Introducing Oral Testing for English Conversation Classes
The Reasons and the Reaction

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【Abstract】 The aim of this paper is two-fold. Firstly it explains why oral testing was used for examining students' spoken English ability and secondly it looks at the students' response to this kind of exam. Students in Japan have usually not had much experience of speaking English prior to entering university and as a consequence are nervous about speaking it. High schools in Japan do not prepare students to speak English, as it does not feature on the university entrance exams. This phenomenon of 'backwash', or 'washback', as it is sometimes known, means that both teachers will teach for examinations and students will study for examinations. The students were told in advance what the format of the exam would be, but were not told what exactly would be required of them, so that they could not try to memorize what to say. The students were not told which group they would be in until the day of the exam. The test consisted of a 'conversation' and a 'nursing role play' for first years, whereas the second years also had a problem solving activity as well. Using this notion of 'backwash' it was hoped that students would feel a need to more actively participate in their English conversation class as a result of being tested orally. In conjunction with this, all students were given written and spoken feedback on their performance, outlining both strengths and weaknesses, to help direct their learning. Students were invited to complete a questionnaire on their reaction to the exam, and this showed a positive reaction. Their feedback, which revealed areas that they found difficult in the examination, has lead to changes in the way that the classes are taught, as well as to the future format of the examination.

Conversation involves both listening and speaking, and as such an examination should test these skills. Perhaps the hardest thing about conversing in a foreign language is the immediacy of having to understand and to speak with almost no preparation time (Brazil, 1995). To engage comfortably in conversing with another person, we need to be able to answer reasonably quickly. The longer the gap between hearing what is said and being able to respond, the more flustered and pressurized we become. It would seem that the only way to reduce this deficit is to practice. To become good at a sport, or a musical instrument, or any skill, practice is the essential component (assuming that we know what to do). The first time we use a new expression, for example, there will be some uncertainty in knowing if it has been used correctly. However, once we have used it for the twentieth time, for example, it becomes easier to use and requires less mental effort to retrieve for use. Gradually, by using language repeatedly, we feel that we know how to use the phrase and structure, and, if we

keep using it, it becomes part of our repertoire. If we take the question 'What did you do at the weekend?' as an example, the first time it is used it requires great mental effort to produce it. Once it has been used a sufficient number of times, it can be produced with minimum effort and the speaker's effort can be concentrated on listening or creating a new phrase. At high school in Japan, conversation is not usually a part of the curriculum, and consequently most students, despite having good reading skills and a firm understanding of how to recognise English grammar (for the purposes of passing tests), have little experience of actually using the language.

Linguists (e. g. Willis, D, 1999) make the distinction between 'knowledge about language' and 'language use', the former concentrating on the component parts of sentences, rules for constructing sentences and so on, the latter being concerned with using language and having the opportunity to speak it. Knowledge about language could be compared to learning how to drive, without

ever actually getting in the car. It is possible to learn how the car works, the function of the accelerator and clutch, for example, from studying manuals, but this cannot prepare an individual for the experience of driving. Until one actually gets in and drives the car, or in terms of English, actually tries to use the language and speak it, English will remain an academic subject, rather than a tool for communication.

Ⅰ. Background

Japanese educational system

The education system at senior high school level is changing within Japan, and there is general recognition that the notion of 'backwash' is critical in determining how teachers teach and students learn. Hughes(1989) defines backwash as "the effect of testing on teaching and learning"(p. 1), and it is now generally acknowledged to have an extremely crucial role in education. Within Japan the most important test for high school students is the college and university entrance exam, and consequently students study for this examination. Gradually the nature of this exam is being made more communicative, but it is fair to say that it is still not a test of the productive skills, and certainly not a test of speaking ability, so consequently speaking is not taught at high school level. As a consequence very few students who have only studied English within the school environment are able to speak it.

Jack Richards(1993), the famous academic and textbook writer, states,

> The native speaker of English who encounters a Japanese high school graduate for the first time and attempts a simple conversation in English is in for a shock. Although some students may be able to sustain a short conversation, many, despite six or more years of English study, have difficulty understanding, and thus responding to, a single question. What has gone wrong? And for the university teacher facing a class of such students, what can be done about it?(p. 50).

At the national level, the entrance exam is being made more communicative in the hope that this will lead to a change in how English is taught. This can be seen, for example, in the change from literary style reading comprehension to passages with dialogue. At high school level, oral communication has been made compulsory in Senior High school, beginning from April 2002,

and it is rumoured that a listening comprehension component will be added to the university entrance exam in 2006.

In an ideal world an oral test would also be introduced but because the scoring of an oral test is subjective and because of the difficulties in organising such a massive operation, it is unlikely to happen. However, at college level it is usually possible to organise such a test and the issue of subjectivity is not so contentious, as the teacher also has the benefit of continually assessing students throughout the year.

In my first year at the college I had carried out both an oral exam(interview style, seeing students individually)and also a combined listening and written exam, so that the exam would bear some familiarity with to what the students were used to. In the second year, I noticed that second year students were more hesitant to speak English than the first year students had been, so I felt that by making the test a spoken one, they would see the importance of practising English in class. My intention in introducing only an oral exam was to facilitate a change in the behaviour of the students, so that they would see the importance of using class time to practice speaking English.

Reasons for student reticence in speaking English

That the students should be reticent to speak English is entirely understandable, given their previous experience of studying English in conjunction with the reasons given below.

1. *Low self-esteem in talking English*

As a consequence of their High school English classes, students are embarrassed to talk in English. This is, perhaps, the saddest aspect. The students, through no fault of their own, label themselves as 'being no good' at speaking English, when in fact they have not had the opportunity to do so. Not only is it the case that at high school speaking English is not a high priority but it is also true that many high school teachers do not have the necessary confidence in their own English ability to actually speak English. Richards(1993)noticed this phenomenon, observing,

> The students' teacher had little confidence in their own English, and hence avoided using spoken English in the classroom(p. 50).

Lack of exposure to spoken English and having little

or no opportunity to use English creates a vicious circle in which students are reluctant to speak English because they lack confidence and therefore they try to avoid having to speak English, which denies themselves the opportunity of improving.

2. Fear of failure

Although there are on-going debates about what exactly comprises 'communicative competence'(see outline of Canale and Swain's description in Cohen, 1994, pp. 20-22)there is general agreement that mastery of grammar is only one aspect of the skills necessary to be able to speak. It is however, the only aspect that can be measured successfully(though this recently is in dispute), so students have developed an obsession with accuracy. To improve speaking, students have to be prepared to make mistakes ; it is a necessary part of the learning process. In sports' psychology the same concept is applied. To improve overall success, the individual must be prepared to risk failure. When fear of failure is prevalent, mistakes may be avoided but because of this fear, it is not possible to improve one's performance.

One of the good things about speaking English is that it is possible to convey one's meaning even if there are small 'errors'. It is important to make a distinction between different kinds of errors. Errors which are problematical to the listeners' comprehension are called 'global', whereas those that do not obstruct meaning are said to be 'local'. It is very hard for students to overcome this fear of making mistakes, as English, in their experience, has been concerned with accuracy and 'getting it right'. Lightbown and Spada(1999), who reviewed 26 studies on correction conclude that "excessive correction can have a negative effect on motivation" and can "embarrass some students and discourage them from speaking"(p. 167). Brown(1994)concurs, saying, "the bottom line is that we(the teachers)simply must not stifle our students' attempts at production by smothering them with corrective feedback"(p. 221).

3. Falseness of the environment

The problems of teaching English in monolingual classrooms have been well documented. As mentioned earlier we generally communicate when we have something of meaning to convey, or a purpose to achieve. No matter how hard the teacher tries to impress on a student the importance of speaking English in the classroom, it is difficult to deny that it is an unreal situation, and as such students find speaking to their classmates in English a rather embarrassing procedure. At various times I have employed the tactic of having the students demonstrate whatever activity they have been practicing in pairs, in front of the class, using 'fear of failure' as motivation to practice hard, but the drawback of this approach is that it is unpopular and can make students feel negatively about English class. Those who champion 'task-based learning' such as Jane Willis(1996)and Peter Skehan(1998), are keenly aware of the importance of students engaging in activities in which students are set tasks in which a task needs to be accomplished, so students are working towards a specified goal. Whilst this might have some impact on students' attitudes to speaking English, in that it is not practice solely for practice's sake, it is still difficult to escape the sense that this approach would be more effective in a multilingual classroom, when English is the natural means of communication. In monolingual classrooms, there is always a falseness in talking in a language when communication would much more naturally occur in the students' mother tongue. Coupled with this is peer pressure. If a student happens to be sitting with another student who is not highly motivated, and who has no real desire to do anything but the minimum, it is very difficult to compel such a student to do more, and this subsequently affects the first student. There is also, of course, the matter of embarrassment if a student should make what they consider to be 'easy' mistakes in front of classmates. There seems little that one can do about this problem other than appeal to the students' maturity to practice despite this limitation.

4. Success in taking written exams in English

Although this might seem something of a contradiction, having talked about students' 'fear of failure', it needs to be remembered that the students in these classes are very successful academically, and have good past experiences in taking traditional English tests. Quoting Richards once more,

> Japanese students of course perform best in English in the kind of skills they have practiced at school-vocabulary recognition, word-by-word reading, translation of English grammatical structures into Japanese, and test-taking skills related to the university entrance examinations. (P. 50)

These skills however are not conducive to speaking the language as very different skills are involved in speaking. The skills tested are those of recognition,

whereas speaking requires both listening and the productive skill of speaking. For the key differences between the spoken and written words, consult Cornbleet and Carter, 2001. A consequence of this distinction is that the activities that are set in class are 'easy' if the test is to be written. Students feel confident that when asked to pick an appropriate answer from a selection of four (as is the case in multiple-choice exams) they would do very well. However this is not what happens when we speak. We have to process what is being said and then create language instantaneously in response. Native speakers in any language use less complex language when speaking as compared to writing because of the lack of time available to create answers. For this reason 'conversation classes' seem to be too easy for students, but this is only if they are tested in written form. If tested orally, they are not so easy.

It was this last reason that motivated me to make the test an oral one. The concept of 'backwash' or 'washback' (see Hughes, 1989 and Shohamy, 2001) as it is sometimes referred to, is the impact that examinations have both on the teacher in terms of what is taught and on the student in terms of how they study. My aim therefore in introducing an oral test was to bring about a change in the way that students acted in class, in the hope that they would use the time in class to actively practice.

II. Research method

Test procedure

The test was an achievement style test, meaning that the test was based upon what had been covered in class. The students were told of the test structure before the summer holidays in general terms so that they would know the broad areas that they should review. They were also told in which categories they would be assessed (fluency, and so on) so that they would be encouraged to practice speaking.

The five categories chosen were based upon what I felt the students most needed to improve (as recommended by Hughes, 1989). For this test those categories were, fluency, participation, comprehension, use of English and social skills. It is well accepted that fluency, accuracy and complexity (which I categorised as 'use of English') are in competition and that to improve one area necessitates doing less well in another. This is

expressed by Skehan (2001), as follows,

> These three areas are theorised to have important independent functioning in oral performance. In addition, they enter into competition with one another, with higher performance in one area seeming to detract from performance in others. (p. 70)

Students were told that they would not be penalised for small mistakes, and instead would be rewarded for taking risks with the language, rather than 'playing it safe'. Participation and social skills were chosen as a means of replicating conversation. I did not want students to feel that 'being shy' was a good reason for not participating, although this is still an area that concerns me. In 'social skills' I wanted to see the students show interest in the conversation of others and to ask pertinent questions as a result. Question asking was an area that I had identified as a weakness and felt that by making this explicit, students would be encouraged to study and practice this area. 'Comprehension' was designed to cover both the listening skills of the students and the comprehensibility of what they said. 'Use of English' was to record the level of English and credit was to be given for those who attempted what I perceived to be more complex English.

One of the major reasons for testing, is of course, to ensure that students' review the work they have done, so all the possible areas of the test were included in the outline (given to students beforehand) of what might occur. Students were not told who would be in their group until the day of their test, as I did not want them to learn or contrive a dialogue by heart. It is not possible to do this in real conversation, so I felt it imperative to ensure that rote-learning would not be an advantage.

Test format

There were four students in each group and the test lasted for between 20 and 25 minutes. The test consisted of three sections for second year students, a conversation, a role-play and a problem-solving activity. First years did only the conversation and role play. For the conversation, students were given the chance to choose one out of three possible topics. In total there were 13 different topics and the three offered to students were rotated so that later students would not have too much of an advantage in knowing what to expect. Another reason for giving students a choice is, as stated by Jennings et al (1999), "Theories of motivation suggest

that increased choice is beneficial in that it empowers the test-taker and may help shift the balance of power from the tester to the test-taker" (P. 451).

Once the topic was selected the students were responsible for everything else and I took no part in the conversation. This was designed to test the students' ability to manage a conversation when left to their own devices. It was noticeable that while the vast majority of groups were able to conduct a conversation in a natural way, there were some groups who took it in turns to speak.

The second section of the test was a role-play between a nurse and a patient. The 'patient' was given a card with an illness or symptom written on it and then it was up to the pair of students to continue the dialogue in a natural manner. (There were 15 different cards and these too were alternated.) Ideally I would have liked to have tested each student in the role of the nurse, as this is the role they will perform in reality once they have graduated, but there was not sufficient time to do this.

I determined who should be the nurse and who should be the patient by their performance in the test conversation. Generally, if a student had been quiet or seemed to have had problems in the conversation, I assigned that student to the role of the nurse. Because students had practiced the role of the nurse more comprehensively than that of the patient, I felt the stronger or more confident students would be more capable of coping with the role of the patient.

The final section of the test was in a 'problem-solving' style, the aim of which was to see if students could give reasons for their choices in English. Hypothetical nursing situations were given to the students and they were given only 90 seconds to read the imagined situation and formulate their answers. As an English teacher I was concerned only with how they expressed their opinions, not with what those opinions were, and students were informed of this beforehand.

Feedback

I recorded all the tests and listened to them again. I did this so that I could prepare individual feedback for each student on the ratings they had been awarded on the five areas of the test, and I also wrote a few sentences on both the student's strong points and the areas on which they most needed to work. In the first class after the exam I spoke to each student for about one minute on their performance. I felt it was important to include the students in the assessment procedure, as had I only awarded them a grade, they would not have known what it really meant in their individual case. As this was probably the first time for most students to take a spoken exam I also asked them to fill in a feedback form for me so that I could find out their reaction to this kind of test and to help me improve it for the future. Recording the tests also made it possible for me to notice frequently occurring mistakes that I could work upon in forthcoming classes.

The Teacher's impressions and recommendations

Considering that this was a novel experience for most students, I was encouraged by what I saw. A few points of interest are noted below.

1. All the students, even the weakest, were able to say some things in English.

2. Some students who appeared to be shy in class excelled in the test, so, it was a revelation to discover that many of the quieter students are good speakers.

3. Conversely, other students who speak well performed disappointingly in the test. When I quizzed them about this in the spoken feedback, it appears that being seen as a 'show off' is something they wish to avoid. This reveals a weakness of the group style oral interview.

4. The phenomenon known as 'accommodation'. It is natural that students will speak more simply so that their friends can understand them.

5. The students who were most noticeably fluent had spent a lot of time listening to the radio in English. Consequently all the students are being encouraged to do the same. Gregory Clark (2000), an advisor to the Ministry of Education, emphasises the importance of listening skills saying, "you cannot have a conversation unless you listen. It is the basis of speaking ability. If you listen and remember you can speak effectively". Listening has an advantage in that it is an activity that students can pursue on their own. Few students have the opportunity to speak outside of the classroom, so listening would seem to be a viable alternative.

6. Mother tongue 'interference' was noticeable in the most common mistakes when students are put under the pressure of speaking English in 'real time'. For example, the ability to express future plans in English disappeared for many students. This suggests that students have

Table 1 *Student responses to questions 1-8*

Question number and question	Total number and percentages of 1st year students		Total number and percentages of 2nd year students	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
1 *Do you think the oral test was a fair way to test your spoken English?*	28(58%)	18(39%)	39(85%)	5(11%)
	Oral	Written	Oral	Written
2 *Would you rather have a spoken or a written test?*	40(83%)	7(15%)	37(80%)	6(13%)
3 *Do you think you'll feel more confident taking the test next time?*	Yes	No	Yes	No
	26(54%)	18(54%)	17(37%)	22(48%)
4 *Will the test make you change what you do in class?*	37(77%)	2(4%)	28(70%)	12(26%)
5 *Will the test change how you prepare for the next test?*	36(75%)	2(4%)	35(76%)	9(21%)
6 *Was your group helpful or unhelpful?*	38(79%)	6(14%)	42(91%)	4(9%)
7 *Do you think you'll have a need to speak English in the future?*	40(83%)	2(4%)	38(85%)	3(7%)
	Helpful	*Not Helpful*	*Helpful*	*Not Helpful*
8 *Was the feedback helpful?*	44(92%)	3(6%)	40(96%)	4(9%)

not practiced sufficiently for it to become automatic, as it is something that receptively they know very well. It also suggests that students need to practice translating from Japanese to English, rather than the other way around. The latter way is receptive and easier ; the former productive and much more difficult.

7．Shy students will be at a disadvantage in this kind of test, especially when it is up to the students themselves to make sure that they speak. In one's native tongue there are some people who excel in the spoken word and others who do not. This is emphasised in an oral test, yet at the same time, the ability to converse is a very important feature of 'conversation' and perhaps it is unavoidable that it will favour more confident personalities.

8．Spoken English is simpler than written English for native speakers(as well as non-native speakers), due to the fact that production is immediate and therefore the time is not available to use more complex English. Coupled with the phenomenon of accommodation, this means that it is difficult for students to display their range of knowledge. Teacher involvement might be helpful in this respect, as students might feel more able to use complex structures with someone whom they are sure will understand. There is also a negative aspect to teacher involvement, which is that as soon as the teacher is involved students are less likely to take responsibility and to resort to the more passive style adopted when talking to their teacher.

III．The questionnaire

The questionnaire was given to the students in the first class after the exam. The students were asked to fill it in anonymously so that should they have wished to write negatively about the style of the exam they would have been free to do so. They were encouraged to answer honestly and to say that it was 'awful' if that was how they felt. As it was anonymous, students who did not wish to submit the questionnaire did not need to do so. Forty-eight out of 50 first year students responded, as did 46 out of 48 second years. See the appendix for the full results. The students' responses for questions one to eight can be found in the appendix, in Table 1. The responses to questions nine and ten are to be found in Tables 2 and 3, respectively.

Student responses
Question 1：Do you think the oral test was a fair way to test your spoken English?
Nearly sixty percent of first years, and 85% of second years answered in the affirmative. Second year students

Table 2 *Student response to Question 9 : What students felt was most difficult section of the test.*

	Conversation	Role Play	Problem-solving
1st *years*	15(33%)	32(67%)	——
2nd *years*	6(13%)	14(17%)	32(70%)

Table 3 *Student response to Question 10 : What students feel is the most difficult thing in studying English.*

	Reading	Listening	Writing	Speaking	Grammar	Listening and Speaking
1st *years*	2(5%)	14(30%)	3(7%)	20(42%)	0(0%)	5(10%)
2nd *years*	1(3%)	2(4%)	0(0%)	28(61%)	3(7%)	7(15%)

deem oral testing to be a fairer way of testing, perhaps because they have had more exposure to conversation classes. First years had only experienced seven classes at the time of the test, so the concept of speaking English is still new to them. For the reasons why it was fair, many students commented that as it was a conversation class it should be tested by means of a speaking test.

For those students who responded that it was not fair, a few mentioned that it discriminates against shy students, which is a valid criticism. One student remarked in the spoken feedback that she was poor at conversation in Japanese. In terms of the test, I think that this is unfortunate, but conversation is influenced by an individual's personal skills. All students are told at the beginning of the year that what they do in class(effort, taking part)is more important than the final examination, so I would like to think this addresses this concern to some extent. Other salient points made by students concerned the element of luck that was involved in terms of the choice of topic and in terms of which group one was placed. These are fair and valid points. Personally, I feel that the benefits outweigh the disadvantages, but the difficulty in making the test conditions identical for all students is a limitation of the oral exam.

Question 2 : Would you rather have a spoken or a written test?

Approximately four out of five students in both years said they preferred to have a spoken test. The positive response was a surprise, and many students gave the reason as knowing that speaking was their weak area

and so needed to practice it. A few gave the rather worrying answer that it is 'easier to study for', but the majority commented that they were more likely to speak English in the future, together with the reason that this class is meant to be a conversation course.

Question 3 : Do you think you'll feel more confident taking the test next time?

The 'yes' answers were primarily concerned with two aspects The first reason given was that as the students are now familiar with this style of the test they should be more relaxed next time. The second response was that they would practice harder in class and become more confident as a consequence. This was the reaction that I had been hoping for, but whether the intention becomes fact remains to be seen. For those who replied 'No' there were three main responses. The most common response was that they always got nervous before any test, another response was were that they did not have sufficient opportunity to practice their speaking and so they could not improve, and the third response, showing the most defeatist attitude, was that they were poor at English. Negative self-perception regarding speaking ability could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. To bolster students' confidence it seems important to set achievable goals in class, so that their perception of their English ability changes. According to Bandura's model of self-efficacy, past success will foster future success. It would also seem to be a good idea to make the aims for all courses realistic and not to expect students to achieve a spoken English level comparable to a native speaker, but rather one in which students can

use English to express themselves and make themselves understood and in which they have the necessary strategies for comprehending what others say(for further detail consult Cohen, 1998).

Question 4 : Will the test make you change what you do in class?

This question is designed to test whether the 'washback' is likely to have an impact on students' classroom performance. It is not actually measuring if it has done so, but whether there is the intention(on the part of the students)to do so. The figures in terms of intention are very encouraging. There is a noticeable discrepancy between 1st and 2nd years. There are three possible explanations. One is that 1st year students are closer in age to school and perhaps, as a consequence, are trying to give the teacher the answer they think the teacher wants to hear. Second years are that much more mature and perhaps surer in their own mind of what they will do, but it is also possible that some of the 2nd years, because of their poor self-perception have already given up and do not believe that anything will make a difference to their ability. There is a third possibility, which is that a third of the students in the second year are already very competent and good speakers, who did very well in the test and therefore have no need to change the manner in which they study in class.

Question 5 : Will the test change how you prepare for the next test?

The most encouraging part here is that the students recognise the need to practice speaking with friends. One student commented that for a written test students can study by themselves, but for a spoken test, they need to study by talking to others in English. It remains to be seen if this happens, but the responses are positive.

Question 6 : Was your group helpful or unhelpful?

The vast majority of both years felt that there group was helpful. This was a 'better' result than I had expected, as one of the weaknesses of group testing is that the relationship between group members will have an influence on how individuals fair. There were one or two groups in which I noticed a poor group dynamic, such as an inability to bring others into the conversation, but it seems that this was a minor problem overall.

Question 7 : Do you think you'll have a need to speak English in the future?

In the raw data this means that only 5 out of 93 students do not see English as being necessary in later

life. This is very encouraging in terms of students' motivation in class, in that they do not see English as irrelevant to their future. Some of the students stated that they wish to work in an international setting, so for these students there is 'extrinsic' motivation(English is a means to achieving a future goal)in studying English.

Question 8 : Was the feedback helpful?

The response to the feedback form was also consistent between both years. My hope is that by giving students individual feedback, they will see the test not solely as something concerned with rating their performance but as a tool for improving their future study of English, and equally importantly to feel that the testing procedure is beneficial to them. To help bring about the change in attitude in the classroom that I sought, namely to increase the time each student spent in talking in English, the feedback was important in showing each student how increased practice was beneficial. By relating it directly to the students I hope that students would feel that the change I sought was in their best interests.

The brief chats that I had with each student regarding their tests were immensely helpful for me, as it enabled me to ask students about their performance, and the questionnaire which they returned is already having an impact on how I teach. One consequence is that we now devote more time to listening, both from listening to tapes and from me as the teacher. I am also trying to explain the reasons behind what we do, so that students can see the relevance, rather than imposing it upon them.

Question 9 : Which part of the test do you think was most difficult?

At first glance, the first years' response that the role play was the most difficult is surprising, as it should be possible to 'learn' a role-play much more easily than it is to 'learn' conversation. According to Nunan(1998, p 42), "most interactions can be placed on a continuum from relatively predictable to relatively unpredictable" depending on the context. In this regard, nursing English should generally be more predictable than general conversation, as the context is more narrowly confined. If talking to a patient at a hospital, it is most likely to be about the patient's health, so in theory it should be easier to narrow down the relevant expressions and vocabulary that occur in this domain.

However, first years had not been to a hospital for a visit at the time of the test, so it is possible that the role-

play was 'outside' of their experience. Bailey (1998), says it is important to ask the following questions before deciding upon a role-play :

1. Will the role-play scenario match the students' experience?

2. Will the role-play scenario at least seem plausible to the students? (P. 174)

It is also possible that the situations in the role-play were not consistent with the students' expectations of their role. Tarone and Yule (1989) suggest that "there are sound educational and philosophical reasons for having the students tell the teacher what they need to learn" (p. 46) and it seems possible that the role I expected them to perform was not a 'real life' one. In the future I will endeavour to find out from the students the circumstances in which they are most likely to need English in a nursing capacity. Another explanation might be that we have devoted more time to conversation, so students feel more confident when doing this. For those student cast in the role of the patient, the experience could have been particularly difficult, as in class we have concentrated on what a nurse might say.

For the second years, the answers are, as I would have imagined. The problem-solving exercise was meant to see if the students are able to express an opinion and give their reasons, and some students commented that it would have been difficult in their mother tongue, let alone a second language.

Question 10 : What do you think is the most difficult thing in studying English?

The most noticeable feature of this table is that speaking is regarded as the most difficult skill. Whether this is skewed by the fact that the questionnaire was given by their conversation teacher is impossible to know, but taking the results at face value it seems that as far as the students are concerned speaking is by far the most difficult aspect of English. It is interesting too that 'listening and speaking' was not a section on the questionnaire but as so many students ringed both, it deserved its own section. From the college's viewpoint there is one pleasing result, which is that second year students seem to find listening less difficult than 1st years. This suggests that students are feeling more confident when listening to lecturers delivered in English.

IV. Conclusion

Having an oral test has hopefully helped change students perceptions about what is important in speaking English, and this might lead to a change in behaviour in their conversation classes. Students have been used to studying about English rather than learning to use it, and by being examined orally rather than in a written test, they will see the need to spend more time in practising the language.

The students are generally in favour of this means of testing as they can see the logic behind testing their spoken language directly. The feedback that I have received from the students has been invaluable to me, and has led to changes in the way that I teach. In relation to the next oral exam, it is possible that students will be examined in pairs rather than in groups of four, and I might take part in the test rather than acting solely as an observer. This I will discuss with the students, as it is important that the students perceive the test to be a fair assessment of their abilities. The area of role-playing is one in which the examination can be improved, and I will attempt to make this more realistic next time.

In the first classes since the test students have been making more effort to practice English in class, the real proof of whether the oral exam has led to a permanent change in behaviour will become apparent in the future. Some students did observe that they simply do not get the opportunity to speak English outside of the classroom, and this is of course a problem. There are still some areas that need further investigation, such as trying to find out what components of speaking they find particularly difficult, and to organise strategies for overcoming these problems. Change will not occur overnight, but if students can see the relevance of practicing English and if the activities they are asked to do also seem pertinent to their future needs, then the oral examination will reinforce the notion that practicing English is the best way to improve fluency, confidence and listening skills.

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英会話クラスのための口頭テスティング導入―導入の理由と学生の反応

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【要旨】 学生の会話能力を測るのにオーラルテストが用いられる理由について考察し，学生がオーラルテストを受けてどのような反応を示すかについて検討する。　日本の学生は，一般的にいってあまり英語を話す経験を持たずに大学に入学し，その結果英語を話すのに臆病になっている。日本の高校では，大学入試には反映されないこともあって，英会話の練習はあまりしない。この現象は「バックウォッシュ」として知られているが，教員も学生も入試にこだわって英語を教え学習するのである。　学生には，どのような形式で試験が行われるかについては伝えたが，具体的に何をテストするかについては教えなかった。これは，暗記するのを避けるためであった。また，学生には，試験当日までどのグループになるか教えなかった。テストの内容は，1年生に関しては「会話」と「看護に関するロールプレイ」で，2年生の場合は，1年生のテストに加えて問題解決のテストが加わった。　「バックウォッシュ」という概念を用いることで，口頭でテストが行われることが念頭におかれ学生は，英会話のクラスでもっと積極的に会話をしなければならないと気になることを期待した。加えて，すべての学生に，学習の手がかりとなるようにオーラルテストの結果を書面と口頭の双方でフィードバックを与え，得意なところと苦手なところを明白に示した。　学生にはオーラルテストがどうであったかについてアンケートに答えてもらったが，結果は望ましいものであった。学生のフィードバックについては，オーラル試験のどこが困難であったかが明らかになり，これからの試験の形式やクラスでの指導方法を変更するものになっている。