

## **THE ROLE OF TESTS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPEAKING SKILL**

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**ABSTRACT:** It is natural that speaking skill is important when learning a language. We can achieve the development of speaking skill at the same time through appropriate tests. The work consists of theoretical and practical parts, a detailed test system, methods and techniques, and analyzed the principles of teaching and development of listening and speech comprehension, the role of original materials in improving the communicative competence of ESP students.

**Keywords:** communicative language, monologue, picture-description, spoken production, spoken interaction.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Occasionally, because of time or financial constraints, test users — those who use scores to make decisions about test takers' qualifications for work or study — may be inclined to use a less-thankfully-comprehensive assessment of important skills or abilities. This is true especially when assessing English-language proficiency, where a key question is often, "Can a single measure (typically, a test of speaking ability, or sometimes reading) serve as a sufficient proxy for a test taker's overall proficiency in all modes of communication in English, including listening, reading, writing, and speaking?" In some contexts, speaking ability seems to be the most important of the four skills; furthermore, test takers' performance in each of the four skill areas is usually very highly related, so this strategy may not be an entirely unreasonable one. Although listening and reading tests can provide an indirect indication of speaking and writing ability, they provide no comprehensive assessment of communicative ability. Thus, Listening and Reading test begin to make the case for a more comprehensive assessment of English language skills. Below, we extend this argument by presenting related reasons for all four English language skills – reading, listening, writing and speaking. Users of English language proficiency tests like the TOEIC and TOEFL tests may sometimes become interested in some language skills (speaking, for instance) than others. However, what they value most often is a person's ability to communicate in English in a variety of contexts that is likely to involve the use of multiple language skills either singly or in combination. The four skills are strongly correlated, but not to the degree that a measure of one can substitute perfectly for a measure on another.

### **METHODOLOGY**

Related to point above is that, for most kinds of decision making, more information is almost always better than less. More trustworthy decisions are possible when additional relevant information is used to supplement initially available information, whether that decision concerns language abilities or other types of skills. Standardized tests are almost always fairer to those who take them when multiple methods and multiple question formats are used. Some people perform better on some types of test questions than on others, and so it is appropriate to use a variety of methods and question types to assess critical abilities. Obtaining more information about test takers is not only valuable to the test user but also fairer to the test taker. What is

tested can affect what is taught as well as what is learned. Selective testing can result in greater attention paid to some language skills than others, resulting in uneven profiles of proficiency in overall communications skills. Testing all four skills is not only fairer to individuals, but it benefits society as well. A test or examination (informally, exam or evaluation) is an educational assessment intended to measure a test-taker's knowledge, skill, aptitude, physical fitness, or classification in many other topics (e.g., beliefs). A test may be administered verbally, on paper, on a computer, or in a predetermined area that requires a test taker to demonstrate or perform a set of skills. Tests vary in style, rigor and requirements. There is no general consensus or invariable standard for test formats and difficulty. Often, the format and difficulty of the test is dependent upon the educational philosophy of the instructor, subject matter, class size, policy of the educational institution, and requirements of accreditation or governing bodies.

A test may be administered formally or informally. An example of an informal test is a reading test administered by a parent to a child. A formal test might be a final examination administered by a teacher in a classroom or an IQ test administered by a psychologist in a clinic. Formal testing often results in a grade or a test score. A test score may be interpreted with regards to a norm or criterion, or occasionally both. The norm may be established independently, or by statistical analysis of a large number of participants.

A test may be developed and administered by an instructor, a clinician, a governing body, or a test provider. In some instances, the developer of the test may not be directly responsible for its administration. For example, Educational Testing Service (ETS), a nonprofit educational testing and assessment organization, develops standardized tests such as the SAT but may not directly be involved in the administration or proctoring of these tests.

Tests have traditionally been used as a way to judge a student based on merit. The SAT and ACT are two common tests that form part of a student's entrance application to colleges. Additionally, students might be required to take additional exams to get into special programs or be placed properly in classes. For example, a student who has taken a few years of high school French might be required to pass an exam to be placed in the correct year of French instruction.

Teachers use tests or exams to measure a student's ability, but can exams actually improve a student's learning? Testing is not only useful as an assessment tool for teachers, but research has shown that the actual process of taking a test can help students to retain and learn new information. Evidence has also shown that taking tests can improve a student's recall and help them to use their existing knowledge in new situations or contexts. If you want to know more about the benefits of testing in education, then keep reading below:

As we mentioned above, research has shown that having to retrieve information during a test can help us to remember that information in the long term. This is known as the testing effect. This means that tests can actually help us to improve our long term memories. If you're a student and you want some guidance on which tests will get you to where you want to be in the future and you want to improve your long term memory, visit [testing.org](https://testing.org). Research has shown that the testing effect can help us to learn all different types of information, including remembering words from other languages. But, learning is more than just learning facts. Students have to know how to apply this information in different situations outside of the learning environment. Knowing how to transfer the information you've learned into real life situations is known as learning transfer and evidence has shown that testing can help improve this too. Research has shown that students who test themselves while they're revising are more likely to pass their exams. Unfortunately, the majority of students choose not to spend time testing themselves during their revision time, instead opting to re-study material they've already learned. Many students are under the impression that re-reading material can help improve learning, when in

actual fact, they may be losing out on the advantages that the testing effect seems to offer.

The majority of students are reluctant to test themselves because they worry about failing. If they fail a self-made test, then they are likely to be discouraged by this, and they may not see the benefit this approach has to offer. However, testing has been shown to lead to better recall in the long-term, so it's definitely worth a try. When researchers think about the retrieval of information from a student's memory, they often spend most of their time concentrating on retrieval as a way to work out what they already know. But, a number of psychologists believe that the retrieval process actually plays the main role in the process of learning as it happens. Tests have been shown to enhance learning and make it more meaningful to students. Research has suggested that the testing effect can have a number of advantages to both students and their teachers, but more research needs to be completed before we know just how useful this strategy is. Once we have more information available, we'll be able to see just how much of an impact testing has in the long term, but the current research certainly looks promising.

### Using test in speaking

Of all four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), speaking seems intuitively the most important: people who know a language are referred to as „speakers of that language, as if speaking included all other kinds of knowing. When we say that someone 'speaks a language fluently, we usually mean that they have a high level in all four skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing. But, as any teacher knows, learners often have strengths or weaknesses in particular skills, and in some cases can achieve high levels in, for example, reading and writing, while not being able to speak or listen at a comparable level. For some purposes – highly specialized jobs, for example – these uneven skills may not matter very much. However, English is such an important skill in the global world, and needed in so many different contexts, that someone without a good ability in all four skills will greatly reduce the opportunities open to them in education and professional life. Ability to use English in a variety of contexts involves multiple language skills and therefore testing the four skills enhances the accuracy of a test.

If we want to assess someone's speaking ability, we must get them to speak. The same applies to all the other skills. We can't infer ability in one skill (e.g. speaking) from performance in another (e.g. listening), or from using tests of language knowledge, e.g. grammar, vocabulary, as proxies for communicative language ability. Therefore, if we want to accurately assess communicative language ability, we need to include tasks which elicit a wide range of skills related to communicative language. The Common European Framework of Reference (2001) extends the definition of communicative language ability into five skills, and divides speaking into two skills: spoken production and spoken interaction. This is based on the evidence that these two skills are different, since one involves only monologue-type speech and the other involves being both a speaker and a listener at the same time. A test of communicative language, therefore, needs to include both spoken production and spoken interaction.

### ORAL TESTING

When testing the oral proficiency of learners, we may simply interview them and assess their responses; or use other techniques like role play, group discussion between learners, monologue, picture-description and so on.

But choosing an appropriate elicitation technique is only one part of the problem; there are many other difficulties associated with design, administration and assessment.

Penny Ur suggests a scale of oral testing criteria. The candidates are tested on fluency and accuracy, and may get a maximum of five points on each of these two aspects, ten points in all.

1) Put the sentences of the dialogue into the correct order.

The white one, please. It looks so sweet.

How much is it?

Which one would you like?

£8.50? OK, I'll buy it for you.

The little cat, please.

Mum, can I have a little soft toy?

The white one or the black one?

£8.50.

3) In the box there are questions from the dialogue below.

Where do they belong?

What about her?      And what do I say?

Who is it?      You mean now?

What's wrong, my dear?      Do you like the new girl?

Mum: \_\_\_\_\_?

Angela:      Nothing.

Mum: But you look really sad, dear.

Angela:      Oh well, it's just because ...

Mum: What?

Angela:      Oh, it's Clare.

Mum: \_\_\_\_\_?

Angela:      She says she doesn't want to be my best friend any more.

Mum: You mean another girl is her best friend now?

Angela:      Yes.

Mum: \_\_\_\_\_?

Angela:      There's this new girl, Cathy, you see ...

Mum: And Clare wants to be best friends with her?

Angela:      That's what she said.

Mum: \_\_\_\_\_?

Angela:      Yes, I think she's very nice.

Mum: Well, why don't you phone her and Clare?

Angela: \_\_\_\_\_?

Mum: Yes, why not?

Angela: \_\_\_\_\_?

Mum: Well, ask them to meet you in the park.

Angela: OK. Good idea. I'll phone them.

Mum: Good.

Angela: Thanks, Mum.

Mum: That's OK, dear. Have a nice day.

4) The day after the burglary, a newspaper reporter asked Mark lots of questions. Write Mark's answers.

Reporter: How did you find out about the burglary?

Mark: \_\_\_\_\_.

Reporter: Where did you go first?

Mark: \_\_\_\_\_.

Reporter: Did they believe your story?

Mark: \_\_\_\_\_.

Reporter: What did you do the next day?

Mark: \_\_\_\_\_.

Reporter: Who opened the door?

Mark: \_\_\_\_\_.

Reporter: Was he afraid when you told him?

Mark: \_\_\_\_\_.

Reporter: What did you do then?

Mark: \_\_\_\_\_.

Reporter: What plan?

Mark: \_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_.

Reporter: Why did you dress up as ghosts?

Mark: \_\_\_\_\_.

Reporter: And did you frighten them?

Mark: \_\_\_\_\_.

Reporter: And what happened then?

Mark: \_\_\_\_\_.

6) Can you write the dialogue?

It's \_\_\_\_\_.

Julie: Look, Mark, a man \_\_\_\_\_.

Mark: What shall we do?

Julie: Run over to the \_\_\_\_\_ and  
\_\_\_\_\_ the \_\_\_\_\_.  
\_\_\_\_\_ later.

Policeman: Which \_\_\_\_\_?

Mark: \_\_\_\_\_.

Policeman: But there are \_\_\_\_\_ on.

(Goes over.)

Where's the \_\_\_\_\_? Ah.

Man: Yes. What is it?

Policeman: Is this your \_\_\_\_\_?

Man: Yes, it is.

Policeman: Well, why did you \_\_\_\_\_ in through the  
\_\_\_\_\_?

Man: I didn't have my \_\_\_\_\_.

Policeman: Why not?

Man: Because it's in my \_\_\_\_\_.

Policeman: And where is your \_\_\_\_\_?

Man: I don't know.

Policeman: You don't know?

Man: No, I went to a \_\_\_\_\_. And when I got up to go home, my  
\_\_\_\_\_ wasn't there.

Policeman: And what did you do then?

Man: I went to the \_\_\_\_\_. And I told you.

Policeman: Me?

Man: Yes, you. An hour ago. You wrote everything down. My name is Cooper.

Policeman: I'm sorry, Mr. Cooper. I remember now.

7) Fill in the speech bubbles.

Mum, Mum, I've hurt my knee.

Dad, Dad, \_\_\_\_\_ the \_\_\_\_\_.

Hi, Simon, Look, \_\_\_\_\_ a \_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_ the \_\_\_\_\_, Mum.

\_\_\_\_\_ the \_\_\_\_\_, Dad. Can I have my two pounds, please?

\_\_\_\_\_ a lovely big \_\_\_\_\_ for you!

### Section 1

1. You have 5 minutes to read the task and think about what you want to say.
2. If there is anything which you don't understand, please ask the teacher who is with you.
3. You can make a few notes, if you want to. The examiner will not look at them.
4. After this 5 minute preparation time, you will go into the exam room and talk about the subject with a teacher. The examiner will listen.

### TASK 3

What makes a good friend?

You are going to talk to the teacher about what you value in your friends.

Look at the suggestions below:

Kindness

fun to be with ...

Support

a shoulder to cry on'

other ...

Honesty

Do you think it's better to have one or two really close friends, or a wider circle of less close friends?

What are the qualities in yourself that you think your friends value? There is an English saying, "Blood is thicker than water", meaning that family relationships are more important than relationships with friend. Do you agree with this?

### Section II

You have 5 minutes to read the task and think about what you want to say.

2. If there is anything which you don't understand, please ask the teacher who is with you, DON'T start talking with your partner yet.
3. You can make a few notes if you want to. The examiner will not look at them.
4. After this 5 minute preparation time, you will go into the exam room with your partner.
5. The teacher will start your discussion with you and will then leave the room. He or she will join your conversation later for a further 5 minutes. The examiner will listen.

#### Format 1: Interview

- The most common format for the testing or oral interaction.
- Traditional form
- The relationship between the tester and the candidate is usually such that candidate speaks as to a superior and is unwilling to take the initiative.

Useful techniques are:

#### A. Questions and requests for information

Yes/No questions should be AVOIDED, except perhaps at the very beginning of the interview, while the candidate is still warming up.

Performance of various operations (of kind listed in the two sets of specifications above) can be elicited through requests of the kind:

“Can you explain to me how/why...? and

“Can you tell me what you think of...?”

#### B. Request for elaboration

Such as What exactly do you mean? Can you explain that in a little more detail? What would be a good example of that? Tell me more.

#### C. Appearing not to understand

This is most appropriate where the interviewer really isn't sure of what the candidate means but can also be used simply in order to see if the candidate can cope with being misunderstood.

The interviewer may say, I'm sorry, but I don't quite follow you.

#### D. Invitation to ask question

- Is there anything you'd like to ask me?

#### E. Interruption

- To see how the candidate deals with this.

#### F. Interrupt change of topics

- To see how the candidate deals with this.



## Pictures

- Single pictures are particularly useful for eliciting descriptions.
- Series of pictures or video sequences form a natural basis for narration.

## Role Play

- Candidates can be asked to assume a role in a particular situation. This allows the ready elicitation of other language functions. There can be a series of brief items, such as:

A friend invites you to a party on an evening when you want to stay at home and watch the last episode of a television serial. Thank the friend (played by the tester) and refuse politely.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To summarize briefly, the findings of the present study revealed that the test had both positive impacts (the instructional practices reflected the intended purpose of the test policy) and negative ones (heavy emphases on test practice and drilling of grammar) on the teachers from both types of school. Though the teachers perceived the test impact generally similarly across type of school, teachers from both types of school showed opposite attitudes towards fostering students' communicative competence in class, and teaching approaches and materials to listening comprehension. Owing to the competitive teaching environment of private schools and pressure from other stakeholders, the private school teachers were found to focus more on the teaching of test-taking skills, and authorities have purchased expensive equipment and test banks, or have opened listening and speaking courses to help their students. The public school teachers, by contrast, tended to use multimedia more often and design more interactive activities that engaged students in oral discussion and presentation. The present study has yielded findings that have both theoretical and pedagogical implications, but it was not without limitations. First, the generalization of the results to other populations with different test policies in other countries or teachers with different school environments may be limited.

## CONCLUSION

Another constraint was that this study was based on semi-structured interviews. Further studies using other research methods, such as questionnaires, observation, or analysis of textbooks could be carried out to explore more about wash back effects in the educational system. While the present study focused on foreign language teacher knowledge and engagement, perhaps future research could explore outcomes of teacher education activities or program designs. Although the majority of the teachers acknowledged the value and usefulness of the test, and its benefits on the development of students' listening abilities, the preparation for, and teaching of, the new test markedly increased their workload and challenged their past grammar-translation teaching method. As a result, this new test has brought unintended, but predictable, negative effects on teaching, in the sense that frequent practice of listening test items and drilling on grammar and translation were the main instructional practices with respect to listening in English classes. Moreover, both the public and private school teachers were under pressure from parents, students, and school expectations of helping students achieve high academic scores in English tests. The different recruitment systems and ability grouping policies in the two types of school influenced how teachers taught English listening and what resources the school authorities were capable of offering. Besides, our argument for using all four language skills, as opposed to testing more selectively, is as follows: It is the broader trait of communicative competence, not specific individual skills, that is critical in most academic and workplace settings and of most interest to users of tests like the TOEFL and TOEIC tests. It is important, however, to test for each of these four skills individually because each is a critical aspect of communicative competence.

Furthermore, direct evidence of specific individual skills can provide at least indirect evidence of other skills. Though strongly related, each of the four skills — listening, reading, writing and speaking — are distinct, and each contributes uniquely to an individual's overall communicative ability. When test scores are used to make consequential decisions, the use of several sources of information yields better decisions than does a more selective use of information. Moreover, assessment is fairer to test takers if they are allowed to demonstrate their skills in multiple ways — with different tests, different methods and different question formats. Comprehensive testing also encourages broader and more generalizable teaching and learning of language skills by test takers. All of the reasons given here are consistent with the trend toward more comprehensive, integrated testing of language skills as seen in many prominent language testing programs.

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