

# Approaching language assessment

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**Resumo:** Este artigo enseja apresentar uma reflexão crítico-teórica acerca de alguns dos vários aspectos envolvidos na avaliação das habilidades envolvidas no ensino de línguas estrangeiras. Nosso interesse é contribuir, por meio de reflexões, para a concepção de que a avaliação é um processo único tanto para aprendizes quanto para professores envolvidos no processo de ensino-aprendizagem de L2.

**Palavras-chave:** 1. ensino de línguas. 2. avaliação. 3. ensino-aprendizagem

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## 1. Introduction

Anyone involved in language education today recognizes the importance of testing and assessment. At the same time, however, politicians, parents, learners, and teachers all have different perspectives on why tests are so important and what they can be used for. For politicians, the main use of assessment is to select people. Parents, in general, view assessment as a synonym of test results. Learners, similarly, are more concerned about their results than anything else. Teachers, differently, are supposed to approach assessment in a totally different manner. As a consequence, an important part of English language teachers' expertise includes a more thorough understanding of assessment.

## 2. Language assessment: a controversial issue

According to Baxter (1993), language assessment is a quite controversial issue in the field of Applied Linguistics. He points out that assessing language students, as well as any other kind of student, can be challenging. This is due to the fact that there is no such "formula" to approach assessment; all groups of students are different and all students are unique individuals. Therefore, it is the teacher's duty to be sensible enough to adequate to his/her students' profile. It is also important for a teacher to be aware of the fact that he/she is also part of this process. Teacher assessment is an on-going process that plays an important role in language teaching, too.

## 3. Evaluating language skills

With respect to student language assessment, there are many factors to be taken into account. Each language skill requires a certain approach. It should be noted, as previously mentioned, that there is no certain way of evaluating your students. As follows, we will present some of the things that should be noted when assessing students in different areas such as reading, speaking, listening and writing.

In "Evaluating Reading Comprehension", Figueiredo (1986) discusses some of the problems of reading comprehension evaluation in relation to some recent cognitive approaches. She suggests that these new reading approaches take reading as a product not considering the various social processes that it involves.

The researcher says that it is difficult for the teacher to get reliable results from the written answers given by the students because of the fact that reading is a mental process. Very frequently, the teacher may not know what exactly the student has understood from the reading or not. Also, depending on the knowledge of the student concerning the text to be read, there will be no input if the student already knows a lot about that certain topic.

Based on what was said above, it is possible to think of a possible solution. It is very effective to hand out a questionnaire before starting a reading course, so that you can ask your students for possible topics that they would like to be reading about throughout the coming semester. This prevents boredom and motivates the students. But, of course it is very hard to please all of them at the same time.

By analyzing the reading comprehension evaluation mentioned by Figueiredo (1986), we agree that when evaluating such a skill, it is necessary to focus on the process of it, too. After all, it is through the process that the teacher can eventually note his/her students' difficulties. We believe that the more the teacher knows about the whole process of reading, the better he will do in making adequate choices in his classes. Reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, guessing meaning through context, activating prior knowledge, predicting and so on should be known by the teacher.

In relation to the listening skill, Ur (1984) contributes with some interesting procedures that can facilitate the assessment of such skill. The author starts out by suggesting that teachers include real-life listening situations in their syllabus. This can create motivation and consequently better performance in the students' tasks.

The author also encourages teachers to provide situations in which the listener will have to improvise in order to keep rapport. According to the author, this is how the world is outside the classroom; you cannot choose what you will listen to or hear. Of course, some of these listening activities are not so easy, so there is nothing wrong in listening to them more than once or even providing your students with the script depending on the level of the task. Doing this will not turn you into a "bad" teacher. This is a myth; it is best to be realistic enough to ensure your students will not get frustrated or bored with the activity.

Another skill that is very well connected to listening is speaking. In general, we only speak if we are spoken to. In other words, we need to listen to someone or something first to establish some sort of communication.

Barcelos (2004) and Figueiredo (2006) are very much into this field of speaking correction. For them, teachers' beliefs are very linked to the speaking ability and, as a result, to the evaluation of their students. Depending on the background education of the teacher, he/she can evaluate the accuracy of the oral production of his or her students in a very strict and conservative way.

Figueiredo (2006) reports a study case of a teacher who was severely punished as a student and does not want his students to experience the same torture. In order to do this, he makes it easier for his students and gives them the expected answers ahead of time. According to the researcher, some of the students enjoy this procedure, but some don't. As predicted, the ones that do not like the teacher's strategy are the ones that feel useless because they are not given the chance to give it a try.

Analyzing this, we believe that the teacher should give the students opportunities to make mistakes. This is the only way in which we all get to acquire fluency in a language. Therefore, it is not advisable to keep interrupting learners as they go along their conversations. It is advisable, however to take notes of the most common mistakes among the class and refer to them as post-activity correction.

Barcelos (2004) also deals with speaking. In her article entitled "What's wrong with a Brazilian accent?", she portrays the attitudes Brazilians have towards accents in general and towards their own accent when speaking English. She shows how Brazilian people have a lot of prejudice against the existing accents within the country and against Brazilians that do not have native-like pronunciation.

Unfortunately, because of our own media and culture we are motivated to believe that when learning a new language, especially English, we are expected to sound like native speakers. In Brazil, depending on where you speak English and to whom, you can be a victim of a joke. Even in language institutes and University classrooms, people make fun of each other because of their accents.

As teachers, we should try to analyze this and do our best in trying to get our students to talk and produce as much as they can, independently of their accent. Of course, there should be a limit for not correcting. A teacher must be sensible enough to choose whether or not to correct his students. We believe correction is necessary if communication fails and in some other cases depending on the mistake.

Similarly to speaking and listening, writing and reading are also very much involved. Kleiman (2004) describes writing and reading as a communicative process that involves a great deal of interaction between the author and the reader. The author will always be aware of the possible readers of his production, and the reader will always try to establish some sort of communication with the author by trying to understand what the author is trying to communicate, in a certain way.

When we think of writing, as teachers, we must understand that it is a process that deals with many important aspects such as social, cultural, historical, ethical and political, mainly. It is through writing that an individual can express himself. Thus, we should take writing very seriously, since it is a political way of inclusion.

In order to provide our students with opportunities to express themselves in a contextualized way, we should once more relate to their real lives and bring in material that interests them. When doing this, we should always remember that error correction can be discouraging and frustrating for our students. Therefore, it is advisable to perform several tasks before actually correcting the final version of a paper.

For example, as an introduction to a certain paper, it is a good strategy to start the class by activating schema for that topic by brainstorming words that relate to the theme. Then, there can be some reminders, that is, reviewing typical features and structures of the type of text that they are about to write. After the reminder, the students can write a first draft, perhaps in pairs, from their notes. Next, they may be able to correct and improve their first draft, looking at content, language, accuracy and organization. Finally, they can write their final version and hand it in.

The strategy described above is a good way of evaluating students. By the time they write their final version, there is a great possibility that there will be fewer errors. This helps them learn more through the process and makes them more confident about their own writing.

#### 4. Teacher assessment

As mentioned in the beginning, teacher assessment is also part of language evaluation. As teachers and professors, we have to be conscious of the necessity of critical teaching. Fortunately, the field of reflective teaching is gaining more and more members. Recently, there have been many studies performed in the area of teacher formation and reflective teaching.

Teachers also make mistakes and as students should accept them and work on them. Even the most experienced teachers and professors commit errors in front of their students. Therefore, it should be noted that admitting a mistake is something that should not be considered a shame. Like learning a language, teaching also implies misunderstanding, sometimes.

An effective way of reflecting on your own practice is by keeping yourself a “diário reflexivo dialogado”<sup>1</sup>. In it, you can keep a record of your comments after every class and help yourself monitor your own teaching. Another good way of analyzing your performance is by handing out questionnaires at the end of a course. This gives students a chance to evaluate your performance and contribute to enriching future similar courses to be given again.

## 5. Conclusion

As it can be seen, there are no “magic” procedures when approaching assessment in a language classroom. All that was said throughout this article are suggestions that can help teachers in the evaluating process. Of course, some of this may not be suitable for certain situations. Again, there is no precise strategy in this field. As noted, every class and every student is different, so assessing them is a challenging task to be performed. The best thing that can be done is getting to know your students’ reality deeper and deeper, so that adequate evaluation can be performed.

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<sup>1</sup> Dialogued reflective diary.