

How a good language test can support effective learning: putting learning, teaching and assessment together

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Even though there is a need for more empirical evidence on the formative use of assessment data, most teachers would agree that instruction is influenced by test content and results, especially in the case of high stakes testing. The washback effect of a language test on classroom practice seems to be undeniable; however, it need not always be negative and stultifying. Positive washback is more likely to ensue if tests are produced with an awareness of the learning context. According to Whitehead (2007) the validity of tests “can be improved if they have a degree of *ecological validity*, that is, if they reflect how teachers teach, how students learn, and how students use the content assessed” (p. 449). Providing teachers with a sense of ownership by encouraging them to play an active role in language testing is likely to increase its formative potential and lead to more effective learning. Learning in this case does not only apply to students, but more significantly to teachers.

Teachers' involvement in language testing helps to diminish the alienation that they sometimes experience in relation to tests that are implemented without their consultation. Teachers need to be able to deconstruct a language test and identify its strengths and weaknesses. It is only in this way that they can contribute to any debates concerning assessment policies and thus avoid having to unquestioningly accept impositions from above. Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith (2012) believe that if a test is to improve outcomes and enhance learning then there needs to be “agreement that the teacher, not the test, is the primary change agent” (p. 75). This means giving more weight to teacher judgement by encouraging teachers to position themselves as examiners. In this way they are likely to feel that their judgement matters.

Teacher judgement can serve to heighten the formative potential of language tests and it is for this reason that there should be more opportunities for teachers to play the role of examiners. Harlen (2005) is in favour of involving teachers in tests because through such “...involvement they develop ownership of the procedures and criteria and understand the process of assessment, including such matters as what makes an adequate sample of behaviour, as well as the goals and processes of learning” (p. 221). The implication is that the knowledge and skills they develop by being involved in test design will feed into their own classroom practices. However, teachers are still not actively involved in language testing, and this is probably due to the perception that their assessment practices are insufficiently reliable. The main danger in such exclusion is in relation to the validity of the assessment system. A system that aims to safeguard its validity while improving outcomes will seek to harness the teachers' knowledge of the learning context.

The solution to a lack of reliability in teachers' assessment practices is best addressed by means of training and not by barring them from participating in language testing. Teachers' involvement in language testing helps to bolster confidence in their own judgement and to develop their assessment literacy. Providing teachers with adequate training is crucial, especially since professional development opportunities that target teachers' assessment literacy have been associated with an improvement in student outcomes. Research seems to show that teachers' assessment literacy is rather poor, and this leads them to assess students in the largely ineffective way they themselves were assessed. Moreover, their failure to understand the purpose of testing affects their classroom

practices and attitudes towards assessment. Teachers' involvement in language testing might be a means of addressing some of these problems.

The significance of such involvement became apparent to my colleagues and me when we agreed to contribute to the design and implementation of an English speaking examination at Advanced level in Malta (Vella Briffa & Xerri, 2013). This component, which forms part of second language education and caters for the needs of around 600 prospective university candidates, was not available prior to April 2013. Upon publication of a sketchy syllabus description of this component by the national examination body, we took the initiative to draft a comprehensive list of specifications, procedures and sample test materials that was ultimately adopted as the official examination manual. Our experience as teachers allowed us to address the gaps present in the original syllabus so that our students and other candidates were provided with a reliable and valid form of assessment. In a lengthy process made up of a number of stages, we learnt a lot about how to structure a speaking exam, write and moderate tasks, trial the tasks, create an analytic scale, and calibrate the scale. Our work was formally acknowledged by the national examination body, which besides implementing the procedures, rubrics and timing we had formulated in the manual also entrusted us with the task of training prospective examiners. For this task we devised an intensive training programme that provided participants with plenty of hands-on practice. On the first sitting of the speaking examination, we also acted as examiners.

Our involvement in the design and implementation of a language test not only helped develop our assessment literacy, but most importantly allowed us to identify our beliefs and attitudes in relation to assessment and to work to improve these by means of reflection amongst ourselves. Enabling teachers to position themselves as examiners empowers them to play a role in reforming language testing so that it is more equitable and more likely to enhance classroom practices. A language test that adopts such an inclusive approach facilitates more effective learning on the part of teachers. Ultimately, this is to the benefit of all their students.

References

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