Using Pair Work Exams for Testing in ESL/EFL Conversation Classes

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This article discusses some common methods used for testing university EFL conversation courses; describes conditions favorable for pair work conversation exams and demonstrates how communicative, task-based pair work may be successfully applied as an exam.

Introduction

Many universities throughout Asia have mandatory, for-credit, English conversation courses. A common schedule in South Korea will include two hours of class per week plus a midterm and a final exam. In some universities the format of the exam is fixed (i.e. must be written, must be oral, a one-on-one interview, etc.); at others, instructors have more flexibility. In this article I will discuss some common methods used for testing conversation courses; describe conditions favorable for pair work conversation exams and demonstrate how communicative, task-based pair work may be successfully applied as an exam. For a more detailed account of issues regarding performance assessment beyond the scope of this article see Brown (2004).

Common Exam Formats

There are many ways to administer exams in university conversation classes. The following are some common formats:

- Written exams (some with listening components)
- Interviews or one-on-one question period with the instructor
- Pair work conversations or pair communicative activities

Written Exams

With large classes, written exams are appealing in that they can be administered and overseen with few resources. It is an efficient use of time for the instructor as they can conduct the exams for all students at once including listening tasks if so desired. Another advantage is that there will be an easily comparable written record of answers and perhaps, but not necessarily, less subjectivity involved than in a verbal examination. Also, because of the time available (generally up to two hours), the instructor can test for many language structures. Regardless, the most glaring disadvantage of the written exam, *especially* for conversation courses, is lack of construct validity; written tests ostensibly do not test for speaking ability.

Interviews

In utilizing one-on-one interview examinations obviously the instructor can get a sense of the oral communicative competence of students and overcome this weakness of written exams. However, there are other disadvantages to this approach. First of all for the instructor, time management can be an issue. For example, assuming a two hour period for exams, a class of 20 students would mean each student only has six minutes of time for testing. This includes the time needed to enter the room/office and adjust to the setting. With such a time constraint it becomes doubtful that the student and instructor can have any kind of normal real-world conversation. Also, considering the weight of the exam (assuming that it is between 20-40% of the final score), it is not a lot of time to elicit and test for speaking ability or listening comprehension. Six minutes for 30 or 40 percent of the student's grade puts a lot of pressure on the students to perform in a very limited amount of time. The fact that it is a direct conversation with the instructor, who will dole out the final grade, would also make it more stressful for the

students. As for the instructors, it can be taxing to both have a conversation with a student and evaluate it simultaneously.

Pair Work Conversations

One way to improve upon one-on-one testing is the utilization of pair work activities as part of or all of the exam itself. This type of activity frees up the cognitive resources of instructors in order to pay closer attention to the production of each student than if they were participants themselves. Students have a longer time to interact, instructors have longer to evaluate and comment on each student's performance. In the case of the instructor following Communicative Language Teaching methods, where pair work may take up a significant portion of a class, it would be appropriate to incorporate similar activities in the exam. That way the exam itself is much better integrated into the fabric of the course. Students can be tested for performance related to activities done in class. For a conversation course, oral pair work exams are much more relevant than written exams or one-on-one interviews. There may also be benefits in regards to student motivation. If students are aware that they will be tested on activities similar to the ones done in class, they may have more incentive to be attentive and use class time effectively.

Example of Pair Work Testing

The Classes

The classes for which I implemented pair work exams were six Practical English Conversation courses.   I weighted the grades in the following way - 30% Attendance and Participation, 20% Oral Project, 20% Midterm Exam and 30% Final Exam. Classes had between 16 and 30 students ranging in ability from false beginner to intermediate speakers and were held in two hour blocks once a week for fifteen weeks including the exams. I initially had the students change speaking partners every class but due to student feedback after week four I relaxed this rule and let students choose their partner(s) before each class and sit beside them. For the exams I also let them choose partners.

From experience, generally students in South Korea have a high grammatical competence compared to sociolinguistic, discoursive and strategic competencies; they know a lot about English form but lack a lot of genuine, real-world experience using it. For this reason I chose to focus on communicative activities and spent little time on reading and grammar based activities. In the two hours of class, the most time was allotted for the Duet (task-based pair work) and Ensemble (group activity) sections of each unit. For these classes, task-based pair work exams seemed the most appropriate way to elicit language that we studied throughout the semester. Students were instructed to choose a partner and sign up for a time at least one week before the midterm and final exams. I had to modify a few exams for trios as some students found it inconvenient and/or discomforting being forced to work with a student who they did not know well.

Making the Exam

While designing the exam I had to decide how I would format it and whether or not I would inform the students about the content of the exam and give examples prior to the allotted testing times.
I considered two ways of administering the exam;

   a) giving the pair work tasks at the time of the exam,
   b) handing out the exam one week prior to the scheduled exam time.

I decided on the latter for a few reasons.

- First of all, I wanted to elicit language highlighted during class time. By giving out the exam early it allowed students to review language from the class in a specific, directed manner.
- Secondly, most students had seven exams during exam week and I did not think it kind to make them prepare too much for their English exam or make it too stressful. All tasks were derived from class activities so students who were attentive and gave effort during class were rewarded by having to prepare less for the exam.
- Thirdly, because the classes had students of differing ability, I wanted to level the field for all.

By giving the specific tasks ahead of time lower level students could make up for deficiencies with a little extra preparation. Another consideration was time. I only had about ten minutes to test and evaluate each pair. It would have taken too much time for the students to read and comprehend instructions and perform the activities had I given them novel tasks on the spot. At least one weakness of my chosen approach was that because the students knew the tasks ahead of time and had time to prepare it did not resemble a real-world scenario. However, due to the reasons mentioned above it still seemed like a practical and relevant alternative. Even though some conversations came across as a little over practiced and unnatural, overall I found that students responded quite well to this format of exam.

Conclusion

While there are many ways to administer exams for English conversation classes it is important to consider the relevance and appropriateness of any format to be implemented. For classes where the instructor follows Communicative Language Teachingmethodology, pair work, task-based activities are a viable and efficient way to examine students. While this article discussed university English conversation courses, the methods could be applied to high school, middle school and perhaps even elementary school contexts.

Through informal interviews I noticed that my students generally preferred pair work testing compared to one-on-one interviews. Future research could investigate this more formally as well as answer other questions such as:

- What are the factors that lead teachers to choose a given test format?
- What are the positive and negative washback effects (including attention and motivation) in class from a chosen test format?
- What are the factors to consider when designing and evaluating student performance on pair work tests?

Appendix

Midterm Example:

PRACTICAL ENGLISH CONVERSATION MIDTERM

PARTNER A NAME:_____STUDENT#:_____ /20

PARTNER B NAME:_____STUDENT#:_____ /20

Try to use language we practiced in class.

You will have only 10 minutes to do these activities so it is important you prepare!

1. Greetings /5

Student A and B:

1. Greet each other

2. Have a conversation about music, sports, reading, interests, etc.

(Hint: Unit 1)

A: B:

2. What's in your room? /5

Student B and A:

1. B – Describe your room to A. A ask some questions about B's room.

2. A – Describe your room to B. B ask some questions about A's room.

(Hint: Unit 3)

A: B:

3. Daily Routines /5

Student A and B:

1. A – Tell B about your daily routines. B ask questions to A.

2. B – Tell A about your daily routines. A ask questions to B.

     (Hint: Unit 5)

A: B:

Overall performance (grammar, pronunciation, fluency…) /5

A: B:

Grading Rubric:

Parts 1, 2 and 3 were five points each.

- 5-Perfect: Followed all instructions, spoke clearly, no unnecessary pauses, native-like pacing, no unnecessary repetitions
- 4-Very good: Didn't follow all instructions, or, one or few errors, pauses, etc.
- 3-Satisfactory: A few errors, pauses, etc., not very clear.
- 2-Needs Improvement: Unprepared, many errors, unclear, poor pacing
- 1-Poor: Unprepared, incomplete, many errors, unclear, poor pacing

Overall Performance

- 5-Excellent: Very clear and well prepared
- 4-Very good: One or a few grammatical or pronunciation errors, pauses, etc.
- 3-Fair: Some grammatical and/or pronunciation errors, hard to understand at times
- 2-Poor: Hard to understand, many pronunciation and/or grammatical errors
- 1-Unprepared: Very hard to understand and incomplete

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