Technology Enhanced Assessment

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Abstract

Introduction and aim: In this paper we take a practice-based look at how technology can be used in assessing English language teaching (ELT). We begin with a brief overview of the changes that have taken place in the area of assessment over the last 50 years. We need to develop certain skills in learners and these skills will help to make our language learners better communicators and 'users' of the language. It is therefore these skills that we need to focus on assessing. Some of these skills are global and associated with a general performance in using and working with the language and some of them are quite specific. They all need to be assessed if we are to effectively evaluate a student's overall language ability.

Research methodology: Observation of the assessment process, discussion of results, interviews with professors and students, comparing and contrasting traditional and innovative methods of assessment.

Results and implications: However, not only has our understanding of what skills and knowledge we need to be effective language users changed, and hence what we assess, but the way we assess has also changed. This is because our understanding of what assessment is and how to assess effectively has also developed. This changing in our understanding of the nature of assessment covers topics like who does the assessment, where it happens, who uses the assessment and when it happens. We understand that many different stakeholders may want to use the information gathered from assessments.

Conclusion: It is concluded in the paper that we no longer take the narrow view that assessment is just for students and teachers. We also understand that a simple mark or score does not fully represent a real picture of a student's language ability. Even the goals of assessment have changed. It isn't about simply evaluating a student's level. Assessment has a role to play in motivation and self reflection. Finally, good assessment can even provide opportunities for learning: In our view the main purpose of language testing is to provide opportunities for learning both for the students who are being tested and for the professionals who are administering the tests.

Keywords: technology, assessment, ELT, administer, different stakeholders, performance

Recently I came across the phrase, which determined the topic of my paper. The Director of Studies, in Hong Kong, giving a welcome speech to teachers at the start of the new academic year said the following: "We need teachers who are confident with technology. You are either into technology or you are into way and had better start looking for the new job." Strong words indeed – quite a wake-up call for a number of teachers.

 Times have changed, teachers have evolved, and we now have a new breed of learning technologists. The first changes began in the classroom itself – new technologies such as overhead projectors, interactive whiteboards, laptop computers and wireless internet have opened up the classroom to the outside world. Teachers who spent their lives managing with a textbook, a tape recorder and a blackboard are now adept at using PowerPoint to present grammar, playing podcasts to practise listening skills, pulling texts off the world wide web to introduce reading skills and perhaps most ground-breaking of all – empowering students by giving them access to a wide range of web-based tools that allow them to publish work and engage with live audiences in real contexts. And that is just the beginning – because just as technologies have begun to change the way that English is learned in the classroom, even bigger changes seem to be taking place outside it. In fact, the digital revolution in learning now threatens to undermine the classroom completely as a

place of study. Learning English through mobile devices gains credibility every day and the increasing popularity and rapidly diminishing cost of tablet devices reinforce this by providing a format that really is capable of delivering courseware. And it is clear that technology still has much to offer ELT.

In this paper I take a practice-based look at how technology can be used in assessing English language teaching (ELT). I begin with a brief overview of the changes that have taken place in the area of assessment over the last 50 years. A common thread running through these changes is our starting proposition that over the last half century we have developed a greater understanding of how we might help someone to learn a language and these changes need to be reflected in the way we assess. Fundamentally, we hold the view that the ability to communicate and do things with language should lie at the heart of language learning. We need to develop certain skills in learners and these skills will help to make our language learners better communicators and 'users' of the language. It is therefore these skills that we need to focus on assessing. Some of these skills are global and associated with a general performance in using and working with the language and some of them are quite specific. They all need to be assessed if we are to effectively evaluate

a student's overall language ability. However, not only has our understanding of what skills and knowledge we need to be effective language users changed, and hence what we assess, but the way we assess has also changed. This is because our understanding of what assessment is and how to assess effectively has also developed. This changing in our understanding of the nature of assessment covers topics like who does the assessment, where it happens, who uses the assessment and when it happens. We understand that many different stakeholders may want to use the information gathered from assessments. We no longer take the narrow view that they are just for students and teachers. We also understand that a simple mark or score does not fully represent a real picture of a student's language ability. Even the goals of assessment have changed. It isn't about simply evaluating a student's level. Assessment has a role to play in motivation, self reflection and washback.

In fact, good assessment can even provide opportunities for learning: the main purpose of language testing is to provide opportunities for learning both for the students who are being tested and for the professionals who are administering the tests. Technology is another area that is having a direct impact on language assessment. Technology can offer affordances that provide new ways of assessing. We can now assess and evaluate students in ways that simply were not available to us even ten years ago. We can video our students interacting in groups or even working on a monologue or story. We can get our students to record podcasts and audio files. We can get them to develop their written work in blogs and wikis. There is an abundance of tools that can be used in assessment and these broaden the types of assessment tasks we can create as well as offer quicker and easier ways to distribute them.

Assessment is a very broad term that can cover formal exams and tests, both external and internal, which are structured and built into the fabric of the academic year, as well as more informal types of assessment that teachers undertake as a part of their day-to-day practice. We recognize that tests and exams set both internally and externally by organizations have changed in major ways over the past 50 years; however, most teachers have little say in the exams offered by an institution since exams are generally set at institutional level or run by external exam bodies. Our focus, then, is on the types of assessments that the teacher can set while teaching a course. These are often less formal and may not even be part of the official evaluation of a student but because the teacher has control over these and has a much clearer idea of

learners' needs at any point in a course of study, it is our view that these types of assessments have an important impact on a student's learning.

When we speak about assessment we deal with a number of terms like summative, formative, portfolios, washback, peer evaluation, self-evaluation and reflection, but first it is worth just contextualizing where assessment sits in the learning cycle.

The learning cycle

First we need to think about our learning objectives and goals. We have already identified that what we expect to achieve in language classrooms and via assessment has changed significantly over the years, and continues to change. We need to create assessments that help us evaluate and understand whether our learning outcomes are being achieved. But we also recognise that the assessment itself may help us in achieving some of our goals (like, for example, better motivation or more collaboration amongst learners). The assessments we set up can be very varied in both the skills they focus on, but also the way they are executed. They may be grammar tests, readings, blogging, podcast recordings, group work writing, for example. The assessments might be individual, pair, or group-based. The evaluation and feedback of the assessments is also important. The feedback could be provided by other students, it could even be practised by the students themselves and so encourage self-assessment. What emerges from this process is a picture of the students' development and a better understanding of whether the content of the course is achieving its outcomes. In light of what we learn about learners' performance during the learning cycle, changes may need to be made to the content of the course.

Here are some examples of how to use modern technology in assessment:

Quiz making tools

The building blocks of learning the English language (i.e. vocabulary, grammar, syntax) are still an important part of the learning process. ICT has traditionally done this part of assessment very well through the use of multiple choice, true or false, ranking, matching and other types of self assessment exercises and quizzes.

ICT can add value to these types of assessments too. Online quizzes can be provided that students can access at any time, allowing for greater flexibility in the timing and organisation of assessments. Many systems can even automatically mark student input, which has the potential to impact on the timeliness of feedback, provide students with useful knowledge of their progress (at least in terms of grammar, syntax, or comprehension questions) and allow students to repeat the exercises as needed. The success criteria can be set by the tutor to provide the learner with the

opportunity to progress to the next level or go to some review resources, depending on how well they did in the quiz. This scaffolding approach can be very powerful for this type of procedural knowledge in ELT. There are a number of free tools online that can easily be used to produce online quizzes and tests. Most virtual learning environments also provide quiz building tools.

Making simple audio recordings

"Vocaroo" is a very simple tool that allows students to record their voice for up to five minutes and then send the resulting recording as an email. It is perhaps one of the easiest audio recording tools on the internet and works literally at the click of just one button. The students don't even need to open an email client to send the recordings. They simply record, play back the recording and then write in the email address of the person they want to send the recording to. The receiver can then

click on the link and listen to the recording. The recordings can also be downloaded onto the students' computer or embedded into a blog by copying the code that is provided and then pasting it into a blog, virtual learning environment, or website. This tool is great for portfolios and for getting the students to build up a collection of short recordings over a period of a module that can show their development and progress. I have been using the tool to get the students to do regular periodic recordings based on activities we have done in class. So, we use the class time to practise certain speaking activities but the students actually do the recordings at home and then send them to me. Students have to evaluate their recordings and then at the end of the course, choose the recording they are most pleased with and submit this for formal evaluation.

Blogging

The students usually get a chance to try out the technologies in class and for homework they write about the technologies in their blogs. Students are encouraged to read each other's blogs and leave comments. They are also encouraged to share their blogs using their contacts so that they can develop the widest possible audience. A teacher reads their blogs but does not leave comments. The blogs are assessed at the end, both for the content and for the language.

Students seem to get very motivated about their blogs and put a lot of attention into making them clear, easy to read and well designed. In some focus group sessions the students emphasised the fact they felt very 'close' to their blogs. They cared about their look and feel and they worked harder on them than they would a normal writing assignment. Many of the students had 20 or 30 friends and connections reading their blogs on a regular basis and this motivated them a lot.

Summary

Testing and assessment has changed enormously over the last 50 years and we believe that most of the changes have been very positive. Technology has played a role in assessment for a long time but with the introduction of the internet and now mobile technologies, the role technology can play is greater than ever. There will be many teachers out there who are using technology in their assessments, but in general it is still not the case. The large majority of assessments are still paper-based and the use of ICT for assessment, just like the use of ICT for teaching, is still at a very experimental stage. Technology often bemuses teaches because it changes so fast. It is constantly evolving and it is nearly impossible for teaching and learning to keep up with these changes. Try not to worry about this. Choose technologies that fit well with your assessment criteria and that will broaden your assessment base and don't worry whether they are the latest thing or not. My view is that ICT can offer great affordances to assessment and we encourage you to make

use of it, and in doing so hopefully broaden your assessment base. Try it on informal assessments with your class and gather plenty of feedback from your students. Remember, most teachers tend to introduce it step by step. You will certainly change and adapt your assessments as you learn more from using them, besides, students are very supportive. It will be a step-by-step process but one that both you and your students will find very rewarding.

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