

ASSESSING GENERAL LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY



Assessing General Language Proficiency Written by Vivien Berry

Lots of language tests claim to test general language proficiency, but what exactly do we mean by the term 'general language proficiency'? And how might our understanding of what it means affect the way we make a test?

So before we start the process of making a test of general language proficiency, we have to decide exactly what we mean by the term. This is because the test we develop will look completely different depending on our perspective.

There are at least three quite different ways we can describe general language proficiency. Let's think about each of these.

One way to describe general language proficiency is to see it as the ability to read, write, listen and speak in real situations.

To test this we'd usually develop a test for each skill, with questions that are designed to imitate real life and that are assessed based on how performance reflects real life. Consequently, these tests are quite long and complex, as each skill is tested and scored separately. The results offer a useful profile of someone's general language proficiency. But the problem is that many test users just average the four test scores to get a single score. This may make the result easy to use, but it hides information about how good, or poor, someone is at a particular skill.

Another way is to think of language ability as being so totally interactive that no skill can be independent of any other. For example, when we're having a conversation with someone, we listen to what they say to us, perhaps compare this to something we've read, and then reply. So there are three skills that affect our response, listening, reading and speaking.

With this approach, a test would consist of a series of tasks in which test takers must show that they are able to cope with situations where different skills interact with one another – for example listening to a radio show and then talking about it. While this is much more like using language in real life, there are problems when making a test. The most critical of these is deciding if a poor performance on a listening and speaking task is due to poor listening ability or poor speaking ability.

A third way is to think about everything that goes into 'knowing a language' so that we can identify what we can call a 'common core' of language. While this core will certainly include things such as grammar and vocabulary, it might also include things like how to get particular information across, how to communicate interactively and how to manage such an

interaction. It could also include assessing knowledge about how to use language appropriately for different purposes.

A test based on this definition would usually consist of questions based on the common core, though in practice test developers tend to just focus on grammar and vocabulary as they are seen as the best overall predictors of language ability. The questions are often based on multiple-choice and the test-taker is rarely asked to use specific language skills such as speaking or reading. So such tests can give us a rough idea about someone's strengths and weaknesses, but they can't tell us much about how well they'd cope in any specific situation.

Whichever way we choose to test our learners' general proficiency, it's important to remember that for a detailed understanding of someone's general language proficiency we need a lot of information. So a short and limited test is unlikely to give us more than an approximation of a test-taker's ability.

And if we believe that the only thing that really matters is how well learners can use the language to achieve what they need or want to achieve, then we should really only consider the first two approaches to designing a test.