

The implications of a newly developed oral test in Business English: Are we heading in the right direction?

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Abstract: The paper presents an overview of the testing and assessment standardization process at the Language Centre of Masaryk University. It exemplifies the process by analysing a two-year development of the C1 Business English oral test administered to students at the Faculty of Economics and Administration (FEA), which resulted in the formation of a completely new testing procedure. The transition from the original teacher–student interview format to a monological discourse and a peer-to-peer discussion, with the roles of the interlocutor and rater split between two teachers using analytic rating scales to evaluate performance, is described, along with its implications on the validity and reliability of assessment. Students' perception of the test importance is also examined. The second part deals with the analysis of a questionnaire on feedback collected from students taking the test in Spring 2014. The preliminary look into the merit of the efforts exerted indicates a noticeable enhancement in quality, reliability, validity and prestige of the oral test.

Key words: reliability, validity, speaking test, peer-to-peer discussion, students' feedback

Abstrakt: Příspěvek představí proces standardizace hodnocení jazykových kompetencí studentů Masarykovy Univerzity, konkrétně vývoj ústní části zkoušky obchodní angličtiny na úrovni C1 na Ekonomicko-správní fakultě. Druhá část analyzuje dotazník pro zpětnou vazbu, vyplněný studenty, kteří zkoušku absolvovali na jaře 2014. Předběžné hodnocení celé této snahy naznačuje, že se jedná o posun směrem k vyšší kvalitě, spolehlivosti, validitě i prestiži ústní části zkoušky.

Klíčová slova: validita, spolehlivost, test mluvených dovedností, diskuse, dotazník ke zpětné vazbě

Introduction

With language testing representing an area which, according to Davies, is professionalizing itself, giving rise to several testing organizations, publications, journals and codes (Davies, 2008:431), i.e. activities Stoyhoff and Coombe claim have increased the perceived status and professionalism of the field of language testing (Stoyhoff and Coombe, 2012:123), the pressure on teaching institutions to professionalize their assessment methods appears to be inevitable. The CEFR¹ development has further enhanced the process of professionalizing the area and has had a profound impact on institutions that have chosen to relate their tests to the CEFR levels. The Language Centre of Masaryk University (LC), the main provider of language instruction to students of Bachelor and Master Study programmes,

¹ *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* [online].

embarked on the process of professionalizing its assessment methods by standardizing its testing methodology and practices, pursuing principles of theory-based testing. The process was embodied in three years of development work resulting in the standardization of all LC tests.

Bachman and Palmer' concept of overall test usefulness (Bachman, Palmer, 1996) became one of the paradigms in approaching language assessment at the LC. They argue that test developers need to find balance among six test qualities, i.e. reliability, construct validity, authenticity, interactiveness, impact and practicality (Bachman and Palmer, 1996:18) to be able to design useful language tests. With approximately 60 language teachers, 9 faculties and several thousand students taking final language examinations at the LC each year, valid and reliable assessment of students' language competences represents the primary goal; however, the aspects of practicality, authenticity and interactiveness also play an increasingly significant role in test development.

When the CEFR criteria were embedded for the LC as binding in relating students' competences to the individual levels, construct validity and its subordinate forms, such as content validity or criterion-reference validity (Hughes, 2002:26) had to be reviewed. The underlying principle of validity and reliability of testing throughout the entire standardization process, and awareness of the potential washback, defined by Brown and Hudson as the effect of testing and assessment on the language teaching curriculum (Brown, Hudson, 1998:667), drove the efforts to increase the standard of language testing at the LC.

During the first decade of the 21st century, assessment at the LC had been a largely individualistic, uncoordinated, non-standardized and lonely activity. Teachers wrote tests on their own, administered them to their own students, assessed their own students and all this with little tester/assessor training, supervision and team cooperation. The system lacked methodological guidance on elementary principles of language testing, e.g. construct specification, test item development or unbiased attitude to assessment. The overall assessment literacy, defined by Fulcher as the knowledge, skills and abilities required to design, develop, maintain or evaluate, large scale standardized and/or classroom based tests, familiarity with test processes, and awareness of principles and concepts that guide and underpin practice, including ethics and codes of practice (Fulcher, 2012:13) was rather low among LC staff.

The initial efforts to standardize testing at the LC to reach a more professional level had appeared with the Compact project (2009–2011), which provided an insight into the values of reliable and valid assessment, and fully exposed the urgent need to increase assessment literacy among the staff. This became the basis for the subsequent endeavour of the Impact project (2012–2015). Testing and assessment became one of five key areas of the project funded from the structural funds

of the European Union, and perceived as one of priorities for further development of the Language Centre.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the LC assessment standardization process by analysing the development of a new format of the C1 CEFR Business English speaking test administered to mainly second-year undergraduate students at the Faculty of Economics and Administration of Masaryk University (FEA). The extent to which the newly developed format enhanced the validity, reliability and authenticity of assessment, and how the work on it contributed to assessment literacy improvement will also be discussed. The entire standardization process will be exemplified by the description of the decision-making procedures when developing the speaking test. In addition, analyses of feedback on the new format collected from students after the first year of testing will be presented.

Material and methods

In order to examine how the partial steps in developing the new format of the speaking test impacted the reliability and validity of assessment, we have chosen to first describe the sequence of steps and decision-making processes throughout the test development cycle, and discuss feedback provided by the FEA language department staff after the second year of pretesting.

The second part of the paper represents the analysis of students' attitude to the new format. In order to obtain solid information about how students themselves viewed the new format of the speaking test, a short electronic questionnaire (see Appendix 1), containing 14 close-ended and one open-ended questions, was developed. For each question students were invited to add free comments. The aim of the questionnaire was to establish whether the teachers' views of the test format coincided with those of students'.

The questionnaire was distributed electronically to all students who passed the written part of the C1 Business English final examination in spring 2014, i.e. to 325 students. Two appeals for the questionnaire completion were made in September 2014, with the total return amounting to 52%, i.e. 169 students responded. The response collected from the questionnaire was strictly anonymous. Subsequently, the data were statistically transformed into percentages of yes- and no-answers and complementary comments were analysed.

Results and Discussion

Prior to the standardization process, the role of the speaking test on the overall C1 Business English test was inferior to the written part, which included listening, grammar, vocabulary, and writing. The undervaluation of the oral part was due to factors not specific to the faculty, but generally stemming from the ignorance

of theory-based principles of language assessment and the role of validity and reliability. With language testing professionalizing itself globally, the need to test more fairly and consistently at the LC became apparent.

The oral test had been based on the comprehension of an extensive text adapted from *The Economist* magazine. Students were expected to summarize the content of a text they had randomly chosen, and a teacher led the ensuing discussion, frequently referring to other similarly-related topics. Students were assessed on their reading skills as equally as on speaking, so the tasks were integrated. Teachers, however, believed to be assessing speaking competence only. Teachers assessed students' performance holistically, subjectively, and individually, which led to inconsistencies in inter-rater reliability, and to an almost invariably absolute success rate. As a consequence, the speaking part of the test was perceived as a chat with a teacher rather than a fully-fledged part of the final examination.

With the zest to apply language testing principles and good practice to use, the faculty team set out on the journey to revamp the test format and its content. In the initial phase, a series of theory-based and hands-on seminars were held on all major aspects of language assessment that should lead to the development of a valid and reliable test, starting with the CEFR level interpretation, construct definition, and item writing principles up to the basics of statistics for language testing purposes. The seminars were open to all teachers at the LC and were found invaluable in increasing assessment literacy among the LC teachers.

At the same time, the rating criteria for speaking were being developed with rounds of benchmarking sessions over samples of recordings of students' speaking performances following. These aspects consolidated the staff's capability of consistent and reliable rating, i.e. inter-rater and intra-rater reliability. The rating scales were divided into individual criteria with several components each, prompting a shift from holistic and subjective to analytic and more objective assessment. Objectivity was further reinforced by a new rule impeding teachers from rating performances of their own students. The rule was adopted in response to teachers' concerns about their ability to manage the double role as raters and interlocutors on a teacher-student discussion test format. The concerns became even stronger when a peer-to-peer discussion test format replaced the teacher-led discussion. Lack of confidence in the ability to play the double role led to the split of the interlocutor-rater role between two teachers; one communicating with test-takers and the other one rating their performance, using the analytic rating scales. This allowed teachers to avoid assessing their own students. The new administrative format proved to benefit the reliability of assessment with teachers enjoying the shared experience.

The next standardization phase consisted of task specification. One of the objectives was to expose students to authentic situations which would prompt them

to authentic language production. The assignments had to be succinct so that the language they contained could not serve as a vocabulary source for test-takers when performing the tasks. In addition, they needed to be sufficiently apt to elicit advanced business language production.

In the first year, two test tasks were specified; a monologue and a role-play. For the monologue, students chose a topic at random and were provided with two separate statements on the topic. With two minutes to prepare they were expected to make a two-minute speech on the statement of their choice. The task was followed by a peer-to-peer role-play on a randomly chosen topic, different from the monologue topic. After a two-minute preparation, students had 4–5 minutes to perform the role-play. Students were presented with a short description of a situation, identical for both, while their individual roles differed. Each assignment included three bullet points to be covered by students to reach a desirable communication outcome. The roles corresponded with the curriculum topics and therefore vocabulary, one of the assessment criteria, represents students' achievement, while other rating criteria, i.e. task completion, grammar, and pronunciation and intonation, reflect students' general language proficiency related to the C1 CEFR level.

After the first round of pre-testing, which – for practicality reasons – was live testing, steps had to be taken to adjust the direction the format was taking. Several issues had to be addressed to meet the desired outcome. First, several roles were found to be tricky as they pitted students against each other, making them resort to persuasive argumentation and making them believe that their arguments should top those of their colleagues to prove their competence. This limited students' choice of language to coercive functions and strong argumentation. Another problem lay in the imbalance in the role description, where, not exceptionally, one role description created more favourable conditions for one of the students in the pair, leaving the other with limited space for manoeuvre. This, along with the fact that some roles were not very authentic for undergraduate students (roles of CEOs or members of top management) led to a unanimous decision to abandon role-plays and define the discursive part of the test anew. The third problem lay in too much of the language expected of students contained in the assignments themselves. Students legitimately made use of it and left raters with the dilemma of how to rate specific vocabulary production when students limited themselves to the language of prompts but were able to attain the communicative goal.

These issues made the test team reconsider the format and modify the specifications. The monologue part, apart from minor modifications, has remained preserved. To obtain a more extensive rateable sample, Task 2, in which the interlocutor asks two or three additional questions related to the topic of Task 1, was added to the format. For each topic a list of 10 questions has been developed for

interlocutors to choose from. A sample version of Task 1 and 2 can be seen in Table 1.

Tab. 1: Sample Task 1 and Task 2 of the 2014 revised version of C1 Business English speaking test

Women in business	Task 1 – monologue
<p>Choose one of the statements below and deliver a monologue. In order to fulfil the task, you are supposed to talk for 2 minutes.</p>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The importance of gender equality in managerial positions 2. The difference between male and female approach to running a business 	

Women in business	Task 2 – scripted questions
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are compulsory quotas and do you know examples of countries that have adopted them? 2. Should countries with low involvement of women in business consider adopting compulsory quota? 3. What is the ratio of women to men in Czech universities? 4. ... 	

The role-play was abandoned and substituted with an academic peer-to-peer discussion. The assignments for individual topics were shortened and adapted to elicit more authentic language so as to contribute to construct validity, making the tests useful for students and practical for teachers. Table 2 presents a sample topic for Task 3.

Tab. 2: Sample Task 3 of the 2014 revised version of the C1 Business English speaking test

Law	Task 3 – pair discussion
<p>Discuss the following situation using the guidelines below. The length of your discussion should be 3–4 minutes.</p>	
<p>A company has been accused by one of its major customers of selling faulty products. The customer is threatening with legal action.</p> <p>Discuss the situation with your partner and decide:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • if the company should compensate the customer out of court or face a lawsuit, • how the company's reputation can be protected, • what can be done to make sure that the situation does not reoccur. 	

The revised format brought a substantially more satisfactory result in the second year of testing. Students now discussed a topic from the perspective of students, shared the same instructions, had to demonstrate the ability to produce language

on their own and were put in a more autonomous position when deciding how to tackle the task.

Teachers' perspective of the C1 Business English oral test new format

By the end of spring term 2014, the team consented that the test tasks in their present form enabled valid and reliable assessment and adopted the format as final. The team felt that the two-year efforts resulted in a more valid and reliable testing practices at the department, allowing more objective assessment. Interestingly, the staff also enjoyed the emphasis on teamwork with one teacher acting as a rater and the other one as an interlocutor. The practice of testing one's own students was abandoned and the aspect of subjectivity thus eliminated further.

Students' apparent change in attitude towards the oral test was also welcomed. The increased interest in the new format was acknowledged a testament to the right direction taken. As a logical consequence of the enhanced assessment literacy and confidence of teachers as raters, the failure rate among test takers increased.

However, the practicality aspect (Bachman, Palmer, 1996) of test administration has remained a trade-off. While on one hand, teachers feel at ease examining in the novel way, certain aspects of test administration have become cumbersome. More effort needs to be exerted to pair up teachers for the examination dates and to allow enough time for students to pair up and to enrol for the examination via the University's Information System.

Students' perspective of the C1 Business English oral test new format

In autumn 2014, after the second round of pre-testing, a questionnaire was distributed electronically to students in order to obtain feedback on their perception of the new speaking test format. In total, the call generated 162 responses, i.e. 52%. Graph 1 represents answers to individual questions. For questions contained in the questionnaire see Appendix 1.

For Questions 1–12, 14 and 15, yes-answers represent positive attitude, while no-answers represent reservations about the new test format, its administration, or doubt over its reliability and validity. The formulation of Q13 is different, and therefore not represented by the graph for reasons of qualitative nature of answers (see further).

For simplicity of interpretation of results, questions were grouped into three different categories with respect to the information they elicited.

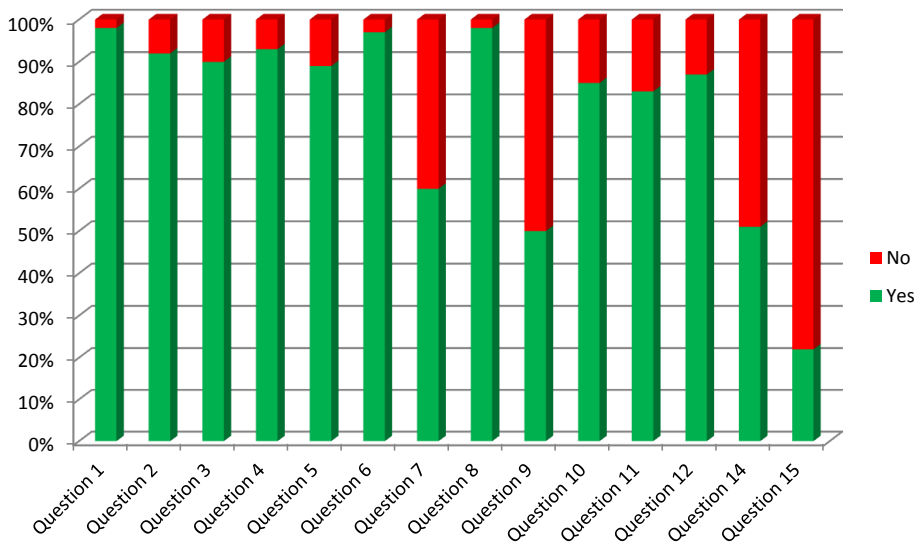


Fig. 1: Students' feedback on the 2014 speaking test format
Source: authors

Category 1 consists of Questions 2–4, i.e. questions concerning the reliability and validity aspect of assessment.

- **Q 2** – *Do you think the selected types of test tasks are capable of testing your language skills?*
- **Q 3**– *Do you agree that the current concept of the oral test contributes to fairer assessment?*
- **Q 4**– *Do you agree that the current concept of the oral test contributes to more objective assessment?*

The average of 91.7% of students chose yes to the three questions. The 8.3% of negative answers provided important feedback for future consideration. Several students expressed their doubt about the effectiveness of the monologue part in prompting students to spontaneous production, claiming that many students only memorized chunks of language related to a specific topic to succeed at the exam. Some also claimed (Q3) that the monologue topics were very abstract and did not provoke any thought and others felt that their colleague's performance at the discussion influenced the rater's final assessment of their own. Several of the comments were unrelated to the questions themselves. One student remarked that the oral part will always, to a certain extent, be assessed subjectively.

Category 2 includes Questions 5, 6 and 8, i.e. questions focusing on administration of the speaking test.

- **Q 5** – *Do you agree that the time frame, where each student’s performance lasts about 15 minutes, is adequate?*
- **Q 6** – *Do you agree that the presence of two teachers on the test, i.e. an interlocutor and a rater, is an advantage?*
- **Q 8** – *Do you agree that enrolling for the test via the Masaryk University Information System and having the option of choosing a date of the oral exam is an advantage?*

For Q5 89.4% of students agreed, while 10.6% did not. Most of those who disagreed felt they would have benefitted from more time on the test, claiming that it takes some time to switch from the mother tongue to English. They would feel more comfortable if they had more time to ‘warm up’, which would also reduce stress levels. Some students would have liked to demonstrate their speaking competence more thoroughly. Two students would have liked more preparation time. 97.5% of students answered yes for Qs 6 and 8, which correlates with our expectations.

Category 3 includes Qs 9–11, exploring the satisfaction with the peer-to-peer format and the ability of the task prompt to elicit the targeted language.

- **Q 9** – *Did the colleague you took the test with influence your performance?*
- **Q 10** – *Do you agree that the discussion assignment provided enough space for you to lead a fully-fledged dialogue with your peer?*
- **Q 11** – *Did the tasks prompt you to an in-depth reflection on the given topic (i.e. it would not be enough to learn vocabulary of each topic only to pass the test)?*

Question 9 raised the most fruitful response with the ratio of yes-no answers being 50-50. Interestingly, many students thought that their colleague in the discussion influenced their performance in a positive way. They believed that if a colleague’s performance was of high standard, they also benefited. These colleagues were able to lead the discussion in the direction that they could follow, and if not, the better student was still able to adapt so that they could discuss the topic in a desirable way. The presence of the second student helped many to relax and feel less stressed out. Those who thought that their colleague in the peer discussion affected them negatively thought so as they lost confidence if their colleague’s English was of a much higher standard.

85% of students answered yes for Q10 and 83% for Q11. In the free comments, some mentioned that the assignments were too general and did not elicit enough ideas for a 4-minute discussion, whereas others paradoxically complained that the tasks encompassed both suggestions and answers and did not leave sufficient space for students’ own creativity, words and ideas.

Category 4 includes questions 12–15, i.e. questions on preparation for the speaking test, seeking to establish to what extent the importance of the speaking test increased. Within this category, two different aspects were inquired. Asking *Qs 12 and 14*, we wanted to establish what strategies students used during preparation, whereas *Qs 13 and 15* were designed to generate a quantitative output.

- *Q 12* – *Did you prepare in any way for the oral test?*
- *Q 13* – *How much time did you spend preparing for the oral part of the test?*
- *Q 14* – *Did you use any other sources during preparation, apart from the textbooks and classroom material?*
- *Q 15* – *Did you employ any strategies either during preparation or during the test itself that helped you to improve the final score at the test?*

On average, 82.5% of students answered yes for *Qs 12 and 15*. This is perceived as an achievement considering that hardly anybody prepared for the previous test format. A variety of comments on different strategies were mentioned, e.g. learning vocabulary taught in the seminars, organizing sessions with colleagues to discuss specific business issues in English, watching news and reading authentic online materials, having extra lessons of English outside the faculty etc. All these answers were welcomed as a positive washback, and a valuable reinforcement of students' autonomy.

A variety of answers ranging from 0 to 150 hours were elicited for *Q13*. 50.6% answered yes for *Q14*, which is still considered a positive indication of an increased weighing of the oral test. Most students mentioned the internet as the main source, while others used other textbooks or books recommended by their teachers.

The two remaining questions, *Q1* – *Did you know how the exam would be organized and what parts it consists of before you took the oral test?* and *Q7* – *Is the maximum number of points on the oral test adequate in relation to the overall number of 100 (i.e. 20 out of 100)?* are different from the other questions and cannot be categorized. *Q1* served the purpose of a test question and the response correlated with expectations (see graph). *Q7* provided an interesting feedback with only 60% of students agreeing. Those who disagreed thought the scoring was inadequate and should be higher than that for other subskills.

The last point on the questionnaire provided space for free comments. The comments of 32 students in total can be divided into two main categories. In category one, students expressed their negative attitude to the exam, or the language tuition at the FEA, considering the C1 level as inappropriately high. Some also commented on the monologue topics as being too specific to generate ideas or preparation time being inadequate. In the second category, students suggested that the LC offer certificates or even organize international certificate testing so

that they graduate from the faculty with a tangible proof of language competence. Nowadays, students who pass the language test can obtain, upon request, a written confirmation issued by the department stating that the student passed a Business English language test at C1 CEFR level, getting a mark A, B, C, D or E. Some comments contained words of praise and gratitude to the staff for the quality tuition and relaxed and friendly atmosphere at the exam.

The questionnaire has provided an important feedback to the teachers fully absorbed in the speaking test development, showing a different perspective of the efforts made. Therefore, even though the prevailing number of students had no objections or negative comments to make about the test, the answers of those who did comment will receive appropriate attention.

Conclusion

The C1 Business English speaking test development has been presented as an example of the decision-making processes most tests at the LC were subject to during the Impact project. With the variety of tests developed during the project, be it due to the different CEFR levels or the different ESP at individual faculties, the decision-making process and test development represented an enormous amount of time, effort and energy invested in advancing to a qualitatively higher level of assessment. If the development of valid and reliable tests contributed to fairer assessment, then the effort and time were well invested. There is little doubt that inconsistency, subjectivity and opacity of tests have been eliminated, with the best intention to benefit the students when making decisions about their language skills.

In addition, the staff themselves benefitted greatly from the efforts on the project in their professional lives as teachers and testers. The series of theory-based and hands-on seminars on language testing resulted in enhancing assessment literacy to a level that may be considered above-average among LSP teachers. The benefits and enriching aspect of team work on test development have become an added value to the entire process. In many cases it served as an eye opener to the inevitable limitations of the best of efforts of individuals to produce test items that could reliably assess a test taker's ability.

A fundamental insight into the basics of language testing is crucial for anyone whose students' assessment and potential consequences it may imply lay in their hands. It would be unjustifiable for the tests, as high-stakes as the LC's are, not to represent a valid, reliable and fair method of assessment. Since test development is a constantly evolving process, there is no limit to the efforts for continuous improvement. The LC at Masaryk University is bound to be an innovative and responsible workplace that takes its commitment to fair testing seriously.

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Appendix 1 – Questionnaire on the new speaking test format distributed to FEA Bachelor programme students in September 2014

Question 1

Did you know how the exam would be organized and what parts it consists of before you took the oral test?

Question 2

Do you think the selected types of test tasks are capable of testing your language skills?

Question 3

Do you agree that the current concept of the oral test contributes to fairer assessment?

Question 4

Do you agree that the current concept of the oral test contributes to more objective assessment?

Question 5

Do you agree that the time frame, where each student's performance lasts about 15 minutes, is adequate?

Question 6

Do you agree that the presence of two teachers on the test, i.e. an interlocutor and a rater, is an advantage?

Question 7

Is the maximum number of points on the oral test adequate in relation to the overall number of 100 (i.e. 20 out of 100)?

Question 8

Do you agree that enrolling for the test via the Masaryk University Information System and having the option of choosing a date of the oral exam is an advantage?

Question 9

Did the colleague you took the test with influence your performance?

Question 10

Do you agree that the discussion assignment provided enough space for you to lead a fully-fledged dialogue with your peer?

Question 11

Did the tasks prompt you to an in-depth reflection on the given topic (i.e. it would not be enough just to learn vocabulary of each topic to pass the test)?

Question 12

Did you prepare in any way for the oral test?

Question 13

How much time did you spend preparing for the oral part of the test?

Question 14

Did you use any other sources during preparation, apart from the textbooks and classroom material?

Question 15

Did you employ any strategies either during preparation or during the test itself that helped you to improve the final score at the test?

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