



BRITISH COUNCIL PERSPECTIVES ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE POLICY AND EDUCATION

The Importance of the Four Skills in the Japanese Context

BCP-1

Barry O'Sullivan, Johanna Motteram, Robin Skipsey and Jamie Dunlea

British Council Perspectives on English Language Policy and Education

The Perspectives Series sets out the British Council's approach to a range of issues around the English language in learning systems across the world. The papers build on the experience of British Council experts throughout the organisation. Contributions come from the English Language Research Group (ELRG) which includes representatives from the Assessment Research Group, English Teaching and Learning, as well as English in Education Systems (EES).

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Overview

In this position paper, we focus on the importance of taking a four-skills approach to the development of a functioning comprehensive learning system. Traditional approaches to teaching English have often been accused of neglecting the skills of speaking and writing. Enacting educational reform to promote the balanced development of proficiency in all four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing across the populace will support the growth of human potential and the development of international economic and cultural ties.

About the Authors



Professor Barry O'Sullivan is the British Council's Head of Assessment Research & Development. He has worked on numerous test development and validation projects globally and advises ministries and institutions on assessment policy and practice. Barry has undertaken research across many areas on language testing and assessment and its history, and has worked on the development and refinement of the socio-cognitive model of test development and validation since 2000. He has presented his work at many conferences around the world, while almost 100 of his publications have appeared in a range of international journals, books and technical reports.

He is the founding president of the UK Association of Language Testing and Assessment, holds a visiting professorship at the University of Reading, UK, and is Advisory Professor at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China. Barry was awarded Fellowship of the Academy of Social Sciences in the UK in 2016, and was elected to Fellowship of the Asian Association for Language Assessment in 2017. In 2019 he was awarded an OBE by the government of the UK for his contribution to language testing.



Dr Johanna Motteram is a project manager in the British Council's Global Assessments group. She earned her PhD from the University of Adelaide with supervision from experts in Linguistics and Education and holds an MA in Applied Linguistics from the same university. She works on language test development and language teaching, learning and assessment projects to support institutional and government clients develop effective language education systems.

She also undertakes validation research work related to use of British Council assessments in specific settings.

Johanna is active in the language assessment research community and has served on the Association for Language Testing and Assessment of Australia and New Zealand's executive committee for many years. She has over 25 years of experience working in EFL education, first as a teacher and teacher trainer, and then in language teaching and learning research, and assessment development.



Robin Skipsey comes from Gillingham in the southeast of England. He studied French language and European history at the University of East Anglia, and lived and worked in the UK and France before moving to Japan in 2005, where he has been based ever since. He holds Cambridge CELTA and Cambridge DELTA teaching qualifications and has passed the Japanese Language Proficiency test at N2 level.

After joining the British Council, Robin taught large classes at public elementary and junior high schools as part of a long-running team-teaching programme in Tokyo, as well as teaching adult courses, including IELTS and Cambridge exam preparation classes. As Academic Manager for English Projects in Japan, Robin oversaw the design, development and delivery of the Leaders of English Education Project (LEEP), a five-year national teacher training initiative commissioned by the Japanese Ministry of Education which trained over 80,000 elementary, junior and senior high school teachers across the country between 2014 and 2019.

Currently Robin and his team are working on a collaboration with a major Japanese publishing company to produce ministry-approved English textbooks for senior high school students, as well as a variety of professional development projects for Japanese teachers of English.



Dr Jamie Dunlea is a senior researcher and manager of the British Council's Assessment Research Group. He has a PhD in language testing from the Centre for Research in English Language Learning and Assessment (CRELLA). He works on a range of language test development and validation projects for the British Council, as well as collaborating with researchers and organisations internationally.

Jamie has advised Ministries of Education and national agencies on assessment reform projects, overseen research for collaborative, international projects such as linking UK examinations to China's Standards of English (CSE) and is active in the language assessment research community. He joined the British Council in 2013 after heading validation research at the Eiken Foundation, a not-for-profit organisation which develops and administers EFL examinations in Japan. He has 30 years of experience working in EFL education, first as a teacher, then in test development and assessment research.

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1. Introduction

English language proficiency sufficient to interact in social, educational and professional contexts is one element which contributes to a nation having a population which can participate in globally-connected communities. Despite this, traditional approaches to teaching English have often been accused of neglecting the skills of speaking and writing, which form the basis for such interactions. Enacting educational reform to promote the balanced development of proficiency in all four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing across the populace will support the growth of this human potential, and subsequently support the development of international economic and cultural ties.

Educational reform should always be seen as a long-term project, as significant and stable change will typically take a generation to take hold. However, we can expect to see some clear benefits emerge during the short to medium term. Success of an educational reform project requires consideration of the three elements of the education system: 1) the national curriculum (or course of studies); 2) the delivery of that system (teacher training and monitoring; textbooks and online resources; the physical learning environment); 3) assessment (both in-class assessments and formal tests). We call this the Comprehensive Learning System (see O'Sullivan, 2020). It is only when all three elements of the system are in full alignment, and the system is appropriate for the context in which it is deployed, that the hoped-for changes will happen.

It is critical that policy-makers fully understand this and look at a broad reform to ensure that teachers are fully prepared to teach to the new expanded goals, that the publishers are engaged with developing textbooks that reflect these goals and that the testing system is reformed to include a focus on the four skills. This is not an easy task and will not bring about rapid change, but evidence from countries such as Spain (Shepherd & Ainsworth, 2017) indicate that, if properly and fully implemented, then there is real hope that there will be a measurable improvement over time.

In this position paper, we will focus on the importance of taking a four skills approach to the development of a functioning comprehensive learning system (CLS).

'Educational reform to promote the balanced development of proficiency in all four skills will support the growth of this human potential, and subsequently the development of international economic and cultural ties.'

2. The Importance of the Four Skills

Later in this paper, we will outline a number of theoretical arguments to support the introduction of a four skills action-oriented learning system while focusing on the importance of assessment within these systems. We also emphasise the importance of not only ensuring that the various elements of the learning system are aligned, but that these also are further aligned to the context in which the system is based.

However, before moving on to these theoretical arguments we believe that there are further, more practical and, it could be argued, more important (certainly to the key stakeholders) arguments that should first be addressed. We see these as being related to:

- Fairness
- Representation
- Information

2.1 Fairness

The first reason for assessing all four skills is to ensure fairness for students. Students' learning profiles vary, with some being stronger at written skills while others excel at listening and speaking. Assessment in all four skills is especially important for students with specific learning needs (for example, reading-related conditions such as dyslexia, hearing, or speaking impairments) since it provides clear evidence of what students can do, rather than failing them on the basis of one or two areas where they might struggle. An assessment system which assesses students' weak areas and overlooks their strengths is therefore intrinsically unfair to students and deprives them of the opportunity to showcase their true ability. It has been our experience over the years that all four skills are amenable to improvement through classroom practice and self-study, and students deserve to see their strengths in each area acknowledged, as well as seeing clearly which weak areas they need to work on to improve.

Additionally, we would argue that fairness cannot be separated from questions of the underlying validity and purpose of assessment with the CLS, and for the individual and social goals for which assessment is implemented. In a world where the importance of using English as a global language for communication is overwhelmingly accepted, we would argue that it is unfair not to teach and assess all four skills including speaking and writing. We recognise the logistical and systemic hurdles of implementing productive skills teaching and assessment. Extra attention does need to be given to ensure fairness when introducing these elements into the CLS. But if we allow those logistical constraints to outweigh the importance of teaching and assessing real communication, we will be depriving learners of a critical life skill.

2.2 Representation

Teachers, parents and students place value on what is assessed (McEwan, 1995). Thus, it follows that if speaking is valued in the curriculum, this should be reflected in the assessment. Evidence from classrooms in Japan and Korea shows that a lack of speaking and writing assessment at critical points leads to teachers and students neglecting the skills of speaking and writing, both in lessons and home study (Choi, 2008; Allen, 2017; Sato, 2019). Introducing assessment of the productive skills is likely to increase the chances that they will be more generally valued. One study in Japan showed that the simple experience of taking a four-skills test led university students to focus more of their study time and efforts on the productive skills of speaking and writing (Allen, 2016).

2.3 Information

Tests provide the kind of information required for many important decision-making purposes. These decisions can be related to the individual (e.g., university entrance, professional qualification etc.) to education boards (monitoring the success of education innovations such as changes to the curriculum) and to policy-makers (providing evidence of achievement in the education system which can drive future policy directions). A clear analogy is driving tests, which are used to ensure that new drivers are safe to use public roads. To fulfil this function, a driving test needs to assess prospective drivers' knowledge and understanding of the rules of the road, but also their ability to manipulate a vehicle safely. A test that examines one aspect, without the other, would not give a rounded view of the prospective driver's ability. To extend this analogy, a driving curriculum or test that focused on candidates' knowledge of mechanical engineering, would not provide relevant information for the task at hand.

In the same way, where the intention of using a language test is to understand a candidate's ability to use the language, that test needs to examine the candidate's proficiency in all four modes of language ability. This will mean that further education institutions and employers can make informed choices about the candidate's actual language proficiency. For this reason, tests such as IELTS and TOEFL, designed for admission to foreign universities, include assessment of all four skills with tasks which reflect the way language is used in universities. In compulsory education, four-skills assessment which is aligned with the curriculum allows education officials, teachers, parents, and students themselves an opportunity to gain a comprehensive understanding of how effectively learning is happening.

'It is vital that stakeholders are brought into discussions around reform as early as possible, and they are given a genuine opportunity to contribute to the debate.'



3. Challenges

The importance of language learning across the population (and not just within an established elite) is highlighted by the OECD's decision to include foreign language assessment in its PISA surveys from 2025. This decision by the OECD recognises that one of the major benefits of foreign language learning comes from being able to interact in the language: the ability to speak and write. In including the productive skills to PISA alongside the receptive skills of reading and listening, the OECD is showing that these skills have equal significance for foreign language learning. While the changes to PISA offer significant hope for meaningful change in English language assessment policy across many countries, it should be recognised that educational reform will always meet with challenges that can be categorised as being either social, theoretical, or operational. We will address these briefly in this section.

3.1 Social

In almost all societies, change is viewed with a level of suspicion. Even where an existing system is unpopular, its familiarity means that it will have a certain level of social acceptance. For any educational (or other social) reform to have any chance of success, it is critical that stakeholders across the organisation or country buy into the ideas behind the reform and into the delivery of the reform. In order to achieve this, it is vital that stakeholders are brought into discussions around the reform as early as possible. It is equally as important that stakeholders are given a genuine opportunity to contribute to the debates around the reform from inception to delivery through genuinely interactive communication. We return to this idea later in the paper when we discuss the application of the socio-cognitive approach, as interpreted by Chalhoub-Deville & O'Sullivan (2020), to test development and validation (which we also see as being relevant to the development and validation of the entire comprehensive learning system).

The focus of education systems globally is increasingly on the ultimate contribution to the economic prosperity of a country of the learners who form the focus of the system. There is evidence that the ability of the workforce to understand and use English can contribute significantly to a nation's economy (Brooker, 2018). Where education systems fail to provide its learners with this vital life skill, they are not only failing the learners as individuals, but are also likely to be causing serious harm to the economic prosperity of their country.

'Of the four skills, speaking has proved to be the most logistically challenging and controversial to assess.'

The introduction of computer-based assessment has eased some of the logistical issues. In recent years, education authorities in countries as diverse as Vietnam, Malaysia, China and Japan have begun introducing speaking tests into their school and university systems.'



3.2 Theoretical

In implementing our approach to language education and assessment reform within the CLA, the British Council draws on the Socio-Cognitive Model as elaborated by Chalhoub-Deville and O'Sullivan (2020). This approach calls for detailed models of the underlying language development construct (i.e., involving clear descriptions of what a learner can be expected to do at different levels of proficiency) and a clearly articulated underlying measurement model (how well does the test work in terms of accuracy, consistency and reliability). The approach also calls for two additional models which are relevant to our discussion of implementing a four-skills approach across teaching, learning and assessment within a comprehensive learning system. These are the Theory of Action Model (essentially a clear description of what the test is expected to allow us to say about the test-taker and a plan as to how this will be achieved) and a Communication Model (a well-described plan of how and through what channels the test developers expect to communicate with all key stakeholder groups, such as teachers, parents, learners as well as academics, policy-makers and local or regional education officials).

Designing and implementing tests will not achieve our goals even if they are created with all elements of the CLS in mind. We also need to have a clear plan of how we will communicate with key stakeholders in the context in which the CLS is based - this is what we mean by a Communication Model. Communication is not simply a one-way information-giving activity which explains a test to stakeholders, but is about engaging with them to understand their needs and reflect these in our assessments, as well as helping them understand how the assessments can support their goals for developing the ability to use English effectively in local, regional, and global contexts.

Our Communication Model should therefore reflect the needs and expectations of all major stakeholders, from policy-makers to test/material developers to teachers and pupils. In order to do this we should consider not only the contents of any message but how it is presented to particular stakeholder groups. For example, a 100-page highly technical report on how the test was developed and how (well) it works is likely to satisfy an academic or technical audience while at the same time frustrating a group of teachers or parents who simply do not have the technical expertise to fully comprehend the contents. In fact, the report may have the effect of making such individuals suspicious that the developers are trying to hide something from them by burying it in academic (or pseudo-academic) language.

3.3 Operational

Of the four skills, speaking has proved to be the most logistically challenging and controversial to assess. The main challenges come from the time and expertise required to reliably assess an individual's speaking ability. This latter challenge involves both the characteristics of language to be assessed and the quality and availability of trained and reliable individuals to score the performances.

However, the introduction of computer-based assessment has eased some of the logistical issues and in recent years, education authorities in countries as diverse as Vietnam, Malaysia, China and Japan have begun the process of introducing speaking tests into their school and university systems.

4. The British Council and English Language Education and Assessment

English language teaching and testing has been at the heart of the work of the British Council since its foundation in 1934. In the years since then, the organisation has worked to build expertise across the world in these areas, supporting numerous projects which focused on all aspects of the learning system (see Weir & O'Sullivan, 2017). These projects have seen British Council experts and colleagues from many UK universities working in areas such as teacher training (language and professional), curriculum development, and assessment.

The British Council was a driving force behind the movement in the 1970s towards a more communicative approach to language teaching and testing. Perhaps the most significant contributions to the movement came from two British Council officers (as they were referred to at the time), Ian Munby (1978) and Brendan J. Carroll who developed (with his team of experts at the British Council) the English Language Testing Service (ELTS), which was the first English-for-academic-purposes test based on communicative principles. ELTS was replaced by IELTS in 1980 and this is still co-owned and administered by the British Council together with its partners Cambridge University Press and Assessment and IDP Australia.

Nowadays, with English broadly recognised as a world language, the British Council is, more than ever, committed to providing access to the highest quality teaching, learning and assessment experiences to diverse societies while expanding people's horizons both personally and professionally. The ability to communicate in English builds connections and mutual understanding between people across the world, and each of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing has an important role to play in this. As a part of understanding how the use of English is changing globally, the needs and goals of users of English in local contexts, and the position language education and assessment reform can play in supporting those goals, the British Council has launched a global, long-term research program: the Future of English (British Council, 2022a). This program is already delivering insights on the continuing vibrant role English plays in enabling cultural and economic interaction in local, regional and global contexts. What is clear is that the ability to use all skills in English to actively communicate lies at the heart of individual as well as national, regional and global uses of the language.

The British Council has actively carried on this work in Japan, with a special focus on teacher training and support, with major ongoing projects in collaboration with MEXT and local Boards of Education, putting teachers and teacher professional development at the heart of education reform (British Council, 2022b). One element that remains constant across all of these British Council-led or supported reform programs has been its commitment to a broad conceptualisation of education programs as integrated systems in which all elements are intrinsically aligned. This approach is articulated in O'Sullivan's (2020) contribution to this series as the Comprehensive Learning System.

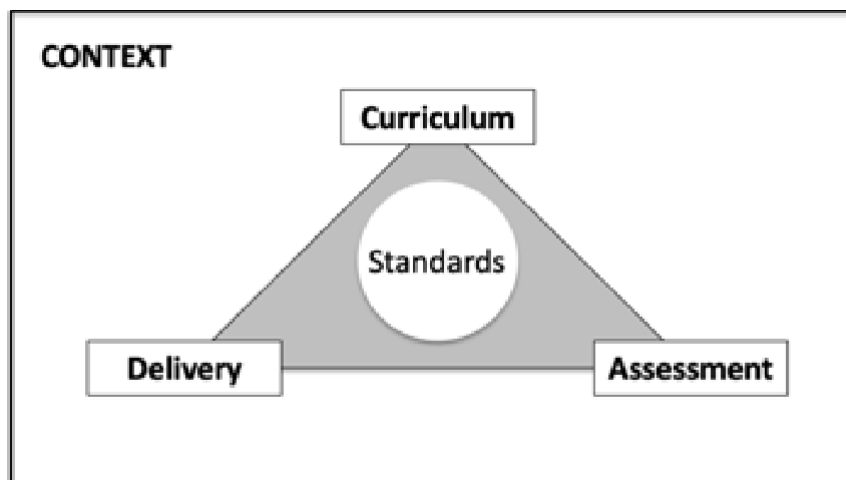
5. The Comprehensive Learning System (CLS)

The British Council has long understood the need for a fully integrated learning system that is appropriate to the context of learning. The system itself was articulated clearly in O'Sullivan's (2020) publication, *The Comprehensive Learning System* (CLS). The theoretical basis of the CLS is that learning systems can be defined by the context in which they are based. This means that the social, educational and political values that drive the context (e.g., the country or region) must be reflected in the learning system in all ways for the system to fully function as planned.

'The CLS is operationalised within any given context through three main elements: the curriculum; the delivery apparatus; and the philosophy and process of assessment. The entire learning system is driven by a clearly articulated set of standards which must be fully appropriate to the context.'

The CLS is seen to be operationalised within any given context through three main elements: the curriculum; the delivery apparatus; and the philosophy and process of assessment. The entire learning system is then driven by a clearly articulated set of standards, which, again, must be fully appropriate to the context. In other words, the CLS triangle in Figure 1 cannot stand alone. Even in situations where the core elements (i.e., curriculum, delivery, assessment and standards) can be shown to fit together philosophically, unless they are shown to be appropriate to the context in which the CLS is embedded (e.g., secondary English language education in Japan), it is unlikely to succeed. This suggests that learning systems should not be copied or implemented in new contexts without extensive evaluation and/or localisation.

Figure 1: *The Comprehensive Learning System (CLS)*



Where the learning system is expected to promote communication, then the curriculum should evidence this. In the same way, delivering the curriculum will require that the physical construction of the learning environment should ensure that this is feasible (e.g., ensuring space for movement and interaction in a traditional face-to-face classroom or ensuring technology is appropriate to enable interaction in the increasing number of online learning spaces). In addition, textbooks and other learning materials should focus on activities that promote the use of the language. Finally, no system can hope to flourish unless appropriate high-quality training is provided for the teachers who are its primary implementers. In addition to these two key areas, the assessment system, which includes both formative (i.e., developmental) and summative (judgemental) aspects, should be carefully considered and specified to support the learning goals.

As mentioned above, the standards that underpin the entire system should be understood within the context of learning. By this we mean, the standards should be developed and/or adapted with the same social, educational and political values that drive the context in mind. A good example of this is the work undertaken in Japan on the localisation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This project, resulted in the development of the CEFR-J (see Tono, 2019, 2022) in which the realities of the Japanese learning context were taken into consideration.

5.1 What this Means in Practice

The rationale behind the British Council's commitment to the implementation of action-oriented comprehensive learning systems across the world can be summarised as follows.

5.1.1 Learning

Students need the ability to use English effectively in practical situations: to understand new information, ideas, or enjoy foreign culture through listening and reading and to communicate what they want, share how they feel, or discuss opinions and ideas through speaking or writing. Knowledge of vocabulary and grammar should play an active role in building the ability and the confidence to communicate.

5.1.2 Teaching in Schools

Education reform aims to drive change in the way that English is taught. As a result, teachers need to understand the change and be supported to adapt their teaching. The British Council actively supports teachers to ensure that they can provide effective and motivating lessons for their students. This entails supporting teachers' professional development: working to assess their needs and helping to improve the quality of teaching in the classroom across all four skills. Much of the organisation's recent work in Japan has focused on helping teachers with practical ideas for teaching interactive speaking, reflecting the recent global trend towards the more action-oriented approach proposed by the Council of Europe (2020) with the publication of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment - Companion volume. Feedback and voices from teachers engaged in British Council training has been positive and indicates the approach has a positive impact in the classroom and across skills, not just on speaking (British Council, 2022c)

'Students need the ability to use English effectively in practical situations: to understand new information, ideas, or enjoy foreign culture through listening and reading; to communicate what they want, share how they feel, or discuss opinions and ideas through speaking or writing.'



5.1.3 Assessment

While the commitment to an action-oriented approach to TLA remains high on the British Council's agenda, it is clear that learning systems globally cannot simply forget about the receptive skills (listening and reading) or essential language knowledge (grammar and vocabulary). Unless the four traditional skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) are seen to be addressed in all elements of the learning system, there is a real threat that those missing elements will be essentially ignored, thus causing irreparable damage to the language skills of learners. In contrast, the evidence from a major reform project in Spain where the focus on language use was reflected in the curriculum, delivery and assessment elements of the system clearly demonstrate a significant improvement in language proficiency across the four skills (see Shepherd & Ainsworth, 2017). It is therefore very clear that the structure and focus of tests within a learning system will have a significant impact on that learning system (see for example, Watanabe, 2013). We therefore recognise that assessment has a crucial role to play, and that the assessments and tests included in the CLS must reflect **all** the skills we seek to develop.

We believe that the introduction of tests by education ministries, schools and universities which move the focus from the easily testable (typically reading, grammar and vocabulary) to the (admittedly more challenging) areas of spoken and written production and interaction will be a major force in promoting English education reform; incentivising students to invest their efforts in improving all four skills. As noted above, the Future of English program of research is clearly showing that governments across the globe recognise that, despite the challenges this presents, it is essential to achieving real change for learners and the societies in which they live, learn, and work and will use English. An example of this approach can be seen in a recent project in Japan, where the British Council worked with Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS) to design and develop a new English language speaking test to bring speaking into the university entrance exam system and actively promote positive washback on teaching and learning at both high school and university levels. In line with the CLS approach, this test has taken into account international (CEFR) and local standards (CEFR-J, high school Courses of Study) from the outset. The test (BCT-S) is now used as part of the university entrance requirements at TUFS and other universities across Japan. See British Council (2022d) for more details.

Of course, there may well be learning systems in which the productive skills are seen to be more relevant, as suggested by the Council of Europe (2020). However, even here, where the focus is on language production and interaction, the receptive skills together with language knowledge form the vital enabling skills which allow spoken and written communication to happen. The example of the BCT-S above is instructive. It was implemented within a successful entrance exam system not to replace other important skills which will continue to be tested, but to fill the gap between curriculum and reform goals that include speaking and a testing system which did not.

6. Conclusion

For almost nine decades, the British Council has been teaching and assessing young learners and adults around the world, as well as supporting teachers in state education systems. During this time, the goal has always been to develop students' practical English language skills and their confidence to use these skills. To strengthen the English language education system, we believe it is essential to address learning, teaching and assessment in an integrated way.

This commitment entails maintaining a clear focus on the needs of the local context of learning while ensuring that the four skills together with language knowledge form an integral part of any learning system. As we have seen above, this means that they are fully reflected in all aspects of the Comprehensive Learning System – curriculum, delivery and assessment (together with the underlying standards of course). A reluctance to change from existing approaches which treat language as a subject to be studied, tested and ultimately forgotten means that learners leave many learning systems with little or no ability to use the language they may have studied for many years. This has a significant negative impact on how learners perceive their own learning (as a failure) and how they see the language (as having no practical value). The negative impact also extends to broader society in that it can significantly affect the economic and social development of a country, (see Powell-Davies' interesting 'thought-piece' on the British Council website).

6.1 Summarising the British Council's Position on the Four Skills

Around the world, an ability to successfully communicate in a foreign language, in particular English, is recognised by governments as a means to empower the population to learn more about the world around them, to make global personal and professional connections, and to explore new opportunities, both personal and economic. We argue here that enacting educational reform to promote the development of skills in English language speaking and listening, as well as reading and writing, across the populace will support the growth of this human potential, and subsequently support the development of international economic and cultural ties.

Since its inception almost 90 years ago, The British Council has focused primarily on production (speaking and writing) while recognising the importance of the receptive skills (reading and listening) and that of the enabling language knowledge skills (grammar and vocabulary), see Weir & O'Sullivan's (2017) history of the British Council in English language testing. While the relative balance of focus on the above skills will depend on the specific context in which the learning system is based (e.g., Japanese second level or higher education), it is critical that no skill be omitted from the system. The British Council position can therefore be summarised as:

In order to reach a point where learners are comfortable in using the language in a meaningful way, it is critical that learning systems focus in a balanced and appropriate way on all four skills and not just focus on aspects of language that are easier to teach and assess such as reading, grammar and vocabulary.

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