



Fun Ways to Assess Speaking

by [Elif Yasin Holocsi](#)

Speaking is not just about having lexical competency, saying the words correctly, and putting them in the right order. Most important, speaking doesn't just "come naturally" (Fox, 2019); in fact, it is considered to be one of the most challenging skills. Aside from being challenging, it could even be labeled as scary. Why is that so?

Before, during, and even after speaking, learners need to process many steps. During an interactive conversation, they need to be on alert at all times not to miss any important messages or cues. They need to prepare for what they are going to say. Even if it takes seconds, there is always preparation time necessary. During listening, the brain searches for the appropriate use of grammar, vocabulary, intonation, and even pronunciation, meanwhile thinking about fluency. Because of all the skills required while speaking, it is, indeed, a complicated, demanding, and challenging skill for learners.

Assessors may face some challenges, too, such as the number of learners, time, reliability, lack of available tests, and administrative issues. Heaton (1990) argued that speaking is an extremely difficult skill to test, as it is a skill far too complex to permit any reliable analysis. I'd like to argue that it might be more beneficial to our students if we do not focus on grading them but rather on how they can learn and develop better speaking skills, decreasing many negative factors in teaching speaking, such as exam anxiety, lack of motivation, and fear of mistakes.

To consider this approach, we must understand the difference between formative and summative assessment. Harlen & Deakin Crick (2002) defined formative assessment as "assessment *for* learning" and summative assessment as "assessment *of* learning." This means that formative assessment focuses on monitoring learners and helping them learn better with continuous feedback, whereas summative assessment focuses on how much learners have learned with a score or result.

Formative assessment, then, can help create a positive atmosphere while we evaluate our learners. Because learners have different learning styles and strategies and because variety creates a better learning environment, promoting formative speaking assessment with different tasks during formative assessment is an effective way to both teach and assess.

Following are various tasks to boost speaking for all levels; you can adjust the sample questions according to your students' proficiency levels. During these tasks, it is important for you to monitor your students to assist when needed. Most of these tasks allow you to achieve more than one objective at a time, and each task also creates a positive environment to promote comprehensible input and meaningful learning.

1. Interviews

In interviews, ask learners general questions—basically about anything. It is important for students to reply with personalized experiences. Learners are able to answer these questions without thinking on them a lot because the answers depend on personal experiences and opinions.

Example Interview Questions

1. How do you usually celebrate your birthday?
2. How can you use your English in the future?

2. Oral Presentations

Provide students with an arguable statement, and ask them to agree or disagree by presenting main and supporting details in an organized way. They should use examples, which may include personal experiences. Give them 2 minutes to prepare before they start speaking. In this way, you are able to evaluate learners' speaking skills along with their presentation skills. These kinds of questions provide more organized speech with samples and details.

Example Oral Presentation Statements

1. Violent video games should be banned for children under 15.
2. University students should work in a part-time job.

3. Integrated Tasks

Have learners read about and listen to a recording about a topic they are to discuss. These integrated tasks are useful because they allow students to utilize different skills at the same time. Learners are engaged in reading and listening to text to compare, contrast, analyze, and summarize.

Sample Integrated Task Prompts

1. Listen to an extract from a radio show about animals being used in medicine testing and read the provided excerpt on the topic. Compare the main points of the program and the text, and add your personal opinion.
2. Read the provided text and listen to a professor lecturing about COVID-19 and education. How are the two sources organized? Are they in favor of the same thing? What do you think?

4. Pair and Group Discussion Tasks

These discussion tasks can be conducted either in pairs or groups, depending on the task itself, the topic, and the learners' profiles. These tasks motivate learners as they need to speak with their peers, not teachers. Note that while learners are engaging in interactive conversations, it is important that you observe to ensure that all students are able to participate equally. After the discussion, peer feedback could be beneficial, too, because peer feedback is a strong learning tool for boosting cooperative and collaborative learning.

Example Discussion Prompts

1. "The government must control what people eat and drink for public health." To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain your answer with details and examples.
2. "Recycling must be compulsory in every country to protect the environment." To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain your answer with details and examples.

Prepare your thoughts for 2 minutes and discuss your points with your partner.

5. Describing Something

In description tasks, students must support descriptive sentences with different adjectives and adverbs. Depending on the lesson content, you can ask them to describe just about anything: a specific room, a particular book, a close friend. If you want to add some fun, you can turn this into a pair task and have partners draw a picture based on the description given by the other student.

Example Description Prompts

1. Describe your favorite restaurant.
2. Describe your best friend. What are they like?

6. Telling a Story

In storytelling, students can practice the use of proper conjunctions and simple past tense forms. Because storytelling is usually about personal anecdotes, learners are likely to be less anxious when speaking. Also, learners can be motivated to give more details if you ask follow-up questions.

Example Story Prompts

1. Tell about your last birthday. How did you celebrate?
2. Tell about your first day at university. How did you feel? What did you do?

7. Comparing Things

For this task, learners discuss the similarities and differences between two things. They should make sure that their speech has an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. In this way, they have the chance to practice the skills of comparing and contrasting.

Example Comparison Questions

1. What are the differences and similarities between your hometown and our town?
2. Do men and women have the same attitudes about shopping?

8. Please Don't Stop the Music!

Give each learner a card with a question on one side and a number on the other. These questions could be related to common topics, such as health, environment, and diet. Learners make a circle. Start playing music; learners pass their card to the next person, question-side down. When you stop playing music, everyone freezes! Say aloud a random number, and the learner with that number is to answer the question on the card. The game goes on until everyone speaks.

9. Roll the Dice

Create a simple board game with tasks, such as “Compliment a friend,” “Say a sentence using simple past tense,” or “Go back to the starting point.” Divide the class into two teams. Learners from each team roll the dice, forward the team token, and complete the task on that number. One player from each team has 1 minute to complete the speaking task. If they complete the task successfully, the team can stay where they landed. If not, they have to go back to where they were at the previous task. The group members take turns moving their token on each turn until the finish line.

10. Where Is the Other Half?

Have every second learner put their head down on their desk, eyes closed. Show a short silent movie clip on the board to the learners whose heads are up, and pause in the middle. It is now time for learners to change roles. In the end, they partner up and tell each other what happened in their part of the movie. Scaffold by defining terms in advance like *plot*, *characters*, and *events*.

Conclusion

Assessing speaking skills does not necessarily mean testing learners one by one. Using varied tasks for assessment can boost learners' speaking skills while also allowing for evaluation, giving students space to display their knowledge without worrying about scores or having exam anxiety.

NOTE: This article is adapted from “[Speaking: a Fun Way to Assess](#),” which appeared in the February 2022 issue of HEIS News.

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