Output Register Parallelism in an Identical Direct and Semi-Direct Speaking Test: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The present trend in developing and using semi-direct speaking tests has been supported by test developers and researchers’ claim of their increased practicality, higher reliability and concurrent validity with test scores in direct oral proficiency interviews. However, it is universally agreed within the language testing and assessment community that interchangeability must be investigated from multiple perspectives. This study compared test taker output from a computer-based Aptis General speaking test and a purposively developed identical face-to-face direct oral proficiency interview using a counterbalanced research design. Within subject analyses of salient output features identified in prior related research were completed. Results showed that test taker output in the computer-based test was less contextualised, with minimally higher lexical density and syntactic complexity. Given these findings, the indicated slight register shift in output may be viewed as non-consequential, or even as advantageous, for semi-direct speaking tests.

KEYWORDS

Computer-Based, Direct Oral Proficiency Interview, Register, Speaking Test

INTRODUCTION

Information technology and computers, throughout recent decades, have begun to play an ever more important role in the field of language testing and assessment. The higher degree of practicality and reliability achievable in semi-direct speaking tests, as well as convincing research findings supporting their concurrent validity with direct counterparts, has seen a growing number of test developers choosing to use computer-based oral proficiency interviews (CB-OPI) in preference to more traditional face-to-face oral proficiency interviews (OPI). The growing body of evidence claiming equivalence has, in turn, led to concerns that important factors in establishing interchangeability have been overlooked (Shohamy, 1994; Weir, 2005; Zhou, 2015), and therefore the ongoing need to investigate test taker output equivalence in direct and semi-direct versions of speaking tests has been established.

Few research studies to date have examined mode effect on test taker language output in direct and semi-direct speaking tests, and those which have (Choi, 2014; O’Loughlin, 2001; Shohamy 1994; Shohamy, Shumueli & Gordon, 1991; Zhou, 2008) have used closely matched tasks, serving to complicate potential output divisions due to the difficulties experienced in separating task effect...
from mode effect. Therefore, further systematic empirical research comparing test taker output in direct and semi-direct speaking tests, while controlling for the aforementioned effect variable, and avoiding the introduction of other additional confounding facets, is of the utmost importance.

This study provisionally indicates a marker for test taker output register interchangeability in identical direct and semi-direct speaking tests, by comparing spoken output elicited from four Chinese L1 users of intermediate level spoken English in a British Council Aptis General CB-OPI and a purposively designed face-to-face direct OPI version. The results from this differentiation can provide empirical evidence contributing toward establishing the equivalence of computer-based and face-to-face test delivery modes in a foreign language speaking test context. In particular, the validation of computer-based input as an elicitation instrument through interpretation of performance.

**BACKGROUND**

Early Speaking test theorem argued that direct tests are the better measures of speaking ability due to their close relationship between test context and real-life, and yet acknowledged that the language elicited is unrepresentative of real-life conversational discourse, because test takers are aware that they are talking to a language assessor (Clark, 1979). Hughes (2003) and Van Lier (1989) supported this view and challenged the asymmetry of the roles of test takers and interlocutors, and the relationship between them, throughout a direct test as “there are few situations in the world in which what the learner says has absolutely no effect on what he hears next” (Underhill, 1987, p. 35).

Clark’s (1979) early work acknowledged mode effect and argued that semi-direct tests involved more artificial language use and assessors missed visual aspects of test taker communication. Van Lier (1989) proposed that face-to-face talk should be regarded as the unmarked form of interaction, and communicating by telephone or speaking into a microphone as marked forms. While the suggestion that direct tests are preferable because of their perceived ability to approximate to real-life communication more closely than their semi-direct counterparts is perhaps reasonable, a reliance on face validity alone to ascertain delivery mode comparability excludes theoretical and empirical research insight.

Subsequent related research has attempted to distinguish this marked form of spoken output in semi-direct tests through numerous spoken output features with differing results found and conclusions made. This stems from both the multitude of approaches taken and the methods of analysis chosen. However, some conciliation between previous research results is to be found within the rhetorical functions and structure of test event discourse.

**Rhetorical Functions and Structure**

Shohamy (1994) defined rhetorical functions as the nature of the input or prompt used to elicit test taker output, while rhetorical structure referred to the underlying discourse organisation of the speech event in its entirety. Shohamy (1994) found both were different in her study, because the OPI mainly consisted of direct interrogatives and the simulated oral proficiency interview (SOPI) of declarative instructional prompts. Two possible explanations for these differences are task effect and the now relatively dated speaking test used in the comparison, which predominantly used a task-response-new task rhetorical structure, because O’Loughlin (2001) showed similar rhetorical functions and structure in both versions of the access test and Choi (2014) labelled them as highly comparable in monologic tasks.

Agreement of research findings relating to the similarities between the rhetorical functions and structure in test taker output from direct and semi-direct versions of monologic test tasks appears to be within sight. However, very little agreement has been reached regarding the similarity of prosodic features and contextualisation in test taker output between delivery modes.
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