

# **Classroom Achievement Tests: An Essential Part of the Second Language Learning and Teaching Processes**

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## **Overview**

Assessment plays a critical role in the field of linguistics, allowing teachers as well as administrators to make important decisions regarding the proficiency, placement, and achievement of second language learners. In addition, assessment can be an invaluable tool in making diagnostic decisions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of particular students. While these types of performance decisions play distinct and crucial roles within language programs, the focus of this article will be on the tests that may be of particular interest to many L2 classroom teachers, i.e., achievement tests.

Achievement tests are primarily used in making classroom-level decisions and are designed with particular reference to the course objectives/learning goals of a specific class. Such tests measure students' mastery of a particular instructional domain in order to make decisions regarding the advancement and/or competency of the students. The content of achievement tests can be derived from three different sources: the textbook, the course syllabus, and the class objectives. Such tests are considered to be criterion-referenced as students' scores are compared with the level of mastery achieved, rather than compared with other students; performance is measured according to an agreed-upon criterion or standard. This article will provide an overview of the perception of testing from the perspective of both the teacher and student. It will also address the benefits and perceived limitations of achievement testing.

## **Perception of Assessment**

Unfortunately, the perception of classroom assessment in language learning has not been entirely positive. As second language teachers, we are sensitized to the importance of fostering a classroom environment that prioritizes affective principles such as language ego and self-confidence. We seek a learning atmosphere based in large part upon the principles of cooperation and student-centeredness. We attempt to minimize the level of anxiety within the classroom while affirming the students' efforts to learn the language.

Some opponents to classroom testing view achievement testing as being counter to these factors as such tests, they might argue, heighten students' anxiety and frustration. Low test scores, some suggest, might have the adverse effect of disempowering students, subsequently lowering their motivation to learn the L2. In addition, achievement testing might be viewed as being psychologically threatening to the teachers themselves as students' substandard test performances could reflect negatively on the job that the teachers are doing in the classroom.

Due, in part, to these factors, some second language teachers avoid incorporating assessments into the classroom. However, avoidance and/or failure to implement such tests could have an adverse impact upon the language development of L2 students. In addition, non-

implementation of achievement tests could lessen the likelihood for subsequent improvements in the curriculum and/or classroom pedagogy--improvements that could benefit both learners and teachers. A more critical look at the goal(s) of classroom testing within the larger framework of the second language classroom may help to clarify some of the possible misconceptions regarding assessment.

### **Benefits of Achievement Testing**

Achievement tests serve a variety of purposes, none of which, obviously, is to instill a sense of anxiety and frustration in the students and/or teachers. However, being assessed is inevitably an anxiety-provoking experience. Nevertheless, as teachers and students, we can also attest that a well-written, content-valid test provides us with an opportunity to take stock of what we have learned, and to demonstrate to ourselves and to others the knowledge and skills that we have accumulated. A well-constructed test will give both the teacher and students an appraisal of their respective achievements. It provides teachers with invaluable information regarding students' needs, abilities, and a measure of how well the students have met the course objectives.

Rather than lessening self-confidence, classroom tests have the capacity to foster it. One of our goals as teachers is to create multiple opportunities for the students to experience success and to excel as language learners. Classroom tests provide one of the strongest ways in which we can help to instill and strengthen positive feelings. Such feelings towards the L2 learning experience, as a whole, can be fostered through tests that challenge students with items that have been designed to emphasize what the students are able to do with the L2. The importance of administering tests with challenging items and a high degree of content validity cannot be stressed enough. Administering tests will lose its importance if the items do not pose a particular challenge to the students and/or if the items do not adequately reflect the given body of content.

Assessment tests in the L2 classroom can foster language learning in a number of ways, including the following: (a) tests can enhance students' motivation by serving as indicators to the progress that they have made, (b) tests can help students establish learning goals for themselves, both prior to and after the test, (c) tests can help students confirm their strengths and weaknesses, thus helping to promote autonomy in their learning experience, (d) tests are able to provide a degree of periodic closure to particular units, while providing students with a sense of accomplishment and mastery of the specified content area, (e) tests can assist teachers in evaluating their own effectiveness, and (f) tests can foster the retention of the particular content area by way of the feedback that they give regarding the students' level of mastery.

### **Conclusion**

Considering such factors, it is evident that classroom assessment tests can be invaluable components of the L2 curriculum. Such tests foster the overall language development of the students, while simultaneously providing teachers with critical information regarding the students' mastery of the specified instructional domain. Achievement tests can be administered in the second language classroom without jeopardizing the interactive, communicative focus of the L2 classroom that we, as teachers, value so greatly.