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## **THE RATIONALE UNDERLYING THE TEST OF SPOKEN ENGLISH (TSE) — BELARUSIAN TESTING INITIATIVE (BTI) FORMAT**

On designing a test of spoken language the test writers usually face challenge of several factors:

- the range of communication
- testing several factors simultaneously
- selecting different criteria for evaluation
- the necessity to test and evaluate every student individually
- administration feasibility

In identifying the range of communication patterns conforming to the current syllabus the authors of the BTI format focused primarily not on those stretches of sustained monologue which are known as “the topics”, but on the everyday speech exchanges of some practical significance. The priority of the latter was determined by the relative neglect with which they are treated both in the old syllabus and the everyday teaching practice. The new syllabus draft provides for this type of communication, so the focus on this genre seems quite timely. The writers of the tests also reasoned that Belarusian teachers are prepared to develop and spin off the sustained monologue through questions and suggestions well onto the level of the personalized interview (though the elicitation strategies will have to be codified and formalized at some further stage), whereas teaching and evaluating the proposed format might need additional training. Inevitably too, the inclusion of any task in qualification examination leads to the effect on teaching and learning. So, in determining the priorities the writers aimed at the backwash effect of raising the oral communication profile in classroom teaching.

There are two sets of criteria which are applied in test design:

- validity, reliability and objectivity which must be borne in mind primarily in the test preparation
- a set of hierarchically ordered criteria for performance evaluation, such as fluency, the range of vocabulary, etc.

The way the format suggested below takes into account those consideration is discussed further.

### ***Role - play Dialogue XV***

#### **XV A**

You have come to Britain to a language centre. You have arrived at the Centre's information desk and want to find out the details of your stay.

- greet the clerk
- ask if he/ she has your registration
- ask where you are going to live
- say you would like to stay with a family. Explain why.
- thank B. Ask for the course programme to read while you wait.

#### **XV B**

You are the information officer at a language centre in Britain. You are asked about some details.

- answer the greeting
- ask whether you can help
- confirm the registration
- ask whether the person prefers to stay with a British family or at a hostel
- say you will phone the family. Ask A. to wait for some minutes till he/she is collected in a car.

The content validity of the suggested format of the TSE - BTI is seen in the fact that it does represent a sample of the communication structures and patterns outlined in the school syllabus and sets the standards for the communicative speech skills required at the school-leaving level. The tasks do not cover all subject areas outlined in the syllabus. The test writers were mainly guided by the requirements of the Council of Europe which are more concise in the subject areas and at the same time more relevant and set out in more detail, and also by the range of the students' personal experience as deduced from the results of the pilot stage of the experiment. Hence, a sizable number of tasks is set in the home environment with the English - speaking visitors initiating the conversation.

Reliability - the constant performance results across a wide range of testee groups - is mainly achieved through pre-testing either in the schools not involved in the scheme yet or, where possible, in the groups of the university first-year students. A special provision will have to be made when the scheme becomes nationwide.

Objectivity can be provided for at the preparation stage by ensuring that all testees get speaking tasks of the same level of scope and difficulty. The test writers aim at including a certain number of fully controlled techniques of speech elicitation which are based on imitation and direct transformation of the offered language material in all tasks. At the same time all tasks provide as equally as it is realistic for the possibility to use the learned language material in natural speaking environment through guided techniques (cues). They give less control of utterances but they still are consistent and objective enough.

Objectivity is further ensured through the application of a scale defining the criteria for assessment and different levels of achievement within the indicated band (expected skills levels).

### **Speaking Test** **Assessment Statements for role-play (with cues)**

<i>Marks</i>	<i>Interaction</i>	<i>Appropriacy</i>	<i>Accuracy</i>
5+	Completes the task using all the cues. Develops the ideas and suggestions. Introduces new turns.	Correct and appropriate exchanges. Extensive range of cliches.	High standard of grammatical accuracy.
5	Completes the task using all the cues. Personalises the information. Paraphrases and repairs.	All information communicated with appropriacy. Speaks with good intonation.	Occasional mistakes in complex structures.
5 -	Completes the task keeping too literally to the cues.	All information communicated. Speaks with hesitation.	Some mistakes in complex structures. Vocabulary adequate.
4	Completes the task not very naturally. Limited interaction.	Limited use of set phrases initiating turns of initiative.	Makes mistakes which do not affect communication.
4 -	Leaves out some information, because occasionally cannot initiate/respond	Speaks in short simple sentences. Unnatural intonation.	Makes mistakes which occasionally impede communication. Vocabulary rather limited.
3	The task not fully completed. The exchanges are artificial.	Speaks in short simple sentences not as part of a dialogue.	Many mistakes. Occasional failures of expression.

			Limited vocabulary.
3 -	The task barely completed. About half of the information not communicated	Few set phrases. Primitive sentences. Strong intonation interference.	Many mistakes and failures of communication. Very limited vocabulary.
2	The task not completed. No communication.	Primitive, disjointed sentences.	Mistakes in grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation prevent understanding.

The priority is given to the message and interaction in order to achieve a certain communicative aim (information exchange, collaboration establishment etc.) The second criterion is appropriacy which covers the subject area vocabulary range and presentation. Accuracy stresses grammar and vocabulary correctness but mainly as relevant to communication again. This scale was developed on the basis of the scales of the English - speaking Union, the Council of Europe and the Northern Examinations and Assessment Board. However, the scale is not sufficient in itself and an independent assessor is necessary to ensure objectivity.

The choice of the simulation role - play offered some further advantages.

Flexibility - the movement along the direction of control from fully controlled techniques through guided techniques of speech elicitation towards spontaneous conversation allows to adapt this particular kind of task for various groups of learners (from the survival level to the fairly advanced).

Scope - the change of communication initiative which is built-in in the tasks gives possibility for both speakers to display their speaking skills. If necessary, two tasks with different speaking strategies can be offered to the pair of testees.

Variability - the task can be administered in several variants: 1) one task, two testees, two assessors, time to prepare; 2) the same without time to prepare; 3) the same, testees preparing together; 4) two tasks, two testees taking turns, 2 assessors, time to prepare; 5) the same without preparation; 6) one testee, one examiner taking a role, one task, one assessor; 7) the same with two tasks, the testee and the examiner take turns. Some other combinations are possible.

The disadvantage is shared with any other task in testing the spoken language: difficulty in administration, for too many trained assessors are required and the difficulty of keeping to the same standards across the whole, and very varied, group of testees at the given time.