

# Fundamental Issues Surrounding Integrated Tests in Terms of Assessment Literacy - The Case of Integrated Speaking Tests -

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss fundamental issues to consider when designing and implementing a speaking test in the context of integrated-skills language assessment, which has become increasingly necessary, as the high school course of study in Japan has been directed toward integrated teaching and learning based on the new guidelines of MEXT (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology). The issues and problems will be considered in light of a recent concept, Assessment Literacy (Taylor, 2009; Inbar-Lourie, 2008) for teacher training: namely, what teachers should know about testing and assessment to make well-informed decisions in their teaching practices in order to optimize the improvement of their students.

## Keywords

speaking evaluation, integrated-skills tests,  
and teacher training

## Introduction

As the high school course of study in Japan has shifted toward integrated teaching and learning based on the new MEXT guidelines, some important issues that arise are related to the difficulty of making valid, reliable, and feasible “integrated” performance tests (speaking and writing assessment). There have been various teaching methods which combine input and output in the fields of TESOL and second language acquisition, but little attention has been paid to assessing achievement in such integrated-skills courses. For instance, when a student does a presentation based on some reading or listening activities, what aspects of the presentation should

be treated as the exhibition of reading or listening ability and how should his or her speaking ability be assessed? What kind of assessment tool fits the evaluation of learning outcomes of such integrated teaching? Facing this new requirement, high school teachers seem to be either at a loss or simply follow traditional ways by assessing different skills separately. Also, university teachers who should guide or train prospective high school teachers are not well equipped to address this demand. In fact, the new direction requires all English teachers to acquire more Assessment Literacy in addition to teaching skills.

## 1 Purpose of the study

The purpose of our research is to make a feasible proposition for dealing with fundamental issues teachers face when creating and implementing integrated-skills performance tests, and for this paper we have focused on speaking tests. Compared to writing tests, the performance of which is left as an artifact, speaking evaluation has always been more difficult because of its elusive nature and the many factors involved in its administration. The issues will be discussed from the following aspects: (a) a literature review on the issues related to making good speaking tests, (b) an analysis of the speaking section of iBT TOEFL® and IELTS®, focusing on the rubric, constructs, and assessments, (c) survey results of present teacher training courses and teacher qualification examinations in Japan, (d) observation and responses collected at prospective teacher training sessions on Assessment Literacy conducted by the Testing SIG of the Japan Association of College English Teachers (JACET), and (e) an analysis of a needs survey for in-service teachers.

## 2 The study

### 2.1 Literature review

In search for feasible models of integrated-skills speaking tests to be used in Japan, speaking-test related sections of major books on assessment were reviewed. In particular, the various ways to validate the constructs and rubrics in the recently published *Examining Speaking: Research and Practice in Assessing Second Language Speaking* (Taylor, 2011) along with Plakans' approach to such integrated-skills testing (n.d.) gave us various new, and helpful insights.

### 2.2 Analysis of existing tests

The constructs, rubrics, and the measurement procedures of the speaking sections of two representative integrated-skills tests (iBT TOEFL® and IELTS®) were compared for advantages and disadvantages. Then, using the knowledge and insights gained in the literature review, different features of these two tests were analyzed with possible adaptations for the Japanese EFL environment in mind. It is apparent that different characteristics fit different test purposes and contextual requirements.

### 2.3. Survey results

In our survey of textbooks used in teacher training courses in Japan (Ito et al., 2010), it was found that most textbooks selected for these courses do not offer sufficient knowledge on testing and assessment concepts such as validity, reliability, and practicality. A more important shortcoming is that methods of test-making and analysis along with new trends in assessment are lacking. A survey of teacher qualification examinations in Japan discovered that the questions related to important notions in testing and assessment comprise only a small percentage of the questions in these examinations (Murray et al., 2011).

### 2.4 Responses to our workshop

The JACET Testing SIG to which the presenters belong to has been holding prospective teacher training sessions on Assessment Literacy during the past four consecutive summer vacations. Our observations and responses from the participants in the workshop confirmed the results of the previously mentioned surveys; the participants felt the need to learn more about test-making and analysis methods since formative assessment is a part of everyday practice. The hands-on practice in such areas that the workshop provided was most favorably received. Also, the participants expressed a keen interest in learning about performance

assessment, the possibilities of which were not explored much in various teacher training courses they had previously taken.

### 2.5. Needs survey for in-service teachers

Finally, we conducted a needs survey of in-service high school teachers about their experiences with and plans for using integrated-skills speaking tests, along with the problems and concerns they have. It appears that most of them have just started considering the possibility of using such tests in their classes, so naturally, they seem to be anxious about implementation. They are unsure about whether or not the tests they will construct are appropriate. As a result, they want to learn more about the underlying theories and methods and to be provided with effective examples.

## 3 Recommendations

Combining the insights gained and the results obtained from these multiple inquiries, we have arrived at a tentative list of what teachers have to know to meet the needs of creating integrated speaking tests, which will be presented as a part of our continuing efforts to collect the invaluable responses of in-service teachers and stakeholders. Finally, recommendations will be made about including integrated test-making methods in teacher education with a view toward enhancing the Assessment Literacy of Japanese English teachers.

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