ORAL COMMUNICATIVE ASSESSMENT: ARE WE DOING IT RIGHT?

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to discuss the important features that are essential for assessing students' oral communicative performance. The subjects for this study were from the VG 2923 course, a second level Life Sciences course meant for the Faculty of Science and Technology students at *Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*. They either have to take this course in their second semester of the first year or the first semester of the second year at university.

The study was conducted throughout the semester for the academic session of 1999/2000. It focused on four major components: criterion-referenced presentation, forum, case study and interview. This paper will first look at the aspect of fluency and competent communication in the assessment of oral performance. Next, the important techniques that have been used by the teachers to prepare students for the assessment will be highlighted. Besides that, the advantages as well as limitations of the oral assessment as a means of evaluating second language competency in a science-based English class will be outlined. Lastly, suggestions and recommendations on how the oral performance assessment can help to upgrade the quality of students' oral communication skills and factors that contribute to the success of the implementation of the test will be presented.

Introduction

The oral test is qualitatively different from other kinds of tests because it does not follow the conventional nature of a language test which:

1.   emphasizes more on the "test instrument" while the test-takers and those who mark it, seem less important.
2.   tests are seen as objects with an identity and a purpose compared to the test-takers who are often referred to as the "subjects".
3.   the role of markers seems less prominent due to the easily marked, multiple-choice or limited-response tests which reduce their role to that of a machine.

These factors have led to a lamentable situation: learners do not enjoy taking tests, and teachers do not enjoy marking them. (Underhill, 1987).

In Malaysia, we have already implemented the communicative approach in teaching at secondary and tertiary level. Therefore, it is only natural that this

approach is reflected in the testing scenario. (This can be delivered via oral assessment).

The assessment of oral skills has always been carried out in an isolated way. However, experts are aware of the importance of adopting more than one measure of speaking in order to elicit more than one type of speech interaction from each learner.

According to Cohen (1994), some ways/activities/tasks for assessing oral skills are:

1. impromptu speech (individually on a specified topic)
2. oral or criterion-referenced presentation (individually - respondent is allowed to prepare)
3. reporting the contents of an article in the target language
4. group discussion on a common theme and
5. role play where each respondent is given a role in a specified topic.
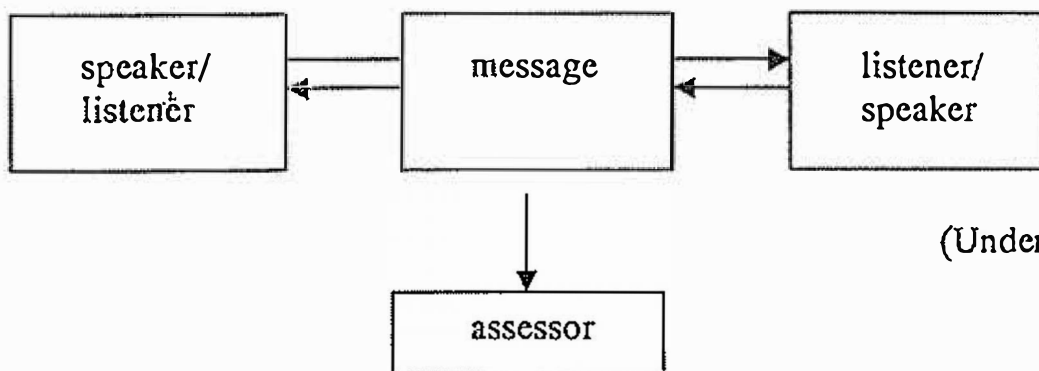
Literature Review

Underhill (1987) has mentioned in his book *Testing Spoken Language* that "speech is usually considered a two-way system of communication". It is therefore quite uncommon for one person to speak and the other only listen. This characteristic of interactive role-switching distinguishes good oral tests from other language tests (listening, reading and writing tests) which are limited to a set of questions with a set of answers which are clearly not interactive.
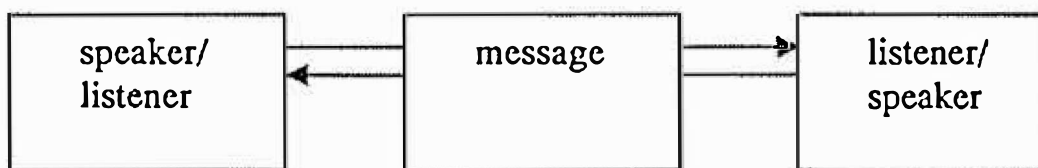
(Underhill, 1987)

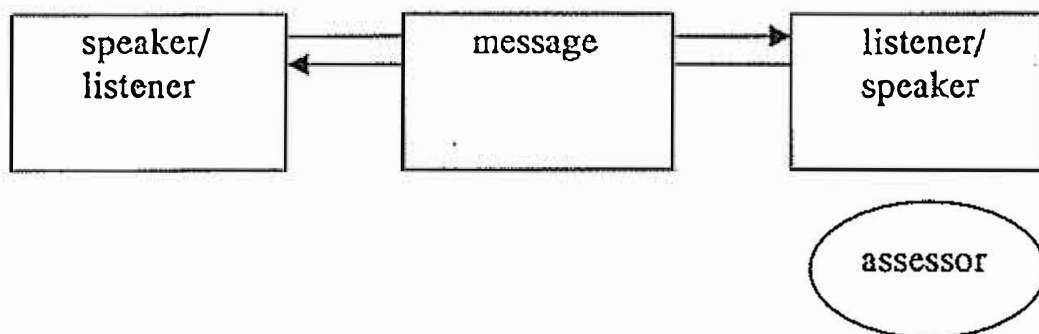The model above represents the process of communication.

On the other hand, with the presence of an assessor, it reflects the oral assessment situation.

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┌──────────┐        ┌──────────┐        ┌──────────┐
│ speaker/ │ ◄────► │ message  │ ◄──────│ listener/│
│ listener │        │          │        │ speaker  │
└──────────┘        └────┬─────┘        └──────────┘
                         │
                         ▼
                    ┌──────────┐
                    │ assessor │
                    └──────────┘
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(Underhill, 1987)

Normally, the oral assessment requires three people, a speaker, a listener and an assessor. There are however, situations where the assessor is involved in the oral assessment as a listener and assessor such as in an oral interview.

This is reflected in the model below.

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┌──────────┐        ┌──────────┐        ┌──────────┐
│ speaker/ │ ◄──────│ message  │ ──────►│ listener/│
│ listener │        │          │        │ speaker  │
└──────────┘        └──────────┘        └──────────┘
                                             ╭────────╮
                                            ( assessor )
                                             ╰────────╯
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(Underhill, 1987)

Oral assessment

Nic Underhill (1987) defined oral test of language ability as a test in which a person is encouraged to speak, and is then assessed on the basis of that speech. Another factor to be borne in mind is that the oral test should be designed around the people who are going to be involved.

Recent researches further support the aspect of reality and motivation in an oral assessment. This requires a test situation to be real for the learners in order for them to speak freely, thus showing this general capability to speak in various situations.

The communicative approach to language testing and group oral assessment has been successfully done in Zambia and was widely welcomed (Hildson, 1991). The concept of group testing was found to be useful and economical. However, the process of training examiners and standardization of scoring at national level were some setbacks encountered.

Formats for Assessing Oral Language Ability

The assessment of spoken language has shifted from the conventional tests of oral grammar and pronunciation to interviews and, more currently, to multiple tasks.

1. Interview

The interview is an obvious format for the testing of oral interaction. According to Perrett (1990), oral interview has a high face validity to elicit the communicative language ability. It assesses phonological, lexical grammatical and certain discoursal aspects. However, it does not assess interactive aspects of discourse such as speech functions or exchange structure, or the use of language in other situations. Underhill (1987) has mentioned another drawback concerning the pressure upon the assessor performing two roles at the same time, as a listener cum speaker, which can be quite challenging.

2. Group discussion

Hughes (1989) defined group discussion as interaction with peers that requires two or more candidates to discuss a topic, make plans and so on. Littlewood (1981) states that this format encourages communicative interaction such as varied experiences, interests and opinions of the learners. It gives learners the opportunity to express their own personality and experience. Despite the benefits of group discussion, assessors should be aware that the performance of test takers is likely to be affected by the others such as the presence of an assertive and dominant group member (Hughes, 1989). In relation to this, it is crucial for instructors to ensure that test takers are grouped carefully.

3. Simulation and role-play

Learners are asked to imagine themselves in a situation, which could occur outside the classroom. They have to adopt a specific role in this situation and are asked to behave as if the situation really exists in accordance with their roles. On top of this, they must project themselves into an imaginary situation in order to make suggestions, express preferences, etc (Littlewood, 1989). Littlewood continues by saying that this format can impose a drawback among the weaker learners who will emphasize more on language practice than the communication of meanings. Apart from that, difficulties will arise when learners fail to identify with their roles in the interaction. All in all, the achievement in

the simulation and role-play format depends very much on the individual learner, not the instructor. The instructor can however, adjust the nature of his own control over the activity to allow greater scope for the learner's creative involvement in it.

4. Response to tape-recordings

Candidates will be presented with the same audio (or video) tape-recorded stimuli to ensure uniformity and promote reliability. This process can also be economical as a large number of candidates can be assessed at the same time. However, one disadvantage of this format is, there is no means for immediate feedback.

Method

At the end of the second semester of 1999/2000, students were interviewed regarding their opinions and perceptions of the oral assessment of the English For Life Sciences II (VG 2923) course.

Subjects

The subjects of this study were selected randomly. They were then interviewed via telephone. Due to limited time, we managed to get the feedback from seven respondents, 4 male and 3 female students. They belonged to the upper-intermediate and advanced proficiency level.

Instrument

The respondents were asked to give their opinion on the four oral assessment components of the English for Life Sciences II (VG 2923) course: oral presentation or criterion-referenced presentation, case study, forum and interview.

Three questions were asked:
1. Out of the four oral assessment components, which one do you like most? Why?
2. Of the oral and written assessments, which do you prefer? Why?
3. How can instructors prepare students for the oral assessment?

Procedures

Students were given instructions explaining the purpose, content and procedure of the oral assessment. The criteria for oral scale were also discussed with the students. They were then informed of the assessment criteria as well as the weightage of each component.

1. **Purpose**
   The oral components were designed for students from Fakulti Sains and Teknologi (FST) and Fakulti Sains Kesihatan Bersekutu (FSKB) who had successfully completed English for Life Sciences I. The assessment helped to equip students with interactive communication skills in English, which are relevant to the workplace environment.

2. **Content**
   The oral components were criterion-referenced or oral presentation, case study, forum and interview.

3. **Course Evaluation**

   i) **Criterion Referenced or Oral Presentation (individual - 10%)**
      - Students selected their own science-related topics, which were to be approved by the instructor.
      - Preparation for the oral evaluation was to be done in class.
      - Each student was given 5-10 minutes to present.

   ii) **Case Study (group - 25%)**
      - Students were divided into groups of 4 or 5. Each student in the group was assigned a different role. Each group was given 20-30 minutes.
      - Students were briefed on the case study.
        (Negotiating and The Language of Meetings). The task and the roles they had to play were explained to them.
      - The **Statement of Problem** was given out and students did the preparation in class guided by the instructor.
      - Students practised in class.
      - The actual case study evaluation was conducted in groups.
      - Each student in the group was assessed individually.
      - Students were not allowed to bring along their notes during the assessment.

   iii) **Forum (group - 30%)**
      - Instructors briefed students on the forum.

- Students formed groups of 4 or 5 (four panelists and a moderator) and selected their own science-related topics with
  ‹ the approval of the instructor. The topics could be informative or argumentative. Controversial and sensitive issues such as politics, race and religion were avoided.
- Preparation for the forum was carried out in class.
- Instructors conducted a practice session in class.
- For the actual forum evaluation, each group was given a total of 25-30 minutes. After the presentations by the panelists (which took about 20 minutes), the moderator allocated 10 minutes for the question and answer session and the summing-up.

iv)   **Interview (individual - 15%)**
- The instructor provided input on the requisites for the job interview.
- Students brought job application letters and resumes which were based on a chosen job advertisement from the newspaper on the day scheduled for the mock interview.
- The instructor interviewed the students individually. Each interview took approximately 10-20 minutes.
- Students were to dress appropriately for the interview.

Result and Discussion

The result of the study was based on the interview carried out via telephone at the end of the semester. Overall, students reacted positively to the interview questions.

Q1:   Students' choices of oral assessment component and rationale.

From the responses gathered, we can summarize that five respondents preferred forum while two preferred oral presentations. The main reasons for choosing forum out of the four assessment components are: the assignment of roles, group preparation and presentation as well as the presence of the audience. On the other hand, two respondents chose oral presentation because they liked public speaking.

Audience played a crucial role in enhancing respondents' self-confidence. Four of the respondents reported that the attention (smile, nod) and feedback given by the audience motivated them as well as raised their self-esteem. Two of the respondents thought that the presence of audience made them nervous and tense while the other respondents were not affected by this. Group work seemed to

have its own advantages and disadvantages. Some of the advantages mentioned were:

i)   work became a lot easier in groups
ii)   group members were helpful and
iii) in.groups they had the chance to debate and exchange ideas with other group members. However, some students preferred to work individually and they felt that group work had its own constraints: finding a suitable time and place to meet.

Q2: Students' preference for oral or written examinations

Four of the seven students preferred oral to written assessment. They perceived oral assessment as a chance to perform in public, as well as have the opportunity to interact with the audience. This is especially true of Respondent No. 4 who was seldom involved in debates or speeches.

They found the data collection process an enriching experience. Work seemed very much easier when preparing for the oral assessment in groups compared to individual effort that is often required for written assessment.

In contrast to the positive feedback, students expressed their lack of confidence in dealing with audience expectation. Besides, they were quite uncomfortable with the on-going oral assessment throughout the semester.

Three of the respondents gave positive reaction to the written assessment. One of the students felt that written assessment allowed her to express herself without any external distraction. Respondent 1 said, compared to the oral assessment, he could prepare for the written assessment at the last minute. This is quite obvious considering students' commitments to other courses as well.

Q 3: Instructors' role in preparing students for oral assessment.

From the interview, we gathered three important aspects that instructors should concentraté on in order to prepare students for oral assessment: practice, instructors and peer evaluation.

Practice

Most of the students agreed that practice should be given prior to the assessment. Practice can be given through simulation. Littlewood (1987) emphasized that learners need more practice at part-skill level (guided) as well as whole task context. In language teaching, this is the stage of 'free practice'

(Hubbard et al., 1983) and 'communicative activity' (Hammer, 1983; Littlewood, 1981). According to Cohen (1994), students should be allowed the opportunity 'for a genuine warm-up exercise, which would lead to better performance and result. This is especially useful for learners who have not achieved speaking fluency and who might find oral assessment traumatic and problematic if they are not given the chance to practise.

Krashen (1985) believes that it is important to activate what has been referred to as the "din in the head" by providing students with at least one to two hours of good quality input in the target language.

Instructors

Interviews with students suggest that instructors should possess certain characteristics to enhance their language ability in oral assessment. Some of them indicated that a good instructor could serve as a role model to be imitated by the students especially while presenting in front of the audience.

Apart from what has been mentioned, the instructor should be able to provide clear instruction and quality input to what is expected from them throughout the semester. They should also motivate students by giving encouragement and providing positive feedback. Littlewood (1994) has emphasized the importance of providing some kind of feedback during or after practice so that students know how close their performance comes to the target they have to achieve. Some of the students expressed the necessity to meet the instructor on a one-to-one basis for consultation. At the same time, the instructor can guide the students with the choice of topic, content as well as approach to presentation.

One respondent specifically mentioned that instructors should give immediate feedback after the practice or real presentation. If this is delayed, students might forget and show lack of interest.

An interesting finding we got from the interview is the fact that students are bored with 'paper and pencil' assessment.

Peer evaluation

According to the respondents interviewed, peer evaluation could also help then to improve their future assessments. In fact, they thought of it as a less threatening approach. This is in line with what Gregory James (1988) said:
"Often, students are able to pinpoint quite accurately some areas of language in which they feel they are weak: pronunciation, vocabulary, etc; but other areas such as intonation, rhetorical convention or appropriateness, are much more difficult to discern, let alone verbalize".

Conclusions and Future Implications

Advantages of the four oral components
Based on the interview conducted, a number of conclusions can be drawn. It is indeed obvious that the four oral components have offered many benefits to the students:

1. **Self-development:** Most respondents perceive oral assessment as an opportunity to enhance self-esteem and self-confidence. It also gives students the chance to project themselves and perform in public. The process of collecting and gathering data is found to be enriching.

2. **Social skills:** Oral assessment components like case study and forum require students to work closely together. They learn to mingle and compromise with group members in determining roles as well as time and setting for research and practice sessions. The four oral assessment components do not only develop interactive skills among group members but they also prepare students to interact with the audience.

3. **Group work:** The collaborative work among the group members can enhance motivation and learning outcomes in language achievement. Students can counter check each other's performance and support each other in order to accomplish the shared goal.

4. **Role play:** The majority of the respondents enjoyed role play because it gave them the chance to assume a particular role for example, the Minister of the Environment, a dietitian, etc. By participating in the role-play, they learn to listen to the opinions of others as well as exchange ideas.

5. **Audience:** The audience has a great impact on the student's performance and achievement. A good response from the audience (smile, nod, thumbs-up, etc.) can encourage the speaker. However, the presence of audience can have a negative impact on the presenter, like making him tense and nervous.

Suggestions/Recommendations

1. **Preparation**
   Testing (oral and written assessment) has a great effect on teaching and learning. This is known as 'backwash' which can either be harmful or beneficial (Hughes, 1989). Thus, to attain positive or beneficial backwash, a certain degree of preparation has to be done on the part of the instructor as well as the students.

   Underhill (1987) has mentioned two advantages of preparing students for oral assessment. Preparation promotes confidence among learners and makes them familiar with the test content and procedure. Furthermore, the more learners are given the chance to practise, the less their performances reflect their ordinary oral ability in a natural situation. Thus, they can be expected to perform better for the purpose of assessment.

2. **Instructors**
   An oral assessment is a live direct meeting between two or more people. Dealing with a different learner every time can be tiring, boring and challenging. However, it is essential for instructors to project themselves as interested and friendly individuals.

   Besides that, instructors should be constantly aware of their presence as a role model to the students. They should be able to guide and stimulate the student without taking away their responsibility in the oral assessment tasks. (Littlewood, 1981).

• 3. **Model of Performance/Sample**
   Equipping learners with a model of performance, enables them to produce videotapes, laser discs, etc, and instructors can be sure that the students are aware of the important features of the oral assessment. Hence, they can independently work towards producing the final products on their own. (Littlewood, 1974).

4. Recording the presentation

According to James (1988), a presentation should not be recorded only for administrative reasons, but also as a collection of sample presentations for future use. Apart from that, the recordings can be fully utilized for the purpose of feedback. However, instructors should bear in mind that the whole process of recording could increase stress and apprehension as well as cost.

5. Students' reluctance to participate

Sometimes instructors may encounter students who are reluctant to participate in role-plays like forum and case study. This might be due to personal conflict in the group, inferiority complex etc. According to Hughes (1989), instructors can abandon role-play or adopt an alternative format for oral assessment. However, in the case of VG 2923, instructors have no other choice but to reassign the roles members in a group have to adopt.

Littlewood (1989) suggested that if the learners could not cope with the task or situation, the instructor could offer advice or give necessary language items. The instructor acts as a guide to provide psychological support for learners, especially those who are slow to develop independence.

Are we doing it right?

In a nutshell, from the literature review and the study that was done, there are various formats for conducting oral assessment such as oral presentation, group discussion and role-play. As for VG 2923, there were four components adopted in the course namely oral presentation, case study, forum and interview.

The question that often bothers instructors is: "What is the best technique to be used for assessing students' language ability?" We however, have found out that there is no best test or best technique for oral assessment. As Hughes (1989) suggested, "each testing situation is unique and it is the testers' job to provide the best solution to that problem".

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