HOKKAIDO UNIVERSITY

Title	Oral Proficiency Test in the English Speaking Course in Hokkaido University
Author(s)	Joseph, Tomei
Citation	高等教育ジャーナル, 3, 162-166
Issue Date	1998
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/29830
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	3_P162-166.pdf

Hokkaido University Collection of Scholarly and Academic Papers : HUSCAP

Oral Proficiency Test in the English Speaking Course in Hokkaido University

Joseph Tomei*
Institute of Language and Culture Studies, Hokkaido University

Abstract—For the general education course of Hokkaido University, the foreign lecturers have developed the Hokudai Oral Proficiency Test (HOPT) in order to assure minimum level of oral proficiency in English among students. The test incorporates a number of interesting features that are designed to target specific weakpoints of Japanese students as well as make the test logistically feasible. We are currently testing all of the students who take the elective English speaking course (approximately 600+ students per term) and we hope that a test such as this could be instituted as a university wide requirement for finishing the general education requirement. This report will give a general idea of the test and the impact it has had on other parts of our own teaching.

1. INTRODUCTION

As recognition of communicative ability as an important facet of foreign language education increases, a testing instrument that evaluates genuine interaction is sought (Morrow, 1986). While recognizing that communicative proficiency cannot be measured on a strictly objective scale, the testing of oral communicative ability has nevertheless emerged as a valuable and desirable tool (Weir, 1990).

As of April 1994, students entering Japanese high school were greeted with a new curriculum that placed much more emphasis on oral communication compared to the curriculum that preceded it. Thus, students entering university as of April 1997 will have completed at least one full year course in oral English during their high school education (Gould, Madeley & Carter, 1993a; Gould, Madeley & Carter, 1993b). Accordingly, a need has arisen to meet the new expectations and abilities of first year students who will enter university with more communicative training behind them (see Nishihori & Stapleton, 1995, for a more detailed discussion of these issues).

A need was felt for an evaluative instrument for spoken communication at Hokkaido University as a way to provide more consistency across courses with different instructors. A test aims to bring several benefits to the English program at the first year level:

(1) acknowledge the shift to a more communicative cur riculum
(2) set a minimum standard of oral proficiency for all first-year students.
(3) establish a positive backwash for future years
(4) indicate directions for future curriculums
(5) enable all students to experience an oral exam

With these goals in mind, the foreign lecturers of the Department of Language and Culture Studies formulated the Hokudai Oral Proficiency Test (HOPT). This term we have conducted the fourth HOPT and with this administration, we will have interviewed over 2,000 Hokkaido University students from all departments, evaluating them for their ability to use English to communicate their own ideas and thoughts to other students. In an earlier paper, (Brown, Glick, Holst, Stapleton and Tomei, 1995), the test as it was first developed along with a background of the oral English classes at Hokkaido University was discussed. In the following paper, I would like to outline the test instrument in its current form and then discuss some of the aspects that makes this test unique.

Given the space limitations of this paper, there is insufficient scope to detail the relationship to wider trends in proficiency based instruction. However, the test is founded on what has been termed the communicative approach to language teaching (for an overview, see Brumfit and Johnson, 1979). Also, because the HOPT is designed for the specific situation we find at Hokudai, all of the aspects may not be transferable to other institutional settings.

2. THE CURRENT TEST INSTRUMENT

*) Correspondence: Institute of Language and Culture Studies, Hokkaido University, Sapporo 060-0817, JAPAN

The test is a test of three students from different classes who are brought together. By having the students come from different classes, we make it very probable that the students will be speaking to students they don't know. To further ensure objectivity, the students are tested by a teacher who is not their E3 teacher. The students sign up for the interviews and are assigned dynamically, i.e. on the day of the test. This way, students are randomly distributed and do not know who they will be partnered with until they walk into the interview room. The teacher testing them does not take part in the conversation, only starting and stopping the students.

The test is divided into two parts:

2.1 PART 1

In this portion of the test, students are given a randomly selected topic from the following list:

- •Family and friends
- •Food and drink
- •Out of class activities
- •Sports
- •End of term vacation
- •Hometown

These topics have been chose for both their familiarity to the students, who then use this topic as a starting point for their conversation and for their relation to classroom lessons that the foreign lecturers conduct. Students are told that the subject is only a starting point, so the conversation may move to different topics. The students are asked to speak for 5-7 minutes while the teacher evaluates them. The aim of this section is to have students both give information about themselves and ask questions of others, all in English.

2.2 PART 2

During the registration for the test on the day of the interview, the students are asked to view a short video and take notes using a supplied form (Appendix 1). The video is a presentation of 4 vacation packages, to London,Tokyo, Hawaii, and Okinawa. The students are then expected to take that information, using the form provided, and discuss their opinions as to which vacation is the best, again while the teacher evaluates them. There is no right answer. The purpose of this section is to have students express their opinions and learn to challenge the opinion of others.

2.3 GRADING CRITERIA

The grading is done on three bands, fail, pass, and honors. The requirements for a pass are cast not so much in terms of accuracy or grammatical structures, but in terms of information given and received (Appendix 2). This emphasizes the use of skills such as restatement, circumlocution, and conversational repair over questions of absolute mastery over particular structures and vocabulary. This emphasis encourages students to be more communicative and cognizant of the needs of the addressee, a particular problem in the Japanese students. (see Anderson, 1993 and Nozaki, 1993 for a discussion of these problems)

The honors band represents both excellent and above average grades. In terms of the ACTFL proficiency requirements (taken from Omaggio Hadley, 1993), the honors band can be described as ranging from high intermediate to superior. Though this is a wide range of abilities, the intent is to make the test manageable for the interviewing teacher. In presentations concerning the HOPT, it has been likened to a driving test, in that a driving test does not seek to classify all the people who take the test, but merely sets to establish the minimum requirements for passing the test. Put another way, while a driving test examiner may note that a examinee is an excellent driver, we would not expect that examiner to identify that driver as a potential F1 driver. This emphasis on the line between pass and fail allows the examiner to concentrate on the borderline cases. This also relieves the examiner of a considerable burden, a point that figures in the logistics of administering the test.

2.4 CONNECTION WITH CURRENT E3 CLASSES

The test is introduced as a separate pass/fail requirement of the E3 classes. That means that no matter how well a student may do in the class, a failing grade will result in a failure of E3. However, the test is not presented as a separate entity. In our classes, we inform the students of the test and give them opportunities to practice for the test by speaking with their peers. We have also developed a safety net so that students who might have difficulties passing the test are identified and can be given extra help. This consists of a warning letter and a weekly voluntary remedial course.

2.5 UNIQUE ASPECTS OF THE HOPT

The general model for oral proficiency interviews has been the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) (for an detailed discussion of the test procedures and philosophy behind the instrument, see Buck, Byrnes and Thompson, 1989) This format is based on a face-to-face conversation lasting from 10 to 25 minutes, with the interviewer carefully guiding the conversation to a point where the interviewee cannot sustain the conversation, thus establishing the upper limit of the interviewee's ability. While this may oversimplify the test, it highlights two important aspects. The first is that the OPI is very 'labor' intensive, in that the interviewing teacher must be a fully committed partner in the conversation. Next, the mechanism for determining a student's ability is one which requires the student to fail. Other authors have pointed out that this is a weakpoint of the test (Savignon, 1985; Bachman and Savingnon, 1986). The problems with threatened or perceived loss of face that the OPI engenders is a particular weakpoint for Japanese students because of the cultural emphasis on social esteem. In the HOPT test, because it is unnecessary to determine the

exact ability of the students, both of these troublesome aspects are avoided.

The aspect that is probably most different from other interview instruments is the simultaneous interviewing of three students. In face-to-face interviews or in paired interviews, care must be taken to avoid rote memorization of exchanges or whole dialogues. This is a particular problem among Japanese students because the often have highly developed memorization skills. The randomized, three student groups make it virtually impossible for students to use memorized exchanges even given that the topics in known in advance. In addition, in this more dynamic situation, the teacher can sit back and evaluate students rather than being simultaneously a conversation partner and an evaluator. Furthermore, the use of three students creates a more natural setting where abilities to express ideas and handle social demands can be not only more easily examined, but can be presented in the classroom as having a direct and useful application. This type of situation is probably more realistic because students will more likely use English as a lingua franca to speak to other non-native speakers rather than to native speakers.

The final advantage with the use of three student conversation groups is that it allows for more students to be interviewed in a shorter period of time. To give an idea of the number of students that can be handled by a test formatted this way, the most recent administration of the HOPT, which consisted of 6 foreign lecturers and on person providing administrative support, processed about 600 students in one eight hour day.

2.6 THE EFFECT OF THE HOPT ON THE CLASSROOM

While subjective, I feel that the HOPT has had several beneficial effects in the classroom. The first is that it has allowed me to be less concerned about making a determination of pass or fail based on classroom performance while allowing me to devote more attention to the determination of passing grades, making those grades more meaningful to the students. Furthermore, the dichotomy between teacher and evaluator is eliminated, allowing me to concentrate on my role in the classroom as teacher and take on the objective role of evaluator for the test.

A second beneficial aspect is that it has allowed me to concentrate on classroom materials and methodology that directly support the acquisition of conversational ability. By sharpening my materials and methodology, I feel that I have become a better teacher.

The most important beneficial effect is that the test has dramatically improved student participation in class. Because the test can be passed by acquiring a relatively easily defined set of conversation skills, in class practice becomes much more meaningful, with students seeing the direct relationship between acquisition of conversational ability and passing the test.

3. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have given a brief description of the Hokudai Oral Proficiency Test and discussed some of the unique aspects of the test. I then described how the test has affected not only student work but my own teaching in the classroom. Current efforts are to have the test instituted as an exit requirement for the general education course. It is hoped that this would represent a step towards standardizing the English language curriculum for the general education course in a way that complements the newly promulgated Monbusho guidelines for study. More importantly, it would give a measure of autonomy and responsibility to the student. These are ambitious goals, but the preliminary signs have been very promising.

REFERENCES

Anderson, F. E. (1993), “The Enigma of the College Classroom: Nails that Don't Stick Up.” in Wadden, P. ed., A Handbook for Teaching English at Japanese Colleges and Universities. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Bachman, L. and Savignon, S. J., (1986), “The evaluation of communicative language proficiency: A critique of the ACTFL oral interview,” *Modern Language Journal* **69**, 129-142

Brown, C., Glick, C., Holst, M., Stapleton, P., and Tomei, J. (1995), “Interview testing for oral proficiency: a pilot test for the Hokudai Oral Proficiency Test (HOPT),” *The Journal of Language and Culture Studies* **30**(1), 219-238

Brumfit, C. J. and Johnson, K. eds. (1979), “The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching.” Oxford: Oxford University Press

Buck, K., Byrnes, H., and Thompson, I. eds. (1989), “The ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview Tester Training Manual.” Yonkers, N. Y.: ACTFL

Gould, R., Madeley, C., and Carter, N. (1993a), “The New Monbusho Guidelines,” *The Language Teacher* **17**(6), 3-5

Gould, R., Madeley, C., and Carter, N. (1993b), “The New Monbusho Guidelines, Part Two,” *The Language Teacher* **17**(11), 3-7, 39

Gould, R., Madeley, C., and Carter, N. (1994), “The New Monbusho Guidelines, Part Three,” *The Language Teacher* **18**(1), 4-7

Morrow, K. (1986), “The evaluation of tests of communicative performance,” in Portal, M. ed., Innovations in Language Testing. Windsor: NFER-Nelson

Nishihori, Y., and Stapleton, P. (1995), “Communicative study materials for the proposed course revision in

1997: A rationale," *The Journal of Language and Culture Studies* **28**(1), 181-209

Nozaki, K. N. (1993), "The Japanese Student and the Foreign Teacher," in Wadden, P. ed., A Handbook for Teaching English at Japanese Colleges and Universities. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Omaggio Hadley, A. (1993), Teaching Language in Context. Boston: Heinle and Heinle

Savignon, S. J. (1985), "Evaluation of communicative competence: The ACTFL provisional proficiency guidelines," *Modern Language Journal* **69**, 129-142

Appendix 1

Naijin Travel

Where you're part of the gang!!

Vacation 1

to: _____

_____ nights and _____ days

breakfast lunch dinner

price _____

Highlights _____

_____

notes _____

_____

Vacation 2

to: _____

_____ nights and _____ days

breakfast lunch dinner

price _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Vacation 3

to: _____

_____ nights and _____ days

breakfast lunch dinner

price _____

Highlights _____

_____

notes _____

_____

Vacation 4

to: _____

_____ nights and _____ days

breakfast lunch dinner

price _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Appendix 2

How the interviews will be graded

Grade	Information Given	Information received/requested	Communication Skills	Discussion Skills
Honors	Gives the information requested and always adds more information that keeps the conversation.	Asks for information that keeps the conversation going and acts on previous information.	Responds in an appropriate way to the conversation. Helps others when they have difficulties by restating or rephrasing.	Participates actively in the discussion and easily puts across his/her own view, as well as responding to the others' viewpoints.
Pass	Gives information that is asked and sometimes gives more information.	Asks for information but doesn't always ask for follow up information.	Participates in conversation, but does not lead. Does not always help partners when communication breaks down.	Presents viewpoint, but only gives very basic explanations. Does not challenge others' viewpoint.
Fail	Gives only what is asked for and no more. Answers are very short or not understandable by the interviewer.	Requests little or no information. Questions are only single questions with no follow up question for more information.	Often only listens to conversation, making no attempt to enter. If communication breaks down, does not do anything to restart the conversation.	Hardly participates in the discussion at all. Only gives opinions when asked and does not explain them.