Writing Test and Exam Questions for the ESL Population

Writing test and exam questions can be frustrating and time consuming. At times, it may seem impossible to test what is actually being taught!

Things to consider when writing test and exam questions:
- How many ESL students are in your class?
- What is the purpose of the test or exam?
- What are you measuring?
- Is testing the most appropriate measure of student learning?
- What level of learning do you wish to test?

The REAL purpose of assessments is to improve student performance, not merely to audit it.

Strategies and Techniques to Enhance Classroom Learning When Writing Test/Exam Questions

Types of Test/Exam Questions
- Objective (tend to best assess memorization of facts) – students choose from alternatives provided
  - Multiple choice
  - True/False
  - Matching
- Subjective (tend to allow assessment of a range of cognitive levels) – students provide the answers themselves
  - Fill in the blank
  - Short Answer
  - Essay

General Guidelines

Write original test questions rather than using test banks. This allows you to incorporate your specific vocabulary, terminology, and standards. Create your own test bank per course by writing several questions after each class, having students submit questions throughout the semester and then use some of these questions on the tests, asking your peers who have taught the course before, for old tests and exams, and using textbook test banks.
Prepare clear instructions on the test/exam. Include a few words of advice and encouragement on the test. Put some easy content questions first. Challenge excellent students with one or two tough questions for extra marks. Give careful thought to the layout and timing of the test. Don’t include trick questions – test what has been taught! No surprises.

**Layout of the Test**

- Use margins and line spacing that make the test easy to read.
- On the first page, write the total number of marks for the test.
- If items are worth different number of points, indicate the point value next to each item or section of the test.
- Group similar types of test items together (i.e. true/false, or similar content).
- Number the pages using page 1 of 5 so students can be assured that they got all of the test pages.
- Include suggested timing for each section of the test.
- Keep in mind that the space that you provide for short answer or essay questions, often indicates to the student the length of the answers expected of them. Don’t assume they will turn over the paper and write on the back if they run out of room.
- When students are expected to write on the test or exam, leave space at the top of each page for the student’s name and section # (if appropriate). When each page is identified, the tests or exams can be separated so that you can mark each question separately.

**Timing of Test/Exam**

- Factor in time to distribute and collect tests or exams.
- Allow:
  - 30 seconds per true/false
  - 1 minute for multiple choice questions. 2 minutes, if there is a lot of reading, or the question is complex
  - 2 minutes for short answer questions
  - 10 – 15 minutes for limited essay questions
  - 30 minutes for a broader essay question
  - 5 – 10 minutes for students to review their work

**Rethinking Tests/Exams**

- Teachers need to carefully evaluate the purpose of traditional, timed tests especially for ESL students.
- Perhaps test needs to be re-evaluated all together.
- Rather than testing coming at the end of units or courses, effective assessment should be an integral portion of what happens in the classroom every day.
- Effective assessment is integral to the success of virtually everything that happens in the classroom!
Resources:


Blackboard’s Assessment Tool

TestGen Tool from Pearson (need login)
http://wpslive.pearsoncmg.com/wps/media/addess/Pearson_Default/8722/8931911/testgen_login.html

Quizzes, Tests and Exams, Honolulu Community College,
http://Honolulu, Hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/quizzes.htm
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