


Chapter 10


Toward the Future of Computer–Assisted Language Testing: Assessing Spoken Performance Through Semi–Direct Tests

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ABSTRACT

Semi-direct speaking tests have become an increasingly favored method of assessing spoken performance in recent years. Underpinning evidence for their continued development and use has been largely contingent on language testing and assessment researchers' claim of their interchangeability with more traditional, direct face-to-face oral proficiency interviews through theoretical and empirical investigations from multiple perspectives. This chapter initially provides background and research synopses of four significant test facets that have formed the bases for semi-direct and direct speaking test comparison studies. These are followed by the inclusion of a recent case study comparing test taker output from a computer-based Aptis speaking test and a purposively developed identical face-to-face oral proficiency interview that found a slight register shift which may be viewed as advantageous for semi-direct speaking tests. Finally, future research directions are proposed in light of the recent developments in the semi-direct speaking testing research presented throughout this chapter.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-1282-1.ch010

INTRODUCTION

Computer-based (CB) and computer-mediated (CM) testing is today, more than ever, being seen as the future of language assessment, primarily through the former's increasing role in testing contexts. The broadening use of computer-based oral proficiency interviews (CB-OPI) by test developers has necessitated that myriad studies be conducted by language testing and assessment researchers in order that this delivery mode is underpinned by sound empirical knowledge. This research has provided a growing body of evidence suggesting a degree of interchangeability between CB and face-to-face oral proficiency interviews (OPI). This chapter firstly reviews CB speaking tests' comparability with OPIs by providing synopses of background and current research findings pertaining to four of the most significant test facets supporting arguments for the use of semi-direct speaking tests over their direct counterparts.

Practicality is the first of these test facets and arguably the most important from a test developers and administering institution's perspective. Representing the second test factor is face validity which has proven to be instrumental in the decision-making process when considering the development and use of semi-direct speaking tests. Test reliability and concurrent validity are essential test measurement factors, and hence have been chosen as the latter two facets to be included within this chapter examining direct and semi-direct speaking test interchangeability. Research studies encapsulating these four test facets have often promoted the development and use of semi-direct speaking tests, and this has led to concerns that the important factor of test taker spoken output from performances has often been overlooked (Shohamy, 1994; Weir, 2005; Zhou, 2015).

The second half of this chapter examines and contrasts test taker spoken output in direct and semi-direct speaking test delivery modes by the use of a recent case study investigating the equivalence of spoken language register in test event performances. This exemplified case study provides additional empirical evidence supporting the interchangeability of test taker output register in direct and semi-direct speaking tests, by comparing spoken output elicited from four Chinese first language users of intermediate level spoken English in a British Council *Aptis General* CB-OPI and a purposively designed identical face-to-face direct OPI version. The results from this differentiation provide additional empirical evidence contributing toward establishing the equivalence of CB and face-to-face test delivery modes in a foreign language speaking test context. In particular, the validation of CB input as an elicitation instrument through interpretation of performance.

DIRECT AND SEMI-DIRECT SPEAKING TESTS

Clark (1979) labels direct speaking tests as consisting of "procedures in which the examinee is asked to engage in a face-to-face communicative exchange with one or more human interlocutors" (p.36). However, a truly direct test measures proficiency inside the identified target language use (TLU) domain, and therefore it is preferable to identify test directness on a cline between the indirect structural model and live performance in the TLU domain as the most direct. Mirroring Clark's (1979) communicative exchange, Luoma (1997) states "the main characteristic of the live test mode is that interaction in it is two-directional", and asserts that "the construct assessed is clearly related to spoken interaction" (p. 44). Although these suppositions were likely to be a given, when early theoretical models underpinned language testing, today the relatively scripted nature of many speaking tests, especially those termed as being high stakes, may well have rendered them problematic. Thus, Fulcher's (2014) view that direct

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