

Oral Assessment in Overseas Matriculation Examinations : Implications for Japan

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Introduction

There is an extensive history of oral assessment being practiced as a core element of foreign language education programs abroad. Oral assessment has been confirmed as dating back to the 1950s in the USA and to earlier decades in the UK and Australia, and predates the advent of communicative language teaching. The oral exam, for example, has long been part of early matriculation exams in the pre-communicative syllabi developed in Australia for German language education. Similarly, early versions of the UK Ordinary Level Examination (“O-level”) for French language courses consisted of traditional exercises such as dictation and translation, but also included oral exams conducted by an external examiner. The adoption of oral assessment procedures in these countries has generally been based on the rationale that speaking ability is of primary importance in communication, and as a consequence oral assessment should constitute a significant component of language assessment.

The extensive usage of oral assessment in many countries contrasts markedly with the slow acceptance and adoption of oral assessment procedures in Japan. This paper consequently considers the historical development of oral testing in the USA, the UK, and Australia with a view to determining whether similar procedures should be developed for university entrance examinations in Japan. The situation

regarding matriculation examinations in Japan is different in a number of cultural and contextual factors that have tended to substantially impede the adoption of oral assessment. The rationale and potential benefits of oral assessment is consequently examined and potential difficulties in implementing oral assessment procedures are discussed. Recommendations are also made for the development of oral assessment in Japan by adapting procedures used in other countries to the Japanese context.

History of Oral Assessment

Oral assessment is usually regarded as originating in the United States during the Second World War, when it was recognized that communication skills were necessary to conduct military missions in foreign countries (Fulcher, 1997). The implementation of the first large scale formalized oral assessment procedures is generally attributed to the US Foreign Service Interview conducted by the State Department between 1952 and 1956 (Spolsky, 1990). Based on these two major developments in oral testing, Fulcher argues that oral assessment techniques in the UK and Australia were derived from the early tests developed in the United States. He also regards the evolvement of oral assessment to have followed similar stages in most English-speaking countries. In the United States, for example, foreign language testing in secondary schools initially consisted of grammar, vocabulary, and reading tests in the 1950s, but with the advent of audiolingualism in the 1960s progressed to a focus on the four skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Language textbooks subsequently also shifted their focus in the mid-1970s to practising meaningful activities in context, with grammar playing a subordinate role to the exchange of meaning. Subsequently, by the mid-1980s communicative teaching practices had been adopted in these countries (Valette, 1989).

The purpose of language education has changed significantly during the period

following the Second World War, when it has become increasingly obvious that communication skills were necessary in foreign languages to serve a variety of practical functions. The United States, for example, quickly recognized the need to promote the communicative proficiency of military personnel and diplomats involved in Foreign Service assignments. Similarly, communicative skills were viewed in Australia as being necessary in foreign languages for a variety of political and business reasons. In his study of the development of national language policy in Australia, for example, Ingram finds ...

... evidence of Australian international policies being influenced by the lack of staff able to speak other languages and to understand directly the people with whom they are dealing, evidence of Australian aid and trade missions operating without Australian interpreters and being deliberately misled or negotiating unsuccessfully or unsatisfactorily for contracts, and evidence of State and Federal Government departments and private enterprise being apparently unaware of the need to appoint Australians with appropriate language skills and cultural understanding to represent them, to negotiate on their behalf, or to interpret for those who do. (1988, p. 19)

However, while oral testing is frequently regarded as originating in the US, there is evidence of the prior usage of oral testing in at least two other English-speaking countries. Spolsky (1990) relates the origins of oral assessment to a UK report on oral testing by Roach in 1945, which was internally disseminated to examiners from the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate. He believes that the significance of Roach's tests have been seriously under-reported in the literature on language testing in both the US and the UK, although it appears that oral tests at the university entrance level did not occur in the UK until much

later. According to Benson (2004), listening and speaking skills were not generally tested in Britain until the 1960s. Oral testing procedures were also included in the matriculation examination in South Australia as early as 1923 (Mercurio & Sarre, 2002), when the oral component of the German examination consisted of three sections: Dictation, Reading Aloud, and *Short Conversation*. The early South Australian oral tests were somewhat dissimilar to modern oral proficiency examinations since they included dictation and reading aloud activities, although the short conversation appears to have continued in Australia as a core feature of oral language testing since its introduction in the 1920s.

Mercurio and Sarre (2002) provide an interesting and detailed chronological analysis of the German examinations used in South Australia between 1878 and 2002. It is noteworthy that as early as 1946 the oral section of the exam was explicitly formulated as: “A short conversation on objects and happenings of everyday life: business, social life, studies, recreations etc. A somewhat higher standard of pronunciation, vocabulary and fluency will be expected” (2002, p. 7). The development of oral assessment techniques in Australia, however, appears to have been delayed by the Second World War, ultimately to resume a similar pattern of development as occurred in most other western countries. Lo Bianco (1987), for example, describes the shift in language assessment in Australia from grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation to a focus on communicative proficiency involving real-life tasks and interviews. However, Mercurio and Sarre (2002) found that the Reading Aloud section of the German oral examination was still being used in 1986, when the oral test comprised a ten minute interview commencing with reading a passage and followed by a conversation on topics related to literature, society, and culture. The Reading Aloud section of the German exam had disappeared by 1991, when the oral examination was modified to consist of an individual conversation with the examiner of between ten to fifteen minutes in length. The oral exam was

subsequently divided into two sections in 2002, and currently comprises a conversation (related to everyday topics) and a discussion (an in-depth study of a chosen subject), with each section aiming to reveal different aspects of spoken language ability.

The Significance of Spoken English in Japan

In contrast to the development of oral testing techniques in many English-speaking countries, oral assessment has been used minimally in Japanese foreign language programs. This difference is evident when comparing foreign language education programs between Japan and other countries. Less significance is attributed, for example, to spoken English in Japan than to spoken Japanese or spoken German in Australia in comparable foreign language programs, where language programs are typically four skills based but commence with an early focus on developing oral communication. This situation is completely different to Japan, where translation, reading, and grammar study form the basis of the majority of secondary English programs. Since oral communication is usually limited to a single subject taken in a junior year at high school, many Japanese secondary students have not been taught how to communicate in English and thus tend to find this challenging when attending university.

It is interesting to consider the reasons for the contrasting development of foreign language programs between Japan and the other countries. A major cause for the lower significance of the oral component of foreign language programs in Japan is the importance of large scale formal tests which are used for university entrance and employment purposes. These tests typically do not assess communicative skills but instead focus on reading, listening, grammar, and vocabulary since these areas of language ability can be machine-graded for

thousands of students and do not require individual oral assessments to be conducted by professionally trained raters (see Blight & Stephens, 2005). The education ministry (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology or MEXT) has recently taken a major step forward by introducing a listening component to the national university entrance examination. However, listening is only part of the requirement for students to develop communicative language skills and the assessment of other key components of practical communication including speaking and interaction have not yet appeared in these examinations.

Clearly the limited emphasis on developing oral communication apparent in most English programs in Japan has already had major consequences. Native-speaking English teachers who have also worked overseas tend to notice a major disparity between the number of years of English study by Japanese students and their oral proficiency levels (see Rees, 1999). Although higher proficiency outcomes are significantly easier to attain in ESL environments, the communicative ability of Japanese students is also under-developed when compared to other EFL environments, including some other countries in the Asian region. The native English teachers consequently tend to question the value of so much intensive study of translation and grammar when after six years of English language study at high school (sometimes in addition to several years of primary school study), some students have difficulty conducting basic conversations or functioning with simple transactional language. The under-developed skills of Japanese students have also been related to limitations associated with traditional methods of teaching and the slow acceptance of communicative teaching principles (see Blight & Stephens, 2005), a situation which has continued for a protracted period in Japan despite official MEXT support for the use of communicative techniques since the late 1980s (Komiya-Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004).

There are a number of additional cultural factors behind the lack of emphasis on

spoken English in Japan. Lowe and Stansfield (1988) highlight the difference between language studies conducted for utilitarian purposes or as a component of humanistic education. The practice in Japan has traditionally been to focus on English as a subject of academic interest rather than as developing a means for practical communication in the modern, globalized context. Similarly, the prevalence of high stakes proficiency tests used for matriculation and employment purposes in Japan can also be viewed as a consequence of various cultural factors. In a contrastive study of the EFL testing component of university entrance examinations in Finland and Japan, Garant (2000) describes how lessons in communicative English at the high school level in Japan were sacrificed in order to prepare students for matriculation examinations. In particular, Garant examines the differences in perceptions of the role of English for Finnish and Japanese learners. The Finnish students regarded EFL instruction as a means of developing communicative skills whereas the Japanese students perceived English simply as a means of passing entrance examinations. This situation clearly indicates the lack of apparent connection between communicative teaching and matriculation examinations, or more seriously, that communicative English is often regarded in Japan as a distraction from the serious business of passing examinations :

The main goal of English instruction in schools is to prepare students for non-communicative university entrance exams. The gradual introduction of communicative techniques into the Japanese education system depends on an equal shift in assessment procedures, at least to introduce a communicative component. (Beale, 2002, pp. 27-28)

However, recent studies indicate a reasonably widespread belief by Japanese students as well as EFL teachers that learning to communicate effectively should be

the main objective of English education programs in Japan (see Blight & Stephens, 2005 ; Ingram, Kono, Sasaki, Tateyama, & O'Neill, 2004 ; Takeshita, 2001). Such findings are clearly contradictory to the current direction of many English programs in Japan. Furthermore, communicative learning objectives are only partially represented in the university entrance examinations in terms of the new listening component. Since research into backwash effects indicates that students tend to acquire most effectively the aspects of a language that are tested, it appears to be both appropriate and relevant to introduce oral assessment techniques in Japan in order to achieve the goal of the majority of Japanese students: "By testing or assessing communicatively, we would expect the backwash to be beneficial. If we wish students to learn to communicate effectively in a variety of practical situations, we should test them on these skills" (Hartley & Spring, 1999, p. 73).

While there are recent signs of increased acceptance of the value of communicative teaching in Japan, in general the progress towards adopting fluency goals remains slow in most foreign language programs. Kobayashi (2001) argues that despite the increasingly favourable climate for the introduction of communicative English, the two major factors currently restricting its adoption are the under-representation of communicative activities in classes for entrance examinations and the general lack of demand for communicative English in Japan. Venning (2002) also reports that Japanese teachers of middle school English often feel confined to teaching the form of entrance examinations used by senior high schools and consequently are continuing to focus on reading, translation, and grammar instruction. Ingram discusses a different problem of language testing as "the gap that exists between tests of language proficiency and real-life language performance" (2004, p. 24). He concludes that there is a significant need for the use of authentic materials in language programs to bridge the gap between test performance and actual language skills. In such a context, oral skills instinctively

appear to be of primary importance because of their frequency in daily life, but for EFL learners in Japan they are often restricted to use in communicative classrooms.

The Advantages of Oral Assessment

The main advantage of oral assessment is that it assesses a language skill which is necessary in real life. Indeed, speaking ability is often seen as the primary language skill because of its significance in social interactions and its importance as a base for further language development, as discussed by Gess and Markley :

Speaking ability is the most noticeable aspect of language ability. It is the ability on which people gauge a speaker's capacity for participating in normal, everyday interactions (for example social interactions and transactional interactions). In a very real sense, strong speaking skills can be seen as a vehicle for propelling a learner through linguistic exchanges that are beneficial to further development. (2005, p. 20)

The usefulness of English speaking ability is clearly also recognized by Japanese university students. Many students enjoy practicing oral communication in classroom settings and the improved fluency they develop can be extremely motivating to their future language acquisition. Indeed, such students find that personal interactions are a more satisfying way of learning a language than studying and translating written texts. Interactions are two-way and dynamic, with each conversational turn changing according to the nature of the response, while studying a written text is unidirectional. Although the inner dialogue prompted by a written text may be stimulating, this form of study lacks the immediacy and unpredictability of interpersonal communication.

The introduction of oral testing provides a specific goal for the students, so that their fluency gains and improved ability to communicate become evident. Recent research into which language skills Japanese university students regard as most important to their future lives also reveals an overwhelming preference for the oral communication skills (speaking, listening) over the academic skills (reading, writing) (see Blight & Stephens, 2005; Matsuura, Chiba, & Hilderbrandt, 2001). The results of these studies clearly indicate the high value placed on developing English speaking ability by the students themselves.

Another important advantage of oral assessment concerns the usefulness of test results. Oral assessment measures a student's speaking performance, which is a more direct measure of language ability than results on grammar and vocabulary tests. While grammatical ability and vocabulary knowledge are important areas of a learner's development, tests in these areas are indirect measures of ability. Hence the student's results on an oral test are more likely to resemble their real-life language performance, and are clearly of significance for this reason: "[T]he more the tasks and contexts in which the language is tested resemble those of real life, the more accurately is the language test likely to predict how the candidate will cope, at least linguistically, with real-life activities" (Ingram, 2004, p. 24).

J. D. Brown, a leading scholar of language testing who has gained familiarity with the Japanese learning context over several decades, argues that in future years there will be an increasing focus in the international arena on performance testing rather than on testing the receptive skills (Newfields, 2003). The testing of performance skills is more challenging than testing receptive skills, but since performance skills are closely related to real-life communication they cannot be omitted from education programs on the basis of practical difficulties with test administration. Furthermore, as English is used increasingly as an international language in future years, performance skills can only grow in importance and

consequently deserve greater attention in education programs in Japan than is currently the case.

In many overseas language programs, measures in gains of the students' communicative competence are sometimes used as the basis for evaluation of the success of a language program. In such situations, where the administration are accountable for program results in terms of the students' communicative performance and where budget allocations are sometimes determined on the same basis, the value of developing communicative competence in students is fully recognized. Byrnes (1989) discusses this type of intensive focus on linguistic outcomes in terms of the development of "functional ability rather than in terms of seat-time or grammatical components" (1989, p.266) as a direct response to the need to demonstrate program accountability. Similarly, Bachman and Savignon (1986) argue that a lack of accountability in some programs is responsible for producing students who obtain high grades in language courses without being able to read or converse at an acceptable standard. Clearly the consensus of views in these areas indicates that practical proficiency is the aim of the majority of modern language programs in English-speaking countries.

Current Issues with Oral Assessment Practices

There are a number of issues relating to oral assessment that should be considered prior to adopting similar practices in Japan. Some of these issues relate to difficulties inherent in oral assessment procedures, while others relate to differences in the Japanese educational context. These issues shall now be discussed in order to gain realistic expectations of what is achievable and to interpret the significance of factors likely to affect the adoption of oral assessment in Japan.

Difficulties Inherent in Oral Assessment Procedures

Limitations of Classroom Instruction

Classrooms are artificial learning environments which cannot replicate the conditions found in real-life. Although activities practiced in the classroom may be modeled on typical social scenarios, it is unlikely that real-life situations will follow the patterns developed in such activities. The extent to which communicative skills acquired in classroom activities can be transferred to realistic contexts is limited. Schulz discusses this situation in terms of the problems occurring when “language exposure is limited to *inside* the classroom, largely *dependent* on simplified, grammatically sequenced materials and teacher creativity to turn contrived exercises into genuine communication” (1986, p. 374). The success of classroom activities can consequently be related to how well they accommodate the range of language variations likely to occur in real-life. While communicative activities are generally regarded as providing useful practice of common social scenarios, Kramsch takes a more extreme view, suggesting that classroom discourse may be fundamentally inappropriate for the development of interactional skills :

Classroom discourse is institutionally asymmetric, non-negotiable, norm-referenced, and teacher-controlled, thus hardly conducive to developing the interpersonal social skills that require interpretation and negotiation of intended meanings. (1986, p. 369)

Issues of Validity and Reliability

Although Hartley and Sporing (1999) argue that communicative assessment methods are as reliable as traditional forms of assessment, difficulties with oral examinations have been previously cited in areas of validity and reliability (Bruhn, 1989; Hall, 1993). Schulz (1986), for example, questions the results of such tests by arguing

that oral skills are the most unstable of the four skills and that skills acquired up to the testing period are the least likely of the four skills to be retained. Richards and Chambers (1996) identify serious weaknesses in the reliability and validity of the oral assessment practiced in the GCSE oral examination. They found that the teachers varied widely in their consistency of marking, and the number of years of teaching experience only correlated with consistency in the scoring of pronunciation. Surprisingly, a group of trainee teachers achieved similar results as the experienced teachers for inter-rater reliability after having received just one morning of induction on oral assessment procedures: "Depending on the marking scheme, performance on the dual marking extended from an astonishingly high consistency, to levels which could have been achieved by chance" (Richards & Chambers, 1996, p. 32). However, such problems should be considered as relating specifically to the GCSE oral examination, rather than as being representative of general weaknesses of oral assessment procedures. Richards and Chambers, for example, conclude that the GCSE assessment criteria are "neither derived from a model of language proficiency nor from an analysis of communicative development which would identify features of performance which cluster at different levels of proficiency" (1996, p. 33).

As with any other form of testing, it appears likely that if specific problems with validity and reliability are identified and addressed, oral tests can provide a sound basis of assessment. In one study, Hall (1993) compared the results of oral and written assessment procedures, and found that while the quantity of language produced during the oral assessment was somewhat less, the quality of language skills could be assessed more accurately because the interactive nature of the interviews provided examiners with more opportunities to fully examine the students' language ability. Hall consequently concludes that oral assessment is a valid means of assessment since oral skills are clearly important and yet typically under-represented in many assessment procedures.

Practical Difficulties with Oral Testing

In an earlier study of the French oral examination included in the General Certificate of Secondary Education (“GCSE”), Chambers and Richards (1995) argue that having to cover a prescribed set of topics during the test results in a highly artificial conversation occurring between the student and examiner. At that time, two or three of a set of seven prescribed topics were required to be covered in the five minute interview. Chambers and Richards subsequently also replicated the interviews with a group of French teenagers, and discovered that some of the prescribed topics were regarded as an invasion of privacy, particularly when the teenagers were asked to describe their home life. They consequently conclude that : “Sometimes the demands of eliciting language and the need to cover the syllabus may leave teachers and examiners insensitive to the artificiality of such exchanges” (1995, p. 7).

Perhaps the most significant practical difficulties in administering oral assessments relate to the time and costs of providing individual interviews to each student. Seward (1973), for example, discusses the administrative constraints and costs of oral tests. Interviews are time-consuming to administer since they require “up to fifteen minutes of two or more trained examiners’ time” (p. 76). Tape recordings are similarly time-consuming to score, and “[i]n situations where a large number of students must be tested, such procedures are simply out of the question” (p. 76). Indeed, such practical limitations would appear to present a major impediment to the introduction of oral assessment in Japan. It is likely that Japanese administrators also believe they are unable to introduce the tests for such reasons, and consequently oral assessment is not included in matriculation examinations. By contrast, oral ability has been considered as sufficiently important for the practical difficulties to have been addressed in Australia and the UK, where oral examinations have been an important component of matriculation

examinations for decades.

Questions Concerning Language Accuracy

While the communicative method and the accompanying techniques of oral assessment used in English-speaking countries overseas have improved language fluency, this has generally been accomplished at the expense of an increase in errors. Hurman (1992) analyzed the responses of seventy-five oral examiners of A-level French, German, and Spanish in the UK. The examiners were asked to rate their opinions of the candidates' performance in relation to previous years, and noted that the candidates were better at expressing their opinion and more willing to embark on discussing complex issues despite not being necessarily able to demonstrate mastery of the appropriate grammar. Hurman summarizes this situation as "... a greater inclination to take the initiative and maintain the flow of the conversation and a decrease in the quality—represented by accuracy and range—of the language used to express that talk" (1992, p. 9). This result seems to be indicative of the backwash effect of communicative assessment. A greater emphasis on meaning has resulted in improved communication but this has been accompanied by a decrease in accuracy. Hurman directly attributes this result to changes in teaching methodology :

The two most prominent factors which may account for this situation are the methods of teaching which have encouraged learners to say something however little or inaccurate rather than remaining silent and the large role played by topic teaching which tends to reduce the amount of time allocated to consolidating grammatical aspects of language. It is in the spoken rather than the written form that this grammatical weakness is more easily revealed. (1992, p. 9)

On the basis of the students' increase in language production errors, the GCSE examination was subsequently revised to include a greater emphasis on "grammatical skill and accuracy than has been the norm in the GCSE to date where the emphasis on communication has led to the neglect of the formal aspects of language" (Turner, 1996, p. 14).

Differences in the Japanese Educational Context

There are a number of issues that should also be considered specifically in relation to the Japanese educational context. First, the majority of oral examinations used in English-speaking countries have involved cognate languages such as English and other European languages. It is possible that the results of oral assessment studies on such programs may have been influenced to a serious extent by the proximity of the foreign languages to the students' first languages. The situation in Japan differs because it typically concerns non-cognate languages (e. g., Japanese and English). Consequently, the extent to which the results of previous studies on oral assessment may be relevant to the Japanese educational context is unclear. Additional research on oral assessment in Japan is clearly required in order to more fully evaluate the particular requirements of this context.

The effects of a range of cultural factors are likely to also be significant in Japan. Jones, for example, discusses the difficulties of eliciting a representative sample of the students' linguistic knowledge when there is an imbalance between the examiner and examinee of factors such as "age, race, social class, education and profession" (1985, p. 81). Jones suggests ways in which the effects of such differences between the student and examiner can be addressed, such as the use of an interlocutor of the same age when testing teenage subjects. In such cases, the examiner would also be present but would act as an observer. Another possible solution proposed by Jones is a group discussion by examinees lead by a native

speaker, although the former suggestion may be more suited to Japan because of the importance attached to the age and status of the interlocutors.

The effects of status differences between examiner and examinee are clearly of major concern in Japan. Beale (2002) argues that it “would be unwise for Japanese educators to blindly apply Western norms and expectations to the assessment of communicative skills” (p.28) because of cultural difference regarding the appropriateness of expressing opinions to the examiner. The results of other research studies in this area also confirm its significance. Bruhn (1989), for example, examines the results of language tests in Senegal and concludes that factors of gender, age, and socioeconomic status affected the objectivity of the test results. In one case, such factors even prevented an examiner of lower status on one of the scales from acknowledging weaknesses in the examinee of higher status. Bruhn argued that these types of cultural issues were not being addressed by the Foreign Service Institute in the United States, and as a consequence the results on their examinations could be skewed.

There are additional differences between classrooms in Japan and the other countries featured in previous studies. Kato (2001) identifies major differences in classroom culture between Japan and Australia in areas including the higher social status given to teachers in Japan, the greater reluctance of students to speak up in classes in Japan, and the greater emphasis in Japan on always producing a correct answer. The classroom culture in Japan may even substantially inhibit the adoption of the kind of communicative assessment that is common in Australia and the UK. Venning (2002) argues that although the communicative approach has been promoted by Japan’s Ministry of Education since 1987, the application of communicative instruction is open to various interpretations. Some of the Japanese junior high school teachers of English in Venning’s study, for example, simply viewed communicative teaching as teaching done by a native speaking teaching assistant.

This seems to be indicative of a major distinction between the roles of the two types of teachers, with the Japanese teachers of English teaching in order to pass written exams and native-speaking teachers teaching communication. Furthermore, the increased frequency of error production that can occur with improved fluency may be regarded negatively in Japan, where language proficiency tests typically focus on assessing grammatical accuracy. If communicative assessment is adopted in Japan it would consequently appear wise to maintain an emphasis on language form while simultaneously promoting more spontaneous interaction. However, the appropriate balance is often difficult to achieve because traditional approaches in Japan have typically erred on the side of stressing formal accuracy and neglecting the negotiation of meaning, while communicative approaches have tended to err in the opposite direction.

The current emphasis in Japan on teaching translation and studying grammatical patterns should also be considered in light of official ministry objectives, which explicitly state the goal of fostering communicative skills. Referring to MEXT's proposal of "Developing a strategic plan to cultivate Japanese with English abilities," Takeshita argues, "The government supposes that the nation's present communication skills are insufficient, preventing Japanese people from freely exchanging ideas with foreign people" (Takeshita, 2003, p. 116). However, there appears to be a gap between the formal objectives stated by the ministry and the outcomes being achieved by many English programs in Japan, although the introduction of the listening section in the national university entrance examination will clearly assist the development of communicative skills. The extent to which the ministry objectives will be achieved in the future must also be questioned given the apparent lack of support from many Japanese teachers of English. Ingram et al. (2004) surveyed forty-seven Japanese teachers of English in secondary schools in Akita prefecture, and describe the teachers' preference for traditional teaching

methods as a “striking outcome” (p. 17). Furthermore, they evidenced a lack of interest in using communicative activities. Ingram et al. conclude that there were “relatively few opportunities given to the learners to use the language creatively, informally or in uncontrolled situations for normal social interaction” (p. 18). The kind of free conversation demanded in the GCSE (see Buckby, 1996 ; Chambers & Richards, 1995) in which students are required to participate in an unscripted conversation could be considered inappropriate in this type of classroom culture.

Implications for the Adoption of Oral Assessment in Japan

The introduction of oral assessment in Japan should be regarded as part of a major shift in teaching methodologies which is necessary to develop more effective learning outcomes in foreign language education. The current reliance upon the grammar-translation method as the basis of language instruction in secondary education is likely to be impeding the ability of Japanese learners to acquire English. However, the initial problems experienced overseas of a decrease in accuracy and fossilization of errors should also be avoided in Japan. As a consequence of communicative methodologies, students have become more proficient in talking and are producing a higher volume of language, but are also making more frequent errors. The development of oral skills does indeed require accuracy, but in the early stages of learning there should be a degree of tolerance of errors in the interests of developing fluency.

According to the method followed in many English-speaking countries, students are expected to make frequent errors in early stages of language acquisition, and subsequently to work on improving their accuracy and fluency as they develop proficiency, rather than attempting to achieve just the first objective as is common in Japan. Hence, while the current emphasis on form should be maintained, the

ability for spontaneous expression which is an important characteristic of conversation should be developed. Free conversation does not imply an absence of form since conversation is a combination of language structures, conversation strategies, and spontaneous interaction. National syllabi of oral assessment in English-speaking countries consequently tend to be tightly structured and specific about learning outcomes (see Curriculum Corporation, 1994, p. 4 ; Mitchell, 2000, pp. 22-24). In such curricula, the goal of communicative assessment is not simply to exchange and negotiate meaning, but to support this process with appropriate knowledge and usage of formulaic utterances and conversational strategies. Hence Mitchell's (2000) observation that Levels 1-4 of the Speaking Attainment Targets for the National Curriculum for Modern Languages in England and Wales require the reproduction of formulaic expressions, while Levels 5 and above rely on the demonstration of more creative language production.

Given the range of factors impeding the adoption of communicative testing in Japan, it is likely that the best results may be obtained by adapting the communicative methodology used in English-speaking countries to local requirements. Jones (1985) suggests the implementation of a needs assessment to justify the desirability of oral tests, and such a procedure could be conducted with a view to ascertaining the relevance of various aspects of communicative teaching in specific contexts. Jones also pragmatically recommends that administrators seek less costly ways of implementing oral tests, for example by limiting oral testing to sub-groups of students, selected on the basis of being representative samples which can be used as reliable indicators of the overall program performance.

The issue of how communicative assessment can be adapted to more effectively suit the Japanese context is open to interpretation pending the results of future research. One important principal involves acceptance that the English language is no longer the preserve of English-speaking cultures. Recent research in the field of

World Englishes now views English as belonging to the international community to develop and adapt to suit different purposes and needs. Mutual comprehensibility has superseded the former model of attaining the native speaker “ideal.”

The significance of cultural differences in learning contexts needs careful consideration, since current practices in oral assessment in Australia and the UK may not be suitable for Japanese classrooms. One area of difference involves the higher status of teachers in Japan which may make it difficult for students to respond to an examiner in an uninhabited manner. It would also be difficult for native-English speaking interlocutors to ignore their differences in status in the tense situation of a high-stakes exam. In such situations, conversation strategies play an indispensable role in the promotion of fluency development. If conversation skills such as *adding extra information* and *asking a return question* are added to the curriculum as specific learning objectives, students in Japan should have no trouble adapting to this requirement.

The communicative approach and oral assessment procedures foster the acquisition of spoken language skills. Hence a significant backwash effect of communicative assessment is likely to be major improvement in the students' communicative skills. Presently it is customary for many students taking university entrance exams in Japan to attend supplementary cram schools to give them the best possible chance in these high-stakes exams. If an oral exam were introduced, it is likely that students attending cram schools would also be required to develop their oral skills. Hence backwash effects are likely to directly promote the development of communicative competence. However, one potential problem with this situation could be that the cost of English conversation classes is typically prohibitive, so the need to provide opportunities to improve oral skills for students who lack the means to enroll in expensive conversation courses should also be addressed.

Concluding Remarks

Despite the acknowledged difficulties of introducing oral assessment at the university entrance level in Japan, the potential benefits in terms of promoting more effective foreign language acquisition appear to far outweigh the problems. The implementation of oral assessment should consequently be viewed as a necessary means of promoting English speaking ability in a country which has hitherto neglected this critical area of language acquisition. Performance testing should also be regarded as essential because it relates to the real-life needs and purposes of students, rather than to the traditional (but archaic) purposes that are still prevalent today. Furthermore, while less value is assigned to spoken English in Japan than in many overseas programs, persisting with this direction contradicts the curriculum goals of the education ministry as well as the objectives of the students, both of whom are in favour of learning English in order to communicate. It also appears likely that current teaching methodologies are inhibiting the development of communicative ability and causing significantly reduced motivation and confidence in students. The Japanese education system should consequently seek to relate learning outcomes more closely to the students' actual needs for learning a foreign language, rather than aiming to perpetuate a bureaucratic system of out-dated learning objectives.

The benefits to Japanese society of the backwash effects following the introduction of oral testing are also likely to be enormous. Oral examinations have long been carried out, researched, and developed in other countries, so Japan is in the privileged situation of being afforded the opportunity to consider the results of the overseas programs and to make modifications to suit the Japanese context. The backwash effect of the introduction of oral assessment in high-stakes matriculation exams would essentially be an improvement in communicative ability. This would

lead to the students gaining increased confidence and a sense of enjoyment and satisfaction when using foreign languages. In an increasingly globalized world, communication skills are necessary not only for improving the flow of information but also for developing mutual understanding and international cooperation. By improving the learning outcomes of foreign language programs in Japan, the next generation will have more direct access to the full range of experiences that ability in the foreign language can ultimately provide.

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