

Implementing Authentic Assessment: One Program's Perspective

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The term authentic assessment is a very broad term and its interpretation varies from program to program. Feedback and evaluation are important components of authentic assessment.

The International Language Institute of MA, Inc. (ILI) includes oral feedback and written weekly, mid-term and final evaluations as part of its tools to measure learner progress and satisfaction with the program. ILI has used this type of assessment since it began in 1984. The school has found that listening to what our learners have to say about their progress and their program ensures that they have input into the curriculum, that our program is meeting our learners' different needs/goals and that overall program quality is consistently being challenged to improve.

Where do you start if you're thinking about incorporating authentic assessment in your program? This article looks at how one school uses authentic assessment and suggests ways to make it more accessible, and hopefully more successful, for programs and teachers.

One Example: Oral Feedback

When teachers and programs consider using authentic assessment, they should first focus on the theoretical background of authentic assessment. We need to understand why we are asking learners about their satisfaction with the class and their progress before we go into the classroom armed with assessment tools. Reading and discussing articles, talking to people in the field who are already working with authentic assessment, and analyzing the variety of assessment tools available provides time for processing and internalizing the idea of authentic assessment. It also allows time for teachers to find/create tools that are appropriate to use with their learners.

Once teachers have a philosophical background in authentic assessment, they can start doing one type of authentic assessment called oral feedback. Asking learners about their progress and satisfaction with the program enables learners to begin thinking about how they learn and what works best for them. It also puts the responsibility on the learners to ensure that the program is meeting their needs. Daily oral feedback, sometimes after specific activities, usually at the end of class, is essential and has to be consistent. Oral feedback also needs to happen at the end of each week so learners can reflect on what they learned in the past week and what they need to focus on in the coming weeks.

Feeling comfortable about doing oral feedback with learners is not always an easy task. At the beginning there usually seems to be resistance by both teachers and learners. Teachers are uneasy about being put into a vulnerable position and learners question why a teacher is asking them about what they think of the class.

A teacher new to authentic assessment had attended a workshop at ILI on authentic assessment and decided to try oral feedback in her class the next week. She said that the first three days she felt resistance from the students and wanted to give up. Her class was going well, and the students weren't forthcoming with suggestions for improving the class. But she decided to continue doing oral feedback and was surprised to find that as time went on, students began to talk more about their progress and what they liked and disliked about the class.

Learners need to feel comfortable talking about the class, and they shouldn't feel like they are attacking the teacher if they do not like a particular activity. Teachers need to depersonalize the feedback sessions so that learners evaluate the actual class activities rather than the teacher. Once this routine is established, learners will feel more comfortable with giving feedback and move from "everything is fine" to "I would like to see....in the class."

One way to depersonalize feedback is to elicit from the learners a list of the class activities and record the list on the board. This gives the feedback session structure by allowing learners to talk about what was covered in the class before assessing the activities. Once the list is created, the teacher asks the learners to rate each activity according to enjoyment and value. A learner may have liked an activity, but doesn't feel that it helped them in the process of learning English. At ILI the rating system is done on a 1-5 numerical system: 1

being of little value or enjoyment and 5 being of high value or enjoyment. A learner can therefore rate an activity with a 5 for enjoyment and a 1 for value.

There are a number of ways that this activity can be conducted. It also depends on the level of the class. Beginning students can rate the activities based on a happy/unhappy face system, while advanced beginning and intermediate level learners can work in pairs and then present their ratings to another pair. Pair work also seems to help in the process of depersonalizing the activity.

Instead of asking learners to rate activities, teachers can also ask specific questions about an activity: What do you think about this activity? What did you learn from this activity? Would you like to see this activity again? This puts emphasis on the activity rather than the instructor. A teacher new to feedback asked her learners: "Did you enjoy the song that I chose?" The way this question is termed does not allow the learners to respond honestly and reflect on what they got out of the activity.

As teachers, we become very close to the activities that we choose, and at times we find it difficult to step back and look at the activity without becoming emotionally involved. One teacher had spent a long time preparing a particular activity. When it didn't go well, the teacher was disappointed. She felt that the activity wasn't successful because the students hadn't come to class prepared. When asked if she had done feedback, the teacher's response was that "she didn't have time." If she had done feedback, she might have found a different reason as to why the activity didn't go well. If we rely on feedback to help plan for future classes and to improve our teaching, we need to make time for feedback. Feedback is especially important after activities that don't go well.

If teachers elicit comments from learners about the class, they should use the learners' suggestions in the following classes. This validates the feedback sessions and makes it more meaningful for the learner.

Incorporating Authentic Assessment

ILLI has found that if teachers are to be successful with authentic assessment they must go through the following stages:

- Teacher is exposed to theoretical background of authentic assessment and the idea of eliciting feedback from learners
- Teacher practices oral feedback using a structured activity of having learners list the activities and rate them
- Teacher adapts process according to teacher style and learner needs
- Teacher feels “ownership” with oral feedback and is ready to go to the next step of authentic assessment

All stages should include time for reflection. The process takes time and the stages may occur at different rates with different teachers. As teachers become more comfortable with the process, learners also become more comfortable with the idea of talking about their progress and what they want in the program. ILI has found that as both learners and teachers become comfortable with oral feedback they seem to move into the area of written assessment and evaluation more easily. The consistency of talking about one’s progress seems to ease the transition to writing about one’s progress.

The following are some ideas that may make the process of adapting authentic assessment in your program a little easier.

Do’s and Don’ts

- Do provide readings about authentic assessment and provide time at staff meetings for people to discuss the pro’s and con’s of articles. Every program should have all volumes of Adventures in Assessment as it is an easy way to have a large collection of articles and tools to peruse.
- Do get a copy of the Tool Kit* and look at other tools that have been created in the field. Analyze tools to see if they could work in your program. Could you use this tool as is or would you have to adapt it? Does it make sense for you?
- Don’t expect that everyone is going to be as excited about authentic assessment as you are and embrace it immediately.

- Do contact people involved in authentic assessment to come talk with your program.
- Do try to observe people using authentic assessment tools before you try it on your own.
- Don't start authentic assessment by using lengthy assessment tools. Start off by doing something like oral feedback in the class.
- Do focus on depersonalizing the assessment process. Learners should be commenting about the activity rather than whether they like the teacher.
- Do be prepared to spend more time than you thought in getting authentic assessment up and running in your program.

As ILI enters its second decade and looks back at all the written assessment tools that it has used, it appears that authentic assessment needs to be approached as a journey. Along the way we have created many assessment tools and discarded just as many. We also realize that there is never one assessment tool that works with all students and all teachers, and that tools to measure progress take a long time to evolve. (See Adventures in Assessment, Spring 1994: "Evolution of an Assessment Tool").

We know that the tools that we are using today will look different in a few years as the needs of learners change and teachers grow professionally. What we have also come to realize is that the actual tool to measure progress is important, but more important are the teachers that use the assessment tools. Teachers who are new to authentic assessment need time to be exposed to and process the concept of authentic assessment. It is necessary for both learners and teachers to have the time to reflect on what is going on in the class and what direction the class/teacher/program should take.

** The Tool Kit is a resource of assessment tools put together by ABE/ESL people in Massachusetts. The Tool Kit includes intake, ongoing and looking back assessment tools. It is available through SABES.*