

## The Role of Progress Tests on the Students' Performance

Asrar Jabir Edan

### 1.Introduction

Once learning is under way, teachers want to find out how much a student has learned in a particular unit of instruction. To achieve this aim, some form of achievement assessment is needed. One way to follow up students' progress over a period of time is by giving progress tests such as short weekly tests based on the topics, themes, or structures that have been covered during that week. The results of these tests can be of use to both students and teachers as they help to identify any areas where students might need to do more work and motivate them by allowing opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned. This research seeks to show the effect of such tests in enhancing the students' performance. In order to fulfil the aim of this study, two sections have been selected from Al-Zerka' Secondary School for Girls, one as an experimental group, which has been tested regularly every week, and the other as a control one. The results of this experiment are going to be discussed in detail ( see pp 7-13).

### 2.What is a Test?

Brown ( 2001:384 ) defines a test as “a method of measuring a person's ability or a knowledge in a given domain”. From this definition one can capture the essential components of a test. First of all, a test is a method, i.e., a set of techniques, procedures, and items which are combined together to form an instrument that requires performance or activity on the part of student.

Next, a test has the purpose of measuring. It measures the language that students have learned or acquired in the classroom both receptively and productively through the elicitation of certain behaviour from which one can make inferences about certain characteristics of those students. A test also measures a person's ability or knowledge. A test samples performance but (as mentioned earlier) infers certain competence. A language test, for example, samples language behaviour and infers general ability in a language. This means that a test should be

used to measure students' knowledge of the phonetic, structural and lexical systems as well as their ability to understand the formula of the language, to speak, read, write, and make the normal responses which the situation demands. From the results of the test, teachers can infer a certain level of students' ability.

Finally, a test measures a given domain. In the case of proficiency test (see section 4) , for example, the actual performance on the test involves only a sampling of skills, but that domain is overall proficiency in a language-general competence in all skills of a language ( *ibid.*:385 ; Bachman, 1990:20 ).

### **3.The Role of Tests in the Classroom**

A good test is an obedient servant since it follows and apes teaching. Classroom tests, however, play three important roles: they define course objectives, they stimulate student progress, and they evaluate class achievement:

#### **3.1 Defining Course Objectives**

The tests can indicate how close each student has come to attaining the course objectives. It is necessary for the teacher, therefore, to define the course objectives before setting out to teach any course and determining tests for that course. In this way, he can make sure that the teaching will be rationally oriented and the tests will show the extent to which students have fulfilled course objectives. A question paper which includes a variety of questions containing items clearly chosen from the textbook and the English language material given in the classroom, can be an aid to the learning process because these items which are chosen for the test present language areas which the teacher wants to emphasize to his students.

If the aim of a particular course, for instance, is to develop primarily the skills of listening and speaking, listening and speaking tests then must be given in proportion to the relative importance of that objective (Valette, 1977:3-4; Basanta, 1995:2-3).

#### **3.2 Stimulating Student Progress**

Tests tell students how well they can handle specific elements of the target language. As much as possible the time given over to classroom testing should provide a rewarding experience. Tests, especially daily, weekly, and monthly, motivate students and make them aware of the areas of weakness or strength that

they find when they put their language ability to actual use at school or elsewhere. At discovering the areas of weaknesses, they can try to bridge the gap and work harder to improve their standard. Discovering areas of strength, on the other hand, gives them more confidence in themselves, thus motivation can be achieved. For the test, daily or weekly, to achieve its aims adequately, it is necessary for the teacher to base it on what has been taught during that period whether vocabulary, structure, or reading comprehension which can be used as either a review of that material or a basis for a new one to be given. It is also important for the teacher to tell his students of what he wants them to do. This can be of help to the students as it can direct their attention to what is exactly needed and help the teacher to get the aim of his test. Besides, the test should be announced in advance to permit students to prepare adequately and their results should be given to them as soon as possible as this may stimulate them to take learning more seriously (Ibid.).

### 3.3 Evaluating Class Achievement

Tests can help the teacher to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme, course books, materials, and methods. Through frequent testing, the teacher can identify which aspects of the programme are presenting difficulties for students so he can determine where to concentrate on extra class drill and how best to assist each student. It will also enable him to assess student's or students' achievement in view of the other students' results after analyzing the results of similar tests in the school or other ones. Through tests, the teacher can also evaluate the effectiveness of a new teaching method , of a different approach to a difficult pattern, or of new materials. On the students' part, the test can help them to realize their ability in expressing themselves using correct forms of the language they are learning. In addition, it can help them to identify their errors and learn from them, i.e. the test can serve as an excellent teaching device (Ibid.).

### 4. Types of Tests

Not all language tests are of the same kind. They differ with respect to test purpose. Accordingly, five basic types of language tests can be recognized: aptitude, achievements, proficiency, diagnostic, and progress.

**Aptitude tests** are conceived as a prognostic measure. They seek to predict the students' probable strengths and weaknesses in learning a foreign language by measuring performance in an artificial language. They are therefore given before the student begins the language programme. Language learning aptitude consists of many factors such as intelligence, age, motivation, memory, phonological sensitivity, and sensitivity of grammatical patterning and thus varies from one individual to another. Aptitude tests may be used to select students for a language course or to place them in sections according to their ability (Heaton, 1988:173 ; Brown et al., 2003:6).

**Achievement ( or attainment ) tests** are associated with the process of instruction. They are formal tests intended to show mastery of a particular syllabus ( e.g. end-of-year tests, school-learning exams, public tests, etc. ). In fact, these tests are rarely constructed by classroom teachers for a particular class and designed primarily to measure the students' progress rather than as a means of motivating or reinforcing language. They are based on what the students are presumed to have learned not necessarily on what they have actually been taught. Moreover, they should reflect the particular approach to learning and teaching that has previously been adopted. For instance, if the students have followed a structural approach to language learning, then a structural-based test should be administered at the end of those students' course and so on ( Power, 2003:3 ).

Whereas achievement tests relate to the past in that they measure what language the students have learned, **proficiency tests** look to the future situation of language use without necessarily any reference to the previous process of teaching , i.e., they do not take into account the syllabus that the students have followed. Instead, they are concerned with measuring psychomotor and cognitive skills in the light of the language demands made later on the students by a future course of study or job. Some proficiency tests have been standardized for world-wide use such as the American TOEFL test and the British/Australian IELTS test ( ibid. :4 ; Nunan, 2003:317 ).

**Diagnostic tests** are used to measure performance against a criterion. Achievement and proficiency tests, however, can be used for diagnostic purposes

in which areas of difficulty are identified so that an appropriate remedial programme can be planned. They are primarily designed to assess students' knowledge and skills in particular areas before a course of study is begun. They are also educative in the sense that they reflect to the learner a picture of his competence in the language with the gaps that need to be filled (Özcan, 2001:8).

**Progress ( or within-course ) tests** are short tests given at various stages throughout a language course to evaluate students' progress towards definite goals. They are administrated at strategic points in a course to determine the degree to which students are accomplishing the learning or enabling objectives. Apparently, their aims are to stimulate learning and to reinforce what has been taught ( Hughes, 1989:318 ). Like achievement tests, progress tests are based on the language programme which the class has been following, but, unlike them, each progress test is unique and can only be evaluated fully by the class teacher in the light of his knowledge of the students, the programme which they have been following, and the class teacher's own particular aims. In this respect, Heaton (1988:171) mentions that the results obtained from the progress tests are of great value to the teacher and the students as well. They are important to the teacher since they enable him to become more familiar with the work of each student and with the progress of the class in general. Moreover, they can show him how successful his teaching has been so provide washback to adjust and change course content and teaching style where necessary. Their results encourage the students to perform well in the target language and to gain additional confidence. Such tests, on the other hand, lie in the completeness with which they examine the material under study. The relative weight given certain elements or skills should therefore accurately reflect the class objectives. In spite of the benefits of this type of tests, Stevenson and Riew (1981:20) state that teachers have been “reluctant” to administrate regular tests giving the following reasons for that:

- i. Teachers consider testing too time-consuming, taking away valuable class time.
- ii. They identify testing with mathematics and statistics rather than a language teaching aid, and

iii. They may think testing goes against the humanistic approach to teaching.

From the researcher's point of view, progress tests are a central part of the learning process since their aim is to measure the extent to which the students have fulfilled the course objectives. The following section may illustrate this point.

### 5.The Experiment

In order to show the effect of progress tests on the students performance, two groups have been chosen, one as an experimental group and the other as a control one. The experimental group consists of (38) subjects and the control one consists of (39) ones. The population of these groups is the fourth year preparatory school students from Al-Zerka' Secondary School for Girls. The experiment has been carried out during the academic year (2004-2005). It is also worth mentioning that the original number of the control group was (41) subjects. Two subjects have been excluded as they moved to another school in their second term of study.

The researcher has noticed that the performance of the students in both sections was weak in their first month of the study as shown in Table (1) below:

**Table(1)Subjects' Marks in the First Month**

Section A				Section B			
No. of Subject	Mark	No. of Subject	Mark	No. of Subject	Mark	No. of Subject	Mark
1	44	21	78	1	30	21	45
2	35	22	42	2	31	22	60
3	60	23	40	3	60	23	82
4	40	24	45	4	35	24	40
5	72	25	40	5	90	25	83
6	38	26	30	6	43	26	35
7	53	27	46	7	35	27	32
8	30	28	35	8	52	28	85
9	50	29	79	9	32	29	36
10	66	30	55	10	56	30	33
11	52	31	30	11	45	31	40
12	45	32	67	12	55	32	80
13	44	33	34	13	33	33	34
14	41	34	60	14	72	34	50
15	30	35	73	15	98	35	36
16	53	36	55	16	30	36	57

17	54	37	40	17	33	37	56
18	40	38	53	18	31	38	68
19	50			19	94	39	38
20	44			20	97		

Table (2) displays the percentage of success for section (A) and (B) in the first month:

**Table (2)The Percentage of Success for Section A and B in the First Month**

No. of Section	No. of Subjects	No. of Passed Subjects	%
A	38	17	44.74
B	39	18	46.15

As noted from Table (2), the percentage of success for both sections is low and approximately the same (44.74% and 46.15% respectively), but throughout the daily activities of both sections, the researcher has noticed that the performance of the students in section (A) is lower than that of section (B). Accordingly, section (A) has been chosen as an experimental group. Both groups have been taught the same material by the researcher herself with one exception. The experimental group has been tested regularly every week. The tests varied from one week to another and almost covered the material previously taught to the subjects during that week such as grammatical structures, reading comprehension questions, composition ( particularly concerning the literary reader), vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling, and even punctuation (See Appendix I). The time allowed to answer the test is between 10-15 minutes depending on the nature of the test, i.e. whether it contains multiple-choice items, or requires writing down a composition, etc. The subjects have been informed of the date of each test in advance. This is necessary to give them the chance to make themselves ready for it. Its exact scope, i.e., whether vocabulary, grammatical structure, etc, is also specified for it is believed that if students know in advance what sort of test will be used to measure their achievement, they will tend to study for the test in the simplest and most obvious way and engage in activities that help them acquire more language. Besides, “students receive satisfaction from having prepared certain material

carefully and then having the opportunity to show how well they have learned it” (Valette, 1977:36). Concerning the arrangement of the questions, the easiest questions are given first to allow all subjects to build up confidence before attempting more difficult items. Each test is then followed by discussion of the results of the tests including feedback on specific things they do well and those that they do not do well. Subjects' errors are used as bases for deciding where further work on the part of the researcher is necessary. Errors have been corrected by the researcher with the aid of subjects who do well in the tests as the knowledge of correct answers “will reinforce the students' learning of the response”(See Finaocchiaro, 1964:109). To take these tests seriously on the part of the subjects, the test papers are corrected and returned to them, as soon as possible, the following lesson and sometimes at the same lesson. Positive statements are written by the researcher on the papers of the subjects who do well in the exam in order to encourage them and make them feel more confident. The subjects who do not do well in the exam are also encouraged to do their best in the following exam, to go over the test and to profit from their mistakes. This procedure helps to enhance subjects' self-confidence and lower their anxiety which, in turn, positively affects their performance (see Krashen, 1987:30-31). As these tests are meant to gain comprehension of how well the subjects understand the material studied during a specific period, the subjects were re-examined on the same material if the results of one of these tests were not good enough so as to give them a chance to master it.

As mentioned earlier, the subjects in the experimental group have been tested regularly every week during their first and second term. The researcher has noticed that these tests have positive effects on their performance in these terms including mid-year examination as they help them practise the material under study and reduce the negative element of nervousness often affecting performance in longer tests. Besides, such frequent progress tests encourage subjects to devote time regularly to their language study and to be acquainted with the types of items that will be subsequently used in longer tests.

Table (3) below shows the experimental group's marks in the first term, mid-year, and second term exams:



**Table (3)The Experimental Group's Marks in the First Term, Mid-Year, and Second Term**

No. of Subject	First Term	Mid-Year	Second Term	No. of Subject	First Term	Mid-Year	Second Term
1	51	57	58	20	45	51	57
2	40	42	50	21	80	91	99
3	60	62	62	22	50	63	61
4	43	37	40	23	43	61	61
5	73	82	78	24	50	59	57
6	42	51	56	25	40	42	54
7	54	63	64	26	34	41	51
8	32	45	46	27	50	48	58
9	52	62	54	28	40	47	54
10	70	76	80	29	82	89	99
11	56	62	54	30	59	73	73
12	56	62	64	31	32	40	42
13	51	62	64	32	70	68	71
14	41	36	42	33	40	53	57
15	32	39	46	34	58	57	62
16	59	55	57	35	76	69	74
17	50	52	50	36	56	50	62
18	43	54	55	37	43	44	62
19	61	73	64	38	58	65	72

Table (4), on the other hand, presents the control group's marks in the first term, mid-year, and second term exams as compared with those of the experimental one :

**Table (4)The Control Group's Marks in the First Term, Mid-Year, and Second Term**

No. of Subject	First Term	Mid-Year	Second Term	No. of Subject	First Term	Mid-Year	Second Term
1	30	36	41	21	46	63	65
2	32	45	43	22	60	65	70

3	64	72	63	23	82	88	85
4	40	50	59	24	45	54	56
5	90	96	96	25	78	90	87
6	40	57	53	26	40	42	52
7	37	40	51	27	34	48	53
8	55	56	61	28	84	83	89
9	33	42	45	29	40	41	46
10	60	68	65	30	34	50	50
11	50	55	58	31	40	46	46
12	54	45	51	32	82	82	82
13	36	39	42	33	40	46	52
14	75	77	76	34	50	59	67
15	98	98	100	35	34	44	45
16	31	48	50	36	62	61	61
17	33	46	56	37	46	44	46
18	31	42	40	38	70	76	76
19	96	99	97	39	40	41	46
20	97	98	99				

Table (5) sums up the percentage of marks of the experimental and control group in the first term, mid-year, and second term exams:

**Table (5) The Percentage of Success for the Experimental and Control Group**

The Experimental Group				The Control Group			
	No. of Subjects	No. of Passed Subjects	%		No. of Subjects	No. of Passed Subjects	%
First Term	38	23	60.53	First Term	39	18	46.15
Mid-Year	38	27	71.05	Mid-Year	39	21	53.41
Second Term	38	33	86.84	Second Term	39	29	74.35

Generally, the results show that the percentage of success for the experimental group in the first term, mid-year, and second term exam, (60.53%, 71.05%, and 86.84% respectively), is higher than that of the control group (46.15%, 53.41%, and 74.35% respectively). In their first term, the percentage of success for the control group has remained the same, whereas a progress in the performance of the

experimental group has been noticed since their percentage of success is obviously higher ( 60.53% instead of 44.74% ) ( See Table (2) ). This is also true of the mid-year and the second term. The percentage of success in the second term for the control group is also better than that of the first one since both groups have been taught by the researcher herself and the same effort is made; yet, the experimental group's performance is better as compared with the control one since, as mentioned earlier, its percentage of success is higher. This is certainly due to the effect of progress tests which have been applied regularly every week and which consequently positively affect the subjects' performance.

## 6. Conclusions

It is believed that a well-planned course should measure the extent to which students have fulfilled the objectives of the course. If this is true, then progress tests are a central part of the learning process since they enable the teacher to become more familiar with the work of each student and with the progress of the class in general, thus providing washback to adjust and change course content and teaching styles where necessary.

By identifying which aspects of the programme are presenting difficulties for students, the teacher can determine where to concentrate extra class teaching and how best to assist each student.

From the students' own part, such tests can tell students how well they are progressing in relation to the course objectives. This may stimulate them to take learning more seriously and to gain additional confidence. This continuous feedback will benefit students, who will feel that their weaknesses are being properly diagnosed, and their needs met.

To show the effect of progress tests on the students performance, two groups have been chosen, one as an experimental group, which has been tested regularly every week during their first and second terms of study, and the other as a control one. The subjects for this experiment have been selected from Al- Zerka' Secondary School for Girls. The results of this experiment have shown that these tests have positive effect on their performance since the percentage of success for

the experimental group in the first term, mid-year, and second term exam is (60.53%, 71.05%, and 86.84% respectively) which is higher than that of the control group (46.15%, 53.41%, and 74.35% respectively). Teachers, therefore are advised to take progress tests into their considerations when setting up their lesson plan since the results obtained from such tests are of great value to the teacher and the students as well.

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### Appendix I Samples of the Progress Tests Carried out during the Experiment

#### Sample 1: Do as required:

1. They arrive at school early. ( Insert: always)
2. Firas speaks English well. ( Make it negative)
3. Jane is helping her mother now.(Use everyday instead of now)
4. It (rain) in winter. It (rain) at this moment. ( Correct )

#### Sample 2: Write a composition on " The Fortune".

**Sample 3: Give the meaning of the following:**

- 1.leave 2.broken to pieces 3.withdraw 4.extinguish 5.remained

**Sample 4: Choose the correct word that carries the given sound:**

- |         |        |        |        |       |
|---------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| 1. /u:/ | : wood | foot   | good   | soon  |
| 2. /i/  | : lady | occupy | supply | cry   |
| 3. /e/  | : bad  | make   | said   | laid  |
| 4. /i:/ | : live | leave  | head   | meant |
| 5. /o/  | : not  | love   | come   | door  |

**Sample 5: Choose the suitable word or phrase that best fills the blank:**

1. I have ----- a good dictionary.( looked at, looked for)
2. The firemen were able to ----- the fire. ( extinguish, distinguish)
3. Many countries ----- in the Olympics. ( take care, take part )
4. He ----- me to do my best. ( devises, advises )
5. You should work hard in order not to----- in the exam. (fail, fall )

**Sample 6: Form adverbs from the following:**

1. quick 2. go 3. west 4. head 5. easy

**Sample 7: Punctuate the following:**

1. adnan and i will go to habbanya next august
2. did mr john send tom a flower
3. lets go on a picnic shall we

**Sample 8: Answer the following using information from your text-book:**

1. Ghassan Kanafani was assassinated by ----- in ----- .
2. When did the situation in the city "Haifa" explode?
3. The duty of the British garrison was ----- .