

1. Context : Academic Year 2014-2015

A standard undergraduate speaking test format was used for the end of Semester 2 summative tests for International Year One — Business Programme students (**Stage 1**) and International Foundation Programme students (**pre-Stage 1**).

Test topic content for the two year groups was different but the structure was the same — groups of 3 to 4 students, given a consensus-reaching task to measure ability in three key areas: **Task fulfilment and Interaction; Range and Accuracy of Language** and **Communication: Coherence, Fluency and Pronunciation**.

As minimum programme entry requirement is IELTS 6.0 (CEFR B2), the end of semester 2 tests demonstrate that, by this time, students are generally able to show evidence of **improvement in language skills; improvement in communication skills and ability to fulfil the assessment task**.

2. Issues arising from the test

- Student perception of the assessment – “just say something”.
- Limited genuine interaction.
- Absence of developing discussion points.

3. Implications for assessing International Year One – Business students

The existing test highlights the difficulties that international students of different linguistic ability have with:

- ‘interacting’ with their peers in an academic seminar discussion.
- ‘interacting’ with their peers in an assessed academic seminar discussion.

4. Aims for the Academic Year 2015-2016

AIM 1: To identify how speaking assessment can happen to make the assessment task meaningful (useful).

AIM 2: To identify how speaking assessment can make the assessment task valuable (preparing the students for the challenges of seminars at Stage 2 university study).

AIM 3: To identify how speaking assessment can facilitate greater contributions from stronger language ability students without disadvantaging the weaker students.

6. The Pilot Test - March 2016

The test was piloted with 8 International Foundation Programme—Business students.

Using undergraduate students allowed a more accurate sense of test validity.

Participating students had average IELTS marks of 7.0, with a range of IELTS speaking marks (6.0, 6.5, 7.0, 7.5) - a comparative ability level to that of International Year One — Business students.

The students were given the test journal article to prepare before the pilot test and the test procedure was explained to them.

As expected, some students had prepared more than others.

The participants were not ‘marked’ with assessment criteria but the following elements were observed to see whether the test would be suitable:

- Responding to the prompt question / remaining on-task.
- Listening to each other’s contributions.
- Responding to each other’s contributions.
- Using each other’s contributions to shape the discussion.
- Referring to the article specifically (with some form of verbal citation) and referring to further research conducted in preparation for the seminar.

Test Group 1: Observations and Comment

1. Good eye contact between students. They settled quickly.
2. Use of clarification questions to enter the discussion. Good examples, additional points and referring back to previous points.
3. All students referred to the text and used subject-specific vocabulary very confidently.
4. Natural interruption occurred between the students.
5. All the students used their own topic knowledge to further the discussion, including examples and other ideas.
6. No prompt questions were used.

Group 1 discussed the points fluently, with excellent interaction, subject knowledge and evidence of further research. They pointed out that they had not really focussed on ‘the ‘shaping discussions’ element of the question - This was an interesting point.

Test Group 2: Observations and Comment

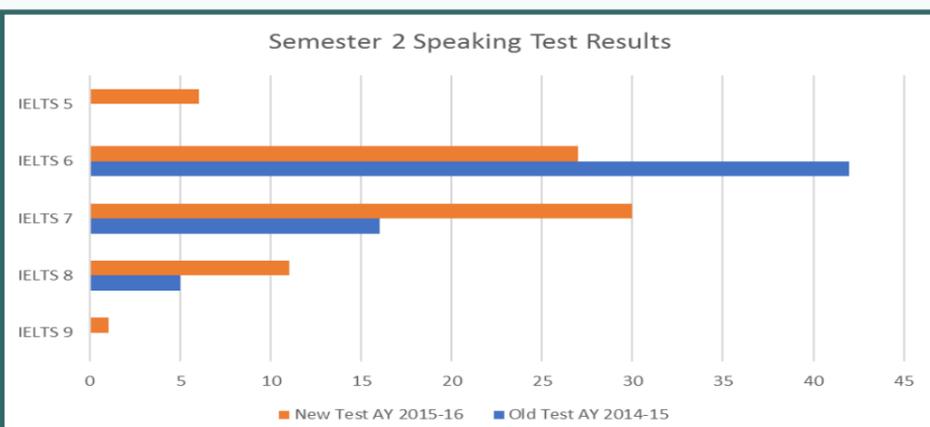
1. Discussion began very slowly. Good eye contact between students.
2. Good responses to points being made, making reference to the text.
3. Very good interaction as the discussion developed.
4. Student C started well but contributions became infrequent and interaction limited - to be expected from some of our lower-level students.
5. Student C was encouraged to participate with targeted questions from the other students.
6. No prompt questions were used.

Group 2 not as strong as group 1. Group support for Student C indicated group make-up is important. Seminar skills lessons over semester 2 should, therefore, enable students to feel more comfortable in the assessment to avoid the hesitation and awkwardness seen in this group.

Test Group 3: Observations and Comment

1. One expected participant did not attend.
2. Discussion began with an example to encourage a response, which was misunderstood by Student E .
3. The slow, stilted response from Student F suggested no preparation of the text before the test.
4. Student F used own topic knowledge and examples.
5. Student E questioned other students to further discussion.
6. Subject-specific vocabulary was used, and other relevant ideas were used to further discussion.
7. Prompt question 1 was used. Answers were brief.

Group 3 had not prepared. Student B’s response this time was interesting, given his strong, Group 1 response earlier, suggesting the right group make-up right is important but, equally, students need to prepare for this assessment.



Conclusions

Results from the pilot test were positive, showing suitability for the International Year One – Business students, with longer preparation time allowing further research and reading and practising in their seminar groups during class time, to build competency in seminar discussion.

Recommendations

Improvement to existing marking criteria to reflect the broader range of seminar skills demonstrated:

Interaction: listening to the other group members and responding to them. **Discussion:** managing discussion points and addressing the task. **Communicative Effectiveness:** language used, fluency and pronunciation

New Seminar skills in the semester 2 syllabus to enable students to practise key seminar discussion skills, including: reporting on a text & verbal citation; preparing background reading & annotating a text; critical reading & preparing further research; discussion; dealing with unseen questions and a practice test, with feedback given.