MODULE 5
5.3 - UNDERSTANDING ASSESSMENT IN TBLT

Let's start with a definition: ***Task based language assessment** is the elicitation and evaluation of language use (across all modalities) for expressing and interpreting meaning, within a well-defined communicative context (and audience), for a clear purpose, towards a valued goal or outcome* (Norris, 2002, 2009).

In a sense, with task-based language assessment we seek to measure the ability of learners of performing tasks in a communicative context. It is essential to clarify the use of the test and evaluate its outcomes.

It needs to have a clear use and we need to know who will take part in the assessment, which kind of information we should provide and which criteria we will consider.

Thus, such approach is characterised by several distinctive features and is deeply connected to 1980s reaction to traditional testing and the rise of Communicative and Task-based Language Teaching. As in TBLT, task based language assessment is based on and organised around tasks.

In the assessment procedure tasks become the fundamental unit of analysis and motivate item selection and the rating of the performance. The main goal of the assessment is that of achieving a close correlation between test performance (i.e. what learner is able to do during assessment), and the criterion performance (what learner is capable of doing in real life).

Assessment in TBLT is characterised by four main features:

1) First of all, it is a direct assessment as learners are asked to perform real-life communicative behaviours which will be evaluated according to their performance.
2) Second, it is a formative assessment, which is strictly connected to a learning programme and aims at enhancing both learning and teaching.
3) Moreover, it is performance-referenced rather that system referenced as it should support information gathering activities targeted at collecting data concerning learners' capacities to use their language skills in a given context.
4) Last but not least, task-based language assessment is bound to authenticity since it involves real-world language use.

For instance, if we decided to use the activity we have analysed together in module 4 Create a catalogue with recommended / worth-seeing films as an assessment, we will see that it can be a **direct assessment** as learners will be asked to talk about their interests and opinions, a very useful skill in today's society.

It will also be a **formative assessment** as it is connected to our aims, e.g. to help learners acquire and use phrases and structures for suggesting and expressing agreement and disagreement.

It is **performance-based** as it allows us to collect data concerning their writing and speaking abilities.

Finally, it is an **authentic assessment** as we ask them to talk about their interests and make recommendations regarding cultural topics, something they would certainly do in daily conversations with their friends and acquaintances.

Therefore, we – as teachers – should be more interested in what language learners can do with the language and incorporate form and meaning in our assessments, instead than focussing solely on grammar structures. As you might remember from Module 1, a task is successful when learners manage to convey meaning. This kind of approach allows us to collect useful feedback on learning, teaching and curriculum planning.

In order to choose which task to carry out and assess, we should conduct a needs analysis and prioritise activities which are closely linked to authentic challenges so as to be capable of measuring achievements. Of course, you may not want to evaluate all the tasks you do with your students, however please remember that this feature is a very important component of any language course since, as we have already said, it informs teaching and learning practices.

In the next videos we will go into details and try to understand better the role of teacher in task-based language assessment.

However, before we move on, please remember to complete the matching activity concerning TBLA.

References

Norris, J. (2014, April). How do we assess task-based performance? Invited LARC/CALPER testing and assessment webinar

Shehadeh. A., (2012) Task-Based Language Assessment: Components, Development, and Implementation in Coombe, Davidson, O'Sullivan, Stoynoff (Eds) The Cambridge guide to second language assessment, Cambridge University Press

Van Gorp, K. Deygers B., (2014) Task-Based Language Assessment in Kunnan, Antony John (Ed)The Companion to Language Assessment, John Wiley & Sons, Inc