An Interactive Video Design for Testing Conversation Skills of E.F.L. Students

by Michael Unher

When studying English as a foreign language (abbreviated as E.F.L.), there are several aspects of a students' communicative ability that can be tested fairly well, and some that can be tested accurately. Phonetics (comprehension and production), writing (especially sentence-combining and grammatical items), and general listening comprehension are all aspects that can be tested for a reasonable level of accuracy. Yet, it seems extremely difficult to discern an E.F.L. student's ability to take part in oral communication, although this ability seems to be what both the student and the teacher strive to attain in a general E.F.L. program. Quite often, a teacher is faced with the challenge of evaluating how well a student can use and understand English in speaking and listening, and in reading nonverbal cues in a face-to-face conversation. All too often the test must rely on subjectivity that can cloud the teacher's assessment and confuse the student. Very few conversation tests are available that afford accuracy in assessment and ease of administration. For example, the interview test becomes subjective the more the administrator repeats interview after interview. Having two or more examiners can create a lack in tester reliability in judgement, and the examiners must be trained to avoid such problems.

The use of a video-type of test can alleviate judgement problems in the administration of the test, and ensures that the interview items are always administered in exactly the same way. A video image can give the student the realism of visual cues inherent in a conversation: body language, facial expressions, visual movement, set background, and a face-to-face feeling. All of these are lacking in an audiotape test, yet are a built-in part of the video medium.

A first logical step in constructing a conversation test on video might be to establish a standard set of tasks, to which the student responds either by recording the answers on paper or on audio tape. In this way, the student can interact with the

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video image, in a very similar way one would interact with a “live” speaker.

Obviously, a test will reflect the teaching methods used in the classroom. The method I have been basing my teaching on is a notional/functional method. Notions are ideas and contexts that are expressed through language, such as health, the weather, the telephone, food, and so forth. Functions are activities of language that we use to do things: giving opinions, asking directions, making requests or offers, and so on. They can be thought of as tools: just as one can use a hammer, nails and wood to build a house, one can use language functions to communicate thoughts to another. These functions are usually in the form of a short phrase, or gambit:

1. I like lice, rather than rice.
2. Would you mind opening the window?
3. Please lend me your car tonight.
4. I’m sorry that I broke your vase.

Each of the above gambits do something:

1. I like (states an opinion or preference);
2. Would you mind (asks a favor);
3. Please (makes a request);
4. I’m sorry that (makes an apology).

This teaching method involves focusing the tasks in class on functions, and presenting the gambits to the students. They can then plug in any number of ideas or contexts to the gambits, depending on what they want to achieve. For instance, if they want to make a request, there are several gambits they can use:

Could you…?
Would it be possible…?
Please…
I’d be grateful if…
Would you be so kind as to…?
I was wondering if you might…

and they can add the context:

Could you repeat that?
  give me your phone number?
  tell me the way to the bank?

When testing a student’s ability to communicate orally (in a conversation), there are several aspects that are involved:

1. Managing a conversation
2. Discriminating between functions
3. Using different levels of language
4. Interpreting social cues and non-verbal language
CONVERSATION MANAGEMENT

A student’s ability to effectively manage a conversation is perhaps the most difficult to test, yet there are ways to achieve some level of qualification. One of these is to first categorize the various ways one might manage a face-to-face conversation. Following are several of these categories:

1. Starting a conversation
   a. with a friend
   b. with a stranger
2. Giving, agreeing with and disagreeing with opinions.
3. Encouraging a speaker
4. Responding to a speaker
5. Generating questions
6. Volunteering information
   a. in response to a question
   b. in response to a statement
7. Making assumptions
8. Turn-taking
9. Leading a conversation
10. Changing topics
11. Making suggestions
12. Ending a conversation

These include the major points of a common conversation, and each has many gambits that can be used to achieve each function.

DISCRIMINATING BETWEEN FUNCTIONS

It is quite common for the E.F.L. student to confuse two or more functions, and therefore lose the thread of the conversation. Two easily confusing functions are REQUESTS and OFFERS, where the student finds it difficult to tell whether someone is asking him for something, or asking to do something for him. An example of a REQUEST gambit might be:

Would you (close the door for me?)

whereas an OFFER gambit might be:

Would you like me to (close the door for you?)

USING DIFFERENT LEVELS OF LANGUAGE

Other problems involve discriminating between and using formal and informal language, the personal and impersonal you form, etc. The student would be expected to use different language with a stranger than with a close friend, for instance. These are
related to the topic of interpreting social cues, as well.

**INTERPRETING SOCIAL CUES AND NON VERBAL LANGUAGE**

Quite often, the student knows the words and the gambits, but still finds difficulty in understanding the true meaning of what is being said or asked. The reason can be the difficulty in “reading” the social cues that the speaker is using. These can be verbal or non-verbal, as many language functions can be communicated through either means. Non-verbal language varies so greatly from one culture to another (between Americans and Japanese, for example), that students often confuse signs and misunderstand the message. Many non-verbal gestures used by native speakers, such as intonation patterns, facial expressions, and other body movements are essential to communication in that particular culture; and so, general ideas and feelings that a native speaker would be expected to see might be lost to an E.F.L. student who does not have the ability to see them. For example, boredom is easily misread by different cultures communicating with each other, as are impatience, hesitation, excitement, etc. On video, both the verbal and non-verbal functions can be presented and tested.

The very nature of video allows for a more natural form of face-to-face communication: a moving image, realistic sound, and a realistic time constraint. The immediacy of playback after recording, the simultaneous synchronization of the sound track and dubbing qualities, and the relative ease of editing all make this a good medium to use to produce materials that can be suited to the students' needs. Of special interest is the ability to present non-verbal gestures, something not possible on audio-taped tests. Also, the context (in a store, on the street, in an office, at a factory) can be presented to the student, something lacking in the interview-type test.

I would like to go over several test items, and show how they can be used in video testing. They are listed according to their function. In each of these, a time constraint is given the student, just as there is often a time constraint in conversation. What is being tested, along with the student's ability to use the appropriate words, gambits, tenses, and so on, is the fluency of the student.

**ASKING FOR CLARIFICATION**

Perhaps some of the most essential functions an E.F.L. student should know is how to ask for the meaning of a word, the spelling of a word, its pronunciation, or repetition of a word or phrase. To test whether or not a student can do these things in English, a person appears on the screen facing the student, while the student has an answer sheet in front of him. The video speaker tells the student something, with one word in the statement new to the student. The cue word *SPELLING?* appears on the
screen, and the student is expected to write out the question he would ask the video speaker about the spelling of that particular word. The student might write, “How do you spell that?”

For the next question, the video speaker again tells the student something, this time with another strange word in the sentence. The cue word MEANING? appears on the screen, and the student is expected to write out what he would ask the person on the screen about the meaning of the word. For example, “What does that word mean?”

The final question in this item might be where the person on the screen writes out a word in a writing system unfamiliar to the student (eg. Hebrew). The cue word PRONUNCIATION appears, and the student writes out a question to find out the pronunciation of that word.

**LOCATIONS OF THINGS**

In order to test the student’s ability to describe where things are, using prepositions (for example: The books are next to the clock), a rather simple method would be to show the student two or three objects, such as a book and a clock on a table, and a voice on the tape asks the student where certain things are. The student then writes out the answers to the questions asked on the video. This not only tests for prepositional usage, but for listening comprehension as well.

The questions can be designed so that all the essential prepositions can be tested for. When correcting the answers, only the gambit (prepositional phrase) and correct location are checked.

**COMPARING AND DESCRIBING THINGS**

In addition to the student’s ability to describe where things are, it is important to be able to distinguish between two or more objects or people:

Susan is taller than Mike.

and

The glass on the left has more water in it.

are two examples. The student is shown some objects, and is asked by a voice on the tape to describe and compare them.

**DESCRIBING PEOPLE**

It is also necessary for the student to be able to understand descriptions of different people. For testing the student’s listening comprehension regarding this function, a family photograph is shown on the screen, with letters or numbers superimposed over the people in the picture. The student has an answer sheet consisting of the names of all the people in the photo, in addition to some others who aren’t
mentioned, and a series of the letters or numbers that are superimposed on the photograph. For example:

Jenny 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Henry 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Mike 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Sally 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Scott 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

(answer sheet)

The student then listens to a dialogue of two people describing the people in the photo (example: “The woman standing with her hands on the man’s shoulders is Sally.”) The student would then identify who each person is, by circling the appropriate letter or number on the answer sheet.

**DESCRIBING ACTIONS**

The student watches someone on the screen doing a series of actions, such as walking to a table, sitting down, and drinking a glass of milk. The student then writes a description of what happened. What is looked for here is whether or not the student can describe actions as a series, using the necessary words and gambits, as well as keep it in the appropriate tense.

**DISCRIMINATING BETWEEN LIKE AND DISLIKE**

The student watches and listens to some people expressing their LIKES and DISLIKES, but only the gambit is used (for example: “I really like…” or “I’m not really fond of…”), and the student decides which opinion is being expressed. He then checks off the appropriate box on his answer sheet, such as the one below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>likes</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dislikes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Also, non-verbal language can be tested for, such as a nodding of the head with a smile, or a nasty grimace. Intonation can also be used here to show enthusiasm, hesitation, etc.

This same method can be used for discriminating between other functions, such as REQUESTS and OFFERS, AGREEMENT and DISAGREEMENT, and intonational considerations, especially for tag questions such as “…isn’t it?” (falling or rising intonation can denote certainty or uncertainty.) This is designed to test only the
student's listening comprehension, and not production.

**EXPRESSING LIKE AND DISLIKE**

Here, the student is given the opportunity to express an opinion. People on the screen ask the student for an opinion on something, such as, “Do you like jazz?”, and the student writes the answer down. Only the gambit is checked for here.

**GETTING INFORMATION**

The student watches a scene on the screen, such as someone visiting a travel agency and making arrangements to go somewhere. The student is given a series of questions that must be answered after watching the scene. Below is an example of questions the student has in front of him:

- Where is she going?
- When will she leave?
- How will she get there?
- How much will it cost?
- When will she return?

This will test for the student's ability to understand specific information.

Another way to do this is for the student to answer a series of multiple-choice questions. In either case, it is important to give the student a chance to read through the questions first, before watching the scene. This reduces the number of variables the student must be concerned with, and he can listen for specific information.

Following these test items comes a series of language topics designed to test the student’s ability to actually take part in a face-to-face conversation, to express interest in the speaker, to keep the conversation going, and to direct it.

**MAKING SUGGESTIONS**

The student watches the screen as people appear and tell the student various difficulties they’re having. For example:

“I need a new bicycle, but I don’t have enough money.”

The student is given 20 seconds to make a suggestion by writing it down on the answer sheet. For example, the student might write:

*Why don’t you get a part-time job?*

In each answer, only the *suggestion gambit* is checked:

*Why don’t you...*
RESPONDING

Some people on the screen ask the student various questions, such as “Do you have a car?”, and “Were you born here (in Morioka)?”. The student is given a short amount of time in which to write down a response. For example,

No, but I plan on getting one soon.

and

No, I was born in Hanamaki.

Again, only the function gambit is checked for — the word or phrase that will lead to more information than just YES or NO, so that the conversation might be maintained.

MAKING GUESSES AND PREDICTIONS

This time, some people tell the student some information, and it is up to the student to make a guess or a prediction about what has been said. For example, someone tells the student, “I’ve been awake all night studying.” The student might then write, “You must be tired.” The function gambit is checked for, in this case: You must be...

ASKING FOR MORE INFORMATION

The student is again told something by the people on the screen, and he must respond with a question, by writing it down, to get more information. For example: “I was up all last night.” The student might ask, “Were you studying?” The function gambit, only, is checked for (Were you...).

CONVERSING

Now we come to the integration of most, if not all, of the functions that a student will need to carry on a general conversation. Below is a list of the questions the student is asked, or the information the student is given, by two or more people on the screen. The student has only a few seconds in which to respond.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VIDEO SPEAKERS</th>
<th>EXAMPLES OF RESPONSES:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A : Hi, how are you?</td>
<td>Fine, thanks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A : By the way, this is Gertrude Stein.</td>
<td>How do you do, Miss Stein?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B : Do you live here in Morioka?</td>
<td>Yes, I do. [or] No, I live in Hanamaki.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B : Oh really. How do you like it?</td>
<td>It’s pretty, but the winters are cold. [ etc. ]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The speakers continue asking questions concerning invitations (“How about a movie
Friday night?"), clarification ("Did you know that Miss Stein is a (COUGH)"), to which the student might respond with, "I beg your pardon?", or "Miss Stein is a what?") and leave-taking ("Well, we better be going now.")

I would like to stress that this type of test is one based not on grammar, but on the student's ability to use gambits to carry out certain functions in English, in a variety of contexts. A student's use of gambits can show general communicative skills, and as long as the grammatical errors do not impede understanding, they should not be of major concern.

Video can produce fine results for classroom and homework practice, as well as for testing. A video test or assignment has the advantage of being able to be self-administered, and thus if a student is absent for a class or test, he can make it up alone at his convenience. To use video for individualized or home assignments is another advantage, because it allows each student to go at his own pace and repeat items as often as necessary. As for testing, because video production is recorded, it is always the same, and test reliability can be expected. In addition, if the class is too large for the screen size, there could be more than one test time, so that everyone can be accommodated.

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