7. Work for washback.

As you evaluate the test and return it to your students, your feedback should reflect the principles of washback discussed earlier. Use the information from the test performance as a springboard for review and/or for moving on to the next unit.

ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT OPTIONS

So far in this chapter, the focus has been on the administration of formal tests in the classroom. It was noted earlier that "assessment" is a broad term covering any conscious effort on the part of a teacher or student to draw some conclusions on the basis of performance. Tests are a special subset of the range of possibilities within assessment; of course they constitute a very salient subset, but not all assessment consists of tests.

In recent years language teachers have stepped up efforts to develop non-test assessment options that are nevertheless carefully designed and that adhere to the criteria for adequate assessment. Sometimes such innovations are referred to as **alternative assessment**, if only to distinguish them from *traditional* formal tests. Several alternative assessment options will be briefly discussed here: self- and peer-assessments, journals, conferences, portfolios, and cooperative test construction.

1. Self- and peer-assessments

A conventional view of language pedagogy might consider self- and peer-assessment to be an absurd reversal of the teaching–learning process. After all, how could learners who are still in the process of acquisition, especially the early processes, be capable of rendering an accurate assessment of their own performance? But a closer look at the acquisition of any skill reveals the importance, if not the necessity, of self-assessment and the benefit of peer-assessment. What successful learner has not developed the ability to monitor his or her own performance and to use the data gathered for adjustments and corrections? Successful learners extend the learning process well beyond the classroom and the presence of a teacher or tutor, autonomously mastering the art of self-assessment. And where peers are available to render assessments, why not take advantage of such additional input?

Research has shown (Brown & Hudson 1998) a number of advantages of self- and peer-assessment: speed, direct involvement of students, the encouragement of autonomy, and increased motivation because of self-involvement in the process of learning. Of course, the disadvantage of subjectivity looms large, and must be considered whenever you propose to involve students in self- and peer-assessment.

Following are some ways in which self- and peer-assessment can be implemented in language classrooms.

- **Oral production:** student self-checklists; peer checklists; offering and receiving a holistic rating of an oral presentation; listening to tape-recorded oral production to detect pronunciation or grammar errors; in natural

conversation, asking others for confirmation checks; setting goals for creating opportunities to speak
- **Listening comprehension:** listening to TV or radio broadcasts and checking comprehension with a partner; in pair or group work, asking when you don't understand something; listening to an academic lecture and checking yourself on a "quiz" of the content; setting goals for increasing opportunities for listening
- **Writing:** revising written work on your own; revising written work with a peer (peer-editing); proofreading; setting goals for increasing opportunities to write
- **Reading:** reading textbook passages followed by self-check comprehension questions; reading and checking comprehension with a partner; vocabulary quizzes; self-assessment of reading habits; setting goals

Tim Murphey (1995) offered an innovative example of self- and peer-assessment of oral production, reprinted in Figure 22.1. This test utilizes interactive work with a partner and promotes respect between teacher and learner in the grading process.

Figure 22.1. (adapted from Murphey 1995)

Test 2: Cooperative pair work and self-evaluation

English II Oral test

Name:

Part A: Filled out by you

grades: A+ A B C F   **ENGLISH ONLY ALL THE TIME**

1. Based upon what you think you know for the test, what grade would you give yourself now, before you take it?

grade/score:_____

2. Based upon how much time and effort you spent studying for the test, what grade would you give yourself now, before you take it?

grade/score:_____

Now, give your study list of words to your partner, and your partner will give you his/hers. Also exchange this sheet of paper with your partner.

Part B: Filled out by your partner

Go outside (if it is pretty) and ask your partner the following (the partner who is the tallest should answer first, and the other should ask, then switch):

3. Call out words that he/she marked on his/her sheet as being difficult and ask him/her to explain them and/or use them in an example. Do at least ten words. If your partner marked more than ten words, just pick the last ten on the list. If your partner marked fewer than ten, choose some others that you found difficult. But do only ten.

Your partner should start to answer immediately. If he/she doesn't start answering after five seconds, hit the buzzer BBBBEEEEEEPPPP. Time's up. But give him/her all the time he/she needs to answer completely.

Write here how many out of ten he/she explained adequately:

grade/score:_____

If you went first, it is now your partner's turn to ask you questions.

4. When both of you have finished #3:

Ask your partner to describe some object at home without naming the object. He/she should be able to tell you at least five things about it that allow you to know what it is. Count the number of things. Give him/her a score of one to five, depending on how many things he/she told you about the object. Then exchange roles.

grade/score:_____

5. The partner with the highest student number should choose one of the following to explain:

    a) the 4 dimensions of learning

    b) steps in learning how to juggle

    c) telling 2 stories that they heard Mr. Murphey tell.

The second person speaking must not choose what the first one chose.
Give a grade of 1(poor) to 5(excellent).

grade/score:_____

6. The partner whose student number is lowest should name 5 ways to improve your oral English outside of class as Mr. Murphey has asked you to do. Write their suggestions below and give them a score.

grade/score:_____

The other partner must name 5 songs and one word he/she learned from each song. Write these below and give them a score.

grade/score:_____

_____

_____

    Minus points every time you spoke Japanese.

    Total number of points out of 25 possible:

    Now return this paper to the owner.

Part C: Filled out by the same person as in A

After having taken this test, what kind of grade do you think you should get? Do you think this test gave a fair picture of what you know? Was it easy, fun, or what? Would you like to take other tests like this? Was it useful? Could it be improved in any way? Write some feedback below.

Thank you very much.

2. Journals

Usually one thinks of journals simply as opportunities for learners to write relatively freely without undue concern for grammaticality. Journals can range from language learning logs, to grammar discussions, to responses to readings, to attitudes and feelings about oneself. Recently, the assessment qualities of journal writing have assumed an important role in the teaching–learning process. Because journal writing is a dialogue between student and teacher, journals afford a unique opportunity for a teacher to offer various kinds of feedback to learners.

Using journals as assessment instruments requires a carefully specified, systematic approach:

- Specify to students what the purpose of the journal is (response to reading, learning log, grammar commentary, etc.).
- Give clear directions to students on how to get started (many students will never have written a journal before and may be mystified about what to do). Sometimes an abbreviated model journal entry helps.
- Give guidelines on length of each entry and any other format expectations.
- Collect journals on pre-announced dates and return them promptly.
- Be clear yourself on the principal purpose of the journal and make sure your feedback speaks to that purpose.
- Help students to process your feedback, and show them how to respond to your responses.

3. Conferences

For a number of years, conferences have been a routine part of language classrooms, especially courses in writing. Conferencing has become a standard part of the process approach to teaching writing, as the teacher, in a conversation about a draft, facilitates the improvement of the written work. Such interaction has the advantage of allowing one-on-one interaction between teacher and student such that the specific needs of a student can receive direct feedback. Through conferences, a teacher can assume the role of a facilitator and guide, rather than a master controller and deliverer of final grades. In this intrinsically motivating atmosphere, students can feel that the teacher is an ally who is encouraging self-reflection. It is important not to consider a conference as a moment to be graded. Conferences are by nature formative, not summative; formative assessment points students toward further development, rather than offering a final summation of performance.

4. Portfolios

One of the most popular forms of alternative assessment now within a CLT framework is the construction of portfolios. A portfolio is "a purposeful collection of students' work that demonstrates to students and others their efforts, progress, and achievements in given areas" (Genesee & Upshur 1996: 99). Portfolios include essays, compositions, poetry, book reports, art work, video- or audiotape recordings of a student's oral production, journals, and virtually anything else one wishes to

specify. In earlier decades of our history, portfolios were thought to be applicable only to younger children who assembled a portfolio of art work and written work for presentation to a teacher and/or a parent. But now, learners of all ages and in all fields of study are benefiting from the tangible, hands-on nature of portfolio development.

Guidelines for using portfolios in a classroom are very much like the guidelines offered for journal writing:

- Specify to students what the purpose of the portfolio is (to emphasize accomplishments, to offer tangible material for feedback from the teacher, etc.).
- Give clear directions to students on how to get started (many students will never have compiled a portfolio before and may be mystified about what to do). Showing a sample portfolio from a previous student might help to stimulate thoughts on what to include.
- Give guidelines on acceptable material to include.
- Collect portfolios on pre-announced dates and return them promptly.
- Be clear yourself on the principal purpose of the portfolio and make sure your feedback speaks to that purpose.
- Help students to process your feedback and show them how to respond to your responses. This processing might take place in a conference, or simply through written feedback.

5. Cooperative test construction

The traditional view of what a test is certainly does not include students in the process of test construction! In fact, it may sound a little crazy to suggest that students construct their own test items. But one of the most productive of the various alternative assessment procedures sees students directly involved in the construction of a test. Tim Murphey (personal communication 1993), whose oral production test was discussed above, told how he got another group of students to cooperate in the design of their own test.

It is one of the most satisfying things in the world to me to see my students busy learning, interacting intensively with each other, occasionally consulting with me, but taking the responsibility themselves and being energetically involved.

I wanted to give a test last week over the different vocabulary and structures that we had covered the last few weeks. But I decided to share the task with the students and see how we might do it interactively. I asked the students in pairs to brainstorm all the things that they thought they had learned and that should be in a test. I forbade them to look into their books. It had to be from memory.

Next they had to go into groups of fours and exchange their papers and discuss whether they agreed with what the other pairs

suggested be on the test. Some ideas were crossed off, some were added on, and there was a lot of negotiation going on. I collected the lists, condensed them into one list, and distributed copies to each person at the next class, instructing them to formulate the actual test questions. They each did so, and then in pairs verified that there were no mistakes in the questions, occasionally asking me as I circulated around the room.

Then I told them that in the next class a certain number of their questions would be on the actual test. In the remaining quarter of an hour they were permitted to read every other student's test and to ask the author the answer if they didn't know it. Needless to say, it was an intense fifteen minutes. What is more, I learned they had learned things that I was unaware of teaching or doing in class, and not learned things, at least in their conscious memory, that I thought I had taught.

I am convinced that the exercise of listing items to test, making the questions themselves, and then discussing them with each other initiated many more "opportunities for learning" than would have occurred if I had simply given them a test. And of course, if I had made the test alone I would have tested what I, one person alone, thought was and should have been learned. Together they taught each other, and me, much more, and the test was ultimately much more reliable as a mirror of what was actually covered very thoroughly in the test preparation phase as the students were convinced that it was a useful and testable item.

It would not be terribly outlandish for you to consider some form of cooperative test design. In my own assessment seminar, I have seen cooperatively produced tests that have engendered a good deal of intrinsic involvement in the process of reviewing and selecting items for the final form of the test. Many educators agree that one of the primary purposes in administering tests is to stimulate review and integration, which is exactly what cooperative test design does, but almost without awareness on the students' part that they are indeed reviewing the material!

ASSESSMENT AND TEACHING: PARTNERS IN THE LEARNING PROCESS

It is quite obvious by now, I hope, that assessment is an integral part of the teaching–learning cycle. In an interactive, communicative curriculum, assessment is almost constant. Tests, as a subset of all assessment processes, do not necessarily need to violate principles of authenticity, intrinsic motivation, and student-centeredness. Along with some newer, alternative methods of assessment, tests become indispensable components of a curriculum.

As a reminder of the value of assessment in the classroom, remember that assessment and teaching are partners in the learning process.

1. Periodic assessments, both formal and informal, can increase motivation as they serve as milestones of student progress.
2. Assessments can spur learners to set goals for themselves.
3. Assessments encourage retention of information through the feedback they give on learners' competence.
4. Assessments can provide a sense of periodic closure to various units and modules of a curriculum.
5. Assessments can encourage students' self-evaluation of their progress.
6. Assessments can promote student autonomy as they confirm areas of strength and areas needing further work.
7. Assessments can aid in evaluating teaching effectiveness.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION, ACTION, AND RESEARCH

[Note: (I) Individual work; (G) group or pair work; (C) whole-class discussion.]

1. (G/C) Teachers are called upon to play dual roles in the classroom. One is the role of a coach or guide, and the other is the role of a judge who administers tests and assigns grades. Ask pairs to discuss whether these two roles are conflicting. Then ask them to brainstorm some ways that a teacher can lessen the potential conflict such that one can play both roles. Then, have them share their ideas with the rest of the class.
2. (C) Review with your students the meaning of **informal, formal, formative**, and **summative** testing, and brainstorm some examples of each of the four categories. As a class, discuss ways that summative tests (final exams, standardized tests, etc.) might provide constructive feedback to the student.
3. (C) Following traditional views of intelligence, we would have to say that numerous highly "intelligent" people fail to learn a foreign language. Ask students how Howard Gardner's and Robert Sternberg's views on intelligence shed new light on such an apparent paradox.
4. (G/C) In the list of characteristics of **traditional** and **alternative** testing, it's fairly easy to identify some specific tests that would be classified as traditional. Have groups look at the list of characteristics of alternative testing and brainstorm some examples of tests or test items that belong to the alternative category. Groups will then share their ideas with the rest of the class.
5. (C) Ask your class to look again at the lists of strategies for test-takers and ask them what strategies they could add to this list.
6. (G/C) This one might take up a full class hour to complete. Direct small groups to devise an oral test for a specified purpose and an audience that they are familiar with and to address the following questions: What is the