

Oral Examination to Assess Conversation Skills

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INTRODUCTION

One of the challenges of teaching a foreign or second language is finding ways to involve students in classroom conversation, and then at the end of the term to evaluate their progress in developing conversation skills. During my time teaching Freshman English (FE) at Asia University (AU), I have created and adapted a series of exercises aimed at developing conversation skills that focus on asking questions (Nattress, in press). At the end the semester, I give students an oral examination to evaluate their achievement during the semester and to diagnose students' speaking difficulties (Underhill, 1987). This article gives a brief description of the exercises used to prepare for the test and explains the oral test procedure and grading method. A sample grade sheet is included at the end of the article.

My goal in using an oral examination is two-fold. First, I use the test to motivate the students in this required language course to participate in the speaking exercises we use in class. Weaver (2001) notes that having a test deadline focuses students' attention throughout the semester. I find this to be true. My students are more inclined to maintain conversations in English, rather than in their native language, when they know that they will be tested on their ability to carry on an English conversation.

Secondly, I use the test as a way to assess both the students' learning, and my own teaching, during the semester. The goal in our speaking exercises is to improve spoken communication and fluency. The main speaking goal for my FE students in the first semester is to be able to carry on a conversation with a partner in English for 5 minutes with no outside assistance or prompting. To varying degrees, all of my students, in the last two years that I have administered this test, have met this goal.

STUDENT PREPARATION

The preparatory exercises I use are designed to build student's speaking skills and confidence through asking questions. In the first exercises, students have the support of writing questions with a partner. They then progress through more open exercises in which student pairs work together to ask follow-up questions, and on to individual students asking their own follow-up questions. By the end of the semester, pairs of students are carrying on extended conversations in conversation chains (Bess and Bess, 1999), in which they converse for several minutes on a given topic, then change partners. Both students in a pair are

encouraged to ask questions and follow-up questions. They are reminded that if their partner isn't speaking, they should ask that partner a question. In addition to these exercises, I use exercises from our textbook (Lee, 1998) that focus on keeping a conversation going by asking general questions, giving long answers, and showing verbal interest while listening to their partner speak.

In speaking sessions, I have students speak with many different partners to help them become accustomed to speaking with people that have different ability levels, speaking patterns, and accents. Having to negotiate meaning with different interlocutors helps students build their conversation skills and speaking confidence. To ease any pre-test anxiety, I allow the students to choose the partner they will converse with during the speaking test, and then work with that partner during the final practice sessions before the test. I reserve the right to assign a different partner if student pairs seem greatly mismatched in ability level or temperament (Weaver, 2001).

THE SPEAKING TEST: FORMAT

My Freshman English class size is usually around 24 students. We meet for 45-minute class periods. This allows me to schedule six pairs per period into roughly eight-minute time slots and finish my oral testing in two class periods. The eight minutes generally allows enough time for students to complete their five-minute conversations.

I arrange the desks so that the students and I sit in a triangle, with the students facing each other. Both students are then given a list of three questions to help them begin their conversations. The questions have been created from textbook themes and grammar that are familiar to the students. I use questions that are easy to understand for my level of students. There are no surprise or trick questions. The questions are merely used to help the students begin their conversations.

The students choose one of the three questions from their list that they think introduces a topic that they could easily discuss, and then decide who will ask the first question. This student asks the first question and the two students continue to talk on this subject for as long as they can. Their goal is to talk for 5 minutes on the first question. If they are unable to continue their conversation on the topic generated by the first question, the second student may then ask his or her chosen question. I listen and mark my grade sheet as they speak.

THE SPEAKING TEST: GRADING

The goal of the oral examination is to assess improvement over the semester in the students' ability to communicate orally with a partner in English, and to diagnose students' speaking errors. I do not grade strictly on these oral examinations, nor grade for grammar usage. This is a fluency assessment. By the time the students take the oral examination, they have already completed a written test based on textbook material, including grammar. I believe that succeeding on these tests helps to build the students' speaking confidence. The grading system I use is designed so that success on the oral exam is an attainable goal for all of my students.

Grading oral examinations is by nature a subjective process. Underhill (1987) notes that though oral tests "involve a subjective judgment...the human aspect of that judgment is precisely what makes them valuable and desirable. When we test a person's ability to perform in a foreign language, we want to know how well they can communicate with other people." I keep this in mind as I am marking my grade sheet during the examinations. If the students are communicating with each other and I can understand them, they are succeeding on the test.

During the test, I listen to the students' conversations to hear if they meet the primary goal of conversing in English for 5 minutes using only one initial starter question. I am also listening for whether or not both partners ask questions and follow-up questions, and give relatively long answers. They earn some points for good eye contact with their partner, and for speaking clearly so that I am able to easily understand what they say.

I give bonus points for the use of certain phrases, such as those used to show interest while listening to their partner's answers. Students have learned these phrases from their textbook. Giving bonus points seems to motivate students to try to fit a little extra into their conversations. Not requiring the use of these phrases allows lower level students to focus more on their questions and answers, and not be distracted by a large array of required points they must address in their conversations. Many students are challenged by the ability to earn bonus points.

Underhill (1987) suggests that using a scale from 0 to 2 for each grading category is optimal for scoring such oral examinations quickly, as the students speak, but I find that this depends on the goals of the test. My categories range from 1 to 10 points. (See The Speaking Test Grade Sheet at the end of this article.) Considering the goals of this oral examination, I weight my point categories to emphasize the goals of communication and fluency. One third of the final score of the test (10 points of 30 possible points) is given for

being able to continue the conversation for five minutes. This helps to remind the students that their main goal is to keep the conversation going. In addition, they are given points for asking follow-up questions (6 points), giving long answers (6 points), and asking new questions (3 points). I give fewer points in the other categories. In these categories, students may earn points for using only one starter question from the list that I give them (2 points), eye contact (1 point), and speaking clearly (2 points). These smaller point categories are designed to focus student attention on these points, yet the number of points for each indicates their relative importance. Using a smaller point range in all of my categories would make it difficult to weight the point categories as I do. I do agree, however, that keeping the number of points in any category relatively small makes it easier to score such oral examinations as the conversations are taking place.

This oral examination process has been a successful method for me to motivate my students during their in-class speaking activities, to assess their progress during the semester, and to diagnose their areas of language difficulty. It also provides me with useful feedback on the success of classroom activities I used throughout the semester. I am able to then use this information in following semesters. I find this form of assessment to be valuable to my students and to me as a teacher.

The Speaking Test Grade Sheet

Freshman English Speaking Test

Class: _____

Student Name	Spoke English for 5 minutes 10 Points	Asked only one starter question 2 points	Eye contact 1 Point	Spoke clearly 2 Points	Asked Follow-up Questions 6 Points	Asked New Questions 3 Points	Gave Long Answers 6 Points	Bonus Phrases Maximum: 2 Points	Notes
Student 1									
Student 2									

Grade: ___/30 Points

References

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Nattress, J. (in press). Creating questions: Progressive exercises for building speaking confidence. CELE Journal, 11.

Underhill, N. (1987). Testing spoken language: A handbook of oral testing techniques. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Weaver, K. (2001). Using Oral Interviews to assess students' achievement in spoken communication. CELE Journal, 9, 113-125.