
Assessment of oral communication skills in LOTE settings in Australia¹

Noriko Iwashita

Abstract

The paper offers an overview of the recent developments in oral performance assessment in LOTE in Australia and summarises the findings of research on key issues in the field. The central role of language testing and assessment within the field of language teaching is proposed on the basis of these findings.

The current emphasis on language in use rather than knowledge of language has presented a challenge not only to teaching practitioners to revise existing language curricula but also to test developers to develop new methods for assessing learners' use of the target language in various settings. The form taken by the new assessment procedure is performance-based assessment, which is very different from existing assessment methods in terms of the process involved in assessment. In Australia, this new assessment procedure has been introduced in LOTE courses at both secondary and tertiary levels, and several LOTE oral performance-based tests for specific purposes have been developed. Also, a number of research projects have investigated issues arising from the development of oral performance tests (eg interviewer/rater behaviour, authenticity of test tasks etc). These research projects have not only contributed to further improvement in LOTE test development, but have also clarified the crucial roles of assessment and testing in the field of language teaching.

1. Introduction

Current views of language focus on language in use not just on language usage (Widdowson 1978), stressing the role of language as a tool of communication. The language teaching methodology evolved from these views therefore emphasises the importance of communication skills in the target language. As a result of this shift,

¹ Paper presented at the ARRP Forum in Melbourne, April 1997

teaching practitioners and test developers alike have been challenged to revise existing test methods in LOTE courses and to develop new methods for assessing learners' communication skills. There has also been a corresponding change in the importance given to the assessment of oral skills. In the past, the assessment of oral skills generally constituted only a minor part of assessment in many LOTE courses; these days it has become a significant part of the assessment of language skills in these settings.

The new assessment procedure usually takes the form of performance-based assessment. As McNamara (1996) explains it, performance-based assessment is different from other methods of assessment in terms of the process by which test candidates' performance is observed and judged. This is because oral performance assessment aims to demonstrate what learners can do in the target language rather than what they know about it (Wesche 1992: 104).

2. Oral performance assessment in LOTE

Over the last ten years or so, a number of oral performance based tests for specific purposes in LOTE have been developed in Australia. In general, the test tasks used in oral performance tests are designed to assess candidates' ability to function in a real-world setting and so they typically simulate particular aspects of interaction between a candidate in his/her professional role and an interlocutor in the role of client. For this reason, the assessment criteria used in oral performance tests are usually based on the language ability required in order to function in a specific occupational setting.

For example, the Japanese Test for Tour Guides consists of a face-to-face interview involving six test tasks, each simulating some aspects of the tour guide's role, the test candidate taking the role of a guide and the interviewer the role of a Japanese tourist.

Candidates' performance on the test-tasks is assessed according to seven different categories using a rating scale developed specially for the test. This custom-built scale is determined by the purpose of the test. That is, to assess whether candidates are able to use Japanese appropriately in a guiding situation. To illustrate this point, tour guides are usually expected to use honorifics in addressing clients. Honorifics are polite expressions which involve grammar as

well as lexical items. Therefore, one of the assessing criteria is 'appropriateness', which for this test really concerns whether or not candidates are able to use honorifics appropriately.

In contrast, in the Japanese teacher proficiency test, the criterion, appropriateness, has a very different meaning. The test tasks developed for the test were deliberately designed to reflect the kinds of skills required of LOTE teachers in preparing lessons, and in communicating with second language learners and with native speakers in contexts relevant to the teaching role. For this reason, no emphasis is placed on the use of honorifics. Rather, the main concern is whether teachers of Japanese are able to give appropriate input to learners. The differences between these two oral performance tests for specific purposes indicates the importance of measuring contextualised language in a specified communication context.

For obvious reasons, oral performance assessment has been adopted in proficiency tests for specific purposes, but it has also been widely implemented in the assessment of general proficiency, both in classroom-based assessment and the formal examinations at the end of secondary education.

By way of illustration, the current VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education) assessment scheme is entirely based on a course focusing on language in use. The speaking component of the VCE external assessment (CAT 2) comprises three parts (general conversation, report and discussion and situational role-play). This is considered necessary in order to assess students' knowledge and skill in using the LOTE orally, in linguistically and culturally appropriate ways (Victoria Board of Studies 1995: 44).

3. Research on oral performance assessment and their implications

In recent years, growing numbers of research projects have investigated various aspects of oral performance assessment in both LOTE and ESL. As I have already indicated, test-tasks in oral performance assessment are generally designed to assess the ability of test candidates to function in a real-world setting in the target language and, therefore, simulate some aspects of interaction in real-world settings as closely as possible. However, a number of questions have arisen as to whether test candidates' performance in

the simulated test-tasks are genuinely similar to their performance in real life and also whether variations in interviewer behaviour have any significant impact on candidates' performance.

In relation to the first question, several studies have investigated the extent to which oral performance assessment represents real life settings and whether the interaction between assessors and test candidates approximates to normal conversation in everyday life (Filipi 1994; Lazaraton 1992).

Filipi (1994) has analysed the test discourse of the 1992 Italian VCE CAT (Common Assessment Task) 2 and examined whether any features of ordinary conversation appear in the exam setting. She found that some features of ordinary conversation did occur in the exam interaction and on the basis of this finding has suggested appropriate teaching methodologies to focus on natural talk.

Although some similarities to ordinary conversation have been found in the interaction between assessors and test candidates, a notable difference between oral performance assessment and ordinary conversation lies in the role of interviewers. These interviewers are generally language teachers who have received some form of training in the test administration procedure.

Now, a number of research projects investigating interviewer behaviour have shown that interviewer behaviour varies substantially in terms of the amount of support given to candidates (Lazaraton and Saville 1994; Morton and Wigglesworth 1994; Ross and Berwick 1992; Ross 1992), the amount of rapport established with candidates (Lumley and McNamara 1993), the extent to which interviewers follow the instructions in terms of the type of discourse elicited from candidates, (Lazaraton 1992; Lumley and Brown 1996), and interactional behaviours of 'easy' and 'difficult' interviewers (Brown and Hill 1997).

Brown and Hill (1997) investigated, first, whether differential behaviour by interviewers affects the scores awarded to candidates, and secondly, what features of interviewer behaviour might contribute to this. They found significant differences in scores awarded to candidates when they were interviewed by 'easy' and 'difficult' interviewers, and further discourse analysis revealed considerable differences in interviewer styles. This study has

important implications for the training of raters in terms of the need to increase their awareness of the possible effects of their own performance on those of the candidates .

Another study, Lumley and Brown (1996), examined among other things the authenticity of the test-tasks, using data drawn from the oral interactional component of an occupation specific test. The findings of the study show that while it is possible to simulate occupational communication tasks reasonably effectively, it is a complex process which needs further investigation.

The studies mentioned above were all based on the data drawn from public tests and formal examinations, but there have been other studies of oral performance in classroom-based assessment (eg Iwashita 1997).

In a study of Japanese, I examined whether the proficiency of a non-native speaking partner has any impact on the amount of talk and score in a task-based oral interaction tests. Test candidates undertook the test twice, once with a partner of the same proficiency level and once with a partner of a different level. The findings of the analysis revealed that while the proficiency of a non-native speaking partner has some impact on the amount of talk, there is little difference in test scores across the testing formats. Questionnaire data has also revealed that many test candidates favour having a fellow learner as a conversation partner rather than an interviewer, which in this context means a teacher. The study also has some implications for classroom LOTE assessment and teaching methodology in relation to use of communication tasks.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, the findings of the research projects I have mentioned have direct implications for further improvements in current testing methods (such as interviewer training and the design of test tasks). They also indicate the crucial role of language testing and assessment in the field of language teaching. In general, teachers need to understand methods of assessment and assessment procedures for the courses they are teaching, which has important consequences for curriculum and methodology. Further investigation of various issues in existing assessment procedures will certainly contribute to development in LOTE programmes. In order to achieve the best

possible outcome for LOTE programmes, it is important for teachers and test developers to work together.

5. References

- Brown, A. and Hill, K. (in press) An investigation of interviewer difficulty in the IELTS tests. Canberra: International Development Program of Australian Colleges and Universities
- Brown, A. and T. Lumley 1996 Interviewer variability in specific-purpose language performance tests. Paper presented at the Annual Language Testing Colloquium, Tampere, Finland
- Filipi, A. 1994 Interaction in an Italian oral test: the role of some expansion sequences. In Gardner, R. (ed.) *Spoken Interaction Studies in Australia*. Applied Linguistics Association of Australia Series S 11
- Iwashita, N. 1997 The validity of the paired interview format in oral performance assessment. Paper presented at the Annual Language Testing Research Colloquium. Orlando, Florida, USA
- Lazaraton, A. 1992 The structural organisation of a language interview: a conversation analysis perspective. *System* 20,3, 373-386
- Lazaraton, A. and N. Saville 1994 Process and outcomes in oral assessment. Paper presented at the Annual Language Testing Research Colloquium, Washington, DC. March
- Lumley, T. and A. Brown 1996 Specific-purpose language performance tests: task and interaction. In Wigglesworth, G. and C. Elder (eds) *The Testing Cycle: New Perspectives*. Australian Review of Applied Linguistics Series S
- Lumley, T. and T. McNamara 1993 The effect of interlocutor and assessment mode variables in offshore assessments of speaking skills in occupational settings. Paper presented at 15th Language Testing Research Colloquium, Cambridge, England. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service ED 364 066)

-
- Morton, J. and G. Wigglesworth 1994 Evaluating interviewer input in oral interaction tests. Paper presented at Second Language Research Forum, McGill University, Montreal, Canada
- McNamara, T.F. 1996 *Measuring Second Language Performance*. London and New York: Longmans
- Ross, S. 1992 Accomodative questions in oral proficiency interviews. *Language Testing* 9, 2, 173-186
- Ross, S. and Berwick, R. 1992 The discourse of accommodation in oral proficiency interviews. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 14,2, 159-176
- Victorian Board of Studies 1996 *VCE study design: language other than English—Japanese*. Melbourne: Board of Studies
- Widdowson, H. 1978 *Teaching Language as Communication*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Wesche, M. 1992 Performance testing for work-related second language assessment. In Shohomy, E. and R. Walton (eds). *Language Assessment for Feedback: Testing and Other Strategies*. Washington D.C.: National Foreign Language Centre Publications