

Aligning Task-Based Language Assessment and Task-Based Language Instruction

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Workshop overview

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1. Discussion of what task-based assessment is and how it is linked to task-based instruction
2. Discussion of the general structure and components of task-based assessment
3. Discussion of steps to be followed in developing task-based assessment
4. Discussion of the importance of aligning classroom task-based assessment and task-based instruction
5. Discussion of what teachers can do to bring about that kind of alignment

What is Task-Based Language Teaching or TBLT?

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- TBLT is an educational framework and an approach for the theory and practice of second / foreign language (L2) learning and teaching, and a teaching methodology in which classroom tasks constitute the main focus of instruction (Richards et al., 2003).
- A classroom task is defined as an activity that is
 - (1) goal-oriented,
 - (2) content-focused,
 - (3) has a real outcome, and
 - (4) reflects real-life language use and language need (Shehadeh, 2005).
- The syllabus in TBLT is organized around activities and tasks rather than in terms of grammar or vocabulary (Richards et al., 2003).

What is Task-Based Language Teaching or TBLT?

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- The interest in TBLT is based on the strong belief that it facilitates second language acquisition (SLA) and makes L2 learning and teaching more principled and more effective. This interest arose from a constellation of ideas issuing from philosophy of education, theories of SLA, empirical findings on effective instructional techniques, and the exigencies of language learning in contemporary society (Van den Branden et al., 2009).

What is Task-Based Language Assessment or TBLA?

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- TBLA is a framework for language testing/assessment that takes the task as the fundamental unit for assessment and testing. It is based on the same underlying principles as TBLT, but extends them from the learning-and-teaching domain to the testing domain. Specifically, as in TBLT methodology, testing / assessment in TBLA is also organized around tasks rather than in terms of grammar or vocabulary. For instance, Long and Norris (2000: 600) state that “genuinely task-based language assessment takes the task itself as the fundamental unit of analysis, motivating item selection, test instrument construction and the rating of task performance.”

What is Task-Based Language Assessment or TBLA?

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- As in TBLT methodology too, the main goal and validity of TBLA is measured against the extent to which it can successfully achieve a close link between the testee's performance during the test and his / her performance in the real world. For instance, Ellis (2003: 279) states that “task-based testing is seen as a way of achieving a close correlation between the test performance, i.e. what the testee does during the test, and the criterion of performance, i.e. what the testee has to do in the real world.”
- Assessment tasks are thus viewed as “devices for eliciting and evaluating communicative performances from learners in the context of language use that is meaning-focused and directed towards some specific goal”.

Utilization and classroom applications of TBLA

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TBLA has been utilized by language teachers in the L2 classroom in a broad range of formal and informal educational settings that serve a wide range of language learners who come from different age groups, different proficiency levels, and different educational and cultural backgrounds.

Positive features of TBA

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- Teachers' and learners' attention is able to be more focused on language as a tool for real world communication rather than on language knowledge as an end in itself, thus potentially improving student motivation.
- Assessment can be integrated into the learning process through the use of attainment targets which are directly linked to course content and objectives.

Positive features of TBA (Cont'd)

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- Learners can obtain useful diagnostic feedback on their progress and achievement since explicit performance criteria are provided against which they can compare their performances.
- Better communication between users of assessment information and educational institutions can be established through the use of various forms of outcome reporting which are couched in performance terms and are hence intelligible to non-specialists.

Importance of aligning classroom assessment and classroom instruction

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- The term "alignment" is heard frequently in educational circles.
- There is talk of alignment of curriculum, instruction and assessment, classroom assessment with proficiency standards and testing, and just curriculum alignment.

Importance of aligning classroom assessment and classroom instruction (Cont'd)

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- Teachers need to be skilled in aligning all of these elements so that the assessment provides an accurate reflection of the student's accomplishments and an effective indicator of the teacher's success.

Importance of aligning classroom assessment and classroom instruction (Cont'd)

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- Instruction and the classroom learning activities should have given the learner opportunities to experience the way(s) in which learning will be assessed.
- A mismatch between what is designed and delivered by the classroom teacher (objectives, content, instruction and assessments) can result in performance that is not truly representative of a learner's proficiency.

Importance of aligning classroom assessment and classroom instruction (Cont'd)

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- Alignment starts with objectives. What is it you want your students to know after instruction?
- What is it you want them to be able to do? Once you have formulated objectives (proposed student outcomes) for your instruction, you have usually defined the way in which accomplishment of those objectives can be evaluated or measured.

Assessing the situation for alignment

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The first step in improving alignment is to assess your situation. Ask yourself (or yourselves, if you are a group of teachers completing a module) the following questions and try to answer them:

1. What related objectives, topics, and activities are targeted in the curriculum frameworks and curriculum guides for your language?
2. What knowledge/skills are measured on the proficiency test? (What are the objectives covered by the test?)

Assessing the situation for alignment (Cont'd)

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3. How is knowledge/skills measured on the proficiency test? (What kinds of items are used?)
4. How are responses scored on the proficiency test? (What are the scoring criteria?)

Assessing the situation for alignment (Cont'd)

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5. Where and how am I (we) currently addressing the knowledge and skills identified in response to questions 1 and 2? (Are we attending to them? How?)
6. How do our textbooks and instructional materials treat the knowledge/content that is tested?

Assessing the situation for alignment (Cont'd)

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7. How am I teaching this content? (Are my instructional methods and activities aligned with content, objectives, and proficiency test requirements?)

8. How am I assessing student knowledge/skills in the classroom? (Are at least some of my assessments aligned with the assessment methods used in the proficiency test? Are my assessments measuring what my objectives call for?)

Strategies for bringing about alignment

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- As a teacher, you need to provide learners with clear learning targets.
- Offer regular descriptive feedback.
- Focus on one learning target at a time.
- Engage students in self-reflection/assessment.

Strategies for bringing about alignment (Cont'd)

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- Identify Learning Outcomes (State the objective and identify skills)
- Instructional Strategies (Integrate the Language Domains: Listening, Speaking, Reading, (and Writing?))

Strategies for bringing about alignment (Cont'd)

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- Refine Learning Experiences (Develop activities which provide interdisciplinary connections, technology integration, and a global perspective for learners)
- Select Multi-Genre Resources (Internet, Authentic Novels, Magazines, Textbooks, etc.)

Strategies for bringing about alignment (Cont'd)

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- Apply standards-based instruction that integrates language domains and reflects the construct of cognitive language proficiency
- Use classroom assessments to ***build learners' confidence*** in themselves as learners and help them take responsibility for their own learning, so as to lay a foundation for lifelong learning

Strategies for bringing about alignment (Cont'd)

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- Translate classroom assessment results into frequent ***descriptive feedback*** (versus judgmental feedback) for students, which provides them with specific insights as to how to improve
- Continuously ***adjust instruction*** based on the results of classroom assessments
- Engage learners in ***regular self-assessment***, with standards held constant so that they can watch themselves grow over time and thus feel in charge of their own success

Strategies for bringing about alignment (Cont'd)

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- Actively involve students in *communicating* with you about their achievement status and improvement

In short, the effect of assessment *for learning*, as it plays out in the classroom, is that students keep learning and remain confident that they can continue to learn at productive levels if they keep trying to learn.

The role of assessment literacy

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- “..training for assessment literacy entails an appropriate balance of technical know-how, practical skills, theoretical knowledge, and understanding of principles but all firmly contextualized within a sound understanding of the role and function of assessment within education and society” (Taylor, 2009)

Assessment literacy for all

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- “ ...an appropriate level of assessment literacy needs to be nurtured not just among engineers and technicians who are actively involved in test development or research activities, or even among applied linguists and language teachers...but more broadly in the public domain if a better understanding of the function and values of assessment tools and their outcomes is to be realized throughout society” (Taylor, 2009)

Assessment literacy for all

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- Teachers should be skilled in choosing assessment methods appropriate for instructional decisions.
- Teachers should be skilled in administering, scoring and interpreting the results of both externally-produced and teacher-produced assessment methods.

Assessment and the language teacher: What skills & knowledge do they need?

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- Teachers should be skilled in developing, using and evaluating valid student grading procedures which use student assessments.
- Teachers should be skilled in communicating assessment results to students, educational decision makers and other concerned stakeholders.

Assessment and the language teacher: What skills & knowledge do they need?

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- Teachers should be skilled in using assessment results when making decisions about individual students, planning teaching, developing curriculum, and institutional improvement.
- Teachers should be skilled in recognizing unethical, illegal, and otherwise inappropriate assessment methods and uses of assessment information

And in conclusion..

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- “We believe that a new breed of assessment literate educators with extensive experience in classrooms will play an important role in implementing assessment policies that truly support student learning”.

(Lukin et al 2004)

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