Self-assessment

Assessment is part of the ongoing process of learning and using another language. Finding errors and making judgements is essential. ‘Good learners’ are learners who:

- at any given time, know what they can do, and are aware of what they still need to learn
- use this assessment to identify what still needs to be learnt
- can identify their mistakes and learn from them so that progress can be made
- keep a regular check on what they have learnt or acquired
- can monitor their work constantly

For these reasons, assessment is not a responsibility you can leave to someone else. The kind of assessment which is essential for learning and acquisition is personal and individual and has to be done by the person doing the learning, i.e. it is self-assessment. You are the only one who knows your personal objectives and needs.

Self-assessment needs to be regular so that you can change course if you find there is a misfit between what you thought you were doing and what you find you are doing. Self-assessment allows you to constantly redefine and clarify your objectives as you proceed with your work.

Of course, there are other types of assessment, such as the external assessment done by course teachers and examiners. If your objective in learning a language is to pass an examination, then you need to take into account the examination syllabus (the types of exercises, skills tested, the examiner’s expectations, etc) when you are selecting your working objectives. Then you can focus your own assessment on how you can satisfy the examination requirements, and on whether you will manage to achieve that goal.

Good learners want to know not only how much they have learnt, but also how effective their learning style is. Therefore, you should use a range of techniques in order to assess this. Remember that there is no comprehensive test which will assess all of the aspects involved in effective language learning.

Some techniques for self-assessment are:

- choosing to take tests, fill in questionnaires, etc which have been prepared for this purpose by other people

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• carrying out a task prepared by someone else for a purpose other than assessment, as if it were a test, e.g. doing a grammar exercise without looking at the rules or examples and then 'marking' yourself

• making up a test yourself, or preparing a task which you can use for self-assessment, or using tests or tasks produced by another learner, e.g. covering up the ‘translations’ of a vocabulary list, blotting out some words of a photocopied article or transcription and then completing them later and comparing them with the original

• repeating any exercise which you have already done some time earlier, to see if it seems easier, or more difficult and, if so, in what ways

• keeping a diary, where you note down all the problems you have come up against during your work (noting whether you have solved them or not), as well as your own judgements, feelings and impressions about your work. By re-reading your diary regularly, you will be able to see how your work is going

• arranging to have conversations with a native speaker or doing role plays with another learner which you record and then work on again later, e.g. checking pronunciation, question forms, how often you asked for help or were corrected by the other speaker, etc

• measuring some specific aspect of your abilities, e.g. how long it takes you to get the general idea of a meaning, how many times you needed to use the dictionary, how many times you needed to rewind a tape or reread a text

• judging the replies and reactions of whoever you are communicating with to check if these were appropriate, satisfactory or clear, e.g. Did you get the refund you were asking for? Did you get the information you were wanting? Did they thank you? Did you make them laugh? Did you make the appointment you wanted?

• comparing yourself to other learners, or asking other learners to assess your work for you, e.g. checking to see whether your level is the same as that of another student, or if you are catching up with another student, or if he or she is better than you, and if so, in what way

• if you are in a group, all the members can assess the general level or particular aspect of the work of one of the members

• asking yourself questions about personal aspects of your work and progress, e.g. Am I still nervous on the phone? Can others understand me more easily? Do I translate from my first language less often? Why is it easier to speak to one particular person than another?