Tests as a Teaching Tool in EFL Classes

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Introduction

Learning a second language can be challenging for any number of reasons, and various theories are available as possible approaches to teaching as well. However, despite a teacher's best efforts, if students do not have the motivation to learn and improve their language ability, it is highly unlikely that they will dedicate the time and effort necessary to develop any measurable improvement. Tony Wright argues that motivation in education is a more effective and proactive tool for learning than coercion or reward (Wright, 1987). Thus, this project is a contribution to the field of student-centered teaching research, with the goal of increasing student motivation and interest in learning English as a foreign language. The second major aspect of this research is test anxiety. The pressure that students feel from test preparation and test taking is a common problem in all fields of education and can lead to disdain for the subjects being taught. The need for testing as a tool to evaluate student progress is a widely accepted and commonplace concept in modern education. "Assessment is how we identify our learners' needs, document their progress, and determine how we are doing as teachers and planners" (Frank, 2012). However, assessment does not have to be an obstacle in the pursuit of increased student motivation. Giving the students the ability to make, take, and grade their own exams could accomplish both goals by creating a more relaxed learning environment, allowing students to enjoy the testing experience, and gauge how much of the target material they have retained at the same time.

Purpose

In regards to testing, it makes sense that "our focus should always be

on gathering information that reflects how well our students have learned what we tried to teach them" (Frank, 2012). In this research, although the tests were created with this in mind, the primary focus was on learning and increasing student motivation. As Irene Iwasaki stated in a similar project, giving students the chance to create their own exams puts the control and responsibility of learning into the hands of the students. By allowing students to create tests, take them, and check for their own mistakes, they are covering a wide range of language learning skills. By composing and taking the tests, they are practicing their writing while affirming their understanding of the target material. The peer-grading step of the process gives the students a chance to practice their reading comprehension skills while simultaneously adding an additional level of review of appropriate grammar usage and the meaning of the target vocabulary (Iwasaki, 2008). As a whole, these student-made tests are designed to give the students additional exposure to the target material, increase their study time, and provide the students with an opportunity to use what they are learning in the classroom to produce authentic language. Additionally, by allowing the students to make the tests themselves, thus reducing the anxiety of not know what will be on the tests or how difficult they may be, they can evaluate how much they have retained in a more relaxed learning environment.

Making the Test

This project was conducted with a total of about 80 students in four EFL classes of varying levels. Each class was divided into groups of about four students and asked to make tests that covered the important grammar, vocabulary, and phrases they had learned in class so far. They were given the freedom to make the test in any form they wished, guided by a few key limitations and general test-making instructions. For example, students were asked to avoid making the tests too easy (by using easy word order questions, matching questions, etc.), as well as to make sure not to give away the answers in other parts of the test. Also, to avoid content overlap, the groups were assigned different chapters of the textbook and material from different

lessons. For the sake of grading, each group's test was to be limited to 20 points, and an answer key had to be provided as well. As the primary goal of the project was to make the test-taking experience more enjoyable for the students, the final requirement was that the tests be creative. The students were asked to make tests that were based on a single theme and to try to make them as funny or interesting as possible.

There were multiple expected benefits to the test-writing phase of the project. First, working in groups typically creates a more enjoyable classroom atmosphere. It gives all of the students a chance to actively participate in the lesson instead of simply listening to a lecture or answering questions one at a time. Additionally, the use of a single-theme requirement for each test was intended to encourage students to manipulate what they have learned to suit their needs. This would serve as an indicator as to whether the students had enough of a grasp on the target material to adapt it to other language situations and express themselves accurately, or whether they were simply memorizing words and fixed phrases from the textbook.

Quality Control

To make sure that these tests had any value as tools to measure the students' language learning progress, the accuracy of the tests themselves had to be guaranteed as well. Therefore, strict deadlines were first set for submissions of the first drafts. Once the tests were submitted, they were checked by the teacher for accuracy and relevance. When mistakes in spelling, grammar, or the use of target words and phrases were found, the instructor highlighted them, providing only hints as to why they were incorrect. The tests were then returned to the students in class for revision.

Setting deadlines and asking for multiple drafts of the tests to be submitted was an absolutely essential part of the process. First, setting checkpoints for the students helped to make sure that they were on task, on time, and properly understood what they were supposed to be doing. Additionally, tasking the students with using what they have learned and then following up with corrections provides immediate feedback to the

students. This lets them know ahead of time whether they sufficiently understand the material, rather than discovering this after they see their test score. Most importantly for the teacher, fixing inaccuracies in advance saves them from future headaches. Questions with incorrect answers, misleading questions, and even incomprehensible questions can lead to confusion during the test, as well as complications during grading. Eliminating these problems beforehand guarantees that the test can be considered a credible evaluation tool and even be included in the students' overall grades, if appropriate. Once the final drafts were approved, the groups were asked to prepare enough copies for the class.

Taking the Test

Taking the test provides the third opportunity for the students to check their understanding of the target material. Ideally, as the students were able to prepare the tests themselves, the experience should not be as daunting as taking a test created by the teacher. They would already have knowledge of the nature of the test questions, as well as their general difficulty, so the fear of being asked questions for which they are unprepared should be mostly eliminated. However, to make the test experience more interesting for the students, the teacher did not share the content of each group's test with the entire class. Therefore, 75% to 80% of the tests was still somewhat of a mystery to many of the students. Although this naturally created a certain amount of suspense and anxiety, the relaxed atmosphere of the classroom resulted in many of the students laughing and commenting on the tests as they saw what their classmates had produced. As the goal of the student-made test project was primarily to increase motivation and study time, rather than evaluate the students' performance, comedic remarks and minor disruptions during the test were completely acceptable and welcome.

Grading the Test

Once all of the students had completed their tests, each group collected their portion of the test for grading. The grading was done in class and returned to each student immediately afterwards. Grading the test together in class also provided a number of benefits. First, it allowed the students yet another opportunity to check their understanding of the lesson material as it became their fourth time reviewing it. When students encountered unexpected answers, or didn't understand why their answers were incorrect, they were able to have their questions answered by the teacher for immediate feedback. Additionally, the students were able to see their test results right away. Being able to see their mistakes soon after the test allows them to better rectify misunderstandings and get a clearer understanding of the lesson material. When students receive their test results several days later, they are less likely to stop and analyze their mistakes. Many students are all too happy to never give a test a second thought once it is over. As an added bonus for the teacher, asking the students to help with grading can save hours. Nevertheless, double checking the students' grading efforts should be done both in class and again afterward, even briefly, after the tests have all been collected.

Project Considerations

1 - Difficulties

Not surprisingly, several problems arose throughout the process. Making reasonable tests can be challenging for teachers at times, so it should be expected that students will struggle much more. In this project, the first major obstacle for the students was making the test "funny" or "interesting." The majority of the students who participated in this project were more accustomed to lecture-style instruction and memorization of test material rather than expressing their own ideas or being creative. Therefore, many groups required a lot of leading, prompting, and even example ideas for the test theme from the teacher. However, the students were reassured that they would not be graded on how funny their tests actually were and were asked

to simply do their best and have fun.

The second problem for the students turned out to be following instructions. The project had many steps, including test-making guidelines and deadlines, so many of the first drafts were poorly written and required major revisions. Some groups submitted tests with sections unrelated to the material learned in class, while others neglected to prepare answer keys. There were also a few groups that tried to finish their tests minutes before the deadline, submitting poorly drafted tests hurriedly written in pencil.

Further calamity ensued when final drafts were approved for printing. Although the number of points per test had been predetermined, the number of pages for the test had not. Some groups unexpectedly drafted tests that were three or four pages long, resulting in a massive test that totaled about 20 pages. Printing this many pages was also expensive and difficult for some of the students who did not have access to printers and used paid copy machines instead. Distribution, collection, and correction of the test was also confusing at times as multi-page tests were not stapled together, and pages went momentarily missing at times. The large amount of test pages ended up adding a fair amount of unnecessary stress to a project that was intended to reduce anxiety.

The final point of concern was grading. As students were grading papers, many students did not think to write in correct answers where there were mistakes. Unless explicitly instructed to do so, it was discovered that most of the students would simply mark mistakes as incorrect without correcting the mistake or putting any additional thought into it. Skipping this step would have been a missed learning opportunity for both the student who took the test and the student grading it.

2 - Adjustments

Learning from the many unexpected difficulties of the project, adjustments were made, and the project was repeated again in the following semester. Tackling the most obvious problem, each group's test was limited to one page this time and had to be submitted as a Word document by email.

This proved to be much easier for the students in almost every aspect. It also eliminated the lazy and sometimes illegible pencil submissions. However, because they were now packing more information into a single page, some of the groups required assistance with formatting. Other problems needed to be addressed with the new changes, too. Some students needed to be reminded to combine their test portions into one group paper instead of sending the instructor separate sets of questions to piece together. Also, the students had to be discouraged from submitting photographs of their handwritten tests because these tests were more difficult for the teacher to correct and do not look as nice when printed.

The logistics of test printing and distribution were also changed. Leaving this step of the process to the teacher made preparation much easier for everyone. The teacher was able to prepare copies at no extra expense and in much less time than the students. Asking the students to prepare the copies had little to no language learning value anyway, and only added unnecessary stress.

3 - Teacher Responsibilities and Expectations

In addition to complications on the students' end, there are many responsibilities and potential obstacles that the instructor needs to consider on their end as well. From the very start, it is vital for the teacher to set clear goals and expectations for the students. Avoid any ambiguity regarding what should be on the tests or when they should be submitted. To help the students better understand these expectations, it is best to show clear examples of acceptable tests and test questions. As the students begin creating their tests, it is also the teacher's responsibility to ensure that all of the tests contain valid questions and are relevant to the material covered in class. Many students are also unfamiliar with Microsoft Office and other word processing programs and may not know how to format their tests properly. For these students, the teacher must be prepared to provide a certain level of technical support if requiring the tests to be submitted in a digital format.

Even after the first drafts are submitted, the teacher must be prepared

to meet their own project deadlines, too. First drafts must be checked and returned to students in a timely manner in order for students to be able to make corrections in the subsequent lessons. Furthermore, the teacher should allow sufficient class time for the project because the students will require a significant amount of guidance to be able to create valid tests.

The teacher's final responsibility is ensuring that the tests are accurately graded. As with all steps of the project, clear instructions should be given before the students begin grading. The instructor should oversee the corrections in real-time and address student confusion and questions as they arise. Additionally, to ensure that the students are getting the most language exposure from the project as possible, students should be encouraged to correct mistakes on the tests. "The test has not lost its value as teaching material the moment it has been prepared and taken by the students. The correction and returning of the paper should be exploited by the teacher to reteach what has not been learned, and also to help the learners to evaluate themselves" (Smith, 1990).

Survey

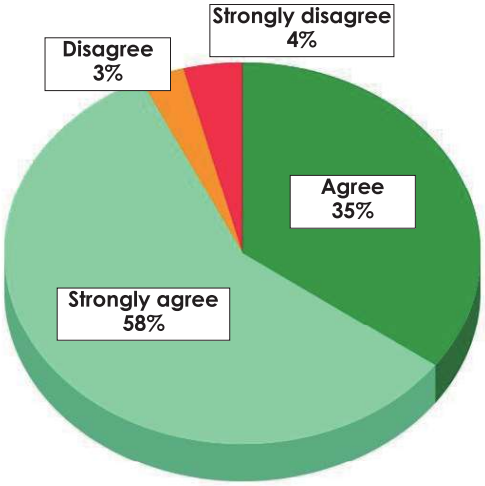
To gauge this project's effect on student motivation and language learning, a survey was also conducted after the exams in both trials. The survey was kept very simple, containing only five questions, each on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The students were also provided a space to provide any comments or feedback that they wanted to share. The questions were as follows:

	Strongly Agree(4)◀——▶(1)Strongly Disagree			
I enjoyed making the test.	4	3	2	1
Making the test myself was educational.	4	3	2	1
I felt more motivated for this test than other usual tests.	4	3	2	1
I spent more time preparing for this test than other tests.	4	3	2	1
I would like to try this again in the future.	4	3	2	1

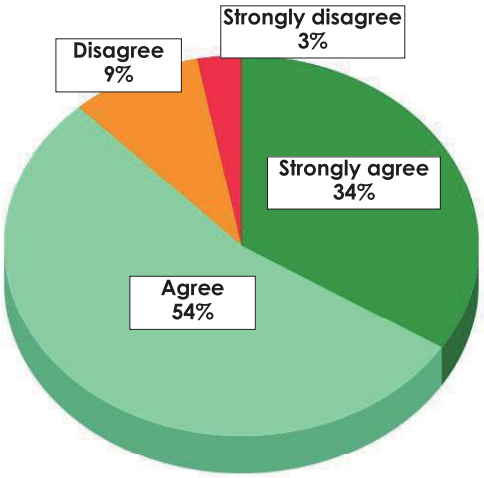
Results

The results from the first survey were positive overall despite the complications and difficulties that came up along the way. 93 percent of the participauts agreed or strongly agreed that making the tests was enjoyable, with four percent replying that they did not enjoy it at all. Similarly, 88 percent said that they felt that the project was educational, and 91 percent expressed an increase in motivation. Furthermore, 82 percent said that they invested more time preparing for this test than their usual tests, and 81 percent expressed interest in trying this again. The following charts represent the overall results of the first attempt for all four classes:

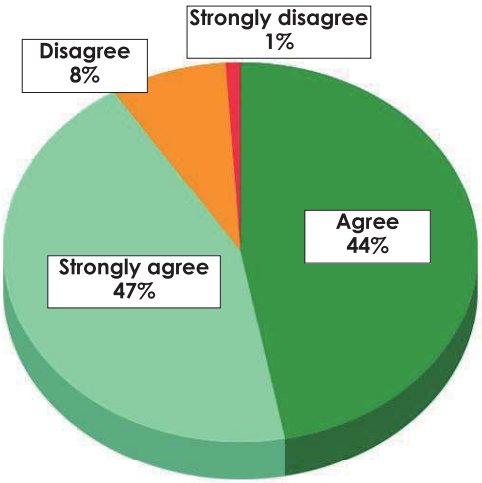
1. I enjoyed making the test.



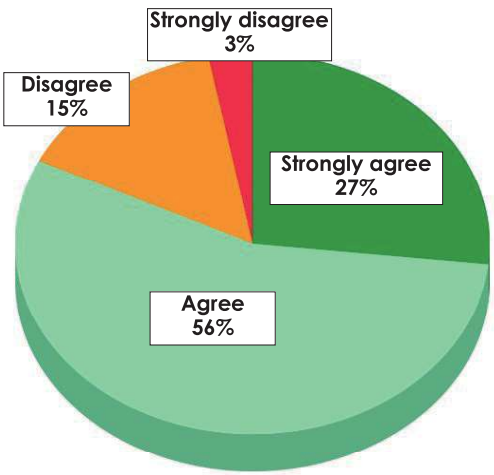
2. Making the test myself was educational.



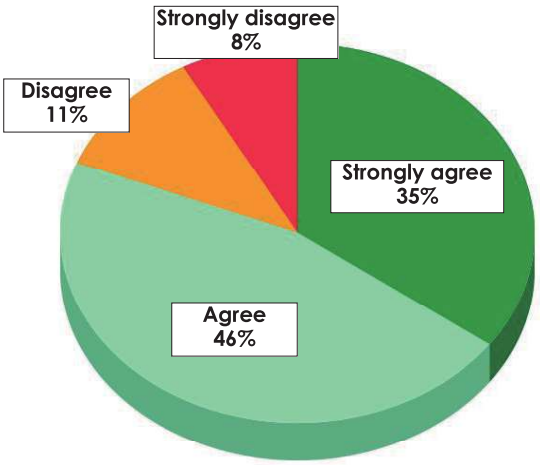
3. I felt more motivated for this test than other usual tests.



4. I spent more time preparing for this test than other tests.



5. I would like to try this again in the future.



Samples of POSITIVE comments included:

"This is the first test I've ever made. It made me much more excited and motivated than usual."

"Because we had to make the tests ourselves, we had to think about what we wanted to express and figure out how to do so in English. It was very beneficial."

"Rather than simply answering the test questions, we had to be more engaged in understanding them. I really like that."

Samples of NEGATIVE comments included:

"Making the copies got expensive, and there were many misprints and errors, which made things difficult."

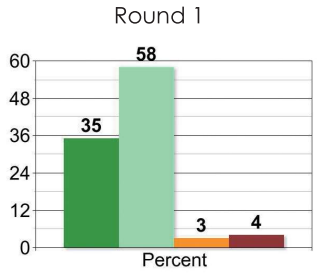
"Because we made the test as a class, I heard that some people were sharing answers beforehand. I don't think it's fair that they receive the same grade."

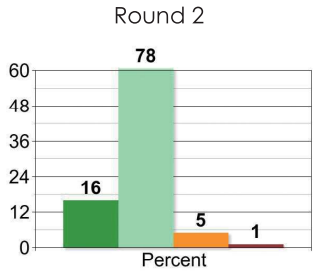
"Questions that required full sentences could have had various possible answers. I wish the teacher would have graded those answers instead."

The survey results from the second testing project, which included several changes and improvements, reflected a slight increase in the number of positive answers and comments. The following graphs compare the data from the same survey questions for both trials.

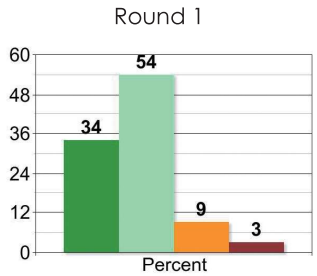
(From left to right, the bars represent Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree)

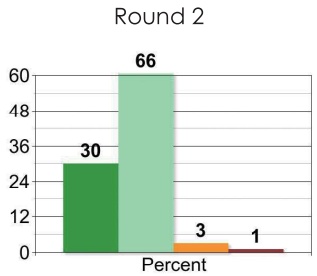
1. I enjoyed making the test.



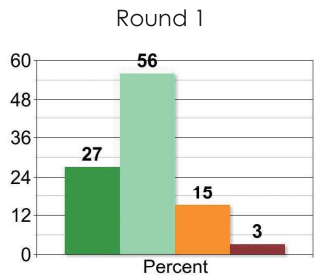


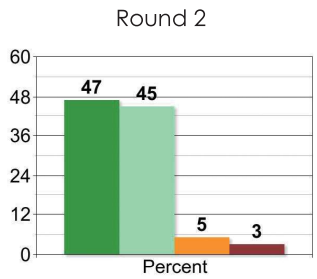
2. Making the test myself was educational.



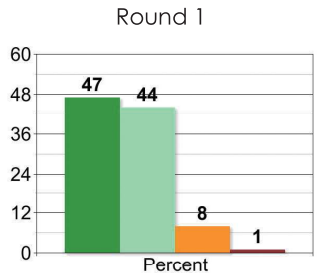


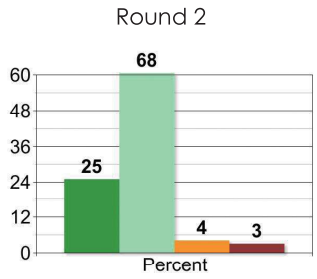
3. I felt more motivated for this test than other usual tests.



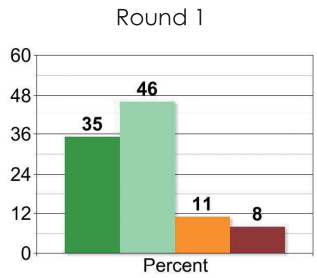


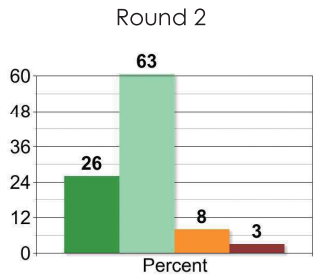
4. I spent more time preparing for this test than other tests.





5. I would like to try this again in the future.





Conclusion

After addressing the problems from the first attempt, such as the length, accuracy, and overall quality of the tests, complaints about test length dropped from 20 percent to only one percent. In addition, complaints about test difficulty fell from 21 percent to only five percent. Overall, the goal of increasing student motivation for learning English was achieved, as over 80 percent of the participants reported increased motivation for studying in comparison to standard tests. The second goal of increasing student studying time by using the test itself as a method of providing increased reinforcement of the learning material was also successful. In the second trial, 96 percent of the students reported spending more time preparing for this test than other standard tests. At the same time, the students were able to enjoy themselves as they learned, as over 90 percent of the participants said they enjoyed making the tests in both attempts. These results also support conclusions from similar research conducted by other researchers, including Irene Iwasaki (Iwasaki, 2008), Lionel Kaufman (Kaufman, 1993 and 2000), and Kari Smith (Smith, 1990).

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