GUIDELINES FOR ORAL ASSESSMENT

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ABSTRACT

This document aims at offering teachers a framework for assessing oral language and some guidelines that will foster the implementation and practice of a homogeneous oral assessment system (OAS) at the EAFIT University Language Center. The document deals with three main topics, namely (1) Communicative Approach to Teaching and Assessment; (2) Planning for Assessment; and (3) Using the Oral Assessment Rubric.

Key words: communicative competence, assessment tasks, rubrics, grading

RESUMEN

En este documento se presentan los lineamientos y teoría para la implementación de un sistema de evaluación oral en el Centro de Idiomas de la Universidad Eafit. El texto desarrolla tres temas principales: 1) el enfoque comunicativo para la enseñanza y la evaluación ; 2) la planeación de la evaluación; y 3) el uso de las herramientas de evaluación.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Competencia comunicativa, actividades de evaluación, rúbricas para la evaluación, escala de puntajes.

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INTRODUCTION

Contrary to the assessment of other language skills, oral assessment is a challenging endeavor given (i) the different teaching practices and beliefs each teacher has, (ii) the lack of specific assessment criteria (tools and standards), and (iii) the lack of systematic and ongoing procedures. These difficulties, however, may be overcome and a consensus on similar assessment and feedback practices achieved through teacher training and appropriate development and use of assessment tools.

This document aims at offering teachers a framework for assessing oral language and some guidelines that will foster the implementation of a homogeneous oral assessment system (OAS). The document is divided into three sections, namely (1) Communicative Approach to Teaching and Assessment; (2) Planning for Assessment; and (3) Using the Oral Assessment Rubric.

1. COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT

1.1 Communicative Competence

Evaluation is about making inferences and decisions about students' performance. It is therefore necessary to have a clear idea of the ability to be measured, which calls for a definition of language ability.

Language Ability or **Communicative Competence** is the ability to use the language system appropriately in any circumstances, with regard to the functions and the varieties of language, as well as shared sociocultural suppositions. It can be described as consisting of both knowledge, or competence, and the capacity for implementing that competence in appropriate, contextualized communicative language use (Bachman 1990).

Communicative competence consists of four underlying competences: *linguistic competence* (knowledge of the structure and form of language), *discourse competence* (knowledge of the rules of cohesion and coherence across sentences and utterances), s*ociolinguistic competence* (knowledge of the rules of interaction: turn-taking, appropriate use of first names, appropriate formulae for apologizing, appropriate greetings), and s*trategic competence* (knowing how to make the most of the language that you have, especially when it is "deficient").

Linguistic competence is the knowledge of phonology, lexicon, and morphology and syntax.

Phonological competence is the ability to recognize and produce the distinctive meaningful sounds of a language, including consonants, vowels, tone patterns, intonation patterns, rhythm patterns, stress patterns, and any other suprasegmental features that carry meaning.

Grammatical competence is the ability to recognize and produce the distinctive grammatical structures of a language and to use them effectively in communication.

Lexical competence is the ability to recognize and use words in a language in the way that speakers of the language use them. It includes understanding the different relationships among families of words and the common collocations of words.

Discourse competence is the knowledge of the rules of cohesion and coherence across sentences and utterances. It refers to the ability to combine ideas to achieve cohesion in form and coherence in thought. A person who has a highly developed degree of discourse competence will know how to use cohesive devices such as pronouns and grammatical connectors (i.e., conjunctions, adverbs and transitional phrases) to achieve continuity and unity of thought (Omaggio 1993).

Discourse competence also involves knowing and using the mostly-unwritten rules for interaction in various communication situations within a given speech community and culture. The speaker must be able to initiate and manage conversations and **negotiate meaning** with interlocutors, perform the turns in discourse, maintain a conversation and develop a topic.

In order to repair the miscommunication that may occur when the speaker and the hearer understand an exchange differently, both parties need to engage in "negotiation of meaning." Negotiation of meaning may include:

* Comprehension checks (Do you mean…?)
* Confirmation checks (Do you understand?)
* Clarification requests (What? Pardon me?)

The following interaction between two non-native learners (adapted from Gass, 1997) provides an example of negotiation of meaning.

> **Ali**:   Where you put saucepan?
> **Omo**:   Saucepan? (confirmation check)
> **Ali**:   Yeah.
> **Omo**:   Um under the, the first to cook…the food
> **Ali**:   Under cooker? (confirmation check)
> **Omo**:   Not cooker. Stove. …Okay? (comprehension check)
> **Ali**:   Under the stove? (confirmation check)
> **Omo**:   Yeah.
> **Ali**:   On the floor? (confirmation check)
> **Omo**:   Huh? (clarification request)
> **Ali**:   Is down on the floor? (confirmation check)
> **Omo**:   No, no. In the stove. On the stove.
>
> **Ali**:   Ahhhh. Okay

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Learning a language involves learning how to relate different types of discourse in such a way that the listener can understand what is going on and see what is important, and be able to relate information in a way that is coherent to the listener. Likewise, it involves acquiring useful language for strategies such as initiating, entering, interrupting, checking, and confirming in conversation.

Language learners will thus have to learn the typical discourse markers which signal the direction of discourse such as "By the way…" (introducing an incidental remark), "I'd like to take up an earlier point…" (returning to consider an earlier argument), and "That's all very well, but…" (challenging an argument) (Hedge 2000) .

Sociolinguistic competence is the sensitivity to, or control of the conventions of language use that are determined by the features of the specific language use in context. It enables us to perform language functions in a way that are appropriate to that context.

Bachman (1990) distinguishes three abilities under sociolinguistic competence:

Sensitivity to register: formal or informal language.
As Brown (1980) defines it, *register* refers to the many styles available to proficient speakers of a language. Speakers can vary their choice of vocabulary, syntax, pronunciation and even non-verbal features to tailor their message for a particular person or social context. For example, when greeting someone in a very formal situation an American might say, *Hello, how are you?* or *Nice to see you again*, but if he were meeting a friend in an informal situation it would be much more appropriate to say *Hi*, or *Hey, whatcha been doing*?

Sensitivity to naturalness: ability to formulate or interpret an utterance in a native-like way.

Ability to interpret cultural references: ability to understand behavior from the standpoint of the members of the culture where the target language is spoken and to behave in a way that would be understood by the members of that culture.

Strategic competence is the ability of the speaker to use verbal and non-verbal communication strategies to compensate for breakdowns in communication due, for example, to gaps in his/her knowledge. Even students at lower levels of proficiency may demonstrate strategic competence by using mimic or gestures or by paraphrasing through circumlocutions or approximations, or abandoning the topic. Learners who lack strategic competence often give up easily and thus limit their opportunity for practice and feedback.

To conclude, being communicatively competent requires more than learning the elements of language. The study of the language itself does not automatically result in the development of the ability to process language in real situations or in the ability to respond meaningfully in appropriate ways. Communicative competence is demonstrated through the ability to communicate and negotiate meaning by interacting meaningfully with other speakers.

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Communicative competence for the EAFIT Language Center may be summarized as the knowledge and the ability to:

- Express ideas with linguistic accuracy in appropriate contexts
- Interact with peers in a dynamic process (negotiation of meaning)
- Express intended communicative functions (persuading, requesting, accepting, etc.)

1.2 The Communicative Approach at the EAFIT Language Center

The oral language goal for the EAFIT Language Center is to develop students' communicative competence, providing student-centered classes, encouraging interaction, and presenting a variety of opportunities to produce spoken language.

In the communicative approach "the instructor makes use of authentic, or real-life situations and activities that require communication and that are relevant to the lives of the learners –role-plays, games, interviews, problem solving activities, and the like-. Teaching communicatively also means that students learn about the language –its rules and exceptions- which are essential if students are to accurately and efficiently use the language. In other words, a communicative approach concentrates on developing the learner's ability to communicate effectively and views grammar study as just one of the vehicles that can be used to promote communicative competence." (Flaitz, 2000:4)

The primary aim of the Language Center's methodology is the development of communicative competence based on the following principles:

- **Interaction** among the students and with the teacher
- Materials and practice activities as **authentic** as possible
- Focus on **meaning** as well as on form
- Ample **comprehensible input** (language addressed to the learner in such a way that, despite the fact that it may contain structures to which the learner has not yet been exposed or which he or she cannot produce, is still understandable)
- Sufficient **time** given to practice and process information
- **Variety** of tasks, teaching techniques, and language forms
- Learner differences recognized

1.3 Assessing Oral Language at the EAFIT Language Center

The principles to communicative teaching should also be present in the assessment practices. Therefore, the assessment of spoken language includes:

- A variety of tasks aiming at different learning styles
- Authentic and meaningful tasks
- Different grouping techniques to elicit interaction among the students and with the teacher
- Encouragement of self and peer assessment
- Assessment tasks derived from curriculum objectives and consistent with instructional practices
- Ongoing assessments so that students can demonstrate the extent of their knowledge and abilities
- Assessment of different aspects of oral language where grammar is only one of many different aspects considered in the assessment of communicative competence

The assessment of oral language at the EAFIT Language Center is done through **authentic assessment** Authentic assessment refers to the use of meaningful tasks that closely resemble or parallel situations that the student will encounter in the real world.

In order to assess oral language ability, the EAFIT Language Center teachers the Oral Assessment System (OAS). The OAS provides teachers with guidelines, general criteria, and scoring scale to evaluate students. In addition, it offers teachers a variety of tasks and suggestions on how the tasks may be designed and used in the assessment of oral language.

The components of the OAS are

1. Oral assessment rubric: set of scoring criteria for evaluating students' oral performance. It covers aspects of oral language and contains descriptors for each level of performance in a scoring scale ranging from 1-5 (minimum passing grade is 3.0)

2. Oral assessment grade sheet: form to record assessment tasks and grades obtained from oral assessment

3. Report card: form that students receive and sign after mid-term and final assessment feedback sessions.

4. Feedback form: it is used to record comments on students' oral performance

2. Planning for Assessment

Teachers will use **authentic tasks** to assess speaking achievement standards (Indicadores de "Logro"). A task may be defined as a broad category of communicative situations in which language is used for a specific purpose. A task encompasses a number of **structured activities** with an objective, content, procedure and outcome.

2.1 Assessment Tasks

An assessment task should be chosen by taking into account the types of instructional activities students have been exposed to. In other words, students should *be familiar* with the type of task that are

going to be used for assessment. It is not fair, for example, to use a role-play for the first time in an assessment session when students have not been exposed to the demands of the task.

Furthermore, an assessment task should foster thinking and elicit the kind of oral language that the students will be required to use in a real life situation. An assessment task is NOT an exercise, drill, or recitation from memory because these types of activities do NOT allow the teacher to make inferences about the students' ability and knowledge to USE language in an authentic situation.

The following table shows major categories of tasks and their characteristics:

TASK	TRAITS
DESCRIPTION	people, places, objects, events, processes, pictures
INSTRUCTIONS	route directions, how to draw something or how to use a piece of equipment, how to arrange things, how to prepare, fix, or make something
NARRATION	tell a story, narrate a personal experience, report (witness account, something seen, read, done, or heard)
OPINION	debate (argue two sides of an issue), round table, justification
ROLE-PLAY	with no script, improvised
INTERVIEW	Question and answer
PRESENTATION SPEECH	oral reports, improvised or rehearsed, convey information

2.1.1 Designing assessment tasks

Assessment tasks should be authentic (a task that students would actually do in real life), meaningful, and oriented to the development of oral language ability. Likewise, assessment tasks should be a representative and valid sample from which generalizations can be made about students' knowledge and abilities. The creation of authentic oral assessment tasks involves several essential steps. Teachers should:

1. Select the performance indicator to be assessed.

2. Select the assessment task (see chart above) very carefully considering the performance indicator the level of difficulty, and the degree of authenticity.

3. Design the activity which task involves:

•   stating the steps that students will need to follow in order to complete the activity and

•   preparing clear instructions so that students understand what they need to do.

Here is an example to evaluate the accomplishment of a speaking achievement standard from course 1 of the Adult English Program:

Assessment Focus: Achievement Standard: "Hacer una descripción física de una persona"

Assessment task: Description

Activity instructions and steps:

Teacher says to students: "Get in pairs. Each of you is going to think about your ideal boy/girlfriend. Describe him or her to your classmate. Include details about his/her height, weight, skin, hair, and eyes color. You should talk for approximately ONE minute"

Stating the steps to develop a task and preparing instructions imply determining which details and information you want the student to include in the task. Clearly structuring the tasks to be used will allow the teacher to elicit from students *extended chunks of speech*. This will make assessment easier and more valid. "Requiring extended chunks of speech, with support from the inherent structure of a specific task, will give the student experience in being in charge in the speech situation and responsible for effective communication taking place." (Brown and Yule, 1983:118)

3. Select the oral aspects to be assessed. Make sure that by the end of the course, each aspect of the rubric has been assessed **at least twice** through a series of formal and informal assessments. **Forma**l assessments are usually planned ahead of time (teachers decide what they are going to assess and how they are going to do it). During **informal** assessments, students are involved in regular instructional activities that may be assessed by the teacher.

4. Think about the administration of the assessment. Think about the material, determine time limit to carry out the assessment task and grouping techniques

2.1.2 Questions to evaluate the appropriateness of assessment tasks

Once the oral assessment task is designed, teachers can evaluate their validity by using the following questions, as adapted from Richards (1993) and Genessee and Upshur (1996):

Does the task measure speaking or something else?

Does the task assess memory? (retrieving from long term memory)

Does the assessment task reflect a purpose for speaking that approximates real-life? (i.e., is the task authentic?)

Is the task appropriate for the course it is intended to? (too easy, too difficult?)

Is the task understandable with respect to expected performance?

Does the task elicit the kinds of language skills established in the standards?

2.1.3 Feedback

A final vital component of planning for assessment is determining when and how to provide FEEDBACK. Usually, students want to know how they performed immediately after the assessment. Providing immediate feedback has more impact on students learning. Feedback may be given verbally either individually or in small or whole group meetings. For these meetings, the teacher must use the **Feedback Form** where he or she has written comments on the student's performance based on the oral assessment criteria (rubric).

It is important to note that feedback provides both teacher and students with the opportunity to use the information they discuss in the meetings for their own improvement. The students' shortcomings may indicate that the teacher did not teach the material well, that the student did not pay attention or did not study, that classroom practice was not enough, etc. After this, the teacher may prepare for remedial strategies (Shohamy, 1991).

3. ASSESSING OLA: PRACTICAL MATTERS

3.1 The Oral Assessment Rubric

The Oral Assessment Rubric is a set of scoring guidelines for evaluating students' performance. It provides for increased consistency in the rating of performances, products, and understanding. Additionally, it gives students an established set of expectations about what will be assessed as well as the standards that need to be met. The rubric can be described as containing:

1. the aspects to be assessed
2. a scoring scale (1-5)
3. descriptors for each level of performance

Since a communicative approach to language teaching is taken at the EAFIT Language Center, the concept of communicative competence is crucial to the assessment of spoken language. For this matter, the aspects included in our rubric comprise linguistic competence (vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar) as well as strategic, discourse and sociolinguistic competence (communicative effectiveness and task completion) and are described below.

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Communicative Effectiveness: measures students' ability to keep speech going and develop interaction (initiating and sustaining speech or conversation) by using communication strategies when breakdowns in communication occur; that is, when the communication is interrupted due to misunderstandings or lack of language knowledge. For instance, to avoid misunderstandings students can:

ask for clarification
"Can you repeat?", "What?, Pardon me?"

confirm understanding
"Do you understand?", "Do you know what I mean?"

ask for explanation
"How do you say — in English?", "How do you spell ——?"

To compensate for lack of knowledge students can use gestures or mimic, self-correction, intonation, paraphrasing, circumlocutions, etc.

It is important to assess "Communicative Effectiveness" because it promotes the development of communication abilities. By using strategies, students are able to maintain a conversation and develop a topic. Students who lack this ability often give up easily and thus limit their opportunities for practice and feedback.

Features to keep in mind: Pausing/Hesitation (too long, unfilled pauses, chopped language); strategies such as circumlocution, intonation, self-correction, rephrasing, mimic, word coinage, clarification and eliciting further information.

Grammar: level of accuracy of previously studied structures. Students' grades should not be affected by lack of control of currently studied structures since such structures are not yet internalized. Features to keep in mind: syntax (form, word order, verb tense, subject-verb agreement, subject omission, etc.).

Pronunciation: ability to recognize and produce the distinctive meaningful sounds, including consonants, vowels, tone patterns, intonation patterns, rhythm patterns, stress patterns, and any other suprasegmental features that carry meaning. Accent should not be penalized unless it interferes with communication. Features to keep in mind: Articulation (consonants, vowels/word endings, mumbling). Prosodics (rhythm, intonation).

Vocabulary: extent to which the student uses vocabulary accurately, reflecting sufficient variety and appropriateness for the level and appropriateness to the context and interlocutor. Students should be able to incorporate vocabulary from previous courses. Features to keep in mind: rich vs. sparse, word choice, specific terminology, target-like phrasing.

Task Completion: It looks at the students' ability to carry out successfully and completely a specific task. In order to measure "Task Completion" students need to:

- Develop ideas with sufficient elaboration, detail, and support (important information is not missing)
- Complete each task step provided by the teacher.

For students to be able to complete a task successfully the teacher needs to provide them with **steps and clear instructions** that indicate students *what* they have to do and *how* they have to carry out the task. Specifying the steps and instructions reduces the task complexity by structuring it into manageable chunks and thus increasing successful task completion. (see step 2: Designing Assessment Tasks 2.1.1. above)

Stating the steps (written on the board on small pieces of paper to hand in) to develop a task facilitates its assessment. The teacher can easily identify what details and information the students missed and thus score their oral performance with more objectivity.

3.2   Recommendations for Grading

(Adapted from Gross, B, 1993)

Try not to overemphasize grades
Explain to your class the meaning of and basis for grades and the procedures you use in grading. At the beginning of the course, inform students about the assessment procedures. Once you have explained your policies, avoid stressing grades or excessive talk about grades, which only increases students' anxiety and decreases their motivation to do something for its own sake rather than to obtain an external reward such as a grade. (Sources: Allen and Rueter, 1990; Fuhrmann and Grasha, 1983)

Keep students informed of their progress throughout the course
For each assessment activity, give students a sense of what their score means. Such information can motivate students to improve if they are doing poorly or to maintain their performance if they are doing well. By keeping students informed throughout the course, you also prevent unpleasant surprises at the end. (Sources: Lowman, 1984; Shea, 1990)

3.3   Minimizing Students' Complaints About Grading

- Clearly state grading procedures in your course syllabus, and go over this information in class. Students want to know how their grades will be determined, the weights of various tests and assignments, and the model of grading you will be using to calculate their grades.

- Avoid modifying your grading policies during the course. Midcourse changes may erode students' confidence in your fairness, consistency, objectivity, and organizational skills. If you must make a change, give your students a complete explanation. (Source: Frisbie, Diamond, and Ory, 1979)

- Provide enough opportunities for students to show you what they know. By giving students many opportunities to show you what they know, you will have a more accurate picture of their abilities and will avoid penalizing a student who has an off day at the time of an assessment task.

- Deal directly with students who are angry or upset about their grade. Ask an upset student to take a day or more to cool off. It is also helpful to ask the student to prepare in writing the complaint or justification for a grade change. When you meet with the student, have all the relevant materials at hand: the test (assessment) questions, and examples of good answers. Listen to the student's concerns or read the memo with an open mind and respond in a calm manner. Don't allow yourself to become antagonized, and don't antagonize the student. Describe the key elements of a good answer, and point out how the student's response was incomplete or incorrect. Help the student understand your reasons for assigning the grade that you did. Take time to think about the student's request or to reread the exam if you need to, but resist pressures to change a grade because of a student's personal needs. (Sources: Allen and Rueter, 1990; McKeachie, 1986)

- Keep accurate records of students' grades. It is important for you to keep a record of all grades assigned throughout the course, in case a student wishes to contest a grade.

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