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## Module 22: Assessment

### Assessment (Part 2)

22.1 Accuracy Vs. Fluency

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#### 22.1 Accuracy vs. Fluency

Accuracy in speaking happens when sentences have correct grammar and vocabulary. Speed is not factored in. In children, accuracy of their native language comes after fluency, with children being able to speak freely despite their limited vocabulary and incorrect grammar (e.g., '*mommy I goed to play.*'). As children develop, they learn to speak their language more accurately. In foreign language classrooms, when focusing on accuracy, traditional teachers use the Audiolingual or Grammar Translation Method and give a lot of exercises and drills in the classroom. If teachers have too much focus on accuracy-based activities, learners will find themselves struggling to communicate with native speakers, which was a major factor in teachers moving away from the sole use of those traditional methods.

Just because someone speaks fluently does not mean that they speak accurately. Fluency in language learning implies expressing ideas easily and with appropriate speed, even if that speech contains grammatical or vocabulary errors. Speakers with strong fluency can make errors, but those errors do not impede meaning, and they are easily understood by the listener.

To ensure that your students have a good balance of accuracy and fluency, you need to use techniques that address both principles. For example, to focus on fluency, create communicative activities such as role plays for students to work on producing meaning in spontaneous ways. To practice accuracy, you can incorporate grammar awareness into your classes. Note that when the speaker is focusing on accuracy, their fluency may be affected, and vice-versa.



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Most importantly, teachers should focus on the needs of the students, aims of the course, and wants of the institution when deciding how much fluency or accuracy practice should be incorporated. It is this desire for a balance of accuracy and fluency that led to the development of our contemporary teaching approaches and methods, which we discuss next.

### **22.2 Reading Assessment**

Regardless of whether you teach children or adults, some form of assessment will be part of your lesson planning. As teachers, we need to constantly evaluate not only our students but also ourselves and whether our lesson plan objectives are being met. Therefore, it is important that we differentiate assessment from testing. For our purposes, assessment refers to a wide variety of ways that teachers collect information on students' language ability and achievement, whereas testing is a subset of assessment that seeks to formally measure students' achievements. Your students may or may not have to take tests, but any good language teacher uses continual and various forms of assessment.

### **22.3 Assessment of Vocabulary and Grammar**

To ensure validity, any formal or informal assessment of vocabulary or grammar must reflect activities that have been practiced in the classroom. For instance, if you have a purely communicative classroom where grammar is addressed in an indirect way, it is not fair to test students with cloze exercises that they have never done in class before. With this in mind, vocabulary can be assessed by giving the target vocabulary word in a sentence and giving multiple choice answers from which the student must choose the correct synonym, antonym, or definition. Vocabulary and grammar can also be assessed in the context of speaking and short-answer or essay writing activities.

Within the context of a speaking task, grammatical accuracy and/or vocabulary use may constitute a part of each student's overall oral skills assessment, as defined by a carefully prepared rubric.

In written form, grammar can be tested with discrete cloze exercises. For example, students who have learned the difference between the simple present and present continuous could be given sentences with the unconjugated (bare) verb in parentheses. Students must then decide which form of the verb is required and write the correct conjugation in the blank spaces based on the given context.

Some teachers believe assessing grammar within writing assignments is better because meaningful context is inherent. For example, if you are testing the students' knowledge of the past simple tense, you could ask them to write a paragraph about what they did last weekend.

The use of visuals is another assessment technique for either vocabulary or grammar, where students must match an action to a picture. For instance, if you are targeting students' understanding of prepositions of location, have them mark a picture that matches the



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meaning within a given sentence.

Another way to assess specific vocabulary or grammar can involve error analysis or correction. This type of assessment includes Grammaticality Judgment Tests (in which a list of sentences is provided, some of which include lexical or grammatical errors, and the students must identify which have errors and which are correct) and Error Correction (in which a list of sentences or a passage contains several errors to be corrected by the students). This type of assessment is particularly useful when teaching writing so that students can become more skilled at correcting errors in their own written work.

### **22.4 Assessing Receptive Skills**

Because listening and reading are receptive skills, they share similarities in testing methods. Commonly, listening and reading skills are assessed by presenting students with a text/audio followed by questions. In both listening and reading, many of the same sub-skills can be assessed with similar techniques and questions. For example, you can design questions that address main ideas, details, inferences, and critical response for both of these language skills. Naturally, however, there are important distinctions. Refer to the contents and video below to learn more about listening and reading sub-skills that can be tested as part of overall assessments for listening and reading skills:

#### **Sample Listening Sub-Skills Commonly Assessed**

**Interpreting Intonation Patterns** – Recognizing surprise, shock, disbelief, or sarcasm on the part of a native speaker.

**Interpreting Spoken Structures** – For example, identifying tag, yes/no, or information questions from speaker intonation.

**Interpreting Discourse Signals** – Following the presentation and progression of ideas by listening for transition words and phrases, thought groups, speech pauses, stress, and intonation.

**Note-Taking Skills** – Listening for keywords and phrases and organizing spoken ideas/information. This is especially useful for students whose primary language goal involves academic performance in the second language.

**Identifying Pronunciation Features** – For example, listening for particular phonemes, or listening for reductions, (e.g., “going to” pronounced as “gonna”).

**Dictation** – Interpreting speech to text; generally done with lower levels.

#### **Sample Reading Sub-Skills Commonly Assessed**



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**Main Ideas** – Students are asked about comprehension, or the gist, of the entire text or specific paragraphs. Appropriate question types are multiple choice and open-ended/short answer.

**Details** – Students are asked to find specific facts within the text. Question types include True/False/NI (no information/not given), multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, or chart/table completion.

**Text Organization** – Students are tested on comprehension of cohesion and coherence within the text. A common technique is to provide the student with an original sentence not found in the text but that is related to it, and then ask them where this would fit within a certain paragraph or passage from the text. This type of question can be found on the TOEFL test, so it is helpful for those planning on taking it.

**Vocabulary in Context** – Students are asked what a particular lexical item means in the context of the given text. Focus on choosing vocabulary from the text that has multiple meanings in English and be sure to include a distractor. Multiple choice and matching exercises are good question types for this purpose.

**Inference and Author's Purpose** – Students must draw conclusions from the text and provide an answer based on the information given. Accept multiple answers as correct since they are merely logical guesses. Multiple choice and short answer lend themselves to these types of questions.

**Pronoun Reference** – Students are tested on their knowledge of what head noun a particular pronoun reference. Multiple choice and fill-in-the-blank can be used here.

**Graph/Chart Interpretation** – Many types of questions can be used for this type of assessment activity.

**Critical Response** – Students must interpret, process, and synthesize information from the text using their own opinions and background knowledge. This is generally done through open-ended, free-response questions, where the answer is usually a few sentences to a paragraph in length.

### Assessment Tips

#### Ten Listening and Reading Assessment Tips

1. Make sure the language level (grammatical structures and lexis) corresponds to your students' ability.
2. Use text and/or audio of an appropriate length.
3. Use different types of listening tasks based on student need (e.g., monologues, conversations, lectures, TV/radio broadcasts, announcements, interviews, and instructions).
4. Use different types of reading tasks based on student need (e.g., work emails, news articles, academic essays, stories, etc.)
5. Whenever possible, use authentic, real-world texts and audio.
6. Choose topics that are relevant and connected to what has been covered in class.
7. Avoid controversial topics or those that require specific background knowledge in order for the text to be understood and questions to be answered correctly and completely.
8. In reading, add paragraph and/or line numbers to facilitate finding answers.
9. If assessing listening, avoid video that contains subtitles, as that also tests reading.
10. Grammar and vocabulary should be tested within the context of a reading or listening.



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### 22.5 Assessing Speaking

Before assessing speaking skills, make sure students know how they will be tested and on what language concepts. Strive to create tasks that are as authentic as possible. The best assessments are based on tasks that mirror real-world contexts.

Try to conduct speaking assessments in a quiet, comfortable setting that is free of distractions. When possible, record your students so you can grade after class without the stress of doing it in real time. Anywhere from 2 to 15 minutes should yield a sufficient sample, which is determined by the language level of the students and the task being assessed.

Allow time for the student to warm up and prepare prior to the actual assessment task. Limit teacher talk time and interference. Let the student do the majority, if not all, of the communicating. Finally, score speech samples according to a predefined rubric, either holistically or analytically. Watch a few minutes of the sample speaking assessments in the following videos from *Cambridge English*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QwIBZc9MrJA&t=35s>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S\\_hUXoKYq6g&t=113s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S_hUXoKYq6g&t=113s)

*The videos demonstrated a few methods for oral assessment. Listed below is a non-exhaustive list of common examples:*

- **Oral Interview:** The teacher interviews the student directly by asking a series of questions which increase in overall difficulty. This type is useful for initial student placement in a class or program level but has the disadvantage of the interviewer being in control of the speech elicited, and of lacking an element of spontaneity.
- **Peer or Group Discussions:** Usually focusing on a topic related to the relevant instruction, such discussions are considered a very reliable measure of student oral production as it mirrors a natural, authentic conversation that would take place in the real world. This is a popular assessment instrument because it allows for more than one student to be evaluated at once, and it also has the positive effect of promoting group cohesion and dynamics.
- **Voice Recording/Speech Samples:** Students are provided with a written, aural, or visual stimulus and must respond appropriately, generally within a time limit. The advantage here is that evaluation of oral production can be focused on specific sub-skills based on the prompt provided.
- **Oral Presentations:** These serve as an effective evaluation instrument for academic and business English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as these activities reflect real-world tasks and incorporate body language in the final evaluation. Students should also be encouraged to include visual aids, audience handouts, and allow for Q&A time in order to make this a truly integrated speaking task.
- **Role Plays:** Generally done in pairs, each student is given a role based on topics and materials covered in class. To be effective as an assessment, students must have become used to performing in this manner as a regular class activity. One



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drawback is that less outgoing students may not perform at their true level of acquisition.

### 22.6 Speaking Rubrics

In addition to the types of oral assessment you can use, you also need to consider the speaking sub skills you will assess. If we want to build strong and conscious second language speakers, we should not just tell them to “speak” in class. Rather we should teach, raise awareness, and assess them on the sub-skills of speaking. You can think of the sub-skills (or micro skills) as the actions that one needs to do in order to achieve that major skill. When assigning and assessing speaking tasks, the use of a specific, pre-set rubric can help both teacher and student to focus on a number of sub-skills, which can be explained and graded within the rubric. Below is a non-exhaustive list of speaking sub-skills:

- **Organizing Ideas for Audience and Purpose** – Student presents ideas coherently and cohesively and does not stray from the topic or task.
- **Fluency**– The ability to speak with ease at a rate of speech comfortable to the listener, with a minimum of hesitation.
- **Pronunciation**– Clear and accurate production of sounds, use of proper syllable and sentence stress, correct timing of rhythm, and appropriate intonation patterns. •
- **Grammar and Vocabulary**– Use of appropriate structures, words, and phrases for a given task.
- **Communicative Competence**– In pair or group work, the student listens actively, initiates conversation, and maintains speech with peers; asks questions and responds appropriately; neither dominates nor says too little.

When using an [analytic rubric](#), the sub-skills you are assessing should be placed within the rubric so that your students are made aware of individual strengths and weaknesses. Placing emphasis on specific sub-skills which are the instructional focus (such as practicing interrupting, giving directions, summarizing information, etc.) by weighting those items higher is recommended.

### 22.7 Providing Speaking Feedback

One important part of using a rubric – and also of practicing more informal speaking in the classroom – is providing students with feedback. Most students want some form of feedback when practicing speaking, and it can be helpful for their language development when teachers provide corrective suggestions and/or praise. There are different methods for doing so, and no one method is objectively better than any other. For our purposes here, two important distinctions in oral feedback are immediate vs. delayed and corrective vs. positive feedback.

#### Immediate vs. delayed feedback

*Delayed feedback* is feedback provided after the fact, once a student has finished speaking. It allows a teacher to provide constructive comments without interrupting student speech. This is more common when students are practicing formal speaking for extended periods (e.g., giving a presentation). The grading rubrics that we touched upon in the previous





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section are a form of delayed feedback.

*Immediate feedback* is feedback provided at the moment something is uttered by a student, which has the benefit of directing student attention to an utterance right after it is spoken. Immediate feedback may disrupt the flow of conversation, but it can be beneficial because students can immediately apply any corrective feedback. It is up to individual teachers to decide when feedback is needed and whether providing it would hinder fluency or the practice of communication, and you can elicit preferences from your students regarding immediate and delayed feedback.

Whether providing delayed or immediate feedback, it is important to strike a balance between corrective and positive feedback.

### **Corrective vs. positive feedback**

Both delayed and immediate feedback can include *positive feedback*, which is praise for correct or well-spoken utterances or speech, something that can be motivating for learners. Positive feedback is more effective when it is more specific and might include something like highlighting correct grammar or improvement in pronunciation. It can also create a supportive classroom environment by encouraging students to give praise to their peers after group speaking activities. Depending on the students' culture, it might be a good idea to gauge students' attitudes about being praised in private or in front of the class.

The alternative to positive feedback is *corrective feedback*, which consists of the teacher highlighting (and possibly correcting) student errors in speech, such as mispronunciations or grammatical errors. There is some debate as to the effectiveness of corrective feedback; however, most researchers and instructors believe that some form of corrective feedback can be beneficial for English language learners. In any case, many students expect and appreciate corrective feedback on spoken output, and many schools require it in some form.

Some corrective feedback techniques include the use of prompts, which is when the teacher highlights an error without correction, and reformulations, which is when a teacher highlights and provides correction. Corrective feedback can also have varying degrees of explicitness, depending on how specific the feedback is. Examples of each kind of corrective feedback are provided in **Figure 1**.

**Figure 1.** Types of corrective feedback



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	PROMPTS	REFORMATIONS
<b>Implicit</b> ↑ .....	<b>Clarification requests</b> S: We very happy yesterday. T: I don't understand. What do you mean?	<b>Simple reformulation</b> S: We very happy yesterday. T: Oh, I see. You <i>were</i> very happy.
	<b>Repetition</b> S: We very happy yesterday. T: We very happy yesterday <i>(The teacher says 'we' with rising intonation, perhaps using a facial expression or hand gesture to indicate the problem area).</i>	
<b>Explicit</b> ← .....	<b>Elicitation</b> S: We very happy yesterday. T: We <i>(long pause accompanied by gesture/expression)</i> very happy yesterday. OR T: We very happy? <i>(The teacher accompanies the prompt with a gesture or expression.)</i>	<b>Explicit correction</b> S: We very happy yesterday. T: You should say, "We <i>were</i> very happy yesterday." <i>(The teacher stresses the corrected form.)</i>
	<b>Metalinguistic clue</b> S: We very happy yesterday. T: Where is your verb?	<b>Explicit correction with metalinguistic clue</b> S: We very happy yesterday. T: Remember that every sentence needs a verb. We <i>were</i> happy yesterday.

Finally, while much research has been done on the relative effectiveness of different forms of feedback for student speech, there is no definitive answer on whether one technique is more effective than another. As such, each teacher should experiment with different types of feedback and corrective techniques with different situations, learners, and teaching contexts. The most important thing is that your students understand and are comfortable with the feedback you provide for them.

For a more expansive discussion of why and how you can provide feedback for speaking activities, see the following link:

Giving Feedback on Speaking (from Cambridge University Press):

[https://www.cambridge.org/elt/blog/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Cambridge Press\\_Whitepaper\\_Feedback\\_Speaking\\_2018.pdf](https://www.cambridge.org/elt/blog/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Cambridge Press_Whitepaper_Feedback_Speaking_2018.pdf)

## 22.8 Assessing Writing

There are several types of written assessments you can use to evaluate your students.

Listed below are some common examples:

- **Portfolio:** A *portfolio* is used to evaluate several pieces of student writing produced over a period of time. It is useful for showing the stages in a student's growth as a writer and for acquisition of rhetorical writing processes. If done, make sure to





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have students do regular self- reflection of their skills in order to build awareness of their strengths and weaknesses.

- **Guided Writing:** *Guided writing* asks that students use some type of prepared content that is provided in a prompt as the basis for a final product. The background information can be in a table, chart, diagram, or some other form. If you give your students this type of task, make sure your instructions are clear and detailed, that they specify the form, length, and requirements of the written product, and that you let them know how and what they will be graded on.
- **Freewriting:** *Freewriting* provides students with a prompt and asks that they create a response based on language skills and knowledge accumulated to date.
- **Peer Assessment:** As the name suggests, *peer assessment* is where students are given feedback from their classmates. It is a useful tool for building student self-awareness and confidence in writing skills; if students can identify problems and errors in a peer's writing, they are exhibiting an understanding of the concepts behind the task. Generally, if using peer assessment, only use it as a partial component of the overall evaluation (i.e., make sure you provide feedback to the writer as well), and that you are the determiner of the final grade.
- **Self-assessment:** During *self-assessment*, the student evaluates his or her own work and progress. This usually takes the form of a writing journal (open-ended writing on topics of student choice) or learning logs (self-directed record keeping of scope and sequence of outside writing activities). The teacher provides general feedback to the student but no error correction. This allows students to have a sense of ownership over their learning process.

As with assessment in all of the four language skills, you also need to consider the sub-skills you will assess. Writing and speaking share some of the same sub-skills. Listed below are some common sub-skills assessed in writing. Compare this list to that of speaking.

- **Organizing Information Appropriately for Task and Audience** – The prompt is directly addressed and the writer presents his or her ideas in a coherent and cohesive manner according to the guidelines of the task.
- **Development of Ideas** – The writer offers sufficient explanation, details, and examples to fully illustrate his or her ideas to the reader.
- **Grammar and Vocabulary** – Clause/phrase/sentence structure and word choice/form are appropriate for a given task and reflect what was learned in the classroom.
- **Editing and Revision Skills** – If applicable, the writer has responded to peer and/or teacher feedback to address any weak areas and improve the final product.
- **Mechanics** – Spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and formatting follow the conventions of the second language.

In addition to selecting the type and sub-skills for assessment, there are other important factors required to create a successful test or task. The design of good writing tests/tasks involves four basic elements. These elements are outlined below.



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- **Directions:** The instructions to the students should clearly specify the expected written product, the required amount of writing, length of time allotted, resources available to the test taker during the test, and a grading scheme/point allotment.
  - **Prompt:** The actual writing task is accessible, clearly and easily understood, relevant to and based on what students have done in class, can be completed in the time allowed, and produces the type of writing you are assessing.
  - **Expected Response:** The teacher should be able to articulate what he or she expects the students to do with the task. This must be clearly communicated to them.
  - **Rubric Evaluation:** Similar to speaking, writing is generally evaluated using an analytic or holistic rubric. A holistic rubric is one that assigns a single score based on the evaluator's impression of the written product as compared to a scaled set of proficiency descriptors. An analytic rubric, on the other hand, evaluates sub-skills separately and assigns a numerical value to each based on a pre-determined scale.

### 22.9 Providing Writing Feedback

Writing feedback tends to put less immediate pressure on teachers because it is usually delayed (i.e., completed texts are graded outside of class). However, it can be difficult to provide concise, comprehensible feedback for student writing.

Analytic rubrics are common and valid methods of assessing second language writing, and they can be very useful for grading and providing focused feedback. To accompany rubrics, many teachers also chose to provide in-text comments to help guide student understanding of strengths and weaknesses on content (ideas, organization, etc.) and form (grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc.). For an example of an analytic writing rubric, see **Appendix A**.

#### *Tips for writing rubrics:*

- Be sure you have a clear idea of what skills you want to assess in the assignment and include them in the rubric as your criteria. What you assess in the rubric should be the same as what your goal of the assignment is.
- Describe what successful completion of each criterion would look like. Be sure to describe things that are observable. Use action verbs. Avoid verbs like “know,” “understand,” or vague verbs like “do.”
- Remember to describe what you can reasonably expect from the level of your students. For example, you probably cannot expect beginning level students to write a paragraph with no grammatical errors. If a student has been in your class and learned what you have taught, they should be able to get full or close to full points on the rubric.

Regardless of what type of approach you use to assess students, consider the reasons behind testing them and what information you hope to learn through that assessment. Keeping that in mind will help you select the best type and method for that particular class or student.

#### **Appendix A – Sample Writing Rubric**



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### **Assignment: Paragraph #1**

You have brainstormed ideas and created an outline of your topic in class. **Goal:** Write a well-organized paragraph about your topic.

#### **Instructions:**

1. Write a topic sentence with a good controlling idea.
2. Write supporting sentences to explain your controlling idea.
3. Write a concluding sentence.
4. Choose a title for your paragraph.
5. Format this into a paragraph on the back of this page.
6. Check your spelling, capital letters, and punctuation.

**You will be graded like this:**

Criteria	Points	Comments
<b>Paragraph Format</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Written as a paragraph with a title</li><li>• Indented</li><li>• Double spaced</li><li>• Margins</li><li>• Handwriting is readable</li></ul>	0 – 5 pts	
<b>Organization</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Topic sentence has a good controlling idea</li><li>• Supporting sentences explain the controlling idea</li><li>• There is a concluding sentence</li></ul>	0 – 10 pts	
<b>Grammar and Spelling</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• All sentences have a subject and a verb</li><li>• All sentences have correct capitalization and punctuation</li><li>• There are no misspelled words</li></ul>	0 – 5 pts	
<b>Total:</b>		

**Link Exam**