How do you Measure Language Learning?

Language can appear like a wild, sprawling thing – 10s of 1000s of words colliding across lines of grammar, sentence structure, different pronunciations, slang, literary invention, collocation, group-speak, tech-speak, etc etc.

So, how to tame the beast? How to impose order on the inherent chaos? How to measure language learning?

As a learner, or perhaps an HR manager procuring learning for a company, clearly you want to know that you’re making progress, that the time and money you’re investing is not disappearing like so much hot air.


External Assessment

Measuring progress takes two forms, broadly speaking. The first is an externally assessed test, normally widely available and recognised internationally. Looks good on the CV. These tend to be fairly wide-ranging in terms of the language they test, covering a variety of language awareness and skills at increasing degrees of complexity. Most exams of this nature test general language ability or, to a lesser extent, business language skills.

Tests are administrated by large professional bodies such as Cambridge Assessment (IELTS, BULATS, PET, FCE), Trinity College for English (GESE, SEW), ETS (TOEFL, TOEIC) or the Ministry of Education in Spain (DELE), among many others. They have been subject to extensive research and testing to make sure they are as objective as possible.

Most have been pegged to the Common European Framework of Reference, which divides language competence into 6 categories, from beginner to advanced, each one consisting of detailed descriptors based on a series of ‘can do’ statements. In order to ‘can do’, a learner will need a range of relevant language to fulfil on this, including appropriate vocabulary, grammar, understanding and communicative skills. And it is this language that forms the basis of an exam preparation course.

Internal Assessment

The second form of progress measurement is an internally-designed assessment of the content covered by a particular course. For most learners, they have quite specific reasons for learning their language of choice. Perhaps they’re looking for promotion, to relocate overseas, to build relationships with overseas clients and partners, invest in foreign climes, or get on better with the in-laws. This means the language they need to learn is quite specific and this should be reflected in the course design – input, materials, practice work, and training methodology.
As the language here is specific, the more generic exams mentioned earlier may not be particularly relevant, and working towards them will result in learners covering content they will probably not use in order to pass the test. As a result, it makes more sense for the course designer or trainer to set an assessment activity to measure progress. This can take various forms and can be matched to the learners’ specific requirements. Assessments can be a company presentation, a written report which is then discussed, or scenario role plays, for example.

Such assessment is ideal for short, targeted language courses, and also for on-going assessment. In the latter, regular learning reviews are very useful reflective exercises, allowing learners to think about what they have achieved to date and what there is to be done in the remainder of the course.

**Hybrid Testing**

In some cases, it is possible to design a syllabus for a more general exam so the content covered in order to pass the exam is relevant to the specific needs of the students. We recently designed a course for a hotel group, which took the key language themes of the Cambridge BULATS Business English exam and ensured that the language studied by participants was relevant to their work at the hotel, while simultaneously working towards achieving a high test score.

In this way, quite general Business English language such as ‘making appointments’, ‘discussing problems’, ‘giving instructions’, ‘health and safety’ and ‘describing products and services’ all had a hospitality theme. Business English study materials were re-purposed and then supplemented by hotel-specific materials, while the participants were able to relate their own experiences to the themes in the lessons.

Such a hybrid is not possible in every case, but shows that with some imagination, course participants can pass an internationally recognised language exam while focusing on the language they use at work, thus directly improving their performance.

**To Conclude**

To get the right assessment structure in place is important. Not only does it test progress, it also demonstrates which areas of language still need further work. In my mind, the more an assessment can focus on the specific language requirements of students, the better, as this allows a trainer to teach what really matters and what makes a difference in the lives of their students. If this can be mapped effectively to an externally recognised test, then great. However, if such a move involves shoehorning a syllabus into an assessment framework that doesn’t reflect learner needs, then this should be avoided and a more tailored test designed instead.

**About SLC**

Specialist Language Courses delivers tailor-made language courses to companies around the world. Language courses are designed to meet specific objectives. Progress is measured by how language learners work towards achieving those objectives. For more information on how this would work for you and your company, contact us today.