

UNIT 4

PRINCIPLES OF LANGUAGE TEST DESIGN

PRINCIPLES FOR DESIGNING EFFECTIVE CLASSROOM TESTS

How can teachers who design their own tests convert ordinary, traditional tests and test situations into authentic, intrinsically motivating learning opportunities designed for learner's best performance and optimal feedback?



Consider the following **4 principles...**

PRINCIPLE 1: STRATEGIES FOR TEST-TAKERS

✓ Offer your learners appropriate & useful strategies for taking the test.

Why? Bc thru strategies-based test-taking,

- ... learners can avoid miscues due to the format of the test alone, and
- ... they should also be able to demonstrate their competence thru an optimal level of performance

PRINCIPLE 1: STRATEGIES FOR TEST-TAKERS

✓ Consider the following before-, during-, and after-test options:

BEFORE THE TEST

1. Give students all the information you can about the test. Exactly,

- what will the test cover?
- which topics will be the most important?
- what kind of items will be included?
- how long will it be?

PRINCIPLE 1: STRATEGIES FOR TEST-TAKERS

2. **Encourage** students to do a **systematic review of material**. E.g.: skim the textbook & other exam material, outline major points, write down examples, etc.

3. **Give them practice tests or exercises**, if available.

4. **Facilitate formation of a study group**, if possible.

PRINCIPLE 1: STRATEGIES FOR TEST-TAKERS

5. **Caution** students to get a good night's rest before the exam.

6. **Remind** students to get to the classroom early.

DURING THE TEST

1. As soon as the test is distributed, tell students to **quickly look over the whole of it** so as to get a good grasp of its different parts.

PRINCIPLE 1: STRATEGIES FOR TEST-TAKERS

2. Remind them to mentally **figure out** how much **time** they will need for each part.

3. Advise them to **concentrate** as carefully as possible.

4. **Alert students** a few minutes before the time is over so that they can proofread their answers, catch careless errors, and still finish on time.

PRINCIPLE 1: STRATEGIES FOR TEST-TAKERS

AFTER THE TEST

1. When you return the test, include **feedback on specific things the student did well**, what they **did not do well**, and if possible, the **reasons** for such judgement on your part.

2. Advise the students to pay attention when you **discuss test results** in class.

PRINCIPLE 1: STRATEGIES FOR TEST-TAKERS

3. Encourage questions from the students about test format or / and test results, scoring procedures, etc.
4. Advise students to make a plan to pay special attention in the future to points that they were weak on.

PRINCIPLE 2: FACE VALIDITY



- Sometimes, students don't know exactly what is being tested when they tackle a test.
- Sometimes they feel, for a variety of reasons, that the test isn't testing what it is supposed to test.

PRINCIPLE 2: FACE VALIDITY

- ❑ Face validity means that in the students' perception, the test is valid (Unit 3).
- ❑ Teachers can help foster this perception with
 - ✓ a carefully constructed, well-thought-out format;
 - ✓ a test that is clearly doable within the allotted time limit;

PRINCIPLE 2: FACE VALIDITY

- ✓ items that are clear and uncomplicated (\neq easy);
- ✓ directions that are crystal clear;
- ✓ tasks that are familiar and relate to their course work;
- ✓ a difficulty level that is appropriate for your students;

PRINCIPLE 3: AUTHENTICITY

- ✓ Make sure the **language** in your test is as **natural & authentic** as possible (e.g. instead of making up examples, look for them on the Internet and, if necessary, adapt them to your needs, student level, etc.)
- ✓ Try to **give language some context** so that items aren't just a string of unrelated language samples (thematic organization of items may help in this regard).

PRINCIPLE 3: AUTHENTICITY

- ✓ The tasks themselves need to be **tasks that the students have practiced and feel comfortable with** (i.e. a test is not the time to introduce brand-new tasks, for you won't know if student poor performance is a factor of the task itself or of the language you are testing)

PRINCIPLE 4: WASHBACK

Washback (beneficial washback) is the benefit that tests offer to learning (Unit 1).

✓ **When students take a test, they should be able, within a reasonably short period of time, to utilize the information about their competence that test feedback offers.**

In other words,

PRINCIPLE 4: WASHBACK

- **formal tests must be learning devices through which students can receive a diagnosis of areas of strength & weakness;**
- **their incorrect answers can become windows of insight about further work;**
- **your prompt return of written tests with feedback is fundamental to **intrinsic motivation.****

PRINCIPLE 4: WASHBACK

✓ How can teachers enhance beneficial washback?

👍 Provide a generous number of specific comments on test performance.

👎 Don't think your job is done by just returning tests with a letter grade or number score on them:

- they give absolutely no info of intrinsic interest to students, and
- they reduce a mountain of linguistic and cognitive data to an absurd minimum.

PRINCIPLE 4: WASHBACK

▪ At best, they give a relative indication of a judgement of performance as compared to others in the class –which fosters competitive, not cooperative, learning.

👍 Give **praise for strengths** together with **constructive criticism of weaknesses**.

👍 Give **strategic hints** on how a student can **improve** certain elements of **performance**.

PRINCIPLE 4: WASHBACK

👍 Finally, washback also implies that students can have access to you to discuss the feedback and evaluation received. This is part of an interactive, cooperative, motivating classroom. Allow students to seek clarification of fuzzy issues –even if you are sure of the grade & know that you will not change it.

PRACTICAL STEPS FOR TEST CONSTRUCTION

A WORD OF CAUTION HERE...

💣 Don't eradicate traditional testing (cloze, m-c, fill-in the gap, etc.) from your testing options just bc you dislike them or bc there are other forms of assessment!

💣 Alternative assessment techniques & procedures may take more effort & time to prepare and to grade!



STEP 1: TEST TOWARD CLEAR OBJECTIVES

It must be as clear as crystal to you what it is that you want to test.

👉 **Don't just give a test bc it's Friday, or 3rd week of the course, or for students to have sth to do in class.**

👍 **Instead, make a list of everything you think your students should know or be able to do, based on the material the students are accountable for.**

STEP 1: TEST TOWARD CLEAR OBJECTIVES

Your objectives can be, for testing purposes, as simple as a list of grammatical structures & communicative skills in a recently-taught unit(s):



STEP 1: TEST TOWARD CLEAR OBJECTIVES

Grammar

- Tag questions
- Simple past in negative sentences & information questions
- Irregular past tense verbs
- *Who* as subject
- *Anyone, someone, & no one*
- Conjunctions *so & because*

STEP 1: TEST TOWARD CLEAR OBJECTIVES

Communication skills

- Guessing what happened
- Finding out who did something
- Talking about family & friends
- Talking about famous people & events
- Giving reasons
- Asking for confirmation

STEP 2: FROM OBJECTIVES, DRAW UP TEST SPECIFICATIONS

Don't freak! Test specifications for classroom use can be a simple & practical outline of your test.

For the above objectives (STEP 1), your specifications will indicate how you will divide up the 50-minute test period (or ...), what skills you will test, & what the items will look like.

Your "specs" may look like this:

STEP 2: FROM OBJECTIVES, DRAW UP TEST SPECIFICATIONS

Listening (15 min)

Part 1: Minimal sentence pairs (choose the sentence you think you hear) [10 pairs, 2 themes]

Cover: tag questions, negative statements, guessing what happened, finding out who did something

Part 2: Conversation (choose the correct answer) [5 items]

STEP 2: FROM OBJECTIVES, DRAW UP TEST SPECIFICATIONS

Use of English (10 min)

[15 items, thematically related or in storyline (cloze) format]

Cover: simple past tense, past irregular verbs, *anyone, someone, and no one*

Writing production (20 min)

[Topic: Why I liked/didn't like a recent movie]

Cover: affirmative & negative statements, conjunctions *so & because*, giving reasons

STEP 2: FROM OBJECTIVES, DRAW UP TEST SPECIFICATIONS

These informal classroom-oriented "specs" give you an indication of:

- a) which of the objectives you will cover,
- b) what the item types will be,
- c) how many items will be in each section, and
- d) how much time is allocated for each.

STEP 2: FROM OBJECTIVES, DRAW UP TEST SPECIFICATIONS

BEWARE!! You may decide **not to test** everything you teach or **not to include all the lg skills** in your test (e.g. for reasons of practicality)

STEP 3: DRAFT YOUR TEST

A 1st draft will give you a good idea of

- 👍 what the test will look like,
- 👍 how students will perceive it (**FACE VALIDITY**)

STEP 3: DRAFT YOUR TEST

- 👍 the extent to which authentic lg and contexts are present,
- 👍 the length of the listening stimuli, and
- 👍 how things like the cloze testing format will work, among other practicalities.

STEP 4: REVISE YOUR TEST

At this stage, you will work thru all the items you've created and ask yourself a number of important questions:

STEP 4: REVISE YOUR TEST

- 1. Are directions to each section clear?**
- 2. Is there an example item for each section?**
- 3. Does each item measure a specified objective?**
- 4. Is each item specified in clear, simple language?**
- 5. Does each m-c item have appropriate distractors, i.e. are the wrong items clearly wrong & yet sufficiently alluring that they are not ridiculously easy?**

STEP 4: REVISE YOUR TEST

- 6. Does the difficulty for each item seem appropriate for your students?**
- 7. Do the sum of the items & the test as a whole adequately reflect the learning objectives?**

STEP 5: FINAL-EDIT AND TYPE THE TEST

- ☺ Ideally, you would try out all your tests before actually administering them.**
- ☺ In real classroom practice, the try-out phase may be virtually impossible.**

STEP 5: FINAL-EDIT AND TYPE THE TEST

☺ **In your final editing of the test, before typing it for presentation to your class, imagine you are one of your students and...**

- **go through each set of directions and through all items slowly & deliberately, timing yourself so as not to underestimate the time students will need to complete the test. If you need to shorten or lengthen the test, do so now;**

STEP 5: FINAL-EDIT AND TYPE THE TEST

▪ **make sure the test is neat & uncluttered on the page, reflecting all the care & precision you have put into its construction.**

STEP 6: UTILIZE YOUR FEEDBACK AFTER ADMINISTERING THE TEST

After you give the test, you will have some info about

- **how easy or difficult it was;**
- **the time limits;**
- **student affective reaction to it, &...**

STEP 6: UTILIZE YOUR FEEDBACK AFTER ADMINISTERING THE TEST

- their general performance.
- ← Take note of all this feedback & use it for making your next test.

STEP 7: WORK FOR WASHBACK

As you evaluate the test and return it to your students, **your feedback should reflect the principles of washback that you already know (*Unit 1*)**.

STEP 7: WORK FOR WASHBACK

Use the info from the test performance as a springboard for review and/or for moving on to the next unit (if it's a test to evaluate learning of unit objectives)