

# An Interview on Assessment with Randall Davis<sup>1</sup>

*Jorge Torres Almazán<sup>2</sup>, The American School of Tampico, Tampico,  
Tamaulipas, Mexico*

## Abstract

In this interview, we will learn first-hand an expert's opinion and answers about some of the many different features of assessment in ELT. Randall Davis is a widely known web material developer, conference speaker, and teacher trainer. He comments on assessing productive and receptive skills, washback and the role of technology in this important issue.

## Resumen

En esta entrevista podremos aprender con información proporcionada de primera mano, la opinión y respuestas de un experto acerca de algunos de los muchos aspectos de la evaluación en la enseñanza del idioma Inglés. Randall Davis es creador de materiales, conferencista, y capacitador de maestros ampliamente conocido. Aquí nos comenta acerca de la evaluación de las habilidades productivas y receptoras, el *washback*, y el papel que juega la tecnología en este importante tema.

Randall Davis teaches at the English Language Institute at the University of Utah, in Salt Lake City. His areas of interest and specialties include Web-based materials development, language assessment, and teacher training. He has given workshops and lectures at conferences throughout the United States. and in diverse places such as China, Japan, Mexico, Peru, and Saudi Arabia. Outside of teaching, he develops a number of Web sites on his own, including Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab ([esl-lab.com](http://esl-lab.com)). In his free time, he enjoys trail running, hiking ([hikinginutah.com](http://hikinginutah.com)), and gardening.

Randall Davis visited Tampico, Mexico, to participate as Featured Speaker at the academic event; Tampico-Lab: Enhancing Language Learning & Teaching. This event was organized by MEXTESOL Tampico as part of their yearly activities.

Randall gave a presentation, "Ten Keys to Effective Speaking Assessment." During this presentation, he showed how each key is relevant to testing speaking skills. However, he also mentioned that there is no simple "right" key for every context, meaning that there are many different aspects to take into account when it comes to assessing not only speaking, but also other skills.

He went through the keys, explaining and demonstrating how they may work, using examples and anecdotes. The session was really interesting and appealing to the more than one hundred teachers from many different public and private schools who attended.

After the conference, he accepted my request for an interview. This interview was conducted on May 22, 2016.

## Interview

**Jorge Torres:** Randall, what would you say is one of the most important aspects in assessment in general?

**Randall Davis:** I would say one of the most important aspects in assessment is that students understand clearly how they are being assessed and too often we don't explain

---

<sup>1</sup> Received: February 15, 2018. Accepted: April 5, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> [jorgealmazan@hotmail.com](mailto:jorgealmazan@hotmail.com)

this sufficiently from a very objective standpoint. We need to explain to students that they are going to be assessed on this point or that point, and so being clear to the learner so they can see that the vision of what you want to accomplish is the most important part of instruction.

**JT:** Thank you, what difference can you highlight between assessing productive skills and assessing receptive skills?

**RD:** I find that receptive and productive are reciprocal skills, and you really can't divorce the two, and when we think about teaching listening or speaking separately, we need to consider combining these skills in assessments. There has to be a way that we assess both listening and speaking together. We try to separate them, but it's very difficult to do that.

**JT:** Would you recommend a specific time to evaluate during a course or a school year?

**RD:** First of all, I would do some type of diagnostic right from the beginning to find out where students are. And then I would say almost daily some type of feedback, such as giving some assessment because, as human beings we want to know how we are doing. Just like in relationships, you want to know how you are doing, right? So I think it has to be ongoing so that students can see from day to day how they are doing and then having more formal assessments periodically.

**JT:** Many people speak about the "washback" effect in assessment, How can we promote a positive one?

**RD:** Well, when we think about "washback", the one thing is you want to make sure, and this is just like a general concept, you just want to make sure students are self-reflective so they can see how they are doing and they can work together with each other to kind of promote a "washback" effect among other students as well. That's a really general thought but the question is doing assessments throughout the process is kind of like a wave effect. Students are constantly exposed to assessments, to feedback, so they can see, again, where they are or where they need go. In a way, can they see the other side of the lake? That's kind of the point of assessing students.

**JT:** Final question, what would be, in your opinion, the role of technology in assessment?

**RD:** Use it judiciously. In other words technology is light years ahead of its effective use, because many technologies are efficient like texting, but are not always effective. So for example if I'm contacting a friend, I might send a text message that is very efficient, but he might not fully understand what I was trying to say and so with any technology, before you use it, think: "Do I need it? Is there a purpose? Can it enhance my instruction?" Many times a pencil and a paper are probably the best technologies we can ever use, so be careful and judicious.

**JT:** Randall, can we have your permission to publish this interview?

**RD:** Sure no problem, as long as you buy me a cheeseburger next time I come. (Laughs) No, no problem, you have my permission.

**JT:** OK, that's a promise, Cheeseburger next time! Thank you Randall!

**RD:** No, problem.

The comments and suggestions in this interview may have a positive impact on teachers in our region as well as teachers everywhere. Randall is a pioneer in the use of the web for ESL/EFL learning and has vast experience in assessment. In this interview, he explains common issues in a simple way that may provide teachers with ideas, especially when deciding about planning assessments in general or in specific ways for either productive or receptive skills, and the effect of washback and the use of technology.