ANM-ANG_113
Lecture 7
Alternative assessment and feedback
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Compulsory reading: Hedge, T. (2000). *Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom.* Oxford: Oxford University Press
(pp. 375-378, 384-401 – extracts from Chapter 11: Classroom assessment by Pauline Rea-Dickins)

11 CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT

Pauline Rea-Dickins

'Simply knowing the final score of the game after it is over is not very useful. What we need is a vivid rendering of how that game is played.'
E.W. EISNER

1 What do we know about assessment and testing?

2 What has influenced approaches to language testing?

3 What should we know about classroom assessment?

4 What characterizes good assessment practice?

Introductory task

Consider each of the statements below in relation to your own teaching situation. Decide whether each of them is true, partly true, or not true. You may wish to discuss your responses with a colleague afterwards. You may also find it useful to revisit your answers once you have read this chapter.

	True	Partly true	Not true
A purpose of marking and assessment is to indicate learners' strengths.			
A purpose of marking and assessment is to indicate learners' weaknesses.			
A purpose of marking and assessment is to motivate learners.			
My assessments focus on my learners' language learning achievements.			
My assessments focus on my learners' language learning development.			
I only assess my learners by means of marks or grades.			
When I report their results, I add comments as well as giving my learners their marks.			

I invite my learners to assess themselves and their progress.			
I write reports/records at regular times during the academic year.			
My school/institution has a policy for assessment that all the teachers and learners know about and understand.			

11.1 Introduction: assessment and testing

The title of this chapter uses the term 'assessment', not 'testing'. This is because assessment is the more inclusive term: it refers to the general process of monitoring or keeping track of the learners' progress. Testing is one kind of assessment, one which is typically used at the end of a stage of instruction to measure student achievement. Assessment is a broader concept: it is part of the whole educational process of teaching and learning, and that is what this chapter is about.

The chapter also raises some questions about attitudes towards assessment and testing and, here, it is interesting to reflect on our own experiences. E. Williams (1985) writes of the negative connotations associated with tests and testing. Other authors make this point too (for example, Heaton 1990; Weir 1993). Indeed, there will be very few of us who have never had any moments of dread caused by one or more testing experiences at times in our learning careers when learning is associated with jumping hurdles that seem too high. Very often, these experiences are associated with feelings of failure and lack of self-esteem which may last well beyond school-days. However, this chapter attempts to examine assessment as a positive experience which contributes to the process of teaching and learning as a whole.

Assessment is a multi-faceted concept that links together the different issues highlighted in the Introductory task. Whilst tests can be used as a 'bolt-on' procedure at end-points in a learning programme, assessment is integral to the whole process of teaching and learning. It is the means by which students' language learning development and achievements are monitored over time.

Assessment is undertaken for different purposes. One purpose is pedagogically motivated, i.e. *formative assessment,* where the teacher will use information gained from assessments about a learner's progress as the basis for further classroom work. This, as we shall see later, is a complex process that requires careful structuring. A second purpose for assessment is to measure learner achievement. This is referred to as *summative assessment.*

Usually it has to fit into the administrative requirements of an institution, for example a private language school, or a school curriculum in which all subjects are required to be assessed. In some cases, the results from summative assessments are used to check quality, for example results from schools and institutions may be compared nationally, or regionally, to set standards. Table 11.1 summarizes some of the distinguishing features of formative and summative assessment.

Table 11.1: Some distinguishing features of formative and summative assessment

Formative assessment:	**Summative assessment:**
– is prepared and carried out by the class teacher as a routine part of teaching and learning	– is not necessarily prepared and carried out by the class teacher
– is specifically related to what has been taught, i.e. content is in harmony with what has been taught	– does not necessarily relate immediately to what has been taught
– the information from the assessment is used diagnostically; it is focused on the individual learner's specific strengths and weaknesses, needs, etc.	– the judgement about a learner's performance is likely to feed into record-keeping and be used for administrative purposes, e.g. checking standards and targets
	– is frequently externally imposed, e.g. by an institution or a ministry of education.

It is particularly important to recognize that formative assessment is concerned with keeping track of the learners' progress as it happens and identifying ways of helping it along. Its focus is on the process of learning. With summative assessment, on the other hand, the focus of attention is on the result of learning. It is more concerned with identifying overall levels of achievement and measuring what learners do against them.

A third purpose for assessment is formal certification. Here, structured tests of the paper-and-pencil variety are usually provided by an external organization. Examples of popular language examinations include the First Certificate in English (FCE) and Cambridge Proficiency in English (CPE), administered by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) based in the UK, and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), administered by Educational Testing Services, based in the USA.

Information from assessments is of interest to a number of people who have a stake in education. These include not only learners, teachers, and parents, but also education advisors and policy-makers. The way information is presented will obviously have to be different for each group. For example, the format of a report for parents will be different from one a teacher would keep.

11.3 What is the role of classroom assessment?

As suggested earlier, testing may be one procedure used by teachers to check on student progress, for example using progress tests available in coursebooks, or practice tests to prepare for public examinations. However, this is only one possible element of assessment. Classroom assessment can take other forms which may be formative in nature. It is to this more general process of monitoring learner development that the discussion now turns.

11.3.1 *What purposes should classroom assessment have?*

Classroom-based assessment is concerned with gathering useful information that the teacher can use to support student language learning. A survey by Brindley (1989a) investigated teachers' assessment practices in the Australian Migrant Education Program and reported on their views of assessment. His findings for 131 teachers are shown in Table 11.2. Brindley's findings demonstrate the importance that these teachers place on assessment as a support to teaching and learning functions. They reflect the view of this chapter that assessment should be part of teaching and learning, and capable of providing detailed information for teachers, learners, and parents. For this to happen, the feedback from assessments has an important role to play, as the next examples show.

Table 11.2: Perceived importance of functions of assessment (Brindley 1989a: 25)

	Mean	SD	Rank
Place learners in class	4.296	1.059	1
Provide information on learners' strengths and weaknesses for course planning	4.137	1.129	2
Provide information on funding authorities for accountability purposes	2.482	1.512	6
Encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning	3.957	1.268	3
Provide students with a record of their own achievement	3.207	1.393	5

(SD = standard deviation)

11.3.2 *What kind of feedback is useful?*

What is the role of feedback provided by assessments in informing curricular processes? The following examples show two contrasting examples of feedback. Example 1 provides limited information. It tells us how the learners have performed on a test, relative to each other. If we assume that five marks and over constitutes a pass, then this information distinguishes between a pass and a fail. However, because the information is limited to scores (and the same would apply to a grade such as A, B, or C) it is unlikely to assist the teacher in precise planning for a class. Neither do results in this form provide a useful guide to the learner on what needs to be worked on specifically in order to perform better. Example 2 is different. The teacher's written comments not only indicate the strengths and weaknesses of the student's writing but they may also assist students in monitoring their own progress and identifying specific language areas to develop further. They may highlight for a teacher priorities in terms of future teaching, or recycling of points already covered. The information could also be useful to parents.

In summary, assessment procedures which only yield scores or grades do not adequately fulfil the needs of classroom-based assessment. They may be useful in establishing norms and in clarifying whether standards are being met. However, in order for teachers and their learners to gain a better understanding of individual development, other types of procedure, which yield more feedback, will be necessary.

Figure 11.1: Two contrasting examples of feedback

Example 1: Marks for a test
Total marks: 10

M. Connolly	9	S. Joseph	9	R. Daimler	8
T. Thorpe	7	M. Roll	5	R. Dodge	4
A. Borrill	3	Y. Sinclair	2	F. Olive	2

Example 2: Teacher feedback on a classroom writing task
Total marks 10: 5 for task; 5 for language

M. Olivier: Total 3 marks

Task: 1	An attempt has been made to write a letter but it does not contain the information required by the task. The letter is too short. The overall message is unclear to the reader.
Language: 2	Very weak control of structures; structural errors obscure meaning. Relevant vocabulary for the task.

R. Nader: Total 7 marks

Task: 4	The letter clearly explains the reason for the complaint and why the customer wants a replacement. The letter achieves the appropriate formality. The message is clear throughout.
Language: 3	Some inaccuracies in use of tenses, but these do not obscure meaning. Appropriate vocabulary. The linking between sentences could be improved.

(Author's data)

11.3.3 *What assessment procedures are available?*

Classroom assessment procedures include the conventional paper-and-pencil style of test, structured classroom observation, and other modes such as portfolios and, self-assessment.

Paper-and-pencil tests

These are the tests with which most readers are familiar, and several examples of test items are given in 11.2.2. Paper-and-pencil tests are structured, tend to be formal, and are administered under controlled conditions with both stimulus and learner response in written form. They are very well-documented in published testing handbooks which take a teacher/test designer through the test construction process. One short section of a chapter cannot hope to examine aspects of test design and construction in any detail and the reader is therefore recommended to volumes such as Hughes (1990); Weir (1993); Alderson, Clapham, and Wall (1995); and

Bachman and Palmer (1996). Heaton (1989, 1990) are useful resources for writing objectively scored tests.

A number of considerations influence both the approach to test design and the content of the tests themselves. One of these, as we saw earlier, is to do with the view of language held by the teacher or coursebook writer and whether the focus is on language form or on communicative aspects of language. Another is the link between the test and the syllabus and materials being used in the classroom. For example, if the learners have been developing skills in producing a piece of writing for a particular kind of reader at an appropriate level of formality such as a letter of application to a course, then ideally the test should set up a task which requires a simulation of this purpose and audience, and the marking criteria will include appropriateness of style.

Observation-driven learner assessment

Observation-driven assessment has not yet developed in EFL contexts. The standard handbooks for teachers are all concerned with the test construction process rather than with the broader requirements of assessment in school settings (for example Hughes 1990; Weir 1993). We generally need to go outside the field of English foreign language education and look at mainstream language education in ESL settings (see McKay 1995) in order to learn about observation-driven approaches to assessment. These hold interesting potential for EFL. For example, in the context of primary children learning English as a second language, there has been a move since the late 1970s away from formal tests and towards overall assessment schemes, description-based and formative. In England, examples of this are the early work of Barrs and her colleagues (Barrs, Ellis, Hester, and Thomas 1988) and Hester (1993), who promoted the use of observation to describe language learning development with a focus on both language and content. The following is an example of a teacher's comments on the writing development of a pupil in the second year of an English primary school.

PC3 Writing Please comment on the child's progress and development as a writer in English and/or other community languages: confidence and independence as a writer; range, quantity and variety of writing in all areas of the curriculum; pleasure and involvement in writing both narrative and non-narrative, alone or with others; influence of reading on the child's writing; growing understanding of written language, its conventions and spelling; development of handwriting.

As a writer she has developed considerably over this year. She is independent, confident and fluent, using writing for a range of purposes and audiences across the curriculum. She is able to sustain a correspondence over two terms, to make books autonomously, and to write in a transactional style. She is always clear about the content and form of her writing, and spontaneously checks for meaning as she writes – prepared to change anything that is semantically/syntactically unclear. She is learning the English spelling system, and in her writing uses phonetic & visual checking strategies, known words, and reference to surrounding print in the classroom.

(Hester 1993: 16)

With an increased focus on communicative activities in the classroom such as information-transfer tasks, role-play, and tasks designed to promote oral interaction (both listening and speaking skills), it can be argued that observation is a valid means of gathering information about the development of language skills and, particularly, those aspects of communicative language performance that are less easy to capture in a traditional paper-and-pencil format. Harris and McCann (1994) point out:

> We often do reading tasks in class in *lockstep* fashion: the whole class reading one text and answering questions on it. Typical examples are the skimming and scanning activities so widely used or the 'comprehension questions' at the end of a text.
>
> There are various ways of assessing this kind of reading in the classroom. The first is by going around the class while students are doing a reading activity and observing which students seem to be understanding it and which are having difficulties.
>
> (Harris and McCann 1994: 17)

In the context of assessing reading in English as a second language, the need for a teacher to notice what a learner does when reading has been highlighted:

> – whether the child uses illustration (initially to help retell the story, later to check guesses)
> – whether the child makes use of the context to help work out the meaning; does what s/he reads make sense?
> – whether the child reads in meaningful chunks, or word by word
> – whether the child uses the structure of language to help work out the meaning
> – whether the child uses knowledge of what words/letters look or sound like to help work out unknown words
> – whether the child uses knowledge about books and written language to help work out meaning
> – whether s/he makes a good guess at unknown words, or waits to be told
> – whether s/he is using several strategies to get meaning from the text, or has heavy dependence on one strategy (e.g. phonic analysis)
> – whether the child self-corrects, and seems to be monitoring her/his own reading.
>
> (Hester 1993: 15)

Observation of learners on specific skills-based tasks can be planned into routine class schedules, but it needs to be well-managed in order to monitor progress in a principled, systematic, and comprehensive way over time.

Genesee and Upshur (1996) provide useful guidelines for planning classroom observation:

> Planning classroom observation
> 1 Why do you want to observe and what decisions do you want to make as a result of your observations?
> 2 What aspects of teaching or learning that are appropriate to these decisions do you want to observe?
> 3 Do you want to observe individual students, small groups of students, or the whole class?
> 4 Will you observe students engaged in specific, pre-arranged activities or during routine classroom activities?
> 5 Will you observe on one occasion or repeatedly?
> 6 Will you incorporate non-linguistic content from the students' other classes or from outside class?
> 7 How will you record your observations?
> (Genesee and Upshur 1996: 83)

There are, of course, disadvantages to the use of classroom-based description of learner performance. It requires an investment of time to get a scheme up and running, and of resources in training teachers to use such systems. However, although the need for additional training might be viewed as a disadvantage from one perspective, from another it can be seen as a useful focus for in-service activity. And there are other advantages, too, in the form of a potentially fuller and more valid picture of what learners can and cannot do, and of stages in learner progress. Observation-driven assessment has the potential to provide the level of detail that the teacher, learner, or parent can use as a basis for constructive action. In the words of one teacher:

> 'Comparing what I do now with what I used to do, the kind of record-keeping I did before was mainly to show me what children had done ... they had read aloud to me; they had worked on the computer. But there wasn't that fine detail of what the child could do, or was saying. There were notes but they tended to record what children had covered and what they'd done. I might have ticked to show that they know their number bonds up to 10. But there was nothing to say how they were approaching it, nor the level of understanding. I'm going deeper now into how they are learning.
>
> It does take longer for me, but it's worth it because I know so much more about each child. As it fits into my planning cycle, I find the planning and assessment dovetail together. But it also helps me to compare one child's development with another, and to plan how, by grouping them, the particular skills of each can be shared. It heightens my awareness of the stages of development they are moving through.'
> (Hester 1993: 38)

Observation-driven approaches to assessment require greater and qualitatively different teacher involvement than more traditional approaches: this includes a sound grasp of ways in which observation can be used to inform profiles of language learning development and learner progress, and the ability to use a broad range of tasks which facilitate this type of assessment.

Portfolios

An artist's portfolio may contain a record of the different types of work created—a range of drawings or paintings over time, not only the most recent—and provides a comprehensive picture of his or her capabilities, strengths, and weaknesses. In the same way, portfolios as part of classroom assessment can include samples from a range of students' work, for example writing, drawings, notes, audio- or video-recordings, extracts from projects, and performance on specific tests, to reflect different aspects of development, achievement, interest, and motivation. These samples of language can be kept in a variety of forms, for example notebooks, scrapbooks, loose-leaf binders, and box files. Students may be asked how they wish their work to be collated and stored.

One of the strengths of portfolios is the way in which they support the learning process. Tierney, Carter, and Desai (1991) (writing specifically of reading and writing, but this can be extended to other skills) suggest that portfolios help students to:

> Make a collection of meaningful work;
> Reflect on their strengths and needs;
> Set personal goals;
> See their progress over time;
> Think about ideas presented in their work;
> Look at a variety of work;
> See effort put forth;
> Have a clear understanding of their versatility as a reader and a writer;
> Feel ownership for their work;
> Feel that their work has personal reference.
> (Tierney, Carter, and Desai 1991: 59)

Making the best use of portfolios requires careful management on the part of the teacher. Students, too, need to be introduced to this mode of assessment and sensitized to the ways in which portfolios can be used as the basis for dialogue with the teacher, identifying developments in their own work, and monitoring their own progress. Graves and Sunstein (1992) also recommends that teachers keep portfolios of their own work in order to increase their awareness of what is involved in the process:

> We need more ... teachers who know portfolios *from the inside* ... . Maintaining our own portfolios has contributed more to our understanding of their possibilities and use than virtually any other aspect of our work with them.
> (Graves 1992: 5)

In other words, keeping a personal portfolio may not only lead to the development of a critical perspective in the teacher, but it may also provide insights into their use which can then be shared with learners.

Self-assessment

The concept of self-assessment has already been introduced in 3.4.3, in connection with learner training and learner autonomy, as a means by which learners may be encouraged to monitor and check their own progress. Self-assessment has been around for some considerable time (see Oskarsson 1978) and, like portfolios, is a procedure which may involve the learner directly in the assessment process. Implicitly it recognizes that learners should be able to take responsibility in making decisions about their own language learning development.

Although there has been a certain ambivalence towards the suitability of this procedure for school learners, there is now a considerable body of research that demonstrates the benefits of self-assessment for many different types of learners. Numerous studies report on the use of self-assessment (for example, Blue 1988; Brindley 1989a; Lewis 1990). For a useful survey see Oscarson (1997).

Harris and McCann (1994) provide a range of potential formats for learner self-assessment. The activity in Materials extract 11.B requires learners to reflect on what has been learned over a period of time and express it as marks out of 10.

Materials extract 11.B

Questionnaire 1
Think about your progress this term. Give yourself a mark out of ten for these areas:

• speaking	/10	• pronunciation	/10
• listening	/10	• grammar	/10
• reading	/10	• vocabulary	/10
• writing	/10		

(Harris and McCann: *Assessment*, page 84)

Materials extract 11.C

Grade these things (1-5) related to effort and attitude:

participation in class	
use of English in class	
homework and projects	
working in groups	
planning and working on my own	

(Harris and McCann: *Assessment*, page 86)

Materials extract 11.C focuses learners' attention on the effort they have made in class and on their attitudes to learning, and asks them to grade these in sequence. In contrast to the example in Materials extract 11.B, which focuses on learner achievement, that in Materials extract 11.C focuses on involvement in the learning process.

The activity in Materials extract 11.D requires learners to reflect on how well they can use the target language to fulfil certain functions, and to estimate how well they can accomplish the listed activities, as well as to identify things that they are unable to do.

Materials extract 11.D

Questionnaire 3

- Tick which of these things you can do now (✓).
- Put two ticks if you can do it very well (✓✓)
- Put a cross if you can't do it (✗)

a I can talk about what I did yesterday.
b I can ask other people about what they did yesterday.
c I can write about what I did yesterday.
d I can give and ask for directions.
e I can understand simple directions.
f I can write simple directions.
g I can talk about how I get to and from school.
h I can understand a description of a place.
i I can write a description about a place.
j I can describe places.

(Harris and McCann: *Assessment*, page 86)

Such procedures are intended for use as part of routine class activity, and the areas in which learners are asked to self-assess directly reflects what has been taught.

Self-assessment is a flexible learning tool, and there are numerous ways to mould the style and content of the assessment to suit a particular course or group of learners. One of its strengths links up with the points made in 11.1 about the sometimes hostile environment of assessment. Self-assessment has the advantage of involving learners.

11.4 What characterizes good assessment practice?

11.4.1 *Are affective considerations relevant to assessment?*

Motivation is as relevant to assessment processes as it is to learning (see 1.3.4). Teachers need to try to understand what motivates their class and learners as well as to identify the problems that learners experience. One question we might ask is whether it would be relevant to include information about affective factors in profiling a learner's general performance.

Heaton (1990) provides a performance profile in connection with the criteria of a learner's attitude ('persistence' and 'determination') in learning English:

5 Most persistent and thorough in all class and homework assignments. Interested in learning and keen to do well.

4 Persistent and thorough on the whole. Usually works well in class and mostly does homework conscientiously. Fairly keen.

3 Not too persistent but mostly tries. Average work in class and does homework (but never more than necessary). Interested on the whole but not too keen.

2 Soon loses interest. Sometimes tries but finds it hard to concentrate for long in class. Sometimes forgets to do homework or does only part of homework.

1 Lacks interest. Dislikes learning English. Cannot concentrate for long and often fails to do homework.

(Heaton 1990: 116–17)

As a teacher, you may not necessarily agree with how this profile is framed, but it is one that could be readily modified to the needs of a specific group of learners in order to better understand their approach to language learning in your class. The issue of attitude is also taken up in Materials extract 11.E. This awareness-raising task for teachers also highlights other affective areas, namely learner co-operativeness, independence, creativity, and presentation.

If we take a broader brief for assessment, it might be relevant and useful to include the characteristics of the learner as well as the learner's ability in the language. This is certainly information that parents might appreciate. It then becomes important to augment the existing and more conventional types of assessment procedure.

Materials extract 11.E

a Attitude
- is interested in class activities
- is willing to offer opinions
- is co-operative with teacher/peers
- is willing to respond to the opinions of others

b Co-operativeness
- is able to work in pairs
- is able to work in groups
- is able to work as a member of the whole class
- is able to share ideas and knowledge

c Independence
- is able to plan and organise own work
- is able to self-correct where necessary
- is able to use sources of information

d Creativity and presentation
- shows original thought, initiative, inventiveness
- presents work neatly and in an ordered manner

(Harris and McCann: *Assessment*, page 21)

11.4.2 *How can good assessment practice be framed?*

Assessment should be fair to all learners, and practicable. To this end a number of writers have put forward guidelines for good practice. In English language teaching these have been primarily with reference to test design and construction and have not been extended to classroom assessment processes (but see Harris and McCann 1994; Brindley 1995; Genesee and Upshur 1996).

It is important, too, that elements of good practice for an assessment *scheme as a whole* are understood. This is the area in which there is much to gain from developments in educational assessment. This extract from Tierney, Carter, and Desai (1991), for example, presents some of the features of a classroom-based assessment programme:

1 Assessment is based on what the child actually does. Student work and process are observed and analyzed to provide a rich view of progress, achievement, effort, strategies, and versatility.

2 Assessment addresses … experiences in which students are engaged.

3 Classroom assessment procedures should describe clearly and accurately how students do on a variety of tasks over an extended period of time. Decisions about students' strengths and needs are derived as a result of analyzing multiple samples of student work that have been collected during the course of the year and show the students' versatility.

4 Effective classroom assessment programs are designed to include the students as active participant in forming … tasks, in developing assessment criteria, and in assessing their own effort, progress, achievement, attitude, and goal attainment.

5 An assessment program should be multifaceted. There should be provisions to assess more than just the final products. Assessment should focus on achievement, process, and quality of self-assessment.

6 Assessment is continuous and inseparable from instruction. It is an interactive and collaborative process in which information is collected in natural classroom instructional encounters (individual, small group, and whole group). …

7 A yearly assessment plan guides the timing and use of a variety of assessment procedures. These procedures should work together to form a composite. It is likely that there are regular assessments that occur weekly, quarterly, and yearly. These assessments may be varied and serve slightly different purposes.

8 Assessment strengthens teacher's and student's knowledge. Assessment should contribute to a teacher's and student's understanding of themselves and each other. … Teachers and students should grow in their ability to make insightful analysis of the data gathered.

9 Record keeping and collections of work samples by both teachers and students provide the systematic information that facilitates communication.

10 The teacher is an expert evaluator, recognized and supported:
- The teacher not only knows the nature of the learners' [work] ... but provides first-hand evidence of progress and achievement.
- The teacher has the opportunity to observe the learner first-hand across a variety of situations including those in which learners are interested, have varying degrees of background knowledge, interact with others, or proceed independently.
- The teacher can explore the environments and situations that enhance learning.
- The teacher assesses what students have achieved in terms of effort, improvement, and process.
- The teacher pursues collaborative assessment with the learner, as well as the learner's ongoing assessment and development of self-assessment strategies.

11 The students' ability to assess themselves is viewed as a measure of how testing and assessment have a meaningful, ongoing, and working relationship with teaching.

(Tierney, Carter, and Desai 1991: 35–7)

In addition to these points it is worth emphasizing that classroom assessment is shaped by the way in which the English curriculum is actually implemented according to the values of a given educational context. Syllabuses differ across contexts; teaching methodologies vary; there are different expectations of teachers, of learners, and of the teaching and learning experience more generally. Teachers may also differ in their confidence and fluency in using English in class. All of these powerful factors interact and are reflected both in the professional practice of the classroom and in the area of learner assessment. Assessment is shaped by its educational context and therefore will need to sit comfortably within it.

11.5 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, the importance of assessment as a positive, informative, and fair experience has been emphasized. In making decisions about the assessment process, it will be useful for teachers to keep in mind the benefits that can accrue to learners from sound assessment practices. Good assessment can be achieved through the gathering of information about learners over time, and through a combination of methods. Of course,

these things do not happen on their own. It is up to the teacher to develop his or her awareness of assessment, to encourage learner awareness, and to make the process as effective as possible.

In conclusion, assessment should have what Tierney et al. describe as 'a working relationship with teaching and learning', and 'students should view assessment as an opportunity to reflect upon and celebrate their effort, progress and improvement, as well as their processes and products' (1991: 21). In evaluating our assessments, we need to check upon the extent to which they do just this. Did the assessment work? Did it provide the necessary information? If not, why not? How could we improve it for next time? Assessment is an important tool for the teacher as it can provide a wealth of information to guide classroom practice, and to manage learning and learners.

Discussion topics and projects

1 This chapter has looked at some affective factors in assessment. Look through the following teachers' comments about some learners' attitudes to assessment. Which observations do you agree with? Which do you disagree with? Are there any other points you would wish to add?

(a) 'Younger learners like assessment, especially if they can colour or draw something.'
(b) 'Older learners do not like assessment.'
(c) 'Learners like assessment: it provides a new piece of evidence for success.'
(d) 'Weaker students do not like assessment; but the better ones see it as a chance to show off.'
(e) 'Learners take assessment as the normal course of events: they are very used to it.'
(f) 'Some learners fear assessment—some kids are told off at home for bad marks.'
(g) 'Sometimes I notice that at certain times of the year learners get overloaded with tests and easily get frustrated with them.'
(h) 'Positive results will encourage learners; bad results the opposite.'
(i) 'Learner nervousness may spoil their performance.'
(Author's data)

2 Look through the general guidelines for using portfolios below. If you are not already using portfolio assessment, what would the benefits of introducing it be to yourself and to your learners? What would some of the disadvantages be? What difficulties do you foresee if you were to introduce this form of assessment in your context?

What are portfolios?
A file folder, box, or any durable and expandable container can serve as a portfolio. If everyone uses the same type of folder, the folders can be stored more easily. Folders should be clearly marked with each student's name, and they can also be decorated to each student's tastes, if desired, to enhance students' feeling of ownership.

What kinds of work are kept in portfolios?
Samples of writing, lists of books that have been read, book reports, tape-recordings of speaking samples, favorite short stories, and so on can all be included in a portfolio. Portfolios have most frequently been associated with written language, but they can also be used effectively with oral language. In this case, students keep audio recordings of speaking samples in their portfolios. …

Students need not have a single portfolio; they can have a writing portfolio, a reading portfolio, a science portfolio, or whatever. Moreover, students can have one portfolio for their best work and one for work in progress. The best work portfolio might be used to show parents and visitors and for grading purposes, whereas the work-in-progress portfolio might be used by teachers and students themselves to monitor their progress and set learning goals.

Each piece of work in the portfolio should be dated clearly and, often, annotated with a short description of why it is included, what the student likes about it, or other pertinent comments.

How much work should be kept in portfolios?
The number of pieces in a portfolio should be limited for practical reasons. Portfolios that are constantly expanding and never cleaned out become difficult to store and, more important, difficult to review and assess. Students may choose to keep a portfolio of current work and one of completed work—the former would be more up to date and reflect current accomplishments whereas the latter would reflect previous accomplishments and the progress they have made.

If the number of pieces is to be limited, then it is necessary to review and update the portfolio periodically. In this case, decisions need to be made concerning the number of pieces (or range) to keep and the criteria for inclusion and exclusion. These decisions should be shared by teachers and students so that the students maintain ownership of and responsibility for their portfolios. …

Who has access to portfolios?
Clearly, students should have access to their own portfolios at all times. Teachers also need to have easy access to them; whether teachers seek

permission from or inform students before reviewing their portfolios probably should be negotiated with the students as a whole. Sharing the contents of portfolios with parents and other teachers and educational professionals enhances their beneficial effects. Portfolios that are not shared are mere collections of school work.

There are occasions when it is not possible or desirable to include students in reviewing their portfolios, however. For example, sharing students' portfolios with administrators may be undertaken as part of a review procedure to examine student placement in particular programs or to revise grades based on standardized testing procedures. Furthermore, students' portfolios may be shared with teachers at the next level or grade so that they know the qualifications and skills of their incoming students in advance and can plan appropriate instruction. Student involvement in these cases may not be practicable or useful.

Where to keep portfolios

Keep the portfolios in a common, readily accessible area to which students have easy access. Storing them in the students' or teacher's desk is not a good idea because it disconnects them from students and from the general life of the classroom. If you are teaching part-time students who do not have their own classroom, it is not possible to store them in a common fixed area. In this instance, students need to keep their own portfolios.

(Genesee and Upshur 1996: 100–3)

3 Think of a task you would like to use for student assessment based on observation (for example an oral interaction task involving two or more learners).
   (a) Identify what you want to observe (i.e. select which aspects of language use you will look for when learners are doing this task, and decide what other evidence you might expect to observe if learners are able to complete the task successfully).
   (b) Decide how you will manage the observation (for example how many learners will you focus on, and for how long?).
   (c) What will you write down as observer? Which format will you use (for example checklist, narrative description)?

4 On your own, or with a colleague, review your responses to the preliminary task for this chapter. You may also wish to take into account your answers to some of the earlier tasks in this section, especially number 1. How would you summarize the way you assess your learners? Do you:
   (a) focus primarily on the language development of individual learners?
   (b) mainly compare the achievement of your learners in your class?

(c) achieve a balance between (a) and (b) above?

5 Make a list of both the strengths and weaknesses of the way you, or your institution, approach learner assessment. Once you have drawn up this list, what changes would you like to see made in your assessment context and why? Would your suggestions be reasonably easy to manage and implement?

Further reading

Brindley, G. (ed.). 1995. *Language Assessment in Action.* Sydney: National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research.

This edited collection introduces a range of reports on testing and assessment initiatives from the Australian ESL context. The case-study focus of each chapter provides accounts of the way in which assessment tools have been constructed to meet the needs of specific groups. These contributions span primary, secondary, and adult language learning contexts and cover areas such as competency-based assessment, bandscales, and classroom-based assessment as well as self- and peer-assessment.

Genesee, F. and **J. Upshur.** 1996. *Classroom-based Evaluation in Second Language Education.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This volume deals with both the principles and practice of classroom-based assessment. It emphasizes the value of assessment for improving both teaching and learning. It provides in-depth analysis and guidance on different assessment procedures, for example, observation-driven as well as portfolio assessment, together with useful examples. Follow-up activities are also provided.

Harris, M. and **P. McCann.** 1994. *Assessment.* Oxford: Heinemann.

This is a very practical volume with plenty of examples to inspire the classroom teacher. It is clearly organized with guidance on assessment purposes, timing, procedures, and content. It contains ready-to-use materials, including model tests, and assessment and self-assessment sheets which teachers may adapt to their specific circumstances. Workshop activities are also included.

Heaton, J. B. 1988. *Writing English Language Tests.* (New edn.) London: Longman.

Heaton, J. B. 1990. *Classroom Testing.* London: Longman.

These two books will be useful to teachers who need careful guidance on how to write tests for their learners. They provide detailed information on how to write, administer, and score tests, as well as including many examples of different test-types. The general principles of testing are also introduced.

Tierney, R. J., M. A. Carter, and L. E. Desai. 1991. *Portfolio Assessment in the Reading–Writing Classroom.* Norwood, Mass.: Christopher-Gordon Publishers.

This book provides the rationale behind assessment, in particular portfolio assessment, and very detailed guidance on how to implement portfolio assessment in classrooms. It contains a wealth of examples and practical guidelines which teachers will find extremely useful. The link between assessment and instructional planning is another strength of this volume.

Weir, C. J. 1993. *Understanding and Developing Language Tests.* Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall International.

This book introduces the principles behind test development and validation and takes a critical look at a wide range of tests. It also includes a training element by providing a number of tasks which guide readers through key stages in the test-development process. The focus is on the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and a framework for the development of tests in each of these skill areas is provided.