



FEATURED THEME: ASSESSMENT

Diagnostic Assessment in Language Teaching and Learning

By Daniel Reed

Language teachers have perhaps always known that diagnosing their students' strengths and weaknesses early on in a foreign language course would, in principle, greatly facilitate their efforts to tailor instruction to the needs of particular students, or at least help them plan class activities appropriate for the general skill levels of the class as a whole. This, of course, is one of those many pedagogical insights that is much easier to talk about than act upon. Many of us forego diagnostics altogether and simply start teaching our class with Chapter 1 of whatever textbook we happen to be using, or perhaps by conducting some activity that has worked well for us in the past—all the while thinking that we'll get to know the students pretty well in time.

A common problem is that while strengths and weaknesses may become apparent as students complete their regular coursework throughout the semester, by the time you get to really know what the students need most, it is often simply too late to do much about it. This is why, years ago, such prominent foreign language scholars as the late Paul Pimsleur began to emphasize the importance of "knowing your students in advance" (Pimsleur and Struth, 1968). More recently, J. Charles Alderson published a book called *Diagnosing Foreign Language Proficiency*, in which he calls for a greater emphasis on diagnostic assessment in both research and practice. The implication is that diagnostic assessment is an important area that is not as well developed as other types of language assessment such as proficiency and achievement testing. However, Alderson does manage to come up with a list of features that many people agree characterize most diagnostic approaches. This list can help tune us in to what diagnostic assessment is all about and includes the following features:

(Adapted from Alderson [2004] *Diagnosing Foreign Language Proficiency* [pp. 11-12])

Diagnostic approaches...

- Identify strengths and weaknesses in a learner's knowledge or use of language
- Have a focus on weaknesses that leads to remediation in further instruction
- Enable detailed analysis and a report of responses to items or tasks
- Provide feedback that can be acted upon
- Are based on content covered in instruction—or content soon-to-be covered
- Are less likely to be "authentic" than are proficiency tests; more likely to be discrete-point, focused on specific elements

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EDITORS' MESSAGE

Dear Readers,

If you are reading this issue of *CLEAR News*, you probably either picked it up at a conference or downloaded the PDF from our website. We will no longer be sending out *CLEAR News* via mail, but we hope you will continue to enjoy this publication by reading it online, downloading it, or picking it up at one of the many conferences we attend each year.

This issue's theme is assessment, a hot topic for language educators around the nation as we are faced with an increasing need to assess and evaluate our students' progress in order to comply with local and national standards. We hope that you find Daniel Reed's article on diagnostic testing informative and helpful.

Also included in this issue, as always, are our Featured Teacher section (this one by Ellen Rothfeld, who teaches Hebrew at Michigan State University) and updates on some of CLEAR's latest projects and products. Remember to visit our website occasionally for more information on new products and for announcements about our summer workshops for 2007.

We hope to see some of you at ACTFL in Nashville this November. Come visit us to say hello and learn about CLEAR in person!

Joy Campbell

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SUBMISSIONS WANTED!

CLEAR News is published twice a year and reaches thousands of foreign language educators in both hard copy and on CLEAR's website with each issue. If you have an article, a teaching idea, or a materials review that you would like to submit for possible publication, send an electronic copy of your submission to CLEAR.

SUBMISSION REQUIREMENTS:

Main Article— an article related to current research and/or foreign language teaching issues. (1000–1500 words)

The Idea Corner— a unique activity or teaching idea for foreign language teachers. Must be adaptable for multiple languages. (500–600 words)

Book/Materials Profile— share your best finds with colleagues by telling us about a favorite text,

website, CD-ROM or other teaching material. (100–200 words)

Featured Teacher—have you benefited in some way from a CLEAR workshop or product? Contact Joy Campbell for information on becoming our Featured Teacher in a future issue!

The deadline for submissions for the Spring 2007 *CLEAR News* is December 15, 2006. Electronic submissions should be sent to Joy Campbell at:

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The U.S. Department of Education awards grants through Title VI funding to a small number of institutions for the purpose of establishing, strengthening, and operating language resource and training centers to improve the teaching and learning of foreign languages. There are currently fifteen Language Resource Centers nationwide: the Center for Advanced Language Proficiency Education and Research (CALPER) at The Pennsylvania State University; the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) at the University of Minnesota; the Center for Applied Second Language Studies (CASLS) at the University of Oregon; the Center for Languages of the Central Asian Region (CeLCAR) at Indiana University; the Center for Educational Resources in Culture, Language and Literacy (CERCLL) at the University of Arizona; the Center for Language Education And Research (CLEAR) at Michigan State University; the Language Acquisition Resource Center

(LARC) at San Diego State University; the National African Language Resource Center (NALRC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison; the National Capital Language Resource Center (NCLRC), a consortium of Georgetown University, the Center for Applied Linguistics, and George Washington University; the National East Asian Languages National Resource Center (NEALRC) at The Ohio State University; the National Foreign Language Resource Center (NFLRC) at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa; the National K-12 Foreign Language Resource Center (NK-12LRC) at Iowa State University; the National Heritage Language Resource Center (NHLRC), a consortium of UCLA and the UC Consortium for Language Learning and Teaching; the National Middle East Language Resource Center (NMEELRC) at Brigham Young University; and the South Asia Language Resource Center (SALRC) at The University of Chicago.

These are basic features that help clarify our thinking about diagnostics, so let's walk through them one by one.

Diagnostics identify strengths and weaknesses in a learner's knowledge or use of language

Normally, the ability to use particular language forms implies knowledge of the forms, but not necessarily vice versa. For example, if someone consistently uses tense and aspect morphology correctly, you would expect him to perform well on a discrete-point grammar test that emphasized those forms. However, there are other students who might respond correctly to multiple-choice questions based on their knowledge of these forms, but these same students might fail to use these forms appropriately while writing essays or in giving oral presentations. So, if students do poorly on a "performance" test (in a "presentational" mode), you might want to give a paper-and-pencil test to find out if they even have concept awareness of the forms they are failing to produce appropriately. If they lack that knowledge, then you could consider some sort of explicit instruction. However, if they demonstrate knowledge of the forms when quizzed, but fail to employ these forms appropriately in using the language, then you could design authentic activities (e.g. writing email messages or leaving phone messages) for demonstration and practice of the forms in contexts in which the meaning was (hopefully) clear.

Diagnostics have a focus on weaknesses that leads to remediation in further instruction

In a sense, diagnostic testing begins where proficiency testing ends. That is, if students perform poorly in attempting to use the target language, you would want to diagnose the reason for the poor performance. Did they lack knowledge of the relevant vocabulary? Did they lack the appropriate modals? Were they unable to correctly pronounce certain sounds, words or groups of words? Sometimes you can get this information from a sample of a student's writing or speaking. Sometimes you only get hints from such samples and need to design quizzes that target the grammatical or lexical aspects that you suspect are problematic. In doing so, you will have to make judgments regarding what forms are really problematic and important, and keep in mind what things you are prepared to teach. Since this is an individualized approach, you will have to make a judgment

regarding how much time you would have to address the issues that you diagnose for all of the students in your class. You can't fix everything for everybody, but you can sometimes identify a few areas that are causing major problems for a particular student, and you can often find important language aspects that most, or all, of your students are having problems with. Put another way, you can't test everything, and so you will have to be selective. One way to select material for diagnostic testing early in the semester is to sample what's covered in various chapters of the text. Another approach, if you feel that material is already ordered from least to most complex in the text, is to sample mainly from the middle or end of the text in preparing diagnostic assessments. Then you can administer similar assessments at the end of the course to see if your remediation was indeed successful.

Diagnostics enable detailed analysis and a report of responses to items or tasks

If you want to conclude that a particular grammatical aspect is a weakness, then you need to be sure to include several examples of that grammatical point in your diagnostic. If you are using four-option multiple-choice format, you need to keep in mind that a person has a one-in-four chance of simply guessing the right answer. Furthermore, you typically will want to test the same point in different contexts. A classic example would be a "voiced consonant" (e.g., *b*, *d* or *g* as opposed to *p*, *t* or *k*), which some students appear to have no trouble with in word initial position, or between two vowels, yet consistently miss in word final position. Based on your own language training, you will often be able to discover patterns, but you will need to communicate these patterns (areas that need attention) to your students in the form of a report. Ideally you would go over this report in a one-on-one conference, but that of course is not always possible. A related idea is to create a student profile for each student (see Figure 1, p. 5).

Diagnostics provide feedback that can be acted upon

You have to have a plan, a list of actions that you and your students can take to address a particular problem once diagnosed. For example, if it's a pronunciation problem, you could send them to the lab to do practice exercises that include the sounds in question. You could also provide

extra exercises for homework that target the areas of weakness, or even allow the students to do homework assignments tailored to their needs instead of doing all of the generic homework assignments. Part of being selective in reporting feedback (you can't report everything) is to focus on things that you know how to address.

Diagnostics are based on content covered in instruction—or content soon-to-be covered

This is simple. At the beginning of the course, it will be based on “content soon-to-be covered.” After that, it could be either recently covered or soon-to-be covered—diagnosis can be an ongoing feature of the course. In principle, content for diagnostics could also be based on theory, but second language acquisition scholars are still working on that!

Diagnostics are less likely to be “authentic” than are proficiency tests; more likely to be discrete-point, focused on specific elements

Language use in proficiency tests should be as authentic as possible, but once you attempt to find out “why” a particular performance is weak, you pretty much have to look at language forms. For this reason, many people think of diagnostic assessment as something that is more useful for lower levels than for advanced learners.

Self-Assessment

Diagnostic assessment informs teaching and guides learning, and yet it is free of the horrible anxiety associated with high-stakes testing, grading, and pass-fail decision-making. It is low stakes in the sense that the results are not used for judgmental or evaluative purposes such as assigning grades or selecting students for particular opportunities. This lowers stress levels and opens the door for the use of various

“self appraisal” techniques since students would most likely be honest in providing information about areas in which they needed help.

Some people feel that self-assessment is actually central to learning. In his book, Alderson (2004), citing examples from the DIALANG project (an Internet-based assessment project that covers many European languages) explains how self-appraisals can be compared with actual performance assessments to help students to develop the ability to recognize their own limitations, and their progress. Another example of the use of self-appraisals is the found on the website for the Federal Court Interpreter Certification Examination (FCICE). This latter resource helps aspiring courtroom interpreters to determine their own readiness to take the FCICE with respect to English and Spanish language proficiency and interpreting skills. Learners whose self-assessment results indicate that they are not ready for the test are directed to resources to help them to develop the requisite skills. While this example is highly specialized, it provides a good illustration of the usefulness of self-assessment and action that can be taken based on a self-assessment outcome.

Student Profiles

Once a diagnosis has been made, it is very important, and very challenging, to find a way to communicate the outcome to the student (and to parents in some cases). This report should summarize the findings in as useful a way as possible. I will illustrate such a report with an example from an interesting and very specialized area of diagnostic testing known as “language aptitude” testing. I have already mentioned Paul Pimsleur, who dedicated much of his career to

diagnosing language learning abilities. He designed his Pimsleur Language Aptitude Battery so that scores could be reported in five categories. The first category was simply a reflection of the student's overall school performance (not specific to language study). The second category was the student's own estimate of his motivation or interest in studying a foreign language. The third category was “verbal ability” and included such things as first language vocabulary knowledge and the ability to induce grammatical rules when presented with examples in a new language. The fourth category was “auditory ability” and included sound discrimination and the ability to retain sound-symbol relationships. The final category was a summary of the other parts. Figure 1 illustrates how scores from these different categories can be used to construct an individualized profile with implications for counseling the student.



TEST PART				
Grade 6 Major Subjects Part 1 (11 Questions)	Interim 4 Part 1 (10 questions)	Verbal ADDITION Parts 2 & 4 (10 questions)	Auxiliary ADDITION Parts 7 & 8 (14 questions)	Total BATTLES Parts 1 - 8 (41 Questions)
RAW SCORE				
11	2	22	31	66
RATING SCALE		PERCENTILE RANK		
100	A-Strongly Excellent	92	60	70
75		8	6	6
50		4	4	4
25		9	9	9
0		8	8	8
0		7	7	7
0		6	6	6
0		5	5	5
0		4	4	4
0		3	3	3
0		2	2	2
0		1	1	1
0				

Daniel Reed, Ph.D., is Testing Coordinator at Michigan State University's English Language Center, and a visiting assistant professor and assessment specialist at CLEAR.

The student whose profile is shown here has great potential, but would need some encouragement and counseling concerning the merits of language study in order to ensure that that they lived up to their potential. The same chart could be used to illustrate the profile of students who might excel in written work but perform below average on oral-aural work. Presented with this kind of information, a teacher could advise that student to spend more time on the latter, provide extra exercises, encourage lab work and so on. This is a very individualized approach. Along these lines, Madeline Ehrman of the US Foreign Service Institute has developed a highly individualized approach to language teaching (see Ehrman, 1996 and 1998).

Final Thoughts...

In sum, “diagnosis” is short for “diagnosis of a learner’s strengths and weaknesses for the purpose of addressing the learner’s needs.” This assessment is not for a grade; its purpose is to facilitate learning. It accomplishes this purpose by individualizing the assessment of learners beyond what generic placement tests can do, and by providing information that informs the design of follow-up activities.

Web Resources Mentioned in Article

The DIALANG Project: www.dialang.org

Federal Court Interpreter Certification Examination (FCICE), Candidate Information Page:
<http://www.cps.ca.gov/fcice-spanish/info.asp>

FEATURED TEACHER



Ellen Rothfeld

I have had the privilege of teaching Modern Hebrew at Michigan State University for over ten years, and have participated in two CLEAR summer workshops. The first, entitled “Using Communicative Activities in a Grammar-Based Curriculum”, was taught by Charlene Polio in 2002. It gave me a fresh perspective on teaching grammar by using games and activities, and added to my enthusiasm as I returned to the classroom the following August. In July 2006, I participated in “Toward Friendly Assessment in the Foreign Language Classroom”, led by Dan Reed. We covered a great deal of material in this five-day workshop, from language assessment principles and purposes, to national standards, to performance-based approaches. One of the many activities in which we participated was listening to recordings and rating the language proficiency of ESL speakers from a variety of countries, according to the ACTFL guidelines. Throughout the workshop, we discussed test validity, reliability and practicality—three major concerns of proficiency testing. There were always examples given and activities to take part in, to illustrate the material being learned and discussed.

Each workshop participant developed an assessment instrument for the language that he or she teaches. In addition to providing suggestions for these assessment tools and referring us to a variety of useful websites, Dan also provided guidance in developing grading rubrics, and even showed us little tricks for making our assessments visually attractive. We each decided on the intended level of language proficiency we were testing. We shared information about our projects, and provided input to each other during the process of test development. This project took several days to develop, and on the last day of the workshop we presented our projects to the entire group in the language lab. My project was an intermediate level Hebrew writing assessment tool. It included several writing-based tasks. Each included Israeli culture in the content, as language and culture are closely intertwined.

We each received feedback from Dan and from the other participants after we presented our assessment instruments. The experience of sharing ideas and working toward a common goal with professionals from other institutions was very fulfilling for me. The participants in our workshop came from Columbia University in New York, Grand Valley State University, Delta College and Michigan State University. We left the workshop feeling that we were ready to put what we had learned to good use. While I have always believed that the real assessment of a student’s knowledge of a foreign language is beyond the test—i.e., how the student will handle authentic situations at some point in the future—this workshop gave me additional tools and ideas for developing evaluations that will be valid, practical and reliable. I am grateful to CLEAR for providing a variety of useful, exciting professional development opportunities for language educators. Our language students, and in turn our language programs, will benefit from the fresh ideas and skills that we bring with us into the classroom.

Ellen Rothfeld teaches at Michigan State University. She also directs the Israeli Film Series and is Coordinator of the Annual Israeli Film Festival at MSU.



Participants in this summer's assessment workshop

Continued Funding

We are pleased to announce that CLEAR has been awarded continued Title VI funding from the US Department of Education, and entered its fourth funding cycle in August 2006. This new award will allow us to continue producing quality materials for language educators and students through 2010.

New Website

To coincide with the beginning of our new funding cycle, we launched a new website in August. The URL remains the same, but we have redesigned the site to make it more user-friendly. If you haven't visited in a while, take a look at <http://clear.msu.edu> and let us know what you think!

New Products

Visit <http://clear.msu.edu/clear/store/> for these and other products from CLEAR.

Instructional Guide for Use in Small Classes ~ Vietnamese

This free downloadable Instructional Guide is written for native speakers of Vietnamese who are teaching Vietnamese in either a classroom or a tutorial setting. Like CLEAR's African Language Instructional Guide and the Thai and Hindi Guides, the Vietnamese Guide begins with an overview of strategies for creating a language course (e.g., establishing goals, using the L2, and finding and using materials). Following the general information, the Vietnamese Guide offers two sets of lesson plans: basic language-learning lesson plans for beginners, and task-based lessons for intermediate learners.

Hausa Online

This site is a virtual language resource page of multimedia language learning material for intermediate to advanced-level Hausa language learners. Hausa Online provides access to samples of authentic Hausa texts, an image gallery with more than 200 images for use in the language classroom, and a link to a collection of language learning modules that you can complete online. If you are a Hausa language instructor, you can register your class and all student work is recorded and reported to you so you can track how your students are doing.

Language Learning Materials for Russian: A Content-Based Course Pack

New modules added! These free content-based modules may be used as an entire course or as a supplement to upper-level and heritage-speaker Russian language classes. By working with these materials, students can gain cultural and literary competence in a variety of fields related to Russia by using the original and authentic materials provided here as well as the interactive language exercises designed around these texts.

Coming Soon

Check our website or the next issue of *CLEAR News* for updates on new products coming soon, including a beginning-level Business German CD-ROM and an advanced pronunciation and phonetics CD-ROM for French.

Current Projects

In this new funding cycle, CLEAR will be working on projects in the following areas:

- Web-Based Materials Development
- Professional Development
- Evaluation and Assessment
- Collaborative Projects
- Research

We are beginning new projects and adding new languages to some of our more-established products. As always, our goal is to provide useful materials and tools for language educators at little or no cost, and we look forward to continuing to develop high quality materials over the next four years.

CLEAR News Goes Online!

CLEAR News will no longer be mailed out, but will be available at conferences and online. Visit our updated website to download PDFs of new issues as they are published, and to access archived issues. You can also sign up to be notified via email when a new issue is available for download.

CLEAR News

CLEAR News is a publication of the Center for Language Education And Research and is intended to inform foreign language educators of the Center's on-going research projects and professional development workshops, to report on current foreign language research and publications and their applicability to the classroom, and to provide a forum for educators to discuss foreign language teaching and learning topics.



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