

PARADIGMS ON TESTING SPEAKING AT A BA IN LANGUAGE TEACHING PROGRAM

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Abstract

Contemporary and future foreign language teachers are expected to possess the abilities to teach consistently with current trends in foreign language teaching. In an ideal world, student speakers of other languages enrolling in an English language teaching BA would already be fluent and competent in the foreign language. The reality on the other hand is very different. The educational institution's objective is to develop teachers of English. However, in many Mexican educational institutions very few students possess, at the beginning of their university studies, the necessary linguistic ability to become competent foreign language teachers. Entrance requirements in Mexican educational institutions are set according to the perceptions of the faculty involved in the design of the program. In Durango, the BA candidates take a language exam which includes an oral interview. The purpose of this interview is to determine whether or not the candidate has the minimum linguistic competences to take core curriculum and elective classes in the target language after his first year of studies. Despite students passing the entrance exams, teachers observed that a considerable amount of learners are unable to actively participate in class when fluent speaking is required. This can be attributed to their notably deficient speaking abilities. This paper will look into the BA oral entrance interview at the UJED and will present some suggested changes due to its perceived flaws.

Introduction

Language tests are applied for different purposes. Schools apply tests for making decisions on a variety of situations. They can be used for deciding which course is the most appropriate for students to enroll in. They can also be used for identifying the strong or weak areas of a group of learners at the beginning of a term. However, they are perhaps more commonly applied for evaluating the outcomes after a learning period. The results of these exams will be providing the teacher with information which will be used for making decisions. Learners will be affected by the decisions taken based of the test results. These decisions will be important for learners to the extent that they have an impact in their lives (Bachman and Palmer: 1996).

However, the results of a school entrance exam will probably have a bigger impact on test takers' lives than in the previously mentioned testing situations. Institutions which require students to be able to use the language for academic purposes will very likely have a language

entrance requirement. Fulfilling entrance requirements will be determinant to the beginning of their academic life. This requirement will be measured through a language exam. Candidates for the School of Languages from the UJED are required to take a language exam to be admitted to the BA TESOL program.

Tests are designed to provide a measure in a given situation. An exam applied in an alien context, will not be useful. Despite the unquestionable quality of a test, the results will not be beneficial if they are not applied in the context for which they were initially designed for. A test will provide information for the intended purpose provided that it is designed considering the language content or skills intended to be measured.

English language teaching has and continues to be a pillar in educational policy. Much has changed with respect to the languages' degree of importance in Mexico. Universities have begun to change the status of the subject from an elective to a core curriculum class. At the Escuela de Lenguas in Durango, Durango Mexico, at Juarez State University (UJED), English is of great importance. The language school (formerly CUAAL-UJED) began offering a BA in TESOL in 2008. Upon the graduation of the first generation it was observed that the graduating class's level of language proficiency was below expectations in language proficiency. Two questions arose from this observation: one regarding the appropriacy of English classes and the other one with regards to the admissions and student selection process. This investigation concentrates on the oral language proficiency aspect of initial candidate assessment. Even though both aspects of the language proficiency assessment are important, we lay a heavier emphasis on spoken ability. Thornbury points out that a "...placement test that includes no spoken component provides an inadequate basis for assessing speaking, and the same can be said for any test of overall language proficiency..." (2011, p. 124). Therefore, testing speaking ability in the student admission process is of great importance.

The problem / context

The aim of any educational institution should be to foster the learning of its students to the highest possible standard. In an effort to maintain and uphold a high standard there are certain criteria that should be exercised with regards to the admissions and student selection processes. In that respect all students who desire to enroll in the BA at UJED's school of languages have to undergo an evaluation of English language proficiency. The evaluation has two main components. The written component is divided in two parts. Selected sections of an online placement exam based on the CEFR competences and writing a short text constitute the written exam. The sections of the computerized exam test reading, language structure and vocabulary. The results are presented to the candidate using the descriptors set for by the Common European Framework (CEF) (Council of Europe, 2001)(A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2). The other component is an individual interview. The desired entrance level was set to B1 of the CEF (See descriptors in Appendix 1). The oral section is an individual interview.

Despite students passing the entrance exams, teachers observed that a considerable amount of learners are unable to actively participate in class when fluent speaking is required. This, as has been put forth by core and foreign language teachers, can be attributed to their notably deficient speaking abilities.

As was mentioned previously, the level of language proficiency for a significant number of students is low. There are two key aspects that should be mentioned before continuing. One, this low level of language is not limited to one semester. It is spread out unevenly within the eight semesters of the program; and two, the low level of language is not characteristic of the entire group as language development and core content teachers have singled out the struggling students. As this anomaly is present throughout the eight semesters of the career, it is suggested that it originated and has continued to exist from the beginning of the career in 2008. While there may be many reasons why this is happening, a proactive approach towards improving the situation would be to look in more depth at the entry language proficiency requirements and the tools that have been used to assess the candidates for the BA in TESOL, particularly the instrument dedicated at assessing their oral production in English. At this point it was decided that the actual instrument needed to be analyzed. A starting point was to look at the entry and exit level student profiles, this with the intention of establishing a representation of the progress BA students are expected to make throughout their journey in the program. Upon an analysis of the evaluation process of language assessment, it was suggested that the oral interview could possibly be part of the problem.

Attention was focused to the admission or student selection process. Given that the written part of the testing instrument is objectively marked by the computer, it was the oral interview which was to be looked at. A closer look at the oral interview instrument suggested that the competences the student needed to successfully participate in all classroom tasks and activities were not being sufficiently considered.

The current interview

As part of the admission requirements to the BA program, students must undergo an evaluation. This is a two part process, an online written evaluation and an oral interview. The online evaluation's purpose is to give a general idea about the applicants' general proficiency on the areas of grammar, vocabulary and reading. The purpose of the interview is to evaluate candidates' competences in terms of oral production and identify whether the candidates have the desired entry profile in terms of what the program of the BA states. Two staff members are randomly assigned to participate in the interview. The interview is applied having an interlocutor whose role is mainly to interact with the candidate and the evaluator, who marks the candidate's oral production against the criteria for this purpose. The evaluator also takes note of the most relevant information the candidate gives for further use.

The interview consists of a set of questions that the candidate must answer freely. He is asked general information about himself, what his reasons for participating in the BA are, whether he has any teaching experience and what he perceives himself doing in five years time. Almost all the interview follows the same interaction pattern. The interviewer asks the question and the candidate responds with personal information. The candidate is restricted to a passive role, where he generates the language he is prompted to respond to. The candidate is expected to give extended answers, if this does not happen the interlocutor can try to prompt the candidate in order to retrieve more information or encourage the candidate to speak. The interview ends encouraging the candidate to ask about his doubts related to the educational program. However brief, this last part gives the candidate the opportunity to take a more active role and demonstrate his abilities as initiator of the interaction. However, this does not always have the desired result for various reasons. Whether it would be fear, nervousness, or just a simple lack of knowledge of the language some candidates say they do not have any questions and there is no information they want to know. As a result, the opportunity to verify the candidates' ability to initiate the interaction and demonstrate the ability to have doubts clarified is vanished.

Although this particular tool does focus on the standard that the entry profile requires in terms of language proficiency one of the perceived weaknesses is its lack of focus on the specific competences particularly needed so that students can perform adequately in the core subjects of the BA. Thus, while it gives a very general picture of what the candidate is able to do, the tool is not giving enough information on what could be the most critical competences the candidates should have before being admitted to the BA.

The proposed oral evaluation instrument

Test results are very frequently expressed in scores. These in turn are interpreted as indicators of the candidate's language ability. The validity of these interpretations need to be justified in terms of the degree to which they are meaningful and appropriate for the test situation. Test designers cannot plainly argue the testing instrument is valid. It is necessary to provide evidence of the relation between the test content and the domain of the intended use of the language. For a score from any evaluation to be justified, we need to make sure that the results obtained reflect the areas of language ability that we want to measure (Bachman and Palmer 1996). It is necessary then, that every activity in the oral evaluation instrument to be proposed derives directly from the competences necessary for students to succeed in classroom interaction. To the extent that the competences measured through the instrument reflect the perceived language ability needed to successfully participate in core classes, the more valid the interpretations made based on test scores will be.

The language context in which the students are expected to use the foreign language is one and several at the same time. That is, the overall context is the classroom. However, not all core classes require the same language abilities to participate, making these classroom contexts somehow different one from the other. To define the construct on which to build the content of

the instrument it was necessary to compile the language competences perceived by core and foreign language teachers to be needed for students to favorably take part in the classrooms' tasks and activities. Thus, eleven, from a total of 15 BA teachers were asked which functions of the language students would need in order to be able to successfully participate orally in their classes. This to gain a deeper understanding of what the teachers consider most important in terms of classroom interaction or what could also be called basic competences.

The data obtained shows that most of the teachers coincide that students should be able to:

- communicate their ideas and thoughts clearly
- discuss familiar topics
- summarize and discuss the contents of a written text
- narrate short stories and talk about past experiences
- sustain interaction with peers and the teacher
- politely express agreement and disagreement
- formulate questions to clarify and/or confirm understanding
- carry out presentations on a given topic

According to Underhill, N. (1987) an interview which is very controlled by the interlocutor could be a good evaluation tool, however, it also mentions that at higher levels, it might not elicit the best of the student's language, therefore the interviewer must be ready to allow the student to take control of part of the interaction so that there could be an evidence of the student's conversational skills. An instrument that focuses on these more specific competences (basic competences) would not only have a higher level of validity, but it would also change the interaction pattern between the interlocutor and the candidate, increasing the possibilities for the evaluator to see a wider picture of the communicative competence the candidate presents. For starters, the interview format would necessarily be changed since it provides a very limited range of interaction which can also be a source of stress for the candidate. A task oriented examination would better attain the purpose of eliciting language from the candidate in which he can demonstrate his level of competence on knowledge, use and understanding of the spoken language.

While the importance of the language competences just mentioned above is utterly undeniable, the general competences the Educational Program (EP) from which the BA emerges cannot be neglected either. The program states that the students should be able to perform at a B1 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF) (Council of Europe, 2001), and this, together with the basic competences should be the starting point for the creation of the assessment criteria in order to preserve content validity. Thornbury, S (2011) states that there are two main ways of assessing a student's speaking ability, either by giving it a single score on the basis of an overall impression, which he calls holistic scoring, or giving a separate score for different aspects of the task (analytical scoring). In this particular case,

analytical scoring would be the most suitable way of assessing both the basic competences and the overall level of proficiency.

With the purpose of making sure that the tool being created will evaluate specifically the basic competences, a set of communicative activities was devised. Each of these activities seeks to elicit language production that would evidence the candidate's level of competence. The CEF (Council of Europe, 2001) states that in order for the instrument to be valid the evaluation should produce data in a varied range of discourse types. It also gives an example of a speaking test that observes the following order: a simulated conversation that works as a warm up; an informal discussion in which the candidate declares an interest; a transaction phase simulating a telephone information seeking activity; a production phase based on a written report the candidate has previously written; and a goal-oriented co-operation which is a consensus task between candidates. This particular example was adapted to the context of our exam. The logic of the activities, their nature, and their sequencing are described in the following table:

CEF Example	Overall test specifications	Competences expressed by the teachers	Time
Simulated conversation----- warm up	The interlocutor asks questions about the candidate's personal information, based on a set of pre-prepared questions which would include the topics of: family, likes and dislikes, hobbies, etc.	discuss familiar topics	1 min
Informal discussion--- issues in which the candidate declares interest	The interlocutor will provide the candidate with a set of four images. The candidate will use the images as support to tell a story.	narrate short stories and talk about past experiences	2 min
Transaction phase---- information seeking activity---simulated face to face telephone conversation	The interlocutor presents the candidate with a phrase expressing an opinion. Then asks the candidate to explain if he agrees or disagrees with the phrase and to justify his opinion. The interlocutor will ask follow up questions if necessary.	politely express agreement and disagreement communicate their ideas and thoughts clearly	2 min
goal-oriented co-operation---- a consensus task between candidates	The interlocutor presents the candidate with a class schedule that needs completing. The candidate will ask the interlocutor for the missing information and will try to complete the schedule.	sustain interaction with peers and teacher formulate questions to clarify and/or confirm understanding	3 min
Production phase----	The interlocutor asks the candidate to	summarize and discuss	2 min

based upon a written report in which the candidate gives a description of his/her academic field and plans	explain what the written essay he was asked to complete before oral evaluation was about and what was his answer.	the contents of a written text carry out presentations on a given topic	
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Communicative Language Ability (CLA) in the words of Backman, L. F. (1990) is described as “consisting of both knowledge, or competence, and the capacity for implementing, or executing that competence in appropriate, contextualized communicative use”. With this in mind, the tasks outlined above try to contextualize the use of the language in a realistic way.

The CEF (2001) makes an important distinction between descriptors of communicative activities, and descriptions of aspects of proficiency related to particular competences. The first is recommended when there is an interest in evaluating the competences that can be observed overall from the execution of the tasks has elicited. The second one is particularly suitable when the aim is to focus on specific tasks the candidates should be able to complete. For the purpose of this tool, both types of descriptors would be needed, since the assessment needs to be both holistic when trying to assess the competences the CEF B1 level describes, and analytically, when trying to assess the basic competences. Therefore, there should be two different assessment grids, one for holistic assessment, and one for analytical assessment.

Conclusions

Student admissions at the school of languages has recently come under scrutiny. Academic bodies have taken an interest in the processes and instruments used to assess candidate students language proficiency. Several reasons have brought this about. The main one being that students of the BA program have not been able make use of their academic abilities due to the limited range and control of the language. The collateral effects of this are highly relevant. Students are not only unable to carry out tasks or activities within each of their classes but group dynamics suffer significantly. Teachers are also affected as the struggling students consume more than their share of teacher attention rendering the teacher powerless to conduct and present class content.

The importance of a functional, applicable, moldable instrument to assess language proficiency that is supported by a high construct validity is desirable. This investigation is one of several steps, it is believed, will be necessary in the design of a reputable and functional language assessment tool. However, we aware that even though the tool may reduce the amount of struggling students accepted into the BA program with deficient language abilities, it will not guaranty a linguistically competent level B1 students as outlined in the entry level student profile.

References

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Appendix 1

CEF B1 general descriptors

Spoken interaction (spontaneous, short turns)	I can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events).
Spoken production (prepared, long turns)	I can connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe experiences and events, my dreams, hopes and ambitions. I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. I can narrate a story or relate the plot of a book or film and describe my reactions.