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# THE INFLUENCE OF LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT ON LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODS

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the influences of language assessment on language teaching. The paper was written in response to the assessment procedures recommended in the new English syllabus for senior secondary schools in Botswana. The main argument in the paper is that unless the assessment procedures are also changed to become communicative, like the recommended teaching approach, the teaching will remain unchanged. It is further argued that changing a test is possibly the most powerful means to bring about improvements in the learning experiences that go before it. The main shortcoming in the new syllabus, it is argued, is that there is no assessment of oral skills recommended for the short term, and therefore the 'washback effect' of the English examination syllabus would be negative: most likely it will lead to the neglect of the teaching and learning of oral skills. The paper goes on to suggest a number of tasks that could be used to test oral skills in the examination of the new syllabus and how these would engender the teaching and learning of oral skills. Expertise for the construction of tests of oral skills, it is further argued, can be found locally; all the responsible authorities have to do is consult it.*

## Introduction

Botswana recently decided to take over the running of the senior secondary school examinations from the University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate (UCLES) in the United Kingdom, which has been running them since the colonial days. Therefore, the whole senior secondary school curriculum is being reviewed and Subject 'task forces' have been appointed

to review syllabi in the curriculum. The task force responsible for reviewing the Senior Secondary School English syllabus has completed its work of reviewing the syllabus and has come up with a syllabus that is believed to be more relevant to the situation in Botswana. The previous Cambridge Overseas School Certificate English syllabus which was followed in the Senior Secondary Schools was said not to be suitable as it was not designed for second language speakers but for first language speakers.

The new syllabus which was implemented in January 1998, is an English as a second language (ESL) type and the teaching methodology recommended is the communicative approach which emphasises the processes of communication, such as using language appropriately in different types of situations; using language to perform different kinds of tasks, for example to get information, give instruction, and so on; using language for social interaction with other people. The main argument in the paper is that unless the assessment procedures are also changed to test communicative skills, the pedagogy would also remain unchanged in spite of the methodology recommended in the syllabus.

Weir (1993) also argues that without appropriate tests, teachers are unlikely to change. If tests remain within a former paradigm, for example, multiple choice tests of grammar and lexis, then teachers may not be disposed to practise, for example, productive writing or spoken interaction in the classroom. This is understandable as teachers and students are judged on test results. So it would be unrealistic to argue that they should prepare students in class for anything other than those things on which they will be tested.

Researchers in language testing have argued that changing a test pattern is possibly the most powerful means to bring about improvements in the learning experiences that go before it. Tests, it is argued, can have a most useful and powerful washback effect on teaching. By the same token if materials are changed to reflect a new approach to a syllabus, and teachers are trained in the new materials and methodology, all this enterprise may be to no avail if corresponding test patterns are not taken into consideration (Weir, 1993; Davies, 1990).

It is important, therefore, to ensure that students are entered only for examinations which sample most effectively those linguistic skills required in the future use situation, that is, features for real-life language use.

## **The New Senior Secondary School English Syllabus and its Shortfalls**

The Senior Secondary School English Syllabus Task Force has already drawn and produced a new Senior Secondary School English Syllabus for schools in Botswana. A number of draft syllabi were sent to all English departments in all senior secondary schools, relevant departments in tertiary institutions and other stakeholders in the country for their comments and input before the final one was produced. So there was wide consultation of the stakeholders in the production of the new syllabus.

The subject content as stated in the new syllabus should be drawn from a range of sources and should address the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Also included in the syllabus are the general and specific objectives for the teaching of the four language skills. Grammar and usage, as indicated in the syllabus, should be taught in an integrated way, that is, as the four language skills are being taught, rather than in isolation. The approach that is recommended for the teaching of the subject content is the communicative methodology.

The new English syllabus appears to be an excellent and well thought out document with appropriate aims and objectives. The problem seems to lie, in the recommended assessment procedures. It is stipulated in the new syllabus that since the first public examination is scheduled for the end of 1999, there are constraints on what is possible in the time available. It is further stated that in view of the said constraints, two important items in the assessment will not be included in the immediate future. These are school based assessment involving coursework in writing and oral skills and examinations assessing oral or spoken proficiency. So, in the foreseeable future only three of the four language skills will be tested in the examination. There is not even an indication in the new syllabus as to when this omission will be rectified.

## Research Design

The author was a member of the Senior Secondary English Task Force that drew up the senior secondary school syllabus. Although he was involved in the planning, development, and production of the senior secondary English Language syllabus, there were aspects and areas of the document which he did not agree should be included. In a democratic country, however, the views of the majority are given more consideration than those of an individual. Concerns about the possible negative backwash effect of not including assessment of oral skills in the syllabus were raised but the majority of the task force members did not think that this was a cause for concern.

The paragraph dealing with assessment procedures does mention that all the four language skills will be tested if the facilities allow. However, there is no hint as to what time the implementers of this syllabus, the teachers, should be working towards when the facilities for testing oral skills would be in place. As things are, school-based assessment in writing and oral proficiency might never be done because no concrete steps are being taken to meet that goal.

The author was also a member of the task force that drew up the examination syllabus for the new senior secondary school English syllabus. The majority view was that oral assessment was not feasible for the foreseeable future and therefore no plans at all were put in place for it. The author also raised his concerns there but in that task force the attitude towards assessment of oral proficiency was even more negative than in the task force that drew up the teaching syllabus.

The data for this paper was therefore collected while the author was participating in the above mentioned task forces.

## Examination Backwash Effect

*Backwash* is the effect a test has on teaching in the classroom (Davies 1990, Brown, 1994). Swain (1984) asserts that while teachers should not teach 'toward' a test, they can use tests as teaching tools. Tests, she further says, are feedback devices whereby students perceive elements of communicative

performance that need improvement. The implication for the non-assessment of oral proficiency in the new syllabus therefore, is that students and teachers might not consider oral performance as an area that needs improving. The non-inclusion of oral proficiency assessment in the new syllabus is likely to have serious consequences on the teaching of English in general and on the teaching of oral skills in particular at the senior secondary school level.

Oral skills entail the ability to interact successfully in spoken language. This involves both comprehension as well as production or speaking. The candidate should therefore be able to display oral skills through initiating conversation by way of, for example eliciting for information or asking for directions and respond accurately and appropriately to a range of spoken language.

Teachers tend to teach what will be tested. So, if there are no items that test spoken interaction in the examination, teachers are unlikely to give it any serious attention, even though in the syllabus it is stated as a very important skill. Weir (1993) argues that the more features or real-life use of language that can be built into tests, the more positive the washback effect and the easier it will be to make statements about what students can or cannot do in the language. It is clear that the washback effect of a language examination that does not include assessment of spoken interaction, is likely to be a negative one, perhaps leading to the neglect of the teaching of spoken skills.

The nonassessment of oral skills in the new syllabus is also likely to render the proposed assessment procedures non-communicative. This is because communicative language testing, like communicative language teaching, implies that our tests must reflect those capacities required for future use. It is obvious that senior secondary school leavers will be required to engage in spoken interaction and therefore if our examination does not include spoken interaction, the language teaching would be noncommunicative. Also, it would be difficult to extrapolate on the result of the examination as to what the candidate can or cannot do in the language, if it does not include a test on spoken interaction.

Shortage of time is stated in the syllabus as the reason why spoken interaction will not be included in the examination in the short term. This is because it takes more time to develop tests that assess ability to engage in spoken interaction. While this is true, it should not be an excuse for excluding an important language skill, such as speaking, from assessment. I believe that tests that assess oral skills could and should be developed in the time available. Following below are a few suggestions relating to the kinds of tasks that could constitute tests of oral skills and how they could possibly engender the teaching and learning of oral skills.

### **Types of Tests of Oral Skills**

To test the oral skills of learners in the target language, it is necessary to get them to take part in direct spoken language activities. We should not be interested in testing whether candidates merely know how to put sentences together in the abstract: we should be more interested in seeing candidates performing relevant language task and adapt their speech to the circumstances, making decisions under time pressure, implementing them fluently, and making any necessary adjustments as unexpected problems arise (Weir, 1993).

There are many tasks that could be used to test oral skills but in this paper only four types are given and discussed, highlighting both their merits and demerits. Weir (1993) gives examples of more tests of oral skills and interested readers may want to look at his book titled *Understanding and Developing Language Tests*.

The first test of oral interaction considered is the controlled interview. An example of the controlled interview task is given in Example 1.

**Example 1: Controlled Interview**

What is your name?

How many sisters and brothers do you have?

Where do you live?

What class are you in?

What subjects do you do at school?

In what science stream are you?

Why did you choose the pure science/physical science/additional combined science/combined science stream? Interviewer chooses to ask about the appropriate stream.

What is your favourite subject at school?

What do you like about it?

Explain what your favourite subject is about?

What is it about the subject which particularly interests you?

What would you like to do after you finish school?

When you grow up what career/job would you like to do?

What training would you need to do in order to do the job/career you want? Where and for how long would you do the training?

What grades would you need to get in your school leaving examinations in order to qualify to train for your career/job.

Can you explain the importance of your intended career/job to your country.

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In the controlled interview technique a set of procedures are determined in advance for eliciting performance. The questions to ask and what to find out about the candidate's ability is normally decided by the interviewer. He or she normally manages the interaction and retains the initiative in selecting

and developing the topics. The candidate normally only speaks in response to questions from the examiner. This interview is usually face to face. It usually starts with personal and social questions designed to put the candidate at ease. It may then enable the candidate to speak at length about familiar topics and perhaps finish at the higher levels with more evaluative routines such as speculation about future plans or the value of an intended course of study in the country. In the above example the interview will take about 15 minutes and the candidates will be asked all the questions.

During the interview, processing can take place under normal time constraints and the purpose of the interaction is acceptable to many candidates who may well face such a role in the future. The candidates may in future be put in the position of having to interact with somebody he or she does not know, of higher status and of either gender. These conditions should as far as possible be built into the test to reflect the future use of the language.

This format allows the possibility of testing the candidates' ability to perform a variety of informational and interactional routines, and the examiner is in a position to assess improvisational skills as well, for example, by asking for repetition, or clarification of responses. With respect to the areas of questioning the example is good as the topic clearly relates to the real life situation of the student.

It is easy to make comparisons across performance as the candidates are asked the same questions. One can therefore be quite confident that the input dimensions will be reasonably similar across candidates. However, even when the procedure for eliciting performance are specified in advance there is still no guarantee that candidates will be asked the same questions, in the same manner, even by the same examiner.

It is also difficult to satisfy such conditions as reciprocity, as the students is mainly cast in the role of respondent and there is little opportunity for him/her to take the initiative, manage the agenda, or take responsibility for keeping the discussion going. Moreover, few demands are put on turn-taking ability either when the candidate is cast solely in the role of respondent (Weir, 1993).

In spite of the above weaknesses which are inherent in this technique, with carefully prepared and agreed criteria, together with a reasonable measure of standardisation to these, a reliable and valid idea of a candidates' level can be formed. This type of interview is easy to set up and administer and has high face validity and potential scoring reliability. It has been shown that with sufficient training and standardisation of examiners to the procedures and criteria employed, reasonable reliability figures can be reached with this technique (Weir, 1993).

Valid concerns have been raised about the practicability of this type of exam in terms of time constraints, for instance, it takes each candidate about 15 minutes to complete this kind of oral examination. However, in view of the fact that the oral examination is administered not in the traditional way, in one sitting, but by the teachers themselves during the course of the term and at several sittings, time constraints should not be a cause for worry.

It is not too difficult to imagine what an impact such an examination would have on the teaching of oral skills in general and interview skills in particular. During the term, before the internal examination period, teachers would not neglect to teach oral skills and interview skills in particular because they would want to prepare their pupils for their impending assessment.

### **Interaction: Student With Student Technique**

In this type of test where the examiner takes no part, candidates should be more at ease and they have more opportunity and inclination to speak. They can select in advance who they wish to do the test with so that they are interacting with somebody they know and feel happy communicating with.

In this type of task students normally work in pairs and each is given part of the information necessary for completion of the task (Weir 1993). They have to complete the task by getting missing information from each other. The main point in these kinds of tasks is that candidates have to communicate to fill an information gap in a meaningful situation.

Tasks should be explained clearly to students before they start. The teacher should interfere as little as possible and only prompt where absolutely necessary (Weir, 1993).

In the example given below, candidates in groups of two or more have to organise and maintain some kind of discussion in which each student is to have more or less an equal amount of speaking time. The exercise involves taking information from written texts and arriving at a consensus on certain matters through interaction. This type of test may follow after the content have been practised in class in a comprehension exercise and the vocabulary and structures perhaps pre-taught. The students should not however, have seen the actual spoken language task before the test but may well have practised on similar activities. The task should be set up so that there is no single correct answer. See example 2 below.

## Example 2: Information Gap Task

### Situation

The executive committee of a school magazine editorial board has the sum of P800 to spend on the purchase of a camera for use to take pictures for the magazine. Two students had been given the responsibility of gathering information on the type of camera to buy. Student X and student Y are asked to decide between four cameras and choose which is the best to buy. Student X has information on two cameras and student Y has information on the other two. They have to exchange this information verbally and decide which camera to buy. The students have ten minutes to complete the task.

### Student's prompt Sheet A

You will find below information on two cameras, A and B. Your friend has information on two more cameras, C and D. Your magazine club has P800 to purchase a camera. Using the information you both have, you must decide which camera to buy. Make sure you check all the information before deciding. When you have finished discussing, you should tell your teacher which camera you would buy, and why. Wait for the other person to start the conversation

	Price (P)	Weight (grams)	Size	Flash
Camera A	800	250	small	+
Camera B	700	300	medium	+

### Student's Prompt Sheet B

The executive committee of your school magazine has P800 to purchase a camera. You will find below information on two cameras, C, and D. Your friend has information on two more cameras, A and B. Using the information you both have, you must decide which camera to buy. Make sure you check all the information before deciding. When you have finished discussing you should tell your teacher which camera you would buy. You must take the responsibility for starting the discussion and reaching a decision. You have only ten minutes for this.

	Price (P)	Weight (grams)	Size	Flash
Camera A	600	250	small	-
Camera B	800	550	small	+

Alternatively, this task could be adapted for use with four students at a time. Each student would be given a prompt sheet with only one of the four sets of detail (price or weight or size or flash) filled in. Each student would be asked in turn by a different member of the group about the various elements, such as cost, weight etc., and the other students would complete the details to answer questions. Next, any student would be allowed to ask for any missing information on any of the cameras. The last stage would involve a discussion on which camera should be bought. This could be structured by first having A/B discussion and then having C/D discussion and lastly the group as a whole coming to an agreement. Further alternatives could easily be designed using: watches, cars, houses, pens, motorcycles and so on (Weir, 1993).

### **Merits of the Information Gap Task**

The task is interactive and therefore comes much closer than most other tasks to representing real communication. Tasks of this nature can be interesting and incorporate real materials from everyday life. The candidates have to solve a problem, report conclusions to a third party and support these in argument, thus covering both interactional and informational routines. The task also recognises the unpredictability of communicative situations and demands an ability to generate original sentences and not simply the ability to repeat rehearsed phrases (Weir, 1993).

Candidates in this type of task use questionnaires, elicit information, describe, make requests, make comparisons, give opinions, state preferences, give explanations, persuade and come to decisions as a normal feature of the interaction. They therefore perform a range of operations known to occur in normal spoken interaction.

The interaction in this task is purposeful and unpredictable. As these types of tasks are designed to encourage cooperation. Negotiation of meaning is required to arrive at a consensus and at a suitable outcome. Also because the candidate's contributions are unpredictable, they are less likely to have been rehearsed before hand, as happens, say in the traditional interview task. The candidates have to monitor and respond to the discussion spontaneously. An

appropriate level of explicitness is required in order to decide on the best choice of camera.

The task requires candidates to use some improvisational skills, for example, they may need to indicate purpose, check on understanding, as the other person for forgotten information, ask for and give opinions, check common ground, clarify by summarising, indicate understanding by gestures and other paralinguistic means, indicate uncertainty and/or lack of comprehension, express agreement or reservation, negotiate meaning by making and/or responding to clarification request in order to succeed in the task, correct misinterpretations, and make themselves understood (Weir, 1993).

The task also involves turn taking and candidates have to signal when they want to speak, recognise the right moment for taking a turn, know how not to lose their turn, recognise others/signals of a desire to speak and know how to let other people have turns.

This type of task better represents the act of communication than most other tests as it fulfils most of the criteria for what makes a test communicative: that it should be purposeful, contextualised and interactive. Also, normal time constraints obtain, allowing performance to be assessed for fluency in terms of smoothness of execution. Responsibility for keeping the interaction going until the objective is realised lies with both candidates. Therefore reciprocity is a marked feature of this task with both contributing, taking what the other person says into account and reacting to it (Weir, 1993).

This is a relatively easy to contrast. It is very practical and therefore it can easily be replicated. Such tasks can easily be reproduced by teachers in a multiplicity of forms by varying the details of the times to be discussed. With a computer this would take very little time and would make valuable contribution to test security as it is easy to change and edit a text on a computer, than on a conventional type writer where you might have to retype the whole text. The ability to modify the task easily and quickly would enhance test security.

## **Demerits of the Information Gap Task**

Like all other tasks that try to reflect real life communication, this type of task may have low reliability scores (Davies, 1990). Performance may be affected, for instance, by topic. If the candidates are not very familiar with the topic their performance may not be very good, particularly with regards to fluency of their contributions. The familiarity of the candidates with each other could also have an effect. The contributions of individual may vary as a result of these factors and though this is true of real-life discussions it may affect the assessment of certain individuals if they say relatively little.

It is therefore very important to choose the topic very carefully so that it is likely to be familiar to both candidates. Since this task is administered by the candidates' class teachers, this should not be a problem.

There is also a potential problem with the reciprocity condition if one of the participants dominates the interaction, as the other candidate may have limited opportunity to demonstrate communicative potential. Moreover, if there is a big difference in proficiency between the two, this may influence performance and the judgement made on it (Weir, 1993).

There is also a problem if one of the candidates is more interested in the topic or the task, because the interaction may become one sided. Therefore, if candidates are being assessed on their performance in a single situation on a task such as this, and extrapolations are made about their ability to perform in other situations from this, the resulting extrapolations may be equally one sided.

To overcome these problems, the pairs of candidates must be chosen very carefully. The proficiency difference in each pair of candidates should not be too great. The task of carefully pairing the candidates should not be too great since it is the class teachers that are administering the examinations.

Lastly, practical constraints on this type of task include the time available, the difficulties of administration, and the maintenance of test security where parallel forms are not available (Weir, 1993).

As mentioned before, if selection of the task and the pair of candidates is done carefully, this should not be a serious problem.

In spite of the problems and constraints discussed above which as indicated can be minimised, this format comes much closer than any of the others, allowing the test writer to build in a wide range of the conditions and operations which currently appear to characterise spoken interaction.

As mentioned above, test of oral performance such as this one, should be administered during the term of the class teachers. The teachers though will need to be trained and therefore workshops for English teachers will need to be held on techniques of administering oral tests.

The information gap task in the assessment of language ability would have a positive backwash effect as it would constrain teachers into training their pupils to be able to use language for real communication purposes. In this task each candidate has only part of the information and would therefore need to interact with the other in a purposeful and meaningful way in order to achieve his/her goal. The teachers would need to train students in the skills of questioning to elicit information, making requests, asking for clarification, and the skills of paraphrasing in order to succeed in this kind of task. As mentioned earlier, this task is highly interactive and as such, comes much closer than most other tasks to representing real communication.

## The Role Play Technique

### Example 3: Role Play: Student/examiner

#### "O" LEVEL ENGLISH

**NOTE TO CANDIDATES: NO NOTES SHOULD BE MADE DURING THE PREPARATION TIME EITHER ON SEPARATE PAPER OR ON THE INSTRUCTION SHEET**

#### ROLE-PLAYING SITUATION

##### Candidate's Instructions

Study the following situation carefully and be prepared to perform in English the role indicated.

You are in a train in Zimbabwe, during the Christmas holidays, going to visit some friends in Harare. The examiner will play the part of the only other passenger in your compartment.

##### Suggestions for possible development by examiner

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ask if you may open the window a little.</li> <li>2. Ask how far he/she is going.</li> <li>3. Discuss the possibilities of getting a cup of coffee on the train.</li> <li>4. Invite him/her to go with you for a coffee.</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Before agreeing ask why. If too hot, agree, but say it's cold outside so you might get too cold. If no reaction to that ask what he/she thinks you should do.</li> <li>2. Going as far as Gweru. What about him/her? Discuss whether he/she lives in Harare, length of journey, and ask whether he/she won't get hungry. If candidate says he/she is hungry, you could say:           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- there is a restaurant:</li> <li>- would he/she like a sandwich/apple?</li> </ul> </li> <li>3. Perhaps the restaurant will serve coffee, but you don't know. What about getting a drink when the train stops at Gweru? (You could say if necessary that the train stops for 30 minutes.)</li> <li>4. Before accepting, suggest looking for a snackbar on the train, and raise the question of (a) losing seats or (b) having luggage stolen if you leave it.</li> </ol> |
|---|---|

According to Brown (1994), the best of oral proficiency involves a one-to-one tester/testee relationship, 'live' performance (as opposed to taped), a careful specification of task to be accomplished during the test, and a scoring rubric that is truly descriptive of ability. The above task meets some of the specifications of Brown. In this task the candidate is expected to play one of the roles in an interaction which might be reasonably expected of him or her in the real world. The examiner plays the other role.

This technique can be valid in both face and content terms for a variety of situations and the purpose should be clear and reasonable. The interaction is face to face, as writers such as Brown have suggested; processing takes place under normal time constraints and reciprocity is an important feature of the interaction.

This type of assessment would motivate teachers into training pupils in playing roles in interactions which might be reasonably expected of them in the real world. This would improve pupils' communicative ability since the interaction is face-to-face and processing takes place under normal time constraints and reciprocity is an important feature of the interaction. So the backwash effect of this type of assessment would be a positive one.

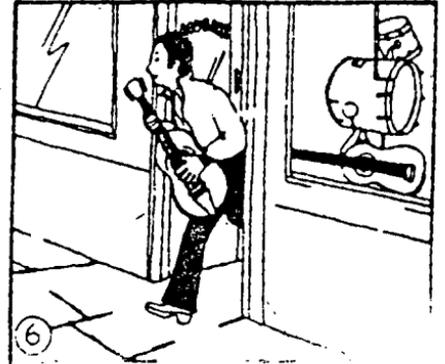
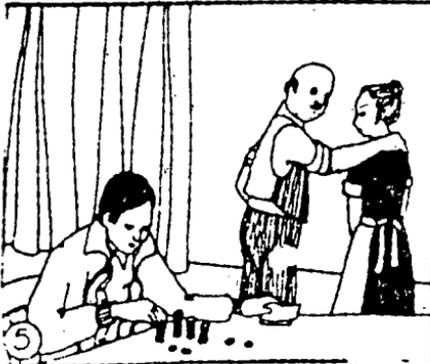
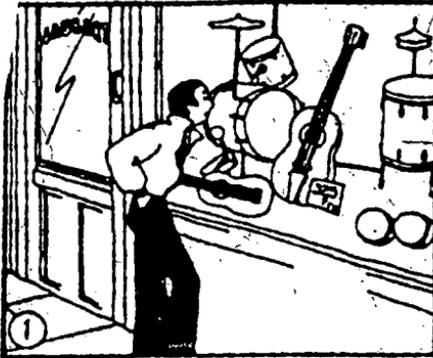
It seems that this is a practical and potentially highly valid and reliable means of assessing a candidate's ability to participate effectively in oral interaction. In the above example the task is contextualised and the student has to take the responsibility for initiation. There is also some room for development and hence the unpredictability in the discourse, though the content is controlled.

One of the demerit of this technique is that the familiarity or non-familiarity of the role might affect the performance of the candidates. Some candidates may not know what is normal to do in certain situations. Another problem that has been encountered in this technique is that candidates often use the language of reporting and say what they would say rather than directly assuming the role (Weir, 1993). Since the oral assessment would be done by the class teachers themselves the above problems can be minimised by planning and choice of situations to be acted.

## **Information Transfer Technique**

The last test of spoken skills that is considered is information transfer, whereby a candidate is given a panel of pictures depicting a chronologically ordered sequence of events and has to tell the story in the required tense. Time should be allowed at the beginning for the candidate to study the pictures.

NOTE TO CANDIDATES: CANDIDATES ARE REMINDED THAT THE NARRATIVE BASED ON THE SERIES OF PICTURES SHOULD BE TOLD USING THE PAST TENSES. NO NOTES MAY BE MADE.



This technique is used by school examination boards in the U.K. Clark and Weinton (1979) in a study they conducted on behalf of TOEFL found this format to be very effective. In this format, the task required of the candidates is clear. However, the value of the technique is dependent on the clarity of pictures and on their being unambiguous and free from cultural bias (Clark & Swinton 1979).

As this task is one of the few available that constrain the candidate to provide an extended sample of connected speech, a long informational routine, which allows the application of a wide range of criteria in assessment including coherence as the organisation of discourse in long terms, it can be an efficient procedure.

It is possible to make a comparison of candidates which is relatively untrained by background or cultural knowledge, given that the drawings themselves are culture free, because all candidates are constrained by common information provided by pictures or drawings.

There are a number of problems associated with this technique. One concerns the quality of the pictures. If the quality is in anyway deficient then the candidate may not have the opportunity to demonstrate his or her best performance. It is therefore necessary to always use pictures of good quality.

The most serious weakness of this technique is that it is noncommunicative, as one might seriously question when students ever need to do this kind of thing in real life. However, a claim might be made for construct validity in that the technique may well be tapping into informational routine of reporting. Describing something which has happened may well be an important operation in some occupations.

In spite of these problems, this assessment procedure can help measure the oral proficiency of candidates, if used as part of a test battery of oral proficiency.

This assessment procedure would influence teachers into paying attention to the improvement of pupils ability to describe verbally a series of events depicted pictorially. As mentioned earlier, the ability to describe something which happened may well be important in certain occupations.

In general, the inclusion of oral assessment procedures in both teaching and examination syllabi would influence both pupils and teachers into giving serious attention to the improvement of oral proficiency.

There are other formats for testing spoken skills, such as free interview/conversation, mini-situation on tape and sentence repetition, which could be used to test oral skills, but I only choose to discuss four which I consider to be the best in terms of testing the candidates' communicative abilities.

## **Conclusion**

This papers has argued that the non-inclusion of assessment of oral interaction in the examination of the new senior secondary school syllabus, at least in the initial stages could have a negative washback effect on the teaching of the English language in general and of oral skills in particular. It is maintained that this would make both teachers and students not to pay serious attention on the teaching and learning of oral skills as teachers and students tend to pay more attention to what will be tested. The paper also gives and discusses a number of examples of tasks that could be used as test of oral skills and suggests that these could be constructed and implemented without too many problems being encountered. In fact, this would not be the first time oral tests have been conducted in the country. In the French 'O' level examination there is an oral component, controlled interview, lasting ten minutes and it runs smoothly every year (Interview with a French teacher working in a government school). The French Department at the University of Botswana also conducts oral examinations. They also have expertise in constructing oral tests and have indicated unofficially that they would be willing to help in developing oral English tests if asked. I therefore conclude that if the Senior Secondary English Task Force and the Examinations, Research and Testing Division of the Ministry of Education put their

heads together and invite experts from the University of Botswana French department, they could come up with a set of tests of oral skills that could be included in the English examination in the foreseeable future.

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# THE INFLUENCE OF LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT ON LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODS

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper examines the influences of language assessment on language teaching. The paper was written in response to the assessment procedures recommended in the new English syllabus for senior secondary schools in Botswana. The main argument in the paper is that unless the assessment procedures are also changed to become communicative, like the recommended teaching approach, the teaching will remain unchanged. It is further argued that changing a test is possibly the most powerful means to bring about improvements in the learning experiences that go before it. The main shortcoming in the new syllabus, it is argued, is that there is no assessment of oral skills recommended for the short term, and therefore the 'washback effect' of the English examination syllabus would be negative: most likely it will lead to the neglect of the teaching and learning of oral skills. The paper goes on to suggest a number of tasks that could be used to test oral skills in the examination of the new syllabus and how these would engender the teaching and learning of oral skills. Expertise for the construction of tests of oral skills, it is further argued, can be found locally; all the responsible authorities have to do is consult it.*

## **Introduction**

Botswana recently decided to take over the running of the senior secondary school examinations from the University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate (UCLES) in the United Kingdom, which has been running them since the colonial days. Therefore, the whole senior secondary school curriculum is being reviewed and Subject 'task forces' have been appointed

to review syllabi in the curriculum. The task force responsible for reviewing the Senior Secondary School English syllabus has completed its work of reviewing the syllabus and has come up with a syllabus that is believed to be more relevant to the situation in Botswana. The previous Cambridge Overseas School Certificate English syllabus which was followed in the Senior Secondary Schools was said not to be suitable as it was not designed for second language speakers but for first language speakers.

The new syllabus which was implemented in January 1998, is an English as a second language (ESL) type and the teaching methodology recommended is the communicative approach which emphasises the processes of communication, such as using language appropriately in different types of situations; using language to perform different kinds of tasks, for example to get information, give instruction, and so on; using language for social interaction with other people. The main argument in the paper is that unless the assessment procedures are also changed to test communicative skills, the pedagogy would also remain unchanged in spite of the methodology recommended in the syllabus.

Weir (1993) also argues that without appropriate tests, teachers are unlikely to change. If tests remain within a former paradigm, for example, multiple choice tests of grammar and lexis, then teachers may not be disposed to practise, for example, productive writing or spoken interaction in the classroom. This is understandable as teachers and students are judged on test results. So it would be unrealistic to argue that they should prepare students in class for anything other than those things on which they will be tested.

Researchers in language testing have argued that changing a test pattern is possibly the most powerful means to bring about improvements in the learning experiences that go before it. Tests, it is argued, can have a most useful and powerful washback effect on teaching. By the same token if materials are changed to reflect a new approach to a syllabus, and teachers are trained in the new materials and methodology, all this enterprise may be to no avail if corresponding test patterns are not taken into consideration (Weir, 1993; Davies, 1990).

It is important, therefore, to ensure that students are entered only for examinations which sample most effectively those linguistic skills required in the future use situation, that is, features for real-life language use.

### **The New Senior Secondary School English Syllabus and its Shortfalls**

The Senior Secondary School English Syllabus Task Force has already drawn and produced a new Senior Secondary School English Syllabus for schools in Botswana. A number of draft syllabi were sent to all English departments in all senior secondary schools, relevant departments in tertiary institutions and other stakeholders in the country for their comments and input before the final one was produced. So there was wide consultation of the stakeholders in the production of the new syllabus.

The subject content as stated in the new syllabus should be drawn from a range of sources and should address the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Also included in the syllabus are the general and specific objectives for the teaching of the four language skills. Grammar and usage, as indicated in the syllabus, should be taught in an integrated way, that is, as the four language skills are being taught, rather than in isolation. The approach that is recommended for the teaching of the subject content is the communicative methodology.

The new English syllabus appears to be an excellent and well thought out document with appropriate aims and objectives. The problem seems to lie, in the recommended assessment procedures. It is stipulated in the new syllabus that since the first public examination is scheduled for the end of 1999, there are constraints on what is possible in the time available. It is further stated that in view of the said constraints, two important items in the assessment will not be included in the immediate future. These are school based assessment involving coursework in writing and oral skills and examinations assessing oral or spoken proficiency. So, in the foreseeable future only three of the four language skills will be tested in the examination. There is not even an indication in the new syllabus as to when this omission will be rectified.

## Research Design

The author was a member of the Senior Secondary English Task Force that drew up the senior secondary school syllabus. Although he was involved in the planning, development, and production of the senior secondary English Language syllabus, there were aspects and areas of the document which he did not agree should be included. In a democratic country, however, the views of the majority are given more consideration than those of an individual. Concerns about the possible negative backwash effect of not including assessment of oral skills in the syllabus were raised but the majority of the task force members did not think that this was a cause for concern.

The paragraph dealing with assessment procedures does mention that all the four language skills will be tested if the facilities allow. However, there is no hint as to what time the implementers of this syllabus, the teachers, should be working towards when the facilities for testing oral skills would be in place. As things are, school-based assessment in writing and oral proficiency might never be done because no concrete steps are being taken to meet that goal.

The author was also a member of the task force that drew up the examination syllabus for the new senior secondary school English syllabus. The majority view was that oral assessment was not feasible for the foreseeable future and therefore no plans at all were put in place for it. The author also raised his concerns there but in that task force the attitude towards assessment of oral proficiency was even more negative than in the task force that drew up the teaching syllabus.

The data for this paper was therefore collected while the author was participating in the above mentioned task forces.

## Examination Backwash Effect

*Backwash* is the effect a test has on teaching in the classroom (Davies 1990, Brown, 1994). Swain (1984) asserts that while teachers should not teach 'toward' a test, they can use tests as teaching tools. Tests, she further says, are feedback devices whereby students perceive elements of communicative

performance that need improvement. The implication for the non-assessment of oral proficiency in the new syllabus therefore, is that students and teachers might not consider oral performance as an area that needs improving. The non-inclusion of oral proficiency assessment in the new syllabus is likely to have serious consequences on the teaching of English in general and on the teaching of oral skills in particular at the senior secondary school level.

Oral skills entail the ability to interact successfully in spoken language. This involves both comprehension as well as production or speaking. The candidate should therefore be able to display oral skills through initiating conversation by way of, for example eliciting for information or asking for directions and respond accurately and appropriately to a range of spoken language.

Teachers tend to teach what will be tested. So, if there are no items that test spoken interaction in the examination, teachers are unlikely to give it any serious attention, even though in the syllabus it is stated as a very important skill. Weir (1993) argues that the more features or real-life use of language that can be built into tests, the more positive the washback effect and the easier it will be to make statements about what students can or cannot do in the language. It is clear that the washback effect of a language examination that does not include assessment of spoken interaction, is likely to be a negative one, perhaps leading to the neglect of the teaching of spoken skills.

The nonassessment of oral skills in the new syllabus is also likely to render the proposed assessment procedures non-communicative. This is because communicative language testing, like communicative language teaching, implies that our tests must reflect those capacities required for future use. It is obvious that senior secondary school leavers will be required to engage in spoken interaction and therefore if our examination does not include spoken interaction, the language teaching would be noncommunicative. Also, it would be difficult to extrapolate on the result of the examination as to what the candidate can or cannot do in the language, if it does not include a test on spoken interaction.

Shortage of time is stated in the syllabus as the reason why spoken interaction will not be included in the examination in the short term. This is because it takes more time to develop tests that assess ability to engage in spoken interaction. While this is true, it should not be an excuse for excluding an important language skill, such as speaking, from assessment. I believe that tests that assess oral skills could and should be developed in the time available. Following below are a few suggestions relating to the kinds of tasks that could constitute tests of oral skills and how they could possibly engender the teaching and learning of oral skills.

### **Types of Tests of Oral Skills**

To test the oral skills of learners in the target language, it is necessary to get them to take part in direct spoken language activities. We should not be interested in testing whether candidates merely know how to put sentences together in the abstract: we should be more interested in seeing candidates performing relevant language task and adapt their speech to the circumstances, making decisions under time pressure, implementing them fluently, and making any necessary adjustments as unexpected problems arise (Weir, 1993).

There are many tasks that could be used to test oral skills but in this paper only four types are given and discussed, highlighting both their merits and demerits. Weir (1993) gives examples of more tests of oral skills and interested readers may want to look at his book titled *Understanding and Developing Language Tests*.

The first test of oral interaction considered is the controlled interview. An example of the controlled interview task is given in Example 1.

**Example 1: Controlled Interview**

What is your name?

How many sisters and brothers do you have?

Where do you live?

What class are you in?

What subjects do you do at school?

In what science stream are you?

Why did you choose the pure science/physical science/additional combined science/combined science stream? Interviewer chooses to ask about the appropriate stream.

What is your favourite subject at school?

What do you like about it?

Explain what your favourite subject is about?

What is it about the subject which particularly interests you?

What would you like to do after you finish school?

When you grow up what career/job would you like to do?

What training would you need to do in order to do the job/career you want? Where and for how long would you do the training?

What grades would you need to get in your school leaving examinations in order to qualify to train for your career/job.

Can you explain the importance of your intended career/job to your country.

---

In the controlled interview technique a set of procedures are determined in advance for eliciting performance. The questions to ask and what to find out about the candidate's ability is normally decided by the interviewer. He or she normally manages the interaction and retains the initiative in selecting

and developing the topics. The candidate normally only speaks in response to questions from the examiner. There interview is usually face to face. It usually starts with personal and social questions designed to put the candidate at ease. It may then enable the candidate to speak at length about familiar topics and perhaps finish at the higher levels with more evaluative routines such as speculation about future plans or the value of an intended course of study in the country. In the above example the interview will take about 15 minutes and the candidates will be asked all the questions.

During the interview, processing can take place under normal time constraints and the purpose of the interaction is acceptable to many candidates who may well face such a role in the future. The candidates may in future be put in the position of having to interact with somebody he or she does not know, of higher status and of either gender. These conditions should as far as possible be built into the test to reflect the future use of the language.

This format allows the possibility of testing the candidates' ability to perform a variety of informational and interactional routines, and the examiner is in a position to assess improvisational skills as well, for example, by asking for repetition, or clarification of responses. With respect to the areas of questioning the example is good as the topic clearly relates to the real life situation of the student.

It is easy to make comparisons across performance as the candidates are asked the same questions. One can therefore be quite confident that the input dimensions will be reasonably similar across candidates. However, even when the procedure for eliciting performance are specified in advance there is still no guarantee that candidates will be asked the same questions, in the same manner, even by the same examiner.

It is also difficult to satisfy such conditions as reciprocity, as the students is mainly cast in the role of respondent and there is little opportunity for him/her to take the initiate, manage the agenda, or take responsibility for keeping the discussion going. Moreover, few demands are put on turn-taking ability either when the candidate is cast solely in the role of respondent (Weir, 1993).

In spite of the above weaknesses which are inherent in this technique, with carefully prepared and agreed criteria, together with a reasonable measure of standardisation to these, a reliable and valid idea of a candidates' level can be formed. This type of interview is easy to set up and administer and has high face validity and potential scoring reliability. It has been shown that with sufficient training and standardisation of examiners to the procedures and criteria employed, reasonable reliability figures can be reached with this technique (Weir, 1993).

Valid concerns have been raised about the practicability of this type of exam in terms of time constraints, for instance, it takes each candidate about 15 minutes to complete this kind of oral examination. However, in view of the fact that the oral examination is administered not in the traditional way, in one sitting, but by the teachers themselves during the course of the term and at several sittings, time constraints should not be a cause for worry.

It is not too difficult to imagine what an impact such an examination would have on the teaching of oral skills in general and interview skills in particular. During the term, before the internal examination period, teachers would not neglect to teach oral skills and interview skills in particular because they would want to prepare their pupils for their impending assessment.

### **Interaction: Student With Student Technique**

In this type of test where the examiner takes no part, candidates should be more at ease and they have more opportunity and inclination to speak. They can select in advance who they wish to do the test with so that they are interacting with somebody they know and feel happy communicating with.

In this type of task students normally work in pairs and each is given part of the information necessary for completion of the task (Weir 1993). They have to complete the task by getting missing information from each other. The main point in these kinds of tasks is that candidates have to communicate to fill an information gap in a meaningful situation.

Tasks should be explained clearly to students before they start. The teacher should interfere as little as possible and only prompt where absolutely necessary (Weir, 1993).

In the example given below, candidates in groups of two or more have to organise and maintain some kind of discussion in which each student is to have more or less an equal amount of speaking time. The exercise involves taking information from written texts and arriving at a consensus on certain matters through interaction. This type of test may follow after the content have been practised in class in a comprehension exercise and the vocabulary and structures perhaps pre-taught. The students should not however, have seen the actual spoken language task before the test but may well have practised on similar activities. The task should be set up so that there is no single correct answer. See example 2 below.

**Example 2: Information Gap Task***Situation*

The executive committee of a school magazine editorial board has the sum of P800 to spend on the purchase of a camera for use to take pictures for the magazine. Two students had been given the responsibility of gathering information on the type of camera to buy. Student X and student Y are asked to decide between four cameras and choose which is the best to buy. Student X has information on two cameras and student Y has information on the other two. They have to exchange this information verbally and decide which camera to buy. The students have ten minutes to complete the task.

*Student's prompt Sheet A*

You will find below information on two cameras, A and B. Your friend has information on two more cameras, C and D. Your magazine club has P800 to purchase a camera. Using the information you both have, you must decide which camera to buy. Make sure you check all the information before deciding. When you have finished discussing, you should tell your teacher which camera you would buy, and why. Wait for the other person to start the conversation

	Price (P)	Weight (grams)	Size	Flash
Camera A	800	250	small	+
Camera B	700	300	medium	+

*Student's Prompt Sheet B*

The executive committee of your school magazine has P800 to purchase a camera. You will find below information on two cameras, C, and D. Your friend has information on two more cameras, A and B. Using the information you both have, you must decide which camera to buy. Make sure you check all the information before deciding. When you have finished discussing you should tell your teacher which camera you would buy. You must take the responsibility for starting the discussion and reaching a decision. You have only ten minutes for this.

	Price (P)	Weight (grams)	Size	Flash
Camera A	600	250	small	-
Camera B	800	550	small	+

Alternatively, this task could be adapted for use with four students at a time. Each student would be given a prompt sheet with only one of the four sets of detail (price or weight or size or flash) filled in. Each student would be asked in turn by a different member of the group about the various elements, such as cost, weight etc., and the other students would complete the details to answer questions. Next, any student would be allowed to ask for any missing information on any of the cameras. The last stage would involve a discussion on which camera should be bought. This could be structured by first having A/B discussion and then having C/D discussion and lastly the group as a whole coming to an agreement. Further alternatives could easily be designed using: watches, cars, houses, pens, motorcycles and so on (Weir, 1993).

### **Merits of the Information Gap Task**

The task is interactive and therefore comes much closer than most other tasks to representing real communication. Tasks of this nature can be interesting and incorporate real materials from everyday life. The candidates have to solve a problem, report conclusions to a third party and support these in argument, thus covering both interactional and informational routines. The task also recognises the unpredictability of communicative situations and demands an ability to generate original sentences and not simply the ability to repeat rehearsed phrases (Weir, 1993).

Candidates in this type of task use questionnaires, elicit information, describe, make requests, make comparisons, give opinions, state preferences, give explanations, persuade and come to decisions as a normal feature of the interaction. They therefore perform a range of operations known to occur in normal spoken interaction.

The interaction in this task is purposeful and unpredictable. As these types of tasks are designed to encourage cooperation. Negotiation of meaning is required to arrive at a consensus and at a suitable outcome. Also because the candidate's contributions are unpredictable, they are less likely to have been rehearsed before hand, as happens, say in the traditional interview task. The candidates have to monitor and respond to the discussion spontaneously. An

appropriate level of explicitness is required in order to decide on the best choice of camera.

The task requires candidates to use some improvisational skills, for example, they may need to indicate purpose, check on understanding, as the other person for forgotten information, ask for and give opinions, check common ground, clarify by summarising, indicate understanding by gestures and other paralinguistic means, indicate uncertainty and/or lack of comprehension, express agreement or reservation, negotiate meaning by making and/or responding to clarification request in order to succeed in the task, correct misinterpretations, and make themselves understood (Weir, 1993).

The task also involves turn taking and candidates have to signal when they want to speak, recognise the right moment for taking a turn, know how not to lose their turn, recognise others/signals of a desire to speak and know how to let other people have turns.

This type of task better represents the act of communication than most other tests as it fulfils most of the criteria for what makes a test communicative: that it should be purposeful, contextualised and interactive. Also, normal time constraints obtain, allowing performance to be assessed for fluency in terms of smoothness of execution. Responsibility for keeping the interaction going until the objective is realised lies with both candidates. Therefore reciprocity is a marked feature of this task with both contributing, taking what the other person says into account and reacting to it (Weir, 1993).

This is a relatively easy to contrast. It is very practical and therefore it can easily be replicated. Such tasks can easily be reproduced by teachers in a multiplicity of forms by varying the details of the times to be discussed. With a computer this would take very little time and would make valuable contribution to test security as it is easy to change and edit a text on a computer, than on a conventional type writer where you might have to retype the whole text. The ability to modify the task easily and quickly would enhance test security.

## **Demerits of the Information Gap Task**

Like all other tasks that try to reflect real life communication, this type of task may have low reliability scores (Davies, 1990). Performance may be affected, for instance, by topic. If the candidates are not very familiar with the topic their performance may not be very good, particularly with regards to fluency of their contributions. The familiarity of the candidates with each other could also have an effect. The contributions of individual may vary as a result of these factors and though this is true of real-life discussions it may affect the assessment of certain individuals if they say relatively little.

It is therefore very important to choose the topic very carefully so that it is likely to be familiar to both candidates. Since this task is administered by the candidates' class teachers, this should not be a problem.

There is also a potential problem with the reciprocity condition if one of the participants dominates the interaction, as the other candidate may have limited opportunity to demonstrate communicative potential. Moreover, if there is a big difference in proficiency between the two, this may influence performance and the judgement made on it (Weir, 1993).

There is also a problem if one of the candidates is more interested in the topic or the task, because the interaction may become one sided. Therefore, if candidates are being assessed on their performance in a single situation on a task such as this, and extrapolations are made about their ability to perform in other situations from this, the resulting extrapolations may be equally one sided.

To overcome these problems, the pairs of candidates must be chosen very carefully. The proficiency difference in each pair of candidates should not be too great. The task of carefully pairing the candidates should not be too great since it is the class teachers that are administering the examinations.

Lastly, practical constraints on this type of task include the time available, the difficulties of administration, and the maintenance of test security where parallel forms are not available (Weir, 1993).

As mentioned before, if selection of the task and the pair of candidates is done carefully, this should not be a serious problem.

In spite of the problems and constraints discussed above which as indicated can be minimised, this format comes much closer than any of the others, allowing the test writer to build in a wide range of the conditions and operations which currently appear to characterise spoken interaction.

As mentioned above, test of oral performance such as this one, should be administered during the term of the class teachers. The teachers though will need to be trained and therefore workshops for English teachers will need to be held on techniques of administering oral tests.

The information gap task in the assessment of language ability would have a positive backwash effect as it would constrain teachers into training their pupils to be able to use language for real communication purposes. In this task each candidate has only part of the information and would therefore need to interact with the other in a purposeful and meaningful way in order to achieve his/her goal. The teachers would need to train students in the skills of questioning to elicit information, making requests, asking for clarification, and the skills of paraphrasing in order to succeed in this kind of task. As mentioned earlier, this task is highly interactive and as such, comes much closer than most other tasks to representing real communication.

## The Role Play Technique

### Example 3: Role Play: Student/examiner

---

#### "O" LEVEL ENGLISH

---

NOTE TO CANDIDATES: NO NOTES SHOULD BE MADE DURING THE PREPARATION TIME EITHER ON SEPARATE PAPER OR ON THE INSTRUCTION SHEET

#### ROLE-PLAYING SITUATION

##### Candidate's Instructions

Study the following situation carefully and be prepared to perform in English the role indicated.

You are in a train in Zimbabwe, during the Christmas holidays, going to visit some friends in Harare. The examiner will play the part of the only other passenger in your compartment.

##### Suggestions for possible development by examiner

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>1. Ask if you may open the window a little.</p>                           | <p>1. Before agreeing ask why. If too hot, agree, but say it's cold outside so you might get too cold. If no reaction to that ask what he/she thinks you should do.</p>  |
| <p>2. Ask how far he/she is going.</p>                                       | <p>2. Going as far as Gweru. What about him/her? Discuss whether he/she lives in Harare, length of journey, and ask whether he/she won't get hungry. If candidate says he/she is hungry, you could say:</p> <p>- there is a restaurant:</p> <p>- would he/she like a sandwich/apple?</p> |
| <p>3. Discuss the possibilities of getting a cup of coffee on the train.</p> | <p>3. Perhaps the restaurant will serve coffee, but you don't know. What about getting a drink when the train stops at Gweru? (You could say if necessary that the train stops for 30 minutes.)</p>  |
| <p>4. Invite him/her to go with you for a coffee.</p>                        | <p>4. Before accepting, suggest looking for a snackbar on the train, and raise the question of (a) losing seats or (b) having luggage stolen if you leave it.</p>  |

According to Brown (1994), the best of oral proficiency involves a one-to-one tester/testee relationship, 'live' performance (as opposed to taped), a careful specification of task to be accomplished during the test, and a scoring rubric that is truly descriptive of ability. The above task meets some of the specifications of Brown. In this task the candidate is expected to play one of the roles in an interaction which might be reasonably expected of him or her in the real world. The examiner plays the other role.

This technique can be valid in both face and content terms for a variety of situations and the purpose should be clear and reasonable. The interaction is face to face, as writers such as Brown have suggested; processing takes place under normal time constraints and reciprocity is an important feature of the interaction.

This type of assessment would motivate teachers into training pupils in playing roles in interactions which might be reasonably expected of them in the real world. This would improve pupils' communicative ability since the interaction is face-to-face and processing takes place under normal time constraints and reciprocity is an important feature of the interaction. So the backwash effect of this type of assessment would be a positive one.

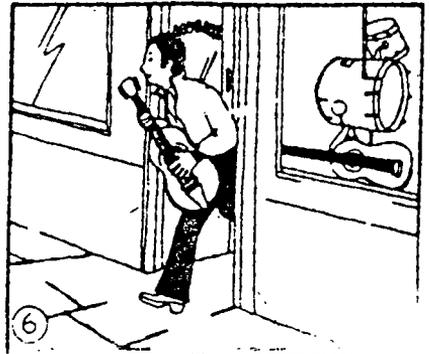
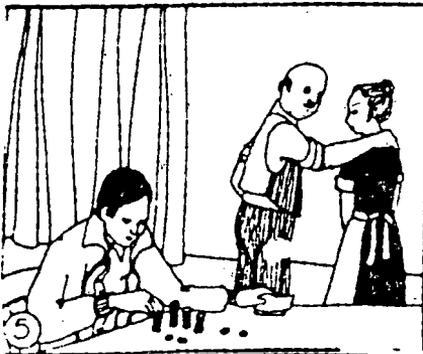
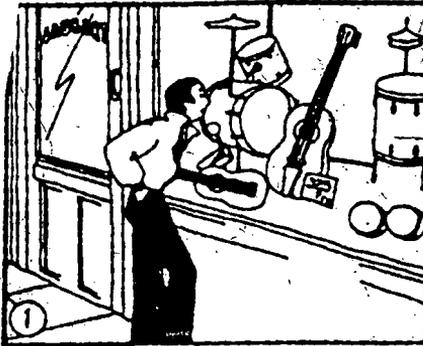
It seems that this is a practical and potentially highly valid and reliable means of assessing a candidate's ability to participate effectively in oral interaction. In the above example the task is contextualised and the student has to take the responsibility for initiation. There is also some room for development and hence the unpredictability in the discourse, though the content is controlled.

One of the demerit of this technique is that the familiarity or non-familiarity of the role might affect the performance of the candidates. Some candidates may not know what is normal to do in certain situations. Another problem that has been encountered in this technique is that candidates often use the language of reporting and say what they would say rather than directly assuming the role (Weir, 1993). Since the oral assessment would be done by the class teachers themselves the above problems can be minimised by planning and choice of situations to be acted.

## **Information Transfer Technique**

The last test of spoken skills that is considered is information transfer, whereby a candidate is given a panel of pictures depicting a chronologically ordered sequence of events and has to tell the story in the required tense. Time should be allowed at the beginning for the candidate to study the pictures.

NOTE TO CANDIDATES: CANDIDATES ARE REMINDED THAT THE NARRATIVE BASED ON THE SERIES OF PICTURES SHOULD BE TOLD USING THE PAST TENSES. NO NOTES MAY BE MADE.



Source: Weir 1993

This technique is used by school examination boards in the U.K. Clark and Weinton (1979) in a study they conducted on behalf of TOEFL found this format to be very effective. In this format, the task required of the candidates is clear. However, the value of the technique is dependent on the clarity of pictures and on their being unambiguous and free from cultural bias (Clark & Swinton 1979).

As this task is one of the few available that constrain the candidate to provide an extended sample of connected speech, a long informational routine, which allows the application of a wide range of criteria in assessment including coherence as the organisation of discourse in long terms, it can be an efficient procedure.

It is possible to make a comparison of candidates which is relatively untrained by background or cultural knowledge, given that the drawings themselves are culture free, because all candidates are constrained by common information provided by pictures or drawings.

There are a number of problems associated with this technique. One concerns the quality of the pictures. If the quality is in anyway deficient then the candidate may not have the opportunity to demonstrate his or her best performance. It is therefore necessary to always use pictures of good quality.

The most serious weakness of this technique is that it is noncommunicative, as one might seriously question when students ever need to do this kind of thing in real life. However, a claim might be made for construct validity in that the technique may well be tapping into informational routine of reporting. Describing something which has happened may well be an important operation in some occupations.

In spite of these problems, this assessment procedure can help measure the oral proficiency of candidates, if used as part of a test battery of oral proficiency.

This assessment procedure would influence teachers into paying attention to the improvement of pupils ability to describe verbally a series of events depicted pictorially. As mentioned earlier, the ability to describe something which happened may well be important in certain occupations.

In general, the inclusion of oral assessment procedures in both teaching and examination syllabi would influence both pupils and teachers into giving serious attention to the improvement of oral proficiency.

There are other formats for testing spoken skills, such as free interview/conversation, mini-situation on tape and sentence repetition, which could be used to test oral skills, but I only choose to discuss four which I consider to be the best in terms of testing the candidates' communicative abilities.

## **Conclusion**

This papers has argued that the non-inclusion of assessment of oral interaction in the examination of the new senior secondary school syllabus, at least in the initial stages could have a negative washback effect on the teaching of the English language in general and of oral skills in particular. It is maintained that this would make both teachers and students not to pay serious attention on the teaching and learning of oral skills as teachers and students tend to pay more attention to what will be tested. The paper also gives and discusses a number of examples of tasks that could be used as test of oral skills and suggests that these could be constructed and implemented without too many problems being encountered. In fact, this would not be the first time oral tests have been conducted in the country. In the French 'O' level examination there is an oral component, controlled interview, lasting ten minutes and it runs smoothly every year (Interview with a French teacher working in a government school). The French Department at the University of Botswana also conducts oral examinations. They also have expertise in constructing oral tests and have indicated unofficially that they would be willing to help in developing oral English tests if asked. I therefore conclude that if the Senior Secondary English Task Force and the Examinations, Research and Testing Division of the Ministry of Education put their

heads together and invite experts from the University of Botswana French department, they could come up with a set of tests of oral skills that could be included in the English examination in the foreseeable future.

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#### ABSTRACT

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