
Post-Graduate Diploma in the Teaching of English

**TESTING LANGUAGE AND
LITERATURE**

**BLOCK
I**

BASIC CONCEPTS IN LANGUAGE TESTING



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TESTING LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

BLOCK I

BASIC CONCEPTS IN LANGUAGE TESTING

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INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

This course in *Testing Language and Literature* aims to help you in understanding the principles of language testing and apply them to the tests you make for your classroom or your institution. As a language teacher, you must be involved with language testing in a big way. You, perhaps, follow the models of past question papers when you set question papers.

A great deal of research has been done in the area of language testing, as a result of which it has become a specialized branch of language teaching. The increase in the number of people appearing for many standardised tests in order to qualify for employment or admission to higher education, has also increased the importance of professionalising testing. This course aims to bring these insights to you and help you in making better tests.

The course has four blocks. The first three blocks have four units each and the last block, three units. Block I discusses the general principles of language testing. It introduces you to what is involved in language testing and the role of testing in an instructional programme. The objectives of teaching and testing are discussed followed by the characteristics of a good test. The final unit of this block illustrates the techniques that are used in language testing.

Block II has four units devoted to the techniques of testing in each of the following areas: grammar, vocabulary, listening and speaking. Block III details testing techniques for reading and writing. This is followed by two units on testing language through literature, and testing literature. Blocks II and III thus comprehensively deal with the testing of the elements of grammar and vocabulary, the four language skills and the testing of language through literature and the testing of literature. The last unit will be especially useful to you if you teach at higher levels of instruction in English.

Testing involves scoring and scoring involves interpretation. Statistics helps us in evaluating class performance and test item quality. Block IV consists of three units dealing with statistical measures that will help you make sense of the performance of your learners and the validity of the test items you create.

Please read each unit, one section at a time, do each activity with care and attempt the review questions. This is a practical course and unless you do the activities you will not understand the principles and practice of good testing. The activities do not have items in test construction. In the assignments you will be asked to frame tasks and this will help you construct good tests yourself. Please follow the instructions in the assignments carefully and attempt the tasks as specified to get the maximum benefit from the course.

INTRODUCTION TO THE BLOCK

This is the first block in your *Testing Language and Literature* course. It is a general introduction to the basic principles of language testing. It is a revised version of Lessons 1, 2, 6 and 14 of the old TLL course written by *Jacob Tharu*.

Unit 1 sets out to describe what language testing involves. It discusses the role of evaluation in the instructional process, specifies the aims and purposes of testing, and the procedures adopted in testing. It also includes the kinds of tests that are used in language testing.

Unit 2 seeks to correlate the objectives of language testing with the objectives of language teaching. It begins with a description of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives and goes on to describe the relation between cognitive and linguistic objectives. It then elaborates on matching objectives with test tasks. The unit ends with a detailed discussion of the different kinds of testing.

Unit 3 analyses the characteristics of a good test. The principles of *validity, reliability, authenticity, interactiveness, practicality* and *impact* are discussed in detail and the unit lays the basis for understanding the analysis of test items in Blocks II and III wherein each unit focuses on the testing of each language element and skill area.

Unit 4 of the block deals with the various item types that are commonly used in language testing and discusses the strengths and limitations of each type. This helps in matching purposes of testing with the available item types.

Block I thus leads into the content of the succeeding blocks. References to the points discussed in this block will appear in Blocks II, III, and IV. You may have to go back and forth through the blocks in order to get the most out of the course.

Unit 1

What is language testing?

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UNIT 1 WHAT IS LANGUAGE TESTING?

1.0 Introduction

Teaching, learning and testing are integral aspects of the formal instructional process. Instruction involves three components: learning objectives, learning experiences and evaluation procedures. This block will deal with the key issues in evaluation and language testing. It will discuss the general principles and practices of language testing.

You are already familiar with the concept of evaluation discussed in **Block V** of your **PGCTE Methods** and **Materials** courses. We would like you to revise those two blocks before you begin studying this course.

This unit will begin with a recap of the role of evaluation in instruction. It will then discuss the aims and purposes of testing, the content of language testing and how we go about testing.

The questions that we will try to answer are:

What is the role of evaluation in the instructional process?
Why do we need to test?
What do we test?
How do we test?

By the end of this unit you should be able to

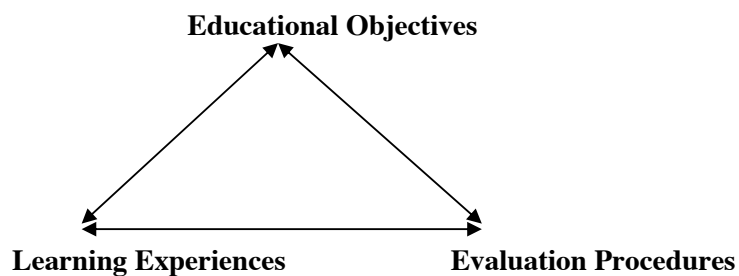
- identify the role of evaluation in instruction
- identify the aims and purposes of testing
- identify the content of language testing
- identify the stages in making a test
- match purposes with kinds of tests

1.1 What is the role of evaluation in instruction?

Evaluation, as you know, is a natural, ongoing activity. Whatever you do, you are constantly evaluating it. You set out to do something with a particular purpose, you do it, and after you do it, you look back to see how you have done it. This retrospective activity is very crucial in the educational process. You may even think about the process *while* you are doing it.

Today, we are engaged in teaching large numbers of learners and we need to ascertain the extent of the effect of teaching on learning. In order to do this, we have to systematically specify what our instructional objectives for a specific group of learners are, how these are to be realised in the classroom and how we assess the fulfillment of objectives. Instruction begins with defining a set of objectives, followed by the instructional process and evaluation. Evaluation procedures relate to both objectives and learning experiences. These three components form a dynamic network and affect one another.

This dynamic network has been described by Furst in the following figure:



(Furst, E.J. *Constructing Evaluation Instruments*. David Mackay. 1958)

Notice that the arrows point in both directions. That is, each of the three elements affects, and is affected by the other two. The process begins with stating objectives. This is followed up with learning experiences. During this phase, the objectives may have to be modified or extended. Evaluation procedures are based both on learning experiences and objectives. The information and insights gained while making and using tests may lead to improvements in:

- a. the quality of the learning experiences,
- b. the clarity and practicability of the objectives, and
- c. the testing tools.

We constantly modify all the three elements of the triangle, thus making instruction a dynamic process.

Do the following activity to understand how evaluation enters all learning activities.

Activity A

You have bought a car to help you to get to your workplace which is 10 kms away. You plan to learn driving and drive yourself. *State your objectives, the process of learning and the evaluation procedure.*

Objective/s:

Learning process:

Evaluation procedure:

Discussion

My objective is: to drive well and confidently during peak office hours on busy roads.

Learning process: I register for a 21 day driving course at a driving school.

I learn the mechanics of driving and then move on to driving on busy roads with the help of the instructor.

Evaluation procedure: I take the driving test administered by the Road Transport Authority. I pass the test and am given a licence to drive in the city.

Without a licence I will not be allowed to drive. Let us suppose that at the end of 21 days I am not confident to take the test. I may want to extend the period of practice before taking the test.

Or let us suppose I take the test but fail in it and am not given the licence. I may reregister for the course, or ask friends to help me

with further practice and apply for the licence again, or give up altogether.

So what is the role of evaluation here? It tells us whether I have acquired the ability to drive a car confidently or not; whether my objective was realised through the course or not; if I should find some other instructor; or I should practice for a longer period; or if all that does not work, whether I do not have the aptitude for driving and hence my objective was not practicable.

There may be yet another situation. I appear for the test and am asked to drive around 10 metres in an open field and am given a licence. But I still do not have the confidence to drive on the road. I try it once or twice but end up crashing into poles and trees. What has happened here? The test itself is not valid and though I have the licence, I do not have the ability to drive.

Let us look at yet another situation. I have learnt to drive; I am able to drive well; but I keep failing in the test and cannot get a licence. Here again, the test is not able to detect the driving ability that I have gained hence is not valid.

The analogy described above illustrates the integral relationship between intention, action and evaluation; in other words, objectives, learning process and evaluation.

Evaluation, primarily is trying to find out if learning has taken place or not. If it has not, it looks into the reasons for failure: the process of learning, the realisability of the objectives and finally it tries to find out if the testing tool/procedure itself is the appropriate one.

1.2 Why do we need to test?

As teachers, we are eager to know the extent to which we have helped our students in learning the language appropriate to their needs and their levels. We get this information in various ways. Do the activity below to spell out the various ways.

Activity B

Write down four or five ways by which you get to know if your learners have been successful in learning what they set out to learn in a given period of time in the English class.

Discussion

I have put down the following. See if your list matches with this:

1. My learners' responses in class and their feedback.
2. Observing my learners' use of language with one another and in their work.
3. The struggle I see in some of my learners in overcoming their mistakes.
4. The improvement I see in my learners' writing.
5. The confidence I see in my learners when using English.
6. Learners' parents complaining that they are not happy with their children's progress in the use of English.
7. Learners themselves approaching me with their problems in reading comprehension or in writing.
8. Their general class work.

These are some of the informal ways by which we get to know the learning progress of our learners. (There could be other ways that you have listed.)

We are thus constantly evaluating our learners and getting information about their learning from various sources. There is, however, some arbitrariness about these opinions about student learning. You might think that Rohan has picked up a good deal of vocabulary, but he himself may not be quite satisfied. You may think that Sheila's pronunciation is quite good, but her parents might want her to speak better. You might think that Ved needs to put in more effort to make fewer grammatical mistakes but his other teachers may think him excellent. Judgements of this kind

are based on subjective expectations and do not give a true picture of a learner's level of ability.

We need to have information that is more valid and reliable. We need to have a *fair* measure of our learners' abilities. We need to measure all the members of a class with the same yardstick: the same test paper, the same time, the same conditions. We need to assess how well the members of a learning group perform on the same set of tasks following instructions. We need to see their relative performance. We need to see how the class has performed on the whole. We need to see why some learners have not learned well. How do we do all this? We do it by assigning scores – numerical values – to describe their levels. This is what a test does.

Test response sheets can be corrected by another examiner and then that can confirm our impressions about our students. A series of tests will help us in assessing learners over a period of time and make our assessment more reliable.

A test will tell the learners where they stand on their own and in comparison to their peers. Test scores tell parents the level of performance of their wards.

Test scores of school-leaving or graduate examinations give employers or higher education authorities a criterion for selecting candidates.

Thus, whenever a course of instruction is offered in a formal mode, all the stakeholders, namely, learners, teachers, parents, institutional authorities want the learning level to be measured, validated and certified.

These are some of the reasons why we need tests. We must, however, admit that measuring language ability even with the best of tools is not absolutely foolproof because of the nature of language, the contexts of language use, the role relationships among language users, the affective factors that accompany language use and so on. Dan Douglas (2011) compares a language test to a 'rubber ruler' to highlight the variability in measurement according to the varied contexts and domains of language use, and test conditions.

Nevertheless, tests help us

- to know if learners are able to understand what they listen to or read, speak and write at the level expected of them;
- to know if they are able to perform the language functions that have been practised during the course of instruction;
- to know what areas of language learners are confident in and what areas are difficult, that is their strengths and weaknesses;
- to know what level they have achieved and what level they can be taken to next or if certain areas have to be revised;
- to know what the problems of individual learners are.

That is, a test helps us in knowing the general and individual levels of language ability, effectiveness in using language, areas of strengths and weaknesses and finally what should go into the next stage of instruction.

The information that we get from the test results, tells us about the levels of learning of the entire class of students as well as individual students. This information will have to feed into the future course of instruction.

A test is something that happens at the end of a course of instruction or after a module of instruction (a set of lessons or units covering a particular area or a set of functions). It is also the basis for the next stage of instruction. It tells us how successful the instruction has been and what modifications are necessary. This is called the *washback effect* of testing on teaching.

You will notice that we have not spoken about the content of the stories or essays that they have studied. Language learning happens through such content but that is not the objective of language learning. When we talk of language testing, we mean the ability to use language and not 'knowledge about' language. You will understand this better when we deal with the testing of the various skills in the later blocks of this course.

Review question I

Tick the items in the following list which you think are the aims of language testing:

1. To know if the learners are able to use language effectively at the level expected of them. ()
2. To know how many grammatical errors learners make in speaking and writing. ()
3. To know if learners have benefitted from the course. ()
4. To know if they are ready for the next level. ()
5. To know if learners can remember all the facts in a lesson they have learnt. ()
6. To know if learners can define grammatical terms. ()
7. To let learners know their levels of ability. ()
8. To know which course objectives were not realised. ()
9. To know if the course needs to be revised. ()
10. To let learners know the level of their ability in relation to their peers. ()

1.3 What is a language test?

Evaluation, as we saw earlier, is a larger process pertaining to all the aspects of the instructional process. It also includes evaluating the syllabus, the materials used for teaching and the entire course itself.

Tests are the specific means or tools through which we determine the extent of learning during a specified period of time. A test is essentially an instrument that we use like a thermometer that measures the temperature or state of heat of a body. Testing involves a standardised set of operations and a numerical score. A particular test is often referred to as an *instrument*.

To most people this instrument would mean the 'question paper'. This is only one aspect of the total process of examining. Assessing the responses of the examinee to the questions is the other crucial component. In fact, the essential core of an examination is what the examiner thinks of the responses. How often have you thought that you have done very well in a test only to be disappointed with the results later – and, occasionally, perhaps, the reverse?

Sometimes, as in the case of an oral examination or interview, there may be no formal question paper. We use other stimulus materials to make the examinee display his or her ability.

Designing, constructing, producing, administering and scoring a test are all important areas of testing. The term *procedure* is used to indicate the total process of making and using a test instrument.

In language testing, we are dealing with the ability to use language correctly and appropriately. Traditionally, this has been done in an indirect way in school curricula. Most school language tests have been based on the stories, essays and poems that form the textbook. They demand a study of the texts and answering questions on them, mainly by remembering the content. Language ability is assessed indirectly from the responses to these content questions, along with an explicit knowledge of grammatical categories (items such as change from direct to indirect speech, or fill in suitable prepositions etc.). This leads to the problem of identifying the ability that is tested.

If we are looking for the ability to use language, then such content based tests do not truly reflect that ability. This is what has resulted in the reduced validity of our school examinations.

If we wish to make learners use language, the tasks should prompt them to display this ability, though in a limited way. Language tests in recent times have thus shifted the focus from ‘content’ to ‘skills’ and courses of instruction are preparing students not only for passing language tests but passing real-life language tests, at interviews, workplace communication and a certain level of social communication according to the needs.

Activity C

In the following list, tick the items that you think a language test should include.

1. Memory/content based questions (on the lessons in the textbook) ()
2. Knowledge of grammatical rules (definitions) ()
3. Comprehension of unseen texts of the same level as those in the textbook ()
4. Appropriate use of grammatical items ()
5. Writing essays on topics already done in the course ()
6. Choice of appropriate vocabulary ()
7. Note-taking from a talk ()
8. Speech-making on a given topic ()
9. Oral information-gap tasks ()
10. Oral interpretation of graphs/charts/figures ()

Discussion

Items 3, 4, 6, 7, 9 and 10 are aimed at testing language ability.

We often do find 1, 2, 5 and 8 also included in test papers.

The problem with item 1 is that a student with not enough language ability might be able to memorise answers to these questions and get a score that is not truly indicative of his ability to use language. In contrast, a student whose language ability is good but has not studied the textbook may fail in the test. Thus it is not a valid indicator of language ability. The purpose of using a textbook is to provide adequate exposure to language and use the texts to illustrate language points.

Item 2. Language ability is reflected in the use of appropriate grammatical forms. It is not necessary to know grammatical definitions. As in 1 above, a student may memorise the definitions and get a high score but not be able to use the grammatical forms correctly and appropriately in his/her own speech or writing. In contrast, a student who has not made an effort to learn the definitions but whose grammatical ability is sound may lose out in the test.

Item 5. In many schools we have seen students memorise essays on a few general topics, out of which one or two are sure to appear in the test. This obviously does not reflect their ability to respond to a given topic spontaneously and construct an essay originally.

Item 8 is similar to item 5 where learners prepare speeches on a few topics and present one or two of them in the test. This is not a way of testing natural speaking. In order to do this, students are given prompts such as pictures or figures which will help them interpret spontaneously. Information-gap activities in pairs also will serve the purpose.

We thus see that we have to be very careful about what a test should seek to test. The focus should be on language and not aspects that are peripheral to it.

Even if there are questions based on the textbook they should be of an interpretive kind, where certain facts or opinions have to be commented upon by the examinees.

To end this section, we will enumerate the questions that a language test should address:

1. Can learners read and understand facts, ideas, opinions, infer and evaluate?
2. Can learners write grammatically and coherently using appropriate vocabulary for the particular purposes?
3. Can learners listen and understand facts, ideas, opinions, infer and evaluate?
4. Can learners interact with others on matters of immediate interest and express their opinions?
5. Can learners perform common language functions in speech and writing?

In short, a language test should include items that cover different areas of language ability: listening, speaking, reading and writing and through them the integral elements of grammar and vocabulary.

1.4 What are the stages in test construction?

In the previous section, we looked at what should go into a language test. That should lead you to thinking about how to go about making language tests.

Before you go into the procedure of making a language test, do this activity as a starter.

Activity D

What are the steps that you generally follow when you make a test in your institution?

Discussion

When I was a novice teacher at the higher secondary level thirty years ago, we had a set pattern for a question paper which we had to follow.

We had two *reference to the context* questions with four items in each from the prose and poetry sections we did during the quarter. Students had to answer any two in each question.

There were two questions with four items in each based on the content of the prose and poetry sections which had to be answered from memory of the content. Students had to answer any two in each section.

This was followed by a question with four items from the Supplementary Reader and two questions had to be answered.

Next was a grammar question with gap-filling in the following areas: articles, prepositions and tense-forms of verbs; transformation from active voice to passive voice and direct to indirect speech and synthesis of simple sentences into compound or complex sentences. The sentences had to be taken from the textbook.

There was a writing section where they were asked to write on one out of three topics of general interest.

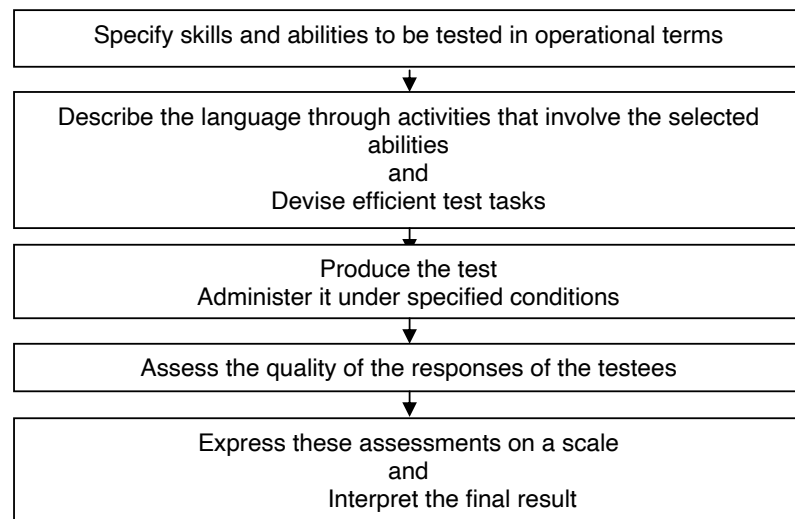
The weighting for Questions 1-3 was 60% and for questions 4 and 5 which may be said to be language-based, it was 40%.

I later worked in a Polytechnic where there was no prescribed English textbook but learners were tested on what they learnt during the course: skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking and the grammar and vocabulary related to their subject areas. To set the question paper, I had to:

- specify the skills and sub-skills that a particular group needed and were trained in,
- specify the functions that they would need to perform in their other subjects and later their fields of work,
- select texts and tasks similar to what they did during the course but different, to bring out their skills.
- prepare a scoring key and
- identify an external examiner to assess the responses.

You can see the difference between the stages in the setting of the two question papers and decide which procedure is more valid for testing language ability. What is the procedure you adopt? Is it similar to the first or the second of the two described above?

Now let us put down the stages in making a language test:
The various activities involved in preparing and using a test may be organized into five major stages which can be represented diagrammatically as follows:



We will discuss each of these in detail in the blocks devoted to the testing of the skills and the elements of language. We will explain these briefly here.

1.4.1 What skills and abilities do you test?

The first thing you have to do when planning a test is to **define its scope**. Language ability is a very broad and complex area and you need to identify what exactly you are looking for. Unlike content areas, where knowledge of content is tested, language ability refers to how well a person can understand and communicate in a language in various domains, for various purposes and at various levels.

There are two ways of doing this. The first one, which probably you thought of, is identifying the particular language elements or skills, such as grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing etc.

The second way of looking at it is to specify what exactly they need to do with language. For example: *read instructions and follow them*, or *summarise a text*, or *use signposting devices in discourse* etc. These are called behavioural objectives. They do not deal with the knowledge of content but the ability to use language for particular purposes. This relates to ‘language performance’ and not ‘knowledge *about* language’.

In order to do this, you need to specify

- the particular levels of the learners’ abilities,
- the contexts of target language use,
- the purposes for which they have to use language and
- the genres that will serve these purposes.

For example, you cannot call it ‘composition-writing’ and give the same kind of test from Class VI to Class XII, varying only the topic according to the age or level.

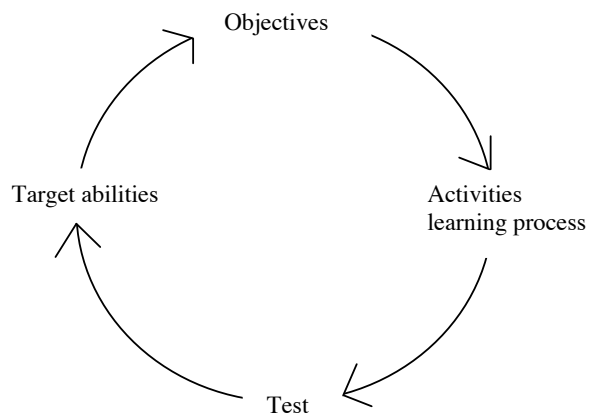
Our specification of abilities may be somewhat like this:
ability to describe the physical features of a place
ability to narrate events in sequence

At the beginning of a course of instruction, you will make a list of the kinds of things that learners have to use the language for (Target Language Use) and devise a set of activities that will help them get this ability. For the end-of-the course test you will select the most representative of these activities and devise your tasks.

1.4.2 What language activities will elicit the ability or skill?

Let us assume that you have identified and described the ability that you are interested in. You will next have to describe relevant activities that will exemplify or elicit this skill. For example, if you are interested in the ability of giving instructions orally or in writing, the task you will set will elicit instructions from the learner in the respective mode.

Activities serve as the link between objectives and the learning process. Learning takes place through activities and learners get the skills by doing the activities. The activities that are done in class then serve as a guide to what needs to be tested. A test item should be related to a particular target ability. The aim of a test item is to make the task specific and efficient.



You have devised a task to elicit a particular ability. Next, you need to check whether the item really tests what it is supposed to test. Suppose, you wish to know if a learner knows how to scan for information in a tourist brochure, then the test task that you set will ask for the information. If a person has the ability to read and retrieve particular pieces of information, he or she may be said to have the ability. If a person is not able to get the information, he or she does not have the ability. The test task should clearly and decidedly tell us if the ability exists or not. This is called *validity*. We will discuss validity in detail in **Unit 3** of this block.

While constructing a valid test task you will also have to select a suitable test format or a combination of formats. The format, say, *gap-filling*, or *multiple-choice* has to serve the purpose of eliciting the specific ability.

1.4.3 How do you produce the test instrument and administer it?

You will have a pool of items for the various skills and abilities that you have used for your course of instruction. You now need to select items that you will need for the test. Then you need to put them into appropriate sections and sequence the sections. You need to allocate time for the various sections. When allocating time you need to ensure that most examinees will be able to complete the test in the allotted time.

The physical appearance of the test paper also matters. The questions should be set clearly and organised well.

A set of instructions to the examinees is one of the important features of the 'finished' test. Instructions must be clear and complete. There are two kinds of instructions: general instructions for the whole question paper and specific instructions for each question.

Administration of the test is as important as the test paper itself. The conditions for writing the test must be conducive to bringing out the best from each testee. Comfortable seating arrangements, proper acoustic conditions, opportunity to get doubts regarding instructions clarified, quality of answer sheets, distribution of test papers on time and collecting them back at the end of the allocated time – all affect the *reliability* of the test.

1.4.4 How do you assess the quality of the response?

Once the test paper is set, administered and responses collected, you need to assess the performance. If the test paper is of the conventional essay type, a great deal of subjectivity is involved in the assessment. That is, Examiner A may give the answer 7/10 while examiner B may give the same answer 4/10.

Even when the test is objective in nature and there is only one definite right answer to each question, the process of arriving at what the right answer is can be subjective. Hence, a team of examiners/teachers should collectively decide upon the right answer. They should also ensure that the test item itself is not ambiguous.

Whether the test is essay type or objective type, a scoring key or examiner's guide is necessary to ensure what is called *inter-rater reliability*.

The scoring key should spell out fairly clearly what is the one (or more than one) acceptable response to each item. It is the *criterion of adequacy* that is applied to the responses elicited by each item, rather than the marks to be awarded, that constitutes the essence of the scoring key.

The process of preparing such a key is an important stage in test construction. In addition to identifying the behavior or ability to be demonstrated, you should also specify the expected standard of response in the syllabus document under course objectives.

So even before you make the test item, you must clearly state the standards of adequacy of the various abilities tested. The scoring key in its final form, however, can be prepared only after all the items have been prepared, ordered and numbered.

You must remember that the key is for the convenience of the scorer. Questions such as: "Why is this response unacceptable for students of this level?" "What quality of response for a short answer will fetch it 2/5 and not 4/5," are answered at the planning stage by the test constructor.

1.4.5 How do you express an ability as a numerical score?

As a teacher, you are constantly dealing with marks or scores. If a learner gets 66% in an English test what does it tell you about his/her ability? If the same learner gets 66% in mathematics what inference will you draw?

So you can see that a raw score by itself does not indicate much. You need to interpret the score based on various assumptions you have regarding what a good score is in a particular subject. The score is also relative in terms of the progress that the learner has made from his/her score on an earlier test.

Thus evaluation would also involve the interpretations of the test scores and relating them to what levels of ability they really imply.

We end this section here. We will deal with each of these issues in detail in **Unit 2** of this block.

Review question II

Arrange the following steps in language testing in sequence:

- a. Assessing quality of responses
- b. Devising the test paper
- c. Specifying the skills/abilities to be tested
- d. Assigning scores to responses
- e. Selecting activities that will elicit particular abilities
- f. Administering the test
- g. Interpreting test results

The correct sequence is

1 _____

1.5 Purposes of testing and kinds of tests

In **Section 1.2** of this unit, we discussed some of the broad aims and purposes of testing. We stated that we seek information on the level of language ability of the learners, the extent of learning that they have achieved during the course, their strengths and weaknesses and at which stage of language instruction/learning they can be placed.

This has been summarised by Arthur Hughes as follows:

- To measure language proficiency
- To discover how successful students have been in achieving the objectives of a course of study
- To diagnose students' strengths and weaknesses, to identify what they know and what they do not know.
- To assist placement of students by identifying the stage or part of a teaching programme

(Hughes, 2010: 8)

Based on each of these purposes, tests can be broadly classified as

- Proficiency
- Achievement
- Diagnostic
- Placement

We will describe them briefly here.

1.5.1 Proficiency tests

We will begin with a brief discussion of what the term *language proficiency* means. Language proficiency is the ability to do things in language in the real world. It implies the ability to function effectively through language for real-life communication purposes. It involves the balanced development of all the four skills of language: ability to interact orally as well as read and write academic, occupational and general texts.

The *Council of Europe Framework* (CEF) describes three levels of language users: *the basic user*, *the independent user* and *the proficient user*. Each of these levels has two sub-levels.

You will find it interesting to read how the two levels of the *proficient user*, C1 and C2 are described:

C2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from various spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. ▪ Can express him/herself spontaneously very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
C1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognize implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.

Of course, not all your learners will be able to come up to this level. The aim of language instruction in second language situations is to ensure that learners come up to at least the *independent user level*.

This is the description of the two stages of the *independent user level*:

B 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialization. ▪ Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. ▪ Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
B 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered at work, school, leisure, etc. ▪ Can deal with most situations likely to arise while travelling in an area where the language is spoken. ▪ Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. ▪ Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

You might be rating yourself now against these scales. That, however, would be a subjective rating. Tests will indicate exactly what you can do and what you cannot. (You can visit the website of CEF to read the description of the other levels.)

The aim of a proficiency test is to measure a person's level of language ability. It is not based on the content of any course of instruction. It aims to find out what a person is able to do in the language.

Employers and higher education authorities base their selection decisions on the candidate's level of proficiency in the language they have to function in. The test is thus of importance to the

external world. It helps everyone understand where a particular candidate stands in language ability.

Large-scale standardised tests like the IELTS exam, the TOEFL, Bank recruitment examinations, Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), etc., are all proficiency tests. The scores on these tests by themselves do not indicate much. It is the score that a particular institution or employer thinks is acceptable for admitting the student to a course of higher education or an organization that is important. A person with a score of say, 235/300 may be selected one year. Another candidate with the same score may not be selected the next year, because there may be a larger number of candidates scoring higher than that in that year.

A proficiency test is thus a test of language ability in relation to academic, occupational and social requirements. It is not based on any syllabus or course of instruction. An engineering graduate, a commerce graduate, a medical professional, a management executive may all have to take the same test for entry into the professional or academic stream of a country.

The content of the test has a reading comprehension section, a writing section, grammar and vocabulary sections and where feasible, listening and speaking components. There are neither any prescribed textbooks nor any specific course of instruction. All that is accessible to the examinees are past question papers and sample test items.

1.5.2 Achievement tests

An *achievement test* is what we are familiar with in the school system. The test at the end of a semester or a module is based on what is learnt during that period. It is based on the syllabus, the term's work and the course book. It is an internal matter of the class or institution. The aim of the teacher is to know whether the learners have learnt what was taught. It is closely related to what learners have studied during the course.

This does not mean that language achievement tests do not test proficiency. Communicative language testing makes school courses more geared to proficiency goals. If you look at the recent CBSE English test papers, a major part is oriented towards testing language use. The difference between this and proficiency testing is that learners are prepared during instruction in doing the test tasks which in turn approximate to real world tasks.

Suppose in a particular module we propose to deal with identifying topic sentences, identifying main and supporting ideas, noting down the main points of a text and summarising, the test paper can have items based on these. Although these tasks are aspects of proficiency, the test can be called an achievement test because those particular skills have been gained through instruction in that module.

Generally, in our contexts, achievement tests are based on the syllabus content. You must remember that the syllabus has objectives and materials for the realisation of the objectives. If the test is based on the objectives, there is a fair chance that the test results will be more valid than if they are based on the materials, that is, the content of the textbook.

We said that in order to be valid and reliable, achievement should be based on objectives. This implies that the objectives should be clearly stated; that the selection of materials should correlate to the objectives and that the skills, abilities that are specified in the objectives should be developed through the prescribed texts. The teacher's role is to mediate between the text and the learners in a way that the objectives are realised.

Progress achievement tests

As a teacher in the classroom, you are also interested in knowing about the progress made by individual learners in language ability. The information obtained from the term-end examinations is of importance to parents, school authorities and the learners themselves. In the classroom, you wish to see how much individual learners as well as the whole class respond to teaching and move ahead. Class tests and classroom-based evaluation are ongoing and give you insights into the learning process and help you modify your instructions according to the feedback you receive. These tests also help you to enable your students see their weaknesses and strengths and take your help in further learning. These are called *progress tests*.

1.5.3 Diagnostic tests

A sugar test tells you whether your blood sugar level is within the normal range or not. If it is not within the normal range, your physician advises you on the remedial steps you should take. The test has helped the physician diagnose the problem.

We can similarly have tests designed specifically to ascertain whether a learner or a group of learners has or has not acquired a particular aspect of language. It could be something like subject-verb agreement or the use of modals. This would require a large number of test items involving a variety of contexts and domains of language use.

Generally, a proficiency test is used for diagnostic purposes. The purpose of a diagnostic test is to identify learners' strengths and weaknesses so that further instruction can be geared to that.

1.5.4 Placement tests

You must be quite familiar with large classes of mixed ability students. If the language ability levels are very divergent we might want to divide them into sub-groups based on their level of ability.

Placement tests help us to determine the levels of learners and put them in two or three groups in order to facilitate the learning process.

Admissions to different levels of instruction can be based on performance at entry-level tests that clearly reflect the levels of learners.

Review question III

Match the purposes of language testing in **Box A** with the kinds of tests in **Box B**.

A	B
1. To discover how successful students have been in achieving the objectives of a course of study	a. Proficiency
2. To diagnose students' strengths and weaknesses, by identifying what they know and what they do not know	b. Achievement
3. To see the progress that learners have made with learning	c. Placement
4. To assist placement of students by identifying the stage or part of a teaching programme	d. Diagnostic
5. To measure language proficiency	e. Progress

We end this unit here. What we have tried to do in this unit is to give you a general understanding about the aims and purposes of

language testing and what it involves. We will take up the points discussed here in the succeeding units.

1.6 Summary

In this introductory unit to testing language and literature, we first discussed the role of evaluation in instruction. This was followed by the reasons for testing language ability. We then discussed the what of testing or the content of language testing. This led to the kinds of tests to match the purposes of testing.

The concepts introduced here will be elaborated in the units that follow. The two blocks that follow this block will expand upon these concepts in relation to the tests for the various skills and elements of language. The last block will discuss the details of scoring and interpretation.

1.7 Sources

- Douglas, Dan. 2011. *Understanding Language Testing*. Chennai: Hodder Education. (South Asian Edition)
- Hughes, Arthur. 2010. *Testing for Language Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (South Asian Edition based on Hughes, 2003 revised edition).

1.8 Answers to review questions

Review question I

1,3,4,7,8,9,10

Review question II

c,e,b,f,a,d,g

Review question III

1b 2d 3e 4c 5a