# Considerations in Developing Writing Prompts for Simulated Oral Proficiency Interviews (SOPI)

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## Abstract

The paper considers validity issues surrounding the design of writing prompts for a semi-direct test of oral proficiency. Drawing on an analysis of samples of test discourse, the authors propose a preliminary typology of prompt characteristics to assist test designers in using items which will elicit an optimum sample of speech from the test candidate. The relationship between the various prompts and their impact on candidate performance is discussed.

## 1. Introduction

This paper addresses one aspect of the validation of an oral proficiency test through examination of the language that is obtained from the items presented in the test. As Shohamy, Shmueli and Gordo (1991) suggest, correlational studies of language tests results are on their own insufficient for validation purposes. 'There is a need to take a broader and deeper look at the language test from more expanded perspectives—its elicitation tasks, the specific language that is obtained as a result of these tasks and the specific strategies that test takers employ in taking tests' (1991:2). As Shohamy et al suggest, 'Even in situations when it is not possible to carry out a large scale construct validation study there are still many other ways to obtain evidence for validity' (ibid). Alternative approaches to test validation have been advocated by a number of researchers concerned with the validity of oral proficiency tests (eg Shohamy 1988; Grotjahn 1986 and Vollmer 1981). Our study of the Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI) represents a step in this direction.

Continuing attention to communicative competence in the teaching and speaking of foreign languages over the past fifteen years (Canale and Swain 1980; Omaggio 1986) has generated a corresponding increase in activity in the development of authentic

communicative tests of oral proficiency. One of the methods of testing speaking proficiency is the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), a face-to-face interview based on the Speaking Proficiency Guidelines developed in the 1970S by US government agencies and adopted by the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL).

The SOPI has followed the OPI's lead but instead employs a semi-direct method, using a cassette tape, player, and test booklet to measure speaking proficiency (Clark 1988; Stansfield and Kenyon 1988; Stansfield et al 1989; Stansfield 1989). Semi-direct tests of English as a Foreign Language were developed in 1982 by the Educational Testing Service; however, the SOPI differs from these in that it is ACTFL-based and visual as well as aural stimuli are employed. While Shohamy, Gordon, Kenyon, and Stansfield (1988) found the OPI and the SOPI to have high correlations with one another (above $r = .90$), the development of the SOPI represents an important advance in the testing of oral proficiency in that it offers an efficient, accurate and economical means of providing a uniform testing situation. Thus, the SOPI merits attention and analysis. The present paper investigates issues involved in writing items for the SOPI and makes suggestions regarding considerations which should be incorporated into future SOPI design.

The levels of oral proficiency established by the ACTFL Guidelines range from Novice to Superior. The SOPI is designed to test the Intermediate to Superior levels. Among other features, the Intermediate level of proficiency is characterised by the ability to ask and answer questions, and to sustain a simple conversation on everyday topics. Discourse at this level is generally limited to the sentence level. The Advanced level is characterised by the ability to narrate, describe and explain topics of current and personal interest in past, present and future time. At this level, paragraph-length discourse is evident. The Superior level rating is assigned to individuals who are able to participate in formal and informal conversations on practical, social and professional topics. Those performing at the Superior level are able to support opinions and hypotheses.

All SOPI items consist of an explanation of the task in English followed by an utterance in the target language. The target language utterance, or prompt[1], indicates that the examinee may begin his or her response. In addition, the target language prompt allows the examinee to hear some of the target language prior to beginning the response. It may provide vocabulary and at times serves to remind the examinee of the context. Other than the target language itself, the prompt does not provide instructions or information that is not in the English language explanation. In other words, this arrangement makes it possible for the examinee to respond to the item without having to necessarily understand the target language utterance provided. This method ensures that the test is designed to measure the examinee's speaking performance without measuring listening skills as well.

The present paper is based on an analysis of items designed for the Spanish version of the Texas Oral Proficiency Test (TOPT) a form of the SOPI developed by the Center for Applied Linguistics for the State of Texas (Stansfield and Kenyon 1991). Since 1990, the French and Spanish TOPTs have been used to measure the oral proficiency of foreign language and bilingual education teachers seeking certification in the State of Texas. A rating at the advanced level of speaking proficiency is required to pass the test. Several other SOPIs, targeted at a more general audience (eg, Chinese, Portuguese, Hebrew, Hausa, Indonesian) as well as high school and college level students (eg, Japanese, Spanish) have since been developed, with several more in the process of development (eg, French, German).

This paper discusses issues in writing prompts for Simulated Oral Proficiency Interviews (SOPIs) and attempts to devise a typology of characteristics of these prompts. The relationship between the various prompts is also investigated.

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[1]There has been some variation in the use of the term prompt. In an attempt to provide greater clarity, we have employed the term 'item' to indicate the English language explanation together with the target-language utterance. We have designated the term 'prompt' to refer exclusively to the target-language utterance following the English language explanation. (In the past, the term 'Prompt' has referred to our 'item')

## 2. Objective

This study was primarily undertaken in order to gain better understanding of which item characteristics assisted examinees to achieve the minimum level of proficiency required by a particular item. This is an important objective given the test's stated purpose of providing an accurate picture of the examinee's current ability to speak the target language in a variety of circumstances and on a variety of topics. A secondary objective was to understand the relationships between the items in the entire test. In addition, we considered which grammatical structures were present in examinees' responses and evaluated whether they coincided with the goals of the item. Duplication of grammatical structures found in examinee responses was also considered across items. We believe that when any new method or instrument is developed for measuring language proficiency this type of 'after-the-fact' analysis complements the extensive research conducted prior to the development of the test, provides highly valuable information for future, improved versions of the tests, and informs researchers developing alternative measures.

## 3. Method

### 3.1    Item analysis

Items from the Spanish TOPT (Texas Oral Proficiency Test) and responses elicited from a selected number of examinees representing a wide range of overall proficiency levels were analysed with the above objectives in mind. Through repeated listening and study of transcripts we attempted to identify the part of the item which functioned as a trigger for specific segments of the examinee's response. We first considered how similar item contents elicited similar responses and then reformulated the items into more general situations and sets of instructions.

### 3.2.    Inter-item relationships

Since the content of the responses could not be solely accounted for by their respective items, an analysis of the relationship between the items was also undertaken, by analysing the discourse produced by a selected sample of candidates across a sequence of tasks.

# 4. Results

## 4.1. Typology of SOPI item characteristics

One result of the above analysis was the development of a Typology of SOPI Item Characteristics (Appendix A) which we hope will be useful to future developers of semi-direct tests of oral proficiency as a means of ensuring that test items elicit a suitably rich and varied sample of speech.

The broad categories of the typology are: Speaker[2], Topic, Audience, and Setting. Different configurations within these categories result in items that vary in difficulty. While lower level prompts do necessarily reflect all four categories, these categories are found in all Advanced and Superior level items. An example of an item together with its analysis in terms of these categories follows:

> A group of high school students has arrived from Colombia to spend a summer session at a community college in Texas. You have been asked to give a brief talk as part of their orientation on two or three recent events in Texas that you feel are important. After your talk is introduced, brief the group on these events.

This item was analysed in terms of the four categories listed above with the following result.

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[2]The term speaker is used interchangeably with examinee.

| Speaker: | Speaker's point of view: Personal |
|---|---|
| Topic: | Familiarity with topic: Speaker probably has knowledge of current events |
| Audience: | |
| *Size:* | Greater than two persons |
| *Speaker-audience relationship:* | |
| Age: | Speaker is older than audience |
| Status: | Speaker is of higher status than audience |
| *Audience knowledge:* | No expert knowledge required |
| Setting: | In the speaker's country/culture |

Table 1. Sample Item Analysis.

## 4.2   Inter-Item Relationships

Regarding the relationship between items, we discovered that substantial shifts in the speaker's assigned roles between items resulted in 'tailoring problems', ie, difficulty in responding to the item in an appropriate manner, taking into consideration the task and audience. This is noted by Shohamy et al (1991) who point out that 'in spite of the fact that the designers of the SOPI tried to introduce an hypothetical interlocutor it seems that the test takers do not really consider that interlocutor that much. The test taker is more concerned about the completion of the task as dictated by the question on the tape' (p. 14).

An example of this discontinuity is reflected by Situations 4 and 5 of the Spanish TOPT:

Situation 4

> You are an exchange teacher at a school in Monterey, Mexico. You have been asked to give a workshop for teachers on increasing student involvement in class activity. After your talk is introduced, first, convey your pleasure at being invited to give the talk and then begin to discuss ways to increase student participation in the class. Note that you are not expected to give a complete talk in the time allotted; you only need to begin your talk and continue until your time is up.

The above item requires the speaker to assume an authoritative and formal role. Speakers responded to the requirements of the task which elicited formal language. Situation 5, which immediately follows Situation 4 on the TOPT, represents two shifts in the speaker's role.

Situation 5

> You are an exchange student at Veracruz, Mexico. A colleague and friend of yours, Ana Marcos, who teaches English, is considering participating in a year-long teacher exchange program in the U.S. She has never been to the U.S. before. One day she comes to you asking for your advice on whether or not she should participate. After she asks her question, advise her, from your point of view, on what she should do.

Upon analysis, the above item is seen to require the speaker to assume a role of an equal in a non-authoritative, informal situation. However, analysis of the taped responses revealed two cases where speakers used language which was more formal than would be necessary in such a situation. In responding to Situation 5, the speakers seemed to remain fixed in the formal 'mode' required by Situation 4. We believe these and similar inappropriate responses

can be attributed to the discontinuity in the roles set up by consecutive items.

## 4.3.   Elicitation of Grammatical Features

In analysing the examinee responses it also became apparent that certain grammatical features such as verb tense were being elicited repeatedly during the course of the test, resulting in a less that efficient use of item potential to elicit a wide variety of ratable speech.

An example of this problem is found in Picture 2, whose task is 'Describe a place or activities'. As expected, the item elicited many present tense forms. The following task (Picture 3) asks the examinee to 'Narrate in Present Time' and was also aimed at eliciting this grammatical form.

A second overlapping feature was found in the items listed below:

| Item | Task | Grammatical Feature |
|------|------|---------------------|
| Picture 1 | Give directions | Imperative forms |
| Picture 3 | Narrate at present time | Present tense forms |
| Picture 4 | Narrate in past time | Past tense forms |
| Picture 5 | Narrate in future time | Future tense forms |

The grammatical features aimed at above do not overlap. However, at the same time all prompts tend to elicit temporal/sequential conjunctions, for example; primero, segundo, entonces, finalmente (first, second, then, finally). While in general it must be recognised that some grammatical and discoursal duplication of this nature is inevitable, we believe with appropriate planning. based on analyses such as this one, greater efficiency in SOPI item construction will be facilitated.

## 5. Conclusion

While far from exhaustive, our analysis of SOPI items indicated that there are a number of important considerations which must be

taken into account in the item-writing process for these types of tests. Such characteristics include audience size, social distance between the speaker and the audience, and the degree of formality of the situation. Moreover, our analysis revealed that an inability to adequately define one of these item characteristics for a given item in a manner that is understood by the examinee may result in an unexpected and undesirable examinee response. In the future, we suggest that items be constructed and analysed taking these preliminary categories into account.

In terms of inter-item considerations, it was found that the consistency of the roles which items assign to the speaker is a factor which affects the speaker's adequate tailoring of the response. Since SOPIs do not follow a linear model of difficulty (eg, all Intermediate items followed by all Advanced items, etc. following the OPI 'level probes') it may be somewhat difficult to maintain consistency in the roles to be assumed by the speakers. However, we suggest that use of the 'natural' breaks in the test (eg, breaks between the Pictures, Topics, and Situations sections) together with greater inter-sectional planning could bring about the best possible situation in eliciting appropriate responses.

This preliminary analysis of item characteristics together with the Typology of SOPI Item Characteristics (Appendix A) can be used and expanded by prompt writers in the future to ensure that a given prompt triggers the response which the item is designed to elicit and contributes to the overall SOPI in the most efficient way. We encourage researchers and test developers to work in this direction.

## 7. References

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## 6. Appendix A: Typology Of Prompt Characteristics

*I* = *Intermediate*     *A* = *Advanced*     *S* = *Superior*

| Prompt Characteristics | Minimum Level Required |
|---|---|
| **Speaker** | |
| *Speaker's point of view* | |
| 1. Speaker speaks from his/her personal point of view | I |
| 2. Speaker speaks from a group's point of view | |
|     a. Which s/he agrees with | I |
|     b. Which s/he does not agree with | |
| **Topic** | |
| *Speaker-Topic/relationship* | |
| I. Familiarity/expertise of speaker with topic | |
| 1. Topic from everyday life that | |
|     a. Speaker has most probably experienced | I |
|     b. Speaker has not directly experienced but s/he can easily imagine the topic and the situation (no hypothesising required). | I |
|     c. Speaker has no experience with the topic or the situation (needs to hypothesise). | A |
| 2. Topic requires more than general knowledge on the part of the speaker | |
|     a. Speaker has this knowledge either through interest or education | A |
| 3. Speaker has no knowledge of the topic either through interest or education | A |

| Prompt Characteristics | Minimum Level Required |
|---|---|
| **II Nature of Topic** | |
| 1. Degree of interest | |
| a. Topic is interesting to the audience. Therefore, less effort is required on the part of the speaker to attract and maintain the interest of the audience. | |
| b. Topic is not very interesting to the audience. Therefore, more effort is required on the part of the speaker to attract and maintain interest. | S |
| 2. Effect on audience | |
| a. Topic is pleasant to the audience. | I |
| b. Topic is not pleasant to the audience. Therefore, there is more burden on the speaker not to insult or offend anyone. | A |
| 3. Speaker transferring what other people believe about a certain topic (someone else's opinion). | |
| a. Speaker agrees with the group's point of view | A |
| b. Speaker distances himself from the opinion he is expressing. | A+ |

**Audience**

**I Size**

1. Audience consists of one person      I
2. Audience consists of two persons      I
3. Audience consists of more than two persons      I

**II Speaker-Audience relationship**

1. Age
   a. S younger than A
   b. S the same age as A
   c. S older than A

| Prompt Characteristics | Minimum Level Required |
|---|---|
| 2. Status | |
|    a. S superior to A | |
|    b. S has equal status with A | |
|    c. S is inferior to A | |
| 3. Degree of intimacy | |
|    a. friend, stranger, professional peers | |
| **III Knowledge assumed from audience** | |
| 1. Topic requires no 'expert' knowledge on the part of the audience | |
| 2. Topic requires 'expert' knowledge on the part of the audience | |
|    a. Audience has this knowledge | A |
|    b. Audience does not have this knowledge. Therefore speaker is responsible for explaining things the audience is not familiar with. | S |
| **Setting** | |
| Where the conversation takes place | |
| 1. In the speaker's country (culture) | |
| 2. In the foreign country (culture) | |