

Testing Tips

Will my assessment work?

Victoria Nier, Center for Applied Linguistics



This month's Testing Tips answers a question from a university-level Arabic teacher. She recently attended a workshop on designing assessments for her students and left the workshop feeling confident in the assessment tasks she'd developed and excited to implement them. Back in the classroom, however, she was beginning to have some doubts. Would her assessments actually work?

The answer to this question is more than a simple yes or no because a lot of elements go into making an assessment “work.” One way of interpreting this question is to ask whether the assessment is really measuring what it was designed to measure – testers use the word validity to talk about this concept. Another interpretation might focus on whether the assessment works consistently over time and across different implementation situations – testers refer to these issues as relating to an assessment's reliability. Still other ways of defining working might focus on whether the assessment is actually practical to implement and whether it has a positive impact. These issues can all be addressed through **trialing**, or trying out the assessment with students before using the results for grading, placement, or to make other decisions. Let's look at each of these issues in turn.

Validity To figure out whether an assessment is measuring what it's supposed to and providing the information you want, start by making sure you have clearly thought out what you want to know, why you want to know it, how your assessment will give you the information you want, and what you will do with that information. It can be helpful to write this down and refer to your notes as you design the assessment. When trialing, you should take note of any issues that arise, refer back to your planning documents, and modify as necessary. You might consider whether or not the students thought the test was fair during the trial, and if their trial responses matched your expectations.

Reliability To determine if your assessment can be implemented consistently, you should also use a combination of planning and trialing. The more detailed your administration instructions, the easier it will be to make sure you implement the assessment the same way each time. You should also provide detailed instructions to students to help ensure that they understand what they need to do complete the assessment tasks the way you intended. Similarly, detailed rating instructions will help to ensure a systematic approach to rating the assessment. All of this documentation will also help someone else to administer the assessment in your stead and get similar results. Trialing will help you evaluate whether your assessment is being implemented in a consistent fashion.

Practicality and Impact. When investigating whether your assessment works in terms of practicality and impact, think ahead and plan for the effects, both positive and negative, that the assessment might have on your students and other stakeholders. During trials and the actual test use you can see how the assessment is working in practice. It is important to consider whether you have the required resources such as time to administer and rate the assessment, technological tools, and physical space, or if the assessment needs to be adjusted. Over time, think critically about what effect the assessment has on students.

It may seem like it takes a lot of time to plan and document all of your questions and try out an assessment before using it to make interpretations and decisions about your students. But as teachers we know that careful planning is the key to success – it even allows us more flexibility to adjust when unexpected issues arise. Further, planning for assessment in this way helps us grow as reflective teachers and, if we involve our students in the process, it gives them a voice.

As you can see, whether an assessment “works” isn’t a simple question – but it’s definitely one worth asking!

If you have a question about language assessment, submit it for a future **Ask a Tester** column by sending an email to opat@cal.org with the subject line Ask a Tester.