

Evaluating Student Talk in the English Language Development Classroom

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Oral language instruction provides English learners with the foundation they need to develop literacy skills and achieve academic success. Research supports this contention (Williams, Stathis, & Gotsch, 2008), and increasingly, high quality English language development (ELD) programs are emphasizing oral language instruction. This new or renewed emphasis on oral language instruction creates challenges for ELD teachers, particularly in terms of determining how to select, implement, and manage purposeful and productive oral language activities. Various strategies to assist educators in these regards have been suggested (Williams, Stathis, & Gotsch, 2009). In addition to selecting, implementing, and managing oral language activities, ELD teachers are called upon to justify the investment of classroom time in oral language rehearsal, requiring them to assess the quality and authenticity of their students' oral language production. This article focuses on strategies and techniques to evaluate the oral language activities in ELD classrooms today.

Putting Oral Language in the Schedule

The first step in developing a strong oral language program, which includes an assessment component, is to make a specific time commitment in the daily classroom schedule for this activity. The more consistent and structured the time commitment for oral language activities, the more likely that oral language production will become an integrated part of the overall ELD curriculum. Planning the specific purpose or objective of the oral language activity leads naturally to the issue of selecting the appropriate assessment strategies and techniques. There are various ways to evaluate oral language production. However, before addressing this issue, several factors need to be considered, including the features of language, the distinction between oral and written language, language proficiency levels, and the importance of using multiple measures of assessment.



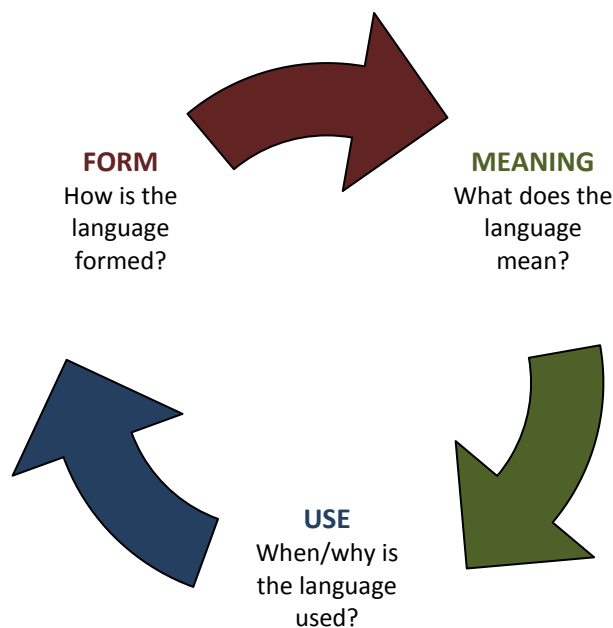
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Features of Language

While it may seem obvious, as a starting point, educators must agree upon a common definition of oral language. According to language experts Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), there are three critical aspects of both oral and written language: meaning, use, and form. First, an English learner must derive *meaning* from what is said (or read in the case of literacy development). Receptive oral language—listening—involves meaningful listening that results in comprehension. To assess whether the student has grasped the meaning of oral expression, the teacher must have evidence that the student understood what the speaker (e.g., the teacher or another student) expressed.

Next, speaking—the expressive oral dimension of language—requires the English learner to demonstrate the ability to use language to perform communicative tasks, which range from social to academic. Referred to as the *functions* of language (Halliday, 1975), purposeful uses of language might involve asking questions, describing, retelling, arguing, comparing and contrasting, or predicting. The English learner's capacity to manipulate language to complete these kinds of oral language tasks provides evidence of the student's mastery of the functions of language.

The final aspect of Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman's paradigm refers to language *form*. Today, educators commonly use the term *form* to describe grammatical structures. This includes the morphology (the study of word formation, including the origins and function of inflections and derivations) and syntax (the way in which words are put together to form phrases and sentences). Current ELD practices are aimed at providing students with sufficient exposure and practice in language forms to ensure their achievement of high levels of oral and written expression. Assessing grammatical accuracy in speaking helps educators determine the extent to which the student has internalized the morphological and syntactical features of language.



Researchers Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman discuss the relationship of meaning, use, and form in language.

Distinguishing Oral and Written Language

Another important factor to consider in assessing oral language is the distinction between oral and written language. Stated simply, educators must understand the oral language is not written language spoken aloud; they must distinguish between oral and written language in their assessment plans. Consider your most recent conversation with a colleague. If that conversation would have been transcribed, it probably would reveal thoughts expressed in phrases, incomplete sentences, and stops and starts. This is both normal and expected in native speech; to expect otherwise in the speech of English learners is inappropriate. Similarly, the vocabulary people use in oral discourse is often less specific and their syntax is more loosely organized. The structure of oral language tends to be less sophisticated because simple sentences are used more often than complex and compound sentence structures. Oral language is also peppered with pauses and “fillers” or discourse markers such as *well*, *uh-huh*, *okay*, and so forth (Brown & Yule, 1983). Thus, assessment must take into consideration the authenticity of oral language as distinguished from written language.

Students' Language Proficiency

Another factor that must be accounted for in assessing oral language is the proficiency level of the English learner. Most ELD teachers work with students who are grouped according to proficiency levels. Depending on the district, English learners may be grouped in up to six levels of language proficiency, ranging from Beginning to Advanced. California, which educates the largest number of English learners, describes five levels of English language proficiency: Beginning, Early Intermediate, Intermediate, Early Advanced, and Advanced. These proficiency levels correspond to students' language abilities in terms of all four communication skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing); however, the descriptions on the next page focus exclusively on oral language (i.e., listening and speaking) expectations at each of the levels.

Oral Language Expectations by Language Level

Level I: Beginning. A Beginning English learner's oral language is characterized by little or no speech or disconnected speech reflecting one or two words to express a thought. Language is more social than academic.

Level II: Early Intermediate. An Early Intermediate English learner's oral language generally reflects short, simple phrases and sentences. Language is more social than academic.

Level III: Intermediate. An Intermediate English learner's oral language is characterized by more complete, fluent sentences. Language is still more social than academic, but at this level students are beginning to use language for more academic purposes.

Level IV: Early Advanced and Level V: Advanced. At these levels, the student's oral language closes in on that of native speakers; Early Advanced and Advanced language reflects complete and complex sentences and a rich, growing vocabulary of academic language. Although it is usually students' reading and writing skills that lag at these two language levels, students will not write what they cannot articulate orally; thus, oral language continues to be critically important.

In assessing proficiency at these various levels, primary consideration in assessment must be given to what students can produce.

Assessment Mirrors Instruction: The Importance of Multiple Measures

Assessment is always a mirror of instruction. As such, if teachers use a variety of learning strategies to give their students opportunities to practice and rehearse oral language, then there should be multiple ways to measure the value and impact of the instructional strategies on students' language learning. This means that a variety of assessment should be used, including checklists, oral portfolios, interviews, recordings, rubrics, and so forth. If the evaluative measure is simple and easy to manage, it is likely that the measure will be used more frequently and with greater consistency.



Most teachers will not use cumbersome and/or time-consuming measures because they are loathe to usurp valuable class time.

Oral Assessments

Having considered factors such as the features of language, the distinction between oral and written language, language proficiency levels, and multiple measures of assessment, what are some ways to effectively and appropriately assess oral language in the classroom? Oftentimes, commercial ELD instructional programs include assessment strategies to assess oral language development with rubrics and checklists. Many school districts have also developed their own assessment tools. For example, in Arlington, Virginia (Arlington Public Schools, 1997), educators developed a relatively simple rubric to

assess students' speaking objectives. On the "Comprehension" skill component, the teacher checks "always," "most of the time," "much of the time," "sometimes," "rarely," or "with non-verbal cues only" in response to the prompt: "Comprehends speech at a normal rate of speed." Other oral assessments, including the TOEFL Independent Speaking Rubrics, are much more elaborate. Some of oral assessments involve self-assessment or peer assessment of oral language activities. For example, a self-assessment might be as quick and easy checklist such as the following:

Sample Self Assessment

<p>1. How much of the activity did you understand?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> All of it</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Most of it</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Some of it</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Very little of it</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> None of it</p> <p>2. Did you participate in the activity?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>3. Did you learn any new words?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>4. Is it easier for you to speak now?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>5. Can you ask for help if you need it?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>6. Can you tell someone what we did and learned in this lesson?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p>



A peer assessment can be quick and easy to administer. It is important to debrief with students after such assessments.

Sample Peer Assessment

1. I understood my partner.

- Very little
- Somewhat
- A lot

2. I helped my partner speak.

- Yes
- No

3. I learned something from my partner.

- Yes
- No

4. I think my partner understood me.

- Yes
- No

5. My partner asked me for help.

- Yes
- No

6. My partner helped me, too.

- Yes
- No

Many ELD teachers intuitively evaluate their lessons by reflecting on the success or failure of the lesson from the student's perspective. In other words, teachers might ask themselves whether or not the students seemed to understand the activity and succeed with the language content. While this approach is certainly time-tested, there are other ways to assess the success or failure of the lesson that provide more information to inform teaching. For example, one method is to analyze the lesson in terms of four dimensions: social, linguistic, academic, and metacognitive. This is easily accomplished by asking the following four questions:

➤ **Did my students grow socially?**

This question focuses on the social dimension of language. It aims to determine the extent to which the lesson helped students enhance their ability to express themselves orally in the social milieu. Assessing social growth allows the teacher to observe and assess subtle aspects of language such as proxemics (e.g., distance



between speakers in conversation), use of hand and facial gestures to support language, and taking turns (e.g., interrupting, interjecting, participating) in a two-way conversation. All of these aspects of language development are important indicators of students' mastery of the socio-pragmatic features of language, which are critical ways in which language proficiency is reflected.

➤ **Did my students grow linguistically?**

In other words, to what extent did the lesson help students better comprehend the linguistic features of the English language as reflected in their oral expression? Teachers want students to advance as a result of oral language practice in terms of general vocabulary acquisition as well as grammar and language usage. This question focuses on that sphere.

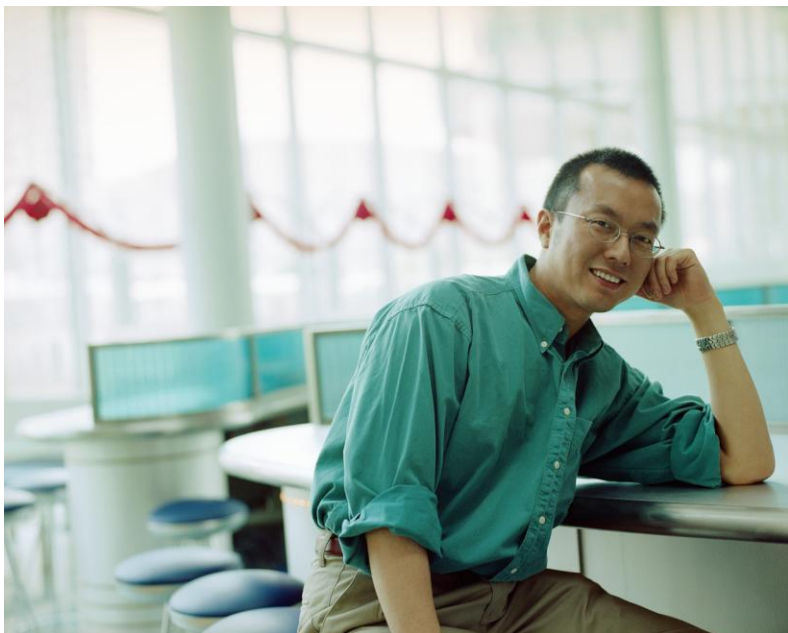
➤ **Did my students grow academically?**

To what extent did the lesson help students enhance their ability to express themselves orally in an academic setting? At the same time that students enhance their language skills, it is important to understand the extent to which students are growing academically. This question prompts information about the students' oral use of general purpose academic vocabulary as well as content-area academic language.

➤ **Did my students grow metacognitively?**

One of the goals of education is to create learner autonomy. Students develop greater language-learner autonomy by developing an awareness of *how* they learned *what* they learned in order to learn on their own. This question focuses on the students' metacognition and prompts the teacher to consider the extent to which the lesson aided students in reflecting on *how* and *what* they learned regarding oral expression.

There are many ways for teachers to measure English learners' oral language development.



By evaluating an oral language lesson through the lens of four dimensions—social, linguistic, academic, and metacognitive—teachers have four distinct ways to assess their students’ language development.

Teachers can use this four-question approach in assessing an entire class or individual students. The evaluation can be as effortless as the teacher answering each question using a simple rubric (e.g., 1 = little, 2 = somewhat, and 3 = a lot). Teachers also can use this four-question approach as an assessment activity that involves students. For example, following the lesson, the teacher can debrief with Intermediate-Advanced students by asking “Wh” questions. The questions below serve as an example of how this approach might be implemented.

Social: Who learned something new about their partner? What happens when you talk face to face with someone? How do you know it’s your turn to talk?

Language: What new words did you learn? What new phrases or expressions did you learn? What new sentence structures or grammar rules did you learn?

Academic: Who taught you something about this topic besides the teacher? What do you know about this topic that you didn’t know before? What is the

most interesting thing you learned? Why did you find that interesting?

Metacognitive: What did you learn that you can use at another time? How would you teach what you learned to someone else? Which do you prefer—learning by yourself or learning with a friend? Why?

By evaluating an oral language lesson through the lens of these four dimensions—social, linguistic, academic, and metacognitive—teachers have four distinct ways to assess their students’ language development.

Conclusion

It is crucially important for ELD teachers to assess their students’ oral expression. This assessment, like the instruction that precedes it, can come in many and varied forms, must be carefully planned, and should take into account factors such as the features of language, students’ level of language proficiency, and both teachers’ and students’ perspectives. There are many ways to systematically assess oral language development using simple and easy-to-use measures, including the ones described in this article. ❖

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