### How to assess oral language functions in an ESL student?

Assessment of oral language should focus on a student’s ability to interpret and convey meaning for authentic purposes in interactive contexts (O’Malley & Pierce, 1996).  Cooperative learning activities that present students with opportunities to use oral language to interact with others (social or academic functions) are optimal for assessing oral language.  The key is to also include assessment right along with daily and weekly lesson plans so an ESL student’s progress can be documented right at the same time.  A good teacher will look for assessment opportunities while completing the actual lessons.  Some of the steps that are important for oral language assessment include: identifying purpose, planning for assessment, developing rubrics, setting standards, involving students in self and peer assessments, selecting assessment activities, and recording information.  When a teacher is better prepared or plans for assessment, the ESL student’s progress is better monitored and overall growth and success is seen.  As a teacher looking more specifically at assessing oral language functions (grammar/syntax) a variety of traditional and alternative testing can be used.  Traditional oral assessments would include the oral sections from the Basic English Skills Test (BEST), the English as a Second Language Oral Assessment (ESLOA), the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the WIDA MODEL, and Pre-IPT Oral English Language Proficiency Test.  Oral grammar and syntax of an ESL student can also be assessed alternatively through real-life uses of grammar in context (students demonstrate their level of grammar proficiency by completing oral tasks), communicative drills and communicative activities through the use of checklists, analyzing taped speech samples, and reviewing notes or records of speech in classroom interactions.  Although looking specifically at grammar and syntax in assessing the speaking skills of an ESL is important, all the areas of oral language (semantics, phonology, syntax/grammar, and pragmatics) need to work together in order for a student to appropriately express a message.   ESL students benefit from clear goals and objectives, well-structured tasks, adequate practice, opportunities to interact with others, frequent assessment, and reteaching when needed (Coleman & Goldenberg, 2009).