

# PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT IN LANGUAGE TESTING

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## **Abstract**

Performance assessments are based on real world tasks and measure whether students can apply the knowledge and skills to accomplish these tasks. The benefits are that students are more engaged and have more information about what they need to do than is the case with more traditional assessments. This article defines performance assessment, trace its origins and development, explain how performance tests can be constructed and describes some basic considerations in utilizing performance assessment in language testing.

*Keywords: performance based assessment, language testing*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Performance assessment has been used for centuries, and its increasing popularity has proved its importance in language testing and assessment (Shohamy & May, 2008). In the 1990s, traditional multiple-choice tests showed the ineffectiveness in evaluating language learners' proficiency and led to the reemergence of PA (Darling-Hammond, L., Adamson, 2013). Brown and Hudson (1998, p.59, as cited in Yousefpoori-naeim, 2014) affirmed “real-life language is not multiple choice”. In other words, the learners cannot show their language ability in real-life situations if they are only assessed with traditional types of assessments. As educators indicated, teaching and assessment have a close connection since the learners' language proficiency shown through assessment reflects teaching quality and curriculum. Therefore, unsuitable forms of assessment can dampen the effort and enthusiasm of the teachers' in-class activities (Colley, 2008; Pinter, 2009; Rixon, 2000; cited in Yousefpoori-naeim, 2014)

A performance test is "a test in which the ability of candidates to perform particular tasks, usually associated with job or study requirements, is assessed" (Shohamy & May, 2008, p.144). Palm (2008) states, "Performance assessment can mean almost anything" (p.3). The most prominent advantages are enhancing students' language proficiency, especially productive skills, boosting their critical thinking, and helping learners recognize their weaknesses in an organized way when they prepare for a performance in real-life situations (Prastikawati et al., 2016). PA has been widely used in organizations and institutions thanks to these outstanding features (Abedi, 2010).

One goal of a performance assessment is to judge the level of competency of students achieve in doing reading/language arts, science, and mathematics (Parker et al.,

2009). Meanwhile, these aspects are a vital channel for teachers to have immediate adjustments. As a result, they will improve their study results. Through the use of PA, the learners can be informed of their strengths and weaknesses and teachers' basis for giving feedback and making judgments about their language learning progress (Suastra & Menggo, 2020). Performance-based assessments are based on real-world tasks and measure whether students can apply the knowledge and skills to accomplish these tasks. The benefits are that students are more engaged and have more information about what they need to do than is the case with more traditional assessments. Finally, because performance tasks are generally taken over multiple points in time, they can provide a more accurate assessment of what a student knows and what a student can do (Griffith & Language, 2011)

## **2. DEFINITIONS OF PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT (PA)**

There is a variety of PA definitions depending on different authors, publications as well as intended audiences (Palm, 2008). Stiggins (2001, cited in Espinosa, 2015) defines PA as a group of strategies requiring the learners to use their knowledge and skills to solve authentic tasks or create a product that follows certain criteria. Meanwhile, Suastra & Menggo (2020) briefly describe PA as a form of assessment in which students have to show how they deal with real-life problems based on what they learned. According to Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p.392), PA is "an approach to assessment that seeks to measure student learning based on how well the learner can perform on a real practical task". Last but not least, performance tasks are also considered as valid means of assessment in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, where performance is defined as "the production of language in a (relatively) authentic often work or study-related situation." (Language Policy Division, 2001)

Performance assessment is strongly believed to provide better feedback about the learners' performance and writing skills. It is the most appropriate way to evaluate the learners' language performance, including writing skills (Yulia, 2018). PA is considered a good way to assess students' language ability due to the following characteristics. First, it manifests authentic tasks without a fixed answer so that students can deepen their understanding of what they learned and show their problem-solving skills. Students actively combine language abilities with knowledge and skills of different content areas to remedy real-life situations (Kelly, 2020; McTighe & Ferrara., 1998; Darling-Hammond, L., Adamson, 2013). Second, PA helps students self-evaluate what they know and can do. It is comprehensive and helps students explore the full implication of their understanding of certain content areas (Abedi, 2010). The purpose of PA is to help students acquire and apply knowledge, practice skills, and develop independent and collaborative work habits (Kelly, 2020)

PA can be used in a language learning environment with different formats such as oral presentation, portfolios, participation, journals, debate, story-telling, performances,

etc. (Irwin & Hepplestone, 2012). According to McTighe & Ferrara (1998), PA can be categorized into three types: products, performances, and process-oriented assessments. A product can be a report, project, brochure, web page, or video clips where students apply what they learned to produce and is often implemented outside the classroom. Performances allow students to show up their skills and knowledge in class under the teacher's observation. They include different in-class activities such as presentations, group work, role-play, demonstrations, or debates. Process-oriented assessments help teachers have an overall insight into student progress from the beginning to the end of the course. Participation, learning logs, portfolios, self/peer assessment checklists, or surveys are the most common examples.

According to Kelly (2020), performance-based activities can coordinate many subjects at the same time. Moreover, they should meet the demand of 21<sup>st</sup> century as much as possible. The 21<sup>st</sup> century expected skills are creative and innovative, critical thinking and problem solving, communication and collaboration.

### **3. PERFORMANCE TEST CONSTRUCTION**

Performance assessment can be utilized in language classes to assess students' language proficiency. It can be implemented in different forms such as oral presentation, story-telling, dramatic reading, English debate, etc. It is a more challenging type of assessment since it requires a lot of time and efforts to construct a performance test. Due to its complicated organization, the behavior of test tasks, how they perform, and how they are assessed has become a considerable focus of research.

Performance tests are authentic because language learners have to deal with the tasks which are similar to those in real life. The construction of a performance test should be in harmony with the curriculum of a language program as well as its objectives. According to Muirhead (2011), when designing a performance test, the teachers should consider the following requirements:

3.1. Needs analysis: A need analysis is conducted in order to provide a detailed description of the specific context and tasks which learners will need to perform, the specific conditions under which these tasks will be performed, and the criteria against which the performance can be judged. The needs analysis will specify the context of the second language use, the type of interactions foreseen, the roles, discourse types, and language functions to be performed, and the basis on which successful fulfillment of the second language task is to be judged. Performance tests are generally assessed with the aid of rating scales which describe what a person can do with the language in specific situations.

#### **3.2. Reliability and validity**

While there has been a great deal of speculation on what makes performance tests valid, a great deal more work needs to be done. Inevitably, a number of issues will be involved: task difficulty, task complexity, task conditions, task characteristics, examinees' perceptions of task difficulty, rater characteristics, test taker

characteristics, the degree of relationship between the raters and test takers, etc. and how these factors interact with each other and with students' performances on tasks

### 3.3. Scoring criteria

There are a number of questions that need to be addressed in constructing performance tests: How can the evaluation criteria reflect the kinds of judgments and consequences that the performance would entail? How can the scoring information be interpreted and presented so as to give maximum information back to the test users? Hamilton (1993) claim that performance on a test involves factors other than straight second language proficiency that cause an overlap in the performance of native and nonnative speakers. Therefore, the reference to native speaker performance is unwarranted. Advocates of performance assessments maintain that every task must have performance criteria for at least two reasons. On the one hand, the criteria define for students and others the type of behavior or attributes of a product which are expected. On the other hand, a well-defined scoring system allows the teacher, the students, and others to evaluate performance or product as objectively as possible. If performance criteria are well defined, the student then will understand what he or she must do to improve.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Assessment has always been a vital component is the triangular of teaching/ learning – curriculum – testing and assessment. Therefore, choosing a suitable form of assessment will have a prominent effect on students' performance. Performance based assessment has been claimed in a lot of research as a useful instrument in assessing language learners' proficiency. However, in order to effectively apply these forms of PBAs, there are some suggestions that should be taken into considerations. First, it is important to define what skills and knowledge that student must obtain before designing a performance task. Then, teachers have to decide what tasks help students to achieve the objectives of the lessons or subject. Moreover, evaluation criteria must be carefully constructed so that students clearly understand what they have to do to reach the highest result with their performance. In this stage, students are able to participate and adjust the criteria before it is officially used in class. Last but not least, it is vital to provide detailed descriptive and analyzed feedback that can help teachers and students do better the next time.

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