Frequently Asked Questions

1. **What is the difference between a language learning task and a language assessment task?**

   Almost any language learning task can be used for assessment purposes and vice versa. The key difference (as we point out in section 1.2) is how the task fits into the instructional cycle, and crucially, what is done with the learner output from the task. If the task is for language learning, teachers would need to

   - conduct appropriate pre-task, while-task and post-task activities to ensure that learners can complete the task satisfactorily and consolidate their learning; and

   - provide on-going feedback on learners' performance.

   If the task is for assessment, teachers would not provide learners with support during the process because the emphasis is on learners demonstrating what they know and what they can do with the language. Moreover, the task itself would be accompanied by a set of criteria which assess task performance by describing what learners must do in order to demonstrate that they are able to perform the task successfully.

2. **How do we assess grammar through tasks?**

   To assess learners' mastery of the target grammatical items, teachers should first identify the specific learning targets and objectives they want to assess learners on. When deciding on the particular communicative functions and language items to be assessed, teachers should take into consideration the language focus they cover in the learning process. They should then design assessment tasks appropriate to the targets and objectives. It is important to note that all grammatical items should be assessed in meaningful contexts and learners should be given the opportunities to use the target language items to perform the task. The criteria set out should also very clearly indicate how learners' performance in using grammar will be judged.

3. **Is it a must to keep on one theme throughout an assessment task, especially when it is for summative purposes?**

   A task by definition is a piece of work having a beginning, middle and end, where the focus is primarily, though not exclusively, on conveying meaning. Therefore, each task must have a theme that binds it together. However, a summative assessment may be made up of more than one task with different themes.

4. **Is it a must to integrate all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) when designing an assessment task?**

   No. As long as learners are required to use language to convey meaning, this satisfies the minimum requirements of a task. A task may involve all four language skills, a combination of skills or a single skill. It is, however, common for pairs of skills to go hand in hand, e.g. reading and writing; listening and speaking.

5. **Is task-based assessment a kind of formative assessment?**

   As stated in section 1.2, teaching and assessment should be in harmony and mutually reinforcing. TBA should therefore be an integral part of task-based language teaching. It can serve both formative and summative purposes. Where formative assessment is concerned, TBA provides not only learners with useful information on their learning progress, but also teachers with insights into learners' strengths and weaknesses to help them review and improve teaching plans and strategies.

6. **How can we develop and use tasks to assess the learning targets in the Experience Strand?**

   To address some of the learning targets in the Experience Strand, teachers might like to develop tasks that encourage learners to express how they feel about certain events and issues. For more sophisticated work, teachers might like to select imaginative or literary texts to elicit learners' personal response. For instance, learners may be asked to respond to a poem by writing their own poem or to write a short story based on information they collect about Hong Kong. It is important to contextualize the tasks for learners (i.e. tell them why they are writing a story or poem, for whom it is written, etc.).

7. **Do we need to develop specific criteria for every assessment task that we use?**

   Yes, it is necessary to develop specific criteria for any assessment task that we develop (see section 1.3). If you intend to provide learners with useful feedback on how they perform in the task, you will need to articulate the feedback in terms of the specific criteria. In short, it is important to be aware of the purposes of the tasks so that specific criteria can be suitably developed.

8. **How can moderation be carried out among teachers on the panel to ensure consistency in the interpretation of the assessment criteria?**

   Moderation is extremely important and should become part of every school's culture. The way to do this is to set aside a specific time to moderate all important assessment tasks. Then teachers should assess a sample of scripts together and talk about how they have interpreted the assessment criteria. The purpose of

moderation is to build consensus and decide if modification is necessary when assessing learners' work.

9. **How many times do we need to assess our students before we can judge whether they have achieved a certain target or objective?**

   Learning is not a linear process; hence, it is not sufficient to assess learners only once to verify whether they have achieved a learning target or objective. They need to demonstrate that they can perform consistently. Therefore each target should be assessed several times, though there is no golden rule as to the optimal number.

10. **Self feedback and peer feedback are much encouraged in task-based assessment. However, will our students understand the assessment criteria and the way to apply them?**

    It would be naïve to consider that students could assess themselves with no training. Students need to practise assessing themselves. They also need to have the assessment criteria explained to them so that they know what you are looking for and what they should focus on. At the beginning you may need to explain to your learners why their assessment of themselves does not match yours, but given time the two assessments will come closer together. And encouraging learners to assess each other will help them understand the assessment criteria and be more critical of themselves as well as each other.