

Academic Speaking: does the construct exist, and if so, how do we test it?

Chihiro Inoue, Fumiyo Nakatsuhara, Daniel Lam and
Lynda Taylor
CRELLA, University of Bedfordshire, UK

Some questions to start us thinking...

Q1: What is understood by the term Academic Speaking? What skills are involved?

Q2: How far do speaking tests commonly used for university admission reflect this understanding? And how do they do this?

Q3: When are academic speaking skills acquired? Before or after university entry? Or does it depend?

Q4: How might currently used tests be made more fit for purpose?

Presentation overview

1. Insights from relevant literature

– what do we learn from the available theory and empirical research into Academic Speaking?

2. Insights from University websites

– what does official university information suggest about how Academic Speaking is understood in the target domain?

3. Analysis of some speaking tests used for UK university admissions

– what do they look like, and in what ways are they ‘fit for purpose’?

1. INSIGHTS FROM RELEVANT LITERATURE

Rosenfeld, Leung and Oltman (2001)...

... surveyed university staff and students to identify the linguistic tasks important for completing coursework....

Staff (graduate):

Stronger students are better at **developing or structuring hypotheses**

Students:

- **Summarising** information
- Giving and supporting **an opinion**
- **Describing** objects
- Making **comparisons/contrasts**
- Speak **clearly and accurately** enough for instructor
- Speak clearly and accurately enough to **make presentations**

Kim (2006)...

... undertook a survey with East Asian graduate students (N=75) who reported that, in their courses, the 3 most common academic oral classroom activities were:

- participating in **whole-class discussions**
- **raising questions** during class
- engaging in **small-group discussions**.

They considered formal **oral presentations** and listening comprehension the most important skills for academic success in graduate courses

Ingram & Bayliss (2007)...

... surveyed tutors and lecturers to identify language tasks required for their courses, and they also observed classes :

- Group discussions/tutorials
- Oral presentations
- One-to-one meetings (medical & PhD)

Ducasse & Brown (2011)...

...undertook classroom observation to identify **16 spoken interaction types** that are present in academic discourse

... analysed the presence of these interaction types in the IELTS Speaking Test

...concluded that some of the most commonly occurring types in 'real life' (6 types) are represented in the IELTS Speaking Test, while others are not

Ducasse & Brown (2011)

Function type	Function	Real-life	In IELTS
Information 1	Providing information, ideas or opinion	5	X
Information 2	Supporting own ideas or opinions	5	X
Information 3	Elaborating own ideas or opinion	1	
Information 4	Suggesting	4	
Interaction 1	Challenging ideas	3	
Interaction 2	Justifying / providing support for other	2	
Interaction 3	Agreeing / disagreeing	4	X
Interaction 4	Qualifying / modifying	1	X
Interaction 5	Persuading	2	
Interaction 6	Asking for information, ideas or opinion	4	X
Interaction 7	Requesting elaboration / justification	1	X
Interaction 8	Elaborating / modifying others' ideas or opinion	3	
Interaction 9	Negotiating meaning	5	X
Management 1	Initiating	1	
Management 2	Changing topic	1	
Management 3	Concluding an argument/decision	2	

Kettle & May (2012)...

... observed lectures, tutorials and assessment task guidelines for 1st year undergraduate students in Australia and found that speaking skills were used for:

- **Answering questions** from lecturer
- **Asking questions**, asking for clarifications/confirmation, challenging observed in tutorials. Necessary for co-constructing knowledge
- No explicit guideline for oral activities in assessment task guidelines (apart from *active participation in discussion with peers and tutors*)

Brooks & Swain (2014)...

... compared students' language on TOEFL Speaking test tasks and their language in real-life oral presentation and small-group discussion/conversation in and outside class:

- More syntactically complex and accurate use of language on test tasks
- More formal register on test tasks
- More asking questions outside class

To summarise....

- The research literature suggests some degree of consensus around the nature of academic speaking skills:
 - organisation of content/argument
 - clarity of delivery (clear, accurate, etc)
 - the ability to hold the floor (presentations)
 - command of a range of interactional skills: *asking/answering questions; giving/supporting an opinion; agreeing/disagreeing; describing/comparing/summarising; 'holding the floor' (presentations)*
 - ability to cope with a variety of discourse contexts: *1-to-1 interview/tutorial, small group discussion, class-based discussion, formal/informal presentation*

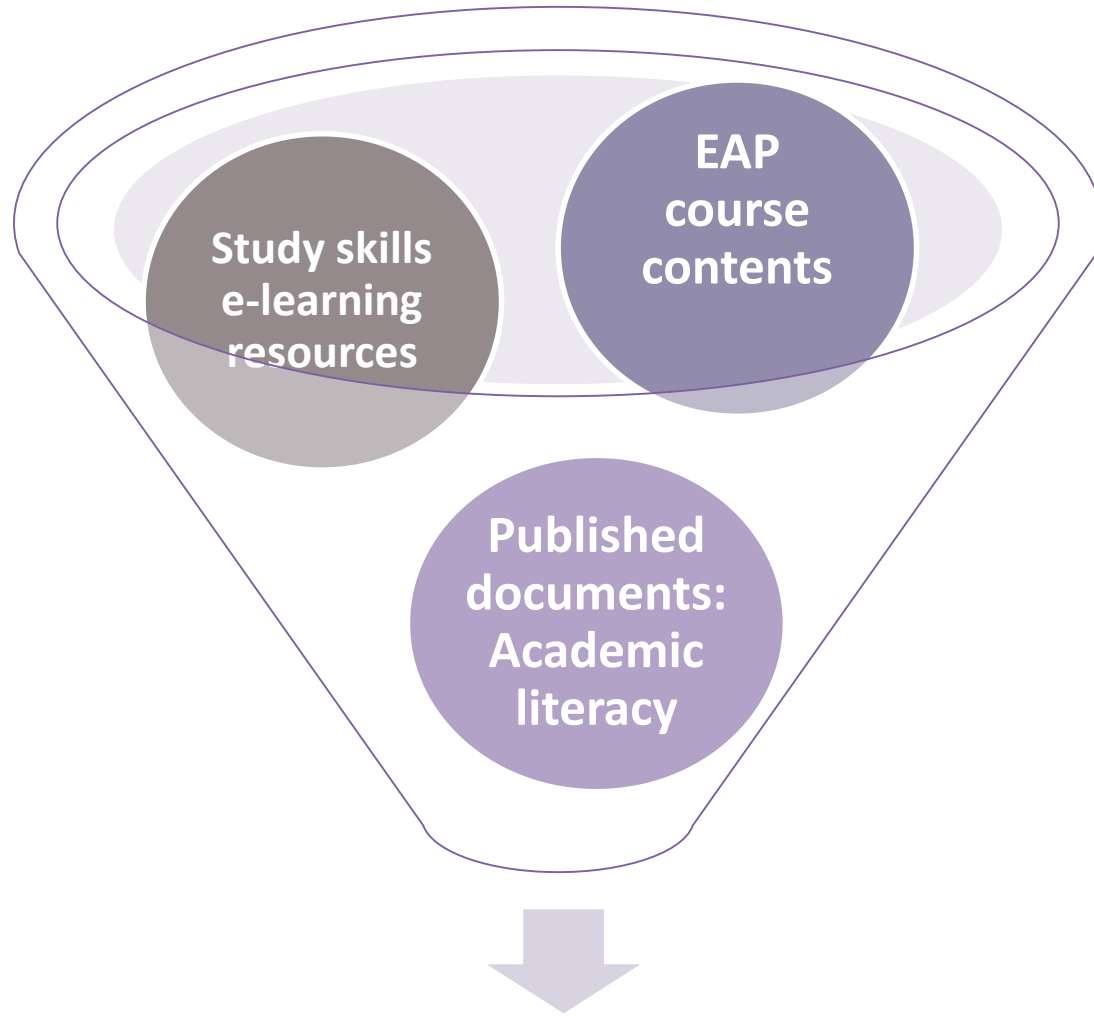
Some studies suggest some that tasks in some speaking tests used for university admissions 'mirror' academic speaking skills to some degree.

“At university you need to do much more than read books, listen to lectures and write essays and exams.”

Monash University – Language and Learning Online

2. ACADEMIC SPEAKING DEMANDS

Where to find out?



Academic speaking demands



The Open
University



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH



The University of
Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM • CHINA • MALAYSIA



MONASH
University

Main speaking activities



Discourse contexts

Presentations

- Individual or group
- Presenting on a topic
- Presenting a reading article
- Presenting a research project you have done



Seminar discussions

- Small group vs. whole class
- Discussion on reading
- Discussion on lecture content
- Collaborative tasks





PRESENTATIONS: A CLOSER LOOK

Nottingham	Edinburgh	Open U	ICAS	Monash
Organizing the presentation (structure)		Preparing notes > full sentences		Structuring the presentation Preparing and using notes
Use of voice		Controlling speed of delivery	Using tone (of voice)	Pace and volume Using pauses, intonation, and emphasis
Using language for presentations	Using presentation language	Using signposting language	Using vocabulary tailored to audience	Using signaling words/phrases
Using body language		Not reading from notes	Using gestures	Using eye contact and body language
Using visuals	Using visual aids; Referring to research data			Using visual aids
	Dealing with questions		Deliver focused, coherent presentations	

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SEMINAR DISCUSSIONS: A CLOSER LOOK

Nottingham	Edinburgh	Open U	ICAS	Monash
Expressing your ideas	Presenting, supporting an argument; Citing sources		Delivering clear speech	Comment on reading
	Asking questions		Ask clearly framed and articulated questions	Put questions to T / other Ss
	Responding to questions	Follow what others say		Answer questions from T or other Ss
	(Dis)agreeing with opinions; Persuading others		Ask relevance to stream of ideas Ask questions for clarification	Comment on other Ss' contributions
Gaining control over your contribution	Interrupting	Take part actively		
			Using vocabulary of the discipline	Report to whole class; Summarize a discussion

Nottingham	Edinburgh	Open U	ICAS	Monash
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Common/differential themes...

Interaction with an audience *(primarily uni-directional)*

- Organisation of content/structure
- Clarity of delivery
- Discourse awareness
- Paralinguistic control
- Use of visual material
- Functional interaction

Interaction in a group *(largely multi-directional)*

- Content planning and management
- Functional interaction (but much richer and more varied)

To summarise....

- Selected documentation reflects some consensus around institutional expectations regarding academic speaking skills:
 - organisation and planning of content/argument
 - clarity of delivery (clear, accurate, etc)
 - the ability to hold the floor (presentations)
 - a wide range of interactional skills
 - asking/answering questions
 - giving/supporting an opinion
 - agreeing/disagreeing
 - describing/comparing/summarising
 - a variety of discourse contexts, particularly : *group discussion* and *formal/informal presentations*
- [But not much is said about any discipline-specific features]**

How do they match up?

Research literature

- organisation of content/argument
- clarity of delivery (clear, accurate, etc)
- the ability to hold the floor (presentations)
- command of a range of interactional skills
 - asking/answering questions
 - giving/supporting an opinion
 - agreeing/disagreeing
 - describing/comparing/summarising
- ability to cope with a variety of discourse contexts: *1-to-1 interview/tutorial, small group discussion, class-based discussion, formal/informal presentation*

University documentation

- organisation of content/argument
- clarity of delivery (clear, accurate, etc)
- the ability to hold the floor (presentations)
- command of a range of interactional skills
 - asking/answering questions
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3. Analysis of some speaking tests used for UK university admissions



IELTS Speaking Test



- **Format:** Face-to-face oral interview
- **Rating criteria:** Fluency and Coherence, Lexical Resource, Grammatical Range and Accuracy and Pronunciation

Part	Task	Timing
Part 1	Introduction and interview	4-5 mins
Part 2	Individual Long turn	3-4 mins
Part 3	Two-way discussion	4-5 mins

Cambridge English: Advanced Speaking Test

- **Format:** Face-to-face, paired oral format
- **Rating criteria:** Global Achievement, Grammar and Vocabulary, Discourse Management, Interactive Communication, Pronunciation

Part	Task	Example language functions elicited
Part 1	Conversation b/w C and I	giving personal information, expressing opinions
Part 2	Long turn (+comments)	comparing, describing, expressing opinions, speculating
Part 3	Collaborative discussion b/w two candidates	exchanging ideas, expressing and justifying opinions, agreeing and/or disagreeing, suggesting, speculating, evaluating, reaching a decision through negotiation, etc.
Part 4	3-way discussion	expressing and justifying opinions, agreeing and/or disagreeing

PTE Academic Speaking Test

- **Format:** Semi-direct speaking test
- **Rating:** Machine scored; items are scored based on correctness, formal aspects and the quality of the response

Item type	
<i>Read aloud</i>	a text of up to 60 words appears on screen to be read aloud
<i>Repeat sentence</i>	listen to a sentence and repeat it
<i>Describe image</i>	image appears on screen – describe image in detail
<i>Re-tell lecture</i>	listen to or watch a lecture, then retell in own words
<i>Answer short question</i>	respond to a question with a single or a few words

TOEFL iBT Speaking Test

- **Format:** Semi-direct speaking test
- **Rating:** Holistic scoring with 3 analytical aspects (Delivery, Language Use and Topic Development)

[Tasks 1 & 2] Independent Tasks

Personal Preference

Candidates express and defend a personal choice from a given category (e.g. important people, events or activities that you enjoy)

Choice

Candidates make and defend a personal choice b/w 2 contrasting behaviors or courses of action.

[Tasks 3 & 4] Integrated Tasks: Read, Listen and Speak

Campus

Candidates read a passage on a campus-related issue/an academic subject and listen to a recording on the same topic (conversation/lecturer). Candidates combine and convey important information from the reading and listening input.

Academic

[Tasks 5 & 6] Integrated Tasks: Listen and Speak

Campus

Candidates listen to a recording of a conversation about a student-related problem and solutions/a lecture. Candidates are required to demonstrate an understanding of the problem and solutions/the relationship between the main topic and examples from the lecture.

Academic

Analysing 'academic speaking tests' for the attention they give to...

- organisation of content/argument
- clarity of delivery (clear, accurate, etc)
- the ability to hold the floor (presentations)
- command of a range of interactional skills, including:
 - asking/answering questions
 - giving/supporting an opinion
 - agreeing/disagreeing
 - describing/comparing/summarising
- ability to cope with a variety of discourse contexts: *1-to-1 interview/tutorial, small group discussion, class-based discussion, formal/informal presentation*

Features of the Test

Skills focus	
Task description	Socio-cognitive framework for speaking tests (Weir 2005; further elaborated in Taylor ed. 2011)
Timing	
Scoring & weighting	
Cognitive processing:	
Levels of speaking	Conceptualisation, Grammatical encoding, Phono-morphological encoding, Phonetic encoding, Self-monitoring
Cognitive processing:	Non-reciprocal, i.e. semi-direct (computer/tape-based)
Interaction pattern + planning time	Reciprocal, i.e. direct (face-to-face) Planning time allowed No planning time included

Features of the Stimulus Task(s)

Domain	Social		Work		Academic	
Discourse mode	Descriptive	Biographical	Expository	Argumentative	Instructive	
Content knowledge	General				Specific	
Cultural specificity	Neutral				Specific	
Nature of info	Only concrete		Mostly concrete		Fairly abstract	
Presentation	Verbal		Non-verbal (i.e. graphs)		Both	
Lexical Level						
Structural range						
Functional range						
Topic familiarity	Familiar				Unfamiliar	
Intended Speaker/Listener relationship, inc. interlocutor features	Speech rate: Variety of accent: Number of speakers: Acquaintanceship: Gender:					

Features of the Expected Response(s) – Spoken Output

Discourse mode	Descriptive	Biographical	Expository	Argumentative	Instructive
Presentation	Verbal		Non-verbal (i.e. graphs)		Both
Lexical Level;					
Structural range					

TEST:	International English Language Testing System (IELTS)	COMPONENT:	Speaking
TEST:	Cambridge English: Advanced (CAE)	COMPONENT:	Speaking

Skills focus

Features of the Test	
Skills focus	The Speaking test is taken face-to-face, with two candidates and two examiners, to provide a more realistic and reliable measure of the ability to use English to communicate. It tests the ability to communicate effectively in face-to-face situations. Candidates are expected to be able

Task description

TEST:	Pearson Test of English (Academic) (PTE-A)	COMPONENT:	Speaking
Features of the Test			

Further task focus information

TEST:	Internet-based Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL iBT)	COMPONENT:	Speaking
Features of the Test			

Skills focus

Skills focus	<p>The Speaking section is semi-direct, i.e. taken using a PC and a headset, and each candidate speaks into the microphone (attached to the headset) in response to written input on screen and/or oral input via the headset. The candidate's performance is recorded and then sent to be rated by qualified raters.</p> <p>It measures the ability to speak English effectively in academic settings, during class as well as outside the classroom. The tasks in this section resemble the real-life situations that students encounter:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During a class, students are expected to respond to questions, participate in academic discussions, summarize what they read and hear, and express their views on topics under discussion. • Outside the classroom, students participate in casual conversations, express their opinions and communicate with people
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Timing

Task description	<p>Candidates are required to speak on a variety of topics that draw on personal experience, campus-based situations and academic content.</p> <p>The Speaking section includes six questions (i.e. tasks). The first two questions are called <i>Independent Speaking Tasks</i> because they require to draw entirely on the candidate's own ideas, opinions and experiences. The other four questions are called <i>Integrated Speaking Tasks</i> because they require to integrate different English-language skills—listening and speaking, or listening, reading and speaking—just as candidates must during class and outside the classroom. The details of each question is as below:</p> <p><u>Independent Tasks</u></p> <p>Task 1. Personal Preference: This question asks candidates to express and defend a personal choice from a given category—for example, important people, places, events or activities that you enjoy.</p> <p>Task 2. Choice: This question asks candidates to make and defend a personal choice between two contrasting behaviors or courses of action.</p> <p><u>Integrated Tasks: Read, Listen and Speak</u></p> <p>Task 3. Campus Situation: This task presents a reading passage (75-100 words) on a campus-related issue and a listening passage (60-80 seconds; 150-180 words) which comments on the issue in the reading passage, and then require candidates to speak.</p> <p>Task 4. Academic Course: This task presents a reading passage (75-100 words) which broadly defines a term, process or idea from an academic subject and a listening passage (60-00 seconds; 150-220 words) which provides examples and specific information to illustrate the term, process or idea from the reading passage. This task requires candidates to combine and convey important information from the reading passage and the lecture excerpt.</p> <p><u>Integrated Tasks: Listen and Speak</u></p> <p>Task 5. Campus Situation: This task presents a listening passage (60–90 seconds; 180–220 words) which includes a conversation about a student-related problem and two possible solutions. IT then requires candidates to demonstrate an understanding of the problem and to express an opinion about</p>
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Scoring and weighting

Timing
Scoring and weighting

Task description

Cognitive processing: Levels of speaking
Cognitive processing: Interaction pattern + planning time

How do different tests compare in relation to academic speaking skills?

Does the speaking test offer an opportunity for the speaker to demonstrate....

	IELTS	CE Advanced	PET-Academic	TOEFL iBT
... organisation of content/argument?	✓	✓	✓	✓
... clarity of delivery?	✓	✓	✓	✓
... ability to hold the floor?	✓	✓	✓	✓
... a wide range of interactional skills?	✓(?)	✓	?	?
... across a variety of discourse contexts?	?	✓	?	?

Fit for purpose?

Current speaking tests used for university entry are sometimes criticised for being a ‘blunt instrument’, i.e. failing to be sufficiently well-designed and sensitive for the purposes of academic admissions.

“Couldn’t students take an English language test based on the discipline area in which they intend to study, and therefore tailored accordingly?”

The challenge of predictive (or criterion-related) validity...

- Is a test score:
 - (i) an **indicator** of 'readiness-to-enter' an academic domain?
 - OR
 - (ii) a **predictor** of future academic outcomes?
- What speaking skills are required for readiness to enter the academic domain, i.e. prior to entry?
- What speaking skills are most likely (or only) acquired within the academic domain post entry?

Generic EAP vs. discipline-specific tests

A discipline-specific speaking test might appear a logical option, but does it make sense if:

- a) we cannot assume that students will come equipped with adequate conversancy in the literacy practices of their future disciplines, as a result of diverse educational experiences?
- b) those literacy practices are part of the academic journey they are about to embark upon and will therefore be embedded within their future curriculum?

Generic EAP vs. discipline-specific 'academic literacies'

*“The high-profile gatekeeping tests that are currently employed by English-medium universities the world over focus on generic EAP and, as we have seen, this fails to take account of the **particularity of literacy practices within specific disciplines** and associated with an **academic literacies perspective.**” (Murray, 2016, p.8)*

Generic EAP vs. discipline-specific 'academic literacies'

*“...[future academic] performance is largely dependent on students’ conversancy in those practices pertinent to their particular disciplines conversancy in which, I have argued, **we cannot assume or expect students to come equipped to university; hence the need to embed tuition in academic literacies within the curriculum.**”*

(ibid.)

The 'burden of expectation'

- Are we tempted to lay too great a burden of expectation on what is typically no more than a 15-minute Speaking Test (either direct or semi-direct)?
- What is it realistic for us to expect in terms of score interpretation?

What could be done to enhance a speaking test used for university admission purposes?

- increase the opportunity/ies for planning and organisation of content and argument
- place a stronger emphasis on the importance of clarity of delivery
- include an extended long turn to allow for demonstration of the ability to ‘hold the floor’ – possibly with planning time, the use of supporting visual material, etc
- ensure that a broad range of functions can be sampled, not only *informational* and *interactional*, but also *managing interaction* functions (e.g. via role-play)
- represent a broader variety of discourse contexts: *1-to-1*, *small group discussion*, *presentation*

Thank you!

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