

## Using diagnostic assessments in language teaching

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**Abstract:** The article is devoted to use different types of assessment in English language teaching.

**Keywords:** diagnostic assessment, gathering information, identify learners, strengths, weakness, judgement, diagnostic tools, language conversation

In my point of view diagnostic assessment is an act of gathering information which helps teachers identify learners' strengths and weaknesses with regards to course content and is tied directly to the course syllabus. Besides that diagnostic assessments are often used before teaching commences. Using diagnostic assessments can support a teacher's decisions about the content that will be taught as well as the approach of assessing that content. The focus of diagnosis is most important. For instance, if we teach how to speak English during an interview then we should assess student's abilities during a spoken interview. If the student writes a paragraph about themselves, then we are measuring a different construct than the oral interview although the topic might be similar. Diagnostic assessment need to match what is expected to be taught in the course syllabus. Thus, they can provide valuable data about what should be given more attention and what students already know, thus helping teachers to use class time efficiently. In my integrated skills (listening and speaking) classes, diagnostic assessment tools require students to recall and summarize the information they have heard, and aid them to express these ideas in written and oral statement. Most often, I try to use diagnostic type of assessment that highlight particular skills needed to interact successfully and model listening comprehension. More specifically, these tools focus on comprehensive understanding of the spoken word, and cover oral, language retell, comprehension retell and oral language conversation. For example, I use oral language conversation to assess the knowledge of the students about things I have taught. We may have a small conversation with the students where students are participants and I am the conversationalist. This assessment can be completed by an individual or a group and takes between 10 to 20 minutes to administer. In an individual conversation, other students participate as an audience or an observer of a discussion. Also, in listening classes I use audio tracks and texts to monitor students' progress in order to reach to the progress in their listening skills. After playing the audio tracks I can check the exercises with the help of the students themselves, they work in pairs and one pair

shares their work to another pair, then they have to check the work of other students together. Next we have a small discussion about the track to elicit how well the students understood the listening track. Although simple and direct, these tools also reflect the importance of interacting with print in meaningful contexts. Meaningful interaction and discussion require an approach to literacy and fluency. Both these diagnostic tools are designed in response to the identified need for early intervention and diagnosis in both low and high achieving students. Hence, the role of assessing should be essential to the practice of effective teaching of literacy and fluency. The tools which is used by me for the assessment are simple and direct and are very accurate and convenient for me to make judgements and make informed decisions about evaluation process and my lesson plan. In this case, I use gathered information from the assessment with regards to my classes to improve the students' knowledge and address the problems they have. If they make mistakes on more advanced listening exercises, I try to teach them more sophisticated listening tracks. Or if they have challenge in fluency during the discussion, it means I should focus on building fluency of my students. In summary, diagnostic assessment tools help both teachers and students to improve their knowledge, to find out the areas to work on and to progress further afield.

As we learned diagnostic assessment is an act of gathering information that helps us identify learners' both strong and weak points with regards to course content and associated directly to the course syllabus. Diagnostic assessment need to match what is expected to be taught in the course syllabus before lesson. Moreover, I am going to use diagnostic assessment not only prior to but also during the lesson in order to achieve more. In my listening and speaking classes, I use conversations and audio tracks as diagnostic tools. After the conversations (whether it is individual or group conversations) I will note and make a list of things that I need to do to help students to get over the problems they have. After I gathered all of these notes, I use this information to make changes in my approach so that it will suit the needs and necessities of students or modify the teaching materials and specify my plans. For example, if my students make mistakes more on the use of Past Simple and Present Perfect Tenses, then I try to do activities based on the difference and usage of these two tenses with students during the class. Or in my listening class I mostly use Activity based Assessment, that is, I use audio tracks and exercises on this listening task. After checking the exercises that have been done by students, I make judgements and inferences as to where students have difficulties. These can be adjusting to different accents or inability to be comfortable with the pace of the speaker's speech. In this case, I try to have more activities with fast track audio tracks with a variety of accents and use dynamic assessment method in my next Assessment check to see how my students made progress so far or how well they have improved.

But there can be some problems with the applications of diagnostic tools I use for instance, I don't have time to interview all the students individually so I conduct interviews with the few students who require most curriculum tailoring. For other students, group discussion can be used. This can cause some confusions among students. Another difficulty is with the addressing steps that take to improve the overall knowledge of my students. These steps sometimes do not suite or relate to the needs of my high achieving students. Or the needs of my higher achieving students cannot be addressed together with the needs of my low achieving students. As a result, there can be a confusion between students. To avoid this, I try to facilitate general and practical teaching methods that can be used for all levels. Other major difficulty is that the diagnostic assessment tool that I use does not always match with the standardized assessment tools. In this situation, I try to combine my method and standardized together and to progress further a field.

I think diagnostic assessment is important in language learning.

- 1) What is the purpose of the test
- 2) What sort of learners will be taking the test?
- 3) What language skills should be tested (reading, writing, speaking and/or listening)?
- 4) What language elements should be tested (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, speech acts, etc.)?
- 5) What target language situation is envisaged for the test, and is this to be simulated in some way in the test content and method? (For instance, is this a test of academic French? Of English for international TAs? Of Japanese for hotel workers?)
- 6) What text types should be chosen as stimulus materials - written and/or spoken?
- 7) What sort of tasks are required - discrete point, integrative, simulated 'authentic', objectively assessable? (That is, what will the test-takers do?)

In my reading classes, explaining new topics to check how well students understood the given material. In one of my lessons, the topic was "Psychology of muscles" and after I completed the lesson. I decided to make a short quiz to measure what I taught in the class the quiz took 10 minutes for us. But before that I divided the students into 3 groups I gave them " Describing of the picture of muscles" task which required students do task based on series of pictures that they saw during the lesson: the step by step environment application procedure. The pictures depicted before and after photos of the women and some other pictures that slowed the operation process. The purpose of this task is to urge students to practice extensive speaking skills and to think and to make up narrative story based on what they learned in the lesson. The task also aims to boost students' critical thinking and logical story telling development. The task is suited for both intermediate and

advanced learners. During the task, student's ability to speak and their capacity to keep their speech flowing and fluency are checked. Along with speaking skills, I also check their grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, speech acts, intonation, stress, cohesion and coherence. This task stimulates students to be prepared for Mid-term and final course assessment and the task content is also envisaged for IELTS task 1 for process diagram, where students are asked to describe numerous procedures as a process. Written content and pictures help as stimulus materials for spoken performance. The task which I assigned requires integrative approach since two groups are given two set of different pictures and each member of the Group should try to participate by describing one particular procedure and the other one should continue to talk the steps looking at the pictures.

Based on my experience as a teacher and what I have learnt in this chapter and discussions at classes, I have come to realize that I have some certain problematic areas in my which assessment I need to work on once I will finish this in-service education course. The first challenge for me has been my focus on accountability, that is, what tracked data tells me about student progress when I knew of no large scale study that demonstrates the positive impact of data tracking systems on learning. What I mean by this is that, by putting so much emphases on collected data, I risk losing sight of the actual results about how much students understand and where they are struggling. By changing certain elements of my assessment and make it more meaningful as well as taking extra workload burden of me, I will be able to adjust my focus on more important areas. As a result, I will have more time to work on the things which my students are having difficulty and make my assessment more efficient. And my next problem which I want to change is to alter some elements of my analytical assessment approaches by adding some constituents of holistic scoring so that I will not end up losing my time on developing judgement using various criteria for individuals work. At some point I think I can grand my higher achieving students or the ones whose progress is clear and obvious to me with positive general score using holistic approach. However when I need to give useful diagnostic feedback, imply on important differences across individual assignment for some of my students who are in need of these directions, I can use analytical scoring. The point is, as most other teachers do, I also have on excellent knowledge about my students' progress and their struggle. And using my time effectively by allocating it to more urgent and important areas in assessment, would bring benefits for me and for my students.

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