

ORAL TESTS:

STRATEGIES FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

TO GET RID OF ANXIETY

Elisenda Castro Escario

Elena González Pastor

Jesús Laguarda Gallán

Escuela de Profesorado

Huesca

RESUMEN

Esta comunicación intenta valorar el papel que el examen oral puede desempeñar dentro de la interacción enseñanza/aprendizaje. A modo de definición-presentación enumeramos contrastivamente con otras pruebas las condiciones especiales de estos exámenes que afectan a profesores y alumnos, y que los hacen cualitativamente diferentes.

Nuestro interés por una mejor investigación hace que consideremos el aspecto humano como elemento positivo. De este modo las estrategias, bien sean psicológicas o de otro tipo, juegan un papel fundamental en la liberación de la tensión. No obstante, una investigación eficiente debería tener en cuenta todos los factores relevantes, que hemos tratado de analizar. En primer lugar ofrecemos todos los objetivos posibles junto con las necesidades y expectativas. Además presentamos los distintos tipos de técnicas de pruebas orales, a modo de estrategias, clasificados gráficamente de acuerdo con la interacción de mensaje y participantes, así como con el grado de dificultad y espontaneidad, con el fin de facilitar la secuenciación y temporización.

La segunda parte se centra en las posibilidades de explotar la valoración y calificación de acuerdo con determinada investigación. La evaluación del *test* debe ser un aspecto ineludible en cualquier estudio de este tipo.

Si todos estos aspectos resultan válidos, la investigación se convierte elemento vivo y constante en nuestro quehacer.

SUMMARY

This paper is based on the value that oral tests may have within the teaching and learning interaction. We begin with a definition-introduction of the main constraints that affect teachers and students which make this type of test qualitatively different from others.

Research could be better planned if the human side is looked at as a positive aspect, for which strategies, psychological or others, play a fundamental role in getting rid of anxiety. Nevertheless, in order to find a more efficient searching way, all aspects that take part in oral tests

should be taken into account and re-examined. In trying to do so, we have firstly compiled and questioned all possible aims alongside with needs and expectations. Oral test techniques (used as strategies) are shown in a chart according to the interaction of message and participants, as well as the degrees of difficulty and spontaneity so that time and sequencing are controlled in order to suit the learner's needs.

The second part explains how assessment and marking could be exploited to favour some particular research. Test evaluation is essential in this kind of research.

Once these aspects have been questioned and proved to be valid, we may find ourselves on a constant research.

This paper is intended for teachers and learners who are concerned about the testing of oral interaction. We should begin by analysing the main constraints that oral tests convey.

Oral tests are *qualitatively* different from other kinds of tests. They do not fit the conventional assumptions about testing and people. Conventional because in the tests of other skills (perhaps with the exception of free writing) students face a paper. Teachers correct mechanically, with objective judgement, which validity and reliability can be easily measured by statistics and finally because there is a long tradition and a great number of books and reviews published about it.

On the contrary, in a speaking skill test, oral interaction is produced by two or more people, not between a piece of paper and a person. Tests are assessed and marked normally through subjective judgement, which implies that people constantly change, so validity and reliability are rather difficult to measure. There is neither tradition nor hardly any bibliography because more than ever teaching is being directed to oral skills, within the process-oriented learning, particularly in early stages and because of all the inconveniences we are mentioning at this point.

This state of things brings teachers certain stress and uncertainty that is, somehow, transmitted to students. Teachers also suffer from the lack of time that is needed to assess speaking tests one by one in large classes. A third type of problem from the learner's view would be to cope with the panic they feel.

As a consequence, testing speaking skills is often ignored, left aside or left for second thoughts. We think that by examining the different aspects of oral tests we might find ways of research and strategies of successful interaction.

1. AIMS

This first aspect poses the question: Why have a test at all? What learners and teachers (in a process-oriented learning) should plan, or teachers ask themselves, would be reflected along these points:

1.1. *Proficiency*: What is the learner's general level of language ability? An oral test is the quickest way to decide the broad target language.

- 1.3. *Placement*: Where does this learner fit in the Teaching Programme?
- 1.4. *Achievement*: How much has the learner learnt during any period of time?
- 1.5. *Techniques*: Features that are going to be measured. Are global or analytical tests going to be used?
- 1.6. *Time*: When are tests going to be taken? How much time is needed to prepare, develop, correct, use feedback, research...?
- 1.7. *People*: Who is going to test or mark? A native or non-native speaker, teachers, learners...?
- 1.8. *Equipment and facilities*: Where? places, rooms, furniture; sound/video recording equipment; photocopying, printing...

2. NEEDS

Needs are personal. They answer the question: What does the individual learner stand to gain or lose from taking the test? They are not necessarily the same as aims. Some research should be done on this point. In ideal circumstances the aims of the programme match the needs of the learners. So the teaching/testing programme provides what the learner most needs.

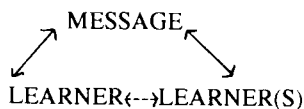
3. EXPECTATIONS

How learners react to a test and how well they do depends on how the test compares with what they expect it to be like. The process of finding out the real and individual expectations, needs, aims, may be a good basis for research. Although some learners might be shy when talking about themselves, oral tests allow the personal side of the learner to come through (and bring out the differences between individual learners) more than in other tests. No doubt, oral tests also help when there is a discrepancy between the expectations and the aims of the programme.

Alternatively, it could be searched how oral tests show the success of the varied strategies used by the learner in the process of learning more than just oral proficiency.

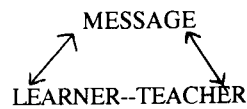
4. TEST TECHNIQUES

Test techniques are used as strategies to elicit the information that most suits the different interests at a fixed point of the process of learning. Though roughly, it would be valuable to have all categories in a chart, according to the interaction of the message and degrees of level from the most spontaneous to the most mechanical:



- Oral report
- Joint Discussion
- Decision Making
- Role Play
- Description-Recreation
- Picture / Picture Story
- Reading Aloud

SPONTANEOUS TESTS



- Discussion/Conversation
- Interview
- Form-Filling
- Making Appropriate Responses
- Question / Answer

PRE-ARRANGED TESTS

- Description / Recreation
- Using Several Similar Pictures
- Role Play

TESTS PREPARED IN ADVANCE

- Oral Report
- Re-telling a Story
- Giving Instructions
- Descriptions / Explanations

ENTIRELY PREDICTABLE TESTS

- Reading Blank Dialogue
- Translating/Interpreting
- Sentence Completion
- Sentence Correction
- Reading Aloud
- Sentence Transformation
- Sentence Repetition

4.1. Speaking to other learners

Apart from the teacher, the learner can speak to another learner or to a group of learners. In both cases, it saves on the teacher's fatigue from the double task of assessing and keeping the conversation alive and avoids him appearing tired because s/he has asked the same question several times. It enables the learner become more fluent or willing to speak because they feel they are talking to someone about their own level, whose interests are similar. They take the initiative more easily. Pairs should mismatch neither in proficiency nor in personality. With a group the interaction is more authentic as it brings more creativity and spontaneity and less inhibition. For the teacher, it may seem more difficult to assess a group but on the other hand s/he has longer time. Students forming a group should not be asked to assess other students because it may weaken the feeling of co-operation.

4.2. Sequencing tests techniques

Using a mix of techniques

- It is more authentic for it will reflect different types of language.
- It will be a fair test if it favours everybody's skills
- It is a more balanced test to help improve the consistency of assessment.
- It is more flexible and can be adapted quickly to changing circumstances of different needs.

5. TIMING

An oral test can be anything from 3 to 30 minutes. Most often it is between 8 and 12 minutes long, in which the learner will probably produce more of the foreign language than s/he does in an hour-long of written test. The best test lasts as long as it takes the interviewer to form a confident judgement.

6. ASSESSMENT

It can stand alone or form a part of a larger oral exam.

6.1. Self-assessment

We constantly assess how successful our communication is, by listening to ourselves as we speak or by observing the effect of our words on the listeners. This type of self-assessment is usually unconscious. In the same way every learner should have the ability to express in an explicit form the limits of his/her own oral proficiency.

Self-assessment enables subjects to have more responsibility in the process of student-centred learning. For introspective self-assessment two distinctions can be made within the different kinds of scales:

- 1 Non-defined: Descriptions only at the top and at the bottom of the scale.
- 1 Defined: Every level is described in between.
- 2 Specific: The learner is asked to rate a particular language situation.
- 2 General: defines the performance of language in general terms.

6.2. Teacher assessment

It can be carried out either as a single exam or as a continuous assessment. In the latter case it would be the record of all the tests administered during a period of time or a course, in which individual variations such as personal problems, nervousness, illness, etc. could not affect.

A third option is to give every student equal opportunity to speak during a certain period of time. According to the learner's needs, the teacher designs a **chart** or a **scale**. Let's see two examples:

6.2.1. A chart (from Brown and Yule, 1983):

Date

Type of speech required

Grammatical Correctness

Appropriate Vocabulary

Fluency / Pronunciation

Information Transfer Score

Others: Is the student creative, imaginative, funny, boring, relevant, irrelevant, witty, etc.?

6.2.2. A scale (from N. Underhill, 1987):

-Size (how long are the utterances produced?)

-Complexity (how far does the speaker attempt complex language?)

-Speed (how fast does s/he speak?)

-Flexibility (can the speaker adapt quickly to changes in the topic or task?)

-Accuracy (is the style or register appropriate?)

-Independence (does the speaker rely on a question or stimulus, or can he initiate speech on his/her own?)

-Repetition (how often does the question or stimulus have to be repeated?)

-Hesitation (how much does the speaker hesitate before and while speaking?)

We must consider the difficulty to measure these features even in native speakers.

6.2.3. The **disadvantages** of teacher assessment are fundamentally concerned with reliability.

-Teachers tend to assess and rate by comparing learners in the same class.

-Relationships between teachers and students are not always the same. Some may be positive, others negative on their learning and this may be reflected, subconsciously at times, on the assessment.

-Learners may feel anxiety either in class or in front of the teacher.

Although it is often due to the poor knowledge of the language, there are times when psychological factors can have strong influence. There are several strategies teachers can use to relieve this stress.

6.2.4. Strategies used by **the teacher** to relieve this stress.

Before and during the test:

- Use the first name of the learner.

- Describe the purpose and the task of the test, even when they are already known.

- Mention the likely duration.

- In an interview look for an area of his/her interest.

- Show the human side: Talk about yourself to get him/her to talk about him/herself.

At the end of the test:

- Announce the end of the test.
- Try to correct or explain something that has gone wrong.
- Leave the learner with a sense of accomplishment, a feeling that s/he has learned something.
- Ask the learner if s/he has any question.
- Give the results or an impression if it is appropriate.
- Thank him/her.

6.2.5. Strategies used by the students.

According to R.L. Oxford (1991), the following list may help learners to lower their anxiety, no matter which skills or combinations of skills are involved:

- Using Progressive Relaxation, Deep Breathing or Meditation.
- Using music.
- Using laughter.
- Encouraging oneself. Making positive Statements: "Everybody makes mistakes, I can learn from mine".
- Taking risks wisely. It doesn't mean taking unnecessary risks, like guessing at random, or saying anything at all, regardless its degree of relevance: saying something sensible when one does not just quite understand.
- Rewarding oneself.
- Taking one's emotional temperature. Listening to one's body and try to control its reactions.
- Using a checklist. Note one's changing attitudes.
- Writing a Language Learning Diary.
- Discussing one's feelings with someone else.

We may add:

- Drinking water and practising gymnastics.

On a second level social strategies would be borne in mind, essential to all four language skills:

- A: Asking questions for clarification, verification or correction.
- B: Cooperating with peers or proficient users of the new language.
- C: Empathising with others:
 - Developing cultural understanding.
 - Becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings.

7. TEST MARKING

It cannot be left to the end but it must be integrated from the beginning because it is a vital part of an oral exam. Most often it is not a case of objective judgement in which intermarker and intramarker scores are consistent. To be sure that a subjective judgement is accurate and trustworthy teachers may find two solutions:

a) Subjective and objective tests are put together in the hope that validity and reliability respectively will combine.

b) To make a conscious decision that the one-to-one aspect is so fundamental that it cannot be ignored or left aside. (Individuals are inconsistent, we frequently change our mind or do not agree with others.)

Once the decision has been made, the teacher should:

-design a subjective testing system trying to be reliable.

-search a marking system significant with the test procedure and consistent with the aims, needs and resources of the programme at the same time.

There are several ways of achieving consistency during the marking procedure:

-Teachers may use more than one assessor within the searching team before, during or after the test.

-Two marks can be given. One for the live performance and the other for the taped one.

-As a scoring procedure, tests can be remarked (total or partially) to gather evidence.

-Mark categories: Analytic (overall score) or atomistic marking (separate marks for each category).

These are often given to each category in a scale or a grid, then combined either by simple addition or by:

-Weighting categories: the different marks are then multiplied by different factors to give them more, or less influence in the total score, instead of marking every category out of ten. Extra marks can be awarded on a more subjective basis.

-Differential weighting: each category can be given different weight for each level.

-Impression marking: teachers award a mark based on the learner's overall performance, without any counting system for errors. This is often used as a rough-and-ready guide for progress tests to cope with lack of time. Much experience is needed, though.

-Additive marking or incremental mark system: the learner earns each mark one by one, given for every "feature" correctly produced.

-Subtractive marking: a mark is subtracted for each mistake. It may be necessary to formulate rules describing how error gravity is judged. It is used for structure, vocabulary... but unsuitable for more general categories. There is a danger of stressing negative aspects at the expense of positive points about the learner's speech.

8. TEST EVALUATION.

The general term for how well a test works is validity. Validity and reliability are generally presented in terms of mutual incompatibility: highly reliable tests are less valid and viceversa. N. Underhill claims that, particularly in oral tests, reliability is a specific form of validity. A test cannot be generally valid unless it is not reliable. But both concepts are extremely vague and need a clearer definition, let alone their assessment or calculation.

All aspects of validity should be critically and carefully collected, always bearing in mind the needs

of the learner. On the other hand, statistical measures endanger the intuitive judgement and the common sense of the testers.

8.1. Face validity

It is easily searched comparing the scores with the general tone of the learner's comments. It answers the question: Is the test reasonable?

8.2. Content validity

The question is whether the test produces a good sample of the contents of the syllabus. (In this case validation depends on the test's designer's intuitive knowledge of the syllabus).

8.3. Contrast validity

Does the test match the theory of the process of language learning? In fact syllabus design, methodology, and tests constitute a unique process. Again intuitive means should be applied rather than statistics. In practice there is little difference between content and contrast validity.

8.4. Reliability

The question searched is whether the markers and the tests are consistent with themselves or in relation to others. Once an efficient system has been designed, the problem is interpretation rather than calculation.

8.5. Concurrent validity

When a correlation coefficient is searched. A great number of correlation coefficient falls somewhere between 0.4 and 0.9.

8.6. Predictive validity

The learner's scores are correlated against their performance on some important tasks at a future time. Different influences can affect the learner's abilities and performance between the two tests measures.

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