

¡VIVA EL ESPAÑOL! ASSESSMENT

Assessment and evaluation of students' progress in a second language play an important part in sustaining the enthusiasm for language learning, and offer you vital feedback necessary for tailoring your teaching to the needs of individual learners. In second-language learning, because students are constantly being asked to produce responses or react to communicative stimuli, there are frequent opportunities for assessment. However, because of the nature of communication and language production, there are different strategies required for assessment and evaluation. The *¡Viva el español!* program offers you frequent, creative opportunities and ideas for carrying out these vital functions.

Types of Assessment

Assessment in second-language learning needs to operate at a number of different levels, because of the many layers of skills and proficiencies that are being acquired, and that thus need to be assessed and evaluated. The types of assessment fall into three major categories: proficiency, achievement, and prochievement. Furthermore, each of these categories can be assessed through both formal and informal means.

Proficiency Assessment

Since the goal of our language teaching is to develop communicative proficiency in students, we must find ways to assess that proficiency. Proficiency assessment seeks to determine what students can do with the language they've been acquiring, and to what extent they can transfer that language into real-life settings that require them to both receive and give information—the act of communication. The emphasis in proficiency assessment is on performance.

There is not always a “right” answer, which can make language assessment difficult at times. For example, there may be several ways in which a student could respond to a given question or situation, each of which is appropriate. Students may give you answers you

don't expect, but that still respond directly to the question or situation you've posed. Students may also give responses that are imperfect on a structural or fluency level, but that nevertheless communicate a message that is understandable and appropriate to the requirements of the setting. Proficiency must be looked at in a global, holistic way. You must constantly ask yourself the question, “Did I understand the message the student was trying to convey?”—and you must remain open and flexible in assessing what your students produce.

You should be aware that proficiency assessment can be very time-consuming, because it requires interaction with individual students or groups of students. For this reason, you may want to spread your assessments out over the entire course of the lesson, working your way through the class. Don't worry that some students will have had more opportunity to prepare for the assessment because they've had additional days of instruction. Language proficiency is not delineated with clear milestones, but is instead an evolutionary, holistic process that does not change dramatically from one day to the next.

Achievement Assessment

Achievement assessment looks at what students know, rather than at what they can do. Unlike proficiency assessment, achievement assessment generally has answers that are right or wrong, and is relatively objective. It requires students to demonstrate retention of previously learned content material. In the case of language learning, achievement assessment can tell you whether students have learned specific vocabulary items, or whether they know accurate endings for a verb or an adjective. It is much easier to set objectives and to evaluate progress in this area. Historically, this sort of assessment has been the mainstay of language testing. As our goals have changed, achievement testing has taken on less importance, but it remains an important part of the overall assessment of student progress.

Prochievement Assessment

Prochievement is a word that describes a type of assessment that combines characteristics of both proficiency and achievement assessments. It asks students to demonstrate what they know in a meaningful context. Where traditional achievement testing has asked students to respond to isolated items, prochievement testing ties the items together in some sort of situation. You are still asking students to tell you what they know, and there are still right and wrong answers, but you come much closer to simulating communicative use of language. Prochievement assessment may also allow students to respond within a *range* of correct answers—i.e., there may be two or three acceptable responses to an item, but still there is an objectively “right” way of answering. Many of the activities and exercises in the Student Edition follow this model and lend themselves to assessment opportunities.

Formal vs. Informal Assessment

Each of the categories listed above can be assessed either formally or informally. In the case of formal assessment, students generally should be made aware that they are being assessed, and also be given some opportunity to prepare. It is important to give formal assessments regularly, though not so frequently that they become burdensome to you or your students. Formal assessments tend to create anxiety in many students, and in some cases, may actually hinder the learning process. You should try to help the students understand your goals in assessing them, and make efforts to lower the stress surrounding this sort of testing. Avoid comparing students directly. Create an atmosphere in which individual students see formal testing as something between you and them, designed to help them, rather than to rank them. Formal assessment should usually result in some sort of feedback to the learner concerning performance so that the assessment does not serve as an end in itself, but rather as a tool for aiding the learner in understanding and improving. Suggestions for scoring or otherwise quantifying performance on formal assessments are discussed later in this section.

Informal assessments can be spontaneous, and may be carried out without the students’ awareness. This sort of assessment does not necessarily result in a score or quantifiable outcome, but will still provide valuable information for both you and your students. Informal assessment should take place as frequently as practical. It may be as simple as taking note of individual, pair, or group oral performance on an activity as you walk around the room, reading over written activities, or looking over drawings and posters that arise out of an activity. Assessment might also be more intentional, coming at the end of a presentation or sequence of practice set of questions. Almost every activity in the text will lend itself to informal assessment.