

Testing Students

The Characteristics of Tests

There are four main reasons for testing which give rise to four categories of test :

1- **Placement test :**

Placing new students in the right class in a school is facilitated with the use of placement tests. They usually test grammar and vocabulary knowledge and assess students' productive and receptive skills.

2- **Diagnostic tests :**

While placement tests are designed to show how good a student's English is in relation to a previously agreed system of levels, diagnostic tests can be used to expose learner difficulties, gaps in their knowledge, and skill deficiencies during a course. Thus, when we know what the problems are, we can do something about them.

3- **Progress or achievement tests :**

These tests are designed to measure learners' language and skill progress in relation to the syllabus they have been following. Achievement tests at the end of a term (like progress tests at the end of a unit) should reflect progress, not failure. They should reinforce the learning that has taken place, not go out of their way to expose weaknesses. They can also help us to decide on changes to future teaching programs.

4- **Proficiency tests :**

They give a general picture of a student's knowledge and ability (rather than measure progress). They are frequently used as stages people have to reach if they want to be admitted to a foreign university, get a job, or obtain some kind of certificate.

Characteristics Of A Good Test

- In order to judge the effectiveness of any test, it is sensible to lay down criteria against which the test can be measured, as follows:

1- **Validity :**

A test is valid if it tests what is supposed to test. Thus it is not valid, for example, to test writing ability with an essay question that requires specialist knowledge of history or biology. A particular kind of validity that concerns most test designers is face validity. This means that the test should look, on the 'face' of it, as if it is valid.

2- **Reliability :**

A good test should give consistent results. For example, if the same group of students took the same tests twice within two days----without reflecting on the first test before they sat it again ---- they should get the same results on each occasion. If they took another similar

test, the result should be consistent. In practice, reliability is enhanced by making the test instructions clear, restricting the scope for variety in the answers.

Types of Test Items

1- Direct and indirect test items :

A test item is **direct** if it asks candidates to perform the communicative skill which is being tested. **Indirect** test items, on the other hand, try to measure a student's knowledge and ability by getting at what lies beneath their receptive and productive skills. Whereas direct test items try to be as much like real-life language use as possible, indirect items try to find out about a student's language knowledge through more controlled items, such as multiple choice questions or grammar transformation items. These are often quicker to design, easier to mark, and produce greater scorer reliability.

Writing and Marking Tests

- At various times during our teaching careers, we may have to write tests for the students we are teaching, and mark the tests they have completed for us. These may range from a lesson test at the end of the week to an achievement test at the end of a term or a year.
- a- Writing Tests :** Before designing a test and then giving it to a group of students, there are a number of things we need to do:
 - 1- Assess the test situation :**
Before we start to write the test, we need to remind ourselves of the context in which the test takes place. We have to decide how much time should be given to the test-taking, when and where it will take place, and how much time there is for marking.
 - 2- Decide what to test :**
We have to list what we want to include in our test. This means taking a conscious decision to include or exclude skills such as reading comprehension or speaking.
 - 3- Balance the elements :**
If we are to include direct and indirect test items, we have to make a decision about how many of each we should put in our test. Balancing elements involves estimating how long we want each section of the test to take.
 - 4- Weight the scores :**
If we give two marks for each of our 10 Multiple Choices Questions (MCQs), but only one mark for each of our 10 transformation grammar items, it means that it is more important for students to do well in the former than in the latter.
 - 5- Making the test work :**
It is absolutely vital that we try out individual items and/or whole tests on colleagues and students alike before administering them to real candidates.

Teaching The Test

When students are preparing for an exam, it is the teacher's responsibility not only to help them get their English to level required, but also familiarize them with the kinds of exam items they are likely to encounter, and give them training in how to succeed. Students can be prepared for future tests and exams in a variety of ways:

1- Training for test types :

We can show the various test types and ask them what the items is testing so that they are clear about what is required. We can help them to understand what the test or exam designer is aiming for; by showing them the kind of marking scales that are used, we can make them aware of what constitutes success.

2- Discussing general exam skills :

Most students benefit from being reminded about general test and exam skills, without which much of the work they do will be wasted.

3- Doing practice tests :

Students need a chance to practice taking the test or exam so that they get a feel for the experience, especially with regard to issues such as pacing.

4- Having fun :

Just because students need to practice certain test types does not mean this has to be done in a boring or tense manner. There are a number of ways of having fun with tests and exams.

Notes: