

## 1.6 Types of assessment

This section looks at different types of assessment, from direct to indirect, from norm-referenced to criterion-referenced. It looks also at the distinction between the assessment of proficiency and achievement.

### 1.6.1 Indirect versus direct assessment

#### Reflect

*Study the following assessment items. What is each trying to assess? What assumptions would we be able to make about a learner's language ability based on performance on these items?*

#### Item 1

*Write the correct form of the verb in the space provided. Then answer the questions by circling 'yes' or 'no'.*

- |   |          |
|---|----------|
| 1. Have you ever (oversleep) ...?                               | yes / no |
| 2. Have you ever (be) ... late for school?                      | yes / no |
| 3. Have you ever (forget) ... to bring your homework to school? | yes / no |
| 4. Have you ever (leave) ... your keys in your house?           | yes / no |
| 5. Have you ever (miss) ... your parents' birthday?             | yes / no |
| 6. Have you ever (arrive) ... late for a party?                 | yes / no |

Take turns with your partner, in asking and answering the questions above, e.g.  
 "Have you ever been late for school?"  
 "Yes, I have."

#### Item 2

You would like to try out the fancy new Italian restaurant "Il Gondoliero" tonight. Unfortunately, no one is free to accompany you to dinner. Look up the phone number of the restaurant in the phone book and call to reserve a table for one at an appropriate time this evening. You will have to speak with the answering machine as the staff do not come in until 5:00 p.m.

*Norris et al. 1998*

Item 1 is an indirect test item, because it only gives us indirect information about the communicative ability of the learner. It will tell us whether our learner can manipulate the present perfect in controlled conditions. However, it will give us little idea of whether the learner will be able to discuss past experiences with someone else in a social situation.

Item 2 is a direct item. If a learner can carry out this task correctly, we can reasonably assume that the learners would be able to leave a similar answering machine message in the real world outside the classroom.

### **1.6.2 Norm-referenced versus criterion-referenced testing**

Traditional assessment is norm-referenced. Basically, a norm-referenced test assesses the performance of an individual against that of others. Learners' performance is thus described as being above the norm, near the norm or below the norm. A criterion-referenced test is, on the other hand, concerned with assessing an individual's performance against specified criteria. On a criterion-referenced test, all learners have the possibility of doing well or poorly.

#### **Reflect**

*What do you see as the pros and cons of these two forms of assessment?  
Which type of assessment do you think is more in harmony with task-based assessment?*

We believe that there is a natural harmony between task-based and criterion-referenced assessment. Both of them take learner performance as their starting point, and both see language development as a matter of learning by doing. They focus on how well learners perform on the task and not on how well they perform in relation to one another.

### **1.6.3 Assessing proficiency versus achievement**

#### **Reflect**

*What do the terms 'proficiency' and 'achievement' mean to you?*

Proficiency is an abstract concept referring to the ability to use language for communication in everyday life. A test of proficiency, therefore, attempts to measure that ability to use language regardless of any training learners may have had in the language. Achievement tests, on the other hand, seek to determine how well a learner has achieved the objectives of a course of study. Standardized examinations such as TOEFL and IELTS are measures of proficiency and claim to assess a learner's proficiency regardless of whether the learner has been studying English in Hong Kong, the Mainland, Europe or America. An end-of-term test which focuses on what has been taught in a particular class or school is a test of achievement.

#### **Reflect**

*Is the "Use of English" examination a test of proficiency or achievement?*

### **1.6.4 Formative versus summative assessment**

Formative assessment is ongoing, carried out during a course and is intended to provide feedback to learners on their strengths and weaknesses as they progress through a course of study. Summative assessment, on the other hand, typically occurs at the end of a course or module of work and is intended to provide information to learners and some outside sources (parents, the school, etc.) on how well the learners have performed on the course as a whole.

Although these two types of assessment occur at different stages and serve different functions, both can be used to promote learning. Teachers are encouraged to make use of results of summative assessment to benefit learners by reviewing their performance and working out a plan for further improvement. In this way, the purpose for conducting summative assessment is extended from assessment of learning to assessment for learning because it is used not just to report the results of learning using grades or marks, but also to provide useful quality feedback to learners.

**To recap the ideas discussed in section 1.6, task-based assessment will**

- **involve the direct assessment of learner’s performance;**
- **be criterion-referenced;**
- **focus on the attainment of specific objectives; and**
- **focus on improving learning outcomes.**

In addition, it is important to remember that task-based teaching aims at promoting proficiency in the use of language for communicative purposes. But, as proficiency is an abstract notion, not related to specific objectives, it is not assessed through TBA. Rather TBA, which relates to the attainment of specific learning objectives, focuses on achievement.

## **1.7 How are assessment tasks developed?**

This section provides a step-by-step guide to the development of assessment tasks. While these steps are, of necessity, set out in a linear fashion, the practical steps of designing both pedagogical and assessment tasks are recursive. That is, you need to constantly return to prior steps in the course of developing an assessment task. (We will return to these steps in discussing the development of specific tasks in Units 2 and 3 of this package.)

### **Reflect**

*What steps do you go through when you develop a task to assess your learners?  
Do you develop such tasks on your own or collaboratively with other teachers?*

**STEP 1: Study the curriculum documents, syllabus outlines and scope on which a language program is based and make a representative selection of objectives / pedagogical tasks to be turned into assessment tasks.**