

Testing Oral Interaction Between Bands Three and Five

**Peter Corbett and*

***Asst.Prof.Dr.Vinit Phinit-Akson*

1. Introduction

In testing English as a foreign language (EFL), the evaluation of the spoken component is often most controversial. Not only does the examiner (or interviewer) have to cope with dialectical and other linguistic variations but such evaluation can be rather subjective.

In this article, Peter Corbett [a former British Council lecturer in ESL and Testing Coordinator, British Council, English Language Centre, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia] describes a test designed to assess the level of oral interaction of students of the English Language Centre [at King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia] Course 101 [a one semester course] for students from the Faculty of Meteorology and Environmental Studies [MES].

The test took the form of an interview/discussion during which questions based on the science content of Course 101 were used to test the oral interaction skills of students in small groups.

All the thirty-three students tested were in the eighth week of the 101 Course at the time of the Oral Interaction test. They were all Undergraduates and came largely from Saudi Arabia [29] with the remainder coming from Yemini [3] and Pakistan [1]. On entry to the ELC, the students had all taken a placement test consisting of a grammar/vocabulary test and a writing test.

2. Aims of the test

The test was intended to conform to specific guidelines. These were as follows:

2.1 The test should have normal status for teachers and students and be a routine part of the course.

2.2 It should be relevant to the students' needs and interests.

2.3 It should relate to the objectives of the course and to the materials used and approach followed.

*Former British Council Lecturer in ESL and Testing Coordinator.

**Language Institute, Dhurakijpundit University, Former Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, Head, English Department and Foreign Relations Department : Ph.D. (Linguistics), T.E.S.O.L. Certificate, University of Pittsburgh, U.S.A.

2.4 It should encourage the students to think about their purpose in learning English and their attitudes towards their English studies.

2.5 It should provide results which reflect the students' ability to speak and understand English in a controlled communicative situation.

3. Procedure

3.1 The test took place in class time.

3.2 The students were informed that the test would take the form of an interview/discussion, during which they would be asked questions on the work that had been done on the course.

3.3 Four members of staff were involved, all of whom taught on the 101 course. Each interview was attended by two members of staff, one teacher acting as the main interviewer while the main role of

the second teacher was to act as assessor, although he was not prevented from asking questions or joining in the conversation.

3.4 The students were interviewed in eleven groups, each group containing three students. The groups were formed on a random basis.

3.5 The questions used were taken from a list, but different selections from the list were made for each group of students. The list which follows gives those questions which were asked three or more times.*

3.6 The interview / discussion for each group lasted for fifteen minutes. The approach was informal, since the aim was to use the questions as a stimulus to further discussion in order to evaluate the students' oral ability, rather than to assess their knowledge of scientific content. Questions were asked

*List of Test Questions

	Times asked
(a) Maths : numbers and expressions	
How many digits are there in the number eleven?	4
What is another name for zero?	6
Is twenty-third a cardinal or an ordinal number?	3
What is addition used for? Give examples.	3
What is the sum of nine and three?	6
What are the factors of six?	3
What is the product of six and five?	6
What is the difference between the US billion and the UK billion?	4
What does the fraction $7/8$ show? Explain it.	5
(b) Life processes	
What are some examples of life processes?	4
Where does cellular respiration take place?	3
What is the difference between a living and a non-living thing?	6
Where do plants get their food from?	3
What is the difference between breathing and cellular respiration?	3
What happens when a molecule of ATP breaks down?	5

(c) Atomic structure

What is an electron?	8
What is a proton?	6
What is the charge on a neutron?	4
What is atomic number?	5
What is the charge of the nucleus?	5
What is the difference between an atom and an ion?	3
How many neutrons are there in hydrogen?	5
What is the similarity between ${}^9\text{F}$, ${}^{17}\text{Cl}$ and ${}^{35}\text{Br}$?	6

of specific students, but if a question could not be answered by one member of the group, it was thrown open to other members. Interchange between members of the group was allowed.

4. Evaluation of student communicative performance

Evaluation was carried out by the interviewer and assessor immediately after the completion of each interview. The performance of individual students was evaluated using the British Council Miniplatform Interview (MPI) description of performance levels. This specifies eight bands, Band one indicating *No functional communication in the language* and Band eight indicating *Complete, appropriate, fluent, effective communication*. For the purposes of this test, Bands three to five only were referred to.

The MPI description of performance at these band levels is as follows:

BAND 5 – Communication in connected utterances now spontaneous and appropriate to a wide range of conversational topics.

- Can handle and develop new elements in conversation, beginning real “give and take” with interlocutor.

- Interaction close to normal speed, only occasional hesitation.
- Pronunciation and grammatical control – has some difficulty only in more complex constructions.

BAND 4 – Communication now is connected, longer utterances.

- Discussion of immediately relevant situations possible.
- Can deal in a limited way with unpredictable elements.
- Unlikely to initiate in conversation.
- Interaction still slow and usually hesitant. Pronunciation and grammatical control adequate for basic construction, with complex construction.

BAND 3 – Communication limited to short utterances but simple information and ideas can be dealt with.

- Reliant on well-rehearsed basic conversational elements.
- Requires cooperative sympathetic interlocutor.
- Needs time and effort to take in and make every utterance.

- Pronunciation and grammatical control limited.

Students whose performance fell midway between two bands were awarded half bands. Thus band four point five indicates a student whose performance was midway between bands four and five.

VERY GOOD	Band 4.5
GOOD	Band 4
FAIR	Band 3.5
POOR	Band 3 or below

The results of the oral interaction test were compared with the results of the students' mid-term test which was given in the same week. This was a written examination which consisted of a reading text with comprehension questions, questions designed to test dictionary usage and the production of a written report of a science experiment from visual input.

5. Results

5.1 The results of the oral interaction test are given below:

Band	No. of students
5	0
4.5	6
4	13
3.5	13
3 or below	1

5.2 Comparison between oral interaction test and written examination:

5.2.1 Six students were placed at band four point five in the oral interaction test. Of these

six students, five gained 50% or above in the written examination and one scored 46%

5.2.2 Thirteen students were placed at band four. Of these, eleven gained 50% or above in the written examination and the remaining two failed.

5.2.3 Of the thirteen students who were assessed at band three point five nine failed the written examination, three passed, and one achieved a good pass (72%)

5.2.4 The student who was not considered to be above band three level in the oral test also did badly in the written test (19%)

6. Comments

The organization of the students in groups for the oral interaction test appeared to have several advantages.

It encouraged a more relaxed and natural communicative situation, with more similarity to normal classroom procedures than the situation whereby individual students are interviewed alone. Conversation was possible not only between the interviewer and one student, but also within the group of students. It was also slightly less time-consuming than individual interviews. The use of content questions provided a useful context for the interview and allowed the interview/discussion to relate to the work that had been covered in the course. In general, in both timing and content the test appeared to be a useful complement to the written mid-term test. ❖❖

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Mini-Platform Interview Description Scale. Bangkok : British Council, English Language Services Department, 1981.