

Assessment, Evaluation, and Grading

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Key Principles of Meaningful Assessment in World Language Education

Effective assessments administered by learner-centered teachers are . . .

1. **PRACTICAL**—embody a realistic, communication-based goal that learners can reach that is relevant to their communication needs
2. **PURPOSEFUL & POWERFUL**—provide meaningful opportunities for learners to showcase what they can do with the target language for authentic audiences and real-life purposes that are relevant and important to learners
3. **PERFORMANCE-BASED**—promote progress by providing individualized feedback about what learners can do and by encouraging them to reflect regularly on that feedback
4. **PERSONALIZED & PROGRESSIVE**—consist of multiple sources of information, collected at different points in the learning process, that highlight incremental improvements in learners’ progress, thereby motivating them to take personal responsibility and accountability for their own learning
5. **PRAGMATIC**—improve performance through learning and generate results that teachers use strategically to inform instructional decisions

As teachers, our challenge is to collect the evidence of linguistic and cultural competence that naturally arises from learners’ interaction with authentic, public audiences, to interpret it in meaningful ways, and to communicate this explicitly to learners (and their parents) instead of expecting them to infer everything from a single letter grade. We can also use the information we collect as a tool for

informing future instruction, curriculum development, and program articulation. However, this does require us to set aside teacher-based views of assessment that revolve around student achievement and mastery of specific content in favor of learner-centered ones that focus on what students can actually do with the target language. Some of the changes this may require are outlined in the chart below.

Components of Assessment	Achievement-Based View of Assessment	Performance-Based View of Assessment
Type of Assessment	Focused on isolated elements of language (i.e., cultural facts, grammatical structures, vocabulary words); Often focuses on summative, standardized types of assessments	Focused on the application of language to accomplish real-world tasks; Often emphasizes formative assessments, which are frequently personalized
Primary Purpose of the Assessment	Giving a grade at the completion of a unit	Providing feedback that informs future progress
Focus of the Assessment	Coverage: Mastery of fact-based curricular material	Communication: Application of communication skills to accomplish real-world tasks
Mode of Assessment	A variety of written quizzes and tests of grammar, vocabulary, and cultural knowledge	A variety of performance-based projects and assessments that require learners to use the three modes of communication to demonstrate competence
Content on Which Assessment Is Based	Checklists of vocabulary, verbs, tenses	A continuum of performance
Criteria for Correctness	One single right answer	Multiple approaches to a task that meet the criteria for “meeting expectations” for the range of performance targeted
Audience for the Assessment	Teacher as the primary audience	Authentic, real-world, public audiences
Assessment Process	Tends to end with a judgment regarding whether or not learners mastered the content that was taught	Tends to foster additional student learning during the assessment, which lays the groundwork for future learning



What are your most meaningful assessments?

Meaningful, performance-based assessments help students figure out what they *want* to do, find out what they *can* do, determine what they *need* to do next, and leave them feeling empowered and motivated to keep learning. This means that learners need time to reflect, to ask questions, to seek clarification, to engage in additional practice, and to attempt tasks more than once in order to help solidify what they are doing correctly before moving on to the next lesson. Opportunities to engage in strategic cycles of reflective assessment can become a powerful motivator for continued language learning.

Motivation. Language learners who can see their progress are more likely to continue investing in their own learning. Yet beginning language learners have difficulty recognizing that they are making any progress at all because it typically takes such a long time to move from one level of proficiency to the next. Thus, one of the profession's most urgent challenges is to use the power of assessment to progressively highlight the improvements that learners make in what they *can do* at every step while minimizing demotivating aspects of assessment. Take, for example, learners who judge their success or failure based on whether or not they get perfect grades. Such students are usually very concerned about what is needed in order to get an A, but may not really attend to what they need to do in order to improve their actual performance in the language. Consequently, these students often do extremely well on paper-and-pencil tests that ask them to conjugate verbs, but are frequently frustrated by the fact that there is no single "right" answer that can be memorized when they are asked to create with language.

As a result, they feel defeated before they ever get started because they find that they cannot achieve immediate perfection as language learners, and do not know how to use their mistakes as tools to improve their future performance. They also sometimes abdicate their learning to the person who controls their grade, instead of recognizing the pivotal role their own efforts play in their language learning success. Assessment that offers concrete evidence of progress can be life-changing for such learners. The assessment practices outlined below can help learners gain confidence in their language ability and assist them in recognizing their own progress.

- **Pre-assessment and Activation of Prior Knowledge—**

Learners share their prior knowledge and experiences and they become the foundation for their future learning. Such activities might include activities in which learners brainstorm what they already know about a topic and record it on concept maps or graphic organizers (e.g., What do you know/want to learn about . . . ?), journal entries (e.g., Tell about a time when . . .), signature searches (e.g., Find someone who has had an experience with . . .), surveys (e.g., Who can explain . . .? How many people in class think . . .?), or think-pair-shares (e.g., Explain to a partner . . .).

- **Activities that Progressively Build—**Learners complete a carefully designed series of activities that progressively develop the skills necessary to accomplish the targeted "can dos" for the lesson through opportunities to "practice without penalty" while they spread their wings in the language. For example, to activate

learners' prior knowledge, learners might try to brainstorm, define, explain, list, or generate questions about a topic. Next, the teacher might ask learners to watch a short video about the topic in the target language, such as an advertisement, a news report, a TV show clip, a public service announcement, or a music video and see how much they understand. Learners might then watch the clip a second time, but work with a partner to complete a task that focuses their attention on important clues that will help them figure out what the video is about. Learners might participate in activities that ask them to identify main ideas from the video or express their opinions about key issues that were raised. Next, learners might watch the clip a third time, focusing this time on the language patterns that are used to accomplish the video's purpose. Finally, learners might use these patterns to work in small groups to create a similar advertisement, news report, or public service announcement in which they share their own ideas on the topic.

Notice that in this sequence, the learners engage with the same text multiple times for different purposes. Each activity builds on the previous one so that learners' comprehension and production skills in the target language also progressively improve throughout the class period. They are able to progressively understand more and say more about the video each time they interact with it. It is important to note that the learners are able to use the language in an authentic way to complete the task without fear of "the grade," but rather in a setting where the purpose and goal of communication allows them to truly communicate, make errors, self-correct (or receive feedback), and continue to complete the task. This is "practice without penalty" that will prepare them for the assessments where they have to apply what they have learned during practice with more accuracy and precision.

- **Thoughtful Scaffolding—**Learners overcome challenges with the assistance of various types of scaffolding embedded in the activities by the teacher in anticipation of their difficulties. Such scaffolding might include: examples, formulas, graphic organizers, lists of rejoinders or transitional words and phrases, sentence frames, templates, or word banks of content-related vocabulary. A text-rich environment, where the language that learners need to use (e.g., sentence structures, key vocabulary, high frequency expressions), are all easily accessible visually to the learner allow them to use these tools to communicate with less breakdown, staying in the language to complete the task. These might include language ladders, word clouds, word banks, word walls, or other "tools" that are quickly referenced at a glance and applicable to the unit of study.
- **Formative Assessment Strategies—**Learners have frequent opportunities throughout each class period to find out how well they can use the target language to accomplish designated tasks. These might include non-verbal checks (e.g., Show me

how well you feel you understand this on a scale of 1 to 5. Are you ready to move on? Show me with a thumbs up/down.); exit tickets which ask learners to produce a response to a question or prompt in order to leave the classroom; or partner activities or role plays in which learners converse with a peer. Frequent use of practiced protocols to complete tasks allow learners to use language in a predictive setting, each getting a turn to interact to show and determine what they know, as they practice the task at hand.

- **Just-in-Time Feedback**—Learners receive “just-in-time” feedback about patterns in their performance on targeted tasks from real-world audiences and peers in addition to the teacher. For example, target-language speaking audiences might be invited to comment on learners’ blogs or video presentations online or to provide verbal feedback to learners about project ideas, or peers might give feedback on designated sections of an ongoing project.
- **Consolidation of Learning and Reflection on Performance**—Learners have regular opportunities to summarize their learning, to reflect on their performance, and to provide the teacher with feedback on the effectiveness of class activities. Many activities allow all three of these goals to be accomplished simultaneously. For example, learners could complete a 3-2-1 worksheet in which learners write down 3 things they learned, 2 things they still don’t understand or have questions about, and 1 thing that they would like to learn next. Alternatively, the teacher could ask learners to write down 3 things about class that they feel are helping them to learn, 3 things they would like to see change, and 3 suggestions they have for changing them. Another option would include a “rotation review” in which the teacher distributes a paper with a topic or question at the top to each learner and gives them 30 seconds to jot down something they remember about the topic before passing it to the person seated next to them.

Teachers who model a focus on communication and growth in proficiency, and who allow learners to be part of that process from start to finish, send a strong message to learners about what matters most. They also serve as excellent role models for colleagues who are looking for ways to further empower learners.

Mentoring. Language learning is never completed. It is an ongoing task rather than a skill set that has an end. Thus, although summative assessments can be administered at the end of each unit, all assessment in language education is really formative in nature. The depth, breadth, and variety of topics a learner can discuss and the control they exhibit when doing so changes over time as content is recycled and additional skills are developed. Consequently, the important part of the assessment is not the end result, but rather the process itself and the feedback we provide as we engage in that process with learners. The same holds true for teachers who are struggling to learn to leverage assessment in more powerful ways in their classrooms.

Many of the “products” that education naturally generates can be useful in helping us to identify what we are doing well and what

needs to change. For example, examining the work that students produce should give us a good sense of what they understood the goal of the task to be, how well-matched the task was to their current level of skill, what they are able to do, and what they might still misunderstand. The same is true of pre-service and inservice teachers—the lessons they design, the materials they create, and the assessments they produce demonstrate the degree to which they understand the purposes of assessment, the goals of proficiency-oriented instruction, and the extent to which they have developed the skills needed to facilitate language learning. According to research on motivation and flow, clear goals, a good match between the challenges of the task and skills, and immediate feedback are all conditions essential to promoting autonomous learning.

For example, teachers sometimes worry that they do not really know how to evaluate learners’ performance levels. Teachers can strengthen their capacity to accomplish this by becoming familiar with performance descriptors and assessing sample student work using protocols that have been recommended by experts. For example, the triad protocol asks each teacher to examine a sample of student work that has already been assessed by an expert. After making a judgment regarding the learner’s proficiency level, each teacher generates three statements to support their findings, and then discusses their findings with colleagues in order to come to consensus. Teachers then compare their findings with the expert evaluations in order to refine their skills. When we use examinations of student work to adjust what we are doing, how we are doing it, and to better communicate our reasons for doing it, assessment can become a very powerful tool for mentoring one another in ways that leverage systemic change.

Reframing Our Results

The articles collected in this focus topic section offer practical ideas for helping us to be part of this kind of systemic change. Before you read them, use the self-assessment tool on the next page to see how well you have developed the professional capacities you need in order to use assessment as an effective tool for supporting student progress, informing instruction, and developing a successful world language program.

Assessment in language education is continually evolving—a fact that can be both uncomfortable and frustrating for many teachers. Nonetheless, this is precisely one of the things that makes this an exciting time to be a language educator. The current focus on proficiency affords an excuse to experiment with creating assessments that are more authentic, more meaningful, and more motivating to learners. It also gives teachers the chance to mentor one another in developing more effective strategies for scaffolding learning and providing useful feedback. In other words, as the profession proactively takes steps



- How do learners in your classes know when they are making progress?
- How do you help your learners own their own learning?
- How do you engage learners in self-assessing and setting targets that will help them?

Self-Assessment

Can-Do Statements	I can do this ____% of the time
1. I can explain my purposes for assessment.	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
2. I can establish routines and procedures that facilitate effective assessment.	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
3. I can craft can-do statements that identify what I want learners to be able to do with language.	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
4. I can pre-assess learners' prior knowledge and elicit their personal experiences as a tool for improving their learning.	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
5. I can develop assessment tasks that generate evidence of how well learners can use the target language to perform specific language functions.	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
6. I can scaffold assessments to improve learners' ability to successfully complete targeted tasks.	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
7. I can design assessment processes that allow learners to progressively evaluate, reflect on, and improve their performance.	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
8. I can create opportunities for learners to receive "just-in-time" feedback from real-world audiences that helps them identify what they need to do next in order to continue improving.	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
9. I can engage learners with technological tools that facilitate assessment.	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
10. I can strategically use assessment results to support advocacy, curriculum development, parent communication, and program development.	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

to move all students toward increasingly higher levels of proficiency, teachers have unprecedented opportunities to grow with their students.

Demystifying the process of assessment from start to finish is essential for both teachers and learners in a performance-based classroom. Knowing what we are learning, why and how it is relevant, and how well we are doing both as teachers and learners is key. The 1999 book *Quantum Teaching, Orchestrating Student Success*, by Bobbi DePorter, Mark Reardon, and Sarah Singer-Nourie, offers some helpful advice as we try to find better ways to support both individual and systemic growth: "In real life, negative feedback doesn't mean failure—or anything else. It has no intrinsic meaning. It's just a message that says, 'Try again.'" In trying new things, we are likely to

discover some strategies that simply do not work. However, failure is an essential component of success. As we learn to embrace our mistakes as important contributors to our learning, we model for our students how to walk a path that will lead them toward proficiency development, individual growth, and a lifetime of personal success.



- How can you use the skills you already have to motivate your students and to mentor your colleagues?
- What skills would you still like to acquire?
- Who might be able to mentor you in developing and applying those skills to your work as a language educator?

Thank You TO OUR REVIEWERS

The Language Educator featured special focus topic sections in our four most recent issues:

Aug/Sept 2015: *Gaining Intercultural Communicative Competence*
 Oct/Nov 2015: *Transforming the Pathway to Learning*

Jan/Feb 2016: *Implementing the World-Readiness Standards*
 Mar/Apr 2016: *Creating Standards-Based Assessment, Evaluation, and Grading*

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