LINC Learning in Inclusive Classrooms

Foreign Language Module
Designing Inclusive Assessment

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C reating foreign language assessments that accurately measure what students have learned can be challenging. It is an even more daunting task to create assessments that remain accessible to today's diverse student populations while upholding the same standards for all students. Here we will explore how the principles of Universal Design can be applied to foreign language assessment.

What Is Assessment?

Assessment is any tool which is used to evaluate students, and must differentiate between students who have mastered the content and those who have not (Thurlow, Johnstone, & Ketterlin-Geller, 2008). Assessment results are used to make decisions, such as whether a student is making progress in learning assigned materials; these decisions result in consequences such as placing a student in a certain course, adjusting instruction, recommending that a student get additional tutoring, or even denying a student graduation (Thurlow et al., 2008). There are two types of assessments: *summative*, which certify competency and are used to compare a particular student's achievement against learning outcomes; and *formative*, which provide students with feedback on their achievement and seek to improve their performance and motivation. Assessments also come in a variety of formats: tests and quizzes done with pencil-and-paper or on a computer, rubrics, and peer- and self-evaluations, to name a few. Regardless of type and format, the use of assessments as decision-making tools means that they significantly affect a student's trajectory in a course. It is therefore vital that any barriers that stand in the way of a student's success on an assessment be thoughtfully considered and eliminated to the greatest extent possible.

Guidelines for Creating Inclusive Assessments

There are a few points which instructors should keep in mind when thinking about designing effective, accessible assessments. First, assessment is inherently selective: it is impossible to assess everything that students learn. Thus, instructors must consider the question *what do I want my students to know and be able to do as a result of instruction?* The assessment should then pertain to those particular skills or knowledge. As Ketterlin-Geller, Yovanoff, & Tindal

(2007) put it, designers must discriminate between the actual content they want to test and other nonconstruct information which may act as a barrier to students. In this vein, test designers also need to identify the skills which the assessment requires. Many skills – such as the ability to interpret diagrams or express knowledge clearly in writing – are unintentionally tested on assessments. These skills, known as *access skills* because they are necessary to access the required construct, can seriously limit some students' ability to demonstrate the knowledge that the instructor intends to assess. While access skills can be supported through specific accommodations for some students, incorporating the principles of Universal Design into assessments can minimize their impact for all students.

Second, it is important to align assessment with course objectives at the initial planning stage, rather than see it as an afterthought at the end of instruction. This gives the instructor time to consider how each objective may be assessed, and how each assessment may be tailored to meet the various needs of the student body. Expectations for assessment should be laid out clearly at the beginning of the course and guidelines made available to students. Furthermore, students should be tested in the same manner in which they were taught; the test should measure the skills or knowledge targeted by the teacher, not each student's ability to navigate a new format or instructions presented in an unfamiliar way.

Third, inclusive assessments provide students with multiple ways to demonstrate their knowledge. Just as the principles of Universal Design dictate that instructors teach in a way that makes material accessible to many learning styles, assessment should incorporate a variety of methods, such as tests, papers, presentations, portfolios, and group work. In addition, traditional tests will be more accessible if they include a variety of formats (short answer, essay, multiple choice, true/false). The use of information technology can also make traditional tests more accessible to students for whom writing is a barrier.

Burgstahler (2010) summarizes five methods that instructors can apply to practice inclusive assessment: *set clear expectations*, *provide multiple ways to demonstrate knowledge, test in the same manner in which you teach, monitor and adjust,* and *minimize time constraints when appropriate.* Of these five, we have discussed the first three, and the fifth is self-explanatory. The fourth involves the use of formative as well as summative assessment in a course. The teacher should constantly assess students informally through class discussion, listening in on pair or group work, etc., and adjust instruction accordingly.

Another list that may be useful is that provided by Thurlow et al. (2008), which details some steps that instructors can take to apply Universal Design principles to their assessments:

1. Clearly articulate the decisions you want to make about your students' skills and knowledge from the test or assessment.

2. Think about how students can best demonstrate their skills and knowledge in a way that will help you make decisions.

3. Identify the access skills needed to successfully interpret and respond to assessment items.

4. Design a task (test or assessment) that will allow you to make the decisions you want to make.

5. Explicitly state the expectations for students and which skills you will and will not be evaluating.

6. Design the scoring guide or rubric with the decisions in mind. Tell students what you are trying to measure.

Finally, both assessments and the guides or rubrics used to score them should be organized, neatly laid out, and legible. Font style and size should be consistent throughout the document. For traditional tests, sections should flow logically and single sections should be kept on one page wherever possible. The appearance of the assessment should not constitute a barrier to students.

Evaluating Sample Assessments

We will now examine a few sample assessments in light of the guidelines discussed above. The following samples are sections from traditional chapter tests for a college Spanish 200-level class. It is important to remember that although we will be looking at individual sections only, the test as a whole should adhere to the principles previously discussed. It is also necessary to keep in mind that traditional tests are only one kind of assessment, and that students should ideally have the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge using various other kinds. This discussion is simply meant to encourage thinking about creating and modifying assessments to be more inclusive.

Section 1: Grammar

F. El orden de los pronombres. *Conteste las preguntas, reemplazando los complementos directos e indirectos con pronombres cuando sea posible.* (10 puntos)

1. ¿Me puedes explicar el ejercicio otra vez?

_____

2. ¿Te doy estos documentos?

_____

3. ¿Les piden Juan y Alicia la paella a los camareros?

_____

4. ¿Le vais a dar un regalo a Isabel?

_____

5. ¿Nos prestan Uds. dinero para planear la fiesta?

_____

In this section, the knowledge tested is whether the student can 1) identify the direct and indirect object in a sentence, 2) choose the correct object pronouns which correspond to them, 3) know how to put the pronouns in the correct order, and 4) know when to change the pronouns in order to answer the question logically (in #1, for example, the question is "Can you explain the exercise to me again?"; the answer will be "I can explain <u>it</u> to <u>you</u>," not "to <u>me</u>."). However, there are certain access skills also demanded by this exercise. To succeed in this activity, students must also 1) understand and interpret the instructions correctly, 2) be able to write, and 3) be able to conjugate the verb in the correct person to answer the question logically.

Modifications can be made to this exercise to reduce the impact of each of these access skills, the first of which is interpreting the instructions. This task might be more difficult for the student than the teacher realizes: the first step tells the student to *answer the questions*, but the second step tells them to *replace* the objects with their pronouns – when in fact they will not necessarily be replacing them, but using completely different pronouns in order to create a logical answer. The instructions could be reworded to express more clearly what the instructor is looking for, for instance *Answer the questions using the most appropriate direct and indirect object pronouns.* In addition, for a complex, multiple-step activity such as this, a model may greatly help students understand what the instructions require of them. Another possibility, along slightly different lines, is to scaffold the activity so that students are required first to circle the objects in the sentences, then to identify the pronouns they would use to replace them, then to craft an answer with the logical pronouns, and adjust the instructions accordingly.

For students who are physically unable to write, there are the obvious options of using technology such as a computer, or taking the test orally. However, for many more students writing is physically possible but can be a major source of stress on a test: students with disorders affecting spelling or syntax, for example. One way of making the test more accessible to these students is simply giving them as much time as they need to take it, but it is also possible to modify closed-ended grammar activities like this one so that they require less writing. Since this exercise is testing object pronouns, we could change the questions so that they look like this:

1. ¿Me puede explicar el ejercicio otra vez?

   Sí, _____ _____ puedo explicar otra vez.

In this way the student must still know how to deal with pronouns, but is saved the work of writing out the entire answer. This modification also affects the third access skill, which is verb conjugation. Of course, some instructors may want to test their students' ability to answer the questions with the correct verb form, in which case this approach would not be feasible. Still, in that situation the instructions should be reworded more clearly or a model given so that students can be sure of what they are required to do.

Section 2: Listening

I. Comprensión auditiva. *Escuche la conversación entre Pía y Mónica y después indique si las frases son <u>ciertas</u> o <u>falsas</u>. Si es falsa, re-escriba la frase correctamente.* (5 puntos)

1. Pía no cree que la democracia funcione.   C   F

_____

2. Mónica no ha ido a votar porque no ha tenido tiempo.   C   F

_____

3. Pía piensa que el candidato liberal es mejor que el conservador. C   F

_____

4. Mónica cree que no es importante informarse antes de votar.   C   F

_____

5. Mónica finalmente decide ir a votar.   C   F

_____

In this section, the knowledge tested is whether a student can gather specific information from listening to a conversation between native speakers. The access skills necessary to succeed in the exercise are 1) reading comprehension, and 2) the ability to write. To lessen the impact of the first, sufficient time should be given so that all students, including those with disorders affecting reading and/or processing, can read over the instructions and the true/false statements and ask questions. The instructor may even choose to give the questions in advance, so that on the day of the assessment students will already be familiar with them and can concentrate on listening to the conversation. Dealing with the second skill requires thought on the part of the instructor – what exactly is accomplished by making students re-write the false sentences, and would changing the requirements of the exercise lessen its validity? If not, the instructor may choose to change the instructions so that the student merely needs to circle the part of the sentence that makes it false, or take out the revising portion of the requirements altogether. It is also worth mentioning that students should be allowed to listen to the conversation as many times as are necessary for comprehension. For many students this will fall within the time constraints of the class, but for others who have difficulties with listening such as processing disorders, it may require scheduling time outside of class. Here, also, the instructor could choose to have students listen to the conversation in advance, so that they are already familiar with it and can devote their concentration to processing and correctly answering the questions.

There are other ways to make a listening activity more accessible to all students, and particularly those who may have difficulty with listening comprehension. When it is possible, showing a videotape of the conversation will greatly aid students who are primarily visual learners. This is also a closer approximation of a real-life situation in which they might encounter the target language (except in the case of telephone conversations). A pre-listening warmup – providing background information such as the identity of Pía and Mónica as college students who are having lunch together, and the fact that it is election day, and then asking students to think about

what Pía and Mónica might be discussing – may also be very helpful, particularly if this is a practice commonly used during listening exercises in class.

Summary

Since assessments allow teachers to make decisions about their students, it is important that the assessments be fair and accessible to a wide variety of students while still maintaining the same standards for all. There are many ways to create inclusive assessment; but the main guidelines to keep in mind are 1) evaluate each assessment and, as much as possible, eliminate the nonconstruct information and skills which may present a barrier to students; 2) plan assessments from the beginning of a course, in accordance with how material is presented in class; and 3) use a variety of types of assessments to allow students diverse ways of showing knowledge. The sample test sections here have offered suggestions on how to think about re-evaluating traditional tests, and that thinking should extend to other types of assessments as well.

References

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