Practice Makes …?

By Adam J. Simpson

Sabancı University School of Languages, Turkey

adams@sabanciuniv.edu

One vivid memory from my time as a student was a quirk of a lecturer of mine, who would let us know that our performance in presentations was inadequate by writing '5P' on a piece of paper and handing it to us. The term 5P referred to '*plenty of practice prevents poor performance*.' Receiving a 5P meant that your performance wasn't up to scratch and that you should have practiced more. I'm happy to report that I was never the recipient of such a note. The five Ps can of course be applied to any number of contexts throughout our lives, but what do they mean in language learning, and in the assessment of speaking in particular? In what situations do we want our students to practice speaking, and what are the implications on the testing of a learner's spoken skills? In my presentation I explored the notion of learners practicing the assessment format for speaking, what practice they are exposed to and their perceptions of how this did or did not benefit them in their exam performance. The findings were drawn from the responses given by students attending the Sabancı University School of languages preparatory English program.

The data was collected between June and August, 2008, with fifty-six intermediate level students responding to the questions. The questionnaire can be accessed online (*http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=t95VBsxXIRs8EpFN4zS4yA_3d_3d*).

The first question asked if the respondents had any practice in class before an exam.

Do you practice before the oral exam?
yes
no
sometimes
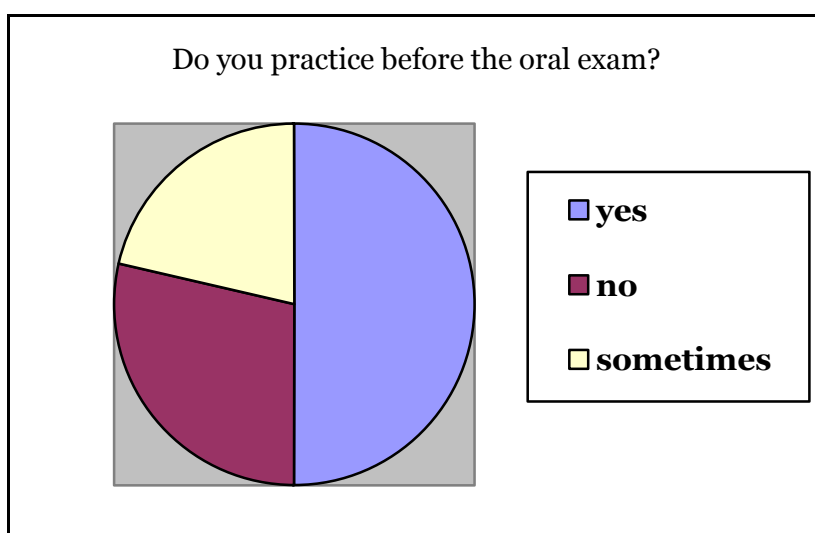
50.0% (28 respondents) stated yes, 28.6% (16) said no, while 21.4% (12) indicated that they sometimes practiced. The '*sometimes'* option was included as each respondent had had at least two previous experiences of spoken assessment at the time of answering, and may have had different experiences before each assessment. These results were intriguing: while there is no standard practice before an oral assessment, there is always at least some form of practice. This issue of student *awareness* was a recurrent one.

The second question asked the respondents which occur before an oral exam. This list was compiled from discussions with colleagues about what they did when preparing students for the oral exam. Respondents could choose more than one.

Action	#	%
A: The format of the questions is explained by the teacher.	20	35.7%
B: The criteria used by teachers to grade the exam are explained.	28	50.0%
C: Students can choose topics from the course book to practice.	48	85.7%
D: The range of topics that might be in the exam is explained.	24	42.9%
E: The teacher videos students and allows them to watch this video.	8	14.3%
F: Students can work in groups similar to the format of the exam.	48	85.7%
G: Students can watch other groups perform the task and comment.	8	14.3%

An '*other'* option was also offered, with one respondent offering another action, albeit one that actually appeared in the list of options above. One anomaly evident at this stage was that all of the students who had stated in question one that they received no practice opportunities proceeded to choose actions from the list above. This links to the issue of students' *awareness* of what we as classroom practitioners do with students. While we are perfectly aware that doing a particular activity in class is for the specific purpose of practicing for a test, are our students as aware of what we are trying to do?

The next question required the respondents to focus on one activity from the list in question two and give a reason why they regarded this particular activity as being beneficial. Respondents were able to choose more than one option.

Interestingly, the two activities considered the most beneficial correlated with the two from the list that occurred most often prior to exams, namely students choosing topics from the course book to practice (*C*) and students working in groups similar to the format of the exam (*F*). With regard to choosing topics from their books, comments such as '*because it helps to learn about topic[s] which may be in the exam*' were representative of the responses given.

As for working in exam-type groups, remarks such as '*because it is [the] same style with [the] real exam*' and '*because if students can practice before exam they will feel more relax[ed] during the exam*' typified the reasons giving for preferring this task.

While not chosen as frequently, option *B*, an explanation of the criteria used during grading, was another significant choice, with half of the respondents indicating that this happened. '*Because it is giving you more information and you can speak longer*' and '*students can try [to] examine themselves before the real exam*' were representative of the responses given by those who chose this task. It was interesting that this figure was not higher, given that it is standard practice to go through the criteria of any form of assessment prior to any particular exam. Again, are our students as aware as us of what we are trying to do?

The next question required the respondents to do the opposite and focus on one activity from the list in question two and say why they regarded this particular activity as less helpful. The two activities considered less beneficial correlated with the two from the list that occurred least often prior to exams; the teacher videoing students and; allowing them to watch this video (*E*) and students watching other groups perform the task and commenting (*G*). There are advantages to recording the discussion, as it may be used in self reflection. However, this overlooks the fact that students, teenagers in particular, may dislike this method. The idea that it heaps extra pressure on students is summarised thus, '*I think the other students' judgments about the others can make a pressure.*' Another issue pertaining to the videoing of practices is that this doesn't occur in the exam and therefore '*it is not helpful because of not [being] included in exam.*' When it comes to watching other groups, it seems that the respondents didn't always see the benefits of observing others completing the task. '*It doesn't develop our oral skills,*' noted several, while another popular response was, '*some students cannot be relax[ed] in front of other students when they are talking.*' Naturally, the age of the students meant they are extremely self-conscious in front of their peer group, also a factor in disliking these methods. Another, particularly thematic notion was exemplified in many answers to this question: '*We don't know what is good and bad.*' Can we expect the students to be able to assess to any effective level using criteria, especially when they are undoubtedly very conscious of speaking out in front of their peers?

The next question asked the respondents to think of one thing that would benefit them if it were done before the oral exam and how would this help. The word '*practice'* appeared in almost every response, in some cases not defined any further than with this single word. However, this key concept of practicing was given greater explanation by many. The two main themes that appeared throughout the responses were those of 1) gaining experience of

the exam situation by learning how to cope with group dynamics, and 2) gaining awareness of the possible exam subjects. Responses exemplifying the former were remarks such as '*practice which [is] like [the] oral exam can give some experiences before the exam*' and '*practicing for oral exam will be benefit for us because we can get some experience like the exam*.' For the latter, responses such as '*the teacher can help us about [the] topic, therefore students can learn and they can be successful in the oral exam*' was typical of numerous responses. These suggestions are rooted in the types of activities already being employed by teachers, although the consequences in terms of being able to assess a natural, true-to-life example of a student's oral ability in such a situation need no explanation.

The next question asked the respondents to consider one thing about the exam format that doesn't help their performance. Again, two prominent themes emerged, the first relating to those doing the assessing and second to the topics that they would have to discuss in the exam. For many, being assessed by teachers they don't know is a cause for concern: '*students can see the trainers during the exam - it makes them under stress*.' Furthermore, some felt that different assessors would give different grades: '*including different teachers in every class because their grade is very different for every student*.' This again relates to this issue of students not being as aware of everything that occurs in assessment, i.e. that assessors will be working with a set of criteria. The second theme received many responses such as '*not knowing the topic before the exam makes [the exam] more difficult*.' This issue of knowing the topic again reflects the impracticalities of self-assessment in this context, i.e. it falls on the wrong side of the line between facilitating fair and reasonable test preparation and maintaining the premise of authenticity and unrehearsed performance.

The next question asked the respondents how they feel about the oral exam, on a sliding scale from the lowest of not positive (1), to OK (3) through to very positive (5). The responses break down as follows:

not positive (1)		OK (3)		*very positive (5)*
30.8% (16)	7.7% (4)	53.8% (28)	7.7% (4)	0.0% (0)

The mean response to the question was 2.38, indicating an average of slightly less than Ok. Four respondents did not answer this question. The respondents were then asked to justify this in the following question, explaining why they feel like this about the oral exam. Again, some clear themes could be identified from the responses given, linking in this case to the

aforementioned notion that the group discussion format favours particular personality types at the expense of others. The words *stress* and *anxiety* featured regularly among replies from the 'not positive' end of the scale, as well as the fear of making mistakes in front of their peers: '*When student[s] make a mistake in one thing, they can lose concentration very quickly and their grade can decrease because of that.*' At the other end of the scale were responses such as '*it helps us to see our oral ability*', '*I think it will be good because I trust myself and my friends*' and '*it's useful to speak fluently.*' Although the mean average veers towards the less positive end of the scale, there are significant numbers of responses at both ends of the scale, indicating that feelings about the oral exam are more based on the individual personality of the respondent.

Conclusions

Students tended to find the tasks that they had been exposed to most frequently to be the most useful. Conversely, those tasks to which they had received less exposure were considered the least useful. So, do they benefit from activities that they are repeatedly exposed to or are there other reasons for these responses? Students are possibly benefiting from the *washback* effect: teachers' classroom practice is influenced by the means of assessment, and the activities most often undertaken are, by default, the most 'beneficial'. Furthermore, through trial and error teachers may use techniques such as videoing and having students watch and assess each other less frequently after receiving less than positive response to such tasks from students. Given the age group taking the exams, this is conceivable. Activities related to recreating the exam situation shouldn't harm the sensibilities of sensitive, teenage students.

Utilising a particular task or even explaining criteria to students is no guarantee that they will regard these actions as beneficial or even remember having done them in class. This perhaps reinforces the notion that they generally perceive as beneficial that which they do most often. Awareness of what we do, or rather lack of it, was a continuing theme throughout the responses, with answers to many of the questions asked indicating that the students do not always know what we are trying to achieve in class with any given activity.

Finally, we must appreciate the benefits of sharing assessment criteria and grading techniques with students while remembering that they may not be able to do very much with this information in terms of evaluating themselves or improving their classroom performance. Effective classroom practice when preparing students for an oral exam would, therefore, involve highlighting the fact that criteria will be used to assess the exam takers and that they

will be assessed according to these descriptors without expecting them to use these to develop their performance to any great extent.

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Adam Simpson has been living and teaching in Turkey for almost ten years, all of that time spent in the tertiary education sector in universities in Istanbul. His interests include corpus linguistics, having been involved in the development of the Sabancı University School of Languages vocabulary syllabus, and in the assessment of oral skills.