



**Assessing the Speaking of LESLLA, SLIFE, and Community
College Students**

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Abstract

Assessing the speaking of a special population warrants careful attention. Several tests that are commonly used to assess the speaking of LESLLA and SLIFE students unfairly disadvantage them. They do not allow the institutions administering the assessment to obtain the most accurate picture of the prospective students' spoken English because variables extraneous to speaking hinder the prospective students' ability to do their best on the test. Other tests, on the other hand, may be more suitable for assessing the speaking of the LESLLA and SLIFE populations.

Background

LESLLA. LIFE. SLIFE. SIFE. Various acronyms are used for adult immigrants (16-65 years old) who are both developing proficiency in English and concurrently developing literacy skills (City College of San Francisco, n.d.). And while at times it may matter whether some immigrants are called LESLLA students (Low Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition for Adults), or LIFE (Learners with Interrupted Formal Education), or SLIFE (Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education), or SIFE (Students with Interrupted Formal Education), for the purposes of this paper the differences among these terms matter less than the similarities among them. This population, which I will henceforth collectively refer to as LESLLA, is the most vulnerable subset of English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) learners. Their numbers—at least 2% of the US population—are substantial (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013). Even though many have been in the country for five years or longer, their rate of employment is only around 55% and more than 75% of them are in the lowest 10% of the country's income distribution (Reder, 2014). Women are one third more likely to belong to the LESLLA group than are men (Reder, 2014).

Despite the fact that there are millions of LESLLA learners, little is known about them. According to the homepage of the organization dedicated to the advancement of LESLLA students,

Only a small fraction of current research concerns the most vulnerable second language (L2) learners: low or non-literate adults with at the most primary schooling in their native language. Studies of adults have either focused on educational practices or have involved adults who failed to learn to read and write in their native language despite schooling. (LESLLA, n.d.)

The most obvious educational need of LESLLA students is the improvement of their literacy skills. This is not surprising considering that the greatest barrier they face is their low level of literacy (in English or any language). While there is some information in the literature about LESLLA learners' literacy acquisition (Alver & Dregelid, 2014; Bigelow & King, 2014; Maffia & De Meo, 2014; Nicholas & Starks, 2014; Vinogradov, 2014), the topic of assessing their spoken English has not previously been covered.

LESLLA learners enroll in ESL programs in various educational settings, including adult education programs, literacy programs, refugee resettlement organizations, faith-based groups, and community colleges. It is in particular at open-access postsecondary institutions (such as community colleges) where LESLLA students may face further challenges when asked to take a placement test.

The Issue

It is common practice at institutions of higher, adult, and lifelong education to assess the English-language proficiency of incoming students for placement purposes. Prior to the administration of a placement test, open access institutions do not know much about the educational background of prospective students who walk through their doors, not even their level of English. A well-chosen assessment tool can quickly and accurately sort prospective students into appropriate courses. Test takers who sit for English-language examinations (whether for secure tests administered at authorized test centers or institutional tests administered at the school) usually receive subscores on the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. For instance, the mean subscores of all test takers who took one such test worldwide in 2013 breaks down as seen in Table 1:

Table 1
Test Takers' Mean Subscores on the TOEFL iBT Worldwide in 2013

	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
Score	19.7	20.1	20.1	20.6
S.D.	6.7	4.6	6.7	5.0

Note: From "Test and Score Data Summary for TOEFL iBT tests January 2013-December 2013 Test Data," by Educational Testing Service (ETS), 2014a. Retrieved from http://www.ets.org/s/toefl/pdf/94227_unlweb.pdf

On a scale of 0 to 30, the mean subscores for the four skills on the TOEFL iBT in 2013 were around 20 points each. To be sure, variations in subscores at the level of the individual test taker get lost in the presentation of aggregate data. However, anecdotal evidence from ESL programs at institutions of higher education where I have taught confirms the generalization that most students have fairly uniform skill profiles. More often than not, if an ESL student is placed in a

low-intermediate-level reading class, she is likely to be able to write, speak, and comprehend spoken English at a low-intermediate level as well.

One cannot, however, make a similar generalization when speaking of LESLLA students, who are likely to have uneven score profiles. Because many of them have lived in the United States for years, they may be quite proficient verbally yet not know the alphabet. Their scores for oral communication (listening and speaking) are likely to be much higher than for written communication (reading and writing). Therefore, in order to accurately assess the speaking of LESLLA learners—the focus of this paper—it is important to select the appropriate assessment tool, one that does not hinge on variables extraneous to oral skills.

Choosing the Right Test of Spoken English

When choosing a placement test of spoken English, the test user—i.e., the institution—must consider a variety of factors. Knowing the test-taking population well is the first step in this direction. Considerations include the age range, first languages, cultural backgrounds, life experiences, educational backgrounds, aspirations, cognitive levels, and special needs of the prospective students. In other words, if an institution is likely to have applicants with limited or interrupted educational backgrounds, the assessment instrument must take this into account.

It is also essential that the construct definitions used by the test developer and test user be aligned. A *construct*, in this sense, is the abstract skill-set that the test attempts to measure. For instance, if a test claims to assess speaking, then the construct defines how speaking is understood. Does it include pronunciation? Grammar? Fluency? Vocabulary? Interaction? Speed of delivery? The ability to give extended answers? The ability to speak both formally and informally? Does it specify the setting within which speaking is to be performed (educational, occupational, personal, social, etc.)? Does it specify the topic(s) about which the speaker is to speak? The test developer must consider all of these questions when defining the construct “speaking ability.” All further steps will build on this foundation. When a test user, such as a community college, considers the adoption of a test developed by an assessment organization, the user needs to be clear about the construct definition that lies at the heart of the test.

A good construct definition must not only include information about what the test measures, but also exclude what is *not* being assessed. As Messick (1995) warns,

Aspects of the task that are extraneous to the focal construct make the task irrelevantly difficult for some individuals or groups....In general, construct-irrelevant difficulty leads to construct scores that are invalidly low for those individuals adversely affected.... construct-irrelevant difficulty for individuals and groups is a major source of bias in test scoring and interpretation and of unfairness in test use. (pp. 742-743)

Even setting aside the basic question of fairness to the test taker, institutional users cannot obtain an accurate picture of the prospective students’ spoken English if construct-irrelevant variance hinders the test takers’ ability to do their best on the test.

Examples of Misalignment

Currently several tests that are commonly used to assess the speaking of LESLLA students are badly misaligned with the students taking such tests. While these tests may be appropriate for some populations in some settings, they are likely to unfairly disadvantage other individuals or groups.

One popular test of spoken English begins by requiring the test taker to read sentences out loud from the test paper, as instructed (Pearson Education, Inc., 2013; see Figure 1).

PART	TASK	TEST DETAILS
A	Reading	<p>Please read the sentences as you are instructed.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Traffic is a huge problem in Southern California.2. The endless city has no coherent mass transit system.3. Sharing rides was going to be the solution to rush-hour traffic.4. Most people still want to drive their own cars, though.5. Larry's next door neighbors are awful.6. They play loud music all night when he's trying to sleep.7. If he tells them to stop, they just turn it up louder.8. He wants to move out of that neighborhood.9. My aunt recently rescued a dog that was sick.10. She brought her home and named her Margaret.11. They weren't sure she was going to live, but now she's healthy.12. I just wish she could get along better with their cat.

Figure 1. Sample speaking task requiring reading aloud from Versant English Placement Test. From Versant English Placement Test by Pearson Education, Inc., 2013. Retrieved from <https://www.versanttest.com/samples/englishPlacement.jsp>.

While this computer-based test purports to assess speaking, the ability to speak hinges on the test taker's ability to *read*. For students whose reading ability lags behind their speaking, this task is insurmountably difficult. This test may also present a challenge for students who are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the computer. Finally, the test taker's basic numeracy is assumed, because the sentences are to be read out loud in the order in which the computer elicits them rather than in the order in which they appear on the test paper.

Another widely used speaking test, though discontinued by the test developer, remains popular at institutions that serve LESLLA students (Educational Testing Service, n.d. a). Although the name of this test—Speaking Proficiency English Assessment Kit—even contains the word *proficiency*, the test is often used for *placement* rather than to assess proficiency. This misalignment in purpose leads to test results whose validity is questionable. Furthermore, several of the tasks on this test rely on the test taker's ability to read. The task below asks the test taker to read, interpret, and explain the verbal, numerical, and pictographical information contained in the graph. Individuals with limited or interrupted educational backgrounds, however, are unlikely to have the skills required to perform this task, leading to construct-irrelevant variance (Xi, 2010) (See Figure 2).

10. The graph below presents the actual and projected percentage of the world population living in cities from 1950 to 2010. Describe to me the information given in the graph. (60 seconds)

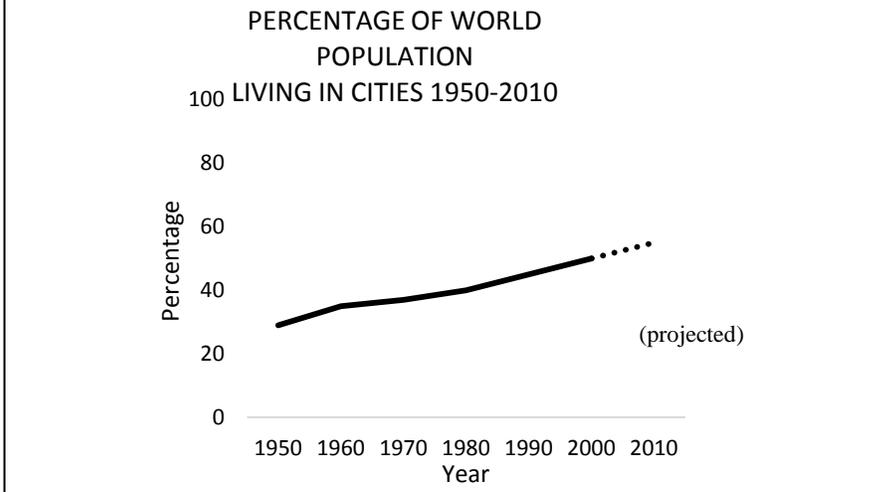


Figure 2. Oral graph-description task on the SPEAK Test. From Educational Testing Service, n.d. a. Retrieved from http://cte.illinois.edu/testing/pdf/TSE_SampleTest060906.pdf.

The two aforementioned tests can be purchased and administered by institutions directly. The next test, on the other hand, is administered by secure test centers. The speaking section of this very popular test contains tasks that integrate multiple skills, as in the following sample question (See Figure 3).

The construct of “speaking skills” implied by this computerized test includes the ability to read an academic text, listen to an academic lecture, take notes on the lecture, synthesize the information, and relate it verbally. The ability to perform all these tasks is central to the design of the task. Test takers who will lack the necessary academic preparation to perform these tasks will be penalized for this in their speaking score. An institution that uses this proficiency test (Educational Testing Service, 2014b) for placement purposes needs to be aware that the speaking subsection score is unlikely to accurately reflect LESLLA students’ ability to speak.

In questions 3 and 4, in an actual test, you will first read a short text and then listen to a talk on the same topic. You will have to combine appropriate information from the text and the talk to provide a complete answer. Your response will be scored on your ability to accurately convey information, and to speak clearly and coherently. In this sampler, you will **read** both the text and the talk. **(Reading)**

Flow

In psychology, the feeling of complete and energized focus in an activity is called flow. People who enter a state of flow lose their sense of time and have a feeling of great satisfaction. They become completely involved in an activity for its own sake rather than for what may result from the activity, such as money or prestige. Contrary to expectation, flow usually happens not during relaxing moments of leisure and entertainment, but when we are actively involved in a difficult enterprise, in a task that stretches our mental or physical abilities.

(Listening)

(Male professor) I think this will help you get a picture of what your textbook is describing. I had a friend who taught in the physics department, Professor Jones, he retired last year. . . . Anyway, I remember . . . this was a few years ago . . . I remember passing by a classroom early one morning just as he was leaving, and he looked terrible: his clothes were all rumpled, and he looked like he hadn't slept all night. And I asked if he was OK. I was surprised when he said that he never felt better, that he was totally happy. He had spent the entire night in the classroom working on a mathematics puzzle. He didn't stop to eat dinner; he didn't stop to sleep . . . or even rest. He was that involved in solving the puzzle. And it didn't even have anything to do with his teaching or research; he had just come across this puzzle accidentally, I think in a mathematics journal, and it just really interested him, so he worked furiously all night and covered the blackboards in the classroom with equations and numbers and never realized that time was passing by.

Question: Explain *flow* and how the example used by the professor illustrates the concept.

Preparation Time: 30 seconds

Response Time: 60 seconds

Figure 3. Integrated reading-listening-speaking task on the TOEFL iBT. From Educational Testing Service, n.d. b. From https://www.ets.org/toefl/ibt/prepare/sample_questions.

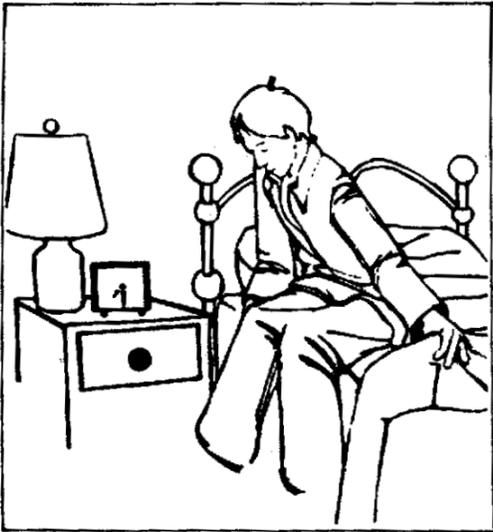
Misalignment between the test takers and the assessment instrument can, therefore, manifest itself in a variety of ways. The ability to read, familiarity with numbers and graphs, being able to memorize details heard aurally, note-taking skills, and facility with computers are just a few of the unrelated skills that cause construct-irrelevant variance in the score. Using a test to assess skills it was not designed to assess (for example, using a proficiency test for placement purposes) also leads to misalignment. The resulting information will be of limited value for either the prospective student or the institution.

Examples of Alignment

There are tests that are more suitable for assessing the speaking of LESLLA learners. The definition of speaking will vary depending on the institution, but the following assessments may provide better alignment.

The John Test is described by its creators as a one-on-one, face-to-face “oral placement test for non-native speakers of English, which was originally developed by ESL teachers” (Language Innovations, Inc., 1974). It consists of a series of drawings from one day in the life of a man named John (See Figure 4). The test taker is asked to listen to the questions and respond to them based on the pictures. The questions that follow each picture are of increasing linguistic complexity. The test is fully scripted and does not assess interactional ability. The rating rubric assesses fluency, structure, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Full scores can be given if “the answer is completely right,” in other words, nativelike (Language Innovations, Inc., 1974, p. 2).

Picture #1



Part I: Comprehension Questions

Picture 1

Is John sitting on his bed?	0	1	2
Is there anything on the table? What?	0	1	2

Figure 4. Listening-comprehension task based on verbal picture description. From “The John Test,” by Language Innovations, Inc. (1974). *The John Test*. New York, NY: Author.

This test does not rely on the test taker to read, take notes, memorize, use the computer, or interpret cognitively challenging information. While the latter may be a drawback for some educational settings, it will allow LESLLA students to accurately demonstrate their speaking abilities.

Another test that may be appropriate for LESLLA learners is the CaMLA Speaking Test (Cambridge Michigan Language Assessments, 2014). This one-on-one, face-to-face assessment

tool is advertised as “a quick, reliable way to test a person’s ability to speak comprehensible English” (Cambridge Michigan Language Assessments, 2014). It consists of a series of five tasks of increasing difficulty and cognitive complexity (See Figure 5). The goals for all five tasks are both printed on the test paper and read aloud by the examiner. The first three are connected to the same drawing, while the last two are on different topics. Like the John test, this one is also fully scripted and does not assess interactional ability. The rating rubric claims to assess “fluency and intelligibility, vocabulary range and relevance to task, grammatical complexity and accuracy, ability to successfully complete a specific task” (Cambridge Michigan Language Assessments, 2014).

Part 1

Directions
In this part of the test you will describe a picture and complete some tasks.



Task 1
Describe the family meal. 60 seconds

Task 2
Tell me about a meal that you really enjoyed. 60 seconds

Figure 5. Speaking tasks involving picture description and personal narration. From CaMLA Speaking Test, by Cambridge Michigan Language Assessments, 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.cambridgemichigan.org/institutions/products-services/tests/progress/camla-speaking-test/>. Reprinted with permission.

Again, this test does not rely on the test taker to read, take notes, memorize, or use the computer. It does, however, challenge the test takers to perform at the A2-C1 (high intermediate to low advanced) levels of oral proficiency on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001). This means that some LESLLA learners will only be able to successfully complete the initial tasks of the test, while other LESLLA students as well as students with uninterrupted educational backgrounds will be able to engage with all the tasks fully.

Conclusion

Institutions that teach students with limited or interrupted educational backgrounds—students who are acquiring both literacy and English-language skills at the same time—need to be mindful of a variety of factors when assessing the spoken English of this population:

- They must have a thorough understanding of their entire student population.
- They must have a clear understanding of how they define the construct “speaking skills.”
- They must purchase (or develop) a speaking test that reflects this construct.
- They must carefully determine the cut-scores that sort students into appropriate classes.

If these steps are taken, the institution will be in a better position to accurately measure the spoken English of their students.

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Author note

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