Evaluating Students' Tapes
···An Interim Report

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1. Introduction

This paper aims at devising a new set of scales for measuring Japanese students' speaking ability of English. Evaluating students' speaking ability interests me because it will help teachers identify each student's problems in learning English, and because proper evaluation can give strong motivation for oral communication to Japanese students who are believed to be 'shy'.

It seems that in most Japanese schools English classes have been conducted mainly on accuracy. Correct spelling, correct grammatical knowledge and manipulation of those rules have been repeatedly emphasized in most classrooms across Japan. Teachers know very well how to evaluate students' performances on these bases, so that they always encourage the youngsters to be correct spellers and perfect grammarians.

Today, however, we know that we have to put greater stress on oral communication. Teachers now should be keenly aware that stubborn insistence only on accuracy may very often discourages students' willingness to communicate. This awareness should subsequently be followed by quests for alternative axes of evaluation scale.

Grading studnets' English ability for entrance examinations will not be discussed in this paper, but it should be added that communicability-based evaluation will have to be introduced even

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into these examinations as soon as possible, because these entrance examinations have such powerful backwash effects to teachers and students at junior and senior high schools in Japan. A large number of people cannot help insisting on the entrance-exam English as the first consideration, while the Monbusho Courses of Study place a strong stress on oral communication.

2. English in Japan

2.1. History of the 'Heavy' School Subject

It has often been pointed out that the majority of Japanese teachers of English and their students have long placed accuracy above fluency and communicability. I admit that some may say the zeal for accuracy is a national characteristic of Japanese people, but there seems to be another and perhaps more persuasive reason.

Since Japan's modernization, Japanese have considered education to be one of the most important keys to success and in that one-and-half century long enthusiasm for education they have counted the English language as one of the most crusial school subjects because Japanese modernization was in fact westernization. What was ironical about this was that until recently, compared with the prevalence of the school English, chances of live communication with the native speakers were surprisingly scarce for common Japanese people including teachers and students in these islands. Thus, practical use of the English language was almost always placed in a secondary place, and considered to belong to limited groups of specialists, such as diplomats, export agents or seamen, and interpreters. Meanwhile, the knowledge of the language has become indispensable

for entrance examinations of secondary schools and institutes of tertiary education.

Today Japanese have well realized at the necessity of communicative ability. They know the have to and wish to acquire practical English. It has been too often pointed out that English sentences and utterances made by Japanese are not at all accurate in the eyes of the native speakers. The pride Japanese have taken in their writing and reading abilities in English also often turns out to be irrelevant because, as Petersen (1988)[1] says, Japanese are not out of 'the mental world of Japanese logic' when they write or speak English. Japanese have learned that their accuracy-based English does not necessarily work well.

However, the tradition of knowledge accumulation in learning English tends to leave many English teachers at a loss when they have to evaluate students' oral performances. It appears that they know accuracy-based scales are often even harmful in oral communication classes, but they are so much used to them that it would take some time and efforts for most of them to be free from the strong spell of accuracy and become more pragmatic.

2.2. Characteristic of Japanese Students

Many native-speaker teachers of English say that Japanese students are shy. The truth seems that our youngsters' attitudes are also product of Japan's educational tradition. The teacher-student relationship of this nation had been here before the Meiji Modernization, over a dozen of centuries. It was kept in a kind of formalized respect rooted in the Confucian philosophy : being good students meant being

good listeners who 'absorbed' whatever their teacher told them and never dared to stop their teacher for questions unless their teacher requested. Making mistakes before the teacher was considered to be something you were ashamed of. Although present-day classes are getting much less formal, its remainning influence is still found.

I once asked Mark Petersen, at a symposium of a certain English teachers' conference[*2] if he thought Japanese students were shy. His answer was that Japanese students are rather too self-consious than shy. The author of the best seller and I agreed that it is very likely that Japanese students can try to stand out only when they are sure of their peers' support (which is very often given silently). They may prefer to be lost in the silent mass than to 'lose face' as an individual.

Sometimes teachers will observe that Japanese students' self-consciousness is more oriented to the group they immediately belong to. Each of them seem to be very keenly conscious of themselves as one of the unanimous members of the class when they face the teacher. Many teachers must have encountered a couple of situations where students after students in the class get taciturn even though not a few seem to know what to answer. When a student is not confident of his/her answer, he/she quickly looks across the class-room for his/her peers' support. And, if he/she is uncertain of support from the rest of the class, The student mostly gives up the effort to think and says 'I don't know.' They say it as if admitting their ignorance was less shameful than making mistakes.

3. How to Evaluate Pragmatic Speech

It must be noted that both students and teachers are aware of the

necessity of oral communication in the classroom now, and that it will need no more explanation why we need it. How to do it should be the topic. In the followings, therefore, I would like to present an evaluation scale based on three acoustic criteria : rhythm, intonation and quantity of voice.

3.1 An Example of Rating Scales

The evaluating of oral communication can range from marking by impression to detailed marking based on a carefully planned scheme. Heaton (1988)[3] introduces and example for the lower intermediate level. He describes six bands under each of three headings of accuracy, fluency and comprehensibility. Of course it depends on each teacher and the purpose of the class what criteria he or she wishes to adopt, and there are other possible criteria to assess the students' oral achievement. As I explained in the previous paragraph, I intend to deliberately neglect accuracy-based assessment. The following is part of Heaton's example. The original scheme has three headings but it will not be necessary to introduce the column of accuracy here.

	Fluency	Comprehensibility
6	Speaks without too great an effort with a fairly wide range of expression. Searches for words occasionally but only one or two unnatural pauses.	Easy for the listener to understand the speaker's intention and general meaning. Very few interruptions or clarifications requrired.

5	Has to make an effort at times to search for words. Nevertheless, smooth delivery on the whole and only a few unnatural pauses.	The speaker's intention and general meaning are fairly clear. A few interruptions by the listener for the sake of clarifications are necessary.
4	Although he has to make an effort and search for words, there are not too many unnatural pauses. Fairly smooth delivery mostly. Occasionally fragmentary but succeeds in conveying the general meaning. Fair range of expression.	Most of what the speaker says is easy to follow. His intention is always clear but several interruptions are necessary to help him to convey the message or to seek clarification.
3	Has to make an effort for much of the time. Often has to search for the desired meaning. Rather halting delivery and fragmentary. Range of expression often limited.	The listener can understand a lot of what is said, but he must constantly seek clarification. Cannot understand many of the speaker's more complex or longer sentences.
2	Long pauses while he searches for the desired meaning. Frequently fragmentary and halting delivery. Almost gives up making the effort at times. Limited range of expression.	Only small bits (usually short sentences and phrases) can be understood-and then with considerable effort by someone who is used to listening to the speaker.

1	Full of long and unnatural pauses Very halting and fragmentary delivery. At times gives up making the effort. Very limited range of expression.	Hardly anything of what is said can be understood. Even when the listener makes a great effort or or interrupts, the speaker is unable to clarify anything he seems to have said.

3.2 Scales for Japanese students

Although the scheme in the previous paragraph is meant for an interview test, it gives a clear idea what kind of criteria teachers have to select, what descriptions each band should contain. Because my interest is the evaluation of Japanese students' oral production, and because the principle on which this approach of rating should be reflected to everyday classwork, I should assert that the rating scale to be planned should fulfill following three conditions :

1. To encourage Japanese students to overcome their accuracy-oriented attitude, and help them speak up before they wonder whether their utterance is correct;

2. To be simple so that the teacher can cope with the large classes of the average Japanese schools;

3. To be used when the teacher assess the students' tapes after a language laboratory class.

To fulfill Condition 1, the criterion of accuracy should be avoided and it should give way to comprehensibility. As Takahashi (1991)*4 states, most of the students are so much conscious of the grammati-

cal rules at other occasions that, even though their errors go uncorrected in pragmatic communication simulation in the class, it will not be likely that so-called 'fossilization 'of errors will take place. Many Japanese teachers of English may feel quite uneasy when they try to let their students' errors go uncorrected, so that they tend to give bad marks to the performance. They have to learn to turn a blind eye to errors so far as the student's attitude to communicate is positive and his utterances are comprehensible. Errors could be corrected at any other occasions, not during the students' performances.

Condition 2 is also an important element when teachers have to take care of several classes, with more than 30 or 40 students in each, at almost the same time, which is often the case in Japanese schools. Heaton (1988) says that an even-numbered scale is often preferred because it helps examiners to avoid awarding the middle mark. I therefore will present four scales in my scheme.

To fulfill Condition 3, the bands under each criterion should be written to cover students performances in the audio tape. It is very difficult to expect live reactions of the students to be clearly recorded in the audiotape. This is a fairly heavy handicap, but giving some kind of interview tests to most Japanese students could be fairly difficult before removing such big obstacles as the large number of the students in the class, and the pressure students are going to experience. Though video-taped interviews would possibly be a better solution, it must also be considered that the video camera can very often intimidate the testees and affect the test results. Audio tapes are a fairly reasonable media. Almost all Japanese students have a cassette player of their own. More and more schools are building a

language laboratory so that oral tests or oral drills can be given at a very short time compared with an interview test.

The following is an example of the schemes designed for tape-recored oral production of Japanese students in the intermediate level. I am talking about average second-or third-year senior high school students (Grade 11 to 12). They are supposed to have mastered basic grammatical rules and have fairly passive vocabulary of around 1500 to 3000 words but most of them have not necessarily been encouraged to pragmatically communicate in the language. Many of English-major junior college graduates may be included in the upper half of this level, but most of them seem to be fairly used to orally communicate in English.

	Rhythm and Intonation	Quantity and quality of voice
4	Fairly natural. Occasionally Japanese accents can be observed but gives a natrual impression.	Enough loud and projective. Reflects the speaker's positive attitude.
3	Satisfactory. Often Japanese accents can be observed but passable. Makes the effort.	Fair. Sometimes fails to speak up, but becomes loud enough when confident of the utterance.
2	Rather flat and sometimes affected by Japanese accents although making the efforts.	Often becomes faint or silent. Sometimes sounds reluctant to speak.

1	Always flat and unrhythmical. Makes no effort to sound like English.	Always faint or silent. Sounds quite reluctant to speak.

These criteria shown above are not used to measure overall ability in oral communication, but it seems marking in terms of these criteria in the language laboratory calss will probably encourage students' motivation for speaking up and uttering rhythmical English sentences. Because this type of experiments should be repeated over certain periods, the actural marking results will be reported in my next paper.

Notes and References :

1   Petersen, M. 1988. *Nihonjinn no Eigo*. Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo.

2   1989 Annual Conference of the Institute for Research in Language Teaching (Zaidan Hojin Gogaku Kyoiku Kenkyujo)

3   Heaton, J. B. 1988. *Writing English Language Tests, New Edition*. Longman, London.

4   Takahashi, Masao, 1991, *Mijikana Wadai wo Eigo de Hyogensuru Shido*. Taishukan, Tokyo.

5   Richards, J. 1969. Songs in Language Learning. *TESOL Quarterly* 3 : 2.