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Testing Speaking Ability

Speech is a complex process. One of its components is a knowledge component. The knowledge component consists of world and language knowledge.

The world knowledge is about content, whereas the language knowledge is about phonetics, grammar and lexicon.

The distinction between the world knowledge and language knowledge is a problem for the testers. Many researchers, such as Alderson and Urquhart (1985), Clapham (1994) and others found significant interactions between the world knowledge and language test performance, particularly when test content and tasks were sufficiently specified and when subject level of language proficiency was sufficiently high to be able to use the situational information. Thus, it appears that under some conditions world knowledge makes a difference to language test performance.

The question is what conditions influence the test performance?

In my presentation, I am going to talk about the conditions, under which world knowledge makes a difference to language test performance and what may influence to test performance overall.

I am OPI tester at the Defense Language Institute as OPI tester (Oral proficiency interview). We test oral proficiency level of our students on ILR Skill Level (*Note: Interagency Language Roundtable, brief description of ILR will be described to participants later*).

Madsen (1983) points out that of all language exams testing speaking ability is the most challenging in terms of test preparation, administration, and scoring.

OPI is a criterion- based test. There are four criteria: tasks/functions, context/content, accuracy and text type. Oral proficiency interview/testing assesses testee's speaking ability in a holistic manner, in other words, how well a person could speak a language. OPI evaluates speaking for functional purposes.

OPI has two major objectives: 1. to measure specific aspects of speaking skill such as structure, vocabulary, pronunciation, intonation, and stress; and 2. to measure the overall speaking proficiency (i.e. speaking tests for functional purposes).

OPI is a reliable language assessment overall but there are some drawbacks, which influence to test performance:

1. age of the testee/confidence
2. education level of the testee: high school

3. background knowledge or subject knowledgeability
4. fluency: speed of delivery

Neither OPI or ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) take into consideration the above - mentioned factors. Age of the testee is a factor that may crucially influence to the test performance, specifically if it is a proficiency test assessment. (*Note: all factors will be described later.*)

References

- Alderson, J. C., Clapham, C. & Wall, D. (1995). *Language Testing Construction and Evaluation*: CUP.
- Madsen, H. (1983). "Selecting Appropriate Elicitation Techniques for Oral Proficiency Tests" in *Directions in Language Testing*. Singapore: RELC, pp. 87 - 99