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PLENARY SPEECH

Linking second language speaking task performance and language testing

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Abstract

This written version of a plenary to the Language Testing Research Colloquium relates research into second language speaking task performance to language testing. A brief review of models of communicative competence and of speaking is provided. Then, two major areas within testing are discussed: the concepts of difficulty and ability for use. The next section covers research into spoken task-based performance, covering effects from task conditions, and from task characteristics. In addition, the measurement of such performance is described and briefly compared with performance rating in testing. Then, the final section relates the task research findings to language testing. A framework for testing spoken performance is outlined, and the general claim made that effective sampling through tests, in order to generalise to real-world performance, can usefully draw on findings from second language task research, as well as the distinction between Conceptualiser and Formulator processes.

1. Introduction

It was a considerable surprise to me to receive the Messick award. The context for this award is language testing, and while there have been times when I have published in this area, they are (mostly) well in the past, and so I was uncertain what I could cover in the associated Messick Memorial Lecture (which is given by the awardee). As a solution to this problem, I decided to draw upon more recent work I have done, focussing on second language (L2) spoken task performance, and to relate this body of work to the testing of speaking. My justification for this is that speaking figures prominently in the general area of testing, but that the research I would draw on, task-based performance with a psycholinguistic approach, while hardly unknown to testers, is less prominent than other approaches to devising and calibrating tests. My assumption was that there is potential gain in making links between these different areas, not least because task researchers are not so test-format driven. They also have different theories for conceptualising tasks, highlight different influential variables, and use different methodologies for measuring task performance.

In this written version of the plenary, there are four sections. The first explores some major models of both communicative competence and speaking. Second, I discuss two general concepts: test-task difficulty, a central puzzle in language testing, and ability for use, the capacity to produce actual language, not simply knowledge about language. The third section tries to cover relevant research from the task literature, on task characteristics, on the conditions under which tasks are done, and finally how task performance is measured. Then, the final section tries to relate the task findings to the constructs of difficulty, and ability for use, and also to the field of language testing more generally.

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