



The potential of the L2 group oral to elicit discourse with a mutual contingency pattern and afford equal speaking rights in an ESP context[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The second language group oral, a test method in which a small group of test takers is expected to discuss a topic without any interlocutor support or interference, has been used primarily to measure a test taker's ability to engage in a real world discussion on general or academic English topics. The degree to which the method can provide test takers sufficient opportunity to demonstrate their oral proficiency in addition to their content knowledge in English for Specific Purposes contexts, however, has received little attention. To provide insight into this question, this study employed a discourse topic approach in which the analyst identified shifts in the discourse topic to determine the extent to which the discourse showed mutual contingency patterns and afforded test takers equal speaking rights and duties. The group oral discourse of four groups of test takers with three members in each of the groups was investigated. The test takers were graduate students who were studying in an English for international business program. The findings suggest that the group oral may be appropriate for assessing L2 oral ability as well as content knowledge of a particular field of study.

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1. Introduction

The group oral format has emerged as a possible solution to the need for a test of second language (L2) speaking ability which assesses a test taker's ability to engage in a discussion. In this format, a small group of three or more test takers is expected to discuss a topic without support or interference from a test examiner. This oral assessment format may also be amenable to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) situations, such as for an English for business communication program. These ESP contexts require assessments that measure a test taker's content knowledge of a given field of study as well as the test taker's oral language proficiency (Douglas, 2000).

The emergence of the group oral has been due in part to the increasing criticism of test tasks which include only an examiner and a test taker, such as the one-on-one oral interview, for yielding discourse which is controlled by the examiner (Johnson & Tyler, 1998; Kormos, 1999; Lazaraton, 1996, 2002; Ross & Berwick, 1992). This one-on-one format makes it unreasonable to infer the degree to which test takers can engage in a discussion with peers as they commonly would in the real world or the language classroom. A group oral assessment format may be more appropriate for assessing this ability to engage with peers. Moreover, the group oral format may make it possible to measure knowledge of a content domain and a more defensible construct of oral ability, one which includes interactional competence (e.g., appropriate turn taking,

[☆] The data were collected at the International University of Japan in Minami Uonuma, Niigata, Japan.

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opening and closing of gambits, responses to others, and negotiation and development of topics) as well as more traditional measures of oral ability such as comprehensibility, fluency, grammar, and vocabulary (see [Appendix](#)).

Two specific concerns about the degree to which the group oral can provide opportunities for test takers to demonstrate their abilities to discuss a topic have been raised. The first is that test takers could choose to pay little attention to what others in the group are saying, opting instead to plan what they will say next ([He & Dai, 2006](#)). This might be of particular concern in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts in which learners have focused on learning content about a particular subject matter domain as well as field-specific vocabulary and are expected to demonstrate their abilities to use this knowledge on an assessment as well as their oral language ability. If test takers did choose to ignore what others say, the resulting discourse would likely not provide an indication of the extent to which test takers could participate in a discussion in which they actively connect what they say to what others say in a pertinent manner ([Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974](#); [van Lier, 1989](#)). As a result, it would be expected that the discourse would not have a pattern of mutual contingency, a pattern in which the talk is determined partly by each group member's preinteraction plans and partly by the other members' talk ([Roloff & Ifert, 1998](#)). If the elicited discourse were composed of disconnected monologues, it may be that the targeted content knowledge can be appropriately assessed, but a test taker's interactional competence, an important aspect of oral ability, cannot. On the other hand, discourse with a mutual contingency pattern might suggest that both content knowledge and oral ability, including interactional competence, can be effectively assessed by a group oral.

The second concern about the group oral is that some test takers could try to control the communication, which would likely mean that other test takers would not have equal speaking rights and duties ([Berry, 2004](#); [Bonk & Van Moere, 2004](#); [Ockey, 2009](#)) and as a result may not be able to demonstrate their content knowledge or oral language ability. Conversational analysis research, the focus of which is to describe the order and structure of conversations ([Sacks et al., 1974](#)), indicates that equality of rights and duties among speakers is a crucial feature of a natural conversation among peers ([Goffman, 1981](#); [Silverman, 1973](#)). If the discourse elicited were dominated by a subset of the members, it would be unreasonable to conclude that the format can effectively assess a broad construct of oral ability as well as knowledge of a particular content.

Specific purpose language assessments should be developed based on an analysis of a specific purpose target language use situation, so the test task and the content are authentically representative of tasks encountered in this context. This makes it possible to make inferences about a test taker's ability to use language in the target language use situation ([Douglas, 2000](#); [Taylor & Geranpayeh, 2011](#)). A group discussion designed to assess test takers' abilities to discuss a topic taken from the content domain of interest might be fairly well aligned with the target language use situation for students who are studying in an ESP context. For instance, a group oral assessment which requires test takers to discuss a topic that they have encountered in their business English language course might be an appropriate way to assess their English-speaking proficiency as well as their mastery of the business topics covered in the course. The present study aimed to determine if the group oral format might be appropriate for ESP language-learning contexts. More specifically, it aimed to investigate the extent to which the group oral can elicit discourse with a mutual contingency pattern and afford equal speaking rights and duties when test takers are cognizant of the importance of demonstrating both their content knowledge of the assigned discussion topic and their oral language ability.

2. Literature review

An increasing amount of literature on the group oral has emerged. The research environments in which these studies are embedded suggest the widespread use of the group oral for various contexts. These studies have been conducted in high-stakes English for general/academic purposes environments ([He & Dai, 2006](#); [Hilsdon, 1995](#); [Turner, 2008](#)) as well as medium-stakes English for general/academic purposes environments, such as for placement in academic English programs or end-of-term course grading ([Bonk & Ockey, 2003](#); [Folland & Robertson, 1976](#); [Liski & Puntanen, 1983](#); [Van Moere, 2006](#)). Findings from these studies, coupled with relevant findings of paired oral assessments in which two test takers are assessed together ([Brooks, 2009](#); [Davis, 2009](#); [Ducasse & Brown, 2009](#); [Galaczi, 2008](#); [Iwashita, 1996](#); [Norton, 2005](#)), provide insight into factors that could potentially affect this assessment format.

Research has been conducted that was indirectly related to the extent to which the paired and group oral formats can elicit discourse with a mutual contingency pattern. [Taylor \(2000\)](#) found that the paired format yielded more varied language, more balanced interaction, and more communicative language functions than a one-on-one oral interview. Similarly, [Brooks \(2009\)](#) reports more interaction, negotiation of meaning, and complex language in the paired format as compared to a one-on-one oral interview. On the other hand, for research conducted on a high-stakes group oral assessment in China, the College English Test–Spoken English Test (CET–SET: [He & Dai, 2006](#)), few instances of disagreeing, asking for information, challenging, supporting, modifying one's opinion, persuading, developing, and negotiating meaning in group oral discourse were found, suggesting that test takers chose to produce disconnected monologs rather than co-construct meaning with each other. A follow-up study on the same exam conducted by [Gan \(2010\)](#), however, found that the group oral elicited these language functions in higher level students but not in lower level students, presumably because the lower level students did not have these abilities. It is also likely that the test takers had become more familiar with the expectations of a group oral discussion test than they were when the format was first introduced. The findings from these studies suggest that paired and group assessments can elicit discourse which can provide an indication of a test taker's interactional competence.

Research on the group and paired oral have indirectly addressed the concern that some test takers' speaking rights and duties could be limited by others in the group through an interlocutor effect. [Berry \(2004\)](#) found that test takers were

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