



EVALUATING SPEAKING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

At all levels of education, students must be able to communicate effectively. Without well developed communication skills, children run the risk of falling behind their peers or becoming emotionally overwhelmed or withdrawn at school. You can give objective grades in a speaking class. Just use the following criteria as you evaluate your students' speaking abilities, and you can give them helpful feedback as to their language learning and also a fair and well earned grade.

Speaking is the productive skill in the oral mode. It, like the other skills, is more complicated than it seems at first and involves more than just pronouncing words. We can suggest some ways of evaluating speaking skills

Create a Rubric

Most teachers will be familiar with the concept of grading with a rubric, a table with different criteria and a grading scale. If you have never created a rubric before, it's really quite easy. Simply choose the criteria on which you will grade students and list them along the left side of the page. Then create an even number of columns along the top of the page.

Four is the easiest to start with if this is your first rubric. These columns will represent potential skill levels of your students. For each criterion, define what level of the ability a student at each of the four levels would exhibit. For example, the most straightforward way to label the boxes on the

rubric would be, "Meets expectations high, meets expectations low, slightly underperforms, does not meet expectations." The more rubrics you make, the more detailed you can be in your descriptions. Then, as you evaluate each student, determine at which level he or she is performing. Take the average level among the criteria and you have an objective grade with suggestions for areas in which your student can improve.

Pronunciation

Pronunciation is a basic quality of language learning. Though most second language learners will never have the pronunciation of a native speaker, poor pronunciation can obscure communication and prevent an ESL student from making his meaning known. When evaluating the pronunciation of your students, listen for clearly articulated words, appropriate pronunciations of unusual spellings, and assimilation and contractions in suitable



places. Also listen for intonation. Are students using the correct inflection for the types of sentences they are saying? Do they know that the inflection of a question is different from that of a statement? Listen for these pronunciation skills and determine into which level your student falls.

Vocabulary

After noting your students' pronunciation levels, move to vocabulary. Vocabulary comprehension and vocabulary production are always two separate banks of words in the mind of a speaker, native as well as second language. You should encourage your students to have a large production vocabulary and an even larger recognition vocabulary. For this reason it is helpful to evaluate your students on the level of vocabulary they are able to produce:

- Are they using the specific vocabulary you have instructed them in this semester?
- Are they using vocabulary appropriate to the contexts in which they are speaking?

Listen for the level of vocabulary your students are able to produce without prompting and then decide how well they are performing in this area.

Accuracy

Grammar has always been and forever will be an important issue in foreign language study. Writing sentences correctly on a test, though, is not the same as accurate spoken grammar. As your students speak, listen for the grammatical structures and tools you have taught them. Are they able to use multiple tenses? Do they have agreement? Is word order correct in the sentence? All these and more are important grammatical issues, and an effective speaker will successfully include them in his or her language.

Communication

A student may struggle with grammar and pronunciation, but how creative is she when communicating with the language she knows? Assessing communication in your students means looking at their creative use of the language they do know to make their points understood. A student with a low level of vocabulary and grammar may have excellent communication skills if she is able to make you understand her, whereas an advanced student who is tied to manufactured dialogues may not be able to be expressive with language and would therefore have low communication skills. Don't let a lack of language skill keep your students from expressing themselves. The more creative they can be with language and the more unique ways they can express themselves, the better their overall communication skills will be.

Interaction

Being able to say what you mean with a foreign language is one thing, being able to interact with others is another. Ask your students questions. Observe how they speak to one another. Are they able to understand and answer questions? Can they answer you when you ask them questions? Do they give appropriate responses in a conversation? All these are elements of interaction and are necessary for clear and effective communication in English. A student with effective interaction skills will be able to answer questions and follow along with a conversation happening around him. Great oratory skills will not get anyone very far if he or she cannot listen to other people and respond appropriately. Encourage your students to listen as they speak and have appropriate responses to others in the conversation.

Fluency



Fluency may be the easiest quality to judge in your students' speaking. How comfortable are they when they speak? How easily do the words come out? Are there great pauses and gaps in the student's speaking? If there are then your student is struggling with fluency. Fluency does not improve at the same rate as other language skills. You can have excellent grammar and still fail to be fluent. You want your students to be at ease when they speak to you or other English speakers. Fluency is a judgment of this ease of communication and is an important criterion when evaluating speaking.

These criteria, pronunciation, vocabulary, accuracy, communication, interaction and fluency are all markers of a student's overall speaking abilities.

Students may excel in one and struggle in another, and not necessarily the ones you

might think. Help your student understand these qualities of effective speakers. Let your students know that you will be listening for these qualities when you evaluate their progress and encourage them to improve their English in these areas. Also, listen to them both when they talk to you and when they talk with other students. They should be able to speak well with one another.

After all, most of the English they will use in the future will be with other nonnative speakers. Finally, remember that a true evaluation will take into consideration more than just the oral interview on the final exam. Listen to your students throughout the semester. Note how they improve in these areas. Encourage them as speakers and learners, and you are sure to reap the benefits, too.

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