

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ORAL ASSESSMENT IN SINGAPORE: A RESPONSIVE APPROACH

Doreen Goh and Syed Mohamed
Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board

doreen_goh@seab.gov.sg ♦ syed_mohamed_abdul_gafoor@seab.gov.sg

In Singapore, the vibrancy of its economy is very much dependent on its people – the main resource of this small island nation. The government, keenly aware of the regional and global challenges, has through the Ministry of Education, expressed its commitment to develop our students to their full potential. The Singapore education system is regularly reviewed to ensure it is responsive to the changing needs of the people as Singapore grows as an open and knowledge-based economy. In this respect, the English Language curriculum and assessment have undergone regular and more extensive reviews in recent years to ensure that every student is equipped with the English Language competencies and skills needed for learning, for work and for life in a global economy. English Language, besides being the working language in Singapore is also the main language of instruction in the national education system. This paper examines the English Language curriculum and assessment, in particular, the oral skills, to see how the teaching and assessment of oral skills have been shaped in recent years to respond to and be aligned with the changing needs and the growing demands of a knowledge-based economy. An overview of some of these significant changes would be presented by tracing the development of assessment of oral skills in Singapore. This paper also provides some insights into the current and future assessment of oral skills and how Singapore schools are preparing their students for the changes.

Introduction

English language has been the *lingua franca* of the society and has played a key role in nation building since Singapore gained independence in 1965. The use of the English Language is set against a backdrop of a multi-ethnic nation that has bilingualism as the cornerstone of our education system.

The status of the English Language has been transforming over the last 4 decades: from a colonial language spoken only by a small proportion of the population, it became the working language which facilitated communication among the different ethnic groups and the medium of instruction in national schools. This shift in the status of the English Language has been accompanied by changes to the teaching and learning of the English Language. These changes, in turn, were a response to the needs of the society, including the continuing shift in the profile of students entering schools.

The profile of students over the years has seen an increasing number of students who speak English at home. But there is a mix in the profile. Overall, our students are competent in English as seen in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) results, but standards of oral and written communication are not even. The wide range of language

proficiencies among our students have also been attributed to the success in bilingual education in Singapore. In the early years, there were few who spoke English but they spoke it fairly well. At present, all students speak English but it is spoken with varying standards.

Observations by employers also suggest that there is a wide range of language use and language ability when our students leave school and join the workforce. The needs of the society in a fast changing and globalised economy necessitate reviews of the way that English Language is taught and learnt. In the drive to sustain competitiveness, a higher level of English Language competence is desired in many countries. The goal of the Singapore education system is to raise the general command of the language among all students, while achieving the best international standards among the most able.

To this end, there have been regular reviews of the teaching and learning of the English Language in Singapore. Changes in the teaching syllabuses will necessitate changes in the examination syllabuses to align assessment with teaching and learning.

Reviews of the English Language Syllabuses

There have been three reviews of the English Language teaching syllabuses in the last three decades: in 1991, 2001 and 2010.

Each review is a comprehensive study of the teaching and learning of English Language in Singapore schools. The reviews include external scans, findings of research and focused group discussions with stakeholders which include students, teachers, parents, principals, employers and representatives from post secondary institutions and universities.

With each review, there have been changes to the assessment criteria of the oral component which is the focus of this paper. These changes are not major but they exemplify the new emphases in the teaching programme.

This paper will trace the key changes in the assessment of the oral component in response to changes in teaching and learning. We will discuss the changes in the context of the Grade 10 Oral Examination for the students in the Normal (Academic) course, N(A) Course in short.

Changes in Oral Assessment in the Grade 10 Examination

Oral Examination in the 1990s

In the 1990s, the English Language teaching syllabus aimed at developing students' ability to read fluently with appropriate rhythm as well as with good pronunciation and clear articulation; to speak fluently and relevantly in clear, plain English; and to be able to sustain a conversation on a given topic with an interlocutor. The aim was for students to be able to comprehend English used in the classroom and real-life situations as well as to carry out a conversation on everyday matters, using clear and acceptable English.

In the English Language syllabus for the N(A) course first examined in 1993, the Oral Paper made up 10% of the overall marks and there were 2 components, Reading Aloud and Conversation.

Reading Aloud and Conversation in the 1990s

The task under the Reading Aloud component involved reading aloud a given text which is less than a page long. The candidates were assessed on two assessment criteria; one was *Pronunciation and Articulation* and the other, *Rhythm and Fluency*. Candidates sitting this examination were expected to read a given passage with correct pronunciation and clear articulation. They were also expected to read the passage with appropriate variation of pitch and tone in order to convey the information, ideas and feelings in a passage at the same time demonstrating their ability in reading a text with good rhythm and fluency.

Under the Conversation component, candidates were required to hold a conversation with the examiner on a topic given to them. They were assessed under two other assessment criteria, namely, *Fluency* and *Content*. In assessing *fluency*, candidates were expected to speak clearly with self assurance and with little prompting while under *content*, candidates were required to make a number of points relevant to the given topic and be able to amplify the points made with examples. They were also expected to express opinions well and generally sustain the examiner's interest in the conversation.

Oral Examination in the 2000s

In the 2000s, when the Syllabus came up for review, the Oral Paper was renamed Oral Communication Paper with an added component, the Picture Discussion. With the review, the English Language teaching syllabus sought to develop in our students the abilities to read fluently as well as expressively with appropriate rhythm, good pronunciation and clear articulation; to be able to express clearly a personal opinion (of the situations depicted in the picture); and to engage in a conversation in internationally acceptable English. The aim of the revised syllabus was to equip our students with the skills to enable them to communicate effectively and to interact with speakers of English from any part of the English-speaking world. In this revised examination syllabus which was first examined in 2004, the weighting of the renamed Oral Communication paper was doubled, from 10% to 20%.

Reading Aloud, Picture Discussion and Conversation in the 2000s

The tasks set in the three components are thematically linked in a broad sense. The first component of Reading Aloud which was assessed under two assessment criteria saw a change with an additional third criterion of *expressiveness* which required candidates to read with appropriate variation of pitch and tone that will convey the information, ideas and feelings in the text to be read aloud. The third component, Conversation, came with a substantial change to the assessment criteria. Candidates were now assessed under three new assessment criteria, namely, *personal response*, *clarity of expression* and *engagement in conversation*. For the criterion of *personal response*, candidates were expected to provide a personal response to the theme of the picture and the passage which would be put to them in the form of prompts for conversation. In assessing for *clarity of expression*, candidates were required to express themselves clearly and succinctly in a conversation, using appropriate vocabulary and structures. Candidates, with the prompts put to them, needed to discuss issues stemming from the picture and the passage (which were thematically linked) with the examiner and were assessed on the final criterion of *engagement in conversation*. The new component, *Picture*

Discussion, was assessed based on three criteria: *interpretation and explanation*, *language*, and *coherence*. Under the first criterion *interpretation and explanation*, candidates were expected to interpret and explain, with supporting details, the situations depicted in the picture. Under the second criterion, *language*, candidates were expected to use a range of appropriate vocabulary and structures to talk about the picture. For the third criterion, *coherence*, candidates were assessed on how they developed ideas in a clear and coherent manner.

Oral Examination in the 2010s

The revised syllabus that is currently used is built upon the strengths of the previous 2001 syllabus and gave emphasis to the key areas important to English Language teaching and learning in Singapore. Listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing and representing continue to emphasise the aim of students using “internationally acceptable English that is grammatical, fluent, mutually intelligible and appropriate for different purposes, audiences, contexts and cultures.” The aim was also for the more able students to do so with increasing ease and inventiveness at higher levels of proficiency. The current revised examination syllabus which was first examined in 2013, continue to have the Oral Communication paper with the weighting unchanged at 20%.

Reading Aloud and Spoken Interaction in the 2010s

In the 2010s, the Oral Communication Paper continues to assess candidates’ oral skills but with a two-component format, the Reading Aloud and the Spoken Interaction components. Changes were made to both the assessment criteria for Reading Aloud and Spoken Interaction. The tasks in the two components saw some fine changes too. For the Reading Aloud component, it is no longer sufficient for candidates to read aloud a text with a focus on pronunciation, articulation and expressiveness. What is assessed additionally is the candidates’ ability to read with an *awareness of purpose, audience and context* with appropriate variations in voice qualities. This criterion of *awareness of purpose, audience and context* replaces the criterion of *expressiveness* in the previous syllabus. The reading passage provided will have a line or two to provide candidates the context in which the passage is to be read.

The last revision to the examination syllabus saw only one of the assessment criteria for Reading Aloud changed – from *expressiveness* to *awareness of purpose, audience and context* and similarly, for Spoken Interaction where *engagement in conversation* has been replaced by *Interaction*.

Personal Response and *Clarity of Expression* are found in the previous oral examination but the rubric is a little different. For Personal Response, students should not just be able to give a personal response but one which is considered and developed. For “Clarity of Expression”, pronunciation is added to apt (“appropriate” in previous syllabuses) use of vocabulary and structures. For “Interaction”, the criterion is to engage actively with the Examiners in a sustained discussion. This is a different requirement from *Conversation* which assessed the ability to discuss issues that arise with the examiner stemming from the picture and the passage.

The following table gives a comparison of the oral assessment criteria in the three syllabuses.

Comparison of Oral Examinations in English Language Syllabuses from 1993 to Present

ENGLISH LANGUAGE SYLLABUS From 1993 to 2003 [10% weighting]	ENGLISH LANGUAGE SYLLABUS From 2004 to 2012 [20% weighting]	ENGLISH LANGUAGE SYLLABUS From 2013 to Present [20% weighting]
Reading Aloud		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Pronunciation and Articulation: read a passage with good pronunciation and clear articulation ◆ Rhythm and Fluency: read with appropriate rhythm and stress to achieve a well-paced, fluent rendering of a passage ◆ Expressiveness: read with appropriate variation of pitch and tone in order to convey the information, ideas and feelings in a passage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Pronunciation and Articulation: read a passage with good pronunciation and clear articulation ◆ Rhythm and Fluency: read with appropriate rhythm and stress to achieve a well-paced, fluent rendering of a passage ◆ Expressiveness: read with appropriate variation of pitch and tone in order to convey the information, ideas and feelings in a passage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Pronunciation and Articulation: to read aloud a passage with accurate pronunciation and clear articulation ◆ Rhythm and Fluency: to read aloud with appropriate rhythm and stress to achieve a well-paced, fluent rendering of a passage ◆ Awareness of Purpose, Audience and Context: to read aloud a text with appropriate variations in voice qualities given the purpose, audience and context
Picture Discussion		
N.A.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Interpretation and Explanation: interpret and explain the situations in the picture with supporting details ◆ Language: use a range of appropriate vocabulary and structures to complete the task ◆ Coherence: develop ideas in a clear and coherent manner 	N.A.
Conversation/Spoken Interaction		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Personal Response: give a personal response to the theme of the picture and the passage ◆ Clarity of Expression: express himself/herself clearly and succinctly in a conversation using appropriate vocabulary and structures ◆ Engagement in Conversation: discuss issues that arise with the examiner stemming from the picture and the passage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Personal Response: give a personal response to the theme of the picture and the passage ◆ Clarity of Expression: express himself/herself clearly and succinctly in a conversation using appropriate vocabulary and structures ◆ Engagement in Conversation: discuss issues that arise with the examiner stemming from the picture and the passage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Personal Response: to give considered and developed personal responses ◆ Clarity of Expression: to express oneself clearly with apt use of vocabulary, structures and with good pronunciation ◆ Interaction: to engage actively with the Examiners in a sustained discussion

Discussion

Considerations for Syllabus Review

The changes highlighted from the 1990s to the present were motivated by the need expressed by the society at large - the needs students would face in schools, the needs of the employers, the needs demanded by the situations encountered in daily life. These changes were made in

the hope, as expressed by Chew 2005, that “more young people can have the appropriate knowledge and skills in the fierce international competition for economic success”.¹

As we do not want our Oral Communication paper of the English Language examination to be a mere academic exercise where candidates demonstrate what they know and can do, we have sought to design the paper to be one which will provide as authentic a context as possible and one which will truly benefit our candidates.

The more recent changes mentioned above were a direct result of the recommendations of the English Language Curriculum and Pedagogy Review Committee (ELCPRC) that was set up in September 2005 to undertake a comprehensive review of the teaching and learning of the English Language (EL) in Singapore schools. The committee had sought feedback from Singaporeans such as students, teachers, parents, principals, employers and representatives from kindergartens, post-secondary institutions and universities.

In the course of its review, a survey conducted by the ELCPRC suggests ... “students’ reluctance to use Standard English to communicate with their peers ... that usage of non Standard English was often perceived as ‘cool’ among peer groups. While the most proficient students showed little difficulty in switching to Standard English, the same could not be said for the rest”.² This revelation highlights the danger of possible deterioration of Standard English in everyday use of the English Language. The review provided an opportunity to make an attempt to arrest this trend early and maintain the standard of English we want our students to have.

Another factor that had to be taken into account was the profile of our learners. The 2006 Primary One cohort data identifies four distinct groups of learners with different predominant home language backgrounds:

8% speak English Language only;
42% speak mostly English Language and *some* Mother Tongue or Other Language;
37% speak mostly Mother Tongue or Other Language and *some* English Language; and
12% hardly or do not use English Language.³

While this profile of our learners may have shifted slightly, what is needed is for teaching to be tailored to the needs of students with varying backgrounds to equip all of them with the necessary skills to meet the demands of daily life. The examination had to be designed to cater to these candidates without compromising the standards. The test items therefore need to be in a context that would be familiar to these candidates. The oral test must be seen to be testing useful skills. In the latest examination syllabus, the Reading Aloud is more authentic in that the text is read to an audience, very much like news reading or making a presentation in a class of students. Spoken Interaction topics provide a platform for discussions on real issues that students would be expected to be familiar with.

¹ G L Chew, *Change and Continuity: English Language Teaching in Singapore*, http://www.asian-e-fl-journal.com/March_05_pc.pdf. [Accessed 20 May 2014]

² *Report of the English Language Curriculum and Pedagogy Review 2005*, <http://www.tesol.edu.sg/pdf/MOE%20English%20Review.pdf> [Accessed 20 May 2014]

³ *ibid*

Moving Ahead

In continuing our effort to keep our teaching and testing relevant and meaningful, We have s embarked on a series of trials since 2009 to introduce ICT into our oral examination, starting with the Normal(Technical) Course and gradually extending to the Normal(Academic) Course and Express Course. A key principle in introducing ICT-based tests into our oral assessments is that there must be value-add. This means exploiting existing technologies to test oral skills in ways where it would not be possible to do with pen and paper-based tests. This is also in keeping with the changes to the curriculum, namely the greater emphasis placed on viewing skills. While viewing skills are not assessed directly, they are essential in carrying out the tasks designed for our oral examinations. For example, the Spoken Interaction component would now require candidates to view a video clip of about a minute in length, replacing viewing of a static photograph, after which they will enter into an interaction with the examiner to discuss issues at personal, societal and global levels. What will be assessed are abilities to speak providing personal response with clarity and to interact actively with the examiner in a sustained discussion. The skills of viewing and listening are essential in order to complete the task successfully but these are not assessed directly.

Conclusion

The English Language is the language of instruction for all subjects except the Mother Tongue subjects which are taught in Chinese, Malay or Tamil in our schools. English is the language that is used widely and frequently in government offices and other places of employment. It is also the language of trade, commerce and international communication. All these would mean that Singapore cannot be complacent about current standards in the language or ignore the added dimension that new technologies bring to teaching and testing. The demands of communication in an ICT-enabled environment and the standard of language use have increased considerably with Singapore's growth as an open, knowledge-based economy and the development of new service industries such as tourism. Given that people in non-English speaking countries are learning English and at a younger age than before, Singapore needs to ensure a higher level of English Language proficiency as well as computer literacy among Singaporeans in order to remain relevant in a world that is increasingly competitive. To this end, Singapore has continually endeavoured to keep its education system up-to-date to provide its students the knowledge and skills relevant to sustain its economic edge over its competitors both regionally and globally.

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