Using Oral Interviews to Assess Students' Achievement in Spoken Communication

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INTRODUCTION

Open Asia University's (AU) Center for English Language Education (CELE) Handbook to the section on goals and objectives of the Freshman English (FE) program and you find Goal #1: "Students will improve their English communication skills" (CELE Handbook, 2000, p. 37). The skills referred to are speaking, listening, writing and reading. The CELE Handbook also notes that a "great degree of classroom time should give students opportunities to participate, including speaking, pair work, group interaction, and volunteering" (2000, p. 38). Although it is a challenging task, the goal is straightforward.

Consider the following hypothetical situation of a teacher recently arrived to teach in the FE program. He believes that language education should make communication one of its main objectives. Aware that many of his students experienced teacher-fronted, lecture-style English classes in junior high and high school, he knows that getting these students to interact in FE classes will initially be difficult. Nevertheless, the teacher emphasizes spoken communication and encourages his FE students to actively participate in class. Slowly but surely, many of his students are learning to

enjoy practicing spoken English. However, when tests are given, the classroom atmosphere is markedly different. The class becomes quiet, almost somber. The teacher assumes a more staid role—in front of the class, behind his desk. The students—writing implements at the ready—wait for the teacher to pass out a "pencil-and-paper" test. Because he lacks expertise in the design and implementation of speaking tests, the teacher has his students take a test that consists largely of reading and writing. Such tests have an important place in the FE classroom, but he is relying almost exclusively on them as a means of assessment. The teacher reflects and asks some important questions: What about speaking? Where was the authentic spoken communication in my assessment of my students' achievement? The teacher, determined to do better, faces a new challenge: How to create an achievement test of spoken English communication.

This article discusses issues regarding testing spoken communication and proposes the use of the oral interview as a format for assessing achievement in spoken English in FE classes.

TESTING SPEAKING: ISSUES TO CONSIDER

An Important Question

Why am I testing? A teacher must carefully consider this question at the outset of the test-design process. As we saw in the hypothetical case above, teaching and testing are not always in sync. One thing is emphasized

during in-class activities, yet another is tested. Nic Underhill states, "many language tests are given *because it is the accepted practice to give language tests as part of a teaching programme, without setting out clear aims* [italics added]" (1987, p. 11). The point is this: As prospective test developers, it is paramount that teachers have a clear goal in mind before creating a test. Although the point is self-evident, it is too easily neglected.

Testing Goals

When considering the purpose of a test, it is useful to keep the following testing goals in mind. Underhill describes four categories: "Proficiency: what is the learner's general level of language ability? Placement: where does a learner fit into our language programme? Diagnosis: what are the learner's particular strengths and weaknesses? Achievement: how much has the learner learned from a particular course" (1987, pp. 12-13)? These categories are not mutually exclusive: Depending on the test, there can be overlapping purposes. But they are convenient categories for asking yourself to what end a test is being designed. For the purposes of this article, the focus will be on the fourth goal—achievement. A working definition of achievement is rather simple: After spending a given amount of time in an FE class, what can a student do in English that she could not do when she first entered class in early April?

A Difficult Task

In putting together speaking tests and reading about them in the pedagogical literature, you soon realize why a teacher might avoid using them. They are not easy tests to do well. Madsen writes, "The testing of speaking is widely regarded as the most challenging of all language exams to prepare, administer and score. For this reason, many people don't even try to measure the speaking skill. They simply don't know where to begin the task of evaluating spoken language" (1983, p. 147).

Backwash

Sometimes even the most conscientious FE teacher may not be using tests that reflect the goal of spoken communication. If testing, teaching, and learning were wholly discrete endeavors, the problem of poor testing would be deleterious, but isolated. Unfortunately, the three are related, compounding the importance of testing well. In the jargon of testing, "The effect of testing on teaching and learning is known as backwash" (Hughes, 1989, p. 1).

Harmful backwash occurs in cases where testing dominates teaching, and its concomitant teaching-to-the-test becomes the norm. Or, it is manifest when testing is at variance with our teaching (Hughes, 1989). This is the case when spoken communication is emphasized in classroom activities, but testing does not include a speaking-assessment component. In the latter case, mixed messages are sent to the students.

Fortunately, the converse is also true. Thoughtful, well-designed tests can produce beneficial backwash. In the FE program, students may be more inclined to practice speaking activities if that is what they are ultimately held accountable for in testing. Tests that logically stem from good teaching benefit both student and teacher and ultimately create a solid language program. The concept of backwash in testing thus forces the issue of good testing. Despite difficulties in their design and implementation, teachers must test spoken English communication in FE classes to meet the speaking portion of CELE Goal #1.

THE ORAL INTERVIEW

Rationale

This article will illustrate how the oral interview achievement test promotes beneficial backwash. Specifically, the oral interview has three desirable traits: It is authentic, communicative, and flexible. Underhill defines an authentic task as "one which resembles very closely something which we actually do in everyday life" (1987, p. 8). Students are likely to be impressed by the usefulness of a test that mimics real communication. Oral interviews are communicative in that a message is conveyed between two or more interlocutors. Madsen says the following about the oral interview: "It can be one of the most communicative of all language examinations" (1983, p.166). So much has been written about the value of communicative

approaches to language learning and teaching, suffice it to say that this article assumes the validity of the approach. Finally, the oral interview is not a one-size-must-fit-all test—the format is flexible. A range of speaking techniques can be used depending on FE level and what has been practiced in a given class. The techniques used can range from simple, highly structured question-and-answer and follow-up question elicitation techniques at the lower FE levels to more open-ended conversation techniques at the highest levels. Since we are testing achievement, what happens in the oral interview depends on the speaking activities students have already practiced. Thus the teacher will have an opportunity to assess the students based on what they can produce and understand as a result of in-class practice.

Logistics

Oral interviews can be conducted in a variety of ways. However, oral interviews in which two students in turn speak and listen to each other seem optimal to this writer. Students could be interviewed en masse in the language laboratory, but eye contact, gesturing, and other important communication skills that do not lend themselves to recording, cannot be assessed. More importantly: Is a recorded interview an authentic language task? As for student-to-teacher oral interviews, the teacher has to divide his or her attention. Underhill states, "when the role of interlocutor and assessor are combined . . . it is difficult for one person to concentrate on assessing

effectively while at the same time trying to appear interested in what the learner is saying and involved in serious communication with him" (1987, p. 29). I suggest that student-to-student oral interviews with the teacher as assessor are superior to other arrangements for at least two reasons. First, students appear to be more comfortable being interviewed by a peer than by the teacher. Having conducted both student-to-teacher and student-to-student interviews, I felt in the latter case my students could concentrate more on communication and less on any perceived differences between student and teacher. Heaton asserts that one way to reduce students' stress in an oral interview is "to interview students in pairs . . . enabling them to speak to each other as members of the same peer group" (1995, p. 97). In the FE program, this is ideal given the students propensity for peer cooperation. Second, with the students responsible for doing the talking during the oral interviews, the teacher can concentrate solely on his or her role as assessor. Again, in my own experience with the two types of pair oral interviews, I found marking much easier when I was not switching hats from interlocutor to assessor. The student-to-student format allows the teacher to focus on assessment.

As for timing, student-to-student oral interviews I have conducted at my FE level (Law 18) typically lasted 10 minutes, each student in the pair having roughly five minutes to speak. Thus the oral interview process need not be too time consuming. It can be completed in three or four 45-minute

class periods. Higher level FE teachers may want to provide more time for oral interviews given their students' greater ability to sustain the interview and to maintain longer conversations. As for when in the semester to conduct oral interviews, it makes sense to have oral interview achievement tests at the end of each semester. The culminating FE experience would thereby reinforce the emphasis on spoken communication.

Student pairing is also important for the success of oral interviews. As stated above, students often demonstrate greater ease when interviewed by a peer as opposed to a teacher. However, not all student-to-student pairs work well. Underhill writes, "care needs to be taken in pairing learners, strong with strong and weak with weak, both for linguistic level and for personality" (1987, p. 30). When scheduling a set of oral interviews, the teacher must carefully consider personalities that have worked well together on in-class activities. Such forethought may prevent an oral interview in which one student dominates the session.

Test Content and Marking

Once the decision to use the oral interview has been made, the teacher must decide on the test content and a means of marking the test. To reiterate, the focus of this article is on testing students' achievement—not proficiency, diagnosis, or placement. The content of the oral interview achievement test and what is marked will, therefore, be dependent upon

what spoken English skills are taught and practiced in a particular FE class. The oral interview test of spoken achievement should derive its material from the teacher's syllabus. Additionally, if certain areas such as follow-up questions, gesturing, or providing extra information when answering questions have been emphasized in class, they should be weighted accordingly in the test's marking.

Marking oral interview tests can be challenging. Objective tests such as multiple-choice tests are easy to mark (Underhill, 1987, p. 88). Oral tests, on the other hand, "require subjective judgement on the part of the marker" (Underhill, 1987, p. 88), thus they are more difficult to mark reliably. Underhill frames the question of whether to test spoken communication as follows: there are, he states, "two solutions . . . one is to avoid subjective tests altogether . . . the second is to make the conscious decision that the person-to-person aspect is so important in testing oral proficiency that it cannot be traded away, and to face up to the consequent problems of involving human judgement" (1987, p. 89).

Obviously spoken English communication tests cannot be reduced to the reliability of multiple-choice tests, nor should they be. Steps can be taken, however, in marking oral interview tests that increase the reliability of their results. First, as mentioned previously, conducting student-to-student oral interviews increases the likelihood of better marking. The teacher can dedicate his or her attention solely to marking. Second, as a backup to the

teacher's own marking, a recording can be made of the oral interviews. If the teacher is unable to properly mark a given category during the interview, he or she may be able to check the recording later. Even better than recording, would be two teachers simultaneously marking an oral interview. Underhill states, "the most effective way of getting round the central problem of lack of reliability is to use more than one assessor" (1987, p. 89). Two or more assessors would be ideal, but given the scheduling of FE classes—most teachers teaching at the same time—it may not be feasible in the FE program. Recording is, therefore, a good alternative. Finally, having a clear marking key with a simple point scale facilitates reliable assessment. Having tried a variety of point systems, I can attest to the importance of a simple point scale. Madsen suggests a point scale in which 2 points are awarded for credit, 1 point for partial credit, and 0 for no credit (1983, p. 171). By keeping the system simple, the teacher does not get bogged down in a complex rating scale or point-awarding system. Points can be awarded quickly and the teacher stays focused on the language and behavior of the participants in the oral interview. Points are awarded on a marking key. This key will have certain language tasks and behaviors clearly defined by the teacher based on what has been practiced previously in FE class and how the students have been preparing for the interview. An oral interview-marking key might look like the following:

Language/ Behavior	Student greeted partner.	Student maintained eye contact with partner throughout interview.	Student answered question partner asked.	Student volunteered extra information when answering partner's question.	Student asked partner question.	Student listened to partner's answer and asked an appropriate follow-up question.
Points						

(Note: The teacher marks two keys at once—one for each student in the pair.)

CONCLUSION

To conclude, testing achievement in spoken English communication is positive for three reasons. First, by providing a measure of what has been learned, students can see just how well their speaking skills have improved as a result of daily practice. Second, I believe all FE students, including less motivated individuals, work harder on daily in-class speaking tasks when they know that they will be held verbally accountable for the material. Third, oral interviews are not only for student assessment; they also provide the teacher a means of assessing his or her own teaching. Focusing on only two students at a time allows for a great deal of teacher reflection. In the hustle and bustle of regular class sessions, it is hard, if not impossible at times, to monitor how effectively you are teaching the spoken language. Watching the student-to-student interviews, on the other hand, the teacher more clearly

sees where progress has been made, and where work needs to be done to improve his or her teaching.

If you have never felt like the hypothetical teacher referred to in the introduction, more power to you. This article is intended for those who have given some thought to speaking tests, but have not designed or implemented them. It is a general how-to and an exhortation on the merits of using oral interviews to assess achievement in spoken communication. We work hard encouraging students and providing them with opportunities to practice the spoken language. What we test, then, should mirror what we teach.

References

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