

Different Aspects of Evaluating the Speaking Skill in Secondary Classroom

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Abstract

The article presents how to deal with evaluation the speaking skill on the basis of the research which the author conducted. This articles show that many aspects of this skill cannot be seen or rated and, as the result, it is difficult to assess them. The goal is to compare and contrast students' and teachers' attitude to evaluation the speaking skill and how they can work with one another. This article will be a kind of help for all those who consider assessment of the oral competence in speaking English a hard and unrewarding task.

What is Evaluation?

People always evaluate. We do it every day. We buy clothing, a new car or a refrigerator. We select a movie or choose a magazine. All these decisions can be called judgements. Indeed, evaluation is inseparably connected with our lives. Here a question should be asked: What does it mean 'to evaluate'? One of the most widely known definitions says that 'to evaluate' means to 'calculate or judge the value or degree of' ([Quirk 347](#)). We can compare evaluation to theatre: it has a stage, it has players and these have roles and they play to scripts. Unlike theatre, however, the scripts are not pre-determined. Focus on the players in any evaluation raises critical questions about who the evaluators themselves are and from what positions they come at the task in hand.

There is also a viewpoint that emphasizes the significance of value as the basic notion in any evaluation. The discipline of evaluation is devoted to the systematic determination of merit, worth or significance. It is divided into fields according to the type of entity evaluated – for example, program evaluation, or personnel evaluation – and there are more than twenty of these recognized fields of evaluation ([Scriven](#)). To tell the truth, it has played a prominent role in many education reform efforts. Evaluation is appealing to politics for several reasons: it is relatively inexpensive compared to making program changes, and it offers visible results. A great many spheres of life could be enumerated where evaluation is present. Different kinds of evaluation have something in common: they always seek for the value of a given phenomenon or thing.

It is worth noting that as evaluation is spreading through various aspects of our lives, it sometimes changes its name and accepts into other terms like e.g. assessment. However, no matter how many names the process of considering the value of anything has, it still remains the same evaluation – that is, a phenomenon we could not do without in everyday life. For whatever we do, we always evaluate, even performing the most prosaic actions like doing the shopping or watching TV.

Each evaluation should possess certain features which both the evaluated and evaluators expect it to be equipped with. The crucial aspect of any evaluation is justice. It is because only justice makes us capable of giving true opinions and, what follows, the most valuable ones. Justice enables evaluated entities to be shown the paragon to follow that could help them develop. Lastly, justice means the responsibility for the opinions of assessors and for objects evaluated.

Furthermore, evaluation must be objective and impartial. To be a good evaluator means to get rid of any affections towards the object evaluated. Under no circumstances can assessors base their opinions on any feelings. A valuable assessor has to discern only those qualities that truly belong to a given person. In no way can s/he depend upon their previous successes or failures because each evaluation embraces only those aspects that belong to the very case of any undertaking. Moreover, assessment has to be plain in a way that any truth is. Irrespective of the final judgment passed, it has to follow the rules of sincerity, that is to say, no matter whether someone's opinion is positive or negative, it must be uttered and by no means can it be altered or concealed. It is because only true and real opinions present any value and, what is more, have powerful influence upon creating the human existence. In order to be valuable, s/he must comprehend all the aspects and complexities of the entity under evaluation. Furthermore, each assessment must serve a specific purpose. It should be previously thought over, well-planned and only then put into use.

To conclude, it is certain that any evaluation must tally with the internal sense of justice of an evaluator. If it does not, it cannot be in accord with the ideals of justice and truth. Such evaluation is irresponsible and deprived of any value. To say more, it presents a great threat for an assessor and an entity being evaluated. For the first one, it is the violation of one's conscience, for the other it may mean the end of development or being directed into the wrong path. Lastly, it must be admitted that all evaluation is identical with tough work. It demands many efforts on the part of an assessor, but when all its requirements are fulfilled it becomes the very essence of truth and justice.

The Art of Evaluation of the Speaking Skill

When we name a given activity 'an art', we have in mind its skill-requiring background. That is the case with assessing the speaking skill. Indeed, it is a very demanding and difficult activity and at the same time a really significant one as far as foreign language teaching is concerned. It is important to tell each student what and how to improve. This information should be given as soon and as often as possible. Being a critic is one of teacher's foremost and most difficult tasks. Apart from being of great importance and difficulty, the evaluation of the speaking skill is a phenomenon of great responsibility. Being one of many assessment methods it should adhere to the measurement principles of reliability, validity and fairness. The instrument must be accurate and consistent, it must represent the abilities we wish to measure and it must operate in the same way with a wide range of students. ([Mead and Rubin](#))

What is more, critical judgement involves a thorough understanding of the thing being criticised, the formulation of acceptable criteria or standards of judgement and the application of these criteria or standards to the object, idea, or event for the purpose of evaluation. This means that the teacher of speech needs a basic understanding of the communication process involving a speaker, his speech and speaking and his listener. In addition, the most effective teacher will have arrived, somehow, at the standards which can apply to the students in their speech performances, whether in acting, discussing, speaking, reading aloud, debating or speech making. ([Balcer and Seabury](#)).

Each speaking act is unique as even if we utter a given sentence once again it will be slightly different. To put it in a different way, there are no identical dialogues, speeches or monologues. For each of spoken words presents a unique entity. We must call 'an art' the activity that requires the capability of grasping something which will never occur in the same form once again. Indeed, a speech act can only be recorded in the mind of an assessor where it undergoes a really involved process of criticism in order to be revealed in the form of a final judgement. That is why it should be called an 'art'.

Methods of Evaluation

Oral and Written Evaluation

The two basic types of evaluation used by teachers of speech are: oral and written. Each method has its advantages as well as its disadvantages.

Oral evaluation of a speech performance not only helps the individual student but also provides help for the whole class. Oral evaluation is a means by which speech concepts and vocabulary can be taught to the group. Specific performances can be tied in closely and evaluated by the standards set up by the class and the teacher. However, oral comments are time-consuming and often centre only on the student's performance.

Written evaluation can provide splendid opportunities for individual criticism which is not always desirable or possible in oral evaluation. Through written criticism, teacher can provide for the individual speech needs and abilities of his students and so recognise their individual differences, better than through oral evaluation when the teacher talks to the whole class. Written evaluations provide opportunity for the teacher to give equal attention and time to each of his students which if one can judge from experience is not likely to occur in oral evaluations of speech behaviour by students. Oral evaluation must be presented in a clear and effective manner if the teacher is to serve as the model of communication. Obviously he is expected to serve as a model. This means that his oral evaluations should be well organised, well supported and well delivered. It means that the teacher of speech should be concrete and specific in presenting his complements and suggestions. He may use the exact words of the speaker when possible, which can be very effective during the process of evaluation as the teacher shows what was said and what should have been said.

Written evaluation must be clear, easy to read and meaningful. It should be also well-organised, written in appropriate penmanship and well supported. Written evaluation may take many forms. Blank sheets of paper may be used. Check list and rating scales are often used. Profile charts are sometimes constructed. A blank sheet of paper offers a critic the advantage of focusing upon the individual speaker and identifying in him, in his speech and his speaking points which merit praise and which

call for suggestions if the evaluation is to be most helpful to the student. However, a blank sheet of paper can hardly prevent the critic's overlooking aspects of the speech performance which are subject to evaluation. One or more of the aspects which may be overlooked can be very important. At any rate, a highly competent, impartial and well-qualified critic and evaluator of speech behaviour has little need for the check list. A specific check list or rating scale can remind the teacher of important items to be evaluated. The use of carbon sheets to supply the teacher with a copy of his evaluation of each speech performance can be useful and, in turn, helpful to students if the teacher uses the carbons to check, stimulate and guide the students' progress. A file of each student's evaluation sheets is an efficient way of helping both students and the teacher to note progress and continued needs. ([Balcer and Seabury](#)).

Student Evaluation

Evaluation in class in speech education is not the sole responsibility of the teacher. It is a function and responsibility of the entire class. Only through the individual student's evaluation do we discover oftentimes his grasp of standards by which to evaluate speaking and whether he is progressing towards goals established by the class and the teacher. If a written comment by a student disagrees with those by the other members of the class, it may indicate the individual student's failure to see clearly some basic concept. Often the use of classroom evaluation points out a weakness in the teacher's own evaluation of a performance, or reveals his overemphasis on a minor point. Students should realise that a variety of reactions is possible and, in fact, usual. When students are given the opportunity and encouraged to evaluate their own performances, some students may decide that someone spoke with 'nice, direct eye contact' and the rest may say that 'no real contact was present'. Or they may think that in one's performance was 'clear organisation' whereas other students indicate 'lack of clear organisation'. Students are not likely to learn how to make valid evaluations of speeches, speaking, or speech making until they have exercised themselves and their own judgement. It may be unwise for the teacher to encourage students to evaluate speech

performances by their peers early in the school year. The teacher ought first to be confident that they know the standards to be used.

Evaluation by members of the class is dangerous when no standards have been formed or when they are not well understood or accepted. Evaluation by students can be either oral or written. Both kinds are worth practising. Many possibilities for variation in oral student evaluation are practicable and desirable e.g.:

- Call for volunteers after a performance.
- Call on students without notice and thereby encourage all students to be prepared to make constructive comments.
- Have students rate the speakers of the day. Call on individuals to justify their rankings with specific reasons.

Written evaluation also has merit. The following methods have been used by high school speech teachers:

- Give each student a rating blank for each student who is going to speak during the class period and have the completed rating blanks handed to the speaker. They may or may not be signed as the teacher and students elect.
- Give students blank sheets of paper and have them write whatever comments they believe to be appropriate about speech performance.
- Have students write one important compliment, one important suggestion, one rating and one rank for each performance in a series of speech performances and have these papers handed to the teacher.
- Many teachers of speech have found it wise to collect all completed rating forms and paragraphs of compliments and suggestions at the end of a class period, keeping them until the next class period. In the interim the teacher can sort and assemble each student's evaluations and carefully analyse the ratings, ranks and remarks by members of the class for each student. Any rating or remark which is 'way out of line' may be removed from the assortment and destroyed. Then, the evaluations can be returned to the students at the following class period. This close scrutiny can also aid the teacher in discovering individual students who need counsel in applying standards. ([Balcer and Seabury](#)).

Time of Evaluation

Three possible times present themselves for offering oral evaluations of speech, speaking and speechmaking. It cannot be said that one of them is better than another. The best advice for the teacher is to vary the time. Oral evaluation may be presented at the end of each individual performance. The advantage of this method is that all students and the teacher have fresh in their minds the performance to be evaluated. Evaluation may be also presented after a series of speeches at which time the teacher can evaluate three, four or more performances together. In this way, the teacher can compare and contrast the performances and generalise, from his observations, all of them.

When it comes to evaluation of speech performances by students, it can wait until the last ten or fifteen minutes before the end of the class. The teacher can then present his evaluation of the speaking done during the earlier part of the class hour. This type of evaluation points out the strengths and weaknesses of the speech performances with suggestions for improvement.

Some teachers have succeeded in making effective evaluation during student's performance. Seated in the back of the room, a teacher can use flash cards or signals to the speaker to increase or decrease his rate of speaking and so on. This method seems to have merit as the students react well to the teacher's on-the-spot evaluation.

Finally, oral evaluation may be presented by the teacher immediately before the student begins his performance in class. Obviously, a student is more likely to give attention to evaluations at a time when he needs help in preparing a speech than just after a performance, when he cannot apply the lesson. ([Balcer and Seabury](#)).

Correctness or Content

It is very difficult to evaluate the speaking skill as it involves numerous doubts. The major problem is which criterion the greatest importance should be attached to and which ones can be slightly ignored. The answer is not easy to find but let us try to have a closer look at some of the criteria taken into consideration while assessing the speaking skill. They can be ranked into two categories:

- A – that is criteria of major importance,
- B – that is criteria of minor importance.

In group A criteria most frequently paid attention to are the following: fluency, rich vocabulary, grammar correctness, logic of an utterance and finally ease in expressing own opinions. When it comes to B category, we can rate the following: correct pronunciation, stress, facial expressions, good intonation and eye-contact. The question is what the hierarchy of the reciprocal relations of the above mentioned factors should look like. Well, if I were to choose, I would give the priority to logic of an utterance, in other words a message a speaker wants to convey. When we compare that criterion with grammar, it seems to be obvious that the latter loses significance. It is because the more attention we pay to what we want to say, the less we pay to correctness. If we pay too much attention to correctness, we do not seem to be speaking a language at all. Let us look at the example of this. Imagine two people who work together in a shop or an office. One morning one of them arrives late for work. What might be the next line in this conversation between them?

- A: Why are you so late?
- B: I am sorry, my mother is take to hospital.
- A: ...

Now imagine the same conversation in a classroom if a student arrives late. We might hear:

- Teacher: Why are you so late?
- Student: I am sorry, my mother is take to hospital.
- Teacher: No, not ‘is take’, she ‘has been taken’ to hospital.

or

- Teacher: Why are you so late?
- Student: I am sorry, my mother has been taken to hospital.
- Teacher: Good!

Well, that might be a slight exaggeration of what happens, but so often teachers do react to the form of what students say instead of the content. In other words, the importance of mistakes is not so big that they cannot be ignored from time to time. Students need the experience of being listened to as people with things to say ([Edge](#)). What is more, we should remember that a slight ignorance of mistakes will enable a student to speak more fluently. It should also help him set his mind on the things he feels

he ought to say and thus it will result in the ease in expressing own opinions. As for the vocabulary richness, it is of course really helpful to have a rich vocabulary but often we can convey a given message using a simple set of words. Teachers must become more flexible in the way they perceive the foreign language teaching. That will surely result in more understanding teachers and less stressed students.

Now, let us consider the B category. All the criteria rated here are undoubtedly significant as far as characteristics of a good speaker go. It should, however, be borne in mind that students are only good speakers-to-be. They will acquire new skills, comprehend the essential linguistic knowledge in order to become good speakers of the English language in the future. Thus, they should constantly be encouraged to put a lot of effort into good pronunciation, intonation, stress; and, at the same time, they should not be hastened. Certainly, our patience will be rewarded. In addition, let us learn to listen to our students because they always have something interesting to say.

The Art of Criticism

The following suggestions for making effective class criticism will be helpful:

1. Think out substituting the word ‘evaluation’ for criticism. It is a common belief among students as well as adults that criticism is destructive and tearing-down process. By calling it ‘evaluation’ the teacher may avoid negative comments from the students during the process of evaluation.
2. Focus on one type of error or weakness in your comments instead of evaluating the total effect of the performance. Keep your evaluation purposeful and specific.
3. Do not use ridicule, sarcasm and imitation of a fault unless it is done in the right spirit and accepted in the same spirit.
4. Give every student equal time. Do not concentrate on one or two students and tend to exclude the others from your consideration.
5. Remember that you evaluate individuals. Study the student you are evaluating. Keep in mind that some student are more sensitive than others. What can be proper for one student may not work for another.

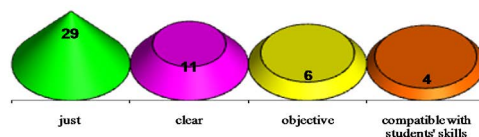
6. Avoid the repetition of the same 'old' critical comments for speaker after speaker. Each speech is a new experience, both for the benefit of each student and for focusing attention by all students.
7. Bear in mind that in speech the whole may be more than the sum of its parts. It can be successful despite weaknesses that are evident, or it can fail despite excellence in all its aspects. The teacher should pay attention not only to the speech as a whole but also to specific aspects. This also means that the teacher should listen to each part of speech as if it were presented in a non-classroom situation.
8. Do not withhold praise and compliments if they are deserved, but do not use praise indiscriminately. Secondary school students are quick to detect the 'phoney' or the 'exaggerated' compliment. Be honest, sincere and fair. Balance sincere praise of a student's good points with helpful suggestions on points which need improvement.
9. Your evaluation should be kept on the important aspects of speaking. Watch any tendency to over emphasise minor, easily detectable points. Delivery factors are, for many people, much easier to comment on than are factors of content, organisation a language. Remember that your students will get a sense of what is important in speaking by what you select to evaluate.
10. Remember about the language of criticism. It should be straightforward and your words should be understood by your students. Do not use terminology that speakers are not familiar with. Make sure that your comments are worth listening for them.

The teacher has a great responsibility while evaluating and criticising his students and their performances. He must make sure that he does it carefully and clearly – indicating strengths as well as weaknesses, with specific suggestions for improvement and thus motivate each student to develop his best abilities ([Balcer and Seabury](#)).

Results of the Surveys Conducted among Students

All surveys carried out for the purpose of the presented article were conducted among secondary school students with a view to find out what attitude students have towards speaking English, being

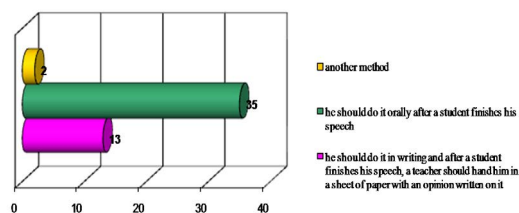
evaluated and whether or not they are satisfied with the way they are taught this skill. Below are the results.



Source: Own Research

Figure 1 What Qualities Should the Evaluation of the Speaking Skill in English Have?

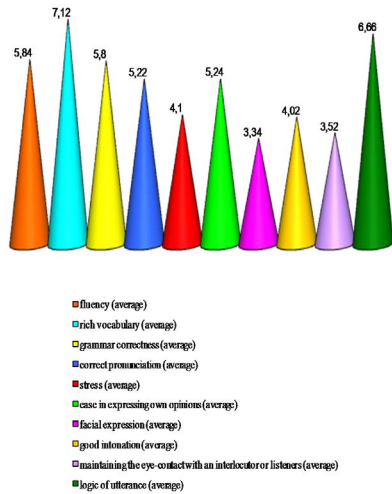
Being asked to answer the open question mentioned above, students openly say that they demand that their teachers be just in their evaluation. It is important that this feature was the most frequent one. As a feature which is less important, students classify 'being clear' in a way teachers explain and justify their assessment. Teachers should also evaluate students' ability to speak English in an objective and compatible with students' skills way. It is worth noticing that these features were presented by the least numerous groups of students.



Source: Own Research

Figure 2 Your Teacher Should Evaluate Speaking Skill in the Following Way

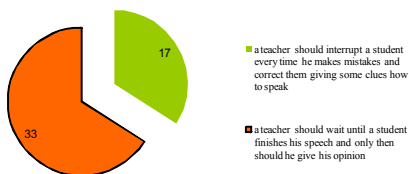
Seeing that most students expect their teachers to make comments on their speaking orally and after they finish is a great step towards being a favourable evaluator. Only some of them want their evaluators to write their opinions on a piece of paper. Unfortunately, those who choose another method do not propose any solution how to do it, which may mean that they expect teachers to be imaginative.



Source: Own Research

Figure 3 Which of the Following Criteria are Important in Assessing the Speaking Skill in English?

The presented chart shows us what, according to students, is important while making a speech. It is unique information as thanks to it teachers are able to understand why their pupils make different mistakes. This awareness can be useful while giving them hints how they should prepare speaking. It is unbelievable that when it comes to such criteria as: fluency, grammar correctness, ease in expressing one's own opinions, answers differ dramatically. Some students give 1 point of their importance while others estimate them as the most essential giving them 10 points. It should be a valuable proof that students have different attitude to the same criteria.

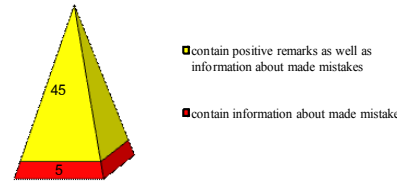


Source: Own Research

Figure 4 When Should the Evaluation (Together with the Correction of Mistakes) Take Place?

The above chart is a clear proof that students want their teachers to wait with comments until they finish. It should be an important clue for evaluators

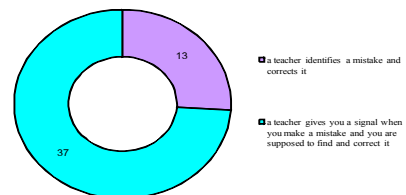
as only by asking pupils in what way they expect teachers to evaluate them, can their dreams of perfect evaluation come true. There is a little group of students who prefer being interrupted, as otherwise they get confused.



Source: Own Research

Figure 5 What the Evaluation of Speech Act Should Contain?

The answers to the question reveal a very unique piece of information. Students want to know not only their mistakes but they also wait for praise. It would be good if teachers remembered that their learners need encouragement to be better. They want to see their progress and what is more disciples depend on their masters and it is a great reward if they get any good comments. Few students prefer harsh evaluation and being informed only about mistakes.



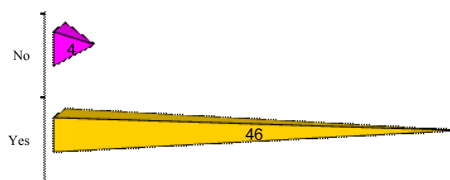
Source: Own Research

Figure 6 The Identification of Possible Mistakes in a Speech Act

Polish students want to be independent. They would like to correct themselves and they demand that their tutors should only recognise the mistake and give them a chance to correct it. It is a very remarkable piece of information that students are not so lazy to wait only to be corrected. It is better if they do it on their own as it forces them to think and they are satisfied.

It can be very graceful for Polish teachers that their students are satisfied with their work and that tutors fulfil their task completely. Although it is not easy to evaluate someone especially in the field of evaluation of the speaking skill, most teachers do

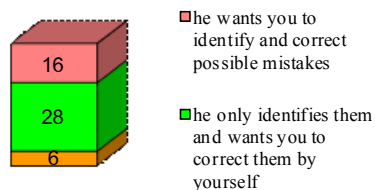
their best to take into consideration every hint they receive from their pupils.



Source: Own Research

Figure 7 Does Your English Teacher Possess the Ability of Objective and Critical Outlook of Your Speeches?

It is very good that students see their teachers as those who combine objectivity and criticism in their evaluation. It is a great relief that few learners do say that they are not so fond of their masters when it comes to being objective and critical while assessing.



Source: Own Research

Figure 8 In What Way does Your Teacher Correct Possible Mistakes?

The presented diagram clearly shows in what way students' mistakes are corrected. The most numerous group of students admit that their teachers only identify mistakes but the process of correction belongs to learners themselves. The least numerous group say that teachers do all work instead of them giving the right version. There are still teachers who give their students chance to identify and correct their mistakes themselves. It can be stated that the difference may come from the fact that every single teacher has his own way of teaching this skill and very often they practice many methods to establish their favourite and most efficient.

When it comes to giving characteristics of students and teachers who are good speakers of English the answers are the same, they should speak English very well, be communicative and use very little Polish during lessons. What is unique for me

is the fact that students answer that students and teachers must like and understand each other very well to communicate sufficiently.

Students do not want to assess themselves. They very frequently say that they just cannot do it without the help of teacher. It seems to be a signal that students do not know what is important while evaluating this skill. When they were forced to answer how they assess their ability to speak English, most students say that they are not successful in speaking at all. They rather say that they are bad at it which is not a good portrait of Polish schools and Polish teachers.

Students want their teachers to help them to make progress while speaking by giving help in choosing proper words and telling them what is good and what is bad in their way of speaking. Polish pupils do not want to stay alone with their mistakes and they do appreciate every remark which is honest and delivered in a proper way. They want to be encouraged by being given nice comments about their way of speaking.

According to students teachers are able to develop their self-confidence in speaking English by marking their mistakes, not shouting but explaining the same thing several times, make their students active during the lesson and make them speak by giving entertaining games. Students pay attention to the atmosphere in the class, they agree that it should be friendly. Some say that they do not know what teachers should do to help them and they believe that teachers know what to do. The most important advice is to practise this ability as, according to students, practice makes perfect.

Besides everything that has been mentioned so far, students also expect from their teachers to help them get rid of 'stage fright' while speaking English. They give some clues how to do it: help them start to speak, make them speak in public, say something nice and praise them. An important conclusion can be drawn from the research: students rely on their teachers and treat them as their masters in every field of learning English.

Most students would not look at what the book looks like; still, a few of them would take this fact into consideration. Fortunately, quite a numerous group of students answered that for them the cover has nothing to do with their opinion. It is good that

they know that the evaluator should evaluate what is inside and assess what is really important and what is the object of proper evaluation.

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