

Computerized Speaking Test – in Example of New TOEFL iBT

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Abstract

This study was conducted to see how the computer-based assessment (CBA) of English speaking skills can be achieved and rated. Taking New TOEFL iBT as example, the conditions, execution and restrictions of taking a computerized speaking test are specified and analyzed, so that English learners may be better informed and prepared. The results of the study showed that, even with the advancement of the computer technology, testing device still cannot fully reproduce the face-to-face scenarios. Test-takers of speaking skills may need to be differently prepared from the actual occurrence of communication.

Keywords: computerized speaking test, CBA, TOEFL iBT

Introduction

With more and more students been found not being able to produce corresponding outcomes in speaking and writing as they do in the receptive skills test, listening and reading, language tests are intended for the very purpose and introduce speaking tests for EFL students. But face-to-face oral tests, like what IELTS does, are limited to space, time and human resources, while online speaking tests, like GEPT or TOEFL, would be more practical and better accepted to the young generation. Nevertheless, most Asian students treat English as a subject taught in class and not a tool used in daily lives. They have been trained to enhance their reading, listening and writing skills throughout their elementary, junior, senior high school, and even college education, but speaking remains the most challenging task for English learners in Asia. Unlike Singapore or Hong Kong under British colony, there is no way for Asian students of English to develop their speaking skills outside of classroom. No success can be attained without constant practice, so English is reduced to merely a subject to be taught and tested at school. They can watch English movies with mother tongue subtitles, and sometimes western films are even dubbed in their native languages.

Integration of Four Skills

Students who take TOEFL, Test of English as a Foreign Language, have planned to study in North America. To make sure they can fully communicate in daily lives and academics, TOEFL lays emphasis on their actual interchangeabilities by adding to the New TOEFL iBT American slangs, reading/listening between the lines, integrating reading and listening in writing, etc. In the speaking part, TOEFL combines reading comprehension, listening comprehension and oral expression.

Whether test-takers of TOEFL have a native-like English accent, is not so important a rubric as the development of a topic, fluency, clarity of pronunciation and the suitability of the oral answer to the topic.

Restrictions of Computerized Speaking Test

Since the oral answers to the speaking test are first recorded on the computer and then passed onto the examiners for evaluation, the quality of recording may vary from computer to computer. Especially when all test-takers in the room start giving off sound at almost the same time, the mutual interfering factor cannot be eliminated and attention may thus be diverted.

Without facial expressions or body language revealed in the speaking test, the non-verbal signals of communication are not in place to facilitate the listeners' comprehension of the questions asked or attitudes delivered. In lack of video telephony, the actual communication is only simulated, but not reconstructed, which may be regarded as a hindrance or insufficiency of computerized speaking test.

Strategies for Computerized Speaking Test

It is very important for Asian students of English to establish a framework of arguing, developing and concluding while taking the speaking test, so that they can acquire the evaluators' recognition through the logical flow of standpoint contemplating, maintaining and summarizing/analyzing.

Speaking fast does not naturally stand for fluency or proficiency. With unclear articulation, simple wording/phrasing or low message-containing, examiners may not

regard such answers as satisfactory. Adequate usage of intonation, emphasis and pause should be in place to show the grasp of spoken language skills.

Students should not overlook the stress when they have to form a reply format and support it with strong points within a short range of time.

Discussion and Conclusion

Logical thinking, language structure and wording quality comprises the practicality of speaking skills. Besides the pleasing pronunciation and intonation, raters of speaking tests would also expect to hear structured sentences and meaningful messages. Fully and correctly understanding the questions may be the key to a successful reply, but strong points organized in logical and effective language nonetheless essential.

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