

Expanding Constructs in Second Language Assessment

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Over the past several decades, construct definitions in second language (L2) assessment, that is, defining what constitutes language ability, have expanded considerably, from early views emphasizing discrete linguistic knowledge to broader conceptualizations that incorporate communicative competence, strategic competence, interactional competence, and language use in authentic contexts (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Chalhoub-Deville, 2003; Chapelle, 1999; Galaczi & Taylor, 2018; Purpura, 2016; Purpura & Oh, 2024). As language users increasingly engage in complex social, academic, and professional activities, researchers have argued that language assessments should reflect a wider range of cognitive, social, and contextual factors that contribute to successful performance (e.g., Purpura, 2021, Voss et al., 2026). Consequently, L2 assessment research has focused on expanding construct definitions to better capture the knowledge, skills, and abilities required for real-world language use. This forum brings together three papers that illustrate how researchers continue to refine, broaden, and operationalize construct of L2 ability to better reflect the complex demands of 21C communication.

Kedi Mo begins by examining construct representation in one of the world's most widely used Chinese proficiency examinations. Through a validity-oriented review of the linguistic features and task structures proposed for HSK 3.0, he investigates whether the revised test adequately reflects the language abilities it is intended to measure and whether its design supports meaningful score interpretations. By focusing on the relationship between test specifications and construct representation, this paper highlights the foundational role that construct definition plays in assessment design.

In line with Mo's discussion of how language ability should be represented in assessment, Ali Ebrahimpourlighvani examines the role of critical thinking in speaking assessment. Drawing on research in oral communicative competence, performance assessment, and critical thinking, he considers whether traditional speaking constructs sufficiently account for the demands of academic communication. He proposes the construct of Critical-Thinking-to-Interact, suggesting that speaking assessments should capture learners' ability to analyze information, evaluate perspectives, and engage in purposeful academic discourse.

Also focusing on speaking assessment, Daniel Eskin examines the construct of interactional competence in paired speaking assessments. Using conversation analytic methods, he investigates how candidates across Cambridge English examinations allocate turns during collaborative speaking tasks and how verbal and non-verbal resources, including gaze and gesture, contribute to interactional success. By identifying differences in turn-allocation practices across proficiency levels, he argues for a more nuanced operationalization of interactional competence and offers recommendations for refining existing rating scale descriptors.

Taken together, these papers demonstrate that construct expansion is not simply a matter of adding new abilities to existing assessments. Rather, it requires careful consideration of how language ability is conceptualized, how emerging dimensions of performance are incorporated into construct definitions, and how those dimensions can be observed and evaluated in

assessment practice. Collectively, the contributions in this forum highlight the continuing evolution of L2 assessment and underscore the importance of construct-centered approaches for advancing the field.

AI DISCLOSURE

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-5) to review the manuscript for clarity and grammatical accuracy. All content was reviewed and edited by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the final manuscript.

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