

# Effectively Constructing, Administering and Evaluating an Oral Placement Test for ESL/EFL Classes

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## Introduction

Oral placement tests are rarely given in ESL/EFL speaking classes because they are thought to be overly difficult and time consuming to administer and evaluate. As a result, the same class often contains students of mixed levels, with some finding the classroom activities to be overly demanding, while others feel that they are not challenging enough. In such a situation, teachers naturally find it difficult to use classroom materials effectively and often have difficulty in setting and achieving lesson goals. The purpose of this paper is to show how one can construct, administer and evaluate an oral placement test (OPT) for an oral communication class more simply and efficiently, making it possible to achieve more effective teaching and learning.

## Private/Semi-private Classes, Students and Materials

In the early 1990s, a large Japanese commercial language institution (more than 100 schools across the nation) where I was employed opened private and semi-private English speaking classes for introductory to advanced levels. The students in those classes tended to be in college or working outside the home, and most of them studied English for the purposes of traveling, working or studying abroad, satisfying a work requirement, or as a hobby.

In order to meet the needs of the students, the school decided to use up-to-date commercial texts which focused on developing the learner's speaking skills. However, since these texts dealt with students from a wide range of ESL backgrounds and activities often involved several students, they were not suitable for Japanese students studying privately or semi-privately. Moreover, the school's existing placement test was based mainly on a listening and reading test. Therefore, there was a lot of mismatch between the materials and actual students' levels. As a result, many students and teachers complained about their

materials, levels and classes.

### **Developing Materials for Private/Semi-Private Students**

Although Bostwick's statement (1995) is in reference to English programs for children, he criticizes that many English programs do not have any clear goals or objectives other than the purpose of finishing the text. He further questions what skills, knowledge, and attitudes teachers want the students to demonstrate after each class.

With the above mentioned statement in mind, the school developed six textbooks from introductory to upper elementary levels for their private and semi-private classes. These new materials covered more than 90% of the students enrolled in their classes. Topics, situations and structures were focused on Japanese false beginners' needs and interests. For example, one of the units in the first introductory text's topic was "Your Occupation" where students learned to ask or answer questions such as "What do you do?" "Where do you work/go to school?" "What do you do/study there?", etc. The main structural focus was on the present tense with the first person singular and by the end of each class, students were able to talk about the target topic using their own information without looking at artificial examples from the text. In addition, rather than interacting with other students in large classes, this private and semi-private lesson allowed more interaction between the teacher (native speaker of English) and the student.

### **Constructing an Oral Placement Test**

The purpose of using the placement test is to "predict the most appropriate class for any particular students" (Hughes, 1989 : 25). However, assessment of speaking ability is not that easy. Weir (1990) stated that interviews take a lot of time and they are difficult to do if there are many candidates. Meanwhile, Nakamura (1995) said that some available commercial speaking tests such as the FSI (Foreign Service Institute) Interview test or the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) and OPI (Oral Proficiency Interview) test are for intermediate and high level students and they are not appropriate for lower level students.

As students in this private language school were to be placed in the appropriate text level, this called for OPT (Oral Placement Test). In an attempt to measure a large number of students' speaking ability and insure they could be

accurately and efficiently placed in a class appropriate to their level, the construction of the OPT was based on the target structures that students were expected to learn in each level. For example, students needed to demonstrate their ability to do such things as ask or answer yes/no and wh-questions, use the correct verb tense and word order, and achieve subject-verb agreement. Underhill (1987 : 13) says, “If syllabuses are based around sequences of grammatical structures, for example, then a placement test should place learners according to their knowledge of these structures.”

Since the school developed six texts (*Interactions Core 2a* to *Interactions Core 3c*), questions for the six levels were constructed first and additional NCC level (novice level) questions and PI (pre-intermediate) level questions were constructed. Each level has ten questions and the passing score is seven out of ten questions in each level.

In order to test smoothly, the testing procedure, “How to Take the Oral Placement Test” was prepared for the students. This procedure includes the purpose of the test, the test format, length of the test, how to ask or answer questions with examples and what to do if you don’t understand questions, etc. This testing procedure was written in Japanese and students would read it just before taking the placement test. Underhill (1987) says that clear instructions are very important otherwise you may end up testing learners’ familiarity of the test procedure rather than their language ability. He further states that if there were low-level learners with the same mother tongue, instructions would be better prepared in their own language.

### **Administration of the OPT**

Prior to the actual administration of the OPT, all the native instructors needed to go through this OPT training. This training consisted of the purpose of the test and how to administer and evaluate it. With only one hour of training, they watched a video of two students taking the test and they could determine the two candidates’ OPT levels quite easily and accurately. The following is the information the testers were given concerning the administration of the OPT :

Testers : All students are tested by a trained native private teacher.

Testing Materials : 1. Private Oral Placement Test 2. How to Take the Oral Placement Test 3. Private OPT Score Sheet

Passing Score : 7 out of 10 questions in each level.

Voice : 1) Speak in a clear voice. 2) Speak just a little slower than natural

speed. 3) Be aware of your accent or sentence level fluency in order to be clear and fair to the student. (e.g. Use “What are you going to do tomorrow?” instead of “What are you gonna do?”)

1. Ask the student to read “How to Take the OPT” silently. (Fill in tester’s name, student’s name, school and date, while the student is reading.) When the student has finished, ask “Are you ready?”
2. Begin the test. Ask one question at a time from the NCC set of questions. If the student’s response is appropriate and 100% grammatically correct, then mark “O”. If there are any mistakes, then mark “X”.
3. Ask all 10 questions. (See exception #5 in What to do if.) If the student misses 4 questions out of 10 in a given level, he/she has failed that level.
4. Do the 2A level next.
5. Skip ahead to 2C if the student passes 2A. (skip ahead simply to save time)
6. Skip ahead to 3B if the student passes 2C.
7. Skip ahead to PI if the student passes 3B.
8. If the student fails a level (e.g. 2C), go to the preceding level (e.g. 2B).
9. The student doesn’t need to study any level which he/she has passed. If the student passes a level (e.g. 2B), he/she doesn’t need to study that level (e.g. 2B). He/She can start at the next level (e.g. 2C). If the student fails a level (e.g. 2B), he/she needs to start studying at that level (e.g. 2B).
10. When the test is finished, fill in the OPT level.

#### What to do If :

- 1) If the student fails to give a full sentence answer, ask “Can you give me a full sentence?” For example : “Have any of your friends gotten married?” “Yes, they have.” (full sentence) “Yes.” (not a full sentence)
- 2) If the student is silent, get his/her attention and then repeat the question (no more than two times in total).
- 3) If you couldn’t hear the student’s answer, gesture with your hand to your ear and say “Again, please?” (so the student knows you didn’t hear the response, not that you want the student to change their answer and try again).
- 4) If the student begins to give long, complicated answers, cut them off by saying “Please give short, simple answers.”
- 5) If the student obviously can’t answer a new set of questions (e.g. fails #1-5), say “Thank you” and stop the test.

- 6) If you clearly heard a student's answer but you still aren't really sure if the student's response is correct, write the answer in the space provided on the score sheet and check with a co-worker or one of your trainers after the test.
- 7) If the student gives a higher-level answer which doesn't appear in the sample answers, mark it correct if it is appropriate and grammatically correct.
- 8) If the student only gives one answer or question when they are supposed to give two, say "One more question" or "One more answer."
- 9) If the student makes a mistake in answering but then immediately corrects it, mark the answer correct.
- 10) If the student has horrible pronunciation or speaks very slowly, mark the answer correct if it is appropriate and grammatically correct ; don't take off points for pronunciation or fluency.

As we follow this procedure, in most cases the administration and evaluation of the test takes an average of ten minutes per student. Such efficiency is possible because the test progresses from easy to difficult items, and teachers are able to stop the test as soon as they determine the student's level. With regards to the duration of the test, Underhill (1987) states that the length of oral test is usually between eight and twelve minutes long and during that time the learner will produce more of the foreign language than during an hour-long written test.

### **Evaluation of the OPT**

Since many of the teachers who would be administering the OPT did not have degrees in TESOL, an objectified, point-based scoring system was used instead of the traditional holistic scoring method which evaluates a wide variety of criteria simultaneously. Madsen (1983) states that objectified scoring can be used both by teachers without much training and by well-trained teachers who would like to evaluate consistently and easily.

With this objectified scoring, almost every trained teacher can mainly focus on students' correct grammatical utterance. The following are some example questions/answers and evaluation criteria :

e.g. #1 Teacher : How was the weather yesterday ?

Student : It was hot.

Evaluation : Appropriate and grammatically correct response.

#2 Teacher : Ask me two questions about what I did yesterday.

Student : What do you do yesterday ? Do you work yesterday ?

Evaluation : Incorrect. The student didn't use the past tense.

#3 Teacher : When did you go to bed last night ?

Student : I went to bed 11:00.

Evaluation : Incorrect. The student didn't use the preposition such as at, around or about.

Although these examples show that the evaluation seems rather strict about grammar, it is necessary to put a strong emphasis on "absoluteness" of marking answers because of the need for consistency (reliability) in test results. Henning (1987 : 74) says "reliability is thus a measure of accuracy, consistency, dependability, or fairness of scores resulting from administration of a particular examination."

## Results and Discussion

After administering more than a hundred students, we collected score sheets (test results) and teachers' feedback for the OPT. The data indicated some consistent results. For example, a student who made a mistake in the initial question of the present perfect tense usually made the same mistake in subsequent questions of the present perfect. The result shows that this particular student has a weakness with this particular structure and he/she has a chance to practice this structure in the assigned level. Consequently, the data indicates strengths and weaknesses of the student's performance and the OPT also serves as a diagnostic test which is to discover particular points of difficulty the student may be having.

Teachers' feedback was also very helpful. They pointed out some problematic questions and suggestions for improvements. We revised the first OPT and distributed the second version immediately. Overall the teachers made very positive comments concerning the OPT, materials and students' assigned levels. Most teachers said that students were assigned in the appropriate levels and teachers could use the materials more effectively. However, a few teachers made negative comments about the absoluteness of correct grammar and inflexibility of the OPT score.

Some teachers mentioned that the OPT is much better than the traditional interview type tests because students need to ask questions. Some teachers also said that it was interesting to answer students' questions because interaction is more natural in real conversations. For example one question says, "Ask me what kind of movies I like." The student would respond, "What kind of movies

do you like ?” Then the teacher would reply, “Oh, I like science fiction movies.” This kind of teacher-student interaction is quite different from traditional oral interviews in which the teacher only asks questions and the student responds.

As this OPT involves interaction and creates a more pleasant atmosphere during the administration, the OPT seems to be humanistic. Underhill (1987 : 6) stresses the importance of human approach in oral tests as follows :

Oral tests must treat people as human beings. In small ways, as well as in the design of the test procedure in general, we can make taking a test challenging, instructive and even an enjoyable experience. There is a good practical reason for this, not just that it is nice to be nice ; if you treat people in as friendly and human a way as possible they will tend to respond in kind, and you are going to get a much more accurate picture of their oral ability.

After a few years of the implementation of the OPT, we could conclude the following strengths and weaknesses of the test.

Strengths :

- minimal training requirements
- easy and time-efficient to administer
- can be scored and evaluated immediately
- high reliability
- student can respond at his/her own pace
- able to detect student’s weaknesses in structures

Weaknesses :

- can only test one student at a time
- cannot test above the intermediate level
- doesn’t test student’s pronunciation, fluency or sociolinguistic competence
- only native or near-native speakers of English can administer

### **Application of the OPT**

Even though the OPT was originally developed for private/semi-private classes, the test could apply to classes in other language programs. In 1997 Konan University in Kobe adopted this OPT for speaking classes for continuing education programs. There were only two classes : one elementary and one intermediate class. The class met once a week on Saturdays for a 90 minute lesson which lasted for twelve weeks. Each class had about twenty students.

In the first week, three teachers at Konan University administered the OPT for about forty students and divided them into two classes. Although we used

the commercial texts called *Interchange 1* for elementary level and *Interchange 2* for intermediate level, we used the OPT with the same testing procedure. The result of the test helped us judge their speaking ability and teachers felt very comfortable placing students in the appropriate class. Also, at the end of the course, we surveyed the students and most of them expressed their satisfaction of the program and they felt very good about their assigned levels.

In 1998, five teachers at Konan University administered the OPT for about 70 students in the same language program and placed them into four different levels (low-elementary, high-elementary, low-intermediate and high-intermediate). We found that as more students enrolled in the program, we could increase the number of classes offered and more accurately place them. As a result, there was not too much difference in speaking ability within each class. Again, surveys given at the end of the program showed a high level of student satisfaction.

## Conclusion

In general, constructing, administering and evaluating oral tests seem to be difficult and time consuming and many ESL/EFL teachers are reluctant to use them. However, observation over several years has shown the OPT to be an effective tool in placing students in a class appropriate to their level. This translates to high levels of satisfaction not only among the students, but also the teachers, who are able to use their materials more effectively and efficiently since their classes more accurately reflect the level their materials were originally intended to be used for.

## Appendix

### Sample questions (Core 3a) and answers

1. Ask me how long I've lived in Japan/Tokyo/Nagoya/Osaka/etc.  
How long **have** you **lived** (**been**) in Japan/Tokyo/Nagoya/Osaka/etc.? [Answer S's question]
2. Ask me if my father has ever been to Japan.  
**Has** your father ever **been** to Japan? [Answer S's question]
3. Tell me **two** cities you've been to Japan? [Answer S's question]  
I've **been** to Nara and Hiroshima.
4. Where do you live? How long have you lived there?  
I live in Tokyo. I've **lived** there (**for**) 3 years/since 1989.
5. Ask me **two** questions about next weekend using "what," "where," "when," or "how."  
[Answer S's questions]

What would you like to do next weekend ?

How will you get there ?

Where are you going to go ?    When are you leaving ?

6. Ask me how to get to the station from here.

Could you tell me how to get to the station from here ?

How do I/you get to the station from here ?

7. Tell me two places I can go shopping in (this city).

You can/could go to Takashimaya or/and Seibu.

8. Which one's better ? Why ?

Takashimaya is (better). (Because) Takashimaya/They have/It has **more/nicer** things/clothes/sales/etc.

9. Tell me what's in your room. Tell me at least three sentences.

There's a bed.    There are (some) plants.    There's a desk.

10. Ask me two questions about last weekend using "what," "where," "when," or "how."

[Answer S's questions]

What did you do last weekend ?    Where did you go last weekend ?

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