how to ... do informal testing

1   What is informal testing? Why do it?

There is a difference between **formal** and **informal** tests.
With a formal test:

- learners generally know the test is going to happen, so they can revise for it

- learners do it alone without external help, although dictionaries may be allowed in certain circumstances

- it is not marked by learners themselves, but by the teacher or other authority

- it has a mark or grade which usually carries some significance, e.g. to determine whether a student can enter a class or move up to the next class.

Formal tests are usually carried out at the end of a period of study, e.g. each term or year, and possibly at the end of each week or unit of the coursebook. But they don't have to be carried out formally. The same test can be done with no prior notice, by learners working individually or in pairs, marking their own answers, and with no particular status attached to the mark or grade. A formal test has now become an informal test.

Furthermore, there are many other ways in which you as the teacher are engaged in informal testing. Here are just a handful of examples:

- concept questions to check understanding of a language point (see *p.150*)

- comprehension questions to check understanding of a spoken or written text

- oral drills to test language forms and check pronunciation

- gap-fill exercises (and the like) to test grammar and lexis

- even controlled speaking exercises allow informal testing of language forms, concepts, and use.

the teacher

In other words, informal testing is taking place at many different stages in every lesson as part of the most common everyday classroom procedures. From your point of view, it provides <u>continuous insights</u> as to what the students have understood and learned, and this knowledge is essential in helping you to decide whether you can or should move on to the next stage in the lesson. And if the testing identifies a

problem, you know you need a solution: you can retrace your steps and repeat a procedure; perhaps look at the problem in a different and possibly more effective way; or make a note of something that will need to be recycled and revised at a later date. This can be shown diagrammatically, e.g.

language input > check / test understanding
> move on > possible recycling > test understanding
> remedial teaching > test understanding > move on

Informal testing also gives you <u>feedback</u> on your own teaching. You shouldn't assume that if certain learners haven't understood something, it's your fault (any more than you should assume that if they have learnt something it is because of you). However, if you become aware that the majority of the class is having difficulty with a new concept, this information helps you to rethink your teaching approach.

the learner

Informal testing enables learners to <u>check</u> if they have understood something, and it helps them to see the <u>progress</u> they are making, which is obviously vital for their motivation. For certain learners, formal or informal testing may be needed to provide external motivation where internal motivation is lacking, while for others, it can serve as a useful reminder that language studied is not the same thing as language learnt. Successful language learning does demand recycling and revision, and informal classroom testing is a vital part of that process.

A glance back at the examples of test types opposite also illustrates the important role that informal testing plays in fostering communication. All the techniques mentioned set up interaction of some sort, either between teacher and learner, or between learners themselves.

> **think!**[1]
> Carry out a quick piece of informal testing on yourself. Cover the section above, and note down:
> - three ways in which formal and informal tests are different
> - three examples of informal testing in the classroom
> - two reasons why teachers and learners need informal testing.
>
> Has this informal test given you any useful feedback?

2   Who tests?

Traditionally, the <u>teacher</u> is viewed as the authority figure in the class who tests learners either formally or informally. You are usually in the best position to assess whether the group as a whole, as well as individuals in the class, have all understood new concepts and can manipulate forms; and you have both the teaching techniques and the language skills to do this informal testing most efficiently. Nevertheless, learners are sometimes very aware of each others' difficulties, and in many situations they can effectively <u>test each other</u> informally. Equally they can <u>test themselves</u>.

learners testing each other

You will find a number of **test your partner** activities throughout the **student's book**, as in this example, where learners have to decide whether the verbs are followed by *-ing* form or infinitive.

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5 Put these verbs / phrases in the correct place in the table.

keep	give up	be willing to	get used to
used to	practise	finish	mind
try	be prepared to	remember	regret
start	look forward to	take up	tend

test your partner

– *Practise.*

– *Practise doing.*

– *That's right.*

from upper-intermediate **student's book**, unit one *p.11*.

There are several benefits when learners test each other in pairs:

– more student-student interaction is created
– learners are in a position to check what they have learnt in a less stressful and less exposed context
– it leaves you free to monitor the pairs and assess how well the target language is being used
– it allows you to help individuals in areas where less peer correction takes place, e.g. pronunciation.

Activities where learners have to match definitions or illustrations with vocabulary items lend themselves to a peer testing stage, once the correct meanings have been established (see the example activity from the **student's book** below).

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1 Match phrases 1 to 6 with responses a to f with a similar meaning. Put the ⓘ symbol next to the two most informal phrases.

1 Did you **get very angry**?

2 Did you **get your own back**?

3 Did you **quarrel** /ˈkwɒrəl/ **with** your sister?

4 Did you **shout abuse** /əˈbjuːs/?

5 Did you **control your temper**?

6 Did you **find it irritating**?

a Yes, I **swore** /swɔː/ **at** him.

b Yes, I **completely lost my temper**.

c Yes, it **got on my nerves**.

d Yes, I **got my revenge** /rɪˈvenʒ/.

e Yes, we **had a big row** /raʊ/.

f Yes, I managed to **keep calm**.

from upper-intermediate **student's book**, unit eight *p.92*.

One learner in each pair (the 'tester') uses the exercise to test their partner, so has the answers which the 'testee' cannot see. Learners can then swap and repeat the exercise. They can therefore support each other, give clues, feedback, and correction.

If you are in favour of the use of the mother tongue in class, there is no reason why learners in a monolingual context shouldn't test each other using **translation** (see *p.150*).

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try it out sentence transformations

1 Divide your class into two groups: A and B. Give all the As a set of six sentence transformations to do, such as:

Did you enjoy yourselves last night?
Did you have _____?
I last saw Jimmy in 1998.
I haven't _____.

(You will find examples of these in grammar practice books, and a similar type of exercise with key words in First Certificate, Paper 3.)

Give Bs a different set of transformations to do.

2 When they have finished, go over the answers with each group separately, or give each group a photocopy of the answers (but don't go over all the answers as a class).

3 Form A and B pairs. A should read their first sentence, with the beginning of the transformation to their partner, who has to do the transformation orally without looking at A's paper. If B says something different from the correct answer, A should write it down. Do all of A's sentences, then swap, and B reads their sentences for A to transform.

4 At the end, the pairs look at any differences in their answers together to decide whether they are possible answers.

5 Have a plenary to clear up any differences. Sometimes more than one transformation is possible.

Students find the oral exercise very challenging, and the activity is a useful way to revise the use of grammatical structures and vocabulary.

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learners testing themselves

There are many ways in **natural English** in which learners can test themselves in and out of class. Here are some examples:

– In the **glossary** activities accompanying texts, learners have to make guesses about unknown words in context. They can then use a dictionary to check, which encourages them to use a productive learning strategy built upon self-testing.

– In their own time, learners can test themselves on grammar. For example, they can study a section of grammar in the **language reference** then cover the left-hand side of the page and do the grammar exercise on the right (**cover & check** exercises). They can repeat these exercises several times.

– The **teacher's book** includes a wordlist for each unit. You can photocopy this for learners to test themselves on key vocabulary in the unit.

– At the end of each unit, there is a section called **test yourself!** This is an opportunity for learners to test themselves on some of the key language in the unit. (Equally, you could administer and mark this which would make it a formal test.)

The **workbook** with answer keys can obviously be used as a self-testing device. If you set exercises for homework, learners can check their own answers, and then rather than spending class time going over them, learners can take the opportunity to ask about the examples they found difficult.

3   Testing language informally

When introducing or revising new language, teachers draw on a range of techniques for checking learning, some of which are listed below. The ones you choose to use will obviously depend on several factors. Which is the simplest way to check this particular item? Which techniques work best with your class? Which are feasible with your class? Translation, for instance, is unlikely in a multilingual context.

You may have other ways of testing informally too. It is worth noting that many of these techniques can both teach and test, depending on when and how they are used. Timelines, for example, can be used to explain a concept, or to test one.

translation

Imagine this scene: you are teaching a class of Spanish speakers and the phrase *I could eat a horse!* comes up in a lesson. The teacher explains that this is an idiom which means *I'm very hungry*, and the meaning is not literal; it is an exaggeration. She asks the class for a translation. One says, *Tengo un hambre de lobo* (i.e. hunger of a wolf – an equivalent idiom) and the others nod in agreement and note it down.

Here, you have a piece of language, explained in English then tested through the mother tongue. It is a quick, time-saving technique, and you are satisfied that everyone has grasped the meaning accurately.

It is obvious that all language learners automatically search for equivalents. For low level learners this is appropriate and understandable, but as learners become more proficient they are less reliant on translation even though they may still find it reassuring to find an equivalent in their mother tongue.

The use of L1 for checking understanding is certainly useful if applied in moderation. Carried to extremes, though, it can have drawbacks.

- Where translation is the **only** means of testing, learners are missing the opportunity to process language through English itself.
- Constant use of translation into the mother tongue may lead to a classroom in which very little at all happens in English, which is clearly not desirable.
- Learners can develop an obsession with finding one-to-one equivalents, which can be frustrating.
- In multilingual classrooms, the use of the mother tongue can set up tensions, especially if you have a dominant group of one nationality who shout translations across the room, making other learners feel excluded.

Translation as a means of informal testing has been out of favour for some time, but used wisely it is a very effective tool.

concept questions

One way of checking understanding without resorting to the learners' mother tongue is by using 'concept questions'. These focus on the meaning of grammatical structures or vocabulary items. They are used alongside specific examples, and well-chosen questions are an effective way of assessing whether learners have grasped a concept. Look at this example of *manage to*, taken from a reading text a teacher is using with her class: *The box was heavy, but Josh* <u>managed to</u> *carry it upstairs.*

The teacher wants to check if learners are able to deduce the meaning of *manage to*, so she writes the sentence on the board and underlines *managed to*. She then asks:

T: Was it easy to carry the box?
Ss: No.
T: But did he do it?
Ss: Yes.
T: So what does *manage to* mean?
S1: Something is difficult to do, but you do it.
T: Yes, you are successful.

The questions are in this case part of the technique for checking understanding, but could equally be used at different stages of a lesson, e.g. to revise vocabulary or grammar.

In order to design such questions you need to define precisely or paraphrase the meaning of the target item using simple language. From this breakdown, you create questions. Here is an example:

I <u>wish I'd gone</u> *to the wedding.* = I didn't go to the wedding, and now I'm sorry about it.

T: Did the person go to the wedding?
Ss: No.
T: Are they sorry now about that?
Ss: Yes.

Learners don't always get the answers right, of course, which is a signal for you to go back and clarify the meaning of the item. These questioning techniques are particularly useful in multilingual teaching contexts, but they are often used in monolingual contexts too, as a way of maintaining a high level of English use in the class and challenging learners to think about meaning. They do require some careful thought, however. Here are some guidelines.

- Dictionaries and grammar books are invaluable for clarifying concept before you plan your questions.
- It is important to avoid using the language item you are testing in the questions themselves. For instance, if you are testing the concept of the present perfect continuous in *She's been working there for years*, don't ask <u>*Has she been working*</u> *there for a long time?* Instead, you might ask, *Did she start working there recently?*
- Keep the language in the questions simpler than the language you are testing. For example, if you are testing *might* with intermediate learners in *She might accept the job*, avoid using *Is she* <u>likely</u> *to accept the job?* as *likely* will probably be unknown.

– Aim to cover **all** aspects of the concept, e.g. *a gadget* = an object you use + it's small + it makes life easier + it isn't really necessary.

Learners are sometimes puzzled by concept questions, as they can appear simplistic and slightly quirky. But most learners adapt to them, and they are a safer indicator of understanding than *Do you all understand? Good!*
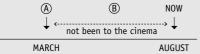
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think!³

Do you think these questions check the concept of the underlined items effectively? If not, how could they be improved?

1 *I've just broken my laptop.*
   Did I break the laptop?
   A long time ago, or a short time ago?
   Is the laptop still broken?

2 *They reluctantly agreed to help me.*
   Did they agree to help me?
   Did they agree immediately?

3 *He was supposed to meet Mary at six o'clock.*
   Did he arrange to meet Mary at six o'clock?
   Did he meet her at six o'clock?

4 *The answer he gave was ambiguous.*
   Was his answer clear?

go to **answer key** *p.153*

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timelines and clines

Timelines are most commonly used to underline or consolidate concepts of time and aspect. For example, this simple timeline shows the difference between *for* and *since* when used with the present perfect:

A: I haven't been to the cinema since March.
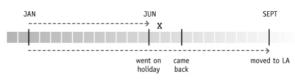B: I haven't been to the cinema for six months.

Some learners find this kind of diagram very helpful and memorable; others find them less effective. If your class are not familiar with timelines, you will need to deal with the first one or two carefully, pointing out how time, events, and duration are represented.

Timelines can also be used to test meaning rather than just illustrate it. Here is an example from the **student's book**.

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1 Read this short story and answer the questions below.

> A horrible thing happened to me earlier this year when I was living in New York. I'd been working for a TV company for six months and I then went away on holiday for two weeks. When I got back, they'd given my job to someone else, so I moved back to Los Angeles. What a nightmare!

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1 Underline the examples of the past continuous, past perfect simple, and past perfect continuous. How are they formed?

2 Match the three underlined phrases with the two dotted lines --- and the cross ✗ on the timeline below.

from upper-intermediate **student's book**, unit five, *p.59*

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think!⁴

Draw timelines to illustrate the underlined language items.

1 Don't ring me at 8.00: I'll be having dinner.
2 We used to go to Spain every year for our holidays.
3 I haven't played the guitar for ten years.

go to **answer key** *p.153*

Clines are associated more with vocabulary teaching and, like timelines, can be used both to illustrate and test various concepts. Clines are effective for series of items that share a certain feature in their core meaning but differ in terms of degree, for example:

Put the following words in the correct place on the cline below.
gale; breeze; hurricane; wind

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weak   *strong*

As a testing device, clines have the added benefits of being simple and easy to use, and versatile, e.g. you can involve learners physically if you prepare written flashcards of the items, draw a cline on the board and ask them to come up and put the words in the appropriate place.

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think!⁵

Look at these groups of items. Which ones lend themselves to informal testing using clines?

1 love, hate, like, loathe, can't stand, don't mind, quite like, not keen on
2 love, like, worship, idolize, admire, fancy, respect
3 freezing, lukewarm, cold, hot, warm, tepid, boiling
4 shout, mumble, shriek, whisper, scream, mutter

go to **answer key** *p.153*

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how to ... do informal testing

defining and paraphrasing

The ability to define and paraphrase concepts in English is beyond the reach of most lower level learners, but it is a very useful testing tool at higher levels because it generates a lot of language use and helps to develop an important language skill.

If you want to use this form of testing, you should make sure first that the target items can be defined or paraphrased clearly and succinctly, and second, that they can be explained without requiring language of comparable complexity.

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think![6]

How would you define or paraphrase these words and phrases? Which items would upper-intermediate learners find difficult to define or explain (because they require language that the learners may not know)?

uniform (n)   dreadful   kidnap sb   get soaked   pride

deserve   spoil sth   throw sth away

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written exercises

There is a wide range of written exercise types for practising and testing language items. Exercises which <u>test understanding</u> include: matching, sorting, true / false, and multiple choice. Exercises which practise and <u>test language productively</u> include: gap-fill, sentence completion, stimuli / response, and transformation.

The advantage of one exercise type over another depends on what you are testing and what you hope to achieve. Sentence completion exercises are usually more open-ended than gap-fill exercises, so have the potential advantage of being more generative, allowing more creativity, and possibly provoking more discussion. On the other hand, gap-fill exercises can usually be constructed in such a way that they only allow one correct answer, so they have the advantage of being more focused and perhaps more appropriate if the items you want to test are very specific. Last but not least, they are usually very quick and easy for either the learner or the teacher to mark.

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try it out *writing grammar sheets*

I did this with a First Certificate class who were motivated to study grammar.

After one lesson where we looked at conditional forms, I asked students, for homework, to write a personal grammar sheet on the language we had just studied. They could look at the language reference and any other grammar books they liked. They had to put together a grammar summary as they saw it using their <u>own</u> example sentences.

The next day in class, students compared with each other, and any problems or differences were discussed as a class. They gave them in for correction and comments, and then I returned them. We went on to do other grammar summaries like this. They found that producing their own summaries and examples was more memorable and gave them the motivation to explore the area more thoroughly. Some of their results were excellent.

Ruth, Zurich.

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4   Testing oral interaction informally

Speaking is difficult to evaluate because you have to assess your learners' performance in real time, and without the opportunity for much reflection. Even in formal testing situations where examination boards have established clear written criteria for evaluation, testing is still quite subjective, depending as it does on how the examiner chooses to interpret the criteria. One person's idea of fluency may be another person's 'occasional hesitation', and teachers' perceptions of accuracy can vary considerably.

For most learners, though, the ability to use English effectively in oral communication is precisely why they come to class, and it is therefore important that we try to give our learners some confirmation of their progress. Here are some guidelines.

a Before you do any speaking activity in class, whether quite controlled or free, be clear in your own mind what you want or expect learners to be able to achieve. For example:

   – using target language appropriately
   – achieving an appropriate amount of interaction with other learners
   – achieving an appropriate level of fluency, e.g. speed and naturalness for their level
   – achieving an appropriate level of accuracy for their level
   – keeping going for a reasonable amount of time
   – speaking intelligibly, e.g. pronouncing clearly without imposing a strain on the listener, and so on.

b Try to limit the focus of your attention in any one activity, even if the learners are trying to do several things at once. Don't try to cover all the criteria above. Pick one or two from the selection above, bearing in mind whether the activity is controlled or freer. If you select one or two criteria each time your learners do a speaking activity, over a period of time you will cover a range of criteria.

c If learners are trying to use language which has only recently been studied, don't expect too much of them, unless the activity is very controlled or limited in its scope.

d At the same time, try to notice whether learners are beginning to use language that they have encountered relatively recently; something perhaps that they couldn't use well a few weeks ago, but they are now using more fluently.

e Remember that the yardstick for measuring their progress is how they perform an activity now compared with similar activities one week, or month, or term ago.

Focusing in this way can help you in several ways. Firstly, you can use the criteria you decided on as the basis for your feedback to your learners on either an individual or a group basis. Secondly, the information you gather will help you to decide how best to proceed with the class: what remedial language work will you need to do? Are there any particular communication skills that learners need to practise more?

repeating activities

One final way of testing learners' progress in oral interaction is by comparing 'like with like'; in other words, after a suitable lapse of time, repeat a freer classroom activity, perhaps adapting it slightly for motivation and interest. Then decide whether your learners can now perform the task more fluently and effectively. Here is an activity from the **student's book** which would be suitable for repetition. On the second occasion, you could use the same task, or you could adapt the topics if you wish. Your focus in feedback the second time should probably be wider, or focus on any areas that were weak the first time.

it's your turn!

1 **Think!** Remember a situation where you did something and then realized you shouldn't have done it. (Or something you didn't do, and should have done.) Use these prompts to help you.

> a holiday
> a journey
> a relationship
> something you spent money on
> your own topic _____

example
a beach holiday in spring: 'I should have waited until later in the year.'

2 Move round the class, tell your story and listen to other people's. Has anybody had a similar experience to you?

from upper-intermediate **student's book** unit two *p.24*.

conclusion

In this chapter we have looked at:

– what informal testing is and why and when we do it in the classroom

– ways in which learners can test each other and themselves effectively

– a range of techniques for testing understanding at different stages in a lesson

– guidelines and ideas for 'testing' speaking activities in class.

We have looked at materials which lend themselves to specific testing techniques, such as 'test your partner', and we have discussed techniques which can be used for several different purposes, e.g. timelines, clines, concept questions, and paraphrase are all useful both for explaining and testing language. The next time you use a technique for input, perhaps think about how you could also use it for recycling or informal testing at a later date.

answer key

think![3] *p.151*
1 These questions are effective.
2 These questions don't go far enough. You also need to ask *Were they happy / willing to help?* (*No*).
3 These questions are effective.
4 This question doesn't go far enough. The teacher also needs to ask *Did his answer have different meanings?*

think![4] *p.151*
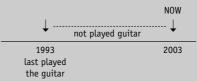Don't ring me at 8.00: I'll be having dinner.

NOW
↓

|
8.00
dinner

We used to go to Spain every year for our holidays.

NOW
↓

x   x   x   x
Spain Spain Spain Spain
stopped

I haven't played the guitar for ten years.

NOW
↓------------------------------↓
not played guitar

1993   2003
last played
the guitar

think![5] *p.152*
1 and 3 can be tested on a cline, as they represent degrees of liking and hating or temperature. The items in 2 and 4 differ in meaning as well as degree, so are too complex to include on one cline.

think![6] *p.153*
The first four are suitable for learners to define / paraphrase:
uniform = special clothes people wear at work, e.g. in the police force or at school
dreadful = terrible
kidnap sb = take someone as a prisoner and demand money for returning them
get soaked = get very wet
We think the last four are hard for upper-intermediate learners to define: it is difficult to explain *pride* and *deserve*; to explain *spoil* sth and *throw* sth *away* you need to use words of comparable difficulty, e.g. *ruin* and *get rid of*. *Throw* sth *away* is best demonstrated, and the other three are best illustrated through situations and contexts.

follow up

Ur P 1996 *A Course in Language Teaching* Cambridge University Press (module 2, practice activities, and module 3, tests: Types of test elicitation techniques)

Thornbury S 1999 *How to Teach Grammar* Longman

Parrott M 1993 *Tasks for Language Teachers* Cambridge University Press (chapter 5: Teachers' use of the learners' first language)

Aitken R 1994 *Teaching Tenses* Nelson (very useful on timelines)