



Daily Formative Assessments in Second Language Acquisition

SUMMARY

Brief partner activities are not only a great way to increase student engagement, but can also be a valuable strategy for providing students and teachers with frequent feedback on student growth. This author advocates a partner approach for daily speaking assessments to provide focused practice and ongoing information on skill development.

Teachers in all

content areas can use frequent formative assessments to improve student learning. This article will focus on how establishing daily routines can increase student engagement and provide students with the feedback they need to make progress on a daily basis. The content area for this example is learning a second language, and the particular skill area is “building speaking skills.”

Standard 1: Students will be able to use a language other than English for communication (New York State Education Department, *Learning Standards for Languages Other Than English*, 1996).

Performance Indicator 4: use appropriate strategies to initiate and engage in simple conversations with more fluent or native speakers of the same age group,

familiar adults, and providers of common public services. (Modern Languages, Standard 1, Key Idea 1)

Although the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (1999) identifies five aspects of language (i.e., communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities), most students and their parents focus on the speaking dimension of communication (Bailey, 2005). Speaking is the least developed of students’ skills, and their inability to express themselves has a negative impact on their confidence and enthusiasm (Office for Standards, 2008). Multiple speaking assessments with immediate feedback can assist students in becoming successful speakers of a second language. For purposes of this article, we will use the example of a Spanish course that may be offered in the middle grades or high school.

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Spontaneous Speaking Assessments

Early in the Spanish course, students complete several spontaneous speaking assessments as pre-tests to establish a speaking skill baseline. In this activity, students are not provided preparation time. They are presented with a topic or an image and are asked to begin speaking in Spanish. For example:

■ Lily is shown a picture of a party and talks about it in Spanish for one minute while her partner, Rowan, counts the number of sentences she says that are “meaningful, appropriate, and comprehensible.” The teacher has modeled the difference between meaningful and non-meaningful, appropriate and not appropriate, and comprehensible and incomprehensible, and the students have practiced discerning these criteria for success.

■ Students reverse roles, and Rowan is shown a picture of a restaurant. Lily counts the number of sentences he says that are meaningful, appropriate, and comprehensible.

As would be expected in a diverse classroom, there is a range of skill levels. Lily starts the year with a response of three simple sentences related to the topic of a party, such as:

“There is a boy. There is a girl.
The boy talks.”

Rowan is not able at this point to speak spontaneously about the picture he is shown. This provides the teacher with important information to guide further instruction.

The teacher sets the following Instructional Target:

“Students will speak spontaneously about an unexpected (but familiar) topic for one minute using sentences that are meaningful, appropriate, and comprehensible.”

In order to help students meet the instructional target, the teacher has the students practice different “language functions” that cross topics and situations. NYSED *Learning Standards for Languages Other Than English* (1996) include language functions in Standard 1 for Modern Languages (Key Idea 1 under Checkpoint A):

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When students complete these in-class formative assessments, they receive immediate feedback. They do not have to wait until the unit exam (two weeks away) or until the mid-semester exam, to know how well they can speak.

More importantly, since the listening partners are not thinking about what they will say next in the conversation, they can focus carefully on the speakers' sentences.

- socializing,
- providing and acquiring information,
- expressing personal feelings and opinions, and
- getting others to adopt a course of action.

To assist them in building their skill with these functions, students are asked to use them across multiple topics. For example, students may explain their *preference* for a certain store in the mall (**topic**). Likewise, they may *ask for information* about a new store (**topic**).

Even though this activity is designed for partners, a back-and-forth conversation is not the goal at this point. The teacher has the students speak individually on a topic so their partners do not limit their practice opportunity (Tuttle & Tuttle, 2012). In a conversation, the responding partner's speed of response, inappropriate answer, or incorrect grammar usage can cause the original speaker to lose focus. For example, when Roberta and Tom have a conversation about movies, Tom is not able to quickly answer Roberta's question: "What type of movie is [Choice A]?" She waits, then asks a different question. If Roberta were not waiting and losing focus, she may have expressed herself with greater detail regarding movies. Therefore, although students work with a partner, only one student speaks during each part of the oral assessment.

More importantly, since the listening partners are not thinking about what they will say next in the conversation, they can focus carefully on the speakers' sentences. The partners record the number of spoken sentences that met the criteria of being meaningful, appropriate, and comprehensible. After the first student in each pair speaks for a minute, the partner tells them how many sentences meet the criteria and offers additional sentences or topics to talk about. For example:

- James narrates about his family vacation.
- Kim responds with formative feedback: "You said five sentences. You describe the lake. *Where is the lake? What is the weather like? What else do you do at the lake?*"
- James records these suggestions. As an improvement strategy, James answers these questions so that he increases not only the quantity but the quality of what he can narrate about his family vacation.
- Students reverse roles, and Kim talks about a different situation while James counts Kim's sentences.
- James reports the number of sentences to Kim and provides her with suggestions for expanding on her topic.

When students complete these in-class formative assessments, they receive immediate feedback (Tuttle, 2009). They do not have to wait until the unit

exam (two weeks away) or until the mid-semester exam, to know how well they can speak. Using this process, the students complete speaking assessments during each class (albeit informal and at times imperfect) and they also receive feedback on how to improve. Their speaking abilities can grow on a *daily* basis.

Through the use of peer assessment, the teacher can multiply the number of students assessed during each class (Tuttle & Tuttle, 2012). If the educator were to spend 1 minute on assessing each student's speaking skills and a half minute providing feedback to each of his or her 26 students, the teacher would spend 39 minutes of the class. However, if students assess each other, the assessment takes only 3 minutes for each student in a pair to speak and to receive feedback. In 3 minutes, all 26 students have been assessed.

Since each speaking assessment only takes 3 minutes of class, the teacher has the students complete more than one speaking assessment during a class. Within a 6-minute time period, the teacher can involve the students in two different speaking assessments. For example, during a unit on *free time activities*, the teacher has the students complete an assessment focusing on:

■ *Asking questions* about an upcoming concert, and

■ *Explaining their opinion* regarding why the local team will or will not win the championship.

In this way, the teacher is able to assess different language functions during each class. Within the time frame of four classes, the teacher can assess eight different language functions. At specific intervals, the teacher can record these data by language function, and enter the data into a spreadsheet for analysis. This allows the opportunity to review student strengths and weaknesses. As the teacher looks over the data from the students' formative assessments, she or he can then modify instruction to address specific language functions that require reteaching or additional practice.

During this reteaching, the teacher focuses on instructional strategies that will directly and immediately address specific functions. Students select which new strategy or strategies they want to use. For example, they can select from the following strategies for "elaborating on a topic" (Tuttle & Tuttle, 2012):

■ **Fill in the Blank:** Student is asked to use the following guide to create detailed sentences by substituting different words in each slot. For example:

"At (time) _____,
I (action) _____
in (place) _____."

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- “At six o’clock,
I wash in the bathroom.”
- “At seven o’clock,
I eat in the kitchen.”

■ Ask the 5 Ws — Plus Which and

How: Student is directed to address a topic and ask: Who, What, Where, When, Why, Which, and How. For example, the topic is “the neighborhood”:

- (Who?) The tall man lives here.
- (What?) He drives a blue car.
- (How?) He goes fast.

■ Use a Different Action (Verb) in

each Sentence: Student is asked to think about as many actions as possible related to the topic, and then develop sentences. For example, the topic is “the neighborhood”:

- drive
- play
- paint

■ **Zoom In:** Student is asked to start broadly with a topic and then pick something or someone to “zoom in on” to give focus and details.

After the students select a strategy, they practice it with a partner. For example:

■ Sarah selects the strategy of *zooming in* and practices this strategy for the topic of describing her family. Sarah brings a family picture to class or uses her phone to show a picture of her family.

■ She *zooms in* on one family member, her father, and provides basic information about him such as his physical description, age, household activities, favorite foods, sports or physical activities.

■ She *zooms in* on another family member, and repeats the above.

After several practices, she feels comfortable using this strategy for elaboration. She increases the amount and breadth of information she can offer for different topics.

Planned Speaking Assessments

Speaking skills are assessed in multiple ways. Students also engage in *planned speaking* assessments. Here, they receive a topic and a function, plan out what they want to say and practice speaking before the assessment. For example, the student is asked to complete the following steps:

■ Describe what they used to do to celebrate their birthday at age 5.

■ Go to the Voki site (<http://voki.com>). Voki is a program to create speaking avatars (i.e., a graphical representation of the user, such as a businessperson or a dog). They record their voice. Students report that they often re-record themselves several times to improve their quality of speaking.

■ Put a link to their recording on their own class wiki page. (At the Voki site they can copy the computer code to embed their speaking on their wiki page.)

Other students listen to this recorded speech and give feedback to the speakers.

The class wiki page serves as an e-portfolio for the students' planned and spontaneous speaking. They record their speaking for each unit. Toward the end of the course, they go back and listen to themselves to hear how much more fluent they have become. They usually hear fewer pauses between sentences and hear a higher number of sentences which meet the criteria for success. They hear more connected sentences, and these sentences focus on the topic. The students can share these e-portfolio recordings with whomever they wish such as parents and friends. In some situations, recordings can be helpful to share with potential employers or college admissions personnel in order to demonstrate their language skill.

The teacher facilitates multiple assessments on multiple language functions in multiple ways (spontaneous or planned) and has students provide each other with a significant amount of feedback. In this way, the teacher helps the students improve on a *daily* basis. The students go from speaking just a few simple sentences to being able to speak fluently about a range of topics.

These approaches can be used in any area of the curriculum that calls upon the students to develop their speaking abilities, to consider strategies offered by the teacher, and to practice those strategies in a systematic and frequent way (Tuttle, 2009). While the students are also involved in more formal assessments, there can be great benefit to daily formative assessments which not only provide valuable information to teachers, but also engage students directly in their own monitoring of — and reflection on — their learning. In the end, this is our long-term goal.



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