Assessing Speaking

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Assessing Speaking

Sari Luoma

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

To my parents, Eila and Yrjö Luoma
Thank you for your support and for your faith in me

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Series editors' preface to *Assessing Speaking*

The ability to speak in a foreign language is at the very heart of what it means to be able to use a foreign language. Our personality, our self image, our knowledge of the world and our ability to reason and express our thoughts are all reflected in our spoken performance in a foreign language. Although an ability to read a language is often the limited goal of many learners, it is rare indeed for the teaching of a foreign language not to involve learners and teachers in using the language in class. Being able to speak to friends, colleagues, visitors and even strangers, in their language or in a language which both speakers can understand, is surely the goal of very many learners. Yet speaking in a foreign language is very difficult and competence in speaking takes a long time to develop. To speak in a foreign language learners must master the sound system of the language, have almost instant access to appropriate vocabulary and be able to put words together intelligibly with minimal hesitation. In addition, they must also understand what is being said to them, and be able to respond appropriately to maintain amicable relations or to achieve their communicative goals. Because speaking is done in real-time, learners' abilities to plan, process and produce the foreign language are taxed greatly. For that reason, the structure of speech is quite different from that of the written language, where users have time to plan, edit and correct what they produce. Yet teachers often focus narrowly on the development of grammatically accurate speech which may conflict with a learner's desire to communicate and be understood.

Speaking is also the most difficult language skill to assess reliably. A person's speaking ability is usually judged during a face-to-face interaction, in real time, between an interlocutor and a candidate. The assessor

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has to make instantaneous judgements about a range of aspects of what is being said, as it is being said. This means that the assessment might depend not only upon which particular features of speech (e.g. pronunciation, accuracy, fluency) the interlocutor pays attention to at any point in time, but upon a host of other factors such as the language level, gender, and status of the interlocutor, his or her familiarity to the candidate and the personal characteristics of the interlocutor and candidate. Moreover, the nature of the interaction, the sorts of tasks that are presented to the candidate, the questions asked, the topics broached, and the opportunities that are provided to show his or her ability to speak in a foreign language will all have an impact on the candidate's performance. In addition to all the factors that may affect performance, the criteria used to assess the performance can vary enormously, from global assessments to detailed analytic scales. The ways in which these scales are interpreted by an assessor, who may or may not be the same person as the interlocutor, are bound to have an impact on the score or scores that the candidate is ultimately awarded. There are, of course, ways of overcoming or at least addressing some of these problems, by careful construction of the tasks used to elicit speech, by careful training of both assessors and interlocutors, through audio or video recording of the speech event and by allowing assessors time to review and revise their judgements. Assessing speaking is thus not impossible, but it is difficult.

The strongest feature of this book is that Sari Luoma discusses with great clarity the problems of assessing speaking, and she does this in the light of her broad and deep understanding of the nature of speaking. Drawing upon a wide base of research and theory, she synthesises a large literature into a very readable overview of what is involved in speaking in a second or foreign language. Her down-to-earth approach will appeal both to language teachers who want to assess their students' ability to speak in a foreign language and to researchers of speaking and language assessment.

In this book, as in other volumes in the series, applied linguistic theory and research are drawn upon in order to enhance our understanding of the nature of what is to be tested and assessed. In addition, research into language testing is examined for what it can tell us about the most appropriate ways of assessing speaking, and for insights it can offer into the nature of this central aspect of language use. Although this book is grounded in research and theory, it is highly practical and is aimed at those who need to develop assessments of speaking ability. It thus offers insights and advice that will broaden the repertoire of readers, give

greater understanding of the issues involved, and lead to practical solutions to knotty problems.

Sari Luoma has wide experience of test development in a range of different contexts, and of research into test development and test validation, particularly in the assessment of speaking. She has taught testing and assessment to a range of students and practitioners, which has clearly informed both the content and the style of this volume. We are confident that readers will both learn from, and enjoy, this book.

<div style="text-align: right">

J. Charles Alderson
Lyle F. Bachman

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Charles Alderson and Lyle Bachman, the series editors, for the efforts they put into helping me finish this book. They applied a successful balance of pressure and support in the course of a long writing process with many ups and downs. The insightful comments I received about the content and structure of the book, especially during the revision stage, improved the quality of the text considerably.

I also want to thank some friends and colleagues who have read the manuscript in its various stages and offered valuable advice. Annie Brown's frequent and frank comments on the second-last version helped me restructure several chapters. Bill Eilfort, Mika Hoffman and Ari Huhta also gave their time, advice and support. Furthermore, I want to acknowledge the helpful comments of two groups of Egyptian teachers of English, too many to name individually, who participated in an Advanced Course on Language Testing at the University of California Santa Cruz Extension in the late summer and early fall of 2002. We used an early version of the manuscript as course material, and their comments and groans made me change my writing style and encouraged me to introduce more examples. I want to thank Jean Turner for inviting me to join the teaching group for the two courses.

I must also thank the teachers and colleagues who discussed their speaking assessment practices with me and allowed me to use their specifications and tasks as examples in the book: Tarmo Ahvenainen, Janna Fox, Angela Hasselgren, and Paula Niittyniemi-Mehn.

Finally, I want to thank the editors at Cambridge University Press,

Mickey Bonin and Alison Sharpe, for their help in getting the book ready for publication. Whatever faults that remain in the book are mine.

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