Classroom Testing Procedures for University Students

Wang Lirong
Changchun University of Science and Technology

Yang Feng
Jilin University

Xu Zhaohui
Changchun University of Science and Technology

Abstract:
Testing and teaching are so closely related that it is virtually impossible to work in either area without being constantly concerned with the other. Testing must accompany English teaching and must reflect how much English knowledge students have grasped in a certain phase of English study. Tests should be constructed primarily to reinforce learning, to motivate students, and to assess students’ performance in language acquisition. Thus, it is necessary for instructors to design tests according to the features of the college English intensive reading course in order for validity and reliability to occur.

Key words: teaching and testing   classroom testing procedures   compatibility and validity

Progress tests, also known as classroom tests, are tests that measure the extent to which students have mastered the material taught in the classroom. Each progress test is unique and can only be evaluated fully by the instructor in light of his or her knowledge of the students, the language program in which the students participate, and the instructor’s own particular aims and goals. The instructor often measures students’ abilities by quizzes and small-scale tests and the results obtained from them enable the instructor to become more familiar with the work of each student and with the progress of the class in general. A good progress test should encourage students to perform well in the target language and to gain additional confidence. In addition, the aim of classroom testing is to stimulate learning and to reinforce what has been taught.

Progress tests differ from achievement tests in that progress tests are less formal. Achievement tests measure achievement on a larger scale and often contain more test items, test types, test time, and standard scoring. These tests are based on
what the students are presumed to have learned, not necessarily what they actually learned or what they were actually taught.

*As we ponder the idea of classroom testing, the question arises: What kinds of classroom practices and exercises should be considered for testing beginning students?*

The college English intensive reading course is one highly practical course geared towards college students of various majors. Testing is not only reserved for written exams, but also for all sorts of classroom practices and exercises. In a broad sense, all exercises and practices, especially oral practices, can be regarded as a kind of testing, such as reading texts aloud or answering questions, which, to a certain degree, may reflect students’ pronunciation, intonation, and the mastery of vocabulary and grammar. This type of testing, however, can be a disadvantage in that evaluating “finished products” may not reflect students’ integrative English levels. For instance, a beginning student reads a poem eloquently and passionately under the guidance of instruction and receives high praise in a speech contest. At first, it may appear that the student’s performance is based on his or her proficiency in English when in actuality, repetition and memorization brought about the appearance of proficiency instead of actual knowledge of the language.

Of course, it is neither reasonable nor practical for instructors to give assessment marks for all students’ readings or conversations. After all, students should not be hindered from learning because of fear of being assessed. If students are assessed too much in the classroom, enthusiasm is greatly reduced, the relationship between student and instructor is decreased, the learning atmosphere in the classroom becomes tense, and students do not dare to think, speak, and question freely.

It should be mentioned that multiple choice testing is often a component in many types of beginning tests; however, the marks obtained from multiple choice do not completely reflect students’ true knowledge of English skills in that it fails to measure the degree that students answer questions correctly or incorrectly. In addition, multiple choice testing fails to measure the ability to use language such as the ability of speaking, writing, and translating. Thus, multiple choice should not be a major component in classroom testing.

*A second question arises: What form of classroom tests would be most suitable to evaluate English skills of moderately advanced students?* For years the teaching practice has used integrated testing forms involving listening comprehension, dictation, and reading comprehension, which measure students’ comprehensive knowledge of intonation, pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary, and other areas. An experienced instructor can write reliable and valid test questions that accurately and consistently measure students’ abilities in these areas. Take a Chinese student who graduated from the Chinese Institute for example. The student always received good testing marks in listening, comprehension, dictation and reading comprehension. When he studied at a New York university, instructors praised him for his excellent
knowledge of English. This is one of many examples demonstrating the consistency of these testing areas. Hence, listening comprehension, dictation, and reading comprehension would be most suitable to evaluate moderately advanced students’ work.

A third question arises: What about reliable and valid classroom tests for more advanced students? According to the requirements of Chinese students, outlined in the College English Teaching Outline, students learn English during four years of college study. Since during the third year universities require students to learn large amounts of vocabulary, using words correctly in context, translation and interpretation skills are key points for English teaching. Thus, retelling stories is used as a valid classroom practice and test to measure these areas. After reading the material and working out the exercises of the texts such as vocabulary, translation, and answering questions, students should be able to retell information in a text. Retelling information can show how much a student has learned from a text and judging from the student’s degree of achievement, the instructor can see if his or her teaching methods are effective. So, retelling stories using oral or written modes of expression is a way of testing for more advanced students.

Testing plays a key role in promoting effective college English teaching. Its purpose lies in examining students’ understanding and mastery of words, expressions, sentence structures and the contents of certain texts during a designated period of time; determining if teaching methods are effective; and finding out if students are receiving instruction effectively. Certainly in order to make progress tests serve teaching better, instructors must reinforce the validity and reliability of testing in college English intensive reading courses and make testing an effective means of measuring teaching, student learning, and promoting the teaching and learning process.

References