

# PERFORMANCE – BASED FOREIGN LANGUAGE EVALUATION

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## Abstract

This paper discusses evaluation practices for foreign language learning. It explains and shows examples of what language acquisition facilitators can do to evaluate communicative language use in their students. The paper explores theory and practice in education and second language acquisition (SLA) and shows how these two areas mesh together in order to form a performance-based assessment and evaluation system in the DELC–UPAEP. Important terms such as assessment, evaluation, competence, and performance as well as aspects of ACTFL's foreign language teaching framework will be discussed in order to explain how DELC's foreign language students are evaluated.

Key Words: foreign language teaching, assessment, evaluation, performance-based assessment, performance-based evaluation, teacher role, facilitator, constructivism, SLA theory

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The evolution of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories and teaching methods has changed the way languages are taught inside a classroom. Teachers “teaching” on the basis of SLA acquisition theories and processing instruction are able to see themselves as facilitators of knowledge rather than the sources of it. This new role of teachers has brought opportunities to increase students' exposure to comprehensible and meaningful input, which involves the use of grammar tasks that help learners to process the syntactic characteristics of language at the same time they process them for meaning (structured input activities), the use of communicative tasks focused on meaningful use of the language (structure output activities), and the interaction among students to negotiate meaning, which results in the need of a well-developed performance-based language evaluation.

During the last two years, the DELC at UPAEP has established processing instruction as part of its teaching methodology or pedagogical framework, and the department has been restructuring its evaluation tools and procedures in order to evolve from a surface evaluation (which only evaluates memorization of grammar forms and functions) to a SLA performance-based evaluation (which focuses on evaluating students' performance in the target language). The present paper aims to make an overview of the way the DELC has incorporated English language performance evaluation through the lens of SLA, but taking into account its students' profiles and needs.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Language teaching and learning theories have evolved since the 1960's, changing their focus from *teaching* and *teachers* to *learning* and *learners*. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research focuses on *learning*, not on *teaching*. One of the main purposes of Second Language Acquisition theories is to research and analyze how people acquire a foreign or a second language. In order to understand how acquisition happens, SLA takes the perspective of focusing on the learner rather than the learning environment. (Pienemann, M., 1998). Because of SLA nature, teachers have based their practices on the principles of SLA theories. Bill Van Patten has developed a model of instruction; Processing Instruction (PI), where concepts such as comprehensible input, intake, and structured input and output activities make up the core of language learning. The DELC has adopted Van Patten's theory and model of instruction to facilitate language acquisition in UPAEP's students. During two years, the DELC has developed its own material based on the principles of second language acquisition and has applied these principles in its books, and its teaching practices. The introduction of PI in the DELC's classrooms has proved to be effective since students have demonstrated to acquire the language better than with the previous methodology; this improvement is highly appreciated in their language performance. With this language acquisition improvement and the evolution of the teachers' identity, the issue of how to evaluate students' acquisition and performance arose: teachers knew that students' language evaluation was mandatory, and that the University requires them to

assign a numerical grade to the students, but is it possible to evaluate students' acquisition? How are students' to be evaluated? The logical answer was to have them take a test, but it could not be a traditional test where only form and function were tested; it had to be a PI test where form, function, meaning and performance were evaluated. Therefore, the DELC began to write its own test, where the aspects aforementioned were taken into account. In order to explain how the new PI tests have been designed, some concepts should be defined.

## 2.1 Performance

According to Van Patten and Benati (2010, p.124), "...performance refers to what people do with language when communicating". In other words, performance is not the implicit knowledge of a language (competence), but "the use of language in concrete situations" (Chomsky, N.,1960, p.4). Van Patten and Benati (2010) state that performance is limited by the quantity of information that can be processed or stored in a short period of time to react, by the errors of use, tongue slips and the style of language of the speaker. As there are performance factors that limit the use of language, language facilitators must be aware of the fact that speakers know more of a language than what they can do with it. In order to assess language performance, tests must be created to measure a specific knowledge because, as they mention, "...just because a learner doesn't produce something doesn't mean he or she doesn't know something" (Van Patten & Benati, 2010, p. 125).

Based on this criterion, the DELC's tests have been designed in order to assess specific items in students' language performance in the four skills; listening, reading, writing and speaking. For example, if the focus of the class was to teach students how to talk about the existence of items in a house, the test is to evaluate the *same* language item; moreover, it has to evaluate the student knowledge of the form, the function and his/her performance when using that language item. See Appendix A.

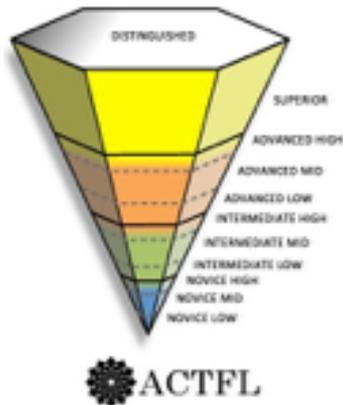
## 2.2 Competence

Communicative competence or mental representation of language "...is the implicit and abstract knowledge of a language possessed by native speakers" (Van Patten & Benati, 2010, p. 72). It is implicit because speakers are usually unconscious of the knowledge they have about their language, and it is abstract because it consists on a linguistic system. Communicative competence allows speakers to create language, usually unconsciously, or to be aware of what the language does not allow. That is, they must be able to differentiate between their native language rules and the target language ones. Competence is the result of the developing system stage where the student is and can be partially measured by the student's interlanguage only when the student's language acquisition has been tracked. "Developing" or "approximative system" is a term used for L2 learners' mental representations at any given time during acquisition (Van Patten & Benati, 2010, p. 80).The developing system is always changing because of the acquisition process; in other words, speakers constantly move from one developing system to another when they acquire more language.

Therefore, DELC' tests are designed based on the expected performance of a student at any given language level. See Appendix B.

## 2.3 ACTFL in the DELC

In order to determine the competence level that a student must have at each language course (ING101, ING102, ING103, ING104, ING105, ING106, IB2CO, IB2NEG), the DELC bases its language levels on the ACTFL standards. ACTFL is an organization that created a detailed framework with proficiency guidelines that include detailed descriptions of what a speaker can do with a foreign language. The descriptors are divided according to the four skills, reading and writing for comprehension and writing and speaking for production. ACTFL describes five levels of proficiency: Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, Superior and Distinguished. DELC's levels reach Advanced according to ACTFL standards. These standards are an instrument for the evaluation of the language performance.



Since The DELC has established UPAEP language levels based on ACTFL, the tests have to be developed based on these standards as well as on the IP principles mentioned before. For example, ACTFL Novice level for speaking states that “...[n]ovice-level speakers can communicate short messages on highly predictable, everyday topics that affect them directly. They do so primarily through the use of isolated words and phrases that have been encountered, memorized, and recalled. Novice-level speakers may be difficult to understand even by the most sympathetic interlocutors accustomed to non-native speech.” (ACTFL, 2012, p. 9) Taking this into account, the DELC asks its novice (ING101) students to interview a classmate asking about his/her name, age, major, occupation, place of origin, place of birth, and place of residence in both the class and the test during the first partial. This type of teaching, enhances students’ increase if their language developing system, and its evaluation assesses students’ competence according to the level they have in the target language.

## 2.4 Assessment

“Assessment is the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student’s learning and development”. (Palomba & Banta, 1999). It focuses on learning and teaching. Assessment is a process that looks for information related to teaching practices and students’ learning in order to obtain results to make changes and take decisions to improve learning. “This information is learner-centered, course based, frequently anonymous, and not graded”. In order to assess students’ learning, the DELC has developed *Key Activities* where students are encouraged to perform a task focused on the function and form of the language being studied. For example, in the Expressing Activities’ Time Key Activity for ING101 students, they have to interact with a classmate to find out their weekly activities and the time when they carry them out. Students are expected to do the activity using the language competence they have acquired during the partial. If students succeed in the activity, it can be assured that students have acquired the language structure required to complete the activity; therefore, it can be said that the student has stored this information in their brains (which means they have acquired that language item) and can make use of it unconsciously when faced with a similar situation in real life. See Appendix C.

## 2.6 Evaluation

Evaluation differs from assessment because it focuses on grades, and reflects classroom components other than course content and mastery level. Evaluation includes discussion, cooperation, attendance, verbal ability, participation, homework, etc. The following chart (Angelo, 1993) explains the differences between assessment and evaluation:

<b>Dimension of Difference</b>	<b>Assessment</b>	<b>Evaluation</b>
<b>Content:</b> timing, primary purpose	<i>Formative:</i> ongoing, to improve learning	<i>Summative:</i> final, to gauge quality
<b>Orientation:</b> focus of measurement	<i>Process-oriented:</i> how learning is going	<i>Product-oriented:</i> what's been learned
<b>Findings:</b> uses thereof	<i>Diagnostic:</i> identify areas for improvement	<i>Judgmental:</i> arrive at an overall grade/score

The DELC has incorporated both types of evaluation into its language curricula. Assessment is carried out via classroom activities (mainly structured output activities) and Key Activities, and Evaluation is carried out via partial exams. Both types of procedures are based on IP and the ACTFL standards.

## 2.7 RUBRICS

The DECL has established rubrics as the main tool to evaluate students' performance. Rubrics are an extremely common and useful tool in the assessment of students' work nowadays, as Benjamin (2000) says, "...like it or not, *rubric*, is the word that we have to work with in the current climate". We use them generally to assess final papers, research, essays and any kind of performance. They have become a cornerstone in modern days for education. All kind of schools, faculties, academies and teachers use them in order to obtain standardized evaluations for all the students registered to a same education plan. By standardizing evaluations, rubrics make students assessment more real and fair, besides, rubrics give students a clear idea of what to do and how to do it, giving them the opportunity to follow a guideline.

There are certain requirements, aspects, and characteristics that students try to meet when working under a specific rubric which gives teachers a great advantage to obtain a more accurate and faster evaluation. Rubrics are used all over the world in language education nowadays because "[m]ost teachers have come to recognize the many benefits of using rubrics in assessment", as Shindler (2009) claims. Some of these benefits are:

- "Rubrics create another level of clarity to the learning targets" (Gettinger & Kohler, in Shindler, *ibid*)
- Rubrics support reliability within the assessment. (Shindler, *ibid*)
- "Rubrics show the student the traits that are being evaluated and what excellence in these traits looks like." (Benjamin, 2000)
- "Rubrics save time, (and) provide timely, meaningful feedback for students..." (Stevens & Levi, 2005)
- "(Rubrics make)... students produce better quality work and students take greater pride in that work." (Danielson, Hansen Powell & Hansen, 1999)
- Rubrics provide a guideline for the student and for the teacher at the same time.

However, Mandel (2009) states that "[r]ubrics... can be limiting and produce unfair grading." Even when certain common pitfalls in rubric use have been identified, as Benjamin (2000) lists them: having too many rubrics, making rubrics too broad and the use of wordiness, rubrics can be consciously developed, so they ask for and evaluate what should be evaluated. Indeed, the creation and use of scoring rubrics requires considerable professional judgment and subject-area expertise" (Gareis and Grant, 2008) because as stated by Flynn and Flynn (2004) rubrics virtually eliminate teacher subjectivity in grading.

The DELC started the use of rubrics five years ago, however, rubrics used at the DELC have evolved from general traditional rubrics with categories stating grammatical forms which did not test students' competence but memory (see Appendix D) to specific rubrics asking for certain functions of language in each of their categories and which students can only meet by making use of the language

knowledge that they have acquired through their language course; in other words, making use of their language competence and performance.(See Appendix E)

## CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, based on our research on a PI based curricula and assessment and evaluation work, and the experience we have acquired through classroom intervention, we suggest to expose learners to enough comprehensible and meaningful input and structured output activities in class that support what you want to evaluate in your students' performance and competence, to create comprehension skilled tests where learners can process the linguistics characteristics of a target language by comprehending input, to develop test activities using a variety of techniques that provide a focus on form and a focus on meaning at the same time, to create tests that encourage learners to produce the language for a specific grammar form (structured output activities), and to create rubrics that evaluate what you really want to assess because "[n]othing kills commitment to learning in school faster than grades that do not reflect a student's learning..."(Strip Whitney and Hirsch, 2007)

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## APPENDIXES

### APPENDIX A

#### Test Activities Samples

#### Student's Test

##### 🔊 Listening A (6 points)

Listen to the descriptions. Write the letter that corresponds to the picture described. Time limit: 10 minutes.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.



a.



b.



c.

#### Teacher's Answer Key

##### 🔊 Listening A (6 points)

Listen to the descriptions. On your answer sheet write the letter that corresponds to the picture described. Time limit: 10 minutes.

Testing  
Tips:  
Listening A

1. Read instructions with students and clarify doubts.
2. Tell students to write their answers on their answer sheet.
3. Read each description **three times**. Speak slowly and clearly.
4. After you have read the description three times, give students 10 seconds to answer before continuing with the next description.

2. There are cabinets. There is a microwave oven. There is a refrigerator. There are chairs. There are orange curtains. There isn't a pot.

**APPENDIX B**

**✎ Writing (14 points)**

Look at the images and on your answer sheet write a question and an answer for each one. Ask about the period of time in which each person does the activity. Read the rubric to help you complete the writing section of the exam. Time limit: 10 minutes.

1.



Saturday and Sunday

2.



4 pm

3.



11 am

4.



9 pm

Picture 1

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Picture 2

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Picture 3

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## APPENDIX C

- Teaching Tips:  
Key Activity
1. Explain the Key Activity to the class.
  2. Clarify doubts.

### Key Activity



#### Routines and Hobbies: Expressing Activities' Time

Complete your agenda by asking and answering questions about activities' time.

- 1 Choose to be A or B. Don't look at your classmate's agenda.
- 2 Read the conversation model with the class.
- 3 In pairs, ask your classmate questions about his/her activities and time.
- 4 Write the activities, day and time in your classmate's agenda.
- 5 Share answers with the class.

What do you do on Sunday?

What time do you get up on Sunday?

No, I don't.

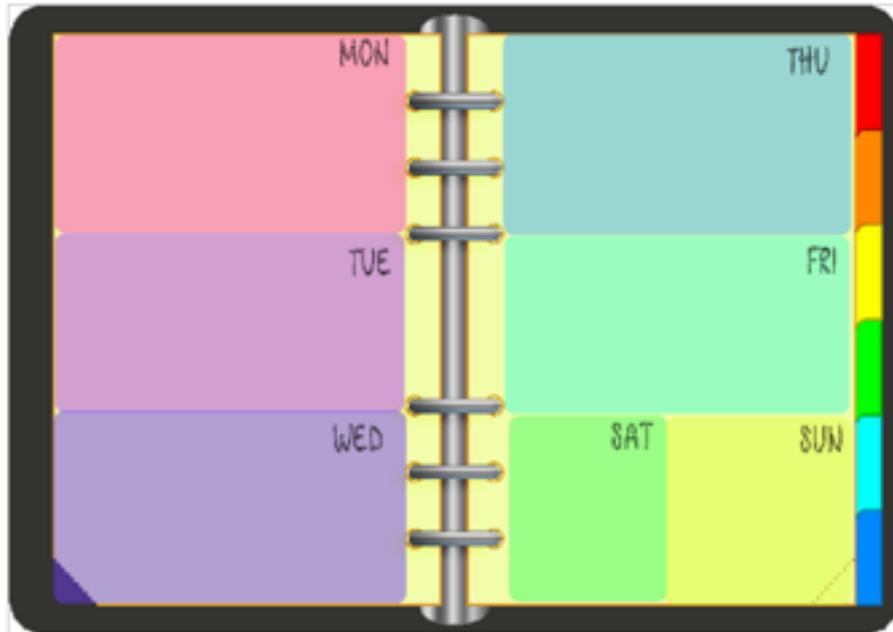
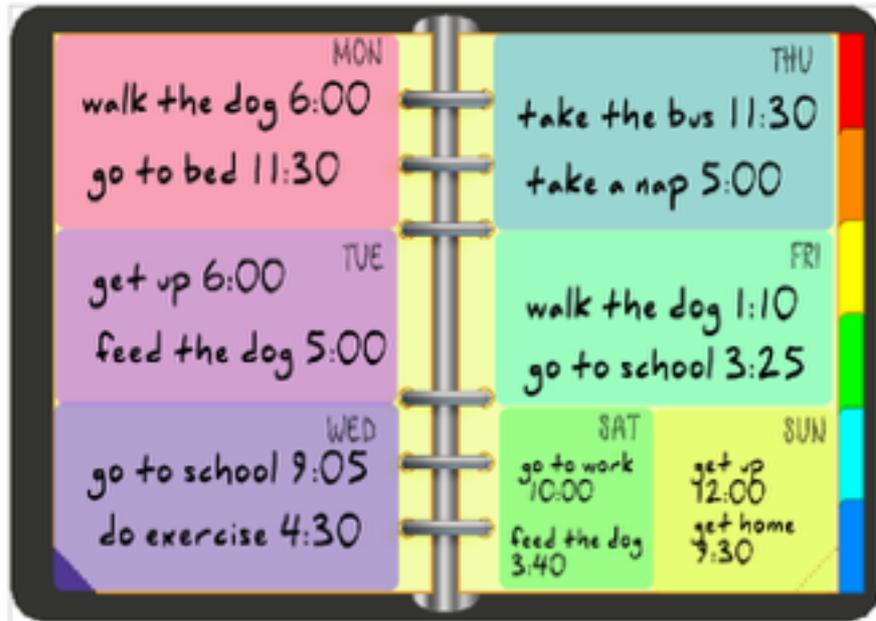


I get up. I walk the dog. I go to bed.

I get up at 6:30.

Do you walk the dog on Friday?

Student A



## APPENDIX D



**Writing** Write a family description.

Student's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Write a number in scale from 0 to .5 rate students' performance in each criterion where:

0 = Not able to perform the task      .5 = excels performing the task		
Category	Skills	0-.5
Personal Information	Student is able to describe the family relationships, names, origin, age and profession of the people in the pictures.	
Physical Description	Student is able to describe the physical appearance of the family members.	
Personality Description	Student is able to describe the personality of the family members.	
Structure, vocabulary and spelling	The verbs <i>to be</i> and <i>to have</i> are used correctly. The possessives <i>his</i> , <i>her</i> and <i>their</i> are used correctly throughout the text. There is at least one 's used to express possession. The text does not have spelling mistakes.	
<b>TOTAL:</b>		

## APPENDIX E

Choose a picture. Describe the room and mention two activities that you do in that room. Read the rubric to help you complete the speaking section of the exam. Time limit: 8 minutes.

Speaking Rubric	0 – 1
1. Se menciona el <u>nombre de la habitación</u> descrita en una oración correcta.	_____
2. Se menciona <u>un primer objeto existente, con dos características</u> , en la habitación en una oración correcta.	_____
3. Se menciona <u>un segundo objeto existente, con dos características</u> , en la habitación en una oración correcta.	_____
4. Se menciona la <u>ubicación del primer objeto existente</u> en la habitación en una oración correcta.	_____
5. Se menciona la <u>ubicación del segundo objeto existente</u> en la habitación en una oración correcta.	_____
6. Se expresa la <u>inexistencia de un primer objeto</u> en una oración correcta.	_____
7. Se expresa la <u>inexistencia de segundo objeto</u> en una oración correcta.	_____
8. Se menciona <u>una primera acción</u> que se realiza en esa habitación en una oración correcta.	_____
9. Se menciona <u>el momento del día</u> en el que se realiza la primera acción en una oración correcta.	_____
<b>Total: /9</b>	