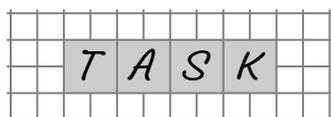


What do we assess?

Before we can assess a student's performance, we need to decide what we are going to assess.

At first sight, this looks like an easy question. As foreign language teachers we evaluate the student's ability in a foreign language. Earlier we gave the examples below as test questions (i.e. the teacher already knows the answers).



What do you think each of the following questions is actually **testing**? Think of your answers before you look at the key below.

- 1 He goes to the cinema. They ...?
- 2 Find a word in the text that means 'angry'.
- 3 On the tape, where does John tell Susan he wants to visit?
- 4 What is the main idea of paragraph three?
- 5 Dictation: write down the following ...
- 6 That's that part of the lesson finished. What do you think we're going to do next?

Key

- 1 This is testing grammar (using the present simple third person plural).
- 2 This is testing vocabulary (recognising that *furious* is a synonym of *angry*).
- 3 This is testing the student's ability to listen for detail.
- 4 This is testing either listening for general meaning or inferring from a text.
- 5 This is testing general ability (writing, reading, listening, pronunciation, spelling, etc.).
- 6 This is testing their ability to infer lesson phasing from their previous learning experience.

So we already test the students on a wide range of skills and abilities.

Message and medium

However, questions can have more than one answer. For example:

Teacher: *Miguel, where does the President of the United States live?*

Miguel (1): *He lives in London.*

Miguel (2): *He live in the White House.*

Miguel gives the teacher a problem here. His first answer is grammatically correct but factually wrong. His second answer is grammatically wrong but factually correct. Which answer is better?

The answer to this question is *It depends why you asked the question*. Language teaching is concerned with both message and medium. If we are testing the third person -s, Answer 1 must be correct. On the other hand, we are also trying to teach students to communicate in a different language. The grammatical mistake that Miguel makes in Answer 2 does not stop communication of the idea. Language teachers have to balance two different 'correctnesses': the right idea, i.e. the message and the right form of expression of that idea, i.e. the medium.

Which language abilities do we test?

Language components versus language use

Another common distinction is whether we assess the individual items that we put together to make a sentence, i.e. the components of a language (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation); or whether we assess how the student puts these components together when they actually use the language (i.e. the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing).

Other skills of using language

We need to use language that is socially appropriate (e.g. formal versus informal vocabulary, etc.). We need DISCOURSE SKILLS: making what we say fit what has been said before (e.g. *I saw John. He said he was going to the cinema, not I saw John. John said John was going ...*). We need STRATEGIC SKILLS, too, such as how to take turns in speaking, get information from a text, listen for gist, etc.

Language learning skills

- the ability to use a dictionary
- the ability to work out meanings of unknown words
- learning metalanguage such as asking the teacher *What's the past tense of that verb?* etc.

General learning skills

- contributing to, and working in, groups in class
- the ability to know what you know and what you still need to learn
- strategies for finding information you don't know
- following the instructions in tests, etc.

Other behavioural or social skills

Many teachers would say that one of the primary skills for any learner is the ability, for at least part of the lesson, to stay sitting in his/her chair working rather than wandering around and disrupting the class.

Which of these abilities should we include in our assessment?

How much should each skill be worth?

And, if they are included, how should we record our assessment?

This takes us on to how easy or difficult these scores are to mark or record.

Other criteria for inclusion: Easy/difficult to mark or record

As we have already seen, there is also a problem about how to mark or record answers.

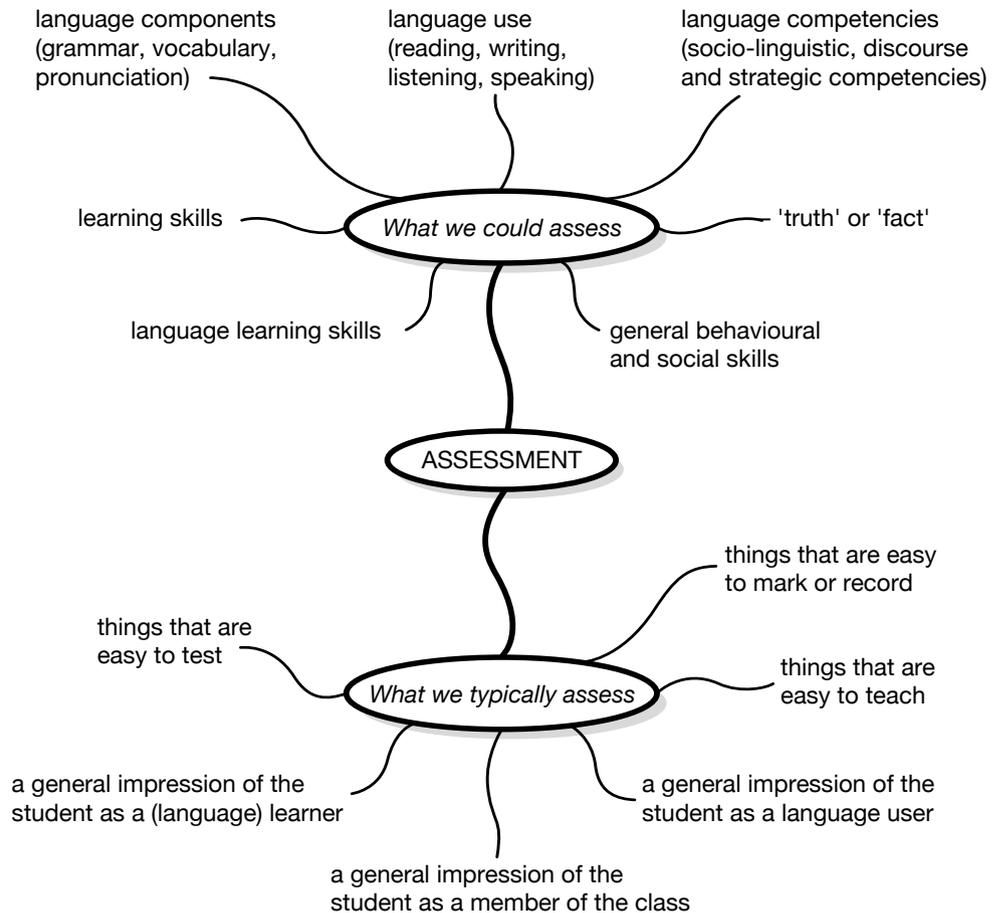
Assessments that give results as numbers (gap-fills, multiple-choice, etc.) are very easy to record. We can simply write the results (or RAW SCORES) on a piece of paper, or we can convert this number into a percentage, a mark out of twenty or an A–E grade.

Similarly, there are ways, as we shall see later (in CHAPTER 9), of marking writing, although these are much more complex as we are not counting correct results, but judging the quality of a piece of writing. We shall also see that the same systems can be used for other abilities, like speaking and behaviour.

However, when we want to assess, e.g. the student's contributions to the class, we have a bigger problem. This will almost certainly mean we will have to write

- notes. Notes are more difficult to record: different teachers will write different
- amounts about different things. If we want this information to be kept, we will
- have to have files for each student.

Summary



T A S K

Think about your current system of evaluating a student at the end of the year. Which of the skills mentioned above are included in your current assessment system? Which of the skills are not included? Can you think why they are not included?

Is one type of skill more valuable than another? For example, it gets higher marks, or determines the student's assessment?

How are these marks recorded?

Which skills are formally assessed (i.e. you record the information on the student's records)?

Which skills do think about when assessing the student, but are not recorded officially?

Does your present system work? Do the good students get through and the bad ones fail?

So how does your system define a good learner? Finish the sentence below:

In our school, a good learner is someone who can ...