



A Critical Look into Authentic Assessment of Language

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Abstract

Each day the policies and procedures involving the assessment of language acquisition impact the lives of millions of language learners across the globe. These testing protocols and customs carefully constructed by institutions of power have been adopted by most of society and directly align with the ideals upheld by language tests, namely those that have been standardized and utilized to determine the extent to which a person has developed proficiency in language. Researchers and theorists have been advocating for innovation within this discipline for some time as the current language testing practices that have been in place for decades hold one singular definition of what it means to be proficient, what kind of English is acceptable, and often it is linked to discriminatory practices such as monolingualism and native speakerism. Tests such as the TOEFL and IELTS often assess rote memorization and one's ability to identify correct grammatical structures rather than to produce this language organically. When test takers receive high marks and gain admission into institutions or work settings, many struggle to formulate meaning and interact within this new environment upon admission into that space [8]. Furthermore, the sociopolitical factors upholding outdated perceptions and notions of "proficiency" prevent innovation and personalization of language tests to fit the needs, strengths and goals of learners acquiring language. Frameworks such as Critical Language Testing (CLT), Translingualism, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and World Englishes (WE) all served as critical lenses guiding this research into a relatively new and innovative form of additional language assessment. Incorporating elements from more familiar assessment strategies such as task-based or content-based language assessment, authentic assessment of language presents inherent opportunities as well as notable challenges for both learners and instructors of language. Authentic Assessment has gained recent traction in a variety of language learning contexts as linguists throughout the world are drawing comparisons to first language acquisition and uncovering how authentic language assessments can be localized and globalized. Despite such advancements, authentic assessment remains in its early stages with significant room to innovate, grow along with the ever-evolving world of language learning.

Keywords: *Authentic Assessment, Alternative Assessment, Language Learning, Second Language Acquisition, Translingualism*

Defining Authentic Assessment

Authentic assessment as a tool, as a means of pushing language learning forward naturally comes in different forms to represent the various learners of language in the world. When delineating what authentic assessment means, some scholars consider the instructional materials that would feel the most relevant or meaningful to the learner and what they plan to accomplish learning a language. To others, authentically assessing language becomes a lot more philosophical, having more to do with creating English tests that closely resemble authentic language use of the test takers. The principle differentiating task-based and content-based from authentic assessments is practicality outside of the testing environment. In order to be deemed an authentic assessment, the test must seek to "evaluate the knowledge and skills of learners with real evidence and approach the real world or real life" [9]. Within this paper, I use the research I have compiled in terms of how authentic assessment is being utilized to build upon these notions of what makes assessments authentic.

Origins of Authentic Assessment

When assessments are built on the foundation that only one superior form of English or utilizing language exists, and that this single form is the standard for everyone, other dialects, forms, cultures are dismissed and left out of the conversation and therefore are not considered when designing or



constructing tests. Authentic assessments were introduced and initially advertised as being the solution to this widespread dilemma in 1989 when Grant Wiggins noticed that similar adaptations to standardized tests such as project-based or task-based language learning lacked understanding that diversified versions of the same language can exist. For example, most language learning environments prioritize learning Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) or Basic Intrapersonal Communication Skills (BICS), the two widely accepted forms of proficiency in second language acquisition [3]. Also referred to as Standard Academic English or SAE, Standard English proficiency is another, more formal form of English considered necessary for admission into academic or professional environments. Naturally, most standardized language proficiency tests are also constructed and administered in this specific form.

How Authentic Assessment is being implemented

Many have explored alternative forms of assessing progress in language acquisition beyond the traditional formats that replicate language proficiency tests with varying results and levels of success. James Brown and Thom Hudson offer over 20 important criteria to consider when constructing alternative language assessments. Most center around the theme of authenticity and meaningful construction of language with a specific purpose. The second and third criteria mention that language assessments should “involve tasks that are worthwhile as instructional activities” and “use real-world contexts or simulations” [2]. Authentic assessment endeavors to do just that, create opportunities for realistic and meaningful exchanges of language as a basis for evaluating progress toward skills in the target language.

For centuries, language instructors worldwide have been adapting their curricula and assessments to facilitate more realistic exchanges of language in an attempt to replicate more accurately what kinds of linguistic exchanges each demographic and/or context of students might encounter, eventually dismantling the systemic issues traditional language assessments in place currently. Only until recently have these forms of assessment focusing on authenticity and practicality outside the classroom become more mainstream and beginning to understand that in order to maintain reliability and validity, the content as well as the subsequent assessment of that content. Examples of authentic assessments that are commonly used in additional language learning environments are demonstrations, presentations, debates, experiments, portfolios, interviews, other projects and peer or self-evaluations.

In their book “Beyond Tests and Quizzes: Creative Assessments in the College Classroom,” Richard and Barbara Mezeske provide a plethora of research based alternative assessments teachers can adapt to fit the needs of students in their classrooms, many of which prioritize personalization and student involvement [7]. The Mezeskes determined that the more personalized an assessment can be tailored to each individual student, the higher their chances are of being able to perform well naturally. When it comes to personal response assessments, biases in the teacher assessment process can be minimized through evaluating using a *rubric* explicitly stating what learning outcome is being assessed and what constitutes an error or loss in points.

Implications

Despite its inherent advantages, authentic assessment does also present some challenges institutions instructing language as well as individual educators must consider. Namely, due to the nature of having to make each test meaningful to each student, authentic assessments are most reliable and valid when administered in a localized context. At the time of writing this paper, research delving into authentic assessment is limited to guides for teachers of additional languages to use and adapt to fit the needs of their students. This dearth in resources has led to minimal innovation over the years when it comes to new ways to authentically assess language learning. Additionally, due to the fact that alternative means of testing is relatively new, students might not have familiarity or confidence producing within the genre. “Students need to know how they will be tested and what will comprise the evaluation, which prevents unfairness in the evaluative process or the learning strategies and content” and this will be a process to transition for a lot of students [6].

Depending on the learning context authentic assessments are conducted in, some curricula or teachers may assess a monolithic approach to language learning, rather than pluralistic and some might still consider this to be authentic assessment. I hope to expand the definition of authentic



assessment to include the assessment of ‘Englishing,’ or the ability to use the English in one’s linguistic repertoire to communicate a desired message to be understood by the majority of people. Similar to Englishing, authentic assessment assumes the negotiating of meaning, anticipates translinguaging and focuses on the effective communication of meaning above all else which may directly or indirectly contradict the English being taught within certain contexts [4].

Authentic assessment as a practice attempts to replicate as effectively as possible a situation where information would be legitimately exchanged, and focuses on the successful, or understandability of the linguistic output. Theorists, educators and linguists adapting authentic assessment into practice understand that “[b]ilingualism is an integral part of students’ identities and should be respected and valued in the classroom” and natural conversations involve much more than SAE or a singular form of English [1]. Authentic assessors then would ideally anticipate translingualism and a variety of Englishes in conversation with one another. Though it is technically the discretion of either the institution or the instructor if use of other languages would result in a loss in points, I would contend that a loss in points would not be truly authentic because in the “real world,” there are alternative solutions and more opportunities to get one’s point across than what would be provided in the confines of a language classroom. Previously, language tests have been used for keeping people out of certain circles of English (inner circle, outer circle and expanding circle) [5]; however, authentic assessment encourages more versions of the same language to co-exist, or a blurring of Kachru’s circles which is an important step toward cross-cultural communication.

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