

The features of a good test

Testing students, and especially young students, is a very sensitive issue and one we cannot do without since we live in a test-orientated society. Children should be made aware of the importance of testing without putting pressure on them since this is a situation they will come across often, in their life.

We can minimize, if not eliminate, test and exam pressure on students if the exams and tests are valid, reliable, practical, well-designed and student-friendly. It's important to explain to students the purpose of the test and what the test is measuring. The test will give information not only to their teachers but also to them as students about what they know but also about what they don't know so that they can improve. After all, it can prove to be a rewarding experience at least for the majority of children. In addition, students should be taught strategies and ways of thinking about how to cope with tests and exams. This way they are going to develop positive attitudes towards testing so that it won't be a stressful situation for them.

A test, more specifically, above all, should suit our student's needs, interests, level and age. Tests for young learners should be short so that our students don't get tired and lose concentration. To avoid children getting bored and distracted we should, also, design tests which consist of a variety of test items, interesting and authentic reading material, and motivating tasks. The material should neither be too easy nor too difficult. On the contrary, it should be graded so that even weak students with basic knowledge of the material we are testing, can complete successfully some of the exercises and achieve a passing mark. The test should, however, differentiate between strong, average and weak students otherwise it will not be fair and reliable. A gap between those students who fail and those who succeed by stigmatizing students will not be created if we make sure that almost all of them, if not all, pass the test. Objective scoring of tests and getting feedback from the students in the form of questionnaires after the test about the test, are also ways that can make our tests effective.

Furthermore, tests should give clear and explicit instructions explaining what the students should do in a given exercise. Instructions shouldn't be too long or complex, so that all students can follow them. The type of exercises and tasks in the test should be similar to the ones the students do during instruction so that they are familiar with them. When tests reflect the work done and the material covered in class, which is based on communicative approach and real-life tasks, will make children's preparation for the test a worthwhile use of class time and part of a developmental and sound programme, responsive to children's interests and needs.

Finally, it is important that we design tests to promote 21st-century skills such as problem solving and increase thus rather than limit, children's educational possibilities. This can be achieved with the use of open-ended questions, real-life tasks, problem solving tasks, creative thinking tasks etc. As for collaborative learning this can be applied during instruction time with information gap exercises and projects with the teacher observing and evaluating students work. In this case it can also be effective to have each group of students evaluating other groups based on a set of criteria we give them.

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In conclusion, the pressure of testing on students can be minimized if students know in advance that testing is not the only form of assessment. A holistic approach to assessment should be adopted with the use of other forms of student assessment, such as formative assessment, self-assessment, peer assessment, student portfolio, group projects, interviews etc. This way teachers will have a clear and rounded picture of what students know and can do, as well as, bring forward students' multiple intelligences and build their confidence.

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