

Authentic assessment of discussion skills

Jennifer Rice and Korey Rice, Kwansei Gakuin University

Authentically assessing English language learners' (ELLs') discussion skills has always proven difficult, and this is exacerbated in environments in which one teacher must assess many students in a large class, making individual interviews impractical. Furthermore, the few established tests generally measure overall proficiency rather than achievement with regard to course goals. As a result, many ESL/EFL teachers and programs give up on authentic assessment of oral skills altogether and rely instead on written work, planned and structured presentations, discrete skill tests, or questionable measures such as self-assessments or ambiguous class participation grades as a means of assessing students' abilities to converse and participate in academic discussion (Hinson, 2005; Shohamy, 1983). Faced with this problem at our own institution, we created an authentic, objectives-based, program-wide assessment of discussion skills that involves testing multiple students in groups, but scoring them individually.

Literature Review

Our decision to develop a group speaking exam came from a process which basically followed that described in John Michael Norris's book, *Designing Second Language Performance Assessments* (1998). We did a needs analysis, identifying the uses our learners had for English discussion skills, revised our course objectives (see "Process"), and concluded that the only way to truly assess the skills that we wanted to teach was to develop an exam in which the examiner would directly observe the students' oral production in an environment that was as authentic as possible.

As suggested by Norris, we wanted students to engage in a speaking task that had "collaborative elements that stimulate communicative interactions," (1998: 9) and we wanted to integrate skills with

content, which meant putting students in conversational situations that would demand an understanding of certain functional language and sociolinguistic features. Basically, this meant doing some kind of speaking test involving conversation. We considered three options: a individual interview format (one-on-one between student and teacher), a group format involving more than one student and a teacher as participant, and a group format with the teacher as a non-participant observer.

We eliminated the one-on-one interview style based on logistics and a few other factors. With only twelve to thirteen meetings of ninety minutes each and with an average class size of about twenty-four, we decided that individual interviews long enough to get a reliable sample from each of the program's 560 students would take too much time away from instruction. In addition, as was pointed out by Brown (2003, as cited in Van Moere, 2006) there were several problems with the role of the interlocutor in individual interviews. Having conducted them in several other settings, we found that they did not lend themselves well to a natural conversation, instead putting the burden on the examiner to guide the conversation and make the examinee feel comfortable.

Conversation often does not flow naturally as the examiner tries to elicit speaking samples that can be easily scored. With this burden, the examiner's focus is diverted from assessing the student (Van Moere, 2006). As a result, we decided that a group exam would be more conducive to testing a large number of examinees in a short time while providing samples of the kinds of functional language that were taught in the course.

We were certainly not the first to try to assess more than one learner simultaneously. Even some high-stakes international tests have adopted this

strategy. A notable example is the Cambridge battery of tests, most of which have used a paired format for the speaking portion of the tests since the early 1990s. In these paired exams, one or two examiners engage two to three examinees in loosely structured interviews (Taylor, 2001). In addition to increasing efficiency, Cambridge found that the paired format added to the validity of their results by engaging examinees in a wider variety of discourse functions.

During one-on-one interviews, examinees were engaged mostly in giving information (e.g., expressing opinions). However, the paired format adjusted the power relationships at work and allowed candidates to use functional language for managing (e.g., terminating a discussion) and interacting (e.g., persuading), allowing examiners to evaluate a broader range of language skills. This makes the tests more closely approximate the kinds of interactions that typically go on outside of testing situations (Taylor, 2001).

Furthermore, Egyud and Glover (2001, as cited in Taylor, 2001) found that pairings were popular with students, gave students more opportunity to produce their best language, and supported good teaching through washback. They also added that the paired format “offers students and teachers...an escape route from the prison of dire one-to-one situations.”

Students echoed this sentiment in another study. They commented that they found group exams with other students less intimidating, in part because it gave them more control over the conversation and allowed them to use more natural language than they might in a personal interview (Shohamy, Reeves & Bejarano, 1986 as cited in Van Moere, 2006; Fulcher, 1996 as cited in Van Moere, 2006).

On the other hand, the Cambridge model generally employs the examiner as a participant or at least facilitator of the test, which could divert examiner attention and cause the conversation to be stilted. In our experience, Japanese learners of English tend to always address the teacher rather than other learners if the teacher is participating in the conversation. This would make it difficult for the teacher to

assess turn-taking, one of our target functions. Furthermore, having an examiner as a participant takes valuable speaking time away from the examinees and reduces speech samples on which a score is to be based. Therefore, we decided that a teacher-as-observer model would be most appropriate.

Research done by Van Moere (2006) and Bonk and Ockey (in Van Moere, 2006) has produced a great deal of support for a test format very similar to the one we used for our test. The test they studied was given to over one thousand students at a Japanese university and, like ours, involved non-participant examiners, a variety of randomly-chosen prompts, and an assessment of functional language, among other criteria. Both studies found the test to be an efficient way to assess a large number of students in a relatively short time.

Regarding reliability, Bonk and Ockey (2003)

the test's more natural interactions offer a chance to assess the examinees abilities in the kind of realistic situations for which classes are meant to prepare

found that rater and scale reliability are “achievable under real testing conditions even when the discourse went largely uncontrolled.” Van Moere found that after one

norming session, the rater agreement score was .74. While not as high as it was on some other, more structured tests, the amount of reliability sacrificed by the group testing format is countered by the increase in the naturalness of the interaction (Van Moere, 2006; Bonk & Ockey in Van Moere, 2006).

Van Moere concluded that, within the university's context, reliability was high enough to justify the richer language samples of the participants. Since the purpose of any language education program is to teach its students to communicate more effectively, the test's more natural interactions offer a chance to assess the examinees' abilities in the kind of realistic situations for which classes are meant to prepare—a testament to the validity of the group format. Van Moere reported that his study suggested “good potential for this format to be used as part of an oral test battery,” (2006: 436) but suggested caution in using it in high-stakes situations until more research could be done.

Bonk and Ockey (in Van Moere, 2006) concurred with this conclusion, adding that its efficiency

is likely to provide a feasible way for institutions to provide a performance assessment for oral skills, something seriously lacking in many programs.

Bonk and Ockey (2003) wrote that the group oral discussion format “deserves a place at the main table of L2 testing,” citing its relevancy to the context of today’s L2 educational environment. “[I]f this type of task closely matches what students do in their regular classrooms, it has the potential for drawing valid inferences to those skills and should not be disregarded simply because it ‘seems’ inaccurate. This perceived inaccuracy likely has more to do with the lesser degree of control over the discourse that can be exerted in more examiner-dominated formats,” they concluded (p. 105).

Bonk and Ockey’s test differed slightly from ours in that their test was meant to be a measure of overall conversational ability, whereas ours focuses more on testing the specific objectives of our “Seminar” classes, which train students in academic discussion skills. However, the test we created could be adapted to fit the objectives of any discussion-based course.

Process

To begin improving our objectives–assessment alignment, we reviewed our program’s overall purpose and the specific course objectives. In Kwansai Gakuin University’s School of Policy Studies English Language Program the main goals are to provide students with general academic skills for study in English medium courses; to prepare students for success in academic, business, and international settings; to promote critical analysis and interpretation of information; to encourage various perspectives on current socio-political and environmental issues; and to encourage learner independence (The Coordinated English Language Program, 2007).

The program is divided into reading, presentation, listening, writing, and seminar courses. Each course has a lead coordinator who makes lesson plans and materials for eight to fourteen other teachers. Students in the same courses take the same assessments, regardless of who their teachers are. All first year students at the university are required to take a seminar course with the following objectives:

First semester

Students should be able to

- converse with a small group for five to ten minutes on a familiar topic.
- use a variety of functional language to check for understanding, ask for clarification, give an opinion, agree and disagree, and make polite requests.
- ask follow-up questions to get more information and continue the flow of a discussion.
- support an opinion orally with personal knowledge and experience.
- use simple notes as speaking prompts.
- participate non-verbally by back channeling and making eye-contact.
- make discussion questions.
- show development toward confidence and learner independence by discussing with minimal preparation and accurate (within ten percent) self-assessment of discussion skills.
- clearly pronounce familiar English words and sentences (word and sentence stress, vowel and consonant sounds).
- use new and varied vocabulary to clearly express an idea and execute circumlocution strategies to explain unfamiliar words to other group members in a discussion.

Second semester

Students should be able to

- sustain a conversation for ten to twenty minutes in English about a semi-academic topic.
- use a variety of functional language to clarify or seek additional information, interrupt a conversation and turn the conversation over to another person, and support an opinion orally.
- explore a topic deeply and broadly.
- use self-made notes as speaking cues effectively and unobtrusively.
- understand and use key vocabulary when speaking.
- react appropriately to a text.
- create, ask, and respond in a relevant way to good discussion questions.
- orally attribute ideas and/or quotes to a text or author informally.
- show development toward confidence and

learner independence by discussing with minimal preparation and accurate (within ten percent) self-assessment of discussion skills.

- undertake guided Internet research.
- demonstrate target pronunciation skills in a controlled setting.

After reviewing these objectives, we realized that the methods for assessing students in the seminar course had not been targeting the purely discussion-based objectives. We had been using written homework assignments and ambiguous teacher-assigned participation grades, which were not reflective of whether or not the students were reaching the course objectives. Therefore, we set out to develop a more authentic way of assessing 560 students in twenty-four classes of approximately twenty-four students each through a group speaking test.

First, we created a user-friendly rubric (see Table 1 for sample rubrics) based on the course objectives. This rubric was developed so both the teacher and the students could use it effectively. With a clearly defined rubric, students had a clear target. After completing each speaking task during the term, students looked at the rubric and reflected upon what they did well and what they still needed to work on before test day. This allowed students to see the relevance of class activities. The layout of the rubric allowed teachers to score up to four students at one time in various skill areas.

In the second semester class the skill areas were active listening, meaningful production, clarity, and timing. A score out of ten was given in each of these skill areas, with the specific objectives listed under each skill area. Using this system, teachers were able to give students credit for effectively using target functional language without penalizing them for failing to use language that might not have been appropriate in the context. For example, if students participated actively in a discussion by agreeing, adding information, and expressing opinions, they should score highly on “meaningful production” and should not be penalized because they failed to disagree, even though phrases for disagreement are one of the target functions.

This system focused examiners on the objectives while scoring on larger categories. In addition, by keeping track of which objectives students were reaching and which they were missing using tick-

marks, check marks, pluses and minuses, examiners were able to accurately assess four students discussing at the same time. By creating a user-friendly rubric, we not only gave students a clear goal for the course, but we were also able to authentically assess approximately twenty-four students during one ninety-minute class period.

Armed with a clear rubric, we proceeded to organize the logistics of test day. This turned out to be a complex step in the process that required consideration of many factors: group sizes and

Table 1. Sample rubrics

First semester rubric

Student 1 _____
 Student # _____

Active Listening (receptive) _____/10
 o follow-up ?s
 o clarification

Meaningful Production _____/10
 o giving opinions
 o agreeing & disagreeing
 o supporting opinions
 o discussion questions
 o # of speaking turns

Clarity _____/10
 o pronunciation
 o grammar
 o volume
 o eye contact

Second semester rubric

Student 1 _____
 Student # _____

Active Listening (receptive) _____/10
 o follow-up ?s
 o clarification
 o back channeling

Meaningful Production _____/10
 o giving opinions
 o agreeing & adding info
 o disagreeing
 o supported opinion

Timing _____/10
 o taking turns/pauses
 o interrupting

Clarity _____/10
 o pronunciation
 o grammar
 o volume
 o eye contact

formation, time-allotment for each group, what non-testing students would do during the test, topics for discussion, what resources students could use on test day, how realistically the students should be able to practice before test day, how to norm teachers, and how to ensure reliability of test day results.

Logistical considerations

Considering that the speaking test would be a major portion of a student's grade (twenty to thirty percent) in the seminar course, we wanted to allow ample time for each student to contribute meaningfully in a discussion. However, we had only ninety minutes of class time to test approximately twenty-four students. Therefore, we determined that groups of three students were to be given eight minutes and, if needed due to the number of students in a class, groups of four were to be given eleven minutes for discussion. This left about ten minutes at the beginning of the class period for reminders and two minutes between each group for the teacher to wrap up scores.

Groups came into the classroom one at a time so the teacher could focus entirely on one group without distractions. Since we were in a university setting, we did not have to supervise students at all times and so were able to divide each class into three main pods. Each pod was told ahead of time to come to class on test day at staggered intervals throughout the period. This allowed non-testing students to practice elsewhere and kept the halls relatively quiet. It also kept the actual testing groups a secret from the students until the last possible moment, so that no one group had extra time to practice together.

Group formation

Group dynamics play a significant role in discussions of any kind (Shohamy, 1983; O'Sullivan, 2002). To minimize this effect as much as possible on test day, students were continually being shuffled into new groups for speaking tasks throughout the term. Working in various groupings helped to build student confidence in any student mix and made tasks more communicative in nature by forcing students to share information with others who were not already

familiar with their ideas. From the beginning of our course, students understood that they would be placed in their testing groups on test day, but not before, so they would not be able to memorize a script. In our experiences teaching English in Asia, remembering lines in a planned conversation has been a popular way for students to speak English in EFL settings, and we wanted to steer away from this type of non-communicative assessment. The unannounced test groups eliminated this potential problem.

Although the test groups were unannounced to the students, teachers were encouraged to carefully plan the groupings well in advance. Since we worked in a coordinated program, this meant that fourteen different teachers were implementing the speaking test in twenty-four classes. Forming testing groups of three or four students was ultimately the individual teacher's choice, but we encouraged diverse groups and asked teachers to consider gender, overall English ability, and willingness to communicate in each group.

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Topics and resources allowed

Choosing test day topics that were familiar to students helped to ensure that the students were being assessed on their English skills and not on their knowledge of a specific topic. Therefore, the test day topics were ones that students had previously discussed at the beginning of the term. This way, students were able to recycle vocabulary and ideas that they had previously voiced. In the first semester, students agreed several weeks in advance on five possible student-generated opinions to discuss on test day. In the second semester, students were given three possible questions based on articles that they had already read and discussed at the very beginning of the term, such as the following:

1. The Japanese population is declining. How will this affect Japan's future?
2. Should Japan make it easier for foreigners to immigrate? Why/why not?
3. Agree or disagree with this sentence: Women should never work outside the home. Explain your answer.

The potential topics were presented to students two weeks before test day. As the group sat down to start the test, the teacher randomly chose the topic on which they would focus. This system allowed the students to prepare and practice for all possible options, but essentially eliminated the possibility that a student would try to memorize any sort of script for a topic. This guaranteed authentic communication within a group and truly tested the student's discussion skills. It also ensured that, for well-prepared students, a lack of familiarity with the topic or its associated lexicon would not inhibit communication.

Since one of the objectives was for students to be able to use notes unobtrusively while discussing, and this had been practiced throughout the term, we allowed students to use note cards on which there were less than seventy-five words total. This meant that for each possible topic, they could only have ten to twenty-five words, which could include important vocabulary, discussion questions, and quotes or statistics from an article. These note cards were checked before the test by peers and by the teacher. Furthermore, because students had been practicing explaining difficult vocabulary using circumlocution strategies throughout the term, dictionary use was discouraged on test day.

Practice test day

What really made test day function smoothly was a practice run. Prior to the final, we gave students time for pairs to score each other's discussions of test topics using the test rubric. On the practice day, a student stood behind his or her partner and marked the rubric as the partner participated in a discussion with two other peers, each of whom were also being scored by a partner. After each round, students were given time to confer with their partners about the scores.

Informing students well in advance of what to expect on test day helped to alleviate students' anxiety. There were only two differences between the practice day and the actual test day. One was that on test

day, the teacher was a silent observer for one group at a time, filling out the rubric for the students as they discussed. Another difference between the practice day and test day was that on test day, the classroom contained only one group of testing students. All other students waited outside.

Ensuring reliability

In a coordinated program like ours, it is essential that all teachers be normed to ensure reliable test scores. We used previously videotaped student discussions and gathered all teachers together to score them using the test rubric. After a basic discussion of what a score of one versus a score of three actually meant (see Table 2 for rubric specifics), we rated the speakers and compared results. This norming session not only allowed teachers to practice using the rubric and become comfortable with the process before test day, but also helped to create a more consistent grading outcome amongst all 14 teachers.

In addition, all discussions on test day were videotaped. If any students had wanted to contest a score, they could have asked to be re-scored by another teacher. Also, if any teachers had consistently fallen below or above average on scoring, then the videos could have been used to re-rate students. Neither of these occurred.

In a pilot class, students were encouraged to watch their videotaped discussion and complete a self-evaluation of their performance. This self-reflection fit into the program's goal of developing

Rubric rating	Explanation
10	- Not native-speaker-like, but very effective in communicating AND in helping others communicate - Does a lot to facilitate the conversation
8	- Effective but imperfect - Does his/her part in the conversation
6	- Minimum pass - Makes mistakes, but does more to help the conversation than to hurt it
4	- Made an attempt, but was generally ineffective
2	- Either did not make a serious attempt or made an attempt that caused serious problems in the conversation
1	- Was present but did not speak, or seriously hijacked the conversation

learner independence. In future terms, this may be a useful technique to use at midterm; however, the negative nature of students' self-reflections makes us hesitate to implement this for fear that it will hurt students' confidence in their own abilities.

To further ensure reliability, an inter-rater study must be completed in which multiple raters score the same conversations, but this study could not be completed in time for publication here.

Reflection

Since this speaking test was a way to directly observe student success with the specific course objectives, it naturally holds high content and face validity. However, it might be suggested that a test such as this could simply be measuring the learners' general English proficiency. In order to determine whether this is the case, we compared learners' scores on the paper-based version of TOEFL and scores on this test. The comparison suggests that the test was based on the specified course objectives, not on overall English proficiency.

Second term freshman students with paper-based TOEFL scores of approximately 450 or above (high level students, TOEFL=approximately 450-523) performed slightly better on the speaking test than students with TOEFL scores below 450 (low level students, TOEFL 327-approximately 450). High level students scored an average of 30.5/ 40, while the low level students scored an average of 27.7/ 40. Both levels of students had a wide range of scores, however, with standard deviations of 7.18 for the high level students and 7.28 for the low level students.

Table 3. Teacher comments

<p>“Some people had really not spoken at all and then they came out in the discussion. They were these wonderful English speakers... I think it might be fairer ... if we [had a midterm test also].”</p> <p>“Some of the students who are usually quiet came out. I think that’s so important that the other students see that that student can do it.”</p> <p>“Women may be at a disadvantage in stating their views, and therefore receive a lower grade.”</p> <p>“I put my quiet students in bigger groups so they had more time to overcome their shyness.”</p> <p>“It would be really useful if the students were scheduled to watch [the video tape afterward].”</p> <p>“Good idea with the oral exam. It brings the course together and sets a good goal for [students] to work towards.”</p>

Overall, the correlation between speaking assessment and paper-based TOEFL was .40 (based on a comparison of 512 students for whom data was available). This weak correlation suggests that speaking test scores were not strongly bound to English proficiency level. Therefore, if the students successfully mastered the objectives of the course, then they were able to do well on the final speaking test, regardless of their overall English ability prior to the course. More research needs to be done to prove this definitively, but the results were encouraging.

Feedback

The final step in the process was to collect anonymous feedback from teachers (n=14) and students (n=560), which enabled us to modify the process for the following term. Table 3 has quotes from teachers; Table 4, quotes from students. Table 5 offers an analysis of student responses to two questions about the test. Because of the positive feedback received, this type of assessment-objective alignment is being implemented in oral skills classes next term in other levels and in additional departments at our university.

Suggestions for the future

As a result of the overall success of the speaking test at Kwansai Gakuin University's School of Policy Studies freshmen seminar course, the School of Science and Technology is looking into adopting this type of assessment for its freshman and sophomore English communication classes. Also, the sophomore seminar classes at the School of Policy Studies are working to better align the course objectives with assessments.

That said, there is room for improvement in the test. One suggestion for the future includes giving a midterm of the same nature and allowing students to watch the videotape for self-reflection. Students would thus have a chance to practice well before the test day and see if they are truly on track. Another suggestion has been made to make the scores more reliable. This includes having each teacher also watch the final test videos of a different teacher's class and rate the

students. Therefore, each student would be rated by two different people, and an average of the two scores would be taken to ensure a more accurate evaluation.

Doing this multiple times would be best, but impractical due to time constraints. Ideally, if the norming session was effective for teachers, scores should be fairly accurate after one rating. Finally, a suggestion to swap teachers on test day has been made. This would mean that students would be scored by a different teacher on test day than the one who had taught them all term. While this may help to eliminate any bias a teacher may have, the anxiety it would place on students in this EFL setting and the scheduling problems it would cause do not seem to justify the swap.

Aligning assessments with course objectives is important for all education programs, regardless of the subject matter. Learning English as a second or foreign language is often a high-stakes endeavor where students' future jobs and college degrees depend on passing certain courses. We as teachers should be sure that we are giving valid, reliable assessments of what these students are able to do. The speaking test mentioned here moves us one step closer to that goal.

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Table 4. Student Comments

(given anonymously after the test)
Q: What are your opinions about the oral assessment (group speaking test)?

“It was very good way to check our speaking skill”

“I think that it is a good way, but it is affected by member”

“I think having the test is good because student effort for this”

“It is useful to improve my skill”

“It’s good. I need more time.”

“It was interesting”

“It was good because teacher can graded us fairly”

“I want to choice my group”

“I didn’t like it because I was really nervous at that time and I couldn’t speak enough”

“That is good system”

“I had fun speaking with my friends even though it was a test”

“I’m sorry. I think I have to do homework”

“It was difficult to participate”

“It’s difficult, but I enjoyed it”

“Great experience”

“It is fair and enjoyable”

“It was very difficult, but if I practice more, I can do good speaking”

“The oral assessment is useful for student very much”

“It’s important for me to do that”

“I enjoyed it”

“That was good idea. But it can change our grade depends on who we make group with. It can be unfair”

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Table 5: Student Comments

Question on the Evaluation Sheet	Average Evaluation by students 1 = strongly disagree 4 = strongly agree	Standard deviation
The oral assessment (group speaking test) was a good way to test my academic discussion skills.	3.28	.6
The grading system was fair. <i>n=560</i>	3.35	.57

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- Jennifer Rice is currently at the Kwansai Gakuin University School of Science and Technology. She has been teaching English language learners at the university level for over four years in South Korea, the U.S., and Japan.*
- Korey Rice is at the Kwansai Gakuin University School of Policy Studies. He has been teaching English at the university level for over five years in South Korea, the U.S., and Japan.*



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