Creating Authentic Assessments for the Language Classroom

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Abstract

Presentations and multiple-choice tests are common in beginner level language classes as they are an objective way for teachers to gauge what students know and often do not require much time for preparation and grading. Yet, these types of assessments often lack context and may not be engaging for students. Authentic assessments are a tool that teachers can use to address these issues. These assessments mirror real-life situations and give students the opportunity to express themselves in ways that are unique to them. Although this type of assessment may require more time for creation, implementation, and analysis than traditional tests, authentic assessments have been shown to increase student motivation and engagement. This paper aims to explain the features and benefits of authentic assessments, outline the steps to create them, and provide ideas for overcoming challenges of creating and implementing authentic assessments.

Introduction

Assessment in a language classroom is crucial in helping students to evaluate their progress with language acquisition and in informing teachers how to proceed. It is particularly important in beginner level courses, where the pace or difficulty of lessons may need to be modified depending on individual students and classes. Quantitative, objective-type assessments, such as multiple-choice tests, fill-in-the-blank, or providing correct word forms, are common in beginner-level language classes. However, while these tests may help both students and teachers gauge language progress, they come with a few limitations. Objective-type tests have clear right-or-wrong answers, but a student's performance on such a test may be a reflection of the student's motivation, rather than their mastery of the language (Kuhbander et al., 2016, pp. 5-6; Soland, 2018, pp. 321-322). Further, the format of the test (such as the question order) and the method of marking (e.g. negative points for incorrect answers) also affect how students perform on these tests (Balart, 2017, p. 28; Bush, 2015, p. 229). Finally, they do not allow students to demonstrate their understanding of how the language is used in various situations (Gill & Lucas, 2013, p. 360). Authentic assessments, on the other hand, have students use the target language in a personalized way, thus making language learning meaningful and increasing motivation. Though advantageous, authentic assessments take time to design, produce, and implement, which can be discouraging for teachers constrained by curriculum and testing requirements. Additionally, the lack of right-or-wrong answers and the use of rubrics may make teachers hesitant to utilize these assessments. Yet, despite challenges in the creation and utilization of these types of assessments, research has shown that both teachers and students have positive perceptions of them, leading to increased student motivation and outcomes (Kohnke, Jarvis, & Ting, 2021). Therefore, language teachers should endeavor to include more authentic assessments in their classrooms. This paper will explore the features and benefits of authentic assessments and aims to demonstrate how to create and implement them into beginner level language classrooms.

Authentic Assessments

Rationale and Features

Traditional assessments are a useful tool in the language classroom, as they can objectively test students' mastery of the target language. However, objective-type tests generally lack context and therefore relevance to real life (Brown, 2019, pp. 13-14; Gill &

Lucas, 2013, p. 360). While results of these tests may help guide teachers in their curriculum, these assessments may only test students' memorization rather than actual understanding (Gill & Lucas, 2013, p. 360). This means that although students may be able to correctly guess the answer to a multiple-choice question, they may not be able to use that same language in their own lives outside the classroom, rendering their language learning useless. Additionally, objective tests may only test students' recall, rather than their ability to use the new language to communicate.

Thus, authentic assessments have two fundamental components: meaningfulness and practicality. Activities in a language classroom should help students move from acquiring language skills to using those skills. So, students should be evaluated on how well they are able to utilize what they have learned to express their personal thoughts and opinions. Thus, for assessments to be meaningful to students, they must allow students to demonstrate what they have learned, with various ways to show it (Brown, 2019, p. 13; Gill & Lucas, 2013, pp. 362-363; Wiggins, 2006, para. 32). Authentic assessments, then, are not one-size-fits-all and do not have correct or incorrect answers but rather allow for individualization within the product or performance.

Secondly, authentic assessments allow students to practice using language in situations that mimic real-life but within the sheltered and lower-stakes environment of the classroom. Although students may not possess the languages skills to accurately reproduce real-world scenarios, authentic assessments should be "faithful to real-world demands, opportunities, and constraints" (Wiggins, 2006, para. 5). As such, they should be complex, where students are required to collaborate and communicate using high-level thinking (Thomas, 2021, p. 396). In this way, they can take risks and use their learned language in meaningful ways that they might use in their future careers (Aliningsih & Sofwan, 2015, p. 23; bin Abdul Aziz & Nurahimah Mohd, 2016, p. 202; Thomas, 2021, pp. 400-401). This chance to practice can help students see the value of the language and skills they are learning. Additionally, teachers can assess if students can use the language in a meaningful way and apply their knowledge and skill to communicate successfully (Aliningsih & Sofwan, 2015, p. 23; Gill & Lucas, 2013, p. 363). Correct utilization rather than memorization and regurgitation can show if students have mastery of the language, allowing teachers to address mistakes and adjust lessons based on student performance.

Creation of an Authentic Assessment

Identifying the Topic and Target Language

An authentic assessment rests on two key questions:

1) *In what real-world situations do people encounter this topic and/or target language?*

2) *What part of the real-world situation should students be able to achieve within the given time-frame?*

These questions will drive the creation and structure of the activities and end product. Question 1 narrows the focus and gives context to the language that students will learn. Authentic assessments should mirror real-world situations but given the time constraints of a course and the language abilities of students, especially beginner level learners, expecting students to mimic a real situation completely is impractical. Thus, Question 2 will identify the crucial points of the real-world situation and guide the creation of the rubric, which identifies the behavior or product to be assessed and defines the various levels of proficiency, making expectations explicit to students, and can be described as holistic (assessing the whole final product or performance) or analytical (assessing individual components of the final product or performance). Many scholars (such as Ayhan & Türkyılmaz, 2015; Chowdhury, 2018; Davis, 2015) have explained the different strengths of each type of rubric and have provided examples with key points of rubric creation. Either type can be used, as Brookhart (2018) found that both types of rubrics produce positive outcomes, but "appropriate criteria are the key to effective rubrics" (p. 2) so the rubric must identify "the qualities that the final work should display" (p. 10). Because students will base their work on the rubric, having criterion that highlights substance (e.g. *Presents a persuasive argument that is logical and well-supported*) rather than quantity (e.g. *Presents an argument that is supported with three examples*) will help students focus on the quality of their product or performance.

Backwards Planning

With the outcomes identified, the unit activities can then be created, guided by questions such as:

1) *How will students master the necessary skills to produce the final product or performance?*

2) *What are logical steps students need to take in order to get to the final product or performance?*

Here, as mentioned previously, time constraints will limit what can be covered in-class or with homework, so focusing on the criteria of the rubric will dictate the unit activities. If using an analytic rubric, it can be helpful to have one or two class periods focused on each criterion. For example, if the assessment is to discuss with a partner and decide on a restaurant suitable for business clients with the criteria being 1) giving an opinion with logical support, and 2) agreeing/disagreeing and giving a clear reason, one class period could be used to practice giving opinions and a second to practice agreeing and disagreeing. Gill & Lucas (2013) give a different example of mini-tasks such as "(1) creating a grocery list, (2) preparing invitations, (3) deciding on activities" which build up to the final project of giving a party (p. 362). Backwards planning in this way can help to focus students' attention on the essential parts of the final product or performance and give them ample exposure to the language targets and practice time needed for proficiency.

Responses to Authentic Assessments

Teacher and Student Perceptions

Research into teacher perceptions of authentic assessment is sparse. Anecdotally, many of the author's colleagues find authentic assessment useful and beneficial to student learning and motivation, though some struggle with creation and implementation due to curricula or timeline constraints. One study by Aksu Atac (2012) confirms this positive regard for authentic assessment, stating that "[teacher] participants [had a] strong sense of inclination toward goal setting in their classes with regards to authentic assessment" (p. 16). Thus, authentic assessment can also be a strong motivation and guiding force for teachers as well as students.

In the author's experience, students respond positively to real-world simulations and have reported that they feel these types of assessments are highly rewarding, though they have found them more challenging than traditional presentations. In particular, an informal survey by the author showed that second-year students enjoyed authentic assessments more than presentations and group discussions and found this type of assessment more useful and valuable. A study by Kohnke, Jarvis, and Ting (2021) supports these sentiments. They found that students had improved confidence in their language skills and were able to "better engage with the discipline-specific language and assess it in its context" (Kohnke, Jarvis, &

Ting, 2021). They also reported that student motivation increased due to completion of an authentic assessment.

Challenges

Despite positive perceptions by both students and teachers and beneficial outcomes, many are hesitant to utilize authentic assessments in beginner level language classrooms due to time constraints and/or inexperience with creating these types of assessments. Time is a legitimate, obvious concern, as creation, planning, and implementation require a lot of time and effort. Gilmore (2019) acknowledges that traditional multiple-choice or gap-fill tests are more convenient and creating new assessments "impose extra costs and burdens on educational institutions" (p. 228). Authentic assessments suitable for the target language may not be readily available, or it may cost extra money to acquire the necessary materials. Further, Brown (2019) highlights that in addition to the time required to design and develop authentic assessments, some types of assessments, such as mock-job interviews, may require more class time to execute than is available to teachers constrained by curriculum (p. 21). Admittedly, these time concerns are significant and may restrict the type and complexity of the authentic assessments that are feasible in individual classrooms.

Teachers have also expressed their hesitation to use authentic assessments due to their inexperience in creating them, particularly with development and application of rubrics. In making rubrics, those who are accustomed to objective-type tests may face difficulty in identifying pertinent aspects of a performance or product or may not be able to clearly define levels of proficiency. "While making performance tasks is relatively easy, developing a performance rubric requires teachers to go into the concept of such performance and articulate it on a written rubric" (Brown, 2019, p. 21). Imprecision on a rubric may lead to students being evaluated on criteria that were not the main focus of the task. This may also influence the objectivity of the assessment. Most teachers are wary of being too subjective in their evaluations. Brown (2019) notes that inexperienced teachers may produce rubrics that do not contain clear criteria, or they may become "trapped in irrelevant aspects of the required performance" (p. 21). These obstacles cause teachers to avoid the use of authentic assessments in their class.

These challenges are real but can be addressed with a few strategies. First, authentic assessments can be used as summative projects where objective-type tests used throughout units inform the final product or performance. Traditional assessments still have an important

place in the language classroom (Brown, 2019; Gill & Lucas, 2013) but using them in tandem with authentic assessments moves students from rote-memorization tasks to meaningful use of learned language. Rather than creating many small authentic assessments, this mixture can reduce the time required for preparation, as many quantitative tests are readily available and are quickly graded. For inexperienced teachers, a simple internet search can provide examples of both authentic assessments and rubrics for the target language. Indeed, Brown (2019), Gill & Lucas (2013), and Thomas (2021) provide explanations and models of authentic assessments while Brookhart (2018), Chowdhury (2018), and Davis (2015) describe the creation and implementation of effective rubrics. Although inexperience may make teachers hesitant to attempt using authentic assessments, avoidance of them is impractical. One cannot learn to ride a bicycle without riding a bicycle – teachers can only learn to create and implement authentic assessments by trying it themselves. Those unfamiliar with authentic assessments can look to existing literature and start with smaller authentic assessments (such as making plans to meet a friend to see a movie for the target language of telling time) using holistic rubrics, gradually building to larger summative assessments as they gain experience.

Conclusion

Despite legitimate concerns about time, effort, and experience, authentic assessments are an effective tool that teachers should use in language classrooms to increase learners' language skills and motivation. Many researchers and educators have published examples of authentic assessments and rubrics, along with an abundance of instruction and advice, so those who are hesitant to try it can look to the literature to get started. Research has shown that both teachers and students have positive views of authentic assessments, as it allows students to apply their learning in ways that mimic real-world situations and that are unique and meaningful to themselves. Further, these types of assessments can be used for various levels and utilizing them in tandem with test-type assessments can give teachers a better understanding of students' progress. Relying less on traditional assessments and implementing more authentic assessments in the language classroom are worth the time and effort of teachers as it will help students use their skills and increase their motivation and engagement with the target language.

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