
UNIT 10 TESTING SPEAKING SKILLS

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10.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you will be able to

- explain why oral production tests are not popular in India,
- devise a variety of speaking tests for classrooms use,
- compare and contrast the advantages and disadvantages of different test items,
- distinguish analytical marking scheme from holistic bands.

10.1 INTRODUCTION

All language teachers theoretically agree that testing students' command of spoken language is important to judge their overall language competence. Yet, oral tests have always received less weightage than written examinations in most of the schemes of examinations in India. Teachers themselves regard the preparation, administration and scoring of speaking tests difficult and challenging.

The most important problem that a teacher faces while testing oral skills is the constraints of time. While it is easy to say that the set tasks should truly bring out the learner's ability and that they should be valid and reliable, the time required is anybody's guess. By the roughest estimate, a teacher would need about 10 hours to test 40 students for fifteen minutes each. Moreover, one single teacher can pay attention ideally to one or at the most to a group of four or five students at a time if the students have to be taken through a series of tasks. What does the remaining class do? In Indian situations where noise level in the class is the only pointer to teacher control and efficiency, (total silence being most desirable), few would dare to be daring and risk testing large numbers of students. Furthermore, as with writing, the teacher has every chance to be very subjective and tends to mark students impressionistically. Although parts of the test can be tape recorded, so that one can check back, if need be, it cannot capture the actual moments/context of the test. (This is not to forget the number of audio cassettes a teacher would need to record the students' response. Very few schools in India can afford such luxuries). The disagreement on what criteria to choose in evaluating oral communication adds to the challenge. Grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, appropriacy of expression, coherence of thoughts, application of communication strategies (i.e. circumlocution, turn taking) are all regarded as important and the teacher is always

Check Your Progress 1

- 1. Your Principal wants to know if oral tests should be introduced as a part of the first term tests. Write your opinion in a paragraph of about 100 words.

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- 2. Explain some of the reasons why teachers avoid assessing speaking abilities.

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10.2 A FRAMEWORK FOR TESTING SPEAKING SKILLS

Cyril Weir (1993) has proposed a three part framework to test spoken interaction, covering -

- a. operations
- b. performance conditions, and
- c. the expected level of performance.

Let us look at these three categories in more detail.

a. Operations

To speak a foreign language, learners must have adequate vocabulary and some idea of how to put sentences together. The language routines that a learner uses can be broadly classified as **informational** and **interactional**. While information routines take into account ways of presenting information (e.g. description, comparison, instructions, or narration), interactional routines subsume ordered sequences of turns as in telephone conversations, interviews, meetings or conversations. This involves the reciprocal ability to use both receptive and productive skills, i.e. to negotiate meaning, rephrase in case of misunderstanding, take turns, allow others to take turns, etc.

b. Performance Conditions

Set out some of the other parameters of assessment of speaking abilities, viz, the time available, the permissible time lapse between exchanges (as long silences tend to break down conversations), reciprocity or the responsibility for continuing the communication,

the number of people involved (whether it is a dialogue or a group discussion), the familiarity of the people involved (known teacher, unknown examiner, peer group), etc.

c. The Level of Performance

This focuses attention on fluency (smoothness of execution), appropriateness (formality required, role relationships), coherence (organisation of discourse in long turns), effectiveness (the ability to meet the demands of informational and interactional routines), accuracy (both pronunciation intelligibility and grammatical correctness) and range of vocabulary.

Evaluation experts are of the opinion that all assessment of spoken language should be based on tasks or activities which the learner performs 'through using the language' (as opposed to drills or substitution tables). Ideally the tasks should be such that learners would be expected to do in real life.

Check Your Progress 2

1. Under which operation (informational or interactional) would you place the following tasks?
 - a. description of a hair dryer.
 - b. short oral interview
 - c. telling a story based on pictures
 - d. role play (customer and receptionist at a hotel counter)
 - e. giving instructions on how to put staple pins in a stapler
 - f. group discussion on a given topic
2. What do you understand by the following terms — fluency, appropriacy and accuracy?

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10.3 SAMPLE TEST ITEMS

An oral test should not be less than about 15 minutes as reliable information cannot be obtained in less time, whereas a 30 minute test would probably provide all the necessary information. To elicit the necessary behaviour of students we should include different items or tasks and activities, so that a student gets as many 'fresh starts' as possible (i.e. a student should not be assessed on the basis of one item only).

In this section we discuss a number of test items, which you may find useful for your classroom use.

Limited Response items can be useful for evaluating students with limited speaking skills.

A. The students are given a situation and examples of the response demanded. They then produce the desired response.

Example:

Mrs. Sen lives in a big city. She doesn't like to live there. She likes to be in a small peaceful village. (Mrs. Sen wishes to live in a small peaceful village)

Similarly: Tony has a small car. He wants to buy a big one. (Tony wishes)

Kamlesh loves to travel. She wants to visit Kashmir. (Kamlesh)

B. The students make an appropriate response to the cue given.

Example:

You want to go to the railway station, but you are lost. Ask someone to direct you. (Excuse me, could you please tell me the way to the railway station).

Similarly: You had bought a shirt yesterday but you find that it is one size small. Ask the sales girl at the counter if you can change it. (.....)

Your younger brother wants you to help him with some sums. Tell him to can do that only offer you have washed your bicycle. (.....)

Advantage of Limited Response	Disadvantage
A large number of items can be incorporated in a short time.	Output is limited and hence range of criteria used for marking has to be limited.

Information Transfer Exercises

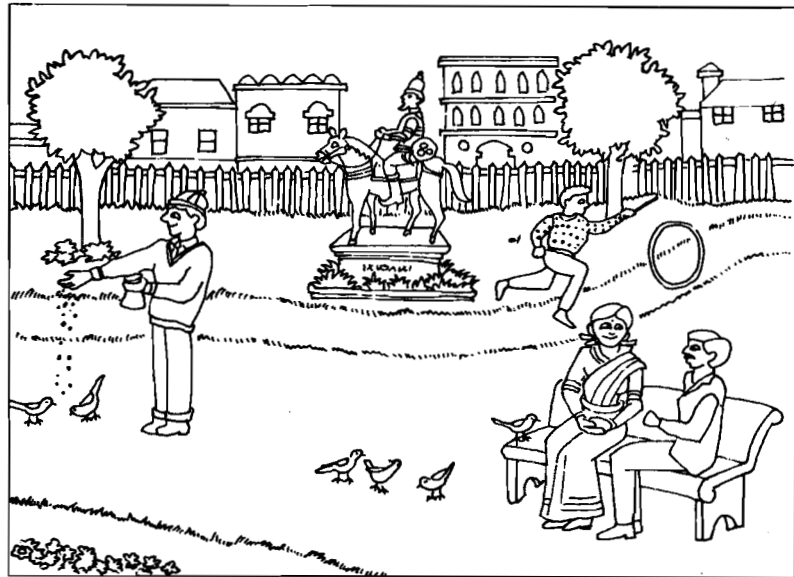
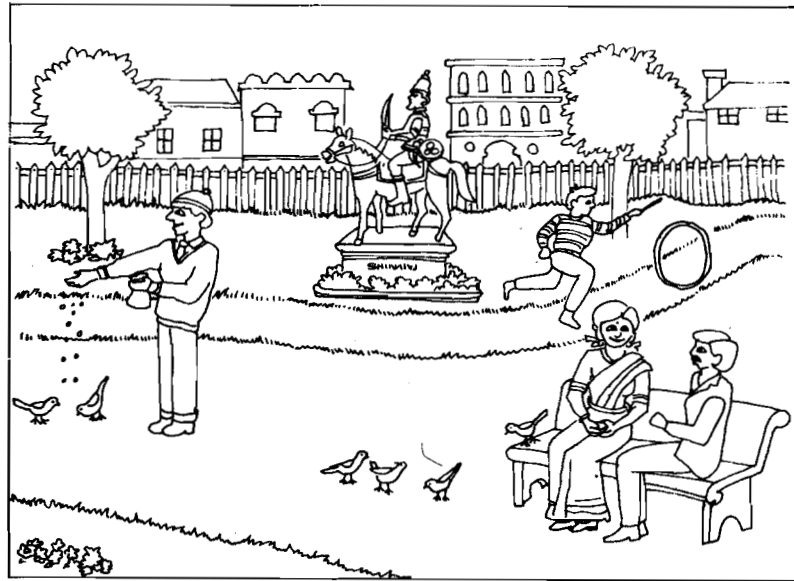
As in all other language tests, similarly in oral production tests, pictures and diagrams can be exploited in a variety of ways to provide ample opportunities to learners to speak. Simple and single pictures as given below can be used for straightforward descriptions

Given below is a picture of a weekly market scene. Use this picture to describe the scene.



(Source: A.L. Khanna and T.C. Ghai *English in Use Book 3*)

A test can be made slightly more difficult by giving two pictures and asking the student to state the difference between the two. An example is given below.



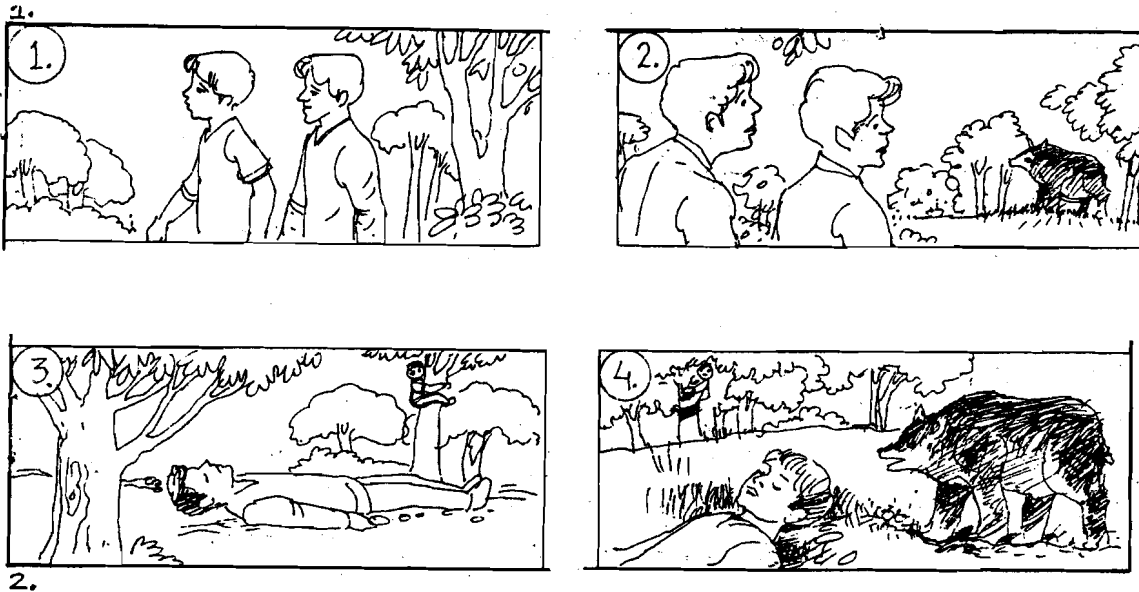
To assess a student's narrative skills a series of pictures can be used as given in the example below.

Given below are some pictures of the Independence Day celebrations at the Red Fort, Delhi. Using the pictures and some of the words given, write a description of how the Independence Day was celebrated in Delhi this year.



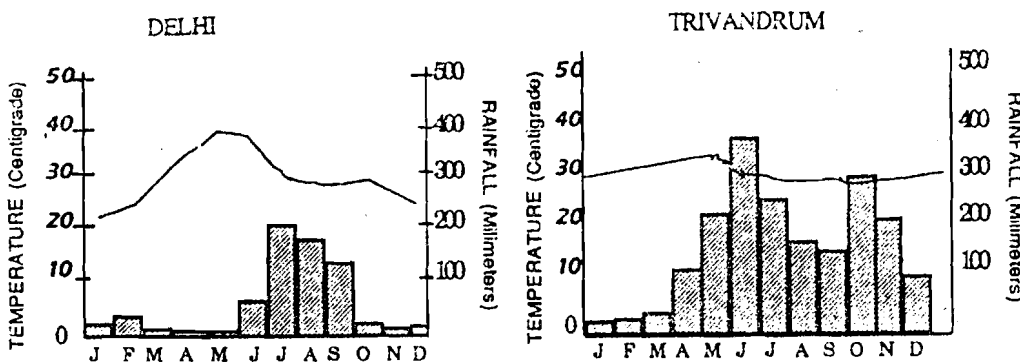
(Source : Khanna, A.L. and T.C. Ghai *English in Use*.)

The same task of narration can be made more challenging by putting the pictures in a jumbled order as in the cartoon strip given here. (A group activity can also be devised by giving a picture to each member of the group. The members first describe his or her picture without showing it to the other members. Later the most plausible/correct sequence is worked out by the group.)



(Source: A.L. Khanna and T.C. Ghai *English in Use. Book 3*)

Diagrams as given later can also be used for testing oral production. The temperature graph and rainfall chart of two places— Delhi and Trivandrum— can assess the student’s ability to transfer information from both non-verbal to verbal mode. Also to compare and contrast the given data, the learner has to speak (coherently) at a stretch for some time.



(Source: *Interact in English Workbook : CBSE*)

Advantages of using pictures/ graphics

The technique is straightforward and doesn't require students to read or to listen to anything.

Gives the student an opportunity to produce a fairly extended sample of connected speech and tests their abilities of narration, description or reporting.

Disadvantages

The task is not (always) interactive and students would never do anything like this (except interpreting data from diagrams) in real life.

Information Gap Activities

These are those activities in which students are given different bits of information, and by sharing this separate information they complete a task. This activity can be arranged in pairs and in groups.

The first example on sharing geographical information is designed for pair work - where one student is 'A' and another 'B'. The students ask and answer questions about various towns and cities, their location, population, climate and complete their own information sheet. A time limit should be fixed for each candidate to ask questions and they should be instructed not to show their paper to each other.

STUDENT A

	Sydney	Delhi
Country?	Australia	
Population		99 lakhs
Weather		Extreme
Like What?	modern, busy	
Famous For?	Opera Music	

STUDENT B

	Sydney	Delhi
Country?		India
Population	3 million	
Weather	hot and dry	
Like What?		Polluted
Famous For?		Kutab Minar

(You can easily make parallel items by using information on Indian towns and cities)

The second example can be devised either as a pair or as a group work activity. The task is given below.

Example: Your friend has won Rs.2000/- in a quiz competition and wants to buy a camera. The two of you/four of you have information on four different cameras. Discuss and decide which would be the best one to buy. Tell your teacher after you have decided. You have six minutes to decide.

(In case of pair work student 'A' has information on 2 cameras and student 'B' has information on the other two. In case of group work each student has information on one camera)

	Price(Rs.)	Weight (grams)	Size	Flash
Camera A	2000	250	Small	+
Camera B	1850	300	medium	+
Camera C	1280	250	small	+
Camera D	1850	550	small	+

Further alternatives can be designed by using information on motorcycles, watches, T.Vs, Walkmans and so on.

Advantage	Disadvantage
Covers both informational and interactional routines. Students have to use many language functions : questioning, eliciting information, description, making requests, stating preferences, coming to decisions, etc. The task will involve turn taking and giving turns to others.	One student can dominate the entire discussion if the members of the group are not evenly matched.
The students have to solve a problem (as in example 2) which is related to everyday life.	

Oral Interviews can provide a genuine sense of communication and the student gets an opportunity of actually talking with someone. If the interview is unstructured, more like an extended conversation, in which the direction is allowed to unfold as the interview takes place, a student is able to take the initiative, change the direction of interaction and introduce new topics.

In a more controlled situations various elicitation techniques can be used by an examiner to gauge the students' language competence. The student doesn't take the initiative in selecting and developing the topics but has an opportunity to perform a variety of informational and interactional routines.

Advantage	Disadvantage
Free interviews are flexible, interactive and take care of both informational and interactional routines	Time consuming and difficult to administer if there are a large number of students.
In structured interviews all students have the same stimulus. Judgement across performance is possible.	The success of free interviews depend on the skill of the examiner.
	Shy/inhibited students may not do well.

Role Playing and Group Discussion

Role playing and group discussions are two other important techniques for assessing oral production as these activities provide students an opportunity for meaningful and active involvement.

In role play students are given fictitious roles and they are expected to improvise language. Usually for each role a card is given describing what kind of a person s/he is supposed to be, what point of view/stand should be taken. The students are given a little time (say one minute) to think of the role and then they are ready for interaction.

Read through this example of a role play (The travel agent) given below.

a. The travel agent

In this example students are divided into pairs in which they play the roles of a travel agent and a customer. The latter wants to book a holiday in a hotel, but insists that the hotel should have a number of qualities (such as the right price, good food, etc.). The travel agent has all the information about the hotels.

Stage 1 Students are told that they are going to work in pairs.

Stage 2 Students in each pair are given the letters A and B.

Stage 3 Students are told that A is a travel agent and B is a customer who wants to book a holiday in Dalhousie.

Stage 4 The teacher tells the students not to show each other the information she is giving to give them, and then gives the following piece of paper to B:

B. CUSTOMER

You want:

- a. to go to a hotel in Dalhousie for a week and you can spend up to Rs.1000 on a hotel
- b. to be as near as possible to the town centre

- c. to go to a hotel with a good heating system
- d. there should to be a swimming pool
- e. the hotel to serve good food
- f. a comfortable room (with a good view)

Get all the information from the travel agent and then write down the hotel of your choice.

A gets the following hotel list:

A. TRAVEL AGENT

Study the following information carefully so that you can answer B (the customer).

	Hilton	Hyatt Regency	Holiday Inn	Taj
COST (double) per night	Rs 40	Rs 60	Rs 75	Rs 35
DISTANCE FROM CENTRE	10 kms	12 kms	20 kms	3 kms
HEATING SYSTEM	Yes	No	Yes	No
RESTAURANT	3***	2***	4*	1**
VIEW	***	*	**	*
SWIMMING POOL	1***	2*	1**	1*

Note: Various features (e.g. view, heating system, restaurants, etc.) have been given stars to indicate quality. ***=very good, ** = good, * = fair. As an example we can say that you get a better view if you're staying at the Holiday Inn than if you're staying at the Hyatt Regency.

The students are told to study their information for a short period.

Stage 5 B is told to select the hotel of his/her choice based as far as possible on the six qualities s/he is looking for. The activity commences.

Stage 6 The teacher is informed of the choice.

Generally speaking, the group activity should be so challenging that an individual student finds it difficult to accomplish it alone but not so difficult that the group cannot attempt it. The nature of the task should be such that language is used to solve a problem and reach a consensus through discussion. Given below is an example from J.B. Heaton's *Writing English Language Tests*.

There has been a massive nuclear accident and everyone on this planet has died. Radio-activity will reach your area in a few hours. There is a small but very safe nuclear fallout shelter nearby, but there is room for only six people out of a total of ten survivors in your area. Which six people from the following list do you think it would be most useful to save in the interests of future generations? List them in order of priority. (Note: M=male; F=female.)

- a marine biologist, aged 56 (F)
- a physicist, aged 25 (M)
- a famous musician, aged 38 (F)
- a farmer, aged 32 (M)
- an electrician, aged 49 (M)

- an English teacher, aged 34 (F)
- a well-known cricketer, aged 22 (M)
- a doctor, aged 63 (F)
- a university student of history, aged 19 (F)
- a fireman, aged 33 (M)
- a factory worker, aged 28 (F)
- a garage mechanic, aged 27 (M)

Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>A number of students (involved in the group activity) can be evaluated simultaneously. Tasks which will take long enough to complete can be set and the students feel that what is being done is significant.</p> <p>Spontaneous conversation involving a variety of language functions can be assessed.</p>	<p>Great care needs to be taken to ensure equal demands on all candidates. Role familiarity (what to do in certain situations) may be a problem with some students.</p>

Check Your Progress 3

1. Name three items which are interactive (you may include items not mentioned here).

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2. Frame the following test items.

a. Three limited response items of different difficulty level (i.e. easy, average, and difficult)

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b. Write atleast ten questions for a structured interview. (Include different elicitation techniques).

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c. Prepare two role cards for the following situation.

Rakesh's father is very unwell and cannot bear the slightest noise. His neighbour, Brijender usually plays the record player very loudly. At first Brijender is stubborn, later he promises to lower the volume.

Student A: Rakesh

Student B: Brijender

(Note: Rakesh has to begin the conversation)

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3. Some evaluation experts have advised against using prepared monologues and reading aloud of passages for testing oral abilities. Write the reasons why they are against this.

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10.4 SCORING PROCEDURES

Scoring an oral test is as challenging as designing appropriate tasks for students. A holistic grading or an analytic marking scheme can be used depending on the level and purpose of testing.

A holistic grade is used when the teacher evaluates all criteria like fluency, appropriateness, grammatical correctness, vocabulary and pronunciation— at the same time. Such grading is impressionistic and hence subjective. Analytic marking schemes, on the other hand, evaluate the learner separately on each criterion. This marking is more detailed and objective. The following table gives both the holistic or global impression band scale and the criteria of assessment in the analytic marking scheme.

Scoring an oral test is as challenging as designing appropriate tasks for students. A holistic grading or an analytic marking scheme can be used depending on the level and purpose of testing. For your purposes, you may adopt the schemes given below.

Band

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- 9 Expert speaker. Speaks with authority on a variety of topics. Can initiate, expand and develop a theme.
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- 8 Very good speaker. Maintains effectively his/her own part of a discussion. Initiates, maintains and elaborates as necessary. Reveals humour where needed and responds to attitudinal tones.
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- 7 Good speaker. Presents case clearly and logically and can develop the dialogue coherently and constructively. Rather less flexible and fluent than Band 8 performer but can respond to main changes of tone or topic. Some hesitation and repetition due to a measure of language restriction but interacts effectively.
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- 6 Competent speaker. Is able to maintain theme of dialogue, to follow topic switches and to use and appreciate main attitude markers. Stumbles and hesitates at times but is reasonably fluent otherwise. Some errors and inappropriate language but these will not impede exchange of views. Shows some independence in discussion with ability to initiate.
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- 4 Marginal speaker. Can maintain dialogue but in a rather passive manner, rarely taking initiative or guiding the discussion. Has difficulty in following English at normal speed; lacks fluency and probably accuracy in speaking. The dialogue is therefore neither easy nor flowing. Nevertheless, gives the impression that he is in touch with the gist of the dialogue even if not wholly a master of it. Marked L1 accent.
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- 3 Extremely limited speaker. Dialogue is a drawn-out affair punctuated with hesitations and misunderstandings. Only catches part of normal speech and unable to produce continuous and accurate discourse. Basic merit is just hanging on to discussion gist, without making major contribution to it.
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- 2 Intermittent speaker. No working facility; occasional, sporadic communication.
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- 1/0 Non-speaker. Not able to understand and/or speak.
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Adapted from B.J. Carroll, 1980, *Testing Communicative Performance*.

Analytic marking scheme (speaking)

Criteria of assessment**Appropriateness**

- 0 Unable to function in the spoken language.
1. Able to operate only in a very limited capacity: responses characterised by socio-cultural inappropriateness.
2. Signs of developing attempts at response to role, setting, etc., but misunderstandings may occasionally arise through inappropriateness, particularly of sociocultural convention.
3. Almost no errors in the sociocultural conventions of language; errors not significant enough to be likely to cause social misunderstandings.

Adequacy of vocabulary for purpose

0. Vocabulary inadequate even for the most basic parts of the intended communication.
1. Vocabulary limited to that necessary to express simple elementary needs; inadequacy of vocabulary restricts topics of interaction to the most basic; perhaps frequent lexical inaccuracies and/or excessive repetition.

Listening Comprehension and Speaking

2. Some misunderstandings may arise through lexical inadequacy or inaccuracy; hesitation and circumlocution are frequent, though there are signs of a developing active vocabulary.
3. Almost no inadequacies or inaccuracies in vocabulary for the task. Only rare circumlocution.

Grammatical accuracy

0. Unable to function in the spoken language; almost all grammatical patterns inaccurate, except for a few stock phrases.
1. Syntax is fragmented and there are frequent grammatical inaccuracies; some patterns may be mastered but speech may be characterised by a telegraphic style and/or confusion of structural elements.
2. Some grammatical inaccuracies; developing a control of major patterns, but sometimes unable to sustain coherence in longer utterances.
3. Almost no grammatical inaccuracies; occasional imperfect control of a few patterns.

Intelligibility

0. Severe and constant rhythm, intonation and pronunciation problems cause almost complete unintelligibility.
1. Strong interference from L1 in rhythm, intonation and pronunciation; understanding is difficult, and achieved often only after frequent repetition.
2. Rhythm, intonation and pronunciation require concentrated listening, but only occasional misunderstanding is caused or repetition required.
3. Articulation is reasonably comprehensible to native speakers; there may be a marked 'foreign accent' but almost no misunderstanding is caused and repetition required only infrequently.

Fluency

0. Utterances halting, fragmentary and incoherent.
1. Utterances hesitant and often incomplete except in a few stock remarks and responses. Sentences are, for the most part, disjointed and restricted in length.
2. Signs of developing attempts at using cohesive devices, especially conjunctions. Utterances may still be hesitant, but are gaining in coherence, speed and length.
3. Utterances, whilst occasionally hesitant, are characterised by an evenness and flow hindered, very occasionally, by groping, rephrasing and circumlocutions. Inter-sentential connectors are used effectively as fillers.

Relevance and adequacy of content

0. Response irrelevant to the task set; totally inadequate response.
1. Response of limited relevance to the task set; possibly major gaps and/or pointless repetition.
2. Response for the most part relevant to the task set, though there may be some gaps or redundancy.
3. Relevant and adequate response to the task set.

Source: TEEP, CALS, University of Reading.

(Both these tables come from Cyril Weir's **Understanding and Developing Language Tests**).

1. How would a tape recording of the student response help you to use the analytical marking scheme?

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10.5 CONTINUOUS EVALUATION OF SPEAKING SKILLS

Hitherto Listening and Speaking skills were neither consciously focussed on nor formally assessed. Very few schools have some kind of oral test — it may be reciting a poem, reading aloud a passage followed by some questions on texts already read. The weightage given is very little. Yet the effort is commendable as some attempt is made in this direction.

With the new stress on communicative teaching in the CBSE affiliated schools, the teaching of these two skills have received some attention and several integrative activities have incorporated interactive spoken tasks. Nevertheless, practical constraints like administration costs; the sheer logistics of testing a large number of candidates, either individually or in small groups; the problem of training a large number of examiners, the controlling and reduction of intra-intra and inter-scorer variability, have pushed out the assessment of speaking abilities from the course end examination. Conversational skills, however, have been included for continuous assessment scheme at the class IX level. In other words, cognizance of this important skill has been taken and including it for continuous assessment is expected to have some backwash effect on teaching also.

Brown and Yule suggest that a taped record of each students' spoken performance be maintained. They are of the opinion that many students forget how they performed a month or two earlier and often feel that they are not making any advances in their use of English. If an earlier (hesitant, ungrammatical or confused) version of story telling can be played back and compared with a more recent (more competent) version, then the student not only gains in confidence but also gets an opportunity for self assessment. (This kind of tape recorded version of spoken performance is like the portfolio that a student maintains of his/her written work). This principle of encouraging the student to pay attention to his/her own performance is being increasingly used even for native speakers of English.

Moreover, if a consistent record of students spoken performance is maintained, the idea of the once-a-year test may be discarded. A teacher can check for progress, or for performance in a specific type of speech activity (reporting for example) as well as listen to more traditional features such as grammatical accuracy and use of vocabulary.

Check Your Progress 5

1. "In order to carry out effective assessment, a student profile containing a student's tape is a basic practical requirement." Do you agree with this statement? Give reasons for your answer.

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10.6 LET US SUM UP

- Practical problems have relegated assessment of speaking skills to the background.
- A checklist can be devised/developed based on a three part framework for testing spoken skills. This allows teachers to specify the skills they aim to test, check the conditions in which the test is taken (as this affects the difficulty level of the test) and also helps to keep track or even vary the criteria of assessment of different tasks.
- Teachers should include a variety of tasks to test the students' speaking ability. A sample of test items are provided.
- Holistic band scales or analytical marking schemes can be used by teachers.
- It is worthwhile to maintain a students' tape (tape recorded performance of each student) for purposes of continuous evaluation by the teacher and self-assessment by the student.

10.7 KEY WORDS

analytic marking scheme	lots of separate impressions on predecided criteria of assessment.
holistic bands	a general impression of student ability expressed as a number on a point scale.
information routine	conventional ways of organising speech, e.g. narration, stating preferences.
interactional routine	typical ordered sequences of turns as in telephone conversation, interviews, discussions.
information transfer activity	presenting non-verbal data/information in a verbal mode or vice versa. (e.g. narrate a story looking at a series of pictures).
information gap activity	different bits of information have to be shared/pooled into complete tasks.

10.8 SUGGESTED READING

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10.9 ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

1. Some clues : Yes, ideally it should be, but certain conditions have to be met. All teachers of the English Department should be properly oriented/trained in testing oral abilities, and all of them should work as a team to assess all students of a particular section at a time. Proper rooms — where there is no outside disturbance — should be arranged for.
2. Time constraints/logistical problems.

Check Your Progress 2

- a - informational; b - interactional (description)
- c - informational (narration); d - interactional
- e - informational (giving instructions)
- f - interactional

(The language used to describe, narrate or instruct would be different and the information would be arranged differently. Informational operations can be individual tasks. In interactional tasks, on the other hand, more than one person is involved and they take turns in smaller exchanges).

2. **Fluency:** the ability to communicate an intended message cogently and coherently without undue hesitation.

Appropriacy: Level of formality used and suitability of choice of words in the given context.

Accuracy: Both grammatical correctness and acceptable/intelligible pronunciation.

Check Your Progress 3

1. Interviews, group activities for problem solving; telephone conversations (for giving and taking messages)
2. Prepare a checklist in three parts so that one is clear about the different specifications about the tasks set, the criteria of assessment to be used and the conditions in which the students will perform the task.
3. The tasks will not really indicate the students' command of the language; there will be interference between reading, writing (for preparing monologue) and speaking skills.

Check Your Progress 4

1. A teacher can listen to the same recording many times and focus his/her attention to one criteria at a time. Even in case of indecision on one particular criterion, the tape can be replayed and a decision arrived at.

Check Your Progress 5

1. A students' tape is useful to study a student's progress in a variety of situations and task types. Although this means that the teacher spends more time on assessing recorded spoken performance, s/he can provide better feedback to individual students and thus improve on individual weakness and build on particular strengths of each student. Continuous assessment of productive skills is pedagogically sound and acceptable.