How to make the best use of tests on a language training programme

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1. THE IMPORTANCE OF ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNERS

Learning Goals

Assessment is the driving force that steers learners through a programme of study. An assessment mindset encourages learners to think about their learning goals and focus on how to achieve these goals. This helps to anchor their motivation and resilience to overcome the moments of self-doubt that lie in any learning journey.

Motivation

Assessment helps learners to focus on their progress, to replenish their motivation and be responsible for their learning.

Feedback

Assessment provides a mechanism for feedback. This can be in the form of verbal correction, encouragement or advice, or it can be hard data through tests taken during a course of learning (formative assessment) or at the end of a course of learning (summative assessment). This feedback enables a learner to take time to reflect on their strengths and plan for a strategy to improve their weaknesses.

Review

Assessment allows learners to benefit from mistakes. By seeing exactly where they went wrong in a targeted question or assignment, learners can pinpoint what is needed to improve. This can dramatically speed up the learning process and ensure the learner in question is on course for an outcome which does full justice to their abilities.

Continuous Improvement

Assessment promotes a mindset of continuous improvement. By being alert to the benefits of assessment when it comes to clear goal-setting, feedback, reflection and enhanced learning, learners and teachers can develop an always-on approach to learning that will transfer into a more professional approach to thinking about new challenges.

In thinking about the essentials to ensure the success of a language learning programme, Training Managers and Directors of Study typically focus on the quality of the teaching, the learning materials, the best use of digital tools and the suitability of the learning environment. Assessment is, unfortunately, often an afterthought. However, as outlined above, assessment is fundamental to the learning process and good tests give key data to both learners and course sponsors while poor quality tests will impede and erode the effectiveness of a language training programme.

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2. WHEN TO TEST

A formative approach to testing

• A formative approach to testing involves setting up a system of regular checks in the form of weekly or module progress checks, mid-course tests, coursebook unit recap tests and mock tests.

• The data gained from these checks can be fed back to the learner for self-improvement and learning reinforcement.

• This data can also be fed forward into future lessons and learning points as part of a cohesive assessment-informed approach.

A summative approach to testing

• In a summative approach, the formalised testing is left until the end of the learning period.

• It is viewed as distinct from the learning programme, placed outside the realm of the classroom.

• Summative testing is more remote from the day-to-day experience of the teacher and the learners, and it is best provided by another team or organisation.

The key question then, is which approach should be taken?

For a language learning programme to be successful, it is better to strategise formative and summative assessment in order to pull out as much learning data as possible. This will enhance the learning outcomes for everybody involved and will squeeze out the maximum value of the money being invested in the programme.

That's why Language Testing 123 are your trusted partner in managing approaches to assessment. Our expertise in assessment writing, planning, reviewing and evaluating has seen us partner with awarding organisations, publishers and government ministries around the world.

Talk to our experts and start planning how you can use smart assessment strategies to maximise the spend on your next language learning programme.

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3. WHO SHOULD BE TESTING, AND WHEN SHOULD IT BE DONE?

A key issue in creating an assessment system for any kind of language learning programme is identifying who will carry out the tests. It's helpful to split the types of tests being carried out into two categories: receptive skills testing and productive skills testing.

Receptive Skills Testing

• Receptive skills testing largely focuses on reading and listening assessment. The learners will be given a selection of reading and/or listening questions that will be marked through the use of an objective answer key, often in multiple-choice format.

• This means that the answers are not subject to any interpretation on the part of the teacher or marker, so whether a teacher is setting a test for their own class or another class unknown to them, the test will still be a reliable and valid test.

Productive Skills Testing

• Productive skills testing largely focuses on writing and speaking assessment.

• For speaking tests, the learners will be given an oral test which might be in the form of some personalised questions and a collaborative task to complete with another learner or with the examiner.

• For writing, the learners might be given an essay-writing task on a set theme, with a number of points that need to be included.

• In a productive skills assessment, the learner's performance is subject to some interpretation on the part of the marker. Whether it is intentional or not, it is difficult to mark productive assessments impartially if the learners are well known to you.

• A good solution might be to swap teachers or examiners around so that they are not marking the work of learners in their respective classes.

• Alternatively, there might be two examiners, with one examiner not being familiar with the learners and acting in harmony with the examining teacher in order to establish the level of performance reached.

3. WHO SHOULD BE TESTING, AND WHEN SHOULD IT BE DONE?

How can quality be assured in end-of-course testing?

The end-of-course test is the final staging post and it is important to the integrity of the programme to achieve reliable and valid results.

Remember, reliability in testing means that if learners were to take a test on multiple occasions, the results would be broadly the same.

And validity means that you are confident that you are testing what you claim to be testing; for example, there is no cultural or general knowledge that distorts the testing of the learner's language ability.

In-course testing can be carried out effectively by the classroom teacher. This is a great way to collect important learner data that the teacher can use to enhance the learning outcomes.

But while it might be a very good idea to switch things up for a mid-course test, it is essential to switch things around when it comes to the end-of-course test.

Why?

Because this is how you can minimise bias, minimise inconsistencies and maximise objectivity.

3. WHO SHOULD BE TESTING, AND WHEN SHOULD IT BE DONE?

A word about using external tests

When planning a language learning programme, it's really important to think about what evidence is needed to prove the success of the programme. Whatever the endgame is, think about how to best prove the beneficial impact of the programme and the return on the investment.

If you have access to professional language testers, then all well and good.

But if you're thinking about using non-professional testers to write materials for in-house tests, then take a step back. Is this really going to achieve the test questions necessary for proving a learner's language ability? How can you ensure the reliability and validity of in-house materials? Do your in-house test writers have the skills to write material that consistently links performance to international level frameworks such as the CEFR? (*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*)

For these reasons, it is a good idea to think about using external tests.

These tests would have been created by professional language testers, with expert judgement used to decide on language difficulty levels of each question and expert validation skill applied to evaluating the validity arguments of each question.

And that's where the team at Language Testing 123 can help. You are just one call away from tapping into their collective expertise, gained through many years of work for world-leading assessment organisations. Contact us today and see how external language tests could help you maximise the positive impact of your language learning programmes.

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4. ADMINISTERING TESTS: THE IMPORTANCE OF CONSISTENT APPROACH

Given the costs involved in setting up a large-scale language learning programme, it is vital to ensure the results are usable. This is especially the case in situations in which the results have real-world implications, whether this may be in terms of proving expertise for a given role or proving expertise to external project stakeholders.

Therefore, it is vital to achieve controlled conditions on all tests taking place in your organisation. Effectively controlled conditions can optimise reliability and validity in the following ways:

• Ensure all markers are briefed on what the testing criteria are, on what the grading levels are and on what constitutes a correct or incorrect response.

• Ensure before the test sitting that the answer keys are complete and have been checked for permissible alternative answers.

• Ensure all learners are taking the test at the same time, as far as this is practical. Minimise the risk to the test reliability and validity of learners who take the test in a different setting colluding with learners yet to take the test.

• Ensure the test is scheduled to be taken at a convenient time that ensures all learners can be present.

• Ensure the room is available for the duration of the time allotted for the test.

• Ensure the test takes place in a quiet area so that learners can concentrate without any issues. Remember to check any audio-visual equipment prior to being used in the test and remind learners not to take any personal belongings into the testing room.

5. HOW TO USE THE CEFR AND SUMMATIVE TESTS

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages is more commonly shortened to the CEFR and it is the gold standard when referring to language level standards.

Some key points about the CEFR

- The CEFR consists of six language proficiency levels, ranging low to high from A1 to C2. These six levels are categorised within three broader groupings: Basic User, Independent User and Proficient User.

- Within each of the six levels, the ability to use a language is mapped out in an extensive set of can-do descriptors. For example, at C2, the descriptor for overall comprehension states that users 'can understand with ease virtually any kind of language, whether live or broadcast, delivered at fast natural speed'.

- In layman's terms, learners evaluated as C1/C2 can be expected to communicate well and understand everything in a general conversation with a person whose first language is English. At B2, a learner might understand most things but struggle with idiomatic expressions. Below B2, learners are considered to be developing so their English use can be a bit inconsistent and dependent upon the context.

- The CEFR is a fantastic resource for all test stakeholders:

  o For testing organisations, it helps them calibrate tests to ensure comprehensive coverage of the CEFR level descriptors.

  o For learners and teachers, it helps with learner autonomy and self-assessment of learning needs to ensure they are confident their target language skills match the level descriptor.

  o And for stakeholders in NGOs, government ministries and companies, the CEFR helps to describe and identify the core language skills needed for families of job profiles as well as helping create a pathway for the upskilling for new recruits.

At Language Testing 123, our experts have been working with the CEFR since its inception and we've used our expertise to create Testfinder, a one-stop shop for all your external summative testing needs. Just sign up to Testfinder and you will have instant free access to a wealth of information on language tests ranging from General English to Legal and Business English, across each proficiency level of the CEFR.

For more information on working with the CEFR, why not drop us a line at Language Testing 123 and see how we can help you with your language and assessment solutions.

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6. WHAT TYPE OF TEST DO YOU NEED?

There are dozens of high-quality language tests on the market and it can be bewildering when you need to interpret results. Whether you're dealing with IELTS scores, TOEFL scores, Pearson Test of English (PTE) scores or any other test on the market, you need to think about a few key points before you can evaluate the test score.

Is the test a level achievement test or a multi-level test?

Some of the most well-known tests on the market are multi-level tests. These include IELTS, TOIEC, TOEFL and PTE. This means a candidate can enter the test without necessarily studying to reach a certain level. Instead, the test assesses their general language competency and the score represents their ability at that point in time, generally measured between the B1 and C2 CEFR proficiency scales.

Alternatively, a candidate may have taken a test such as Cambridge Proficiency, which is aimed at one particular CEFR level, which is C2 in the case of Cambridge Proficiency.

A key difference between a linear level test and a multi-level test is that a linear level test is likely to involve a pass/fail element, whereas a multi-level test will report to a scale, for example CEFR, so even if a candidate takes a test they aren't perhaps ready for, they will have their level reported rather than receiving a fail. However, linear level tests are often considered to be beneficial by providing a comprehensive syllabus for learners to move up the CEFR levels.

Is there an equivalency chart?

With so many tests available, this naturally increases the range and type of test scores that are available. Is the result you're looking at graded A/B/C, Distinction/Merit/Credit, C2/C1/B2/etc. or other? In such cases it is helpful to search for equivalency charts that give you a rough and ready overview of how tests of English language measure up against each other. One such equivalency chart is https://www.examenglish.com/examscomparison.php. A chart such as this can help you get a very quick overview of what a test score can mean in relation to other tests and how the results can suit the needs of your organisation.

Need more information? Talk to our experts at Language Testing 123 today about which external tests would suit your needs and how you can create an interpretation framework that suits your organisation's needs.

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7. HOW TO SET UP YOUR LANGUAGE LEARNING TESTING AND EVALUATION PROGRAMME

Language testing is a complex field. Whether you are sorting placement tests from achievement tests, deciphering CEFR scales, or setting up a programme to assess 500 employees across multiple continents, there is a lot to take in, a lot to evaluate and a lot to communicate.

Here are a few things to avoid. Read on for six pitfalls when it comes to Language Testing …

• **Do not take a test off the internet.**
Language testing is a well-established field with lots of diligent experts doing excellent work behind the scenes to ensure their tests are valid, reliable, usable and meaningful. Always seek expert input for your language testing needs.

• **One test does not fit all needs.**
Don't rely on just one test because it's well known. You need to be clear about what you need from your test. Do you need a range of accents in listening materials? Do you need to report multiple levels? Do you need specialised texts in reading tests? Be clear about your testing needs in order to ensure the assessments are fit for purpose.

• **Don't underestimate the linguistic needs of your organisation.**
Take time to plan what language skills are required for each job profile in your organisation and this will help to maximise satisfaction with the assessment system.

• **Don't overlook your audit trails.**
Language testing generates a wealth of data that can be fed into training programmes and a careful approach to auditing will help to refine the assessment for future cohorts. It is also essential to use you audit trail as part of your validity arguments if you need to prove the language skills of staff in your organisation.

• **Be consistent.**
Make sure to brief the assessors on what each proficiency level consists of, on what strong performances and weak performances would look like in each proficiency level and on what the testing conditions should be, including timings, locations and result processing.

• **Do not ignore ethical concerns.**
Be clear about your security procedures for test integrity, eliminate the potential for collusion, ensure the test is fit for purpose and be careful to interpret the test results so that any claims made about the test outcomes can be backed up through the evidence gathered in your validity arguments.

Whether it's identifying the language skills required for different positions, analysing test audit data or developing assessment needs, LT123 can help. Contact us today at info@lt123.co.uk.