

The Construct of Current English Oral Proficiency Tests: What Aspects of Performance Are and Are Not Measured by the Tests?

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Although language tests have introduced various innovations in test design in terms of *how* to measure a target ability, they maintain relatively conservative views on *what* to measure (i.e., the test construct). It has been claimed that the primary target of most performance tests is the quality of linguistic characteristics rather than on the ideas, emotions, or information to be conveyed. In other words, language testing may exclude important aspects of oral performance that make communication successful. This issue needs to be taken seriously because a narrowly defined test construct restricts the inference about test-takers' performance in real-world target language use domains. The present study thus aimed to investigate how test constructs are defined by some current general-purpose English oral proficiency tests and to explore what aspects of oral performance are and are not measured. The following two research questions were addressed: (a) What is the construct that current general-purpose English oral proficiency tests measure? and (b) What aspects of L2 communication are included in or excluded from their construct definitions?

The present study analyzed publically available handbooks, websites, and test reviews for 14 English oral proficiency tests and the CEFR. First, these information sources were examined to identify statements about the test construct. Second, content analysis was conducted on the assessment criteria used in the tests. Subsequently, all the criteria were coded into 13 distinct categories in order to identify the features measured in the proficiency tests. The results have shown that the majority of these tests state that their construct is ability to communicate in English or English use in real-life settings. Nevertheless, it was found that their construct definitions focus heavily on the components of linguistic knowledge (vocabulary, syntax, and phonology). In contrast, features related to the fulfillment of communicative tasks (e.g., content, communication strategies, interactional resources, and non-verbal behaviors) are not necessarily included in the test constructs.

This finding is useful for stakeholders in interpreting test scores for making appropriate decisions about test-takers' future. They need to be aware that the majority of oral proficiency tests do not necessarily provide evidence to show how well test-takers can communicate in English in real-life target language use domains. In addition, language teachers should pay more attention to aspects excluded from the constructs of proficiency tests, insofar as their concern is with assessing English communication ability. This attention will lead to changes that will make performance tests more authentic by capturing the features, beyond linguistic knowledge, that contribute to successful communication.