TESTING ORAL ABILITY. SPEAKING TASK TYPES

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The objective of teaching spoken language is the development of the ability to interact successfully in that language. This involves both comprehension and production. When we are assessing speaking, we guide the examinees' talk by the tasks that we give them. These outline the content and general format of the talk to be assessed and they also provide the context for it. Task design is a very important element in developing assessements.

There are two types of tasks: open-ended and structured tasks. Open-ended **speaking** tasks guide the discussion but allow room for different ways of fulfilling the task requirements. They typically call for a stretch of talk, which can be either a number of turns between speakers or a single long speaking turn. Structured speaking tasks, in contrast, specify quite precisely what the examinees should say. They typically call for limited production, and often it is possible to give an exhaustive list of acceptable responses.

Open-ended speaking tasks

The main purpose in open-ended tasks is to get the examinees to *do* something with language as an indication of their skills. This can be a relatively long activity, such as giving a presentation, or a short, function-based action like making a request. The longer the activity, the more potential freedom the examinees have for responding to it, though task instructions may provide some content guidelines for them.

One way of dividing open-ended speaking tasks into task types is discourse types. *Description, narrative, instruction, comparison, explanation, justification,*

prediction, and *decision* tasks can have pictures or written material as their basis, or an examiner may name a topic for the examinee. One of the most common format for the testing of oral interaction is the interview. Useful techniques for the interview are: questions and request for information, pictures, role play, interpreting, prepared monologue, reading aloud.

The Oral Proficiency Interview, for example, includes a description task, and the interviewers are instructed to ask the examinees to describe something that is familiar to them, such as their friend's house if the examinee has mentioned a friend earlier. The interviewers do not know whether the description is factually accurate, but this is the case in most 'real-world' situations when somebody is asked to describe something. The criterion is rather whether they can picture what the examinee is describing. When the material is provided by a picture, the content of the examinee's talk must also correspond to the testers' expectations.

All the tasks can be completed between an interviewer and an examinee or between two examinees. If they are given to two examinees, it might be useful to create an information gap between them by providing each of them with part of the content only. Decision tasks, such as recommending a course of action to someone who has written to an advice column in a magazine, could also conceivably be done in a group of three or four people. With a little bit of planning time, any of the tasks could also be included in a tape-based test of speaking. The talk created in this context would be different, because it is clearly a monologue with no immediate listeners to interact with, but some of the language activities would be the same in all contexts.

Another category of open-ended tasks is *role-play*. Some of these tasks may simulate the professional context of the examinees and put the testers in the role of their clients or non-expert acquaintances. Other role-play tasks simulate social or service situations such as buying something or going to a restaurant, which have a fairly predictable structure. These may need an elaborate script, at least if

one of the examinees has the role of a service provider. From the point of view of clients, the situations are fairly predictable, and this is why they are sometimes used even in tape-mediated tests in the form of simulated discussions. The examinees hear the service provider's turns from the tape and respond according to the standard expectations. The intention in role-play tasks is to simulate reality. In professional contexts, the aim is to assess how well the examinees can cope with the language demands of their profession. In social role-plays, the task design usually includes some social twist so that the examinees' ability to deal with social complications or unpredictable turns of events can be assessed. A task that combines some elements of role-play and the previous category of discourse-type tasks is giving a presentation (professional) or making a speech, such as speaking to someone on their birthday (social). The examinee assumes a role and speaks at some length, structuring their talk according to the conventions of the talk type and using the social conventions required by the role-play situation.

A semi-structured task that focuses on socially or functionally complex language use is *reacting in situations*. The examinees read or hear the social situation where they should imagine themselves to be, and they are asked to say what they would say in the situation. The responses require the use of formulaic language but also the ability to modify expressions, as the situations often include a social twist. For example, the examinees might be asked to complain about the noisiness of a neighbour's party while they have to study, knowing that they will themselves be having a party at home the following week. This task type is used in tape-mediated and face-to-face tests, but because there are usually a handful of different situations, they fit tape-based tests better, as it is difficult tor the face-to-face tester to change roles credibly too many times.

Structured speaking tasks

Structured speaking tasks are the speaking equivalent of multiple choice tasks. The expected answers are usually short, and the items tend to focus on one narrow

aspect of speaking at a time. While these tasks cannot assess the unpredictable and creative elements of speaking, their strength is comparability, as they are exactly the same for all examinees, and with the help of a scoring key they can be scored fairly with very little training.

In the most highly structured speaking tasks, the examinees get everything that they should say from the task materials. Since the testers know what they are going to say, their responses can be justifiably judged against this norm. ***Reading*** *aloud* usually focuses on pronunciation, and while comprehensibility may be an important criterion, norms and expectations about rhythm, stress, intonation and accuracy of individual sounds usually have an influence in the background. Another structured task, ***sentence repetition,*** is more processing-oriented. There is no written input, but rather the examinees hear a sentence and repeat it immediately afterwards. A task is usually composed of a series of sentences, which become longer and more complex as the task progresses. To do well, the learners need to understand each sentence and divide it into a small number of meaningful chunks that they can remember and repeat accurately. To create a sentence-repetition task that provides interpretable scores, the developers need to know how to make the items more complex in a principled way, most likely following a theory of speech processing.

Tasks that give a little more freedom for the examinees to decide what to say include *sentence completion* and *factual short-answer questions*. The focus in sentence completion is on grammatical knowledge and contextual understanding, as the examinee response has to complete the sentence in a way that makes sense. Short answers focus a little less on grammatical knowledge, though the response has to be a self standing utterance, and more on understanding the context and providing the required information. *Reacting to phrases* focuses on knowledge of phrases and social acceptability. These tasks typically include common question-

answer or comment-response sequences such as greetings or apology-acceptance routines.

Structured speaking tasks are commonly found in tape-based tests and much more rarely used in face-to-face testing. A tape based test would also typically contain some less structured tasks such as reacting in situations and giving a presentation or talking about a topic. These give the testers a longer stretch of the examinees' speech and thus evidence about their ability to keep going and express their thoughts independently.

Task materials

Task materials are any written or picture-based materials that are given to the examinees during a speaking assessment to provide contents, outlines or starting points for the test discourse. These include role-play cards, menus, schedules, suggested topics or sub-topics for a discussion, short written texts, pictures and picture sequences, or whatever materials that the examiners provide to the examinees to generate talk.

Task materials are important because they provide a way for the test designers to guide the talk during the test. For the same reason, they are also time-consuming to develop, because they need to be inspiring enough to generate talk in the first place, structured enough so they really generate the talk that the developers intend, and unpredictable enough so the examinees cannot rehearse their performance on these particular topics and tasks.

With picture-based tasks, the developers can work with existing pictures or photographs. Different people can have surprisingly different interpretations of a picture and different strategies for telling a story related to a picture sequence. Single pictures are particularly useful for eliciting descriptions. Series of pictures (or video sequences) form a natural basis for narration.

The accurate measutement of oral ability is not easy. It takes considerable time and effort to obtain valid and reliable results.

References

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