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Constructing a Cultural Performance-Based Speaking Rating Scale

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Background
This study aims to develop a cultural performance-based speaking rating scale to assess language learners’ proficiency level in the context of teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL). The purpose of developing such a model is to resolve the two dilemmas in language assessment area. Firstly and theoretically, most of the currently used foreign language proficiency guidelines such as ILR1, ACTFL2, CEFR3, CLB4, and ICCLE5 claim to assess communicative competence of a foreign language speaker. However there has never been a unanimously adopted definition for communicative competence. Instead, the components of communicative competence have been controversial (Saussure, 1959; Chomsky, 1965; Hymes, 1972; 1974; Canale and Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; Bachman, 1990; Young and He, 1998, and Johnson, 2001). Secondly and practically, proficiency tests claim to assess learner’s communicative competence by providing a holistic rating. However, few of the above proficiency guidelines provide a method of using one unitary rating to assess multi-dimensional competence. This study fills the gap.

Research Questions
In order to deal with the above dilemmas, this study developed and verified a cultural performance-based speaking rating scale model, which answers the following questions. 1. What criteria can be used to judge oral performance? 2. What relative weighting should be given to the different criteria? 3. How can the construct validity of the speaking rating model be tested? 4. How can the scoring information be interpreted and presented so as to give maximum information back to the test users? The above questions are fundamental issues related to oral assessment. However, they are rarely addressed in previous oral proficiency guidelines.

Method
The procedure consists of the following steps. Firstly, I developed video-recorded speaking samples of three Chinese learners with one video corresponding to each leaner. Then the three videos were all put on each of four WebPages. Secondly, thirty six question items were created to evaluate the three learners’ proficiency level with nine questions on each webpage following each of the three videos. Then Chinese natives went online and responded to the survey. Finally, two statistical procedures, factor analysis (FA) and the paired samples t-test, had been run to analyze the data.

There are two groups of subjects. One group is composed of common Chinese natives. They evaluate the three Chinese learners using the thirty six question items. The other group consists of three Chinese learners who are college students at a Mideast school. The three video recordings correspond to each of the three Chinese learners.

When developing the videos, several aspects are considered, such as the number and length of the videos, the number and variety of topics to be asked, and the difficulty levels of these questions.

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1 ILR refers to The Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale
2 ACTFL refers to American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages
3 CEFR refers to Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
4 CLB refers to Canadian Language Benchmarks
5 ICCLE refers to International Curriculum for Chinese Language Education
When analyzing the data, two statistic procedures have been used: FA and the paired samples t-test. The paired samples t-test is used to compare the means of two variables. FA therefore is used to identify the underlying factors that contribute to the measurement of Chinese learners’ proficiency through the question items. One key step of conducting the FA procedure is to identify these question items based on sociocultural theories, performance theories, and cultural performance-based pedagogical philosophy (Vygotsky, 1981; 1978; Bauman 1975; Bauman and Briggs 1990; 1992; Briggs 1988; Richard and Bauman 1977; Hymes 1981; 1975; 1968; Carlson 1996; Vitor, 1987; Duranti, 1996; Walker, 2000; Walker and Noda 2000; Shepherd 2005). The study generated thirty six question items to predict the latent factors contributing to measure oral performances.

**Temporary Results**

FA identified five statistically significant factors. These five factors were labeled as: information receiving, information delivering (accuracy, clarity, and complexity), information acceptance, fluency, and cognitive thinking. These five factors can only explain 75 percent of the holistic rating in oral assessment. Namely, the five recognized factors have the power of explaining 75% of a testee’s oral performance.

The significance of this study is twofold. Firstly and theoretically, this cultural performance-based oral assessment model provides a valid theoretical foundation for developing oral proficiency tests. Secondly and practically, the correlations between the ratings of each factor and the whole have been explored, namely, to what degree each factor accounts for the holistic rating. Thus, people can use one unified rating to assess an oral work and be able to interpret the rating from the five factors in terms how importance they are based on their correlation to holistic rating.