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BEYOND THE WRITTEN TEST: RECONSIDERING ORAL ASSESSMENT IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN THE AGE OF GENERATIVE AI

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ABSTRACT

The rapid diffusion of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) is prompting a critical reconsideration of established assessment practices in foreign language education. This paper argues that a continued reliance on written assessment, increasingly vulnerable to the unauthorised use of AI-enabled technologies and personal devices, may undermine the validity of language assessment. Drawing on the principles underlying ALTE guidelines and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the article challenges the widespread assumption that standardised written testing necessarily provides a more objective measure of linguistic competence. It argues instead for a renewed centrality of oral performance, which enables teachers to observe learners' linguistic resources and communicative competence in real time. Oral assessment, when supported by clearly defined criteria and appropriately designed tasks, offers a particularly direct means of assessing spontaneous language use, interaction and the negotiation of meaning. The paper also addresses practical and psychological concerns associated with oral assessment, particularly its implementation in large classes and its relationship with foreign language anxiety. It concludes that the emergence of GenAI should not simply be regarded as a threat to academic integrity, but as a catalyst for rethinking assessment practices and restoring greater importance to forms of evaluation that privilege authentic, synchronous and interpersonal language use.

Keywords: Generative AI, Oral Assessment, Language Assessment, CEFR, Communicative Competence

INTRODUCTION

The increasingly pervasive presence of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) in students' everyday lives has created a significant challenge for established assessment practices UNESCO. (2023). While AI offers considerable opportunities for personalised learning and educational innovation, its unregulated use in formal assessment and in the completion of assignments raises important questions about the validity of the evidence on which teachers base their judgements of student achievement.

The issue is particularly acute in foreign language education. Language learning is fundamentally concerned with communication: the ability to mobilise linguistic resources in order to understand, express, negotiate and construct meaning in interaction. Yet written production has historically occupied a privileged position within educational assessment, often for reasons of practicality, standardisation and administrative efficiency. In the current technological environment, however, written work can be difficult to authenticate when students have access to AI-enabled tools, smartphones or other connected devices.

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This development calls for a reconsideration of the relationship between assessment format and the construct being assessed. In this context, foreign language teachers may need to undertake a significant methodological shift by restoring greater importance to oral assessment.

MOVING BEYOND THE "CAGE OF OBJECTIVITY"

A deeply rooted assumption in many educational systems is that written examinations are inherently more objective because all students respond to the same questions and their answers can be evaluated according to predetermined criteria. However, this assumption risks conflating the reliability and standardisation of scoring procedures with the validity of the assessment itself Bachman and Palmer (1996).

A highly standardised assessment procedure is not necessarily one that provides valid evidence of communicative competence. A closed-response test, or even a short written composition produced—or substantially assisted—by AI, may reveal relatively little about a learner's independent ability to communicate in the target language. In such circumstances, assessment may risk measuring not linguistic competence but the learner's ability to access technological assistance or circumvent systems of supervision.

Oral assessment should therefore not be regarded as a less rigorous alternative to written testing. When it is carefully designed around clearly specified constructs, shared assessment rubrics and meaningful communicative tasks, it can provide particularly strong evidence of learners' ability to use language spontaneously. In this sense, oral performance makes it possible to assess language as it is actually mobilised in interaction rather than as an abstract body of knowledge reproduced under artificial conditions.

THE AUTHENTIC VALUE OF ORAL PERFORMANCE

Oral interaction offers a distinctive assessment context because it enables teachers to observe learners' linguistic performance as it unfolds. In synchronous communicative situations, students must draw on their available linguistic and cognitive resources in real time. They are required to retrieve vocabulary, construct utterances, respond to interlocutors, interpret meaning and adapt their language to the evolving demands of the interaction.

As Hughes (2003) emphasises, spoken interaction can provide evidence across several dimensions of language competence simultaneously, including vocabulary, grammatical control, pronunciation, intonation and aspects of sociolinguistic and sociocultural appropriateness. Oral assessment can therefore offer a more integrated representation of communicative ability than assessment formats focusing on isolated linguistic components.

More fundamentally, speaking is not merely the vocal reproduction of linguistic knowledge previously acquired through written exercises. It is an active process through which learners mobilise their linguistic resources in order to participate in communication. Assessment practices should therefore recognise the centrality of the learner's ability to use the target language as an instrument of interpersonal interaction.

INSTITUTIONAL ALIGNMENT: ALTE, THE CEFR AND THE FINNISH EXPERIENCE

The renewed emphasis on oral assessment is not simply a reaction to the challenges created by artificial intelligence. It is also consistent with broader developments in international language education and assessment.

ALTE (Association of Language Testers in Europe). The principles underlying language assessment developed within the ALTE framework recognise the importance of assessing candidates' ability to use language for communicative purposes ALTE. (2011). Language proficiency cannot be reduced to knowledge of grammatical rules or success in decontextualised written tasks. The use of can-do descriptors reflects an orientation towards what learners are able to accomplish through language in meaningful communicative contexts.

The Council of Europe and the CEFR. The CEFR Companion Volume places particular emphasis on interaction and mediation (Council of Europe, 2020). Within this perspective, language is understood not simply as a system of forms and rules, but as a resource for social action. Meaning emerges through interaction and is often co-constructed by participants. Assessment practices should consequently take account of learners' capacity to participate actively in communicative processes.

The Finnish experience. The Finnish educational context is frequently associated with a strong emphasis on formative assessment, continuous learning processes and collaborative work rather than an exclusive dependence on high-stakes standardised testing Sahlberg (2021). Activities such as interdisciplinary projects, individual presentations, debates and collaborative tasks are compatible with an approach in which assessment is embedded within meaningful learning experiences.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that a stronger role for oral performance is not a departure from contemporary educational thinking but is broadly consistent with approaches that conceptualise language as action, interaction and social participation.

PEDAGOGICAL FEASIBILITY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS: ADDRESSING THE MAIN OBJECTIONS

Recentring assessment on oral performance inevitably raises two major concerns: its practical feasibility in large classes and its potential relationship with learner anxiety. Both concerns are legitimate. However, they need not lead to the conclusion that oral assessment is impracticable. Rather, they invite a reconsideration of the traditional model of the individual oral examination.

MANAGING ORAL ASSESSMENT IN LARGE CLASSES

The logistical challenge can be addressed through assessment formats that allow several learners to participate simultaneously. Debates, paired role-plays, group discussions and panel presentations within Project-Based Learning contexts can enable teachers to observe and document the performance of multiple students during the same activity.

Such approaches also help to reduce the artificial separation between teaching and assessment. Rather than interrupting classroom learning through isolated examination events, oral performance can become part of everyday pedagogical activity. Assessment, in this sense, is integrated into the learning process itself.

ORAL ASSESSMENT AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY

A second concern relates to anxiety associated with speaking in a foreign language. The phenomenon commonly described as Foreign Language Anxiety has been extensively documented as a factor capable of affecting learners' cognitive processes and performance MacIntyre and Gardner (1994).

For this reason, an increased emphasis on oral assessment should not mean a return to infrequent, high-pressure oral examinations. On the contrary, oral interaction should become a regular and familiar component of classroom practice. From the perspective of assessment for learning, frequent low-stakes opportunities for oral performance may help reduce the exceptional and threatening character traditionally associated with oral examinations.

Clear and shared assessment rubrics can also contribute to reducing uncertainty. When learners understand the criteria against which their performance will be evaluated, assessment becomes more transparent and predictable. In Krashen's terms, such conditions may contribute to lowering the affective filter Krashen (1982), allowing learners to engage more effectively with communicative tasks.

CONCLUSION

Generative Artificial Intelligence should not be regarded solely as a threat to learning or academic integrity. Its emergence may also function as a catalyst for a necessary reconsideration of what educational assessment is intended to measure.

If increasingly sophisticated technologies can generate written texts and translations that exceed the independent performance of many intermediate learners, the validity of assessment can no longer depend exclusively on the final written product. Greater attention must instead be paid to the processes through which learners mobilise their knowledge and use language independently.

Spontaneous interpersonal communication, real-time interaction and the negotiation of meaning represent particularly important dimensions of language use that cannot be adequately captured through written products alone. They are also dimensions that require learners to demonstrate their ability to act linguistically in the presence of others and under the evolving conditions of authentic communication.

For these reasons, the challenge posed by Generative AI may ultimately encourage language educators to move beyond an excessive reliance on written testing and towards a more balanced assessment ecology. Within such an approach, oral performance should not occupy a marginal or supplementary role. It should instead be recognised as a central source of evidence for the assessment of communicative competence

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