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A comparison of students' performance in face-to-face and virtual reality oral tests

For the past decades, computer technology has been increasingly used in all aspects of language testing, including test design and development, test administration, scoring, and analysis in order to accurately measure one's second language speaking ability (Chapelle & Douglas, 2006). Although assessing oral language proficiency via computers or other forms of multimedia technology has been a popular trend in the fiend of language testing, it has some limitations. Some studies have found that semi-direct interviews such as tape-mediated interview (e.g., SOPI) elicit different language functions and skills (Shohamy, 1994; van Lier, 1989). More importantly, talking to the computer or tape-recorder does not measure interactional competence, that is, how a person manages a conversation in real contexts.

In light of these issues, it seems timely to develop an interactive speaking assessment, in which test takers can discuss topics with each other using a computer (Ockey, 2009). One of the possible platforms could be a Virtual Reality (VR), which provides immersive environment thus increasing the authenticity of the situation (Huang, Rauch, & Liaw, 2010; Ong & Mannan, 2004). The purpose of the present study is to explore if a VR could be a suitable platform for second language assessment. It specifically compares students' performance in a VR oral test and a face-to-face oral test. A total of 25 KFL students enrolled in a private institution in the southwestern part of the United States participated in the study. The participants took two sets of face-to-face and VR tests after receiving training in the VR Data was drawn from students' test scores, a survey asking their perceptions towards the two testing modes, conversational analysis of their speaking test scripts, and interviews. Theoretically, the present study adds valuable knowledge to second language testing theory by providing validity evidence of a VR oral test. Practically, the study provides practical implications for test developers or language practitioners in terms of test design and the importance of training in the VR (337/500)