

What if we abolish placement tests when starting off with a new learner?

Marina Grilli

Placement tests are usually the first contact between a private teacher and a new learner. From the standardized ones, highly based on CEFR, to somewhat informal talks and short written exercises, they help the teacher plan ahead by giving the learner the opportunity to show their knowledge, strengths, and weaknesses, and are frequently seen as a synonym of an experimental class.

However, it may be of use to consider not starting off with a new student by conducting such a test. In the following paragraphs, I intend to bring some questioning on how to begin not only teaching English, but also building an educational relationship with someone eager to acquire the language.

Language skills and performance

For decades, language has been categorised into four skills which supposedly help course designers, textbook writers, and teachers do their jobs. However, practicing each one of them separately, or even two at a time (e.g. listening and taking notes, or interviewing a partner and writing down their answers), is not enough to turn a learner into an autonomous language user.

It is useful to keep in mind that we, Brazilian teachers, learners, and speakers in general, might benefit from a bit of skepticism towards the CEFR. The document does not consider the complexity of multilingual environments in its categorization

of proficiency levels, nor the social obstacles involved in learning a prestige language in a Global South country.

That is, even though the CEFR can-do's are communication oriented, there can be no room for genuine communication in an English class in Brazil between describing heavy winter clothing and mocking up London airport dialogs, as is the norm in textbooks. Communicating cannot be a synonym for faking, and when a so-called communicative approach consists of predefined dialogs with no room for misunderstandings or external interference, it means that it's still all about grammar.

Grammar, grammar, grammar

Conducting placement tests, let us acknowledge that, is basically assessing grammar. It doesn't matter if the learner introduces themselves, understands all the teachers' questions and answers them satisfactorily: if the grammar is not perfect, the teacher will most probably say "well, well, very good indeed, and yet we are going to start from scratch".

The problem is not reviewing what was learned before in order to enhance ways of structuring more complex phrases — the problem is what we consider "starting from scratch" to be. The need to take a step back and go through third-person conjugation all over again does not spontaneously come from the learner or the teacher, it is a product of a grammar-focused language approach.

And what would a placement test be without a grammar-focused language approach?

Conversation indeed

The answer to the question above is: a dialog. A “language test” that is not focused on grammar is called a dialog, from which the teacher is, or should be, able to assess much more than language itself. Instead of inculcating in learners that language is about abiding by rules poured onto them as if they were *tabulae rasae*, we should focus on coming closer to them by assessing their understanding of the role played by a language like English in the very environment they live in.

Such an approach ought to consider:

- their goals, not only English-related, but in life as a whole;
- their personal feelings towards English and the symbolic universe regarding the language;
- the challenges they face in their study routines
- and, most importantly how they cope with these challenges.

All we teachers need is to understand that all these factors together make up a complex picture of a social agent, that is momentarily taking up the role of a learner of new resources, in order to act better in their social environment. That is, instead of focusing on language in its traditional definition, namely an amount of vocabulary and grammar chunks distributed into four skills, we should begin our relationship with a new learner by raising their awareness of language as a social practice.

And let the third-person conjugation be all wrong at first.

The premises of communication in context

While Dogme ELT symbolizes the idea of building a tailored teaching-learning process from the relationship between teacher and learner, it may be

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kept in mind as a better option than placing grammar at the center, or even on top, of the whole thing. Nonetheless, I myself am not an advocate for Dogme for a simple reason: we do not need to import any more foreign ideas to reproduce foreign conceptions of teaching.

In the land of Paulo Freire, teachers are more than capable of critically observing their surroundings and doing more than meeting learners halfway between their specific needs and the proficiency standards defined in documents such as the CEFR. After all, a beginner-level speaker’s communication skills are not going to be assessed by the mythical, idealized native speaker, based on how grammatically correct their sentences are. Neither is the communicative situation just about delivering a message — it’s about negotiating meaning in a situated context.

A message can be delivered and understood as long as both parts of the dialog engage in adjusting repertoires. When the situation involves buying heavy winter clothing, a Brazilian learner should be able to not only describe what they are looking for, but also conduct the dialog from the perspective of a social agent that is not acquainted with heavy winter (and will possibly not receive the most patient treatment from an exhausted salesperson at Walmart).

When mocking up London airport dialogs, the beginner-level learner must bear in mind the rush

of adrenaline caused by being in a hurry, speaking a new language, in a distant country, to someone who might not understand their speaking in such a loud and crowded place. When the context demands high levels of self-awareness like this, grammar is the least important thing.

And when beginning the very first private English class with a new teacher, the Brazilian learner should be able to face the situation not as a rehearsal for real life, but as a real-life situation itself. Inasmuch as it is expected from the teacher to lead the process and check the learner's language level, the goal of this first encounter should be to open doors to meaning-making, not to close doors based on verb conjugation.

In sum, we should be less concerned about placing the learner inside a box called A2 or B1, and more interested in showing them how to read the situation. Showing this attitude in the first encounter is teaching by example. The more capable the teacher is of reaching the learner as a social agent, the more spontaneous the whole process is allowed to be.

Conclusion

My intention with this brief essay is not to determine that all placement tests should be abolished — and if it did seem so at first, I must say I am sorry for the bait-like title. The point is: let us turn the teaching-learning experience into a genuine relationship, where two people get to know each other by exchanging

points of view on individual experience and shared social practices. Because language is a social practice, or, better said, is the social practice *per se*. Authentic language use is genuine communication, through which social practitioners are constantly learning how to deal with each other in specific contexts.

In other words, instead of picking grammar as a starting point for placement, let us develop a relationship based on self-awareness, allowing the learner to act critically in whatever place they decide to be.

P.S. I am proud to say I've looked up two or three expressions in a virtual dictionary while writing this text, but used no AI tool whatsoever in any stage of the process. Yes, we can.



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