A Task Based Assessment of Academic English Pronunciation

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Introduction

Task-based assessment simulates the types of tasks learners are required to perform outside the classroom.

- Assessment based on functional professional tasks is more relevant than standard pronunciation assessment tools, such as picture description or elicited single words.

- Task-based assessment can aid in prioritizing aspects of pronunciation that have the greatest impact on the individual's intelligibility, especially vocabulary for specific professional purposes.

International students and visiting scholars may be surprised by their unintelligibility to many American listeners.

- They may have "passed" an assessment of their English speaking ability (such as the TOEFL) in order to gain acceptance into an academic program.

- Their required speaking tasks may include classroom discussion, participation in meetings, teaching, presenting, and everyday conversation exchange with peers and mentors.

Speakers of English for academic purposes typically have a specific focus area of research or study.

- A task-based assessment of academic English pronunciation must be flexible enough to accommodate a variety of academic disciplines.

Components of the Task-Based Assessment

1. Oral reading of a paragraph describing the purpose and characteristics of an effective "elevator pitch" (a concise summary of one's work to share in various professional contexts)

2. Oral reading of an example elevator pitch on the topic of emotional intelligence in mentor-mentee relationships

3. Open-ended Wh-questions designed to stimulate the subject's thinking regarding developing a potential elevator pitch

4. A spontaneous speech and language sample of 30 to 90 seconds in which the subject delivers an elevator pitch specific to their own academic interests

5. Self-rating of participation in various communication activities

6. Demographic and background information

Participant Materials

Oral Reading:

The oral reading passage explains the purpose and characteristics of an effective "elevator pitch;" a concise summary of one's work to share in various professional contexts with influential colleagues, delivered in the time that it takes to ride an elevator.

Two example elevator pitches are provided, on the topic of emotional intelligence and the mentor-mentee relationship. The topic was selected for its relevance across multiple professions.

- The first elevator pitch is too lengthy and contains jargon terms.
- The second elevator pitch conveys the same meaning in a more concise and conversational manner.

Academic Words and Phrases:

The author composed the oral reading task using vocabulary from the Academic Word List (2000). The task includes a representative sample of American English phonemes in all word positions.

The Oral Reading task also includes phrases from the academic phrase list (Ellis et al. 2008). The following excerpt illustrates **academic words** in bold and *academic phrases* in italics.

- Recently I've been **focusing** on *the extent to which* mentees use emotional intelligence skills *in order to* **facilitate communication** with their mentors...*It may be possible* that mentors make **assumptions** about their mentees' goals...I'd like to **investigate** cultural **aspects** of *different types of* mentoring.

Spontaneous Elevator Pitch Elicitation Questions:

1. What is your primary area of study or research?
2. When did you become interested in _____?
3. Why do you think this area of study or work is important?
4. Who is an influential and respected person in your profession?
5. Where do you think you might be able to meet this person?
6. How would you explain your common interest in _____, or your connection to this person's work?

Self-Rating of Participation in Communication Activities

WHODAS 2.0 is a self-administered questionnaire that assesses participation in activities and the impact on health and quality of life. It is applicable across cultures in all adult populations in clinical and general population settings. It uses the following rating scale:

0 = No Difficulty	3 = Severe Difficulty
1 = Mild Difficulty	4 = Extreme Difficulty or Cannot Do
2 = Moderate Difficulty	

Six questions from the categories Understanding and communicating; Getting along with people; Life activities; Participation in society:

- D1.5 Generally understanding what people say
- D1.6 Starting and maintaining a conversation
- D4.1 Dealing with people you do not know
- D4.4 Making new friends
- D5.6 Doing your most important work/school tasks well
- D6.1 Joining in community activities

Examiner Results Rating

The examiner obtains the following information from the participant's spontaneous elevator pitch:

- Speaking rate (words per minute)
- Specific grammatical differences (e.g., articles, plurals, verb tense)
- Pronunciation differences (vowels, consonants, syllable stress)
- Minimal or near-minimal word pairs produced
- Number and type of disfluencies produced (e.g., repetitions, hesitations)

The examiner uses a rating scale for four areas:

- General Language Proficiency
- Listener Effort and Involvement
- Overall Intelligibility
- Fluency/forward flow

Each rating scale describes specific characteristics for each level. The following example rating scale summarizes Overall Impression (the average of the four ratings):

None, absent, negligible NO PROBLEM High/excellent	Slight, low MILD PROBLEM Very good	Medium, fair MODERATE PROBLEM Good/emerging	High, Extreme SEVERE PROBLEM Fair/beginning	Total difficulty COMPLETE PROBLEM Poor
0	1	2	3	4

Utility of Task-Based Assessment of Pronunciation

Combined results of the Task-based Assessment of Academic English Pronunciation facilitate prioritization of the elements important for intelligibility among lingua franca speakers and listeners as identified by Szpyra-Kozłowska (2014).

- General language proficiency (grammatical correctness, appropriate choice of vocabulary and idiom)
- Fluency, pauses, hesitations, self corrections, fillers
- Frequency of phonetic errors
- Speech rate
- Minimal and near-minimal pairs
- Effort invested in interaction

The relative severity rating of each element determines the relative importance for instruction. Following instruction and learning, the task can be re-administered for comparison with the initial results.

Selected References

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