

THE IMPORTANCE OF TESTING

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Testing is an important part of every teaching and learning experience. Well-made tests of English can help students in at least two ways. First of all, such tests can help create positive attitudes toward your class. In the interest of motivation and efficient instruction, teachers almost universally aim at providing positive classroom experiences for their students. There are some important ways that testing can contribute to this aim. One that applies in nearly every class is a sense of accomplishment. Tests of appropriate difficulty, announced well in advance and covering skills scheduled to be evaluated, can also contribute to a positive tone by demonstrating your spirit of fair play and consistency with course objectives.

A second way that English tests can benefit students is by helping them master the language. They are helped, of course, when they study for exams and again when exams are returned and discussed. Where several tests are given, learning can also be enhanced by students' growing awareness of your objectives and the areas of emphasis in the course. Tests can foster learning, too, by their diagnostic characteristics: They confirm what each person has mastered, and they point up those language items needing further attention. Naturally, a better awareness of course objectives and personal language needs can help your students adjust their personal goals. For example, one person might note your strong test emphasis on aural comprehension, and he might also find that he had missed several vocabulary items on a recent test. One logical step would be for him to concentrate on the meaning of troublesome words, especially in a spoken context. Learning to spell them or recognize them in a printed context would become a second priority.

In short, properly made English tests can help create positive attitudes toward instruction by giving students a sense of accomplishment and a feeling that the teacher's evaluation of them matches what he has taught them. Good English tests also help students learn the language by requiring them to study hard, emphasizing course objectives, and showing them where they need to improve.

We, the teachers of English, are generally expected to be accountable for the results of our instruction. Our tests can help us answer the important question "Have I been effective in my teaching?" In other words, we can

use them to diagnose our own efforts as well as those of our students. As we record the test scores, we might well ask ourselves the following questions: "Are my lessons on the right level? Or am I aiming my instruction too low or too high?" "Am I teaching some skills effectively but others less effectively?" "What areas do we need more work on? Which points need reviewing?" "Should I spend more (or less) time on this material with next year's students?"

And tests can provide insights into ways that we can improve the evaluation process itself: "Were the test instructions clear?" "Was everyone able to finish in the allotted time?" "Did the test cause unnecessary anxiety or resentment?" "Did the test results reflect accurately how my students have been responding in class and in their assigned work?"

Tests, then, can benefit students, teachers, and even administrators by confirming progress that has been made and showing how we can best redirect our future efforts. In addition, good tests can sustain or enhance class morale and aid learning.

Language testing today reflects current interest in teaching genuine communication, but it also reflects earlier concerns for scientifically sound tests.

Tests today are mainly concerned with evaluating real communication in the second language. In this communicative era of testing we feel that the best exams are those that combine various subskills as we do when exchanging ideas orally or in writing. In particular, communicative tests need to measure more than isolated language skills: they should indicate how well a person can function in his second language.

Language components involved in communicated include vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. While they are all blended in a skill such as listening, it is possible to test how well each component has been mastered individually.