

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.

Plenary to the 43rd Language Testing Research Colloquium, Messick Memorial Lecture, 11 March 2022, Tokyo (virtual conference).

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Table of Contents Testing Second Language Speaking

1. Understanding the eBook Testing Second Language Speaking
 - The Rise of Digital Reading Testing Second Language Speaking
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying Testing Second Language Speaking
 - Exploring Different Genres
 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - Features to Look for in an Testing Second Language Speaking
 - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from Testing Second Language Speaking
 - Personalized Recommendations
 - Testing Second Language Speaking User Reviews and Ratings
 - Testing Second Language Speaking and Bestseller Lists
5. Accessing Testing Second Language Speaking Free and Paid eBooks

- Testing Second Language Speaking Public Domain eBooks
 - Testing Second Language Speaking eBook Subscription Services
 - Testing Second Language Speaking Budget-Friendly Options
6. Navigating Testing Second Language Speaking eBook Formats
 - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
 - Testing Second Language Speaking Compatibility with Devices
 - Testing Second Language Speaking Enhanced eBook Features
 7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
 - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of Testing Second Language Speaking
 - Highlighting and Note-Taking Testing Second Language Speaking
 - Interactive Elements Testing Second Language Speaking
 8. Staying Engaged with Testing Second Language Speaking
 - Joining Online Reading Communities
 - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
 - Following Authors and Publishers Testing Second Language Speaking
 9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books Testing Second Language Speaking
 - Benefits of a Digital Library
 - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection Testing Second Language Speaking
 10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
 - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
 11. Cultivating a Reading Routine Testing Second Language Speaking
 - Setting Reading Goals Testing Second Language Speaking
 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
 12. Sourcing Reliable Information of Testing Second Language Speaking
 - Fact-Checking eBook Content of Testing Second Language Speaking
 - Distinguishing Credible Sources
 13. Promoting Lifelong Learning
 - Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development

- Exploring Educational eBooks
14. Embracing eBook Trends
- Integration of Multimedia Elements
 - Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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