

Book Review

Assessing Speaking in Context: Expanding the Construct and its Applications ISBN-13: 978-1-78892-382-8. M. Rafael Salaberry, Alfred Rue Burch (Eds.). Multilingual Matters, Bristol (2021). p. 328. E-book: UK£25.00/US\$40.00.

The field of EAP has always had a primary focus on written academic discourse. Both in teaching and research in the field, rather less attention has been paid to learners' ability to engage in oral discourse. Certainly, EAP learners routinely participate in paired and small-group discussion activities, give seminar-style presentations in class, and practise taking interview-based speaking tests. However, a search of the archives of this journal produces only a relatively small number of articles that underpin these pedagogical activities by investigating students' oral language needs and their ability to perform various academic speaking tasks, whether in the classroom or in other contexts around the university campus. Thus, *Assessing speaking in context* may be seen as addressing an area which EAP researchers have neglected to some degree.

The contributors to the volume are concerned with expanding our concept of what speaking involves and exploring ways in which the extended construct can be operationalized through appropriate assessment procedures. The key construct is "interactional competence" (IC), a term generally credited to the US applied linguist, Claire Kramsch, who in a 1986 article argued for a broadening of the conception of communicative competence in foreign language education to include the ability to engage in conversation, discussion and a variety of speech acts. The authors of Chapter 2 of the book refer to these kinds of oral activities as "talking", to distinguish them from monologic presentations and participation in structured interviews, which are designated as "speaking". It should be noted that IC has a great deal in common with pragmatic competence, and several leading scholars who have worked with that construct, such as Gabriele Kasper, Carsten Roever and Soo Jung Youn, are also contributors to this book.

The contents of *Assessing speaking in context* come from papers presented at a conference with the same title, held at Rice University in the US in 2018. The thirteen

chapters are organised into four parts, which follow a logical sequence: *Conceptual and Theoretical Issues*; *Collecting and Rating Speaking Data*; *Designing Speaking Assessment Tests*; and *Using New Technologies to Assess Speaking*. The editors have written the first and last chapters to introduce and conclude the volume respectively.

In Part 1 of the book, the authors discuss the limitations of standardised English proficiency tests as measures of just speaking, rather than talking in the broader sense. Although interview-based tests such as the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) in the US and the speaking component of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) require a kind of interaction, they give the test-takers little if any opportunity to engage in turn-taking (taking the initiative, changing the topic, interrupting) or more generally to co-construct the dialogue. Such tests also represent speaking in fairly generic terms, whereas IC researchers emphasise the importance of identifying the needs of learners in specific social and educational contexts. They favour the use of Conversation Analysis (CA) to gain a micro-level perspective on what is involved in truly interactive communication and the performance of relevant speech acts. This includes appropriate non-verbal behaviour (NVB). In an interesting review of quite extensive literature, India Plough shows how gestures perform a variety of pragmatic functions in human speech communication, along with facial expressions, eye contact and other body language. Thus, part of IC is the ability both to use NVB appropriately in speaking the target language and to interpret the non-verbal aspects of how one's interlocutor responds.

Parts 2 and 3 comprise case studies of IC research and test development in particular educational contexts. One problem for EAP practitioners in this regard is that the majority of the contexts in these chapters are not directly relevant to their own teaching programmes. Two chapters involve secondary school students of English in European countries and four others focus on learners of foreign languages in US universities at beginning to intermediate levels of proficiency. The two more relevant chapters are those by Soo Jung Youn and Shi Chen, who analysed roleplays of university students negotiating a time to meet on a group project, and Shane Dunkle, who explored the use of social deduction board games (as compared to business-oriented roleplays) to assess the negotiating, turn-taking and bluffing skills of advanced ESL university students at a US university. Another limitation of all these studies is their exploratory nature, often discussing a handful of cases, rather than reporting more established assessment programmes.

Leaving aside the issue of contextual relevance, a number of themes emerge from the eight chapters in the two middle parts of the book. Roleplays are commonly used as the basis for assessing IC competence but they are more valid when they are open-ended, and they are likely to work better if they constitute a stand-alone test, rather than being incorporated into an interview-based assessment like an OPI.

Two key components of IC that can be the basis for assessing learners are the ability to take turns collaboratively (through turn-taking, turn-holding and turn-yielding) and having good repair strategies. The latter come into play when the participants encounter a breakdown in communication and need to reach a mutual understanding through strategies such as repetition, paraphrasing, asking for clarification and identifying what was misunderstood. Even when such skills can be carefully described on a rating scale for assessing roleplays or problem-solving tasks, raters need careful training and monitoring in order to be able to apply the rating criteria consistently. They also need to work collaboratively, recognising that they approach the inherently complex rating task from different perspectives.

Part 4 of the book has a focus on uses of new technologies to assess speaking. The chapter by Jayoung Song and Wei-li Hsu reports on a small classroom-based study using Virtual Reality goggles to enhance the experience for first-year learners of Korean as they perform roleplays in a simulated campus café setting with a pre-recorded interlocutor. This is followed by a broader survey by Noriko Iwashita, Lyn May and Paul Moore of trends in the assessment of speaking ability in the computer-based versions of the major international English proficiency tests, IELTS, TOEFL iBT and the Pearson Test (PTE). Whereas the computer-delivered IELTS uses videoconferencing technology with a live examiner, the other two tests involve semi-direct tasks where the test-takers respond to pre-recorded prompts. The authors highlight the active interest among researchers, particularly at Educational Testing Service (publisher of TOEFL), in exploring how to exploit new technologies to elicit more realistic samples of interactive behaviour. Nevertheless, the current state of play in computer-based testing falls well short of the kind of face-to-face communication among real people that is the focus of this book.

The theme of the adequacy of new technology to meet the aspirations of IC advocates is taken up by the editors in their concluding chapter. Salaberry and Burch note that it is inherently challenging to assess the interactional aspects of language use, even for experienced researchers, not only because of the limitations of the technology but also the

amount of training required by teachers and examiners to be able to identify and reliably rate the key elements of interactional performance. They therefore see a strategic “division of labour”, whereby major tests are largely restricted (as they are now) to assessing monologic speech and responses to questions or other prompts, whereas genuine face-to-face interaction can be assessed only on a small scale within institutions and language schools. It remains to be seen whether further advances in the technology and/or pressure from the users of major tests will change this equation.

Assessing speaking in context is well organised and there is a pleasing sense of completeness in the way that the last two chapters return to the opening theme of the inadequacy of standardised proficiency tests. Although the chapters in Parts 2 and 3 are a little variable in quality, reflecting their origin as conference papers rather than specially commissioned contributions, they have been carefully edited and give a realistic account of how language teaching professionals are exploring how to assess IC in their own situations.

Overall, the book offers much of value to readers who recognise the importance of developing interactional competence for second language learners, including students who need English for academic purposes. It will be of greater interest to researchers and practitioners who have a commitment to assessing this component of communicative competence, especially when the EAP students they work with need to acquire professional skills in oral interaction to a high degree, such as majors in business, law and the health sciences. It is unfortunate from this point of view that none of the case studies involves this kind of professional context. At another level, readers who are critical of how speaking skills are assessed in the major international English proficiency tests may gain insights into how challenging it is to design test tasks that can validly measure interactive skills on a large scale, particularly when the test is computer-administered.

References

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