

Teaching and Testing

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Language teachers do a lot more testing of their students than they realize. This is especially true of beginning teachers. It is suggested here that what is needed is more teaching and less testing. Further, teachers need to be aware of when they are teaching and when they are testing.

This is not to imply that testing is of itself undesirable. Nor am I referring to regularly scheduled weekly quizzes, mid-term examinations, finals, etc. What is being discussed here is the testing that goes on during the daily lesson.

For example, if a teacher uses a drill exercise such as the following slot substitution practice, is this teaching or testing?

T: Mary had a little lamb. Goat.

Ss: Mary had a little goat. (Expected response.)

T: Sam.

Ss: Sam had a little goat.

T: Big.

Ss: Sam had a big goat.

I submit that this drill, if presented as above, is a test. It tests the students' ability to fit the cue words into the proper positions.

Instead of the above, suppose the teacher uses an approach such as this:

Class listen:

Mary had a little lamb.

Mary had a little goat.

Sam had a little goat.

Sam had a big goat. etc.

Now repeat these sentences after me:

Mary had a little lamb.

Mary had a little goat.

Sam had a little goat.

Sam had a big goat.

This is teaching. Notice that the teacher is presenting a live model for the students to hear. The students are being afforded the opportunity to hear the utterances many times. They are then given a chance to repeat the sentences in imitation of the

teacher. (It could be argued that even this is a form of testing, but for our purposes we won't consider it as such.) Finally, the test itself is taught. Then the students are tested to see if they can fit the words in the correct positions. A teaching situation has been built up to a testing one.

This teaching/testing dichotomy need not be restricted to pattern practice type exercises. The same rationale applies to pronunciation drills. Asking students during minimal pair exercise to indicate which word is being said before they have had adequate time to learn to hear the differences is surely another example of testing. Even if lists of minimal pairs are put on the chalkboard, the teacher indicates with his hand just which word it is he is saying. The students are given the opportunity of listening many, many times before being asked to discriminate one word from another in a testing situation.

How many times are students asked to listen to a particular line of a dialogue before they are called upon to repeat it? Have they heard it first so many times that it is ringing in their ears? Or has the teacher been content with a couple of modelings before starting the testing? (And isn't it a test of sorts to ask the students to repeat the line of a dialogue?)

There are too many failures in foreign language learning. Everyone has learned at least one language. Is it really so difficult to learn another? Perhaps the failures are due, in part, to too much testing and not enough teaching.

About the Author

Ted Plaister, at the time this article was published (1968), was Assistant Director of the English Language Institute at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Plaister, who first gained local fame for his humor (which was often as dry and biting as any desert storm), later wrote Developing Listening Comprehension for ESL Students (a.k.a. "The Kingdom of Kochen"), a text for which he will surely gain entry into TESOL's "Hall of Fame."