

Video Talk 1: The Principles of Assessing Key Competences

A warm welcome to this session on the principles behind competence-based assessment. My name is Janet Looney and I am the director of the European Institute of Education and Social Policy, based in Paris. In this video, we are going to talk about the principles behind competence-based assessment – that is, the principles that are important to keep in mind when assessing how learners apply their knowledge and skills to solve real world problems, as well as their transversal skills such as creativity and initiative.

It may be helpful to first start by outlining the three major approaches to student assessment, and the purpose of each. The first of these is “summative assessment”, also referred to as assessment *of* learning. Summative assessment refers to tests or examinations that are used to make summary judgments of student performance. These are the tests that students take at the end of a learning unit, at the end of a school year, or at the end of secondary school.

The second approach to assessment is known as “formative assessment”. This is sometimes referred to as assessment *for* learning. Formative assessment is the kind of “real time” assessment teachers use to understand how well learners understand a new concept or are to apply a new skill – and provide the learner with feedback on what they still need to do to meet the learning objective. The teacher may adjust teaching approaches to meet learning needs more effectively. An assessment is considered as formative once the gap has been closed and the student has met the objective.

Both summative and formative assessments are focused on whether students have achieved the learning objectives outlined in curriculum and standards. These assessments are typically criterion-referenced. In other words, there are specific criteria by which to gauge learning performance.

A third kind of assessment is student self-assessment, also known as ipsative assessment, which focuses on the student’s personal development. Progress is measured against the student’s prior performances – so it is a self-referential approach. This approach is particularly appropriate for key competences that do not have a pre-defined learning objective – such as transversal skills of creativity, initiative, or the constructive management of feelings.

Any assessment, whether summative, formative or self-assessment, needs to be valid, reliable and fair.

- Validity means that the assessment effectively measures what it is intended to measure.
- Reliability refers to the extent to which the assessment is consistent and accurate over time, or across a large number of students.
- Fairness refers to the need to consider factors that could influence the assessment – such as a noisy environment that interrupts the student concentration, or assessments that systematically favour one group over another, such as girls vs. boys.

Assessments of key competences, whether formative, summative or self-assessments, need to capture the student's:

- Reasoning processes
- Understanding of interconnections
- Ability to perform complex tasks
- Attitudes, such as curiosity, perseverance and motivation to learn.

More traditional assessments that measure discrete bits of knowledge are not effective for measuring how students are able to make connections between ideas, to solve problems, or their attitudes toward learning.

Newer approaches to summative assessment, such as portfolios, ICT-based assessments that can measure the quality open-ended performances, or simulations showing how students carry out a complex process, are more appropriate.

Classroom-based formative assessments are well suited to teaching key competences. Teachers may uncover how well students understand complex concepts through extended dialogues that build on a series of questions. Questions should be designed to reveal possible misconceptions. Teachers should avoid “yes” or “no” questions or questions that stress recall. They may also provide feedback with specific suggestions on what learners need to do to improve their work and meet learning goals. Feedback may be scaffolded. That is – teachers provide as much or as little information as the student needs to progress to next steps. These techniques all support the development of higher-order thinking skills.

Students may also develop greater autonomy as they learn to assess their own progress toward specific key competence objectives, or their personal progress in developing transversal competences, such as creativity and initiative. Here, portfolio assessments or other tools that help students to track progress over time are very useful.

Any kind of assessment, including summative assessment will be most effective when based on multiple measures over time. This is because no single test or classroom interaction on one day can really capture what a student is able to do.

To sum up, there are three major approaches to assessment. These include summative assessments – or assessments *of* learning; formative assessments – or assessment *for* learning, and self-assessments tracking progress against prior performances. These assessments need to be valid, reliable and fair. They also need to be able to capture students' reasoning processes and problem-solving skills.

Later in this module I will be providing you with a few examples of good practice in assessing key competences. Remember that you can access further reading and related resources to this session from our course library. We also encourage you to visit the course forum where you can take part in an ongoing discussion linked to this topic with fellow participants and instructors.