

Practicalities of ongoing assessment

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Assessment is the estimation of the quality or value of something. In the context of education, it refers to "the practices and procedures for monitoring and measuring learners' performance in relation to goals and objectives" (Vale, Scarino and McKay, 1991, p. 94). Educational assessment can be divided into *summative assessment*, which is given at the end of a unit, course or programme as a final judgement of a student's performance; and *formative assessment*, which consists of both formal and informal tasks to help both teacher and student form an opinion about performance. Formative assessment is also labelled *ongoing assessment* (OA) as it is continually taking place within the classroom. Whereas summative assessment is concerned with the product (test results), ongoing assessment is also concerned about the process of learning. In this way, teachers can identify how students acquired the language proficiency suggested by their test performance.

Ongoing assessment is not something new to education. Each time a teacher makes a judgement about student performance (whether consciously or sub-consciously), assessment is taking place. However, often the criteria used to make these judgements are vague and ill-defined. To be of real value, OA must be developed in a principled and systematic way. This article considers some of the more common activities used as OA, which principles of OA they incorporate, and the practicalities of using them in the classroom. The accompanying article 'Fundamentals of Ongoing Assessment' offers a detailed definition of OA, a description of its principles and discusses the concerns of test reliability and validity.

Activities Used As Ongoing Assessment

Table 1 provides a list of some of the more common activities that can be used as OA. It is by no means exhaustive, but has attempted to include assessment items that many teachers may normally incorporate in their classes. The table identifies which of the principles of OA is most appropriate for each activity:

1. **Purpose** - Is it assessment-oriented, instruction-oriented, or learner-oriented?
2. **Form** - Does it require students to respond to set questions or is it purely teacher observation of routine class work?
3. **Nature** - Is it quantitative or qualitative? and
4. **Formality** - Is it formal or informal?

Table 1. *Some common activities that can be used for ongoing assessment.*

ACTIVITY	PURPOSE			FORM		NATURE		FORMALITY	
	Assessment	Instruction	Learner	Response	Observation	Quantative	Qualitative	Formal	Informal
Journals	—	★	★★	★★	—	—	★★	★	★★
Questionnaires	—	★★	★★	★★	—	—	★★	★★	—
Std. Feedback Forms	—	★★	—	★★	—	★	★★	★	★★
Portfolios	★★	★	—	★★	—	—	★★	★★	★
Conferences	—	★★	—	★★	★	—	★★	—	★★
Classroom Observation	★★	★★	★★	★	★★	★	★★	—	★★
Observed Com. Activities	★★	—	—	★★	—	—	★★	★	★★
Group Discussions	★	★★	★★	★★	—	—	★★	—	★★
Peer Assessment	★★	—	—	★★	★	—	—	—	★★
Self-Assessment	★★	—	—	★★	★	—	★★	★	★★
Weekly Tests	★★	—	—	★★	—	★★	—	—	★★

KEY: ★★ strong ★ weak — N/A

Journals, Questionnaires & Student Feedback Forms

Journals, questionnaires, and student feedback forms are similar in purpose, form, and nature. Their main use is to obtain information about the teaching and learning processes. This information includes students' goals and expectations; their feelings and attitudes about themselves and their peers; their experiences and the learning process. As these activities

Suggestions

1. Ask students to respond in their journals (three or four times) about the unit they are currently studying, as in Table 2.
2. Have students use their journals as 'learning logs' in which they record what they've learned in class, then reflect and comment on it.
3. Have students keep scrapbook journals of news clippings, songs, pictures, etc. relevant to the current study theme and respond to each scrapbook item.
4. Have students complete questionnaires at the beginning of a course regarding their expectations and feelings about studying English.
5. Prepare a detailed questionnaire for students to complete at the end of a course as formal feedback about the course.
6. At the end of a lesson, issue students with small scraps of paper and have them quickly write one or two sentences about a particular activity they just did.

usually take the form of a response based activity, teachers can control the kind of response they elicit by being systematic in the choice of questions. Journals are used often in the language classroom as a means to encourage fluency in writing. However, with a more systematic approach, journals can provide informative insights into the learner and the instruction process itself.

Table 2. *Three journal entries from a student about story books.*

10/4

Children's picture story is very fun. I like to read Children's picture story so I'm looking forward to writing Children's picture story. But I think it difficult.

10/11

Today's lesson is fun. I like children's picture's books. I studied children's English for semi. So I read many children's picture books. But to make it is difficult. I have no idea. I'm thinking. I think one idea. My idea is very simple. I teach numbers from one to ten. I write my idea very quickly. It's finish. But I just think another idea. For example, big and small . . . I'm thinking. I'll makethis book next class. I'm looking forward to making this book.

12/8

I'm happy because children read my book. My book title is "How many!". So children count animals in my book. They say big voice "One, two, three . . ." I think my book is good. But my book don't have story. Other people's book have story so children can guess. But my book can't guess. Children's book is difficult.

Portfolios & Conferences

Both portfolios and conferences involve the learner as well as the teacher in recording and monitoring language proficiency. Portfolios are used as a collection of the students' work to demonstrate their abilities and achievements. This has the benefit of being a continuous record of accomplishment available to show to others. Portfolios also encourage students to be a part of the assessment process. However, the nature of portfolios and conferences is that they need to be an integral part of teaching if they are to be of benefit.

Suggestions

1. Students keep a file folder in which all their 'best' pieces of writing throughout a course are included. At the end of the course students are asked to select 6-8 pieces, rewrite them and submit them for final summative assessment.
2. Students keep an audio tape of speaking samples and submit a selection for summative assessment as above.
3. Students and teacher work together in a conference to determine the class goals and/or assessment criteria.
4. Teacher keeps notes on file cards from conferences with individual learners regarding their writing style, speaking strategies, etc.

Classroom Observations, Observed Communicative Activities & Group Discussions

Observations in the classroom are undoubtedly occurring all the time. However, to be of value they need to be carried out in a systematic and manageable fashion. Classroom observations are distinct from observed communicative activities in that they are always informal and involve the teacher making observations of normal classroom activity and behaviour. Teachers often do this immediately after setting a task to ensure that students have understood the instructions, etc. Observed communicative activities on the other hand, can be formal with the teacher recording a grade from set criteria for a particular activity. Group discussions have been included here as they provide teachers with an alternative means to observe students using the target language and employing language strategies.

Suggestions

1. Keep an anecdotal record on file cards or in a teacher journal about students' performance or behaviour.
2. Create a checklist or rating scale for use with a particular communicative activity or group discussion as in Table 3.

Table 3. *A checklist rating scale for communicative activities or group discussions.*

Name: _____	Needs Improvement ----- Excellent
Criteria	1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4
Vocabulary	-----
Grammar/Mechanics	-----
Pronunciation	-----
Fluency	-----
Communication Strategies	-----
English Only	-----

Peer & Self Assessment

Peer assessment promotes healthy competition and students are very good at providing friendly criticism and feedback on performance. Self assessment encourages students to take responsibility for the learning process in addition to evaluating their own achievements.

Table 4. A sample student progress card

Give yourself a point for every question you answer 'Yes'.

- *Were you on time?*
- *Did you bring your text book?*
- *Did you try in today's lesson?*
- *Did you bring a dictionary?*
- *Did you do your homework?*

Date	On Time	Dictionary	Text	Homework	Effort	Total
4/21	1	1	1	1	1	5
4/23	0	1	1	0	1	3

Suggestions

1. Students use a checklist or rating scale (preferably the same one used by the teacher during formal assessment as in Table 3 to assess each other during speaking or communicative activities.
2. Students edit and comment on other students' written work i.e. paragraphs, essays, etc.
3. Journals can be used as a means of an ongoing classroom dialogue between either two students or a small group of students, each student responding to what the other student/s have written.
4. Students keep a progress card throughout a course of study as in Table 4.
5. Students answer a questionnaire about their study habits at regular intervals throughout the course.
6. Students complete a checklist at the end of each lesson regarding their effort, participation and commitment to the class. The scores obtained on such a list can be used as the basis of a 'Participation' grade as in Table 5.

Table 5. A sample student 'participation grade' card.

Check the box which shows your level of improvement.

Am I improving in these skills?	Same as before	Improving	Much Better
Writing good sentences			
Writing good paragraphs			
Using prepositions and conjunctions			
Increasing vocabulary			
Editing and rewriting essays			

Weekly Tests

Weekly tests are perhaps the most recognisable of activities used for ongoing assessment. They are also the most traditional and are particularly useful for recording quantitative performance results.

Suggestions

1. Quick five minute tests to focus on a particular form or structure such as spelling, vocabulary, etc.
2. Dictation done at a so-called "native speaker speed" (over 100 WPM) to focus on the use of communication strategies such as clarification questions, etc. ("Please repeat that." or "Could you speak more slowly, please.")

Criteria Determination

Formative or ongoing assessment is effective because it provides the teacher and student with continual information about the teaching and learning processes. Summative assessment, because it comes at the end, is too late. The processes have already stopped and neither teacher nor student can gain any benefit. As Rea-Dickens and Germaine (1992) note:

The advantage of learner involvement is that the feedback is both immediate and qualitative. Course appraisal is largely formative, pedagogic, diagnostic, and process-oriented where outcomes will be qualitative and descriptive. This contrasts with summative tests that grade learners, where the tests are formal, largely external to teaching and learning, and product-oriented. (p. 45)

Although norm-referenced tests can be utilised as OA, criteria-referenced tests have the benefit of providing teachers and students with the kind of qualitative information meaningful for future use. Students need to know why grades were awarded or not. That is, an explanation as to what performance was good and what was inadequate. Criteria-referenced profiles (Table 6) and analytical marking schemes (Table 3) can provide this information.

Table 6. *A sample criteria-referenced profile for an OA classroom.*

<u>Level</u>	<u>Accuracy</u>	<u>Fluency</u>	<u>Comprehensibility</u>
6	Pronunciation is only very slightly influenced by the mother tongue. Two or three minor grammatical or lexical errors.	Speaks without too great an effort with a fairly wide range of expression. Searches for words occasionally but only one or two unnatural pauses.	Easy for the listener to understand the speaker's intention and general meaning. Very few interruptions or clarifications required.
5	Pronunciation is slightly influenced by the mother tongue. A few minor grammatical and lexical errors, but most utterances are correct.	Has to make an effort at times to search for words. Nevertheless, smooth delivery on the whole and only a few unnatural pauses.	The speaker's intention and general meaning are fairly clear. A few interruptions by the listener for the sake of clarification are necessary.
1	Serious pronunciation errors as well as many "basic" grammatical and lexical errors. No evidence of having mastered any of the language skills and areas practised in the course.	Full of long and unnatural pauses. Very halting and fragmentary delivery. At times gives up making the effort. Very limited range of expression.	Hardly anything of what is said can be understood. Even when the listener makes a great effort or interrupts, the speaker is unable to clarify anything he seems to have said.

For the purposes of reliability and validity any assessment, including Ongoing Assessment, needs to relate specifically to the class/course goals and objectives. The accompanying article by Robert Croker discusses the concerns of reliability and validity in more detail. The benefits of OA is that the teacher can determine these goals and objectives either herself or in conference with the students. This allows teachers to set realistic assessment criteria that are relevant to the class context in which they are teaching.

Classroom Realities

The constraints of time, class size, syllabus and school administration, just to name a few, can be so restrictive that the incorporation of a systematic process of ongoing assessment appears to be both impractical and impossible. However, as Table 1 illustrates, activities that can be used as OA are already being used in many classrooms. For the most part OA activities are qualitative and informal and it is these principles which make OA practical for the classroom. It merely needs to be consistent and incorporate a system of recording to elicit its full value.

Suggestions

1. Keep a lesson log. This does not need to include a detailed lesson plan but merely information regarding the date and the class, a brief description of the activity/ies and space for observations and reflections.
2. Summarise student responses on formal questionnaires and feedback forms.
3. Collect and collate samples of interesting and insightful student journal entries when specific to a particular lesson or learning process.
4. Keep a record of activities completed such as homework, tests, in-class activities, etc. to use for the end of semester 'Participation' grade.
5. Criteria or analytical marking schemes as in Table 3 can be created for specific goals and objectives relevant to individual classes or assessment activities. Once prepared they can be re-used thus reducing future workloads.

Conclusion

Ongoing Assessment can be practical to implement in a systematic way with limited adaptations to classroom administration on the part of the teacher. If teachers raise their consciousness of classroom practices and formalise the assessment they use, then OA can be effective and lead to innovation in educational practices - always a part of good teaching. Thus, OA transcends mere assessment practices and incorporates educational evaluation which facilitates the ongoing evaluation of not just the learner, but the teacher, the syllabus and the materials. We conclude with this advice by Rea-Dickens and Germaine (1992):

Evaluation of our educational practices is varied and covers a wide range of issues. Focusing merely on learner performance does not provide an explanation as to why something works or why something does not. We should also evaluate the process of teaching in order to develop insights into ways in which aspects of teaching can be improved. Using evaluation activities we can also confirm the validity of what we do in the classroom and develop ways in which we can seek to understand better the processes, for example, types of materials, particular methods, or learner involvement, which lead to successful teaching and learning. (p. 22)

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