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Teaching and testing: truths and myths

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1: Tests get in the way of teaching and learning.

- A badly written or poorly chosen test, or too frequent testing, may get in the way of teaching and learning.
- Well-written or well-chosen tests, however, can improve and contribute to teaching and learning.
- To identify what to test and how to go about it, it helps to stand back and think about what would be the best possible test to suit your circumstances.
- Most essentially, make sure that any test is used in a way that will benefit teaching and learning.

Overall: More myth than truth

2: Teachers are the best people to write tests for their students.

- For classroom assessments, there are great advantages to teachers writing tests for their students, as they're closest to their students' context, learning goals and needs.
- However, writing effective and fair test materials demands expertise and time, so teachers may need training in the principles and practice of assessment.
- If test scores are going to be used for other purposes, or to compare students' proficiency with the wider population, it's better to use external tests.

Overall: It depends. For classroom testing, truth; for other testing purposes, myth.

3: Tests should be based on authentic language sources.

- The aim of tests is to replicate the cognitive processes that go on in real-life settings, rather than to replicate real life – which is impossible in a test situation.
- Tests have tight specifications which contribute to their reliability. Authentic texts rarely meet these specifications, so they need to be adapted.
- The test writer's skill lies in including enough natural features in texts so that they look or sound authentic but still meet the demands of the test.

Overall: More myth than truth

4: It's not a proper test unless some people fail it.

- One of the reasons we use tests is to sort people's performances into categories, particularly if the test is being used for selection purposes. However, there are many other uses of tests (which don't require a test taker to be awarded a specific grade) where pass/fail distinctions might not be useful.

- Assessment is both a measurement and a judgement. There is no way of entirely removing the subjectivity from assessment, but we can all increase our awareness of the values we're bringing to the test context and the effects these may be having.
- Test outcomes are information, and what really matters is how that information is used. They may be useful to help you, the teacher, to think about what you're teaching and testing and whether you need a different approach. They're also useful for your students, to help to guide their learning path. This depends on specific, descriptive feedback.

Overall: More myth than truth

5: AI will automate test writing.

- AI is already being used to different degrees by various large awarding bodies, and for different tasks. However, there is still human involvement and it doesn't seem that this will change all that quickly. That being said, the roles that people play may change.
- There are concerns that the way AI reaches its decisions is not transparent and it's therefore difficult to know what inferences can be made from these decisions. Given that test validity is centred around these inferences, this is potentially a significant threat which needs much more investigation.

Overall: An inevitable truth – but there are caveats

If you'd like to explore anything further, here are some references and links.

On testing principles and classroom-based assessment, among other things, see Glenn Fulcher's YouTube channel:

- <https://www.youtube.com/@glennfulcher5625>

On creating authentic-sounding listening scripts:

- https://eprints.lancs.ac.uk/id/eprint/152542/3/2021_LAQ_RossiBrunfaut_ListeningAuthenticity_AuthorAcceptedManuscript.pdf

On the effects of formative feedback:

- Lipnevich, A. & Smith, J. (2009). Effects of differential feedback on students' examination performance. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*. 15(4). 319-33.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017841>

On AI in assessment:

- Xi, X. (2023). Advancing language assessment with AI and ML—leaning into AI is inevitable, but can theory keep up? *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 20(4–5), 357–376.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15434303.2023.2291488>

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