‘Distinctions & Dichotomies’ article for ETP
‘Testing and Assessment in ELT’

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‘Testing’ and ‘Assessment’ are two terms which are frequently used together as a lexical ‘chunk’, like ‘law and order’, as if they were a single entity. They do have a lot of overlap in terms of common areas of use, and many shared characteristics, but they are not the same thing.

People tend to say ‘Testing and Assessment’ rather than ‘Assessment and Testing’, because in the world of ELT ‘testing’ has a very long history, and is a familiar part of most teachers’ daily lives, whereas assessment is a much more recent arrival on the scene as a recognised, ‘respectable’ means of evaluating language learners’ performance. While a few academics and a small proportion of the language teaching profession have for many years favoured different modes of assessment over testing, the majority of language teachers and teaching institutions worldwide have taken the view that the only reliable way to determine the progress, attainment and proficiency of language learners is by using language tests.

In fact, as language teachers we assess all the time. We do it unconsciously in every class we teach. Whether we have made a deliberate decision to assess our learners or not, after a term or a year of teaching a class we have a pretty good idea of who the good ones, and the not-so-good ones are. It has been a commonplace for teachers to think or say ‘She shouldn’t have failed the exam - she’s much better than that’ or ‘The test grades don’t reflect what I know them to be capable of’, and yet for many years test and exam results have been assumed to have greater validity and reliability, and therefore credibility and currency, as measures of language ability, than assessments done by teachers. This has largely been because a teacher’s assessment of a learner’s performance was held to be necessarily subjective and unscientific, open to bias and favouritism, whereas tests and exams could be relied on because they could be standardised, because all the testees could be required to do the same tasks in the same amount of time and under the same conditions. But the assumption that tests are always going to be more reliable than teacher assessment is a false one. With careful planning, and the adoption of suitable frameworks and systems, the unconscious assessment that we do anyway can be complemented by a range of well-documented assessment procedures, both formal and informal, to provide reliable evidence of progress, attainment and overall language proficiency for each member of each group we teach. The one proviso is that there should be adequate contact time for a reliable sampling of each learner’s language to be made..

In contexts where teachers have a high level of contact with learners, either on intensive courses or less intensively but over extended periods, as is typical in many schools, assessment can not only offer much greater formative benefit to learners, feedback to help them improve, but also provide a basis for much fairer summative judgements. The reality is that institutional language tests and even national language exams can sometimes produce scores that bear little relation to the language learners’ actual ability to function in the language, their operational command of the language in real-life situations. This is because the exams very often do not test the full range of what has been taught, frequently seeking to find out what learners don’t know, rather than what they can actually do with the language. At school level, tests often fail to reflect what learners can really do because very few language teachers have received more than the most rudimentary training in test design and production. As a result, they know little about what makes tests work, nor how to evaluate whether they
are working as well as they should for particular purposes and in particular contexts. Most EFL teachers have learnt about testing from their older colleagues. They follow existing practice, working within national and institutional traditions, repeating the familiar and imitating the formats of language exams whose concerns are almost entirely summative. Until relatively recently, most language testing around the world has focused on knowledge of the target language as a language system, rather than on the skills and strategies which allow for effective communication, on grammatical and lexical accuracy rather than discourse skills, fluency, flexibility, range and delicacy, on the production of scores and grades rather than the provision of feedback for the learners and the teacher. Tests which have purported to provide accurate measurement of learner performance have often failed to sample the learner’s range of language adequately, making predictions of overall communicative language ability on the basis of tests which have not even attempted to target the learners’ spoken language, and which have often neglected key communicative skills. This situation is now starting to change, and the most significant feature of this change is the increasing use of assessment rather than testing, or assessment in addition to testing, as the basis for evaluating the progress and performance of language learners. There is clear evidence of this change at all levels: in the changing titles and topics of conferences and colloquia; in the appearance of ‘assessment’ in the titles and the content of publications of all kinds, particularly on the Internet; and in the renaming of the IATEFL Testing Special Interest Group (SIG) as the Testing, Evaluation and Assessment SIG, TEASI.

So what then are the key differences between testing and assessment, and what are the advantages and disadvantages of these two ways of evaluating the performance of language learners? The most obvious (and very important) difference is that ‘tests’ are ‘events’, ‘snapshots’, relatively brief moments in the extended process of learning a language, whereas ‘assessment’ is a set of processes which go on the whole time, but which can be formalised, systematised, harmonised and reported on in a variety of ways as required. Assessment is thus potentially based on much more extended samples of language performance and is likely therefore, in that respect at least, to have greater content validity as a measure of overall language proficiency and to be more reliable than the briefer and inevitably more limited sampling taken by a test or even a series of tests.

Another advantage of assessment over testing is that the majority of assessment procedures can be much more flexible and more delicately tailored to the individual learner than is possible with most test instruments. While it is rare, for obvious reasons, for a language teacher to create individual tests for each member of a group, the very nature of assessment as a set of ongoing processes means that the teacher can focus on the performance and progress of individual learners in ways which allow for the individual differences which all good teachers try to recognise in their choice of materials and methods. It is widely recognised that personalisation and individualisation are positive features of what has been called learner-centred language teaching. Assessment allows teachers to be sensitive to learners in ways that tests rarely allow, in that tests are usually fixed and standardising assessment instruments, which remain inflexible once they have been constructed. Tests with a ‘Pass Mark’ can be likened to a high jump bar which has been set at a fixed height. Assessment procedures can allow the bar to be set at different heights, as appropriate, so that at any given moment in an individual learner’s development accessible targets can be set and positive progress registered.

In simple terms, assessment can allow us to achieve the formative objectives we have as teachers, the provision of feedback to support each learner’s learning processes and maintain motivation, much more effectively than would be possible by testing alone. Testing and assessment should both have formative and summative objectives. We should operate with a range of procedures and instruments which we do for learners and not just to learners. In most EFL teaching contexts, though, testing has tended much more towards the summative, the provision of marks and grades, as a result of a worldwide historical tradition of expressing test results in figures, with their apparently more scientific basis and greater susceptibility to statistical analysis than the description of language learning outcomes with words. A key difference between assessment and testing is that assessment procedures are open to reporting in much greater detail, with words as well as figures. Words can
provide the ‘end users’, learners, teachers, parents and employers, with ‘results’ which are much more meaningful and usefully informative than the marks and grades that are the typical products of language tests. Recent examples of language performance profiles, ‘Can-Do’ statements and verbal descriptors of the kind to be found in the Common European Framework for Language Learning, Teaching and Assessment are powerful testimony to the increasingly widespread view that we should be less concerned with making language learning outcomes measurable, the quantitative approach that has largely held sway since the early 1960s, than with finding modes of assessment which can provide a basis for more detailed description of language ability which the target audience can understand and use.

A further benefit of assessing learners, rather than just testing them, is that the variety of possible approaches allows a number of wider educational objectives - learning-to-learn objectives and attitudinal objectives, as well as language objectives - to be reflected. Assessment can include not only the assessment of learners by teachers, but peer assessment, self-assessment, negotiated self-assessment and portfolio assessment, each of these being formative instruments involving enormously powerful developmental processes, as well as sources of detailed summative information, including marks and grades, when required.

It will be clear that assessment can offer a great deal to language teachers as a major extension to their repertoire of instruments and processes for evaluating learner performance. Often it will be perfectly appropriate to assess without making any use of formal testing instruments, but it must be remembered that tests remain valuable tools, one of the modes of assessment particularly suited to determining language learning outcomes in those situations and in relation to those skills where assessment is always going to be less effective. As language teachers we can only assess what we can see and what we can hear. That means that while it is true that we can assess in broad terms, over time, how a learner’s reading and listening skills are developing, assessment is most effective in relation to the productive skills, speaking and writing. We will still need to use carefully designed tests to be able to determine in any detail the extent to which, for example, skills such as skimming, scanning, reading for gist and ‘reading between the lines’ are developing.

So the important thing to remember is that the good language teacher needs to have an understanding of, and an ability to use, a wide repertoire of test instruments and assessment procedures. The effective evaluation of learner performance in language programmes does not require teachers to make a choice between testing and assessment, but to use the right combination of both for the particular context.

This article was first published in ETP in 2003