that the more students can learn to make good connections, the better their acquisition of the foreign language.

Good, practical classroom testing and assessment practices

It can be argued that good teaching is good teaching, no matter if one is teaching foreign language, mathematics, or music. It can also be argued that there are significant differences in the teaching and testing methods that are appropriate for an academic discipline. It makes intuitive sense, however, to link instruction with testing/assessment no matter what the discipline.

For testing and assessment to be valid (testing what is supposed to be tested) and reliable (getting consistent results), the instructor must make the connection between the way she/he teaches and the way she/he tests. It is just common sense, but there are also pedagogically sound reasons for finding ways to connect one’s teaching and testing. These reasons include key factors for the treatment of students: equity, fairness, and transparency. Is it equitable not to treat all students to the same L2 instructional program? How fair is it for language teachers to emphasize communication in their teaching and then test students on the rules of grammar? And, in this day and age, should language instructors not be very open about both their instructional strategies and their testing strategies so all students know the rules? The above questions highlight commonly accepted principles of pedagogy not only for language instructors but all instructions, particularly high school and college instructors who teach students who are capable of abstract reasoning and learning to become autonomous language learners. It goes without saying that language instructors want to teach students «how to fish» [i.e., acquire another language] when they are hungry, to use the old saying about teaching a hungry person to acquire food for themselves, instead of giving them a meal to take care of their immediate hunger.

6. Conclusion

This article has taken the premise that foreign or second language teaching and instructors must link testing in deliberate ways. It has been argued that there are many different ways that this goal can be accomplished in the field of language education. While language testing has traditionally focused on sampling what students know (e.g., the rules of grammar or vocabulary in the language classroom), contemporary language teaching practice advocates assessing what students can do with the language and less on what they know. The article is written from the perspective that language educators need to «start where they are» with this topic of connecting teaching and testing, «but not stay there.»

The author welcomes interaction with readers about professional topics: hancock.2@osu.edu

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REVISTA DIALÓGICA
 Vol. 3 / N.º 3 / Diciembre, 2006
 Departamento de Pedagogía, Universidad del Zulia
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