

B Developing a shared understanding of intelligibility in assessment

A study investigating how AMEP teachers and other members of the community assessed the intelligibility of learners at CSWE I level found that:

- Teachers tend to estimate they were actually able to understand more, of what learners say than members of the general public can
- Individuals vary enormously in the way they rate intelligibility
- Intelligibility is a combination of:
how much we estimate we can understand
+
how hard it is for us to understand

It does **not** mean how much we actually **can** understand.

This means, that when we are judging the intelligibility of a speaker, we are really judging a combination of both how much we **think** we can understand and how **difficult** we find it to understand what they are saying, (in other words, how hard we have to work to understand the speaker).

Assessing for intelligibility

When assessing the intelligibility of a speaker, it is important to agree as much as possible on the extent to which we are assessing:

- how much we understand a speaker
- how hard we have to work in order to understand a speaker.

We also need to decide the perspective from which we are making assessments: is it from our own as teachers or, as Fraser (2000) suggests, from the perspective of 'an Australian of average goodwill'?

It would be useful to feed our insights from assessing our students into our teaching so that we can target those areas that will be of most benefit to them.



Designing tasks

When we listen to someone, we use many different cues from the context in order to understand what the speaker is saying. Task design can therefore be an important influence on our perceptions of the intelligibility of a speaker during an assessment task. This means, when we design assessment tasks we need to ensure they require the learner to say something that isn't totally predictable.

The content of many assessment tasks is so predictable we do not really need to understand what the learners are saying at all – this is often compounded by teacher and learner 'cue cards' which can have the effect of sequencing and scripting responses. If we already know, or can very easily guess, what a speaker is saying, we do not need to be able to understand what they are actually saying.

One way to ensure we actually understand what a learner is saying is to create a communicative gap – a good assessment task from the point of view of assessing intelligibility would be one in which the learner has to communicate something the listener doesn't already know or cannot easily predict.

For example, in a CSWE I assessment task, such as providing a spoken description, learners are typically asked to describe a picture the learner and listener can see. However, if we get the learner to choose one picture from a whole range of pictures that they can both see, then the listener must use the spoken description to identify which picture is being described, and so on.

Moderation

In order to make fair assessments it is important teachers share a view of intelligibility. This involves participating in moderation activities in which they can:

- Clarify shared understanding of intelligibility
- Moderate assessments of students' performance on the intelligibility criteria

Consider different aspects of task design (eg predictability, communicative load, role of the teacher, and context).