

# ASSESSING SPEAKING



## Assessing Speaking

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Most of us speak every day - it’s part of who we are. We speak to our friends, our colleagues at work, even to ourselves.

When we speak our brain is engaged in a whole range of activities, from finding words to putting them together in a meaningful way. Because we speak to different audiences for different reasons and under different conditions we can look at speaking as being multi-dimensional. Since an assessment should try to replicate as closely as possible the real-life use of the language, in terms of the brain activity and the social conditions in which the language is used, a test of speaking needs to be as close to the context we are interested in as possible – so, if I want to test your ability to ask and follow directions, I should include this activity in my test.

There are many different approaches to assessing speaking. The most commonly used formats are: the interview – which can have one test taker and one or more examiners; the oral presentation - with one test taker speaking to a real or imagined audience; the interactive task - with at least two or more test takers working together, often to solve a problem or make a decision; the group discussion task – with 4 to 6 tests takers.

There are lots of different tasks that are used in tests of speaking. Some commonly used tasks are: describing something – this can be a picture, a place, a person, or even an action; telling a story – this can be based on a single picture, on a series of pictures or it can be simply invented; comparing things – this can be real objects, photographs or artwork, or even abstract concepts; giving some personal information – this might involve talking about your family, hobby, hometown or some experience you’ve have had – such as a holiday.

All of these can be done in different settings. They can be performed ‘live’ in front of one or more examiners. They can be recorded and evaluated later by one or more examiners. The test taker can also talk over a phone to an examiner or to a recording device. Yet another option is for the test taker to communicate via a computer or tablet, with the examiner either ‘live’ or working from a recording. In all these situations the examiners award a score or grade based on what they have observed. Just how they do that is the final part of the puzzle.

When the examiner is asked to award a score for a speaking test performance, it is usual practice that they use a set of descriptions of what to expect at different levels of ability. This set of descriptions is known as a rating scale. Some rating scales are simple in design and

simple to use, others are more complex. As with most things, the complex ones tend to be best but are more difficult to create and to use. Improvements in voice recognition technology, when combined with advances in computer power and speed as well as in our understanding of artificial intelligence, means that we are getting closer to having an interactive conversation with a machine, which would then rate your performance.

To create a useful test of speaking we need to think about all these things while at the same time making sure that the language the test tasks generate will reflect what we are planning to assess. Getting all this right is not an easy job as there are often conflicting demands which make the development of a speaking task a bit of a trade-off – for example, we might really want to assess a test taker's ability to interact face-to-face with an examiner but we may not have enough examiners to make this possible, so we have to compromise and use an alternative solution, such as a computer-based format where the test taker reacts to the tasks set by an on-screen avatar.

There are positives and negatives to all solutions, we just need to be aware of this complexity when designing a test of speaking.