

Measuring and Evaluating Oral Presentations

(A teacher sits at a lunchroom table, eating a sandwich while simultaneously supervising a portion of the student body as they eat their lunch. An apparently very distraught student walks up to his table.)

Student: "Mr. Smith, I... am...so...scared!"

Teacher: "Why is that, Sara? Is the lunch really that bad today?"

Student: "I'm serious, Mr. Smith. I'm so worried about my oral presentation this afternoon!"

Teacher: "Didn't you prepare what you wanted to say?"

Student: "Yes, but I have to get an 86 on it if I'm gonna get an A for the quarter."

Teacher: "Oh, if you prepared, you should do all right."

Student: "Mr. Smith, my parents will *kill* me if I don't get an A in your class!"

Teacher: "If you've done all you can to get ready, I'm sure you'll do fine."

Student (dubious): "I hope so!"

(Two hours later, as the Spanish I class is letting out, the same student timidly approaches the teacher's desk.)

Student (almost whispering): "Mr. Smith, can you tell me what I got."

Teacher: "Ah, let's see...you got an 82."

Student: "An 82...! That means I won't get an A! I thought I did a good job."

Teacher: "Well, an 82 isn't a bad grade."

Student: "But, why an 82? Why not an 86? I was so close! How do you figure out the grades anyway?"

Teacher: "Well, Sara, you got a copy of the rubric."

Student: "Well, where didn't I do well?"

Teacher: "Your weakest areas were in Organization and in Preparedness. For Organization, you got a 70% and for Preparedness it was an 80%.

Student: "How did you come up with a 70% for Organization?"

Teacher: "Well, the rubric says that 70% means, 'The student departs several times from the logical order of the presentation'."

Student: "Well, what does 'several' mean? Is it two times, three times, eight times? How many times did I skip around?"

Teacher: "Sara, I really can't remember that now."

Student: "And what would an 80% have been for Preparedness?"

Teacher: "It says, 'Student seems pretty prepared, but could use more practice.'"

Student: "What do you mean 'seems'? How can you give me a grade for what I *seem* to you? How do you know if I'm prepared, pretty prepared, kind of prepared, sort of prepared, a little prepared? That's just your opinion! And it determines my whole grade for the quarter!"

Teacher: "Sara, we both have another class in two minutes. We can talk about this more after school, if you think you really need to."

(The student stomps off angrily and the teacher tries to hide the sick feeling he has knowing that her questions contained a kernel of validity to them.)

Have you ever experienced a similar conversation? I can tell that I have because, as I was writing that dialogue, without intending to, I had a specific student in mind from many years ago and could see her face as I was writing.

How satisfactory were the teacher's answers? Were they satisfactory to you, possibly, as a fellow teacher? What if you had been that girl anticipating talking with her parents that evening? Even more to the point, what if those same questions were posed to the teacher, that evening after school, by the girl's parents? How sick might he feel then?

So what is the problem? The problem is that rubrics, unless extraordinarily detailed, are not precise enough measurement tools. The issue is that the teacher lacks an exact means of recording and analyzing his students' extended discourses. When a rubric uses terms such as "seems", "pretty much", "mostly", "almost always", "somewhat", "often", "might", "many", "sometimes" and "probably", it is setting the teacher up for trouble and the student for frustration.

Let's go back for a moment to the eleven principles found in Chapter 2 that became the foundation for my teaching starting in the summer of 1980. The first part of one of those

principles reads: "I would ensure that my testing methods and emphases remained consistent with the above principles and practices, despite the greater challenge of creating objective testing measurements for oral speech." When I spoke of a "greater challenge", I was referring to the fact that tools for the evaluation of oral work are harder to develop than they are for written testing. Yet if I claimed that I truly wanted my students to learn to speak the language I was teaching them, then I was obliged to weight oral performance very heavily and to test for that skill in a precise, objective and fair manner.

With those exigencies in mind, I determined to create a symbolic method for recording the content of students' extended discourses and the frequency of any structural errors they might commit. I would leave as little room as possible for approximation or for my subjective opinion regarding my students' performance. I would not evaluate matters best left for their speech class, such as an impression of their preparedness or the order of the topics in their presentation. All that mattered to me was the volume of information conveyed and the structural accuracy of their remarks. Therefore, in order to quantify my students' speech, I created the Speech Transcription and Evaluation Method that is explained on the next three pages.

Speech Transcription and Evaluation Method

The following symbols are recorded by teachers, ideally in real time, as they listen to their students' oral presentations:

ORAL PRESENTATION EVALUATION SYMBOLS

X = subject + correctly conjugated verb

X / = subject + correctly conjugated verb + infinitive

X / = subject + correctly conjugated reflexive verb and pronoun

X / = subject + correctly conjugated compound verb tense (auxiliary + participle)

/ = 3-word phrase (usually a prepositional phrase)

/ = consecutive use of same subject + verb (Ex.: I live in a house. I live in Michigan.)

/ = extra point for use of challenging new vocabulary (teacher's discretion)

/ = extra point for use of a negation (teacher's discretion)

/ - = symbols replacing the "X" if an error appears in the first four situations above

- = symbol replacing the "/" if an error exists in an situations 5 – 7 above

7 = 3-word phrase, but containing a minor error, normally one of gender

VALUE OF EACH SYMBOL FOR CONTENT

X = 2 pts **/** = 1 pt. **-** = 1 pt.

VALUE OF EACH SYMBOL FOR STRUCTURAL ACCURACY

- = 1 error **7** = ½ error

MEASURING FLUENCY AND STRUCTURAL ACCURACY

To receive a score of 100% for fluency, students must speak at a rate of **25 points per minute** for the first three minutes of a talk and then **20 points per minute thereafter**. Their fluency grade, therefore, corresponds to their actual score divided by the number of points expected for the duration of the talk (1 minute = 25 pts., 90 seconds = 37 pts., 2 minutes = 50 pts., 3 minutes = 75 pts., 4 minutes = 95 pts., 5 minutes = 115 pts., 10 minutes = 215 pts.). That grade is then reduced on the basis of the quantity of errors in the talk. For errors of accent mark or gender, the student loses half as much as for errors of sentence structure or word selection. Below you see the points lost per grammatical mistake:

1-minute talk = -2 per error

90-second talk = -1 1/2 per error

2-minute talk = -1 per error

3-5 minute talk = -1/2 per error

6-10 minute talk = $-1/4$ per error

Optionally, the teacher can take into consideration any guidance given prior to the talk about specific elements the talk was to include. The absence of any such elements from the talk would be deducted by the amount to be determined by the instructor. Additionally, though this interjects something of a subjective element into the evaluation, the teacher may choose to add or deduct points for the quality of the student's overall pronunciation during the talk.

SAMPLE SENTENCE

Ex: Yo espero vuelvo a casa después del escuela, pero debo quedarse para un partido.

Symbols: X - 7 X / - /

Of course, the sentence above, given as an example, would be spoken and your notes would not include its text. The text appears here simply in order that you might follow its evaluation. This sentence would be worth 9 points: two points for the conjugated form of “espero”, one point for “vuelvo”, one point for the phrase “a casa después del escuela”, two points for the correctly conjugated “debo”, one point for the infinitive form of “quedar” and one point for its reflexive pronoun “se”, and finally one point for the

prepositional phrase “para un partido”. Therefore, strictly on the level of fluency, that is “communicated information”, the sentence above receives 9 points.

However, the sentence also contains three types of errors. One error is the failure to use the infinitive form of “volver”. The second corresponds to a half error for the incorrect gender of “escuela”. The last error corresponds to the incorrect choice of reflexive pronoun in “quedarse”. In sum, therefore, the student has 2 ½ errors in this sentence.

Being able to perform this evaluation in real time takes practice. Once you have mastered it, however, you will even be able to scrawl down the nature of the errors while students continue talking, albeit cryptically, as you can see below. In that way, you can explain the mistakes at the end of the talk. You only need to write enough of the mistaken structure to remind yourself about the nature of the mistake. Thus, moving quickly, your notes for the sentence above would probably look something like this:

	esp	viv	del	esc		qued	se
Symbols:	X	-	7	X	/	-	/

DETERMINING AN OVERALL SCORE

Let’s take the example of a two-minute talk. During his talk, a student obtained 45 points and made 8 errors, however he covered all of the elements previously determined by his teacher. As 50 points corresponded to the total required for a score of 100%, his fluency score = $45/50 = 90\%$. In that the student loses one point per error in a 2-minute talk (see chart on the previous page), that score would be reduced by 8 points, giving him a final score of 82%.

$$45/50 = 90\% \text{ (fluency)} - 8\% \text{ (structure)} - 0\% \text{ (divergence from rubric)} = \underline{82\%}$$

This is how I organized an oral presentation session. I would meet one-on-one with my students, placing in the students' view any representative images that would serve to keep the students "on track" in their talk. I would not allow them to use written notes, even in English, as that would reduce the activity to little more than an exercise in reading or translation. However, I would allow them to see images that represented the topics about which they could speak. I did this because I did not want them to "freeze up" because of nervousness while they made their presentation, and thus forget all that they were capable of saying. Mine was not a speech class and I was not testing their "sang froid".

As the students would speak, I would simultaneously record the symbols on the preceding page. Wanting to give them feedback at the conclusion of their talk, whenever I noted an error, I quickly scrawled a word above the error symbol to remind

myself of the nature of their mistake and thus allowing me to explain it to them once they had finished speaking. By the time a student finished his or her talk, I also had finished transcribing my symbols, and then it would take me less than 30 seconds to tally their score.

While teachers are getting up to speed in making such notation, they may choose to record the students' presentations, giving themselves the leisure time to do the notation later when they can start, stop and return in the recording and thus "catch up" with portions of the students' speech that they found too rapid to note. Nonetheless, the time and practice at symbolic notation is well worth the teacher's effort because it is objective and fair to the student and largely does away with any room for dispute on their part or on the part of their parents.

Language Teachers' Topics for Reflection

1. Why is it so difficult to measure an oral presentation in a precise and objective fashion?
2. Why is it important to do so?
3. How do rubrics fall short?
4. How does the author perform speech transcription?
5. How does he consider both fluency and structural accuracy in assigning students a grade for their extended discourse?
6. What do you see as the most difficult aspect of his system to master?
7. Until teachers can get up to speed in transcribing the symbols representing their students' speech in real time, when can they do to make this mode of evaluation practicable?

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