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Assessing

The purposes of assessment

KEY IDEAS

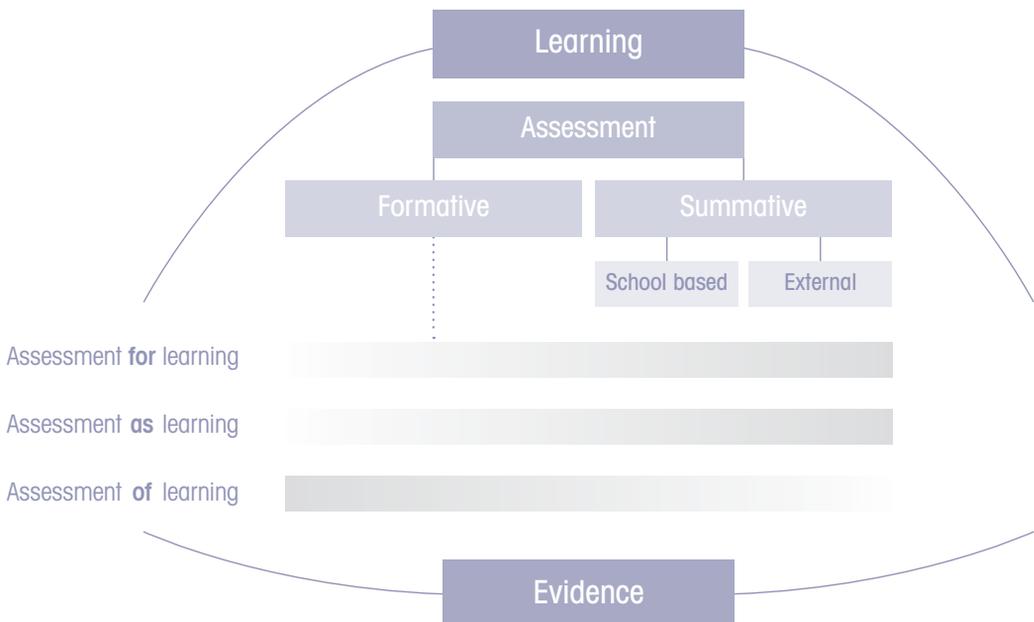
- Assessment is an integral part of learning
- Assessment is used for diverse purposes
- Assessment is both formative and summative

Assessment *for*, *of* and *as* learning

Assessment in any educational context and at any level is integral to student learning. It involves making considered judgments about what students have learned and understood, how they are learning, and where they are along their personal learning trajectory. The relationship between assessment and learning has been captured recently in general education with the distinctions among assessment *for* learning, assessment *of* learning and assessment *as* learning. The relationship is also captured in the distinction between *summative* end-of-unit or end-of-course judgments about students' overall learning and progress, and ongoing, *formative* assessment.

Embedded within these distinctions is the important concept of purpose in assessment, which ranges from diagnostic, developmental, formative purposes oriented to learner progress through to reporting and certification. These different purposes centre on the issue of accountability and whether the accountability is internal to the immediate learning system (eg classroom) or external (eg system-wide accountability). Whereas these purposes have previously been held as distinct, there is now an increasing educational understanding that they are meshed in complex ways and teachers need to work with all these purposes simultaneously. Thus, while the distinctions are useful at one level, it needs to be recognised that the purposes are integrated, particularly when assessment includes a long-term perspective. For example, the summative assessment information gathered at the end of Year 8 can be seen as serving a formative purpose at the beginning of Year 9.

The diagram that follows depicts the idea that all assessment is connected to learning and that there are two major purposes of assessment: formative and summative. The latter of these may be school-based or external. Assessment *for* learning and assessment *as* learning foreground formative assessment and assessment *of* learning foregrounds summative assessment.



During the 1990s and into the 2000s, the purpose of systemic accountability was foregrounded through the development and use of state-wide frameworks of outcomes and standards. These were often generated through committee consensus without a base in research on what it is that students learn across the K-12 continuum. The emphasis was on the summative assessment *of* learning and more on reporting than on the assessment process itself. In recent years, research has established that formative assessment can raise standards of student achievement (Black & Jones, 2006) and systems have begun to emphasise the importance of assessment *for* learning and *as* learning alongside the assessment *of* learning.

Formative assessment

When linking assessment to learning, it is important to consider the *meaning* of formative assessment. Black and Jones (2006:4) highlight the meaning as follows.



Assessment for learning is any assessment for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting pupils' learning. It thus differs from assessment designed primarily to serve the purposes of accountability or of ranking or of certifying competence.

An assessment activity can help learning if it provides information to be used as feedback, by teachers, and by their pupils in assessing themselves and each other, to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Such assessment becomes 'formative assessment' when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching work to meet learning needs.



The meaning of 'formative' here is that it actually forms or shapes learning. Thus, all that as teachers we believe about learning, and our stance to our role as languages educators, influences our teaching. Contemporary learning theories recognise that learning is a deeply social and cultural process that involves active construction through interaction, mediation, talk, questioning, and scaffolding with more knowledgeable others.

Connection points between learning and formative assessment include the following.

- **Eliciting prior knowledge**, that is teacher questioning of students to elicit their existing understanding as a basis for identifying ways of interacting, scaffolding; and building connections.
- **Ongoing interactive questioning and discussion**, that is teacher to student, student to teacher, student to peers – that build from simple to complex, that challenge students to elaborate their meanings, that invite students to reformulate, respond to or build upon the response of another in ways that shape their understanding.
- **A focus on transfer**, that is encouraging the application of knowledge in different contexts, building complexity. As Black and Jones (2006:5) state:
‘If teachers want to find out what pupils understand and/or can do ... then these pupils need to be challenged by activities that make them think and perform.’
- **A focus on scaffolding** in ways that are appropriate to the gap in understanding on the part of the student, as perceived by the teacher and ensuring that the teacher monitors, considers how the student responds to the scaffolding.
- **A focus on feedback** that actually moves learning forward by explaining what it is that students actually need to do in order to improve the piece of work, providing or clarifying the rationale behind particular tasks and monitoring the improvement so that students appreciate that it matters.
- **Encouraging self and peer assessment** such that students come to understand, for example, criteria for quality, problems and strengths of particular pieces of work, how to give and receive feedback, in the context of developing self-awareness as learners.

Ultimately assessment is formative, in the sense of influencing learning, when evidence from assessment is actually used to change what students do.

Another important connection between learning and assessment that emerges from contemporary learning theories is that assessment is not a single episode or event or task; rather, it is a dynamic process which involves coming to understand students’ performance and learning over time, in the context of their developmental trajectories. This, in turn, challenges the teacher to bring together the range of information gleaned from students’ responses, and determine how to act upon it in ways that will enhance students’ understanding and further learning.

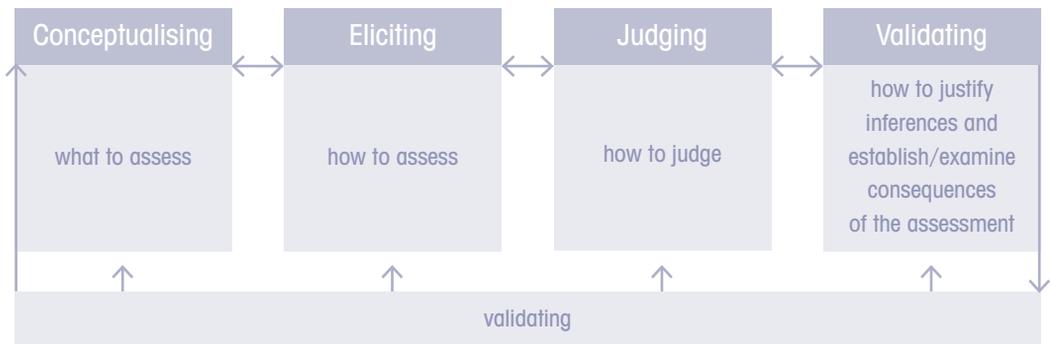
The assessment cycle

KEY IDEAS

- Assessment can be understood as a cycle of interrelated processes of conceptualising, eliciting, judging and validating
- There are varied ways of eliciting evidence of student learning which capture diverse dimensions of students' learning

The assessment cycle

The diagram that follows provides a means of understanding assessment itself as a set of interconnected processes (Scarino, 2006).



- **Conceptualising** (understanding deeply *what* is being assessed)
- **Eliciting** (developing ways of obtaining assessment information via a range of possible processes, including observation, interactive questioning, values questionnaires, self-assessment, peer-assessment, student journals and portfolios)
- **Judging** (interpreting performance and understanding evidence)
- **Validating** (ensuring that the inferences made about students' performance are fair and justifiable).

This cycle reminds us that assessment is a conceptual process, not just a technical one. It means that it needs to be thought through at every point especially in terms of what it is that is to be assessed.

Conceptualising

Conceptualising assessment in the context of language learning begins with the recognition that (at least) two languages, and therefore (at least) two systems of values and meaning, are involved. The process of conceptualising requires that questions on how language learning is understood be addressed. If, for example, the focus is on intercultural interaction, the conceptualisation implies acting/doing/recognising that a person's way of interpreting the world varies in different cultures; that it involves decentring from one's own cultural perspective; that it requires personal exchange of meaning, etc. In moving between the two languages, students need to 'make sense' of themselves and others and their world. They do so positioned both as young people actively using language in interaction with others and as learners who continuously make observations, noticing things about language, culture, communication and interpreting, and making meaning.

In considering what is to be assessed, conceptualise:

- what students know and can do in the target language and culture
- how they interpret/figure things out
- what they mean when they interact
- how they are using language and culture
- how they are participating in activities
- what positions they are enacting in relation to each other
- what identities they are developing as part of their own growing self-awareness.

Eliciting

Eliciting different kinds of evidence includes analyses of moment-to-moment action/interaction; written work (notebooks, projects, quizzes, tests); conversations that probe students' meanings; surveys; interviews and other self-reports; and summaries of actions and accomplishments. Moss (2008) highlights that by eliciting and analysing evidence in these different ways, teachers focus not only on knowledge and skill but on embodied experience, meaning, language, culture, participation, positioning and the identities enacted.

In eliciting intercultural language learning, assessment processes may focus on receptive (listening and reading) or productive tasks (speaking and writing). In receptive tasks the focus is on understanding (observing, noticing, comparing, interpreting) interactions, texts and attitudes. To ensure active engagement it is important to select texts that are meaningful to students, and to develop questions that encourage understanding and responding to the content, and also noticing, comparing, observing those subtle but fascinating things about the choice of words, tone, meaning, biases, implications, linguistic and cultural comparisons across languages, etc. These observations are part of meta-awareness of Language and Culture. If this dimension is absent from assessment, it is difficult for a teacher to see how students are understanding interculturality; that is, the intersection point of their first language and culture and the language and culture being learned.

In assessing through productive tasks, the focus is on participating in interactions, in 'critical moments'. The idea of 'critical moments' refers to the fact that there needs to be some kind of intercultural negotiation, that is, negotiating the exchange of meaning across the two languages and that this negotiation is meaningful to students, in the sense that it is a task in which it is worth investing from the students' point of view.

Given that intercultural capabilities develop over time, ways of gradually eliciting and building up evidence also need to be considered. It is therefore important to include a range of opportunities that allow students to perform their understanding. Each new opportunity adds to students' repertoires of participation and may include ongoing observations (teacher and student), portfolios, journals, recording experiences and extended projects. In both single episodes of assessment and cumulatively across episodes, it is important to consider the impact of the assessment procedures used.

A special note: young learners

Assessment processes necessarily vary across phases of schooling. For young learners, assessment in language learning is essentially formative – achieved through action-related talk, with the teacher continuously noting responses and questions. It is also important to record the kinds and extent of scaffolding provided so that the teacher has a picture of what students can do, both with and without assistance. One of the best ways of capturing evidence of learning in this context is audio- or video-recording classroom or small group interactions, then making them available for analysis and reflection.

Summary

Procedures for eliciting intercultural language learning need to:

- involve interactions in the target language on the part of students in which they negotiate meaning through the use of language in diverse contexts among communicators from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds
- elicit students' understanding of the social, cultural, and linguistic construction of human experience and the way our enculturation affects how we see the world, interact and communicate
- involve eliciting students' meta-awareness of the language-culture nexus in such interactions and their ability to analyse and explain, this awareness
- position students as both language user and language learner in interaction (though in any individual procedure one role may be foregrounded for different purposes)

- ensure that students learn from the ongoing direct experience of the target language and culture
- draw upon a range of assessment-types including interviews, conferences, journals, observations, storytelling as appropriate to the phase of schooling
- capture students' cumulative learning so that development and progress can be taken into account, for example, through the use of portfolios
- include self-assessment that recognises learning as a personal process
- include dimensions that require reflection on the part of students on their developing knowledge and understanding.

In developing assessment processes, then, consider the following questions.

- What is it important for students to know and understand in relation to the language and culture they are learning at the particular level? What questions should they address? What judgments should they make? What language do they need to do so?
- Why is this important?
- What kind of evidence is needed to support interpretations, decisions and actions?

Judging: considering criteria

The development of criteria for judging performance is interrelated with the conceptualisation of learning language and culture and the methods used to elicit this learning. Criteria provide an indication of the important features of performance. Most frequently, they are set in advance, as part of the process of designing assessment procedures so that they can be communicated to students. Recently, with alternative approaches to assessing complex tasks, it has been recognised that it is useful to allow for criteria to *emerge* from experience and reflection on student performance. What is important is that teachers consider carefully the bases of their judgments both at the point of designing assessment procedures and criteria and at the point of judging, and that they are able to articulate these to their students and colleagues. Teachers need to provide examples of work to illustrate the evidence of the features described in criteria.

A framework for developing criteria for judging performance, expressed at a non task-specific level, includes the following:

For receptive tasks (listening and reading)	
Nature and scope of the interaction	Level of complexity/sophistication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understanding of theme/concept from social life in texts, tasks, experiences 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recognition of diverse assumptions/perspectives 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • response to different perspectives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> noticing deciding explaining comparing connecting relating applying valuing abstracting questioning/challenging 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understanding the process of interpretation/understanding themselves as interpreters/ability to reflect <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – questioning assumptions (own and others)/conceptions – managing variability (understanding how language use is enmeshed with variable contexts of culture) 	

For productive tasks (speaking and writing)	
Nature and scope of the interaction	Level of complexity/sophistication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • spoken or written in ‘critical moments’ (ie moments where students’ responses matter to their identity) 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • managing the interaction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – giving a personal perspective/personal information – responding to other(s) – openness to the perspectives or expectations of others <ul style="list-style-type: none"> noticing comparing deciding explaining connecting relating valuing applying abstracting questioning 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understanding the process of interpretation/understanding themselves as interpreters/ability to reflect <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – interpreting contexts, roles, relationships – managing variability: understanding how language use is enmeshed with variable contexts of culture 	

Within a long-term perspective	
Cumulative questions to be addressed while building up a long-term picture of learning include the following	Level of complexity/sophistication
• What connections can the student draw within and across themes, topics and concepts?	
• What connections can the student draw between his/her responses/comments and those of others?	
• How has the student come up with these connections?	
• Does the student's engagement with these questions and his/her own/others' responses to them provide variable ways of understanding social life-worlds in the language and culture being learned and any other languages and cultures? How?	

These generic criteria provide a framework for developing criteria that are specific to assessment involving particular tasks, texts and experiences.

Validating

Validation is the process by which teachers consider the evidence they use to ensure that the inferences they make about students' performance are in fact fair and justifiable. They need to be able to justify their judgments to themselves, their students, parents, colleagues and educational administrators. Validation best occurs in dialogue with others through opportunities to compare students' work at a district or state level.

Questions for reflection

- 1 How do your current teaching and assessment practices reflect assessment of learning, assessment for learning and assessment as learning?
- 2 How do you currently elicit evidence for assessment? How diverse are your assessment processes?
- 3 Considering your role as a languages educator, what is your stance on assessment?