Assessing and Evaluating Student Learning

Using a Variety of Assessment Strategies

The process of assessment includes any task a student performs in order to demonstrate knowledge or ability in the subject area.
The teacher should use as many instruments as possible on as many occasions as possible to ensure valid and reliable indicators of student progress and attainment.
The following are some methods which may be used to evaluate student performance during this course:

1. Student-Teacher Conference
    One of the best ways to help students revise a piece of writing is to discuss it with them. Talking with ESL students about their writing is sometimes the only way to find out what they were trying to say. Long conferences are often not practical in the high school setting. However, it is always possible to hold short conferences during class time when the other students are working in groups or revising their writing individually.

2. Peer Evaluation
    If students know what to look for and how to look for it, they can be very helpful to each other during the writing process. However, it is rarely productive to merely ask students to exchange papers and mark their peers' work. Checklists provide guidelines for students to read and assess each other's work. A student composition photocopied and distributed can be analyzed in whole class or small group discussion. For example:
    *   what point is the writer making?
    *   what are the supporting ideas?
    *   what is good about this piece of writing?
    *   what could the author do to improve his/her writing?

    Students can assist each other with grammar as well, as long as they have specific guidelines. For example:
    *   do all the verbs agree?
    *   is tense use consistent?
    *   is there subject/verb accord?

3. Self-Assessment
    ESL students need to read their own writing and to examine it critically. They also need to know when to edit their work. When students are writing a draft, they should be encouraged to get their ideas down on paper and not to worry about grammar and spelling. 'Mistakes' are perfectly acceptable at this stage.

Proofreading an entire piece of writing is often daunting. Students should be given checklists to encourage them to concentrate on one area at a time and they should always be given enough time to use these checklists, read their work aloud, and use a grammar book and a dictionary.

4. The Writing File
The teacher should keep samples of the student's written work. A file on each student provides the teacher with a record of progress and ensures that different types of writing have been completed. Many ESL students perceive their own offerings as meager in comparison to the quantity of writing done by their native English speaking peers. Cumulative writing files provide the students with concrete proof that they are indeed making progress.

5. Observation
All teachers use classroom observations during their day-to-day instruction. The challenge is how to organize and record the observations in a systematic way and to make effective use of the information. Without a coherent framework, teachers' observations run the risk of being fragmented and therefore pedagogically less useful.

Comparison of student performance with performance objectives indicates the extent to which students attain these objectives. If we wish the comparison to be a useful one, it is necessary for teachers to focus their observations primarily on the demonstration of the skills specified in the course. Focusing observations in this manner makes classroom observations manageable and systematic because it defines and delimits what is to be observed.

Checklists and rating scales are particularly useful because they lend themselves to specificity and detail. The applicability and content of existing checklists and rating scales depends on the particular syllabus and its objectives. When teachers are devising their own checklists and rating scales, it can certainly be useful to consult existing checklists and rating scales, but these should not be used without careful scrutiny and modifications as necessary.

Systematic observation of student performance can be viewed as 'testing'. Therefore, these methods of obtaining information should have the same properties as good tests.

6. Tasks
When selecting tasks to be used in evaluation, it is useful to consider the response characteristics of the task. These response characteristics can be described in general terms as close-ended, limited and open-ended.

In open-ended tasks the teacher has little knowledge beforehand of what the students will say or write and how they will express it linguistically. Open-ended tasks are suitable for assessing speaking and writing skills because they require language production. Examples of open-ended tasks are oral interviews, information gap activities, compositions, essays and term papers. Choice with respect to the ideas, concepts, details and linguistic forms is possible within such tasks.

Judgement is necessary in scoring open-ended tasks because one student's response is likely to be different from other student responses but no less correct or appropriate. Consequently, scoring open-ended tasks is much more demanding and requires more forethought than scoring close-ended tasks. Whereas the value of close-ended tasks is directly related to the care that goes into making them up, the value of open-ended tasks is related to the care that goes into scoring them.

To ensure that scoring is reliable and fair, attention must be put into deciding how to score such tasks before the scoring begins. It is advisable to develop a scoring 'protocol 'which specifies the criteria to be used for evaluating the task. Students should know what 'counts' in evaluating their responses. In a written composition, for example, does spelling count? Is originality important? What exactly will be scored? What weight will different components of the compositions be given, i.e. how many marks will be awarded for content and how many for the various linguistic components?

7. Tests
    Much diagnostic evaluation can be informal but formal diagnosis via tests and quizzes is also necessary, as tests seem to motivate students to study harder and the results are often taken more seriously than informal feedback. This is especially true for students coming from countries where formal evaluation is the norm. Note that students form much of their ideas of what is important to learn in a course by what the teacher gives the greatest weight to in his/her evaluation; thus evaluation has a direct effect on the direction and degree of student effort.

Resources

Teacher Resources

- Communicate!
- Essential Words for the TOEFL
- Exploring Through Writing: A Process Approach to ESL Composition, 2nd edition
- Handbook for Writers 3rd Canadian Edition
- Intermediate Listening Comprehension
- Reader's Choice
- Reference Points
- Resource Lines 9/10
- Teaching English Pronunciation
- Understanding and Using English Grammar

Student Resources

- Advanced Learner's Dictionary
- Reader's Choice, 4th edition
- Understanding and Using English Grammar
- Writing Academic English

Websites

- www.eslcafe.com
  (The English Language Training College: Dave's ESL Cafe)

- a4esl.org
  (Internet TESL Journal: Activities for ESL Students)

- esl.about.com
  ('What you need to know about' Network: English as 2nd Language)

- www.fis.edu/eslweb
  (Learners, teachers and parents' grammar vocabulary site info: A Guide to Learning English)

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