Frequently Asked Questions

The following is a list of frequently asked questions related to the various aspects of assessing and teaching speaking in the classroom.

How will assessment of speaking affect my teaching?

We often ask how instruction will affect our assessment and by this we usually mean that appropriate instruction should precede any assessment of what is studied. However, here we pose a slightly different question by asking how teaching will be affected by the assessment of speaking. It is a common belief that assessment affects instruction inasmuch as what we assess is what we teach (in the research literature, this is variously called the washback effect, the backwash effect, curricular alignment, teaching to the test, etc.). Thus, having the tools to assess speaking may lead to our devoting more time and energy to teaching and practicing speaking.

How should I organize the individual assessment in my regular teaching?

Lessons in which students work independently – either alone or in groups – provide the perfect opportunity for individual and/or group assessment. You could call up the student(s) to be assessed while the rest of the class is working on individual or group activities or assignments. When assessing student's oral presentations, the rest of the class can be the audience. In this case, you may want to have the students themselves give feedback on the presentation they saw and heard. Although student feedback may differ from the feedback provided by the teacher, students can learn from one another. Furthermore, having students also give feedback strengthens their own understanding of what is involved in the task.

What is the role of the teacher/assessor?

Within the context of the performance tasks included in this kit, the assessor may assume different roles. In one context, the teacher/assessor assumes a dual role, both taking part in the interaction and assessing student performance. The main advantage of the teacher participating in the interaction is that privacy for the student is ensured, and his or her performance is not affected by the level of other students. An additional advantage is that the teacher is often able to understand student speech, while peers may not. A disadvantage may be that the teacher/assessor is simultaneously both interlocutor and assessor. Furthermore, power relations between the student and teacher/assessor are unequal and there is an unequal distribution of rights and responsibilities. In another context, the teacher’s role is limited to being the assessor only, since the student speaks to another student or group of students. The advantages here are that the teacher can focus on student performance. Furthermore, when only the students themselves are involved in the interaction, the language level is similar and the interaction may possibly be more realistic and lifelike. However, individual personality and language level differences may actually inhibit some students.
**Why are there so many tasks to choose from?**

It is believed that students work better and are more motivated when allowed choice. Furthermore, different tasks suit different students. Finally, by providing a range of types of spoken texts, it is possible to collect a broad array of evidence and information regarding students' speaking ability.

**Can the tasks in the kit be changed or can additional tasks be added?**

You should feel free to make any changes or adaptations you feel would ensure that the task better suits your intended purpose, instructional context, and target population. For example, the kit provides suggestions for questions that you could ask to encourage speech. For example, should you find yourself in a situation where the conversation goes in a direction you did not anticipate or where speech has not been elicited by the questions suggested in the unit, you should be prepared to add your own questions.

**What are the limitations of performance tasks?**

Although mostly advantageous in classroom assessment, these tasks have a drawback in that they are relatively time-consuming. This is a disadvantage mainly when first using them. It should be noted that once the use of performance tasks becomes incorporated into routine teaching and assessment, they are less time-consuming.

**How can I help my students prepare for the oral assessment session?**

Since the assessment tasks are designed to blend with instruction, there should be no need for specific preparation. However, it is recommended that you work with your students on the types of tasks they will be performing in the assessment. Discuss the topics that are included in the assessment tasks, and focus instruction on the grammatical and lexical requirements of the various tasks. To this end, you may wish to use the instructional activities that have been included in the kit. These instructional activities can be used in the classroom since they are or may be adapted to the target student population. When assigning the assessment tasks to your students, you may wish to give them time to prepare for the assessment session; the amount of time given would depend on your assessment purpose, your students' needs, and the type of information that is to be collected.

**How long should the assessment session be?**

A common belief is that the session should take as long as it takes for the assessor to form a confident judgment of student ability. A quote from one teacher best exemplifies the issue: "My test was over when the students had nothing more to contribute, they felt happy with what had been said and I had a big enough sample for me to be able to assess them. In case it happened that one of the pair spoke much less than the other I always asked him/her some questions to make sure I elicited enough language from both the participants" (Betakova, 2009, p. 5). Suggestions for the length of sessions accompany some of the tasks; however, feel free to adapt the time frame to your needs and instructional context.
Oral assessment is sometimes perceived as being threatening. How can the perceived threat be reduced?

Research has shown that some students find the requirement of speaking in L2 very threatening and are thus often apprehensive about it. Horwitz (2001, p. 113) has defined communication apprehension as a "...type of shyness characterized by fear or anxiety about communicating with people." Osboe, Fujimura and Hirschel (2007) suggest that "...teacher behavior plays a large role in how confidently students use the L2 in class" (p. 35). They suggest that small group discussions and topics that are familiar to students can enhance the level of comfort in speaking English. Providing students with opportunities to practice speaking reduces their anxiety and stress.

In particular, part of the success of the assessment session rests on the teacher's ability to create the right atmosphere, and "...it is a question of human personality...It is a challenge to the interviewer to create the right atmosphere in a very short time, just as it is a challenge to the student to respond to it" (Underhill, 1987, p. 45). In order to ensure a non-threatening environment, it is important to smile, be relaxed, and be patient. Show an interest in what the student says, rephrase instructions using simple English or L1, and always give positive encouragement.

When should the grade be given?

The decision as to whether to give the grade immediately at the end of the assessment session will depend on your context. If you feel that you have a representative sample of a student's ability and are able to assess performance on the spot, give the grade as soon as the assessment session ends. Many teachers may prefer to record student performance for future assessment. You should be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of each of the two approaches and make the decision after weighing each in the specific context.

How often should speaking be assessed?

This question should be addressed within your own particular educational setting and be based on your purpose and your student population. In general, since speaking is an important skill to work on with the students, and since assessment information influences your teaching, it is recommended that you assess students at least once every semester. It should be noted that the frequency of assessment is dependent on the purpose. For example, if the purpose is summative assessment, it may be sufficient to assess students at the end of a given unit or period of time. If the purpose is formative, it may be necessary to assess students during a period of instruction. If the purpose is to monitor progress, it would be necessary to carry out a number of assessments and analyze performance in terms of trends across time.

What accommodations should be provided to students with special needs?

Students with special needs have often been allowed accommodations such as extended time on tests, having tests read aloud to them, and in extreme cases, oral testing.

Since both a lack of time constraints and oral testing are inherent in the kit, it is, by its very nature, appropriate for use in the assessment of speaking among students with special needs who may need extra time or who have all their tests read out to them. Nonetheless, following is
a list of suggestions you may wish to implement when assessing the speaking of students with special needs:

- Allow time for the students to become comfortable with the assessment setting by reducing the level of distraction in the room, reducing anxiety, and ensuring that they are at ease.
- Allow time in advance for students to think about the tasks they will be given and provide pre-discussion, pre-writing, and/or pre-reading time if necessary.
- Space out the sessions for those students with attention difficulties, or allow for two sessions on a given task.
- Provide a supportive atmosphere in which students feel free to ask for repetition, and repeat instructions, words, sentences, etc. whenever the student makes such a request.
- Break the task down into component parts and provide instructions for one part at a time.
- Combine both auditory and visual stimuli (e.g., in addition to saying what you wish to say, write it on the board whenever possible).
- Recognize, praise, and reinforce students' performance throughout the session.
References and Further Reading


Glossary

This glossary provides working definitions of terms as they appear in this kit. The purpose is to create a common set of terms that are understood by all those using the kit and based on the meanings as they were intended by the designers of this kit.

Alignment – The alignment of instructional activities and assessment tasks implies that they both address the intended learning goals. This alignment between instructional activities and assessment tasks provides clearly defined goals, well-designed activities that are relevant and in line with the assessments task, and assessment criteria for giving feedback on student performance and planning future instruction.

Assessor – Someone who listens to the student speaking and makes an evaluative judgment on what he or she hears. An assessor is aided by predefined guidelines such as rating scales, which serve as a basis for making these judgments.

Colloquial – Characteristic of or appropriate to ordinary, familiar, or informal speech (particularly words and phrases) that is characteristic of conversation.

Interactive – Involving each of two or more persons, acting upon or in close relations with each other (e.g., within a conversation).

Interlocutor – Someone who takes part in a dialogue or a conversation.

Interviewer – A person who talks to a student in an oral test and controls to a greater or lesser extent the direction and topic of the conversation. While exercising this control, he or she may nonetheless yield the initiative to the student to redirect the discussion to another area.

Planned vs. Unplanned Discourse – Planned discourse has been thought out and organized prior to its expression while unplanned discourse lacks forethought and organization. There are various levels of planning and therefore planned discourse and unplanned discourse are considered as two poles on a continuum.

Prosody – The melody and rhythm of spoken language.

Register – Suiting language to a particular purpose or to a particular social setting.

Vocabulary – The total bank of words and phrases of a particular language.

Pronunciation – the production of sounds that are used to make meaning and include attention to stress. Stress is important on the word level – multisyllabic words have one or more syllables that are stressed; and on the sentence level – the most important words are stressed (usually these are content words such as nouns, principal verbs, adjectives and/or adverbs).