

Current Approaches to Assessment and *English – No Problem!*

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Introduction

As the teacher approaches her, Keiko looks up from her Check Your Progress sheet for Unit 4 in the English – No Problem! workbook. For the past five minutes, Keiko has been absorbed in thought, pondering the goals she'd set two weeks ago at the beginning of Unit 4. "You've done well, Keiko!" says the teacher, handing her a Project Assessment form. "Your presentation on a dream business was well-organized and clear. Your Unit Check-Up is also excellent," adds the teacher, handing Keiko another sheet. "One area you still need to work on is listening comprehension." Keiko thanks her teacher and peers for several minutes at the sheets. She then returns to the Check Your Progress sheet and writes "listening" as a goal for the next unit.

The assessment of adult students such as Keiko in English as a second language (ESL) classrooms has been a dramatically growing area in the field of education over the past few decades. Until the mid-1980s, most teachers who received training in TESOL equated "assessment" with "testing." They were taught principles for constructing good classroom tests that focused on specific features such as grammar rules, vocabulary items, and the comprehension of details in listening and reading material. In the same vein, the standardized tests of the pre-1980s era were largely multiple-choice in format. While the construction of good pencil-and-paper tests continues to be a valuable skill for teachers, the field of second language assessment has broadened to embrace other important assessment techniques.

These techniques are often referred to as "authentic assessment" or "alternative assessment" to distinguish them from the traditional timed, pencil-and-paper tests (O'Malley and Pierce, 1996; Holt and Van Duzer, 2000). They reflect a desire to assess the full range of activities that occur in a second language classroom – including activities such as role plays, simulations, compositions, conversations, and various types of projects. Assessment of these activities is "authentic" because the activities themselves reflect truly communicative situations. In a communicative classroom, it is no longer enough simply to teach and test sub-skills such as grammar, pronunciation features, and vocabulary in isolation.

Authentic assessment is especially important in adult ESL classrooms, where the material learned in class is often transferred immediately to activities in the world beyond the classroom. Along with providing activities that emphasize practical life skills (such as making a telephone call for a doctor's appointment), adult ESL teachers need to determine how well their students are performing these tasks. In addition, as Brigitte Marshall has pointed out, authentic assessment is often necessary in order to determine if adult ESL students are meeting widely-used performance standards such as those set by EFF and SCANS (see Marshall, 2002, pp. 93, 107, 113). Authentic assessment tools provide teachers with specific criteria for evaluating their students' performance and

forms for communicating information about student performance to administrators or to the students themselves.

Current Approaches to Assessment in ESL

What, specifically, does authentic assessment look like in ESL? The most common techniques involve checklists, rubrics, and portfolios.

Forms of Authentic Assessment

At the beginning of a lesson or unit, the teacher might provide the students with a **self-assessment checklist** which allows them to identify what they know already and would like to learn. Students may also use checklists to identify what they are reading or listening to outside of the classroom. And they might use a self-assessment form at the end of a unit to review what material they have learned and how well they have learned it. This emphasis on self-assessment provides teachers with valuable information about their students and also allows students to feel a sense of ownership over what they are learning (Brown, 1998, p. 53).

The most widely-used form of authentic assessment is the **rubric**. A rubric is usually a numerical scale with performance descriptors attached to each number. Teachers can use rubrics to evaluate how well students have performed on holistic, integrative tasks such as role-plays, simulations, essays, reports, and projects.

Rubrics actually have a rather long history in the field of foreign language education. For instance, for a number of decades, the Foreign Service Institute's *Oral Proficiency Interview Scale* has been used by many language programs to assess overall proficiency in speaking. In the area of writing, the *Test of Written English (TWE) Scale* has also been used for the past two decades as a simple holistic scale to assess proficiency on essays and other compositions (Hughes, 2003, pp. 131-133, 96-97).

More recently, however, a variety of rubrics have become available, and teachers have been encouraged to construct their own rubrics for various kinds of classroom activities. Teacher education courses focusing on assessment now often involve workshops on how to construct effective rubrics, and newer standardized tests (such as the CASAS, the New York State Placement Test, and the BEST Oral) include rubrics.

A third area of authentic assessment involves **portfolios**. Portfolios are dynamic collections of student work over time (Gottlieb, 1995, p. 12). Individual pieces of work may be evaluated with rubrics, or the quality of the overall portfolio might be evaluated with a rubric or form. Increasingly, adult ESL programs are being asked to provide student portfolios to validate that their students have achieved an appropriate level of proficiency in a number of key areas.

While we might typically think of portfolios as folders containing student writing, they can also include other products of classroom activities, as well as forms which assess

performance on oral tasks and multi-faceted projects. Some portfolios focus on a student's progress over time, while others might showcase the student's best work in a number of areas. Portfolios can even be maintained on computer disks, videotapes, DVDs, and other media that record written and spoken communication.

Are portfolios and other forms of authentic assessment too unwieldy and time-consuming to be realistic in adult ESL programs? This is an important, pragmatic question asked by many teachers. Adult ESL teachers are busy people, and they often work in more than one classroom or program. In my experience, it is important to avoid adopting too many forms of authentic assessment at once. By gradually introducing self-assessment forms and rubrics for various assignments, and by establishing simple expectations for portfolios, teachers can find the best mix for each particular situation.

The Place of Traditional Testing

In addition to these three areas of authentic assessment -- checklists, rubrics, and portfolios, many teachers have continued to use **timed pencil-and-paper tests** as part of classroom assessment. This more traditional form of assessment has benefited from the influence of authentic assessment. The writing section of a test, for instance, might be scored with a teacher-constructed rubric. And traditional "discrete-point" tests of grammar, vocabulary, and content have become more authentic as teachers have applied principles for making tests more communicative.

These testing principles include an emphasis on **authentic texts, real-world tasks, and realistic discourse**, even for sub-skill areas such as grammar. For example, the listening section of a test may feature a genre such as a radio broadcast rather than a voice speaking in an undefined situation. In the same way, reading comprehension might be tested through classified advertisements from a newspaper rather than a contrived paragraph. And a test section involving a feature of grammar, such as past tense verb forms, might be presented in the form of a dialogue rather than a series of unrelated sentences. Foreign language experts such as Alice Omaggio Hadley have long argued that the discourse of discrete-point classroom tests needs to be as meaningful and "contextualized" as possible (Omaggio Hadley 2001, p. 395).

Perhaps the best way to summarize the current movements in second language assessment is to refer to the concepts of **reliability** and **validity**.

Traditional multiple-choice tests often had a high degree of reliability (consistency in scoring) but a lower degree of validity (authenticity or relevance to real-world objectives). On the other hand, classroom techniques such as projects and role-plays have often had a high level of validity but, due to subjective scoring, a low level of reliability. Ideally, an assessment should have the highest possible level of both reliability and validity.

Since the 1980s, there has been a strong effort to increase the validity of timed, pencil-and-paper tests by making them more authentic and connected to the real world. At the

same time, the reliability of complex, holistic activities (such as projects) has been increased through the use of rigorous authentic-assessment forms and rubrics. As a result, today's adult ESL teachers are blessed with a large range of valid and reliable assessment tools to enhance their classes and the evaluation of their students.

Assessment in *English – No Problem!*

The *English – No Problem!* series contains all of the assessment tools and techniques described in the previous section. Each unit of the five-level series has a built-in collection of tools that appear in the student book, workbook, teachers' guide, and supplemental materials. These assessment tools are deliberately spread throughout the various components of the series, rather than concentrated in one supplemental book, so that they will be available when and where teachers need them.

The philosophy behind these assessment tools is as important as the tools themselves. The *English – No Problem!* series encourages teachers and students to set goals for learning in each unit and lesson, using the goals and objectives presented within the texts and identifying personal goals. As students engage in communicative activities, tasks, and projects, they can track their progress toward meeting these goals according to carefully-established criteria by using the various assessment techniques. Rather than simply covering the textbook material, the students are working to master it. The assessment activities provide an important "feedback loop," which leads the students to higher and higher levels of performance.

A Taxonomy of Assessment Options

What specific assessment tools are offered in this series? The following paragraphs describe what the series offers in terms of tools for **self assessment**, **peer assessment**, **teacher assessment**, and **program-level assessment**.

- **Self-Assessment 1: Goal-setting for units.** In the student book, each unit opener ends with a goal-setting activity that allows the students to identify key goals for the unit. This encourages students to take ownership of the learning process and allows them to set individual priorities. At the end of each unit, the workbook also provides a follow-up self-assessment, *Looking at Your Goals*, which allows the students to revisit their initial goals and evaluate how well these were achieved.
- **Self-Assessment 2: General self-assessment forms.** In addition to the unit-specific self-assessment forms, each level of the series provides general self-assessment forms that cover the skills of speaking/listening and reading/writing in the world outside of the classroom. (These forms are found in the reproducible masters book for each level.) By using these forms, students can identify what they are (and aren't) doing to communicate in English outside the classroom, and they are encouraged to set goals for communication practice on their own. These forms also provide teachers with valuable information about their students' of English and their communication needs.

- **Peer Assessment.** Students are encouraged to provide non-threatening, constructive feedback to peers on major assignments such as the tasks and projects in each unit. At each level, the reproducible masters book includes a peer assessment form for projects and tasks.
- **Teacher Assessment 1: Unit Check-Up/Review.** At the end of each unit, the reproducible masters book provides a “unit check-up/review” – a short test on the listening skills, grammar, vocabulary, and life skills of the unit. This is a carefully-constructed, discrete-point test which can be photocopied and easily scored by the teacher. Although these check ups are in the category of more traditional pencil-and-paper tests, they follow current assessment principles by containing discourse contexts and simulations of authentic listening situations.
- **Teacher Assessment 2: Project Assessment Forms.** Each level contains several project assessment forms (found in the reproducible masters book) that can be used by teachers to provide detailed feedback on the most complex student projects. These forms include rubrics with criteria tailored to the specific project.
- **Teacher Assessment 3: Writing and Speaking Assessment Rubrics.** In addition to the specific project forms, each level of the series provides teachers with a more general rubric to use in evaluating student performance on oral and written tasks and projects. The descriptions in these rubrics are specifically tailored to the level of instruction (i.e., beginning or intermediate).
- **Teacher Assessment 4: Ongoing Assessment Mini-Rubrics.** Sometimes teachers need simple rubrics to assess how well students are performing on the smaller activities in the series. The teacher’s edition of each level provides simplified mini-rubrics (in a simple 0-1-2 format) with criteria related to particular presentations or role-plays. These rubrics are built into the lesson guidelines in the teacher’s edition to make them as accessible as possible.
- **Program Assessment 1: Placement Test.** The series includes a comprehensive placement test, which is divided into a literacy section, a section for Levels 1-4, and an oral interview. In addition to providing scores for accurate placement in the series, the test provides information about how much a student knows as he or she enters a program.
- **Program Assessment 2: Portfolios.** Teachers and administrators can assess student progress by having the students keep portfolios of their most significant assignments. To facilitate this, the teacher’s edition suggests which forms and student-produced materials might be collected in a portfolio. Forms recording the results of any of the above assessment tools can also be included in a portfolio.

This list may seem, at first glance, to be rather overwhelming to a new teacher. It is important to remember that a teacher can use as many or as few of these tools as the

situation warrants. And, of course, teachers (especially more experienced teachers) will want to create their own assessment forms, rubrics, and tests. The tools in the series can serve as good models for teacher-constructed assessment.

A Principled Approach

The *English – No Problem!* series tries to be as user-friendly as possible by building assessment into the student book, workbook, teacher’s edition and, especially, the reproducible masters book. These masters allow teachers to photocopy key assessment materials without fear of violating copyright restrictions.

Teachers may also wonder why particular tasks and projects in the series were chosen for more detailed assessment. Quite a bit of thought went into the selection of tasks for authentic assessment. The tasks chosen had to meet the following criteria:

1. They are **integrative**, involving several areas of language use (e.g., reading, writing, speaking, listening, life skills, grammar, vocabulary);
2. They are **authentic**, involving something that could be done in the world outside of the classroom (e.g., writing a letter, making a presentation, making a choice and explaining it);
3. They are **proficiency-focused**, so that completion of a task demonstrates English language proficiency at an appropriate level;
4. They allow for each student to be assessed **individually**, even when he or she is working in a group.

Conclusion.

As we have seen, the multi-faceted assessment program in *English – No Problem!* is based on current theory in second language assessment. The series provides a treasure trove of authentic assessment forms and rubrics. These authentic assessment materials are carefully tailored to focus on criteria in the specific tasks and projects.

In addition to a strong emphasis on authentic assessment, the series provides carefully constructed Unit Check-up/Review tests which help teachers determine how well their students have mastered key areas such as grammar, vocabulary, and life skills knowledge. Even in the era of authentic assessment, most teachers still desire the information they can gain from pencil-and-paper testing. To help students achieve the highest level of formal accuracy as they gain proficiency in a language, we need what Allen Trussell-Cullen calls a “multi-strategied approach” which includes both traditional and alternative forms of assessment (Trussell-Cullen, 1998, p. vii).

The *English – No Problem!* series strikes a balance between a communicative, task-based approach, which requires authentic assessment, and discrete-point activities, which favor more traditional testing. By providing this broad range of assessment options, the series draws upon the best ideas in contemporary educational theory and practice. And, most

importantly, teachers are given the tools to integrate assessment into their lessons, so that adult students like Keiko are guided toward ever-higher levels of mastery.

References

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