

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.

It is important that adequate coverage is given to the curriculum, notably the learning targets and objectives, so that assessment provides an accurate picture of the learners' ability. It is also important to have a balance between individual skills-based items and integrated items.

STEP 2: Collect, adapt or modify input data for each assessment item.

Most assessment tasks will require learners to interact with some stimulus material. This could be a listening or reading text, or some non-textual source such as a diagram, chart or visual. Where possible, the data should be derived from an authentic source.

STEP 3: Draft the assessment procedure (what the learner is required to do).

Here, you need to do two things, set out the procedure, along with a set of instructions to the learners for what they are required to do. At this stage, there are several questions to keep in mind.

- Is the difficulty level of the instruction consistent with and not more difficult than the procedure? (You will probably find that writing the instruction is even more challenging than writing the procedure.)
- Does the assessment task actually assess the learning targets and objectives that you have decided to assess?
- If you are assessing a linguistic as well as a communicative performance objective, will the assessment task actually elicit the linguistic item in question?

STEP 4: Specify the criteria to be used in evaluating learner performance.

This is a crucial step, because the criteria are what differentiate a learning task from an assessment task.

You are at a party for new exchange students. Exchange personal information with the other students at the party.

This task could be turned into an assessment task by adding criteria such as the following:

- Three pieces of information must be exchanged.
- Utterances must be comprehensible to someone who is not used to dealing with non-native speakers.
- Learners must demonstrate an ability to initiate and terminate an interaction appropriately.

(The issue of performance criteria is further elaborated in section 1.8.)

STEP 5: Decide how the results are going to be reported, by whom and to whom.

How the results of the assessment are to be reported will depend on the purpose of the assessment. If the principal purpose is to provide learners with feedback, giving them insights into their strengths and weaknesses, then qualitative feedback, perhaps

supported, in summary form, by a list of criteria (see section 1.8) will be most appropriate. If the assessment is meant to be summative (e.g. at the end of a course, a term or a year), some form of number or letter grade may be required.

STEP 6: Try out the task on a representative group of learners.

This process is often referred to as piloting the task / assessment. If you are building up a bank of assessment items that will be reused, rather than a one-off task, then it is important that you try out the task, and get feedback on how well it works.

There is one further step we need to take before the process is complete. Can you think what it is? We will come to Step 7 in section 1.11 below.

Reflect

Either by yourself or with a partner:

Select one or two learning targets and objectives at KS3 and have a go at developing an assessment task following the first three steps above.

1.8 Criteria for assessing learner performance

Performance criteria are a crucial part of an assessment procedure or item. These criteria need to be keyed to the important learning outcomes. In other words, they need to reflect those learning targets that the task has been designed to assess. At the same time, the criteria should be couched in terms that are understandable to the learners, and, where feasible, the criteria should be developed collaboratively with the learners. Criteria should address a number of aspects of performance. When assessing a group oral presentation, for example, the criteria would include:

- linguistic accuracy;
- fluency;
- presentation style;
- content; and
- collaboration with others.

Criteria can be relatively simple or quite elaborate. The simpler the criteria, the easier they are to use. However, more elaborate criteria provide more detailed and complete information on the learner.

1.9 Means of providing feedback to learners

Feedback can take many shapes and forms from quantitative feedback in the form of marks and grades through to qualitative feedback from the teacher. The form it takes will depend much on the purpose of the feedback which, in turn, will depend on the purpose of the assessment.