

THE SCHOOL-BASED ORAL ENGLISH TEST: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN OPINION BETWEEN TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The school-based Oral English test was introduced to Malaysian Form 4 and 5 students in 2002. A qualitative study was undertaken to investigate the implementation of the test in selected Maktab Rendah Sains MARA schools. Thirty students from three different schools comprising 5 focus groups were interviewed, and 14 teachers from the same schools were either observed in the classrooms and/or interviewed over the course of 7.5 months. This paper examines the question: Are there any similarities and differences in opinion between students and teachers regarding the revised school-based Oral English Test? Recommendations are then made based on the results.

Introduction

In 2002, Hassan and Selamat investigated teacher perceptions of the reasons for KBSM students' low proficiency in English. The results showed one main finding - that teaching and testing in schools and in the national examinations focused mainly on writing and reading skills. Listening and speaking are not given much attention in the classroom. The study also reported that speaking is the learners' weakest skill. The lack of attention given to speaking, resulting in students' weaknesses in speaking, is of great concern.

A new standardized national scale school-based Oral English Test (OET) was introduced to Malaysian schools in 2002 and the results were first announced

nationwide in 2003. One of the reasons for the introduction of the new OET to Malaysian secondary schools is the hope that the test preparation will help to develop students' oral competence in line with the learning objectives stated in the English Language Syllabus for Malaysian Secondary Schools (Malaysian Examination Syndicate, 2002).

Curriculum Specifications (as stated in Lembaga Peperiksaan, 2002) claim that the OET encourages authenticity in order to assess a candidate's real speaking ability. It encourages teaching and learning processes in the classroom. It also provides for continuous assessment of students from Form 4 to Form 5 as they will be assessed twice in Form 4 and once more in Form 5. Further, it meets the needs and requirements of the revised communicative syllabus. Finally, the examiner, i.e. the teacher, is the person closest to the student and therefore is able to assess the actual capability of the latter in terms of speaking skills. From 2004 teachers were required to assess students in the classroom as part of the teaching and learning process. This was to ensure authenticity in the assessment procedure and to emphasize assessment for better learning.

The new OET is school-based. In the Malaysian context, this simply means that the assessment is based on teacher evaluation as part of students' official overall grade in a subject (Mokhtar & Amran, 2006). The school-based OET mandates that teaching and testing have to be integrated in the classroom. Thus, this is also a move away from the traditional method of teaching to a more communicative one.

The Study

In 2007, a qualitative study was undertaken to examine the changes brought about as a result of the implementation of the school-based OET focusing on the effects of the test on the learner and the teacher (Bailey, 1996). Studying the teachers, their classroom practices, and their beliefs will help the author and her colleagues in their teaching practices.

More specifically, the study looked at how teachers in selected Maktab Rendah Sains MARA (MRSMS) schools prepared students for the test in their respective schools, how they tested the students in a school-based context, and examined the washback effects of the test on classroom instruction and student performance. A total of 30 students from three different schools following the same system comprising 5 focus groups were interviewed, and 14 teachers from the same schools were either observed in the classrooms and/or interviewed over the course of 7.5 months.

Where the present research is concerned, the use of an oral test focusing on communicative competence in the schools should have the beneficial washback effect of making sure that the Form 4 and Form 5 syllabuses also focus on ways of promoting oral skills. Administering tests that not only assess the level of oral skills but also promote the improvement of those skills would then induce test-driven learning, since the way to pass the test is to participate in class, and to give the oral skills time to grow. One of the pedagogical principles of a communicative approach to language teaching is that teaching is learner-centred and responsive to learners' needs and interests (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983).

In this respect, Richards et al. (2001) administered a questionnaire to 112 second language teachers, the majority of whom were from Southeast Asian countries. The one aspect of teaching in which teachers reported the most change over their careers was their focus on the student; most respondents described their teaching as "more learner-centred, more focused on students' purposes for learning, more closely related to students' interests and daily lives, and more individualised" (p.48). The study also reported changes in teaching methods (more communicative) and teaching styles (more interactive and activity-based), and teacher roles that seemed to correspond to the central beliefs of the learner. Teachers also reported using more communicative activities, group work, discussions, role-play and games in their language lessons. Whether this report is representative of the teachers in this study remains to be seen.

Aims of the Study

A deeper study is needed to provide more insights and help refine the implementation of the school-based OET. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to investigate any changes produced, positive or negative, by the school-based OET on teaching and learning English. Examining the test from the perspective of the students especially in trying to understand what the students are going through in terms of their perceptions, attitudes, motivation and learning practices adopted for the test, will help teachers to understand their students better in future so that the teachers can help the students in achieving the objectives of the oral test.

Review of Literature

School-Based Assessment

Short (1993) notes that there are several reasons to assess student learning in the classroom: to place students in classes, to measure student progress and achievement, to guide and improve instruction, and to diagnose student knowledge

of a topic before it is taught. She cautions however, that such assessments must be carried out carefully.

One of the criteria of the OET is that it is school-based and thus it is a classroom assessment by the class teacher, a form of alternative assessment. Alternative assessment according to Nitko (2004): (1) presents a hands-on task requiring students to do an activity that requires applying their knowledge and skills from several learning targets, and (2) uses clearly defined criteria to evaluate how well the students achieved this application. Alternative assessment requires students to do something with their knowledge. Further, Nitko (2004) states that alternative assessment must have two components: (1) the alternative task itself, and (2) a clear rubric for scoring. This, states Nitko (2004), means going beyond simply doing an activity; it means focusing on specific learning targets and evaluating achievement of these learning targets against established criteria.

Communicative Language Tests

Kitao and Kitao (1996) suggest that communicative language tests are intended to be a measure of how the test takers are able to use language in real life situations. Communicative language tests are those which make an effort to test how language is used in real communication. They contend that it is not always possible to make language tests communicative, but it may often be possible to include communicative elements. This can have beneficial washback effects. If students are encouraged to study for more communicative tasks, this can only have a positive effect on their language learning (Kitao & Kitao, 1996).

For example, in testing productive skills, emphasis is placed on appropriateness rather than on the ability to form grammatically-correct sentences. In testing receptive skills then, emphasis is placed on understanding the communicative intent of the speaker or writer rather than on picking out specific details. In fact, the two are often combined in communicative testing, so that the test taker must both comprehend and respond in real time.

Testing of Speaking

What then of testing for oral ability? As defined by Underhill (1987, p.7), it is a test in which a person is encouraged to speak, and is then assessed on the basis of that speech. The feature of interactive role-switching distinguishes good oral tests from other language tests. As well as a person who speaks and a person who listens, in an oral test, we need somebody to assess that speech (Underhill, 1987).

After the learner himself, the teacher is the person who has the most experience of the learner's speaking ability in the foreign language (Underhill, 1987), as is the case with the Malaysian revised school-based OET, and this is one of the reasons cited for the new test. Teacher assessment can be carried out either on the spot or as continuous assessment over a period of time, which is also what the new OET introduced in Malaysian secondary schools in 2002 proposes to do - provide continuous assessment over a two-year period, when students are in Form 4 and Form 5.

However, according to Madsen (1983), the testing of speaking is widely regarded as the most challenging of all language tests to prepare, administer, and score. Thus, it is no surprise that testing oral proficiency has become one of the most important issues in language testing as the role of speaking has become more central in language teaching (Hartley & Sporing, 1999), especially with the advent of communicative language teaching. However, there are numerous difficulties in the construction and administration of any speaking assessment. There is great discrepancy between the predominance of the communicative approach and the accurate measurement of the ability to communicate (Hughes, 2001).

Since the role of speaking is gaining importance in language teaching, Kim (2003) notes that testing oral proficiency has become a vital issue in language testing. The basic problem in testing oral ability, says Hughes (2001), is we want to set tasks that form a representative sample of the population of oral tasks that we expect candidates to be able to perform. He contends that the tasks should elicit behaviour which truly represents the candidates' ability and which can be scored in a valid and reliable manner.

Promoting Positive Washback

In view of the present study with a primary focus on washback to the learner, how would one promote beneficial washback to the learners in the classroom? Will the school-based oral English examination with task types which include pair-work and group interaction generate a positive washback effect on classroom teaching and learning? Teachers may feel the need for providing their learners with opportunities for more peer interaction in order to prepare them for the paired task or the group work of the oral examination. Similarly, students may take speaking activities done in pairs and small groups seriously as these classroom management formats are likely to be perceived by them as relevant in terms of examination preparation. Bailey (1996, p. 268), drawing from the available literature, suggests a number of factors that she thinks promote beneficial washback: "(1) language learning goals, (2) authenticity, (3) learner autonomy and self-assessment, and (4) detailed score reporting".

1) *Language Learning Goals*

Bailey (1996) posits that washback can either be positive or negative to the extent that it either encourages or hinders the accomplishment of educational goals held by learners and/or programme personnel. This relationship between tests and educational goals is best summed up by Buck (1988, cited in Bailey, 1996), as follows:

Most educators would probably agree that the content of classroom instruction should be decided on the basis of clearly understood educational goals, and examinations should try to ascertain whether these goals have been achieved. When the examination does that, it forces students and teachers to concentrate on these goals, and the washback effect on the classroom is very beneficial (p.268).

However, any teacher who has been teaching long enough will be aware that students may have two goals that are seen to be at odds. We can all understand that a student's immediate goal is often to achieve a given test score, or to exceed a previous score, but it may also be true that the student's long-term goal is one he/she may share with his/her language teacher, i.e., to enhance his/her language proficiency. Bailey (1996) contends, "to the extent that students view the steps leading to these two goals as different, standardized exams can be seen as having negative washback" (p. 269).

(2) *Building in Authenticity*

Wesche (1983) highlights that by making tests more reflective of the kinds of situations, language content and purposes that second-language speakers need, we will be able to predict their performance in using the target language in real life. Wesche (1983) further states that such testing is likely to have great effects on the format and content of second language curricula, and student motivation. This comment relates directly to positive washback effects especially learners' motivation to prepare for the test.

(3) *Learner Autonomy and Self-assessment*

Bailey (1996) contends that one way of promoting positive washback effects to learners is the possible introduction of self-assessment mechanisms in standardized external-to-program tests. According to Bailey (1996), learner autonomy "refers to the philosophy that learners should have a large amount to say about what, how and how fast they learn. It incorporates principles of choice, intrinsic motivation, attention focus and personal evaluation." (p.270). The direct relationship of self-assessment to autonomous learning and positive washback is best explained by the following comments from von Elek (1985, cited in Bailey, 1996):

1. Self-assessment enables learners to assume greater responsibility for the assessment of their proficiency and their progress

2. It enables learners to diagnose their weak areas and to get a realistic view of their overall ability and their skills profile
3. It lets learners see their present proficiency in relation to the level they wish to attain
4. It helps learners become more motivated and goal oriented.

(4) Score Reporting

Shohamy (1992) points out that to promote positive washback, assessment information must be detailed, innovative, relevant and diagnostic and that a variety of dimensions must be addressed rather than appearing as one general score. Spolsky (1990), on the other hand, binds the use of detailed score reports, which he feels are more beneficial than single scores, indirectly to washback because of the tendency for some to use test results to take shortcuts. Therefore, testers have the moral responsibility to testees to see that results are accurate and not easily and quickly interpreted.

Results

There were four research questions posed in the overall study. However, this paper looks at one of the questions asked: Are there any similarities and differences in opinion between students and teachers regarding the revised school-based OET? The opinions solicited from the teachers and students were then categorised, labelled and tabulated. From the data, the only opinion that showed a similarity between the two sets of interviewees was that the oral test was viewed as ‘just another test’. A teacher (SATI) commented, “ just another ... just like ... just different way of testing”, whilst a student opined, “Haa ... I’m just happy...yeah, because for me, you just write it, then see the teacher for the grammar mistake and then we just memorize it. Just nothing.”

Teachers’ opinions of the test tended to centre more on the integration of the test with activities that take place in class; for example, “integration helps us to a certain extent because we don’t have to reserve like one, two weeks just to conduct the oral test since it is already incorporated in the daily lessons.” Teachers also gave their opinion about the ability of their students in the language: “One good thing about the OET is that we get to know the students’ ability in the language, we know their level, their proficiency in a way,” (SATC: 125-126). Subsequently, according to SATC, “we can see their vocabulary level, pronunciation level ... when we teach, somehow we can be aware of how high a language that we should use in the classroom (128-31).”

However, students’ opinions centred more on what they gained from the test such as the affirmation they received. An example quoted from a student is: “ the best thing ... it’s like when you talk about the topic, with like I did about ‘Love’, everyone is

like OK and then... they like to listen you know ... it's like the best thing. It's like the people understand what (you're) talking about." Students also talked about their use of free expression when speaking. As a student said, "... I can voice my opinion what... on how do I feel about the topic, what emm ... what is my mentality and I can express myself without someone, preventing me from saying what I'm want ... yeah." Several of the students were gratified that they could take credit for their own work, "because I wrote the essay myself and ... emm ... I know all the nook and cranny of the essay, so all questions were answered easily." Lastly, students talked about the confidence they gained from doing the test: "...when all the other guys were talking and nobody was shy to speak about their opinion ... emm ... questions were asked and they were answered, no problem about that."

Table 1 groups the suggestions mooted by the students on how to conduct the oral test and they are worth further consideration by teachers, together with suggestions by teachers.

Table 1: Suggestions by Students and Teachers on How to Conduct the OET

Suggestions by students on how to conduct the oral English test:	Reasons:	Suggestions by teachers:
1. <teacher talk, > student talk	To boost confidence, to get rid of shyness, to encourage students to talk	
2. more presentations by students/ provide more practice	To improve their English and confidence ino communicating	Practice speaking more for better deliverance in test
3. more participation from the audience/class members during presentations	To get everybody to speak and to get used to talking in front	
4. Should not be done in one particular day/doing long term judging	Students to be judged on their participation, how they speak English in class, this is more natural, and gives a more accurate result	
5. Teachers should show more concern for the students, be more willing to work with individual students e.g. in practicing/presenting the oral the teacher first gives an example of what public speaking is	To get first hand help from the teacher, to get confidence	

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| <p>6. oral tests should be done spontaneously, without the students knowing in advance, even jotting down the marks secretly</p> | <p>The test is predictable so students can easily prepare for it.</p> <p>This way students have to be prepared all the time and speak more in class</p> <p>Students cannot then memorize any text</p> <p>Teachers are better able to gauge the level of students</p> <p>Students will not feel the pressure</p> <p>Marks given are more believable</p> | <p>Impromptu speeches in Semester 2 of Form 4, to test real oral performance</p> |
| <p>7. Teachers have to clearly brief students on the mechanisms of the test; how to present a speech, the criteria for marking, etc.</p> | <p>The oral test is not just about talking to the teacher</p> | |
| <p>8. The oral test has to be fair to all students</p> | <p>No distinction between the weak and good students</p> | |
| <p>9. The oral test should be done more often/ twice a semester</p> | <p>“Oral test is the time when we hear students who don’t really speak English, speak in English (FG4, 199-200).”</p> | <p>As many tests as possible, to help students</p> |
| <p>10. Spontaneously for good students but based on improvements over time/ succeeding tests for weaker students</p> | <p>Weaker students need to show improvement and the marks they get at the end are believable.</p> | |
| <p>11. Having the right environment to enable students to use the language</p> | <p>Students will not be shy to use the language</p> | |
| <p>12. Retain the four (4) Models over 3 semesters.</p> | | |

Do away with Model 1 and start with Model 2 instead.

Role plays in Form 5

13. Test at the end of Form 5 for a valid test for real proficiency
 14. No role-plays as weak students do more actions while better students talk more; not valid
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Students who are on the receiving end of the oral test seem to be more sensitive to how the test should be carried out in terms of classroom or oral test procedures and what is important for them to learn in the process of preparing for or doing the test. For example, the suggestions on classroom procedures when preparing for the test include less teacher talk and more student talk. They want teachers to encourage more participation from their classmates and that teachers should be more caring towards their students. In implementing the test students suggest that teachers should brief students on the mechanisms of the oral test and the test should be fair to all students.

Discussion

To sum up, the data suggests a lot of similarities and differences between students and teachers as a result of the revised school-based OET. Two instances were tabulated; the opinions of the students and teachers regarding the OET and suggestions as to changes to be made to the implementation of the OET.

In giving their opinions, teachers spoke disparagingly about the OET but there were those who talked more about the good points the OET has brought about in gauging the level of proficiency of their students and how test integration has helped in their teaching and learning. Students, however, tended to focus on their presentations when doing the OET such as the affirmation they received from fellow students and their ability to express themselves freely and being given credit for doing their own work. The differences are inevitable as the groups are different and their focuses are different.

Another difference in thought is the way teachers and students would like changes made to the implementation of the OET. The changes requested by students seem to suggest they want better implementation of the OET by the teachers as students are frustrated with the minimal help received from teachers. Teachers seem to be more concerned with the frequency of the test and the tasks used in the OET.

Why is it that students collectively could suggest more changes to the OET, all of which are viable and sensitive to their needs? A reason could be because they are at the receiving end of the OET. They realize how it impacts on them and their friends

and they see a need for a more valid testing of their speaking and communicative ability. Teachers, on the other hand, are more concerned with changing the test per se and less about their own development as teachers and their role as assessors and what they can do to improve students' proficiency.

The test had a direct impact on students as they were the ones tested as opposed to the teachers who were given another "new" test approach by the Ministry and were only in fact carrying out orders. What is clear from the literature is that if curriculum, instruction and assessment are integrated, the assessment itself should become a valuable learning experience for both teachers and students. The revised school-based oral English test should bring about changes; one would think positive changes, in the teachers' and students' perceptions and attitudes to their teaching and learning respectively. The revised school-based OET should empower teachers to be more involved in assessment but this is not reflected in the observations and interviews. The test should not only communicate to the teachers what is important to learn but also model the kinds of instructional tasks and processes that teachers should use in their classrooms. In short, the implication is that there should be a paradigm shift among teachers with regard to school-based assessment. The scoring rubric and individual student profiles should communicate to the teachers what is expected in student performance and the change should be whether teachers adapt and use the rubric in their classroom assessment and teaching. With the shift of focus to the learner, teachers need to nurture an approach that would help them understand the students.

There should also be a paradigm shift among students. They should understand that the school-based OET could be more of a meaningful assessment of their speaking skills. Thus, students should also show changes in their attitudes and perceptions of what a school-based assessment is and this should be reflected in their learning and test-taking strategies. However, based on the classroom observations and data from the focus group and teacher interviews, this is not always the case.

The inclusion of students in this study was deliberate. Murphey (2008) documents research around the world where student voices are elicited and heard, among them Halsey, Murfield, Harland and Lord (2006) in England, Student Voice (2007) in Australia, and Harvard Family Research Project (2002) in America, where each has confirmed the advantages of student voices being heard by teachers, researchers, educational planners, and students themselves. As Murphey says, students are the ones who have had the greatest number of teachers and classes.

From the data, we can conclude that the students were more insightful, seeing beyond the OET in class as compared to the opinions of the OET of the teachers, even in the changes to the test suggested.

Recommendations

Based on the discussion above, recommendations can be made to English teachers in schools pertaining to the implementation of the school-based OET:

a. Moderation

James Dean Brown (interviewed by Sunga, 2003) pointed out the problem teachers have with testing is that they, like many educated people, are not test-literate. Genesee and Upsher (1996, pp. 58-61) have proposed ways for enhancing rater reliability by using more than one rater or using trained or experienced raters. In addition, a general strategy they recommend to enhance reliability is to begin by considering sources of unreliability. This means teachers should be trained on how to conduct oral language assessment in order to become experienced and reliable assessors. Thus, it is highly recommended here that prior to testing; teachers should sit down, discuss and moderate the awarding of marks.

b. Feedback to Students

From the teacher interviews very little was said of this but generally though, some teachers do inform the students about their marks after each assessment, though after this little more was done. Students were informed of the results of the oral language assessment so that they would have the information to help them make the changes needed in their performance. Teachers should make the most use of an oral communication assessment by thinking more about students' progress. As espoused by Luoma (2004), teachers' comments or any suggestions given after the assessment to a specific student or groups are the most valuable in the oral communication learning process. The scores are an advisory mechanism for the teacher about individual students' performance. In fact, in the OET, individual students have their own individual profile form for teachers to record scores. Teachers should use this information from the score to target individual remediation. Feedback given as part of formative assessment would help learners become aware of any gaps that exist between their desired goal and their current knowledge, understanding, or skill and guide them through actions necessary to obtain the goal (Sadler, 1989). The recommendation here is that teachers must inform their students of the marks and discuss how they may improve. Further, teachers should be more open to what students have to say.

c. More Practice

Students in the focus groups pleaded for more practice in using the language prior to testing. Lourdunathan and Menon (2005) recommend that interaction strategies be taught to learners together with instruction on essential vocabulary, as effective use of these strategies requires a certain threshold of language proficiency.

The students would have more confidence to use more difficult interaction strategies such as clarification if they have adequate language support. Students also spoke of the affirmation they receive from classmates during their oral presentations. Thus, teachers in schools could also try out the recommendation by Lourdunathan and Menon (2005) in training students in effective strategies, including cooperative learning and peer support so that the students are encouraged not only to express themselves clearly but also to contribute more to the discussion.

Thus, based on the evidence in this study discussed above, a decisive conclusion to be made is that there is a need to make sure that the school-based OET should at all times provide an overall balance of validity, reliability and test efficiency in the assessment of communicative skills and in ensuring positive washback.

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