

PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

UDC 811.111:378.261 (045)

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The article is about a problem of the English language for specific (professional) purposes. Language for specific purposes is being analysed in comparison with the General Language. Oral proficiency interview is being described as an effective tool of oral proficiency measurement. Regarding high reliability of the test results, the ways to validate the oral proficiency interview as a part of oral test in English for specific purposes aimed are proposed.

Розглянуто питання володіння англійською мовою для спеціальних цілей. Проаналізовано особливості англійської для професійних цілей порівняно з розмовною англійською. Описано характеристики усного професійного інтерв'ю як ефективного засобу визначення рівня сформованості умінь говоріння. Запропоновано шляхи валідації усного інтерв'ю як частини тесту з англійської.

Рассмотрены вопросы владения английским языком для специальных целей. Проанализированы особенности английского языка для профессиональных целей в сравнении с разговорным английским языком. Описаны характеристики устного профессионального интервью как эффективного способа определения уровня сформированности умений говорения. Предложены пути валидации устного интервью как части теста по английскому языку.

Statement of purpose

Language for specific purposes (LSP) is a complicated notion which might be defined at a structural level, functional level and discoursal level which complement each other [1,37] in communication. It is known that traditionally LSP is considered the language used for work or academic purposes. If LSP is viewed as an approach not as a product [1,19] it is possible to conclude that all specificity lies in the area of learner's needs to use the language in some target language communications. From this point of view any language used purposely in specific situations of communication can be defined as LSP.

Obviously that communication in LSP will be different from communication in general language (GL). Our teaching and testing experience show that the main difference between LSP and GL is background knowledge which serves as a necessary prerequisite for successful learning and testing LSP.

The background knowledge concerns specific communication situations and is reflected in vocabulary (e.g., terminology), communication intents and tasks (e.g., job related communicative tasks), topics (e.g., job related areas of language use), etc. Therefore communication in LSP is feasible for participants with relevant background knowledge required and identified by specific communication purposes.

While testing the LSP one should take into account various factors which might affect a test taker's performance and, therefore, the reliability of testing results.

In this article some issues concerning testing LSP will be reviewed and some research results and current tendencies in this area will be identified.

Firstly, the difference between the LSP and the GL tests will be considered. Then the research results in the area of assessment of spoken language, and the oral proficiency interview (OPI) in particular, will be reviewed and analyzed.

Review of research results

Douglas reports that there are two main features that distinguish an LSP test from a GL test. One difference concerns authenticity of the test tasks, and the second one deals with interaction between language knowledge and subject matter knowledge. The test task authenticity is identified by the degree of the test task relevance to the target language use situation (situational authenticity) and the degree to which the test takers' performance demonstrates use of language, strategic and world knowledge involved by the test task (interactional authenticity) [2].

There are several challenges faced by the LSP test designers. One is the degree of influence the specific content knowledge has on the performance of the test taker.

For instance, the proficiency LSP test might require more specific background knowledge than a diagnostic LSP test. That is because the more authentic a test task is to be, the more specific purpose content it will require.

Similarly, the higher level of performance to be measured, the more specific purpose content will be reflected in the test task.

In order to properly evaluate how much specific purpose background knowledge is needed one should clarify *how specific* is specific and what makes the text more or less specific. One of the assumptions might be that this is the level of contextualization that makes the text more or less specific [1; 2].

For instance, the Listening Comprehension (LC) test for aviation personnel is based on job related text and situations. Since the language use at the workplace is closely connected with technical procedures, the authentic test task will require extended specific purpose background knowledge.

While taking LC test the Aviation Academy students (ab initio controllers) in comparison with professional controllers, often demonstrate much lower comprehension of the radiotelephony text, whereas they are usually more successful in comprehending the professionally-oriented text which is beyond the technical procedures.

Another challenge is the method of scoring the test results which should be based on the authentic (job related) criteria. For example, in case with aviation personnel two raters should be involved: a linguistic specialist and an aviation specialist with advanced language knowledge - to assess properly both language and specific purpose content knowledge.

According to language requirements of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) aviation personnel language ability should be assessed in two skills only – listening comprehension and speaking. The ICAO rating scales include detailed descriptors of oral ability of the personnel. So, assessing speaking is considered below.

Speaking ability is widely believed to be the most complicated among others to master and, therefore, the most difficult to assess [3]. Speaking ability means the ability to interact successfully in the language, and this ability involves both comprehension and production [4,113].

N. Schmitt mentions that in addition to producing language, spoken interaction also involves negotiating language under time constraints. Participants of spoken interaction are to adjust their utterances in accordance to their communicative intents.

Among issues under consideration N. Schmitt indicates genres and generic structure of speaking, also keeping exchange, turn-taking (turn types) and topic management [5].

Speaking can be realized only by articulation of sounds and tone. N. Schmitt points out on the importance of pronunciation, which is "responsible for 'intelligibility' - whether or not we can get our message across"[2,212]. In pronunciation he indicates key roles of stress/unstress and sound segments, tone units/chunking, prominence, turn-taking, introducing and ending topics, social meanings and roles [5].

Therefore, speaking test is an assessment of the ability to speak the target language. The assessment of the candidate's speaking ability can be carried out indirectly as a paper and pencil test, and directly by observing his/her interaction performing within interactive test task [6,182].

Lots of researches have been done to find the best solutions for proper measurement of spoken language ability. Thus, the researchers focus on test-taker characteristics, types of test tasks, test qualities, rating scales, effects of interlocution strategies, impact of examiner/interlocutor's and rater's training, etc. [7], scoring rubrics and rating criteria [3], test participants' behaviour [8].

Regarding assessment of speaking ability a test taker should demonstrate an oral language performance within a construct to be measured. This performance should reflect in maximum his/her real ability to speak in target language in real-life situations. The test results should be reliably documented. Let's have a look at some of the crucial factors regarding the LSP oral test.

A test taker is any person taking a test. There are other synonymic terms such as candidate, examinee, testee [6,208] or interviewee in oral tests. Any of his/her personal qualities, background knowledge, educational and working experience and other factors might affect the test taker's performance.

L. Bachman describes four groups of *test taker's* characteristics which may affect the test performance namely personal characteristics, topical knowledge, general level and profile of a test taker's language ability and predictions about test takers' potential affective responses to the test [3,129-130].

B. O'Sullivan identifies three categories of test taker's characteristics which might the best way reflect characteristics of LSP test takers. They are as follows: physical (physiological), psychological, experimental. Physical characteristics cover age, sex and also ailments or disabilities, psychological characteristics – memory, personality, cognitive style, affective schemata, concentration, motivation and emotional state, experiential characteristics include education background, experience in taking tests, preparedness for the test, communication experience [7].

Regarding the LSP test one characteristic is lack – this is working/occupational/job related/professional experience of a candidate.

Purpose of the work

To make the test design appropriate to LSP targets one should focus on the test task format which is the best for job/professional related situations.

The term task refers to 'a type of test item involving complex performance in a test of productive skills', e.g., adopting a specified role in a role play, describing a picture, etc. [6,196].

A test task is a means to elicit language performance which is feasible and expected, represents the real candidate's language ability and 'will be scored validly and reliably' [4,113].

To design a relevant test task a construct which is to be assessed should be identified. B. O'Sullivan reports about three groups of 'operations involved in the performance of a particular task'.

They are as follows:

- Informational – providing personal/non-personal information, elaborating, expressing opinions, comparing, complaining, speculating, analyzing, making excuses, explaining, narrating, paraphrasing, summarizing, suggesting, expressing preferences;

- Interactional – challenging, agreeing/disagreeing, justifying/providing support, qualifying, asking for opinions, persuading, asking for information, conversational repair, negotiating meaning;

- Managing interaction – initiating, changing, reciprocating, deciding, terminating [7,7].

It should be noticed that all the above mentioned operations fit well to the construct identified for the LSP test and the test for aviation personnel in particular.

Hughes suggests to elicit a valid sample of oral ability with appropriate techniques which can be presented in three general formats: interview, interaction with fellow candidates, responses to audio- or video-recorded stimuli.

In case of testing aviation personnel all three formats might be appropriate and being used now in different Aviation English tests. But specificity of ground-to-air communication between a pilot and a controller may identify an oral interview format as the most relevant to the real job situation.

Hughes points out a drawback of the interview which is lack of possibility to elicit various styles of speech because of inequality of participants (interlocutor is viewed as a senior partner of communication). He stands 'for introducing a variety of elicitation techniques into the interview situation [4,119].

Six types of the techniques have been indicated:

- questions and requests for information (e.g., requests for elaboration, appearing not to understand, invitation to ask questions, interpretation, abrupt change of topic);
- pictures;
- role play;
- interpreting;
- prepared monologue (presentation);
- reading aloud [4, 119-121].

The techniques may be well applied to testing aviation personnel which is done through OPI.

Many researchers express criticism of the OPI. The criticisms are based on presumptions that proficiency as a unitary language ability which is not similar to interactional competence, can not be assessed appropriately through the OPI.

This testing procedure lies in a limited domain of interaction and therefore is able to provide with a valid sample of overall language oral ability [7,6]. "The general consensus nowadays is that the inherent inequality of the test event makes true conversation impossible" because of interlocutors having control over the candidate's discourse [7,8].

In other words the speech sample we get and assess through the OPI does not reflect a candidate's ability to interact in any untested context within all communicative functions and variety of speech events. Therefore this is an issue of the construct validity.

One of the ways to provide an appropriate construct to be assessed as well as to increase reliability and validity of testing results is the OPI validation.

Different approaches to validation of the OPI are described in the reference literature.

A. Lazarson reviews outcome-based empirical studies of OPIs which have been carried out in response to criticism of this test task type.

Variety of issues related to the interview procedure have been studied in the area of

- a) proficiency interview guidelines;
- b) validity of a construct in respect of relationship between grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic and strategic components of communicative competence;
- c) consistency of relationship between direct and semi-direct proficiency interviews' ratings;
- d) impact of interviewers' and raters' behaviour, topics, speech styles on eliciting/scoring performance in the face-to-face proficiency interview, and many other issues [8,6-12].

The results reported have proved appropriateness of an OPI to assess speaking. At the same time and in respect of the LSP, special attention should be paid to the following main factors which might significantly influence the candidate's scores on oral proficiency:

- Interlocutor's and rater's reliability and proper preparedness;
- Availability of task-specific rating scales and their proper validation;
- Topics and speech styles;
- Direct or semi-direct format of the interview;
- Proper construct validation.

Another approach to validate an OPI can be a process-based research with the interview discourse analysis [8,12]. This method of the interview validation seems to be more relevant to the LSP test and in particular to the test for aviation personnel.

Through the discourse analyses it might be possible to validate the construct which is aviation specific within radiotelephony communication.

Discourse competence is a component of communicative competence "which is basically concerned with above-sentence-level cohesion and coherence" [6,47].

While analyzing discourse one will have a look at real texts and study “the relationship between texts and the contexts in which they arise and operate” [5,56]. In other words the discourse analysis enables to deal with language in its social context, and in this respect it can well serve for development of evaluation criteria of test performances as well as for validation of test tasks.

There are many approaches to discourse analysis depending on their disciplinary origins. For instance, in respect of aviation area of communication two disciplines are worth mentioning – sociology and sociolinguistics.

Sociology is considered to make the major contribution to analysis of spoken discourse from its conversational analysis.

Sociolinguistics approaches, namely ethnography of speaking and interactional linguistics, enables to study speech events.

Conversation analysis is concerned with dialogic, spoken discourse of an informal character. Rules and sequence of turn-taking are a main focus of the analysis.

Interactional linguistics is concerned with studying of how language creates effective communication in a context.

Ethnographic approach deals with research of speech events in their cultural and social contexts [5,60-64].

Discourse-based studies on spoken language assessment conducted the last decade have made it possible to get empirical results on a/ how the language proficiency interview is accomplished through discourse and b/ evidences of multidisciplinary nature of oral assessment.

Regarding assessment of pilot/air traffic controller oral ability some of the discourse-based approaches seem to be relevant for research aimed at validation of the OPI as well as rating procedures [8,14].

They could be as follows:

- studies on the interview participants behaviour;
- studies on extent of identity of a candidate’s behaviour in testing and real-life environment;

– studies on comparison of test task formats, e.g., direct or semi-direct interview, questioning, describing a picture, responding to recorded stimulus, etc.

All of the above mentioned approaches are in compliance with what might be going on during the oral interview of aviation personnel.

Presumably the participants of the interview might be two people interacting in the non visual format via microphone and headset. One of the participants is a pilot and another one is an examiner/interlocutor pretending to be an air traffic controller and vice versa. This kind of relationship and interaction format simulate real life situation on the job place.

The specificity of the interview is that the interlocutor should have some technical background knowledge though he/she works within interview scenario (structured and semi-structured parts of the OPI).

As it has been mentioned above one of the criticism of OPI was that the interview format does not allow assessment of a candidate’s oral language performance within all possible communicative functions, that the interview is restricted in speech events and makes impossible to cover its variety in natural context.

In order to compensate this, the interview for aviation personnel might include different test task types including direct and semi-direct formats.

It should be noticed that in the case of assessment oral ability of the aviation personnel there is one peculiarity absent in many other occupations.

This is that the speech of the interaction participants is recorded in both test and non test situations. This condition is of great value since one can have authentic recordings of the same candidates from the job place and from the OPI to serve the basis for discourse-based research.

For any research on the LSP test data analysis and presentation are of great importance. The research on the OPI of aviation personnel can be carried out reflecting on general analytic techniques suggested by A. Lazarton:

- 1) using authentic, recorded data;
- 2) using 'unmotivated looking' rather than pre-stated research questions;
- 3) employing the 'turn' as the unit of analysis;
- 4) analyzing single cases, deviant cases;
- 5) disregarding ethnographic and demographic particulars of the context and participants;
- 6) eschewing the coding and quantification of data [8,75].

While analyzing interactive data the following analytic tools are proposed to be used in five consequent steps [8,88-92]:

1) to select a sequence of research interest by looking for identifiable boundaries;

2) to characterize the participants' actions in the sequence by answering the questions: "What is the participant doing in this turn?"¹

3) to consider how packaging of actions (how they are formed and delivered) provides for certain understandings;

4) to consider how timing and turntaking provide for certain understandings of actions and the matters talked about;

5) to consider how the ways the actions were accomplished suggest certain identities, roles, and/or relationships for interactants.

As mentioned above, the OPI for aviation personnel may consist of various task types and formats of interaction. Some of sections of the interview may include description of a picture or extend on questions printed on the card (or displayed on monitor). In these cases the candidate will be expected to demonstrate monologic speech. The monologic data can be analyzed through rhetorical, functional and structural analysis [8,96-100].

Conclusion

All the issues mentioned above are being studied and researched because of their key role in making language ability measurement precise and efficient.

It is evident that proper validation of the OPI will significantly influence on the quality of the LSP test. Due to quality testing a test taker will be provided with comfortable friendly atmosphere during the interview which makes possible to demonstrate the best oral language performance. In case with aviation personnel it is a key issue because the testing is conducted with a purpose to obtain a speech sample measurable against descriptors of operational level according to requirements of ICAO [9].

In turn it will contribute to possibility to manage language performance of a test taker and in this way to provide him/her with friendly test taking environment. In turn, it will contribute into the reliability of the test results

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The editors received the article on 17 June 2010.

¹ It should be noticed that in case with the Aviation English the participants are to deal within mandatory communicative functions prescribed by ICAO Doc # 9835, app.B [9].

