

*Making Informal Assessment Easier

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Abstract:

The purpose of this presentation is to show how to use bands effectively when doing informal assessment. Bands are excellent tools to help teachers gather information about the performance of the students when developing the 4 skills. This is an easy way to keep records that allow teachers to provide effective feedback to language learners.

Introduction:

The purpose of this paper is to talk about the use of bands in the assessment of English language. It is a burden for all language teachers to find easy ways to develop instruments that help them gather information about the daily performance of the students in the classroom. Most of the teachers do not have a systematic way to gather information about their students' strengths and weaknesses and judge them in terms of “I feel” and “I think” or do not give them enough support because they do not know exactly how they are doing. Teachers might know well the strong and the weak students in the classroom; but, what about the rest? Teachers have to be able to gather accurate information to guide students appropriately on time. Different types of bands to assess the 4 skills will be shown in order to facilitate this daily task. The idea is to help teachers keep records after having defined their learning objectives and make it fast. After this presentation, teachers are expected to develop or adopt suitable bands that help them assess their Students easily and appropriately.

I. What is assessment?

There are different definitions for assessment; some of them are given next. Assessment is “Measuring our students' performance in any one of many

different ways, diagnosing the problems and measuring the progress students make” Harris and McCann (1994, p. 89). Trussel-Cullen (1998) says “Assessment is seen as the gathering of evidence and documentation of learning” (p. 6). They both emphasize several ideas such as measuring performance in different ways, gathering evidence from the students. I would also add the idea of using these measures and evidence to provide students with effective feedback so that they are aware of their progress. I believe assessment is not only for teachers or to give a number; but to help students improve their performance and competencies in the language they are learning. Assessment does not have to be seen as punishment or appraisal but as provider of indicators on how students are doing.

II. Informal and formal assessment

Some of the authors make the distinction between formal and informal assessment. An example of this is Harris and McCann (1994) who say that formal assessment refers to “Tests given under conditions which ensure the assessment of individual performance in any given area.” (p. 90). They also state that informal assessment is a “system for observation and collection of data about students’ performance under normal classroom conditions” (p. 90). If we work in the classroom keeping this distinction in mind, we would identify two ways to gather information instead of only one. These two ways are through testing and through activities in the classroom. Tests are scary for many students resulting in poor performance. Then, activities in the classroom provide teachers with a safer atmosphere and students with more possibilities to show what they have learned. However, preparing activities is not the main problem in this situation; but planning the gathering of information and the criteria to measure students’ performance as well as actually gathering the information. In the next section some ideas are presented.

III. How should we assess students?

Harris and McCann (1994) suggest some principles about how assessment must be done:

- 1) Constructively (focused on achievement) Allow students to demonstrate that what they can do rather than what they cannot.
- 2) Reliably. Our assessment procedures have to be the same for all students and have to give us results that are similar. Clear criteria has to be established
- 3) Validly. Be sure we are assessing what we want to assess and nothing else.
- 4) Practically. Not too time consuming
- 5) Accountably. We have to be able to show the progress of our students in a clear way and have a rationale for the way we are doing so.

Keeping these principles in mind, it is time to think about the instruments we need to gather information and to establish criteria in order to carry out informal assessment successfully. To gather information it is recommended to design a format that helps you visualize your students and their performance. Trussell-Cullen (1998) includes in his book *Assessment in the Learner-Centered classroom* several useful formats to gather information. Next, I include a format designed by one of my students:

	Speaking				Reading			Listening			Writing				Effort				Participation				Grade		
Value	2	1.5	1	.5	2	1.5	1	.5	2	1.5	1	.5	2	1.5	1	.5	1	.75	.50	.25	1	.75		.50	.25
1. Nahum Samperio				4				4				4				4				1				1	10
2.																									
3.																									
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To continue, I will present bands or rubrics as an effective way to measure the performance of our students when developing an activity. First, I will define them and then some examples will be given.

IV. What are bands?

A" band describes an ability level in any one skill"

Baxter (1997:94)

They are descriptors that define the level of performance of a student in certain ability.

They help us make the subjective objective somehow.

They help us "to place a student on a scale according to his/her performance at any one given moment in time." (Harris and McCann (1994:10)

Examples of bands:

Speaking:

Fluency

- | | |
|---|---|
| 5 | Speaks fluently- almost no errors |
| 4 | Speaks quiet fluently- some errors |
| 3 | Some difficulty in speaking – many errors |
| 2 | Difficulty with speaking –almost incomprehensible |
| 1 | Unable to use language |

(Harris and McCann, 1994:10)

Writing:

- 5 Construct grammatically correct sentences and phrases and shows full mastery of appropriate vocabulary. Text is organized coherently. Correct spelling at all times. Excellent content and presentation. Message wholly relevant.
- 4 In general, grammatically correct sentences and phrases but some errors which do not affect understanding. Does not use appropriate vocabulary at all times. Some difficulties with organization of text. Some errors in spelling. Good content and presentation. Message mostly relevant.
- 3 Grammatical errors and use of vocabulary affect understanding as does organization of text. Many errors in spelling. Satisfactory content and presentation. Message not always relevant.
- 2 Text understood with difficulty due to inaccurate grammar and inappropriate use of vocabulary. Poor content and presentation. Message generally lacks relevancy.
- 1 Impossible to understand text due to frequency of grammatical errors and incoherence of organization. Poor spelling message irrelevant.

(Harris and McCann (1994:14)

Listening

- 5 Can understand complex messages
Can understand different oral presentation
Can distinguish between explicit and implicit information
- 4 Sometimes has difficulty with some complex messages
Can understand most oral presentations
In general, Can distinguish explicit and implicit information
- 3 Has difficulty with complex messages
Has difficulty with some oral presentations
Cannot distinguish between explicit and implicit information
- 2 Cannot understand complex messages
Has difficulty with most types of oral presentation
Cannot distinguish between explicit and implicit information
- 1 Cannot understand simple messages
Cannot understand any type of oral presentation

(Harris and McCann

(1994:14)

Speaking assessment

Score	Pronunciation	Grammar	Fluency
0	unintelligible	no grammatical or syntactical control	speech is virtually impossible
1	Occasionally unintelligible	some control or basic grammatical constructions	Pauses interfere with intelligibility
2	Intelligible	general good control	more natural flow
3	always intelligible	sporadic minor grammatical errors	speech is smooth

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I consider bands or rubrics excellent tools to measure the students' performance in a very objective way with some subjectivity though. The criteria in these bands help teachers assess students while performing classroom activities without investing a lot of time. Designing the descriptor implies a lot of work; but after this task is done, everything turns very easy. Some authors recommend designing bands as group work where most of the teachers in an institution get involved so that criteria become a standard. In addition, bands facilitate feedback provision for teachers. They can see the strengths and weaknesses of the students at a glance making it easy to explain the performance.

To conclude, when I have asked teachers how they usually assess their students, they frequently mention the activities they use to do it but nobody, so far, has mentioned some criteria to measure the students performance. This has made me think they do not have any to assess the four language skills. Then, I consider bands an excellent way to start developing a set of criteria to assess students in an easier and clearer way. Bands are great helpers for assessment and feedback provision.

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