

## **Assessing Academic Speaking Skills: A Group Discussion-Based Activity**

*by Tara Tarpey, Angelo Pitillo, and Yuna Seong*

One challenge that often confronts many English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs is how to assess the type of speaking skills that students will need to thrive in their university classes. As Swain (2001) notes, dissatisfaction with the oral interview as a primary assessment tool has led to many speaking tests requiring small groups of students to debate an issue or solve a problem. Group-based assessments can be administered more efficiently, and students have been shown to react positively to them (Fulcher, 1996). In addition, Gan (2010) has shown such group-based tasks to engage students, produce a rich exchange of ideas, and elicit the use of a broad range of speech functions.

This paper describes a group discussion-based speaking activity developed as an end-term assessment in an intensive summer program at New York University for a special group of conditionally admitted freshmen to evaluate their readiness to participate in university classrooms. The discussion-based assessment tool is unique in that it takes place in a group environment designed to mirror that of a typical university classroom. As developers of the assessment and instructors in the program, we have concluded that this assessment instrument positively engages the students, accurately and efficiently assesses their academic speaking skills, and provides teachers and students with valuable feedback.

### **Assessment Objectives**

The discussion-based assessment tool was designed to meet the following objectives: First, we wanted to provide an objective measure of students' oral proficiency that the high profile of this program demanded to supplement their classroom teachers' judgments. Second, we aimed to assess students' speaking skills in a context that resembles an academic classroom. Finally, we sought to provide students and their teachers with meaningful feedback on their performance.

### **Design**

In order to achieve the above objectives, the assessment activity was structured to include the entire class group, multiple interaction patterns, and a range of academic and non-academic content.

The entire class group is tested at one time in order to create a testing environment that closely resembles an academic classroom discussion. Students are asked to produce short monologues as well as to participate in a free discussion, which the students themselves facilitate. The full assessment activity includes two discussion sequences: the first discussion, which serves as a warm-up, focuses on a general topic; in the second, students discuss the op-ed article they had read as part of the earlier writing exam.

### **Procedures**

Prior to the test, a group of students participates in a written exam in which they are asked to read, summarize, and respond to an op-ed article. They also review directions for the speaking test. Two test proctors meet to review the procedures using a scoring rubric.

During the test, the seating arrangement is of particular importance. Students are randomly assigned numbers and seated in a circle accordingly. The faculty raters are seated outside of the circle.

Each discussion sequence comprises two “go-rounds” in which students are each given a set amount of time to comment on the topic, as well as a free discussion period. Students have 1 minute for the initial go-round, 45 seconds for their follow-up monologue, and 15 minutes for free discussion, which the students themselves lead and facilitate. The go-rounds proceed in clockwise direction in Discussion #1 and counter-clockwise in Discussion #2 so that students’ positions vary. Proctor participation is limited to reviewing instructions and keeping time.

## **Results**

After the completion of the program, feedback was sought from the proctors, the teachers, and the students. Not only was there strong agreement on the students’ scores between the faculty raters, but also the raters’ final evaluations largely corresponded to the classroom teachers’ impressions of their own students. In addition, the teachers felt that the assessment provided them with useful and detailed feedback on their students’ performance. Other benefits of the program were its efficiency in assessing a large group of students at once and its ability to positively engage students.

The students gave enthusiastic feedback on their experience, commenting that this was the “truest” test they had ever taken and that their “real” English was being evaluated. Students also appreciated the detailed feedback they received.

## **Suggestions for Implementation**

In implementing this assessment, both the preparation and the procedures should be considered. First, it is important to create beforehand a rubric with clearly defined components and a clear scoring scale. In addition, the content of the assessment should be appropriate to the students’ level, relevant to their studies, and free of potential biases. Once the materials have been created, the proctors should become familiar with the program and the purpose of the assessment. Finally, before giving the assessment, students should be made familiar with the procedures.

## **References**

- Fulcher, G. (1996). Testing tasks: Issues in task design and the group oral. *Language Testing*, 13(1), 23–51.
- Gan, Z. (2010). Interaction in group oral assessment: A case study of higher- and lower-scoring students. *Language Testing*, 27(4), 585–602.
- Swain, M. (2001). Examining dialogue: Another approach to content specification and to validating inferences drawn from test scores. *Language Testing*, 18(3), 275–302.

*Tara E. Tarpey is a language lecturer at the American Language Institute at New York University. She received her B.A. in English from Vassar College, her M.A. in TESOL and her Ed.M. in applied linguistics from Teachers College, Columbia University. Her research interests include conversation analysis, body language, and technology-mediated discourse.*

*<[tet2@nyu.edu](mailto:tet2@nyu.edu)>*

*Angelo Pitillo is a full-time language lecturer at NYU’s American Language Institute, New York*

*University. His areas of interest include advanced writing and grammar, program development, and EAP curriculum design in global education. He recently spent eight weeks in Tokyo working on the start-up of the ALI's new Tokyo Center. [amp3@nyu.edu](mailto:amp3@nyu.edu)*

*Yuna Seong is currently teaching ESL and working as the testing coordinator at the American Language Institute, New York University. She is also a doctoral student in applied linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her research interests include language assessment (testing speaking in particular) and language teaching. [ys45@nyu.edu](mailto:ys45@nyu.edu)*