

2. Here one can generalize: for most people the foreknowledge that there is going to be a test produces more conscientious learning of the material. Whether this is a morally or educationally desirable way of getting people to learn is another question. My own opinion is that testing is one acceptable way of raising short-term motivation to learn specific material, but that if it is used as such very often, and as the main source of pressure to learn, then there may be long-term negative results. Both teacher and learners may cease to seek and find enjoyment or satisfaction in the learning itself, or to see the goal of knowing the language as intrinsically valuable: the whole teaching–learning process is in danger of being devalued, of being seen merely as a means to get good grades.
3. Most learners like to know how well they did on a test, and the assessment is perhaps most conveniently expressed as a number. Even people who do not like being tested may feel cheated and disappointed if they are not told their score. They often do not, however, wish other people to know: so it may not be a good idea to publish results by name.
4. People’s responses to this question depend to a very large extent on what they are used to in their own learning experience. Perhaps most tend to prefer their work to be checked by someone they perceive as authoritative; but even more important is their reliance on that person’s fair and unbiased evaluation.

► **Unit Three: Types of test elicitation techniques**

Formal and informal testing

Tests in the classroom may be of the conventional type exemplified in the previous unit, where the testees are told in advance what they need to know, what the criteria are for success, and so on. But they may also be informal: a homework assignment may in fact function as a test if the teacher’s main aim in giving it is to find out whether the learners have learned some language point or not; questions asked during the routine give-and-take of classroom interaction may serve the same purpose, as may some textbook exercises.

Analysing elicitation techniques

Tests, whether formal or informal, utilize one or more of a large number of elicitation techniques. Some of the more common of these are listed in Box 3.3; more comprehensive taxonomies can be found in, for example, Hughes, 1989.

Which you will choose to use for a certain testing purpose will probably depend mainly on the following considerations:

1. What will it tell me about the testee’s knowledge? In other words, for what type of knowledge might it be a valid test?
2. How easy is it to compose?
3. How easy is it to administer?
4. How easy is it to mark?

BOX 3.3: ELICITATION TECHNIQUES

- 1. Questions and answers.** Simple questions, very often following reading, or as part of an interview; may require short or long answers:

What is the (family) relationship between David Copperfield and Mr Murdstone?

- 2. True/false.** A statement is given which is to be marked true or false. This may also be given as a question, in which case the answer is *yes* or *no*.

Addis Ababa is the capital of Egypt.

Is Addis Ababa the capital of Egypt?

- 3. Multiple-choice.** The question consists of a stem and a number of options (usually four), from which the testee has to select the right one.

A person who writes books is called

a) a booker b) an editor. c) an author. d) a publisher.

- 4. Gap-filling and completion.** The testee has to complete a sentence by filling a gap or adding something. A gap may or may not be signalled by a blank or dash; the word to be inserted may or may not be given or hinted at.

They (go) to Australia in 1980.

Or

They _____ to Australia in 1980. (go)

Or

A _____ is someone who writes books.

Or

I've seen that film. (never)

- 5. Matching.** The testee is faced with two groups of words, phrases or sentences; each item in the first group has to be linked to a different item in the second.

large	small
unhappy	many
a lot	big
little	sad

- 6. Dictation.** The tester dictates a passage or set of words; the testee writes them down.

- 7. Cloze.** Words are omitted from a passage at regular intervals (for example, every seventh word). Usually the first two or three lines are given with no gaps.

The family are all fine, though Leo had a bad bout of flu last week. He spent most of it lying on the sofa watching _____ when he wasn't sleeping!

His exams _____ in two weeks, so he is _____ about missing school, but has managed to _____ quite a lot in spite of _____ feeling ill.

- 8. Transformation.** A sentence is given; the testee has to change it according to some given instruction.

Put into the past tense:

I go to school by bus.

- 9. Rewriting.** A sentence is given; the testee rewrites it, incorporating a given change of expression, but preserving the basic meaning.

He came to the meeting in spite of his illness.

Although

- 10. Translation.** The testee is asked to translate expressions, sentences or entire passages to or from the target language.

11. Essay. The testee is given a topic, such as 'Childhood memories', and asked to write an essay of a specific length.

12. Monologue. The testee is given a topic or question and asked to speak about it for a minute or two.

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Task Critical study of elicitation techniques

Try applying the above considerations to the set of elicitation techniques shown in Box 3.3.

My own comments follow.

Comments

1. Questions and answers

These can be used to test almost anything. The more 'closed' the question is (that is, the fewer the possible options for correct answers), the easier the item will be to mark. It is fairly easy to compose and grade closed-ended questions; more open, thought-provoking ones are more difficult, but may actually test better.

2. True/false

This does not directly test writing or speaking abilities: only listening or reading. It may be used to test aspects of language such as vocabulary, grammar, content of a reading or listening passage. It is fairly easy to design; it is also easy to administer, whether orally or in writing, and to mark.

3. Multiple-choice

This may be used for the same testing purposes as true/false items; it does test rather more thoroughly since it offers more optional answers and is obviously very easy to mark. It is administered more conveniently through writing; but note that since the reading of the question-and-options is fairly time-consuming, the process of comprehension of the actual question items may take more time and effort than the point ostensibly tested, which raises problems of validity. Another important problem is that good multiple-choice questions are surprisingly difficult to design: they often come out ambiguous, or with no clear right answer, or with their solutions over-obvious. They are to be approached with caution!

4. Gap-filling and completion

This usually tests grammar or vocabulary, as in the examples. It is tedious to compose, though not so difficult as multiple-choice; it is more easily administered in writing than in speech; the marking is usually simple. You may need to be aware that there is more than one possible right answer.

5. Matching

This usually tests vocabulary, and is rather awkward to administer orally: thus it is best presented written on the board or on paper, though responses may be either oral or in writing. Items can be time-consuming and difficult to compose, and again, there may be alternative 'right' answers to any particular item. Answers are fairly easily checked.

6. Dictation

This mainly tests spelling, perhaps punctuation, and, perhaps surprisingly on the face of it, listening comprehension: people can only usually write words down accurately from dictation if they understand them. It does not, however, test other writing skills or speech, and involves very little reading. It may supply some information on testees' passive knowledge of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. It is very easy to prepare and administer; it is relatively easy to mark, though there may be a problem deciding how much weight to attribute to different mistakes.

7. Cloze

This tests (intensive) reading, spelling, and to some extent knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. It can be adapted to 'target' specific language items, by, for example, omitting all the verbs (in which case it is not, strictly speaking, 'cloze', but rather 'gap-filling'). It is fairly easy to prepare and administer. Marking can be tricky: you may find it difficult sometimes to decide if a specific item is 'acceptable' or not.

8. Transformation

This item is relatively easy to design, administer and mark, but its validity may be suspect. It tests the ability of the testee to transform grammatical structures, which is not the same as testing grammar: a testee may perform well on transformation items without knowing the meaning of the target structure or how to use it in context. Marking is fairly straightforward.

9. Rewriting

This tests the same sort of thing as transformation, but is likely to reflect more thorough knowledge of the target items, since it involves paraphrasing the entire meaning of a sentence rather than transforming a particular item. It is, however, more difficult to compose, and the marking may be more subjective. It is, as its name suggests, usually done in writing.

10. Translation

A technique which, at the time of writing, is for various reasons rather unpopular, but in my opinion undeservedly so. In a monolingual class whose teacher also speaks the learners' mother tongue, the translation of a 'bit' of language to or from the target language can give very quick and reliable information on what the testee does or does not know, particularly when it involves entire units of meaning (phrases, sentences) within a known context. Translation items are also relatively easy to compose – even improvise, in an informal test – and administer, in either speech or writing. Marking may sometimes be more difficult, but not prohibitively so.

11. Essay

This is a good test of general writing abilities. It is relatively easy to provide a topic and tell the class to write an essay about it but marking is extremely difficult and time-consuming. It must be clear in advance, both to you and to the students, how much emphasis you are going to lay on language forms, such as spelling, grammar, punctuation, and how much on aspects of content, such as interest and originality of ideas, effectiveness of expression, organization (see Module 11: *Teaching writing*).

12. Monologue

This tests oral fluency in 'long turns' – something not everyone can do in their mother tongue! It also tests overall knowledge of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. To choose a topic and allot it is not so difficult; to assess is very difficult indeed, demanding concentration and a very clear set of criteria and weighting system (see the Unit Six of Module 9: *Teaching speaking*).

▷ **Unit Four: Designing a test**

In this unit you are asked to design your own test. This should be for a learner population you know: a class you teach or have taught, or the kind of class you have in the past been a member of yourself. Ideally, of course, the test should be one that can be integrated into your own teaching programme with your own class, and that you will have a chance to administer in practice.

The material to be tested should, similarly, be part of a syllabus and teaching programme you are familiar with: perhaps a section of a coursebook, or certain elements of a set curriculum.

Task Designing a test

Stage 1: Preparation

Prepare your test. It is a good idea to list in writing all the material that you want your test to cover: you can then refer back to the list during and after the test-writing to see if you have included all you intended.

You may find it helpful at this stage to refer to the guidelines listed in Box 3.4.

Stage 2: Performance

If possible, administer your test to a class of learners; if not, ask colleagues to try doing it themselves.

Stage 3: Feedback

Look at how your test was done, and ask the testees how they felt about it. You might find it helpful to base your questions on the criteria in the guidelines in Box 3.4.