

The four skills

The four skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing, can be classified as:

- **receptive** – listening and reading
- **productive** – speaking and writing.

Most speakers of languages, whether they are first or second language speakers, have stronger receptive skills than productive ones. They can understand more difficult pieces of speaking and writing than they can produce themselves. Have you found that this is true for you in your first and second language? What about for your students?

It is also the case, though, that different learners will have different strengths across the four skills for a number of reasons:

- their previous learning or may have concentrated on developing particular skills because of a particular exam syllabus
- their level of confidence may mean that they feel safer with the receptive skills (listening and reading) than the productive skills (speaking and writing)
- their own particular learning style may naturally favour the development of one set of skills over the other.

This chapter looks at:

- ways of finding out more about learners' strengths across the four skills
- ways of helping learners become more autonomous by showing how they can monitor their own learning both in and outside the classroom.

Finding out about skills



Choose one of your classes and draw up a profile of each student's strengths and weaknesses across the four skills. It may help to use a chart like this:

Name	Speaking	Listening	Reading	Writing

You may want to use a simple 3-point scale to make your chart easy to read:

1= weak, 2= OK and 3= strong.

If you do not teach your students across all the four skills, then talk to their other English teachers and try to build up a profile between you.

- One important thing we can do to help students become more independent is to help them to think about what they can already do well and to build on these strengths.
- We need to get students to think about what they like and do not like and what their strengths and weaknesses are. These are not always the same thing. Ask your students to think about the four skills and to rate themselves. You can also

ask them which skills they enjoy practising and notice whether there is or isn't a connection between what they like and what they are good at.

Skills survey

- Encourage students to think about their own skills profile by doing a class survey. This is also useful practice of the question forms:
Are you good at ... ?
How good are you at ... ?
Do you enjoy practising ... ?
How much do you enjoy practising ... ?
- Be sure you match the questions to the level of your class. You could use a chart like the one on PAGE 47. Ask your students to think about themselves and each other and to fill in the chart in small groups. They could use a 3-point scale to record their answers about what they like and what they are good at.

1 = S/he's not very good at this	A = S/he doesn't enjoy practising this
2 = S/he's OK at this	B = S/he doesn't mind practising this
3 = S/he's good at this	C = S/he enjoys practising this

- Students usually enjoy finding out about themselves and each other and the survey provides useful language practice. For example, they could write a short paragraph comparing themselves with another student.

I like writing. I can plan and check in the dictionary if I'm not sure. Maria doesn't like writing because it's boring. She prefers listening because she's good at guessing.

- If you have intermediate students you could get them to write a summary of the results of the survey using:
All of us ... A few of us ...
A lot of us ... Not many of us ...
Many of us ... None of us ...
Some of us ...

Then compare your skills profile chart with the information your students have collected about themselves. Were there any surprises?

The information collected can be used in a number of ways:

- In class we can sometimes give students choices about which skill to practise. For example, they could choose to report on something orally or in writing.
- Sometimes students can do an activity because they need the practice and sometimes they can do something because they enjoy it, for example, listening to a favourite song.
- Students can look for opportunities outside class to practise the skills they need to improve. For example, they could choose to read something from an English magazine or to write down the words to a pop song.
- We can sometimes give students a choice of homework to practise a skill they enjoy. For example, they can label a diagram from a written description or they can look at the diagram and write a description themselves.

Students find it much more motivating to do something they have chosen than something they have been told to do and the more students are involved in decisions about their own learning the more learning is likely to take place.