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Course Module 21: Assessment

Assessment

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21.1 Language Levels

English language learners (ELLs) are normally grouped into one of three broader categories: beginner, intermediate, and advanced. Within these categories, you might see a qualifier, such as low beginner vs. high beginner. In addition, some educational institutions use other terminology, such as “novice” for very low beginners, or “proficient” for students with near-native English skills. Keep in mind that students might be more proficient in one language skill than another. For example, you might have a student displaying advanced-level speaking skills, but intermediate-level reading skills. Conversely, you might have a “true beginner” for speaking skills, but the student may show slightly higher reading and writing skills. For our purposes, we will use the following levels and descriptors found in the first column of **Table 1**. However, be sure to ask administrators at your school if they prefer a specific categorization system.



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Table 1. Defining language levels

Level	Also sometimes called...	Common Characteristics
True Beginner	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Novice• Pre-production	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Very limited communication in English• Uses gestures and 1-3-word utterances• May know greetings and a few "chunk" phrases, such as "How are you?"
Beginner	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Limited English proficiency• Emerging learner• Production	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Communicates with difficulty and many errors• Very simple, unelaborated answers• Many hesitations• No ability to extend conversation• Uses simple grammar & vocabulary
Low Intermediate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• High Beginner	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Communicates understandably with some errors• Simple answers and little elaboration• Attempts interactive conversation• Attempts more complex grammar
High Intermediate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mid-level	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Communicates fairly well• Some elaboration, especially on familiar topics• Can converse with errors and some hesitations• Attempts more complex grammar & vocabulary
Advanced	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bridge• Near proficient• Near-native	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Communicates well with occasional errors• Errors do not obscure communication• Offers a lot of elaboration and interacts using appropriate social cues and gestures• Uses complex grammar and vocabulary on a consistent basis

21.2 Needs Analysis

A key aspect of creating an effective student-centered classroom is for the teacher to collect information on individual student or whole-class traits. Needs analyses can take several different forms. One of the simpler methods of needs analysis is a survey, which can ask open-ended or multiple-choice questions about the following student traits:

- educational background
- culture
- language abilities
- motivations
- interests
- aspirations



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To achieve this, you can make and administer a simple survey, or *needs analysis*, at the onset of your course. A needs analysis is a short pre-test that can be used to learn more about your students' wants, needs, background, and/or language abilities. The results of the needs analysis will help you better understand who your students are and assist you in determining how and what to teach.

Depending on the language level of students being surveyed, multiple-choice questions are often more effective for gathering information, as the data is easier for a teacher or school to analyze. Note, however, that while multiple choice questions are convenient and often easier for lower-level students to complete, they can also be limiting in scope. You will only get a select amount of data because students are not able to explain their answers. **Figure 1** shows a sample survey that includes several different question types, and it can be used or altered for the purpose of general needs analysis.

Figure 1. Sample needs analysis



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Sample Pre-Course Questionnaire/Needs Analysis		
Name _____ Date _____		
1. Why specifically do you need/want to learn more English? What situations are difficult for you in English?		
2. What specific areas would you like to improve in the next [insert the length of class in weeks]?		
3. Order the skills you need from 1 - 6. Number 1 is the most important and number 6 is the least important to you. Please use each number only once.		
Reading _____ Writing _____ Listening _____ Speaking _____ Vocab _____ Pronunciation _____		
4. Think about when you need to use English and check the boxes below. (Check ALL boxes that apply.)		
I'd like to practice English. . .		
Travel/Community <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> To read travel information online (e.g., flights, hotels, etc.)<input type="checkbox"/> To ask for/give directions<input type="checkbox"/> To have conversations and make English speaking friends<input type="checkbox"/> To open a bank account<input type="checkbox"/> To speak with a cashier to buy or return things in a store.<input type="checkbox"/> To look for an apartment or house<input type="checkbox"/> To talk to the landlord or hotel about house/room problems<input type="checkbox"/> To talk with teachers<input type="checkbox"/> To make or change a doctor's appointment<input type="checkbox"/> To talk about symptoms, illnesses & health problems<input type="checkbox"/> To follow doctor's instructions about treatment and read medicines<input type="checkbox"/> Other _____	Work <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> To look for work<input type="checkbox"/> To fill out a job application<input type="checkbox"/> To write a resume<input type="checkbox"/> To go on a job interview<input type="checkbox"/> To talk with co-workers<input type="checkbox"/> To talk with supervisors<input type="checkbox"/> To talk with employees<input type="checkbox"/> To write an email<input type="checkbox"/> Other _____	Education and Training <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> To take college/university courses<input type="checkbox"/> To take a special training or professional course<input type="checkbox"/> To take a TOEFL exam<input type="checkbox"/> To take a TOEIC exam<input type="checkbox"/> Other _____

When using a survey with students, it is important to remember that not all learners have a clear perception of their own needs and abilities. They may not be aware of which language skills they actually need, or they may have an inaccurate view of their current language abilities (either over or underestimating their proficiency). Thus, teachers can and may need to use multiple different tools for assessing their students' needs, possibly including some form of diagnostic assessment.



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21.3 Diagnostic Assessments

Diagnostic assessments are tools used to determine gaps in a student's language ability and weaknesses in particular skill areas. For example, you might have your students turn in a writing sample as part of a diagnostic assessment. That sample would then be analyzed by you to better identify rhetorical or language areas that may need attention (e.g., grammar, tone, organization, etc.). Even if your school doesn't require them, it might be useful to use some form of traditional diagnostic assessment in the first days of class to evaluate the skill areas of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. These are formative assessments and are not to be done as a formal or summative evaluation; rather, they should serve as a baseline, one that can be referred back to at the end of the course to help determine progress.

Diagnostics assessments can be a useful part of a larger needs analysis, as they help to establish the scope and sequence of a course over a specific term and help provide students with a framework for feedback for self-improvement. For an expanded example of a needs analysis, one that includes an in-class diagnostic assessment of various skills, see [Appendix A](#) Sample Needs Analysis & Diagnostic Assessment.

21.4 The Test-Teach-Test Lesson Format

One format of lesson planning that provides an alternative to the PPP format is called Test-Teach-Test (or TTT). In this format, formative assessments are used as substantial stages of the lesson plan. Note that, given our definitions above, TTT might be better named as ATA, or Assessment Teach-Assessment, but TTT is the more common term for this format.

A lesson using the TTT format contains the following basic steps:

Step 1 - Test

- The teacher administers some form of assessment covering a target language structure or skill
- Students use whatever knowledge they may already have to complete the assessment, free from teacher involvement

Step 2 - Teach

- The teacher uses the results of the first assessment to structure some input in the form of meaningful examples, perhaps in the form of expanded and corrected answers to the previous assessment, providing some teaching about target language or skill
- The students' previous knowledge is highlighted, as are any gaps in that knowledge
- Students work through text and/or practice activities; the teacher facilitates

Step 3 - Test



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- Students are tested again, using a similar (but different) assessment from step 1, allowing the teacher to monitor student language usage
- The teacher can use delayed error-correction (i.e., correct any issues/errors only after the assessment is complete) to focus on any differences/improvements from the first assessment

It is easy to see that assessment plays an important role in TTT lesson planning, with formative assessments in the first and final steps. TTT can be difficult to implement properly, especially for more novice teachers, as it requires substantial real-time improvisation that is based on the results of authentic assessment. However, this is also the main positive attribute of TTT: the lesson content and teacher actions are driven by the results of authentic learner assessment.

No matter what lesson plan format is being used, it is important that your plans and assessments encompass the needs of all learners, so you should plan both lessons and assessments that account for various learning styles. This means that your assessments, just like your lesson plans, should regularly include visual/aural, read/write, and kinesthetic components.

21.5 Summative vs. Formative Assessment

There are two general kinds of second language assessment: formative and summative. Summative assessment allows the teacher to determine what language students have acquired up to a particular point in time. Formal tests given as mid-term or final exams are summative in nature. Formative assessment, on the other hand, takes place during the instructional period and provides a way for the teacher to make adjustments to the methods, materials, or lesson plan in real-time. These are often informal and done at the end of a stage or lesson. Checking for comprehension in the review stage of a PPP lesson plan would be considered formative assessment; it is assessment because it measures the extent of learning, and it is formative because it is used to inform the creation of the objectives and lessons to come.

TESOL teachers should also strive to create authentic assessments that mirror the tasks and language skills students have already practiced in the classroom. For example, if you do paired role plays in class to practice orally giving directions, your assessment should not ask the students to read a paragraph on giving directions and answer multiple choice questions. Instead, the assessments should also be done orally on a comparable topic (e.g., using a different map) to mirror the role play that was practiced in class. It can then be evaluated by the teacher or student in a relevant way. By matching assessments to classroom practices, you are setting your students up for a better chance of success. Some examples of authentic methods of assessment include portfolios, teacher observations, self assessments, student presentations/writing with scoring rubrics and anecdotal records.

[Exam Link](#)