2. Evaluating Oral Skills
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Abstract
The following paper examines the relationship between communicative teaching aims and the procedure we use in testing and evaluation, particularly of oral skills. A distinction is made between progress and achievement testing with reference to communication skills and enabling skills. We consider the testing of reciprocal and non-reciprocal listening and the use of video for listening. We look at task-based speaking tests and finally consider benchmark standards in oral evaluation.

Introduction

In this paper I would like to examine the relationship between our teaching aims and our evaluation procedures particularly in the area of oral skills – listening and speaking. This examination is made in the context of current teaching procedures.

Despite all our efforts there is always a difference between the classroom and real life. People can learn foreign languages without entering a classroom, but we believe that our classroom procedures (including our evaluation procedures) will make this learning process more effective and efficient.

Why do we test?

Teachers are very conscious that their job is to teach. Testing is often seen as an interruption of the teaching/learning process. It as seen as serving an administrative rather than an educational purpose. For these reasons, teachers resent the time and energy which testing requires and they seek the easiest, fastest and least disruptive testing techniques.

The educational benefits of regular testing can be found in two areas. Firstly, tests are (or should be) a restatement, for the students, of the aims of foreign language learning. Today, our learning aims are related to all aspects of real life communication rather than simply knowledge of the foreign language. Both oral and written communication are important but these days, a greater priority is given to oral communication skills.

Testing communication

Since the introduction of the communicative approach in the 1970s, we have searched for a more communicative approach to language testing. In this period, we believed that our aim in language teaching was to develop communicative competence. We also believed that we should teach language *through communication*. That is to say, we believed that we should abandon any formal training in grammatical patterns in favour of 'functional exponents'.

This change in approach required a radical change in the content and format of our tests. Tests of grammar and vocabulary were gradually replaced with tests of listening, reading, speaking and writing.

Later in the 1980s, teachers began to reject the 'pure' communicative approach in favour of an approach which retained a 'structural approach to language learning' whilst adopting a communicative approach to language use.

Progress and achievement testing

It is important that we make the distinction between progress and achievement testing. Achievement tests are more closely linked to our final aims in language teaching. Our final aims are not to produce students who are competent at doing grammar exercises. Our final aims are related to the students' communicative competence.

On the other hand, progress tests are more closely linked to what happens in the classroom. They echo teaching methodology. Progress tests measure the students' progress in learning what has been taught. For these reasons, public achievement tests such as the UCLES suite of KET, PET, FCE, CAE, and CPE focus on communicative competence rather than the teaching/learning process.

However, we should be careful not to take this distinction too far.

Communication skills and enabling skills

Spelling is an enabling skill for writing, pronunciation is an enabling skill for speaking. It would not be going too far to suggest that grammar and vocabulary are enabling skills of all communication. Perhaps this is what Louis

Alexander meant when he said that 'grammar and vocabulary are the means by which we communicate'.

In our classroom teaching, we tend to concentrate on teaching enabling skills and often our progress tests focus exclusively on these. We should beware of over-concentration on details causing us to lose sight of the big picture.

Oral skills in Progress and Achievement tests

The preceding remarks have been concerned with testing and evaluation in general. Now we should consider, in particular, the position of oral skills in progress and achievement tests.

Listening tests

It could be said that our tests are somewhat limited and inadequate. We concentrate our listening tests on comprehension of pre-recorded, scripted listening texts. This is non-reciprocal, non-interactive listening. We measure our students' ability to listen to radio weather forecasts, airport announcements, radio dramas and documentaries but we rarely test their ability to listen and take part in conversations.

Similarly we concentrate on 'blind listening' – listening without using our eyes to support comprehension. In real life, it is said that we comprehend more through our eyes than through our ears, but this 'watching and listening skill' is rarely tested. Many teachers believe that the days of the recorded audiocassette should be limited. They teach students to 'listen with their eyes' – that is to combine visual and audio data as we do in real life and with video recordings.

Speaking tests

The limitations of our tests of listening skills are small compared with our failure in testing speaking skills. We all believe that speaking skills are important. It is just that speaking tests are difficult to organise and take a lot of time.

We tend to concentrate on the 'oral interview' between the teacher and student. Because this is often unstructured, it often becomes yet another disguised grammar test and oral composition. The teacher uses prompts such as: *What*

did you do last weekend? and *What are you going to do next weekend?* to test the use of past and future tenses.

It is not just the structure of the tests. It is also the way in which we evaluate performance. Do we actually evaluate communication or do we evaluate correct use of vocabulary and grammar?

What sort of speaking tests should we be doing?
Last summer, I observed two young French girls outside an ice-cream shop in Brighton. They were discussing buying some ice-creams. They went into the shop. One of the girls said, "It is possible we can have two ice-cream?" The shopkeeper did not try to correct their errors. He was much more interested in selling ice-cream. He smiled and said "Yes, of course." He walked to the freezer cabinet and said "Which ice-creams would you like?" Later the girls left the shop with their ice-creams.

How does this story relate to speaking tests? It is a story of achievement. At the beginning the girls were outside the shop needing ice-cream. At the end, they had satisfied their need. This had been achieved through the use of English. Their English was less than perfect but they achieved their aim. They had succeeded in a 'real life' test of their speaking skills.

We claim that, in our teaching, our aim is communication. Communication is not just exchanging information. It is using language to achieve some practical purpose. When we test speaking skills, do our students have practical tasks to achieve? Do we measure our students' ability to communicate in English or are we more concerned with pronunciation and (so-called) grammatical accuracy?

And which standards of grammatical accuracy are we using? We know that spoken and written English do not follow the same grammatical conventions. For example, the recently published *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*[1], says that, in spontaneous speech between native speakers, 'sentences do not realistically exist'.

At lower levels, we should measure what students can do in English – that

is what they can achieve. As the students become more competent, we can begin to judge how well they do it.

Using tasks to test speaking skills

Through courses like *Cutting Edge*[2], we are accustomed to using different kinds of communicative tasks in our teaching. Why should we not use the same type of task in our testing? Why should speaking tests always be done individually rather than in pairs or small groups? At beginner/elementary level, we can use simple information exchange activities found in many text books. At intermediate levels and above we can use reports on project work such as those we find in the *Cutting Edge* series. Business students can roleplay situations from their textbooks. Case studies, such as those we find in *Market Leader*[3], can be an excellent resource for both roleplays and presentations.

Measuring oral performance: which standard?

During the round table on this topic at the TESOL conference in Paris in November 2000, one of the points raised by a conference participant was the standard by which oral performance (speaking in particular) should be judged.

This question is one which has generally been avoided by both teachers and testers. When testers have been forced to declare a standard, they have usually said 'native speaker'. But which native speaker? And why a native speaker at all?

When we are asked to evaluate whether a student's language production is 'comprehensible', what do we mean? Comprehensible to an English language teacher who is accustomed to hearing French speakers of English? Comprehensible to a ticket clerk in a noisy railway station in south London? Comprehensible to a group of Egyptian business people?

These questions are too difficult to answer and it is probably beyond the competence of most teachers to judge whether a Mexican Car Rental Executive would be able to understand a particular student's utterance.

However, we all have a fair idea of competence in 'International English' through listening to politicians, sports people, and others speaking English

on the radio and TV. Perhaps our 'acceptable standard' should be closer to this experience.

Our language teaching aim is not to produce native speakers of English but competent non-native speakers of English. Perhaps our intermediate level students should be able to speak English as fluently as Davide Ginola and our advanced students with the precision of Romano Prodi.

Summary

In this paper I have tried to review some general points about the nature of testing and evaluation, particularly as they apply to the testing of listening and speaking. I have contrasted the aims of progress tests and achievement tests in the light of current attitudes to English language teaching.

In language teaching we intend to achieve changes in behaviour by giving our students new skills. Do our systems of evaluation really match those aims? Currently, I fear they do not.

Notes

1 Biber, Douglas, et al. *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*, Harlow, Longman 2000
2 Cunningham, Sarah, and Moor, Peter, *Cutting Edge* Harlow, Longman 1998
3 Cotton, David, Falvey, David and Kent, Simon *Market Leader* Harlow, Longman 2000

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