

How can we assess more fairly and effectively?

This is the transcript for Series 3, episode 5 of the TeachingEnglish podcast. You can find out more about the words highlighted in the transcript in the show notes for this episode.

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

assessment, teachers, students, test, British Council, Senegal, assess, learning, learners, bias, important, language, teaching, feedback, country, English, formative assessment, curriculum, tests, system, people, technology, model, language, industrialisation

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Teaching English with the British Council

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'for sure, yes, our objective is just to lead them to success not to failure'

'And then the assessment to evaluate and measure student learning and progress'

'Accessible by all without bias towards anybody within the population'

'It's about what kind of feedback people are getting, how we're giving that feedback, what they're doing with that feedback'

Teaching English with the British Council

This is episode 5: How can we assess more fairly and effectively?

Chris: Hello, and welcome to episode 5 of Teaching English with the British Council. In this episode, we'll look at how we can assess more fairly and effectively. We'll be talking to Barry O'Sullivan, from the British Council, and Massamba Seck, a teacher and trainer from Senegal. We'am, we're going to be focusing on two particular aspects of assessment: fairness and effectiveness. What do you understand by the term 'effectiveness' in terms of assessment?

We'am: For an assessment to be effective, I look at the objective of that assessment, whether it is clear or not. It should be aligned with the overall objectives of the lesson, for example. I also look at whether this exam is valid – does it measure what it's supposed to measure? – and whether it is practical, so the design is feasible considering the time and the resources of the teachers and the context. And the last thing, maybe feedback, whether this assessment give an opportunity for learners to get detailed feedback and learn from that feedback and build on it. The other aspect of assessment is to be fair. How do you define fairness, Chris?

Chris: Well, it's an idea linked to what you said before about **validity** of, of an English assessed piece of assessment, or any kind of language assessment, is **reliability**. The idea that if you do one of these major standardised tests, like IELTS or TOEFL, that it should be the same, it should be the same degree of

fairness if you do that in Brasilia, in Senegal, in London, in Bangkok, you know, wherever you do it, you should be able to, it should be fair for all of those students. But it's also on a national level as well, the idea if you do it in the north, east, south, west of the country, in an urban area, in a rural area, it should be fair for all students. And to make sure it's fair, we really need to know what we are assessing – what kind of competence are we assessing in this exam? – to make sure we are assessing that competence and only that competence and not anything else. So no other factors can unfairly advantage a student who's taking that, that test.

We'am: Yeah, and that also includes perhaps providing necessary accommodations and inclusive practices in assessing students, all students.

Chris: Absolutely. So that might be providing more time for certain students or particular equipment that might be needed. And I think this is one of the challenges that can be faced, certainly in low-income contexts where that may not be possible, there may not be the time for that, there may not be the equipment available for that. And that is where people who are already disadvantaged can be further disadvantaged.

We'am: Yeah, and that's when an assessment becomes unfair.

Chris: In our first interview today, we'll be talking to **Professor Barry O'Sullivan**, the head of assessment research and development at the British Council.

We'am: So welcome, Barry. First of all, we're going to ask you about the key underlying principles which make assessment fair and effective.

Barry: That's a really interesting question, actually. Not only is it an interesting question, but the wording is interesting, because when we think about communicating from language testers to the rest of the world, we have our own language, like a lot of other areas, and our own **jargon**. So 'fair' has a specific meaning. Basically it means that it's accessible by all and without bias towards anybody within the population. And most exam boards will have systems for accounting for students with various disabilities. So they'll allow for special **accommodations**. And we thought over the last number of years that that's not quite enough, because really what you need to be thinking about is your tests as well. You need to think about the, the test content. So, to what extent are people of disability and people from **minority groups** represented in your tests? So, like, all doctors aren't men, and all nurses aren't women. And, like, that's a fairly simplistic example, but you know what I mean? So, for me, that's what fairness is. We tend to broaden that nowadays too. It used to be called **EDI** – equality, diversity, inclusion. We now refer to them as JEDI, and not the knights from the film, but it's justice, equality, diversity and inclusion. And the justice idea is that we bring everybody in under the umbrella of fairness. So it doesn't matter who you are or where you're from, what your ability or disability is, your test should be open and fair to everybody. A few years back, I wrote a paper called '**The comprehensive learning system**', where I argue that we need to integrate all elements of the system. And people who know me and hear me talk will often see me make the old triangle, with the curriculum, the delivery of the curriculum and the assessment within the curriculum. If they're all linked together, we have a real system, a system that works.

Chris: Sorry, Barry. I was just going to say, is there a risk partly with that, with that triangle model which you've described there of the, of **the tail wagging the dog** a bit? In the sense that it's easier to assess grammar, for example, like, through cloze tests or writing, and therefore that then becomes the curriculum,

rather than perhaps focusing on speaking or more kind of communicative aspects of language, which arguably are more important for, for most users of English.

Barry: Absolutely agree with you, 100 per cent. We see so often around the world people take the easy way out. If you look at a lot of education systems, they don't include assessments of the productive skills – sometimes writing, but rarely, if ever, speaking. And the reality is that for the vast majority of learners, speaking is the most important skill for them.

We'am: Do you think with the rise of AI now speaking will become more common of an assessment?

Barry: Definitely. Like, we're already working on serious projects within the British Council, looking at how we can build on what we already have with artificial intelligence, looking at how we can create not just productive tasks. The interesting bit with what we're looking at and making, I think, some good strides with is looking at interactive speaking. We have created systems that we are actually making available to learners in the next few weeks in some of our online learning systems, for practice.

We'am: The 'Global report on teachers' says that there will be a deficit of 44 million primary and secondary education teachers by 2030.

Barry: Yeah. And the big problem there is that we have to avoid replacing teachers with machines. So what we need to do is probably rethink how we use the teachers we have. I think AI is going to change the world; it's going to change our world. And I think it's going to change teachers' world. And I think for teachers who are not really into AI, I think it's going to be a challenge. I think people like that are going to have a bit of a shock over the next few years. But for me, it's changing in a positive way.

Chris: In what ways could teachers now use AI?

Barry: Well, I'll give you an example. Exactly 30 years ago, I was working in Japan, and the curriculum changed. So the new teachers had to go out and teach it. But unfortunately they also had to test it. So they had to teach communication and test communication every Friday. Essentially, people who are taking the whole week to test their class, so they aren't teaching them anything. So AI will give you the opportunity to do things that teachers find it difficult to do – test 40 people and give them feedback, an absolute nightmare. I came up with some, as I thought, innovative ways to help my students to do it. And when I think of it now, I think they learned a lot. And I think the kids being tested learned a lot. But I think the technology now will allow people to do that kind of formative assessment. Increasingly, teacher-led formative assessment, in a formal or an informal setting. In other words, you could do it in class or you could do it at home. Feedback then could be given to the students and to the teacher. It can save masses amount of time.

Chris: And it actually presents an opportunity to humanise or rehumanise language teaching, because some of those more procedural tasks can be automated, and teachers can then focus on, on really engaging with their students and giving them the support and all those other aspects which they, which only a human or only a kind of a caring human teacher can give.

Barry: Absolutely, and that's where learning comes from. The pressures on the teacher right now are all on the admin, like, the amount of admin that teachers are expected to do. So there's no time to think, there's no time to be an actual teacher. I was just making up the slides for my talk in Taiwan in a couple of days' time, and one of the slides is humanising learning systems. Because I do think that that's where technology

is helping us to go. It's helping us to move back to this sort of **pre-industrialisation** of education, and the pre-industrialisation of assessment, to a more humanistic and a more human-focused type of learning.

Chris: That's interesting. So the kind of the technological aspect can make it more fair, going back to our original question. But I guess it's then also how we control the algorithm and make sure that's free of bias as well.

Barry: Yeah, and that's a critical one. You look at the world of assessment out there now, it's like cowboy country, you know? There's tests out there, commercial tests out there, using **AI-driven auto-scoring** models that we know nothing about. Nobody even asks the questions. People, teachers, students, parents should be out there saying 'Show us that you've tested your system. Show us that there's no bias.' Because I'm convinced that there's bias.

Chris: I guess the problem is, is, as with so many of these things, is **vested interest**, a huge opportunity and no one wants to put their **head above the parapet** because, yeah, it might cost them.

Barry: Yeah, well, we actually now will only work with companies in the AI world who can demonstrate to us that they check their model for bias. That's part of the regulations within the British Council.

We'am: So how do you see the future of standardised international exams, such as **IELTS**, with the rise of AI?

Barry: I do believe that those tests will change, because the technology is changing the way we even consider assessment. And I believe if those tests don't change to reflect those new technologies, they're just going to disappear. Personally, I believe that assessment is going to change radically. In five years from now, tests will not look like they look now. Technology is now something that will allow us to create, at a reasonable cost, it'll be easier to create systems that are really high functioning. I have two problems. One problem is the industrialisation of education is, I think, is a real issue. Because if we have this system where you have this industrialisation of education, it's quite possible that the purely technology-driven solutions will be sold to governments around the world as the new modern way. Whereas the governments, or the people, or the individuals with access to money, will have access to real human teachers. So you will still have this **massive divide**. So I think, you know, I think technology is great. I think it offers a huge amount for the future. But I don't think it's the future on its own.

Chris: You would say that the sort of the ability for people to take standardised tests will be easier, but they still won't have that, that access to do well in them, as it were. Because as we know, in many countries, you know, doing IELTS, for example, you know, it's only a certain part of the population which can, can access that. But you see that problem potentially being minimised, but there's still going to be those equity issues in the provision of English language teaching and those links to assessment?

Barry: Yes. I think the, the access to the technology is always going to be an issue. And technology often fails because of access to the cloud technology or access to the hardware. And that generally is a socio-economic status. So basically, these systems are integrating bias into their own systems, socio-economic bias into the system. So what you need to do in those situations, as far as I'm concerned, is a certain percentage of test scores should always be marked by a human. Otherwise you're building bias into your system. So I think it's a massive issue, that people – again, it's like the other issue – people aren't asking the right questions. So I think what we need to do, and teachers out there, and policymakers out there, and policy influencers out there, need to ask the questions.

Chris: Is there potentially an issue as well with, going back to what we were saying about AI, with big language models, and so on, that those pieces of assessment which do well – say, pieces of writing – it becomes almost a new norm, and then people are just ending up trying to write like those particular models in order to score well, rather than trying to write what they want to write or in an engaging and interesting way?

Barry: But, like, academic writing is like that. I started to write papers about 35 years ago which wouldn't get published in the *Tipperary Star*, never mind anything else. Then when I cracked the code, I've got, like, a hundred and something publications to my name now because I cracked the code. And part of the code was learning how to write like you're expected to write.

We'am: Lots to learn from.

Chris: Yeah, thank you, Barry, that was, that was brilliant.

We'am: This is a very insightful examination of the challenges and the solutions within the assessment field by Barry.

Chris: I was really interested in what Barry said about the triangle, you know, you know, saying that what's important is that the curriculum, the content of what we're learning, the delivery of the curriculum, the pedagogy used by teachers in the classroom, and then the assessment need to be directly linked each with the other. If you don't have that, then you don't have an education system which is functioning in the best possible way. Those three things have to be directly linked with each other. And very often they're not.

We'am: Yeah, as Barry noted, when assessment methods are easier to administer, like grammar tests or through, like, *cloze activities*, they might dominate the curriculum and possibly at the expense of more communicative and essential skills like speaking.

Chris: Exactly. And he also talked quite a lot about digital divide, which I know is an area of interest for you, We'am. What did you take home from the ... he used the phrase 'it's a bit like cowboy country', what did he mean by that?

We'am: Cowboy country?

Chris: Yeah, to describe the, kind of, the world of digital assessment.

We'am: What does it mean?

Chris: I think what he means by cowboy, it's often a word we use in English to talk about people who don't do things very well. They're looking to make money quickly out of the system. So talking about being cowboy country is there's a huge opportunity here now, but it's important that responsible actors and stakeholders get involved with AI, otherwise there's a risk that those who are already disadvantaged are further disadvantaged.

We'am: Yeah, so basically he advocates for a balanced use of technology, where human interaction and personalised teaching are prioritised along technological advancements, which makes assessment more fair and effective.

Chris: Yeah, and it can give that **personalised feedback** as well. And I think we have to look at the opportunities that offers in low-income contexts. There is an opportunity for AI to help bridge that digital divide. But it's who's in charge of AI which is really important.

We'am: And that goes back to the key points of the triangle model, which is curriculum, which is what is taught, and then delivery, how it's taught, and then the assessment to evaluate and measure student learning and progress. So whether you're using AI during teaching or not, you can link these aspects together to make assessment more fair and effective.

Chris: In our second interview, we talk to **Massamba Seck**, a teacher and trainer from Senegal in West Africa. Welcome to the podcast, Massamba.

Massamba: Thank you, Chris, thank you.

Chris: In general, what would you say is the best way of preparing students for assessment?

Massamba: When dealing with assessment, OK, you have to make sure **instructions** are clear to the students' minds. Because there is something important, that is, you have to define the criteria – what I call the success criteria – and then tell the student that they will be assessed based on those criteria. And they should know, OK, what these criteria are. And also, in a practical way, you have to give them similar questions or tasks.

Chris: People might think that tests are somehow there to trick students or to catch them out. But really what you're saying is it's really important they know what they're going to be tested on, so it's a fairer and more useful test.

Massamba: For sure, yes. Our objective is just to lead them to success, not to failure, OK? That's why we should prepare them the best way possible. We should also offer **constructive feedback**. And then we have to focus on areas for improvement, and the feedback should be specific.

Chris: What kind of feedback would you give? How would you give it? What are some of your tips for giving feedback about assessment?

Massamba: OK, so we have different strategies in giving feedback. Asking questions in a conversational way, because we have to build confidence, so we should make sure that the classroom environment is anxiety free, and I think that's very important. We should, you know, make the students feel comfortable in the classroom. We should take into account what I call **differentiated instruction**, because we all know that there are different learning styles. In the feedback I think that we should use different strategies depending on, you know, the different learning styles that you may have in your classes.

We'am: It's interesting that you said that the class should be anxiety free and friendly, and that makes us think about the challenges of assessment. Some students feel really heavy about assessments. Why do you think that is, and how can we do assessments in a more engaging and more effective way?

Massamba: Yes, it can be engaging, OK, especially when we use **peer assessment**. Collaboration is very important. When you make them work in groups, they can work together and help each other. Some of them may, you know, spot out other students' weaknesses and then have an opportunity to help them improve, and group work is very important because this builds confidence, and it is a way of motivating learners.

Chris: Massamba, you're in Senegal, as we can hear in the background, lots of, lots of noises from the street there. When you try and use perhaps self-assessment, peer assessment, these are more unusual types of assessment or less traditional types of assessment. What do your students think? Or what does your head teacher think? What do parents think when you try these different forms of assessment?

Massamba: Well, I mean, the attitude of my students is positive. Yes, because here our head teachers are not, I mean, specialists of, you know, the English language. Maybe something I can say is, we have what we call here 'pedagogic cell'. Teachers of English get together to talk about teaching issues. And also, I mean, my colleagues, OK, think that, you know, peer assessment and, you know, self-assessments, OK, are good methods, OK, that can help people improve, OK, in their learning journey. Yes, so here the reaction is, is positive on the whole.

Chris: And they're also developing useful skills by working with each other.

Massamba: Yes. We have to try and, you know, make our learners become active learners. If they can take responsibility, OK, for their own learning, right, they will be more engaged. I mean, that is what I've noticed. And as you said, you know, making them work in groups can help develop 21st-century skills such as communication, creativity, critical thinking, collaboration.

We'am: You mentioned at the beginning that assessment is basically a process, so there's, like, a stage pre-assessment and maybe post-assessment. How do you think teachers can give the right balance between teaching a language and also preparing students for assessment?

Massamba: Instruction, OK, should be aligned with, with assessment. So, in general, what I tell my colleagues is that, OK, they should test what they teach. If assessment is embedded instruction, I think that we are going to come up with excellent results. Yes, as you said, it is a process, yes, because you have a different type of assessment, OK, as you mentioned, yes, pre-assessments, OK, is just, you know, to help us because we need to have some information before we start a lesson, from, from the students. OK, we need to know, you know, how familiar the students are with a given topic before it is taught. This can help the teacher plan, you know, his lesson or her lesson or plan the next steps of his lesson based on, you know, what the students already know about the topic. So, this is a preface. And now formative assessment, which happen, OK, while learning is under way, is very important, and I think it is essential. So, while learning is under way, you have to assess. So at every point, you have to stop, OK, to see whether the students, you know, are having a grasp, OK, of what they are being taught, and this is important. And the students, they make a list of things they learned, and from that the teacher can know whether his lesson has been successful or not.

We'am: Yeah, and this way, also, you give them the opportunity to speak the language and be assessed at the same time.

Massamba: Absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely.

We'am: You also mentioned checking also with learners continuously, like asking maybe concept-check questions or making sure that they understood the instructions. Do you think this is also part of assessing the students?

Massamba: Yes, absolutely. To make sure the students understand the instructions, OK, you can use concept checking. OK, 'What are you going to do? How are you going to do it?', this type of question. Instead of asking the question 'Do you understand?', right. OK, this is not good.

Chris: Senegal is a very multilingual country. Do you see the value of in formative assessment using students' first languages, their home language, and checking that understanding? So, for example, using **Wolof** in Senegal or other languages to check their understanding.

Massamba: Yes, that's right. I myself I sometimes use it. So what is bad is the overuse of the local languages, but sometimes I use it just to check understanding.

Chris: And it also seems very important, as well, because in Senegal language is obviously a sensitive issue. There's, you know, students are learning English and French, they have Wolof and other languages. By using those different languages to check understanding, it sort of puts those languages at the same level. It's not saying one is necessarily more important than the other or anything like that. But it gives a really important role to, to the **lingua franca** of the country.

Massamba: Absolutely, absolutely. Because not only do they, do they learn English and French but they also learn other foreign languages, such as Spanish, Portuguese, German, Italian. At high school English is compulsory, but the others are optional.

Chris: Massamba, thank you so much for your time today. That was great.

Massamba: My pleasure, Chris. My pleasure.

We'am: Thank you so much, Massamba.

Chris: One of the key points coming out of that interview with Massamba was about the importance of making students active in their own assessment and that importance of autonomy.

We'am: Yeah, it's very important to build those skills in students, because this preparation helps them, first of all, reduce anxiety. It sets them up for what to expect during assessment and improve, keep improving. Language is not static. I mean, you build on it.

Chris: Moving away from that idea that the language classroom is a laboratory, you know, it's about that the language is for use in the real world with real people.

We'am: Yeah. And they're more likely to use that with non-native speakers, as we discussed in previous episodes. So giving students the skills, for example, of peer feedback, getting formative assessments, preparing them before the summative assessment.

Chris: Yeah, there is this perception of assessment has to be done by an 'expert', quote, unquote.

We'am: I think it's all about preparing students. So, for example, if you give them a list with what you are going to assess them for, maybe giving them the chance to assess each other before, then that gives them an idea about what is assessment, what to look for, and then they are able to follow that when they speak or when they do an exam.

Chris: When we talk about formative assessment, it's that 'formative' word which is the most important. You know, it's about developing, creating, all of those sorts of things. It's not the assessment part. It's

about what kind of feedback people are getting, how we're giving that feedback, what they're doing with that feedback. That's what's really important. But I think too often we see formative assessment as just another test. You know, Barry talked about it earlier as well, about in Japan 30 years ago, his experience there where they introduced that new curriculum. And the teachers were spending all week teaching the content for that test. So they're never actually developing their linguistic competence. They're just learning in order to be able to pass a test. And if we go back to our keywords about fairness and effectiveness, one of the best ways to prepare students for assessment is that they know what kind of questions they're going to have to answer and broadly what the topics are going to be about. There should be no surprises in terms of the structure.

We'am: Yeah. And it also goes back to the key points of curriculum and then delivery and assessment. It's about the methods and facilitating a meaningful learning experience for the students.

We'am: Thank you for listening to episode 5. Chris, how do you assess this episode?

Chris: 65.

We'am: Not 100?

Chris: No, not 100. No, very good, but it's kind of, you see, when you give a number and you give no context, it doesn't mean anything. And that's one of the important parts of assessment.

We'am: It would be interesting to hear what our audience are thinking about this episode. How would you assess it?

Chris: So please let us know on the TeachingEnglish Facebook page.

Chris: Please join us next time for episode 6: How can we use play to teach English?

Teaching English with the British Council

For episode 10 of this series of Teaching English with the British Council, we are inviting you, the listener, to share your questions with us. Please visit the Teaching English Facebook page to ask our three experts any questions which you might still have about the world of English language teaching.

We'am: I've got a question.

Chris: Yes, We'am?

We'am: How can we access this?

Chris: Well, you can go to the show notes to find the link.