



# 21st Century Language Teaching Conference 2024

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# **Peer-evaluation of English Speaking Communicative Adequacy**

Shzh-chen Nancy Lee

## **Abstract**

Speaking assessment in language classrooms presents ongoing challenges teachers face due to the multifaceted nature of conceptualizing and measuring speaking proficiency. In the field of task-based language teaching (TBLT), communicative adequacy has been proposed as an alternative measurement to assess the extent to which speakers successfully achieve their speaking tasks (Pallotti, 2009; Suzuki & Kormos, 2020). However, like other measurements of speaking proficiency, the measurement of communicative adequacy is also controversial because it also depends on how it is conceptualized. The conceptualization of communicative adequacy is still evolving as it is a relatively new term. Meanwhile, while it is challenging for teachers to effectively conduct speaking assessment, it poses even more challenges for learners to evaluate each other. Peer evaluation is an important task in TBLT because it improves learners' learning experiences and outcomes, such as increased learner engagement, autonomy and ownership, promotes critical thinking skills, enhances communication, provides immediate feedback, and increases autonomy and ownership. Therefore, how peer evaluation of communicative adequacy can be effectively conducted in the EFL context would be a new challenge for researchers and classroom practitioners. This paper reviews literature to conceptualize and measure communicative adequacy. It also reviews literature related to peer feedback and evaluation. Finally, it explores the effectiveness of implementing peer evaluation of communicative adequacy in the EFL context.

## **Introduction**

Speaking is the most immediate language skill, yet less tangible than reading, writing, and listening (Hughes, 2011). The conceptualization of speaking proficiency is therefore controversial as it is difficult to describe what this skill exactly entails. Different conceptualizations of speaking proficiency have resulted in different dimensions of measurement frameworks (Iwashita, 2010). From a linguistic perspective, second language speaking proficiency has often been conceptualized in terms of complexity, accuracy, and fluency (Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2005; Norris and Ortega, 2009). The conceptualized CAF triad has been measured using different validated CAF measurements. However, while the CAF concept and measurement framework have been widely acknowledged, learners who are disfluent, use non-complex forms, or produce inaccurate linguistic features can still successfully achieve their speaking goals, while learners with high levels of complexity, accuracy, or fluency might

not (Révész et al., 2016). Therefore, the CAF framework alone might not be sufficient to measure second language speaking proficiency as it does not measure how successful learners have achieved their target speaking task.

Unlike the CAF framework that measures segmented measurements of complexity, accuracy, and fluency, holistic measurements such as communicative adequacy prioritizes achievement of the overall communication. Communicative adequacy measures the extent to which learners successfully achieve their communicative goals (Pallotti, 2009). However, similar to most language assessments, communicative adequacy is also often rated by expert raters who have traditionally conducted assessments using predefined scales that might have neglected the broader context of successful communication. These expert-driven assessments have overlooked the potentials of peer assessment that provides a learner-centered perspective of communication.

One overlooked area of speaking proficiency measurement is the usage of peer assessment. Peer assessment offers a unique opportunity for learners to be involved in the evaluation process, increases learner engagement and understanding of assessment by enabling them to reflect on and internalize the necessary criteria for assessment. Previous speaking proficiency measurement studies predominantly focused on expert ratings (e.g., Iwashita et al., 2008) so little is known about how learners themselves conceptualize and measure speaking of other learners. By engaging learners in the evaluation process, it also enhances their critical thinking and learner autonomy.

This paper aims to review literature related to the conceptualization and measurement of speaking proficiency by looking specifically at the conceptualization of a holistic measurement called communicative adequacy. It also reviews literature related to peer assessment and aims to explore the possibility of implementing peer assessment of communicative adequacy based on its new conceptualization and defined measurements. By examining the conceptualization and measurement of communicative adequacy as well as literature related to peer assessment, the study aims to explore some insights into learners' perceptions of who successful speakers are. This paper would like to conclude with some practical implications for implementing peer assessment of communicative adequacy in the second language classrooms.

## Literature Review

### **Conceptualization and measuring speaking proficiency**

Speaking is a dynamic and multifaceted process that requires the integration of multiple linguistic, cognitive, and social skills in real time. In the second language or foreign language context, speaking proficiency therefore becomes a multi-dimensional concept involving multiple skills with varying operational definitions (Hughes, 2011). It can be conceptualized differently depending on the discourse

in which it is analyzed such as pragmatics, linguistic, functional, interactional, conversational, and sociocultural discourses (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). Speaking proficiency can also be defined differently depending on different learning purposes and learners, and contexts. The conceptualization of L2 speaking proficiency is therefore not without controversies because it is not always clear what speaking proficiency entails. This ambiguity makes the measurement of speaking proficiency difficult and also makes comparisons between studies across the discourses almost impossible (Housen & Kuiken, 2009; Iwashita, 2010). In a linguistic discourse, second language speaking proficiency has often been conceptualized in terms of three constructs: complexity, accuracy, and fluency (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Norris & Ortega, 2009).

Second language speaking proficiency has been measured using various methods ranging from the earlier and subjective (e.g., Adams, 1980) to later and more objective measurements. (e.g., de Jong & Vercellotti, 2016). Different researchers have used different measurements to determine the complex, accurate, and fluent degree of oral production leading to controversies over which measurements are most suitable for assessing speaking proficiency (Housen & Kuiken, 2009; Norris & Ortega, 2009). However, different measurement methods have produced different research results (Nitta & Nakatsuhara, 2014). While different measurements of speaking proficiency have been proposed, many researchers (e.g., Norris & Ortega, 2009) agree that speaking performances need to be measured using multiple measurements in order to gain more precise and objective accounts of oral proficiency. This is because researchers who have used single dimension measurements (e.g., fluency measurements) have reported more positive results in their studies from the effects of pedagogical interventions than those who have used multi-dimensional measurements (Bygate, 1996). For example, researchers who measured speaking proficiency development using fluency related measures have predominantly produced positive results from their intervention (e.g., Ahmadian 2011).

### **Conceptualizing and measuring communicative adequacy**

In the field of task-based language teaching (TBLT), the emphasis on holistic assessment has brought new insights into speaking assessment. This shift aligns with the principles of TBLT which emphasize the value of meaningful communication and task completion over improved segmented speaking features. Unlike the analytical CAF measurements that are time-consuming and very often not practical to be conducted as classroom assessments, holistic measurements such as degree of comprehensibility (Suzuki & Kormos, 2020), communication ability (Sato & McNamara, 2019, communicative effectiveness (Sato, 2012), and communicative adequacy (Revesz et al., 2016) by measuring speakers' overall oral performances using human raters.

Communicative adequacy has been proposed as an alternative framework for assessing speaking. It focuses on the speaker's ability to achieve their communicative goals rather than solely evaluating linguistic accuracy or complexity (Pallotti, 2009). It measures the extent to which a speaker successfully completes a speaking task (Suzuki & Kormos, 2020). While communicative adequacy aims to measure the overall success of completing the target speaking task, previous research indicated that it is likely to be closely related to fluency indicators (Suzuki & Kormos, 2020). In addition, speech organization and speech elaboration may also predict raters' holistic ratings (Sato & McNamara, 2019). Therefore, while communicative adequacy has been proposed to be a holistic measurement of speaking proficiency, it is also closely related to some specific traditional segmented speaking measurements. Therefore, the reconceptualization of communicative adequacy needs be conducted and measurements for communicative adequacy need to be reexamined (Lee & Ogawa, 2022).

## Peer evaluation

Peer evaluation has gained much attention in the field of TBLT in the past years due to its effectiveness in the language learning process and outcomes (Lee & Tajino, 2008). Although it was previously used more commonly in the writing classrooms (Yang et al., 2006), it is also becoming increasingly more popular for speaking tasks as it also resolves time and class size constraints imposed on teachers for giving individual evaluations as learners can provide immediate evaluation for each other (Yang et al., 2006). While teachers tend to make more comments for improving grammatical features, learners have the ability to make more overall evaluation by focusing on improving the content, organization, and vocabulary (Paulus, 1999). Additionally, it also helps learners to develop critical thinking skills by analyzing and reflecting on their own performances and others'.

Peer evaluation promotes learner engagement and autonomy as well as active participation and social interactions (Yang et al., 2006). Positive social interaction is important for the language classroom because it decreases learner anxiety as well as increases their desire to use the target. While higher-achieving students seem to respond positively and benefit from teacher evaluation and corrective feedback, research has shown that some lower-achieving students respond negatively to teacher corrective feedback and evaluation (Guénette, 2007).

Despite its many advantages, concerns remain regarding the reliability and validity of peer evaluation. Learners may lack sufficient skills or confidence to assess their peers effectively and this might result in inconsistent or biased evaluations. The implementation of peer evaluation requires clear and effective evaluation criteria to ensure reliable and meaningful assessments. While explicit CAF measurements can potentially overcome the lack of clarity in evaluation, it is doubtful that language learners can conduct evaluations on their peers using the CAF measurements because of their limited

knowledge, experience, and language proficiency (Saito & Fujita, 2004). On the other hand, although learners may lack the ability to specifically evaluate grammatical complexity, accuracy or fluency, they are likely able to perform holistic evaluation where the overall success of the task is concerned.

### ***Peer evaluation of communicative adequacy.***

Conducting peer evaluation of communicative adequacy might be a promising solution for the above mentioned challenges. To address the continuous controversies over the conceptualization and measurement of speaking proficiency, communicative adequacy was proposed as an alternative method to measure learners' overall success of their target speaking task. Communicative adequacy supports the TBLT principles at prioritizing meaningful communication over improving segmented CAF gains. While it can be conducted by teachers, learners would probably benefit more from evaluating each other's communicative adequacy as peer evaluation helps learners to understand the evaluation criteria.

In a previous study conducted by the researcher (Lee & Ogawa, 2022), evaluation criteria were created by learners to holistically rate their peers. Japanese university students were asked intuitively evaluate other learner dialogues using a five-point Likert scale (1 = unsuccessful; 5 = successful). Each dialogue involved a short conversation in which a student sought to schedule a meeting with another student. Participants were asked to provide comments to explain their holistic ratings. It was found that fluency emerged as the most influential factor when learners evaluated their peers' success in achieving their speaking objectives. In addition, while fluency emerged as the most influential factor in participants' evaluations, a large number of fluency related comments were made along with other comments such as: pronunciation and sound, organization, grammar and vocabulary, comprehension, content, and overall achievement.

## **Conclusion**

The assessment of second language speaking proficiency remains a complex and multifaceted issue. While traditional frameworks such as the CAF triad provide valuable segmented measurements of linguistic features, they were unable to measure the holistic success of communicative tasks. Communicative adequacy, with its focus on achieving communicative tasks, offers a promising alternative perspective with the task-based language teaching context. The introduction of peer evaluation in assessing communicative adequacy provides learners with more opportunities to engage critically in the evaluation process, fostering autonomy and reflective learning. By allowing learners to intuitively assess their peers' speaking performances, peer evaluation not only addresses practical classroom constraints but also empowers learners to understand and internalize criteria for successful communication.

Further research is needed to refine the conceptualization and measurement of communicative adequacy and to explore effective methods for implementing peer evaluation.. It is important to ensure its reliability and validity by developing clear criteria and structured guidance for learners. Ultimately, the integration of peer evaluation into the measurement of communicative adequacy in the second language classrooms holds great potentials to enhance both the assessment of speaking proficiency and learners' overall learning process and outcomes.

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