



# Pronunciation assessment: should we bother?

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# Overview

- Background: pronunciation and its assessment
- Are we assessing (and if not, why not?)
- Why and how we could assess in the classroom
- Examples: perception and production tests
- Integrating pron assessment into your weekly classroom



# (The grim) Background

Pronunciation assessment: the last to ‘catch up’ to the pronunciation resurgence of the last decade.

- Pronunciation still only a ‘peripheral role’ in publications on L2 speech assessments (Fulcher, 2003; Luoma, 2004 as cited in Isaacs, 2017).
- The only text on EL assessment (which included pron) was published over half a century ago by L2 assessment specialist Lado (Isaacs, 2014).
- In the longest published journal on L2 assessment, *Language Testing*, only 2 pronunciation focused articles were published in its first 25 years 1984 -2009 (Isaacs, 2013).



# Do we assess currently?



## Why?

More variables than other skills which are challenging due lack of teacher training/ knowledge/ informative publications.

- **Lack of time** – difficult to prioritise in busy syllabus/ implement in a big class
- **Lack of test instruments/** knowledge to produce our own
- **Contents:** Perception or just production? Segmentals or intonation or both?
- **Set up:** 1-1 assessment? Pair/ group assessment?
- **Practical concerns:** equipment, a quiet recording space/ classroom
- **Lack of progress/** backsliding: is it worth it?
- **Feedback:** Who and how? Teacher or other L2 user?
- **Assessment anxieties:** is it ethical to keep testing?

# Why should we assess?

- **More student centred** - ability to identify learners' needs and respond directly by adapting syllabus or materials to include more or less support/ practice.
- Provide specific and **personalised feedback** to students on their progress – a motivating factor.
- Because today we teach in a largely communicative style and learners' confidence in and ability to pronounce may **benefit them in during classroom practice**.
- **Monitor our own effectiveness as teachers** and make adjustments where necessary.



# How to assess: by student need



**Stage 1:** Identification of features: based on research (e.g. [Learner English, Smith & Swan, 1987](#)) and diagnostic perception test

**Stage 2:** diagnostic production assessment + re-evaluate features based on students' responses (if necessary)

**Stage 3:** Teaching/Input over several sessions

**Stage 4:** Summative assessment/ exercise

**Stage 5:** Feedback



# How to assess: By content/ input:

**Stage 1:** Identify features from week/ month ahead/ syllabus that you predict ss will have difficulty with

**Stage 2:** diagnostic perception/production test + re-evaluate features based on students' responses (if necessary)

**Stage 3:** Teaching input over several sessions

**Stage 4:** Summative assessment/ exercise

**Stage 5:** Feedback

# Perception Tests



Image: New York Times (2007).

# 1. Contextualised Minimal Pairs

Listen to the sentences and circle or underline the word ***in bold*** that you hear.

- Take the first ***right/ light***.
- Did you ***live/ leave*** there?
- I need a ***pin/ bin***.
- I meant to say ***ten/ den***.
- She said ***sell/ tell*** it.
- How do you spell ***sure/ show***.



# Contextualised Minimal Pairs

## Advantages

- Allows for targeted assessment of perceived contrasts
- flexible format: can include a variety of sounds

## Disadvantages

- Writing and producing recordings (if none can be located) takes time
- Students often predict (sometimes incorrectly) from language context
- Can be boring and reduce remaining lesson's input time



## 2. L2 – L2 Dictation

**Read the following text to your partner, instructing them to write exactly what you say.**

*Pete is a Belgian peach picker and lives near a big peach orchard. Every morning he leaves his living quarters and picks peaches all day, but only the beautiful peaches, not the bruised ones. Peach picking leaves Pete with a good living, but his wages are sometimes a bit cheap. So Pete picks the peaches when they are at their peak, and he leaves the peaches without the pits on the branches and in the green leaves.*



# L2 – L2 Dictation

## Advantages

- An excellent awareness raising activity
- Easy to implement in the classroom
- Flexible: any text can be adapted into a dictation
- Can double as a production activity
- L2 partner 'assessor' – more representative of real life

## Disadvantages

- In a monolingual class, ss may be attuned one another's pronunciation and therefore perception issues may not be easily identified
- Text needs to be suitably challenging to avoid students predicting content
- A pronunciation error can turn into a perception error
- Can be difficult to make 'meaningful'!

### 3. Listen for the most stressed word

In each sentence, one word is emphasised more than the others. Underline the emphasized word you hear. The first one has been done for you as an example.

- A: Do you think food in Scotland is expensive?
- B: Not really.
- A: Well, I think it's expensive.
- B: That's because you eat in restaurants.
- A: Where do you eat?
- B: At home.
- A: You must like to cook.
- B: Actually, I never cook.



# Listen for the most stressed word



## Advantages

- Provides a clear snapshot of ss ability to perceive nuclear (tonic) stress
- Can be contextualised so that content is more meaningful

## Disadvantages

- Creating/ sourcing content and recordings can take time
- Only enables suprasegmental assessment



# Production Tests (pre-prepared)



Source:

<https://www.londonscreenwritersfestival.com/a-look-in-the-spec-pile-the-actors-table-read-2014-by-lucy-v/>

# 1. Read aloud script

## Production test script

*Two university students meet.*

- A: Excuse me, where's the library?
- B: It's on the corner of Pin Street and Mill road
- A: Sorry, did you say Mill road or Meal road?
- B: No, not Meal, Mill road. It's right there, straight ahead of you.
- A: Thanks, I need to buy some books for my classes.
- B: Oh, then you need the book shop, you can't buy books in the library. You can only borrow them.
- A: Oh, I must have confused the words. They are different in my language.
- B: Me too, I get mixed up with Spanish words that sound like English language words, but have different meanings.
- A: Are you studying Spanish?
- B: No, but Spanish is my first language. I study Russian literature.
- A: Russian Literature? Right, that must be difficult. I'm studying English now, but in September I will study law.



# Read aloud script

## Advantages

- Allows specific sounds or features to be pre-selected and inserted into script(segmentals + suprasegmentals)
- Ss cannot reformulate to avoid a difficult word/ sound

## Disadvantages

- Does it represent real spontaneous speech?
- Reading aloud is a different cognitive skill to spontaneous speech



## 2. Semi-structured dialogues



### **Real life Conversation: I'm really lost!**

Write a conversation between two people about being lost in a new city. Use any of the words from the vocabulary box at the bottom of the page, or add your own words using /r/l/p/b/. Use your own experience to help you!

### **Vocabulary bank:**

a little bit  
help  
a rentals agency  
running late  
lend me  
right along  
laugh

really  
tell  
a bank  
really early  
right  
around  
love

absolutely  
point  
building  
punctual  
rude  
left  
along

unbelievable  
direct  
a library  
behind schedule  
perfect  
respect  
like



# Semi-structured dialogues

## Advantages

- Allows specific sounds or features to be pre-selected and inserted
- Creative and meaningful exercise which the students are likely to recycle

## Disadvantages

- It's still reading aloud!



# Spontaneous Production Tests



# 1. Diapix

Work with a partner: spot the 10 differences



Copyright: Archer, G. (2016)

Artwork: Scattini, R. (2016.)

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# Diapix (DiapixUK, 2010)

## Advantages

- Elicits spontaneous speech in a simple, recognisable format (spot the difference)
- Fun interactive activity
- Pair work replicates real life dialogue
- Some pre-made downloadable Diapix tasks available at <http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/project/kidLUCID/diapix.php>

## Disadvantages

- Teachers sometimes need to be involved in either eliciting target language or enforcing turn taking
- Can take time (and money!) locating or creating the right pictures
- Pictures should contain 'known' vocab – so at times the context may seem simplistic
- Takes time to assess after
- Needs a quiet testing room and some recording equipment.

## 2. Story Boards





# Story Boards



## Advantages

- Simple method of eliciting spontaneous utterances
- Suitable for young learners or lower level students
- Removes spelling/ phonics difficulties of other tests
- Can be completed independently / with a recording device
- In creating your own story board, you have control over the specific features you want to assess

## Disadvantages

- Locating appropriate images takes time
- ([www.storyboardthat.com/](http://www.storyboardthat.com/))
- While suprasegmental features would appear spontaneously, pre-selected segmentals may not be if the word is unknown to the learner e.g. 'hose' might be described as 'water pipe'.

### 3. Finish my sentence!

Listen to my sentence and add a final word.

1. The colour of grass is \_\_\_\_\_?
2. We put our rubbish in the \_\_\_\_\_?
3. When we take air into our lungs we \_\_\_\_?
4. Our mouth is made of two \_\_\_\_\_?
5. The opposite of expensive is \_\_\_\_\_?
6. Another word for 'sick' is \_\_\_\_\_?



# Finish my sentence!

## Advantages

- Allows for insertion of specific features
- Can be easily altered to suit different language level
- Can double as a fun 'retrieval' game for ss to practice new/ key vocabulary
- Could be used to test syllable stress as well as phonemes

## Disadvantages

- Only allows for single word utterances
- The questions need to be achievable in terms of content/ general knowledge or based on prior learning



# The ideal assessment



- Is personalised around students' needs and enables teachers to provide specific feedback/ guidance;
- Can be both diagnostic and summative;
- Includes tasks which measure both pre-selected speech in a pre-prepared task but also some spontaneous input too. E.g. a read aloud task followed by a story board – linked in context;
- Measures intelligibility not native-likeness.



Thank you!

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