

**TESTING SPOKEN SKILLS AT UPPER SECONDARY LEVEL:
A MELTA WORKSHOP/SEMINAR HELD ON 5TH APRIL 1986**

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The seminar was conducted by Robin Davis, a freelance teacher trainer with vast experience in the testing of ESL. A total of over forty participants from schools, colleges and universities spent the Saturday morning, first examining current objectives and practices in the testing of oral skills in the SPM examinations, and then considering what alternative forms there could be.

Robin started the morning by getting the participants to relate the present form of the SPM 'Oral English Test' to the objectives of the upper secondary syllabus for teaching oral skills.

The objectives were identified as:

- (a) Participating in a discussion or conversation.
- (b) Making a telephone call and conversing through that medium.
- (c) Giving oral instructions.
- (d) Describing an object, a location, or an event.
- (e) Reporting an incident, a process, a discussion, or similar activity.
- (f) Explaining and demonstrating a process or an experiment.
- (g) Giving a short talk, such as a welcoming address, introduction of a person or expression of thanks.
- (h) Summarizing what has been read or heard.
- (i) Presenting an argument, citing premise and enumerating points in support of the argument.

The examination format was seen by participants to have three phases. The format incorporated reading a dialogue aloud, answering questions based on a picture stimulus, and presenting an appropriate form in response to a situational stimulus.

During the workshop which followed, there was a heated discussion as to whether the exist-

ing three-phase format reflected the stated objectives. There was a fair spread of 'conservatives' and 'revolutionaries' among the participants, not to mention the 'polite fence-sitters'. However, it did not take long for the participants to reach a consensus that there was a mismatch between the stated objectives and the present examination format.

Participants were then briefed on current ideas of communicative oral testing. Robin's major premise was that communicative oral testing should be based on the principles of oral production, i.e.

- (i) interaction based
- (ii) unpredictable
- (iii) occurring within a context
- (iv) purposeful
- (v) behaviour-based

When procedures for testing did not reflect these principles then the 'wash-back' effect of the testing format would mean that the stated oral-skill objectives of the communicative syllabus would not be met. In other words, conscientious teachers, preparing their pupils to pass their examinations, would teach what was required of their students to pass the examination, rather than fulfill the objectives of the syllabus.

During the second session, participants working in groups, examined possible new formats and procedures and criteria for evaluation. Participants discussed how the constraints of large numbers of testees and the generally low level of expertise/experience of assessors could be dealt with when designing possible new testing procedures. During the round-up plenary session, groups reported on their tests and criteria for assessment. The reports reflected that the majority of the participants believed that new directions in the testing of oral skills at SPM level were both necessary and possible.