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ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of a pilot longitudinal study that attempted to develop a method to take subjective, qualitative observations about the English language speaking skills of Japanese English language learners and transform them into objective, quantitative measures. The following considerations must be addressed in the course of constructing this measure: What are the appropriate expectations of proficiency of a given student? Which skills should be mastered, to what level, and in what order? Are the instruments used valid measures, encompassing all the proper variables? Are the raters evaluating the students consistently? How can results be compared from speech to speech, class to class, year to year? Three types of tests are used: monologue speaking test (presentation); a dialogue speaking test (interview); and a multilogue speaking test (discussion and debate). (KFT)

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Teaching and Testing Oral Communication Skills

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1. Theoretical background and rationale

Communication skills are a highly desired aspect in today's job market and the increasingly rapid changes in the workplace make management aware of the importance of competent communicators (Tatum 1998). It therefore follows that as business grows on an increasingly global level, students are in need of English oral communication skills as they graduate from university if they are to be competitive in the job market. Communication classes are now firmly entrenched in universities that teach English as a second or foreign language. However, many students are still graduating with little more than elementary "survival English" skills. As language teachers, it is crucial that we enhance students' delivery skills, increase students' confidence, and develop students' methods of organization and critical thinking skills. As language testers, it is necessary for us to establish a careful research design and conduct a precise measurement to determine if these goals have been met. The oral communication field needs a clear-cut method of evaluation as can be found in discrete language skill classes such as listening comprehension. Language teachers and language testers need a method which takes subjective, qualitative observations, and transforms them into objective, quantitative measures. What we will present is a discussion of our on-going pilot project which is attempting to reach these goals.

2. Purpose of the research

This paper will present the results of an in-progress pilot study concerned with the previously mentioned assumptions and address the following considerations :

Teaching and Testing Oral Communication Skills

1. What are appropriate expectations of proficiency of an undergraduate student or a graduating university student?
2. Which skills should be mastered, to what level, and in what order?
3. Are evaluation instruments used sound in that they cover the range of the variables, all of the items fit, and all the items measure what they are intended to measure?
4. Are the raters evaluating students consistently?
5. How can the results be compared from speech to speech, class to class, or year to year?

In addressing the question of what are the appropriate expectations of proficiency of university students, our initial assumptions are based on a study done with Japanese graduate students at Keio University. In the study where graduate students were asked to cite what they felt were the most important/useful English skills for them to learn, the resulting list was conversation, presentation, discussion, and debate. (Hiyoshi Review, 2000). These, in turn have been the areas we decided to focus on.

To what degree our evaluation instruments are sound in covering the range of the variables, fit all of the items to be measured, and measure what we intended them to measure will be determined at the end of the term. The university at which this study is being conducted runs on a year-long course system and students are half way through the school year at the time of writing this paper.

This is a two-year, longitudinal study, so we have been able to compare the students performance from both last year and this year. The students had a non-native speaking English teacher for the first year and are currently with a native English speaker for the second year of this project.

3. Research design and methods

3.1. Three types of speaking tests

1) Monologue speaking test (presentation)

- *show and tell*-Students are allowed to talk about anything of their choosing. This activity focuses on giving students one of their first opportunities to make a small presentation in English, so is short in time and varied in topics.

- *truth/lie story*-Students tell stories. Other students in the class have to decide when they are telling the truth and when they are lying.

- *class presentation*-Students talk about their university majors and seminars. They are expected to go into more detail than with the “show and tell” activity and use more techniques generally associated with proficient presentation skills.

- 2) Dialogue speaking test (interview)-This is an open-ended, student lead-discussion with the teacher. As a “real” conversation is not rehearsed or written in advanced, either is this test. Students are told in advance that they will be required to use the conversation skills they have learned throughout the course to lead a one-to-one conversation with the teacher. Each individual student is in charge of choosing the topic and regulating the flow of the conversation. Because of this, issues of background knowledge, etc. are not considered an issue. The conversation lasts for approximately ten minutes.
- 3) Multilogue speaking test (discussing and debating)-The discussions are student-generated discussions. Students are put into groups, and as a group, students decide on a topic they feel would be of interest for the rest of the classroom. Next, students prepare two sets of questions. One set is a list of ten multiple-choice questions based on the topic their group has chosen. The other is a list of five questions to guide the group discussions that will follow. After this, students are put into new groups, so one member from each of the original groups is in each of the newly established groups. Taking turns, each student is then put in charge of leading their new group in a discussion after the other members in their discussion group have completed the multiple-choice questionnaire. Each student is, in turn, the group leader for one 90 minute class that focuses on group conversations based on the topic the original groups chose. The following is a chart to help illustrate this procedure :

Teaching and Testing Oral Communication Skills

Group A (four students)

Group C (four students)

Group B (four students)

Group D (four students)

Each group decides on a discussion topic and then writes both multiple-choice questions and group discussion questions.

New groups are then made up from one member from each of the original groups :

ABCD ABCD ABCD ABCD

In turn, each member runs a 70 minute conversation based on the topic chosen by the original groups.

The final evaluation will be done after a unit on how to debate has been completed. At this time, students ability to debate in English will be evaluated. This will be done in the last semester of the second academic year.

3.2. Procedure of the research

1) Subjects

Twenty-six Japanese college students majoring in Business Administration and Economics. The numbers are made up of approximately 70 % male and 30% female students.

2) Raters

Two classroom teachers (M : a native speaker of English, Y : a non-native speaker of English)

3) Rating items and criterion

Evaluation Items :

Presentations :

- content
- language
- eye contact

Interviews :

- comprehensibility
- pronunciation
- fluency
- ability to explain an idea

Discussing and Debating :

- able to be part of the conversation to help it flow naturally (including times other than when asked a direct question)
- uses fillers/additional questions to include others in conversation
- transfers skills used in dialogues to group discussions

4) Rating procedure

The presentation test was rated by the non-native speaker of English, and the interview test and the discussion (and/or debating) test were rated by the native speaker of English.

5) Rating scale

The rating scale used in the analysis was a four-point scale as follows :

1	2	3	4
poor			good

4. Data analyses

Following data analyses will be conducted to answer the research questions mentioned above.

1. Inter-rater reliability of the two raters
2. T-test analysis between the mean scores of two raters
3. Descriptive statistics of three tests (Task difficulty)
4. Item difficulty (10 items)
5. Internal consistency of 10 items
6. Factor analysis
7. Correlations between raters and items

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Inter-rater reliability

Table 1 Inter-rater reliability between the two teachers

	N	correlation	sig.
M overall and Y overall	26	.746	.001

Since all three tests were not rated by the same teacher, as mentioned in the procedure above, we first look at the inter-rater reliability to examine the rating consistency between the two teachers by using the overall evaluation of 26 students each.

Table 1 shows the inter-rater reliability between the two teachers, which is reasonably high and acceptable for an oral assessment. Although this correlation is calculated based on the overall evaluation of each student (not by individual items) of the both teachers, it is reasonable to grasp the rating tendency of the two raters. Also, the coefficient (.746), which is acceptable as an oral proficiency assessment, will enable us to count on the evaluation of the following three tests by the two teachers.

5.2. The t-test results of the mean scores between the two teachers

Table 2 The t-test results (by the mean difference) between the two teachers using the overall evaluation

	M	N	SD	t	df	sig
Native	2.77	26	.71	-1.995	25	.057
Non-Native	2.99	26	.66			

In order to check if there is a significant difference of the rating (harshness or leniency, etc.) between the two teachers, we will use the t-test analysis so that we can statistically investigate the mean difference between the two raters.

Table 2 suggests that there is no significant difference (no significant at the .05 level of significance) of the mean scores of the two raters.

Table 1 and Table 2 confirm that two classroom teachers rate consistently with each other and that there is no significant difference in their ratings in terms of harshness or leniency.

5.3. 'Descriptive statistics of three tests

Table 3 Descriptive statistics of three tests

	Presentation	Interview	Discussion
M	3.21	2.76	2.41
SD	.70	.63	.69
Mini	1	1.5	1
Max	4	4	3.67
N	26	26	26

Table 3 demonstrates that the discussion test is the most difficult task for students, followed by the interview test and the presentation test. One possible explanation for this is that the presentation test which can be prepared in advance seems easier than the other two, while the discussion test which requires students' complicated interactive ability is the most difficult one.

5.4. Item Difficulty

Table 4 Item difficulty (10 rating items)

Item	Easy					Difficult				
	Pcn	Pln	Ipr	Pey	Dtr	Icm	Ifl	Iab	Dhl	Duse
M	3.54	3.27	3.08	2.85	2.77	2.69	2.65	2.65	2.35	2.12
SD	.76	.83	.63	.88	.65	.74	.80	.75	.80	.91

N.B.

Symbols used in the table :

Presentations :

- content (Pcn)
- language (Pln)
- eye contact (Pey)

Interviews :

- comprehensibility (Icm)
- pronunciation (Ipr)
- fluency (Ifl)
- ability to explain an idea (Iab)

Discussions and Debating

- able to be part of the conversation to help it flow naturally (including times other

Teaching and Testing Oral Communication Skills

- than when asked a direct question) (Dhl)
- uses fillers/additional questions to include others in conversation (Duse)
- transfers skills used in dialogues to group discussions (Dtr)

Table 4 suggests that two items in the presentation test are easiest. This is probably because students can prepare and improve in advance in their writing process, while practicing eye contact in group situations is more difficult to practice. Even pronunciation in the interview test can be practiced individually beforehand. However, other items which are more related to interaction, negotiation and listening ability become more difficult for students.

5.5. Internal consistency of all 10 items as a whole communication test

Table 5 Internal consistency of 10 items as a whole communication test

Reliability coefficient Alpha = .90

Table 5 demonstrates the internal consistency of 10 items. The reliability coefficient .90 (Alpha) is rather high and acceptable as the internal consistency. Therefore, we can claim that these 10 items of three tests are measuring the students' general communication ability consistently.

5.6. Factor analysis

Table 6 Results of factor analysis

	Component	
	1)	2)
<i>Prcontent</i>	—	.887
<i>Prlanguage</i>	—	.925
<i>Preyecon</i>	.459	.648
<i>Incompre</i>	.923	—
<i>Inpronoun</i>	.764	.389
<i>Influency</i>	.899	—
<i>Inability</i>	.762	—
<i>Dihelp</i>	.851	—
<i>Diuse</i>	.807	.346
<i>Ditrans</i>	.671	.308
% of variance	48.831	25.406

N.B. The blank space means that factor loadings are below .300

Table 6 shows the results of factor analysis and it suggests two factors. Although we started with three tests (Monologue : Presentation test, Dialogue : Interview test, Multilogue : Discussion and Debating), the suggested components of the whole communication ability is two factors. One is possibly dealing with the combination of dialogue (interview) and multilogue (discussion), in other words, interactive and reciprocal ability, while the other is one-way, simple presentation ability. Since the number of students as well as the number of items is small, it is difficult to make a general statement from the results here. However, there seems to be a difference between the monologue type ability and the dialogue-multilogue ability. Further studies should be left for future research.

5.7. Correlations between raters and items

Table 7 Correlations between raters and items

	M overall	Y overall
<i>Prcontent</i>	.239	.360
<i>Prlanguage</i>	.246	.385
<i>Preyecont</i>	.389*	.607***
<i>Incompre</i>	.853***	.631***
<i>Inpronun</i>	.669***	.777***
<i>Influency</i>	.842***	.732***
<i>Inability</i>	.674***	.701***
<i>Dihelp</i>	.712***	.633***
<i>Diuse</i>	.724***	.739***
<i>Ditrans</i>	.485*	.535**
N	26	

N.B. 1) *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

2) M overall : a native speaker,

Y overall : a non-native speaker

Table 7 indicates that there is some shared information/part between the rater (teacher) judgment and the two tests (interview test and discussion test). However, the presentation test has less shared element with the two raters. This could also support the result of factor analysis that the presentation test should be dealt with rather separately from the other two (dialogue and multilogue) tests.

6. Conclusions and implications

We can draw the following conclusions from the previous results and discussion.

1. Two raters are consistently evaluating students' oral proficiency within the acceptable range of rater reliability
2. Among three tests (tasks), the discussion test seems to be the most difficult followed by the interview test and the presentation test. In other words, the multilogue ability is the most difficult and followed by the dialogue and the monologue ability. Although we are not yet sure of the appropriate expectations of the three abilities at this stage, the dialogue and multilogue abilities obviously should be enhanced.
3. Related to the previous results, among the three tests, the difficulty order (difficulty to easy) is Multilogue, Dialogue and Monologue. Among the 10 items, if we consider these items separately that measure the whole communication ability, the difficulty order (easy to difficult) is Presentation content, Presentation language, Interview pronunciation, Presentation eye contact, Discussion transfer, Interview comprehensibility, Interview fluency, Interview ability, Discussion help and Discussion use. As mentioned above, the items in Multilogue and Dialogue should be paid more attention. Especially, the last two difficult items (Discussion help and Discussion use) should be enhanced.
4. Judging from the results of the internal consistency, 10 items have functioned properly as individual rating items to measure students' communicative ability.
5. One finding is that classroom teachers do not predict so much the presentation ability, which has become clear from the correlations. There must be something unique in the presentation ability. Not only this result but also the two components suggested by the factor analysis have urged to reconsider the whole of communication ability.
6. Listening in the discussion is different from that in the interview, because the former requires students to pay more attention to the third speaker. In order improve the discussion ability, one of the important elements is to enhance students' listening ability in the discussion (especially where native speakers are involved). Listening ability in the discussion could be improved in a

classroom situation as a training course, by using taped conversations where more than three people are talking.

7. The presentation evaluation was conducted last year, and the interview test and the discussion test were administered in the middle of the current year as interim report grades ; therefore, we can not make any clear-cut generalization. However, future research would make clearer idea of communication ability with more data.

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