

# An oral achievement test for large university classes

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Many of the language courses taught to non-English majors at Japanese universities are labeled oral communication classes. Why then, are many teachers not evaluating their student's oral abilities? Oral tests have a bad reputation—they are time consuming, require multiple testers, are difficult to design and students find them stressful—simply put they are too much trouble and so are often avoided altogether. Failing to find a suitable test for their teaching situations, Rankin and O'Sullivan were motivated to develop an appropriate one. The purpose of this paper is to describe an oral interview test, which is used with university classes of up to 45 non-English majors students. The test has been favorably used by numerous teachers and has received repeated positive feedback from students. The focus of this paper will be on 3 areas: how to set up the test, how to familiarize the students, and how to carry out and grade the test.

英語を専攻していない日本の大学生の語学コースといえば、英会話講座または英語コミュニケーション講座とされています。ですが、実際には、担当の先生方の多くは、学生の英会話力や聴き取り力を評価するためのテストを実施していないのでしょうか。英会話テストは、時間がかかり過ぎ、試験官も複数人が必要で、テストの段取りも厄介で、学生も乗り気ではない——つまるところ、手数がかかりすぎるので敬遠されがちだというのが実情のようです。RankinとO'Sullivanは、こうした自分たちの教育現状にふさわしい英会話のテスト方法を考えだしました。本論では、英語を専門としない大学生のクラスで大変うまくいったテスト方法を紹介します。教師1人が、クラスの学生全員を5名からなるグループに分け、1グループあたり約3分でテストは終了します。しかも、学生達の取り組みは、常に積極的でした。以下、このテストを行うにあたっての準備、学生へのルール説明の仕方、テストの実地要領とその評価方法の3点を中心に論述します。

**M**ost teachers would agree that students in oral language classes should if possible be given the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned. In class surveys students have clearly indicated that they want to be assessed orally. See Figure 1.

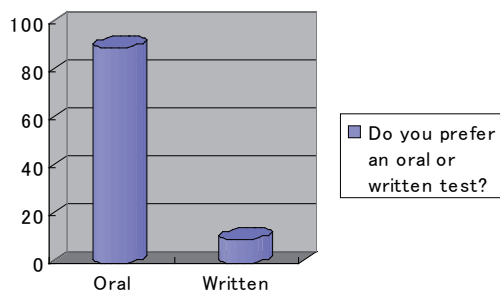


Figure 1. Student survey

An achievement style oral test would be one way. If teachers were to consider undertaking an oral test which would fit in with Canale and Swain's (1980) framework of communicative competence, which Scarcella and Oxford contend should test sociolinguistic and discourse competence (1992), it would be extremely challenging. Generally non-major students of English simply do not have the language abilities and teachers working on a 14 week term do not have the time to develop these abilities let alone test them. The students would end up feeling even less confident in their English ability and participate less than before. In fact, Cohen considers the testing situation of beginning learners as follows:

“The scales for grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation would still be of prime importance for beginning learners, since these speakers would be in the process of sorting out basic features of

the language and would not yet be tackling more complex aspects.” (1994, p. 287)

In addition, both Hughes (1989) and Weir (1990) argue that teachers should be actively involved in making the actual tests for their students. Ready-made tests are potentially inappropriate because a test in which many of the students will not do well or feel powerless to affect the outcome, will have negative effect on not just the students but also on the teacher and the classroom atmosphere. According to Brown (2004), an effective test must demonstrate five criteria. The test must be practical, reliable, valid, authentic and have washback.

Taking the above points into consideration, the writers were compelled to create a test, which would test students on English they had studied and practiced in class during the term. For simplicity this test will be referred to as Large Class Interview Test (LCIT) in this paper. After using the test in several universities with a variety of students it was noticed that even some higher level learners found simple questions such as “What do you do?” or “What is your father like?” hard to understand. Such basic questions give lower level learners an opportunity to acquire fluency. The test does not spring any surprises on the students because they are able to practice for it. The majority of them perform very well. The students gain confidence from taking part in the test preparation. In addition, they feel satisfied that they have acquired the necessary language to master the test, leading to an overall positive impact on the class. See Appendix 1 for Test Items and Appendix 2 for Answer Sheet.

This paper will thus introduce an oral question and answer interview type test that was initially developed

in 1998. It was created for non-English majors at the university level in large oral language classes which meet once a week for 14 weeks. This test is used as an end of term achievement assessment based on the first half of the EFL textbook “English Firsthand First Gold 1” and other classroom English. It accounts for 20% of the final grade. The classroom teacher administers the test and the students are tested in groups of five. The test groups are selected randomly from the student list into groups of five resulting in a representative sample of student abilities. The testing procedure can be fully understood with little usage of the students’ native language. It is also time efficient; one group of five students are tested in three minutes and large classes of up to 50 students can be tested in the time frame of a single class. This oral interview assesses fluency and accuracy with the aim of answering at least five questions by each student. Only grammatically correct answers are acceptable and the students are aware that they have a group responsibility to answer in a timely manner to ensure everyone has a chance to be asked five questions.

The method of scoring is simple. The students keep their own score using visible score markers to indicate correct and incorrect answers. During the evaluation, the tester can see the markers that clearly show how many questions each student has been asked.

The students, engineering majors, with lower level oral English abilities are comfortable with this new style of evaluation. The students perform well during their interview due to practice tests administered prior to the actual test. The students’ scores below provide support for these statements.

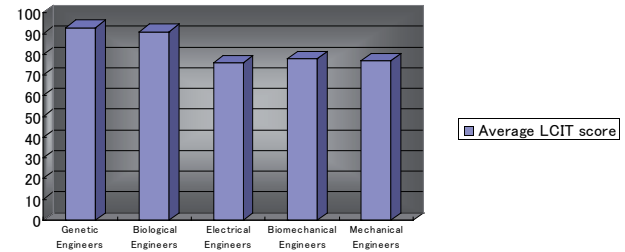


Figure 2. Average LCIT scores

## How to Set Up and Carry Out the LCIT

### Step 1: The test questions are selected

The functions and items to be tested are determined and a list of questions is compiled. See Appendix 1 for Test Items. This is completed during the semester or before the term begins. For a term that is 13 to 15 weeks long 50 to 60 questions are most appropriate. The test questions are taken from three sources; the textbook, the class handouts, and other materials covered. Examples of items used on the test are:

1. What is your occupation?
2. How often do you go shopping?
3. Where do you go to school?
4. What is your Mom like?
5. Introduce yourself.

***Step 2: The list of questions is provided to the students***

Four classes before the test day, the students are provided with a list of questions. For homework the students write the answers and bring them to class the following week. They complete this work outside of class either alone or in self-organized groups. The students are not permitted to be in the classroom without the answers to the test the next class. The students are reminded that only grammatically correct answers will be accepted; some questions do not require full sentence answers. Furthermore as this is an oral test their pronunciation and stress must be clearly understood by the tester order to receive credit.

***Step 3: The answers are checked and a test demonstration is carried out***

In the next class, which is three classes before the test, the students form groups of four or five and review their answers. See Appendix 2 for Test Answers. Then, as a class, they are provided time to ask the teacher answers to the questions they still do not know. The process of checking the answers takes approximately ten minutes over the course of the next two classes. Students are expected to update their answers each week.

***The test demonstration***

A clear test demonstration follows:

1. Place five desks side by side in the front of the classroom. Request that five students come forward and sit down to take the test. Students are

not required to bring anything with them.

2. Request an additional student to come forward to act as the timer. The timer sits in a desk right behind the five test takers with a stop watch.
3. Choose another volunteer student to be the test scorekeeper. This student sits somewhere near the front and has a prepared score sheet.
4. The remaining students come and stand in the front in order to watch and understand how to keep the score.
5. The class teacher who is the tester stands at a podium that is situated directly in front of the students' desks'.

On each student's desk, are there are ten dominos or chips, five are red and five are yellow. The red and yellow dominos or chips are used to keep score. The red dominos are used for correct answers and the yellow dominos are for incorrect answers. The test administrator, the classroom teacher, holds a short stick, which is red on one side and yellow on the other side. The five test takers will be asked questions from the list they received in the previous class. If their answer is correct the tester will show them the red side of the stick, and the student moves one red correct domino forward to the front of their desk. If the answer is incorrect the yellow side will be shown and a yellow domino is moved forward. Moving the dominoes out to the edge of the desk allows the tester to clearly see how many questions each student has been asked at all times during the test. The students are to be reminded that the dominoes are their points and therefore

have to be moved forward after each answer. The test timer monitors the students’ movements ensuring they move their dominos forward. The timer taps the student on the shoulder when they fail to do so. To start the test the timer says “One, two, three, go”, and pushes the start button and when the stopwatch goes off at the end they push the stop button and shout “stop.”

The test is three minutes long. The tester’s aim is to ask all five test takers at least five questions. When the time allotted for the test has elapsed, the student who is answering is permitted to finish. If a test taker does not know the answer they are instructed to use communication strategies like “I don’t know.” If they cannot hear the question they request that the tester repeat the question, and are taught to use expressions like “pardon.” They are limited to using this expression only once during the test and if they fail to speak within five seconds they will be shown the yellow side of the stick and their answer will be marked as incorrect. The students are asked in random order and so they are told to keep their eyes on the tester at all times. There are questions that the students may find personal such as “What does your father do?” or “Who do you live with?” The students are told they can make up answers to such questions. In order that the students feel positive about the test right from the beginning, each student is asked an easy first question and after that, the questions are chosen randomly. Since the students have had more than a month to study and practice the test questions, the degree of difficulty should be the same for each question.

The scorekeeper comes to the front desk after the time allotted has elapsed and records the scores. In an actual test when the group of five test takers come into the testing

room the scorekeeper reads off the five names in the order that they appear on the score sheet and the students sit in the appropriate desk. As mentioned earlier there are five desks lined up side by side in the front of the room. Below is a copy of a score sheet for Group 1. See Appendix 3 for a complete score sheet.

**Table 1. Score sheet**

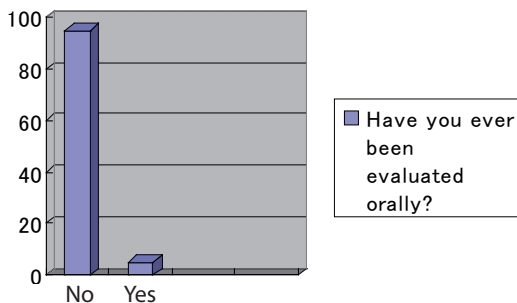
Timer	Kenji
Score Keeper	Shota
Manabu	/
Naoyuki	/
Shinya	/
Munehiro	/
Shingo	/

Manabu sits in the desk farthest to the left, Naoyuki sits beside him and so on, and finally Shingo sits in the desk on the far right. By doing this the scorekeeper is able to record the scores after the test quickly and correctly without any confusion. The scores are written on a score sheet in fractional form; the number of correct answers over the total number of questions asked which will be the total number of dominos pushed forward. Between each test group the scorekeeper gives the score sheet back to the tester who then passes it on to the next group’s scorekeeper.

#### ***Step 4: The students practice the test***

Based on personal observation, student questionnaires and research by Philips (1992), student anxiety increases in oral

testing situations. Furthermore, Table 3 clearly indicates that the vast majority of these students have never before been assessed orally.



**Figure 3. Student oral assessment survey**

For this reason, practice tests modeled after the above sample test are held two or three times during class in the remaining three weeks. About ten minutes is used for this purpose and participation is voluntary. Accordingly, students are encouraged to practice at least once so that they are familiar with the process. They need to become comfortable with this testing style so that they can perform well on the test day.

#### **Step 5: The test answers are given to the students**

One week prior to the exam, the students are provided with the answers to the test. The reason for this is that most students have taken the time to organize the test answers,

however their answers have not been individually checked, so it's crucial that they do not memorize incorrect answers. The answer sheet for the questions in Step 1 is as follows:

1. I'm a student
2. Once a week
3. Ritsumeikan University
4. She's talkative and outgoing.
5. I'm Mary, I'm from Ireland, I enjoy camping.

#### **The Testing Rooms**

It is recommended that two adjacent classrooms be used for this test. One classroom is used to administer the test and the other classroom is provided for students to sit and wait for their turn. In order to ensure that the test is administered effectively the waiting room must be organized before the test begins and this takes about 15 minutes. There are three things to do to prepare the waiting room:

1. To ensure the students know what group they are in before they enter, a master seating-plan is posted outside the waiting room, so that the students know what group they are in before they enter. This plan places the students in groups of five and has one student timer and one student scorekeeper. A class of 30 students will have six groups. This master plan is also posted on the walls inside the room providing the students the opportunity to easily confirm their group number. The following is an example of a group one's

seating plan. This is also used later as the score sheet for group one. See Appendix 3 for Master Seating plan and Score Sheet.

**Table 2. Sample score sheet**

Timer	Kenji
Score Keeper	Shota
Manabu	/
Naoyuki	/
Shinya	/
Munehiro	/
Shingo	/

- The test group numbers are posted on chairs in the waiting room. The students come in and sit with their assigned group members.
- Timer and scorekeeper cards are made. These cards are on a front desk in the waiting room before the test begins. For example, in the above group Kenji would pick up timer 2 card and Shota would pick up Scorekeeper 2 card. The designated timers and scorekeepers retain onto the cards to remind them of their responsibilities. After they complete their jobs the cards are returned to the tester.

Once all students are seated in their groups and the timers and scorekeepers understand their responsibilities, the tester goes into the test room and remains there for the duration of all the group tests. The students manage themselves, coming and going into the test room when required with little assistance from the tester. If there is only one room

available, the students sit and wait silently in their groups during the tests coming forward to the front desk only during their test time.

If the last group does not have five test takers, students can retake the test. This chance to redo the test is especially recommended for those test takers in earlier groups who do poorly. For example with a class of 27 students the last group will only have two students in it. Three students are needed to complete the group, and three who are not satisfied with their scores can join in the last group.

### Test Variations

Although this test was originally designed for use with large classes of 50 or more students and tested in groups of five it can be used with smaller classes placed in similar sized groups. The length of the test and the number of questions asked can be adapted. For example in a ten minute test the tester will ask each student 15 questions. Another way to change this test involves the tester or the interviewer. Like the scorekeepers and timers who are student volunteers, a student can be the tester. This adaptation is recommended in the second term after the students become comfortable with this testing method. In this version the classroom teacher still marks the test, by controlling the two sided stick and determines whether the answer is correct or not. The student tester is chosen randomly as this motivates the students to work on their pronunciation so that the test takers can understand him or her.

## Evaluating the LCIT

As stated in the introduction, a successful test should be practical, reliable, valid, authentic, and have washback. The LCIT will now be discussed in reference to these five criteria. In terms of practicality, it is not costly, it stays within a time limit, it is easy to administer and it has a specific and time efficient scoring procedure. Concerning validity, two of the more important types are content validity and face validity (Brown, 2004). Content validity refers to whether a test assesses the goals of a course. LCIT was developed for use in an elementary speaking and listening language course and the classroom textbook, *English Firsthand*, involves the learners doing mostly information gap activities which are appropriate for the level and therefore can be judged as having content validity. The second type of validity, face validity, occurs when students consider the assessment to be “fair, relevant, and useful for improving learning” (Gronlund, 1998, p. 210). After LCIT was administered, the students were given questionnaires and they responded that the test encouraged them to study the course material, to practice listening to and answering specific questions.

From the students' perspective, LCIT has familiar questions, and can be completed within the 3-minute time limit. Furthermore, the directions are clearly understood with little use of L1 and the difficulty level is realistic (Brown, 2004). This supports our contention that LCIT has face validity.

The fourth criteria, washback, is what Bachman describes as the effect of testing on instruction. For example, he suggests that positive washback would result in “the use of an oral interview for a final examination for a course

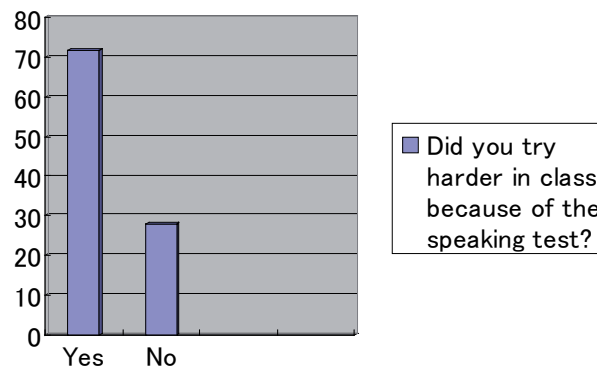


Figure 4. Student feedback results

in conversational language use” (1990, p. 283). LCIT was specifically designed for use as an end of term language assessment in speaking and listening English classes.

Finally, in regard to the fifth and last criteria, reliability, Brown (2004) says a test must be consistent and dependable. The test is dependable as it is carried out by their classroom teacher in a room they are familiar and comfortable with. It is consistent because the rules for correct and incorrect responses are very clear to the students and rater who is the teacher. It could be argued that the scores of LCIT may differ depending on the difficulty of the questions asked. Therefore in order to increase the reliability of the test, Rankin and O'Sullivan are revising it, in order to categorize the questions into five levels of difficulty. In this way students will be asked a question randomly from each category whereas previously the questions were asked randomly from the whole list.



## Conclusion

According to Perett (1990), oral interviews have a high face validity, meaning that the test looks as if it is measuring what it is supposed to measure. If lower level students are studying oral communication using a textbook, it stands to reason that it is this kind of oral communication which they are doing in the classroom which should be tested. LCIT places the student in control of what they have learned and encourages them to take responsibility for their final oral evaluation. Students are required to learn and remember basic structures and functions that are covered in class. They are given the questions and answers and they have ample time to practice and become familiar with the test. Overall utilizing this testing method is an affirming experience, one which will positively impact their English learning experience.

## Acknowledgements

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**Monica Rankin** is from Canada and teaches in the Engineering Department at Kinki University in Wakayama. She is the coordinator of the literacy program for young bilingual learners in Wakayama. Her interests include developing student presentation skills and cross-cultural rhetoric.

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Economics Department of Shiga University in Hikone. She is involved in running a Kyoto-based program for bilingual children and she is interested in developing communicative and presentation skills among business students.

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### Appendix 1 Score Sheet and Master Seating Plan

#### Group 1

Timer Toshihiko  
Score Keeper Taku

Yosuke	/
Ryohei	/
Shigenobu	/
Kousuke	/
Yuki Y	/

#### Group 2

Timer Taiki  
Score Keeper Yosuke

Takuya	/
Hiroyuki H	/
Hidenobu	/
Tomomi	/
Yohei	/

#### Group 3

Timer Tomomi  
Score Keeper Takuya

Taku	/
Masahiro	/
Shuji	/
Toshihiko	/
Yoshifumi	/

#### Group 4

Timer Yukihina  
Score Keeper Hidenobu

Taiki	/
Hiroyuki Y	/
Koichiro	/
Yuki C	/
Yuji	/

**Group 5**

Timer Yuji  
Score Keeper Tomomi

Ryohei /  
Hiro /  
Koji /  
Ayana /  
Ai /

**Group 6**

Timer Masahiro  
Score Keeper Koji

Kyohei /  
Shinji /  
Tomoko /  
Yukihina /  
Harue /

**Appendix 2 Test Items**

1. Where are you from?
2. Where do you come from?
3. Where were you born?
4. Where were you raised?
5. Where do you live?
6. Who do you live with?
7. What is your occupation?
8. What is your father's occupation?
9. What is your mother's occupation?
10. What do you do?
11. What does your father do?
12. What does your mother do?
13. How many brothers and sisters do you have?
14. What are you interested in?
15. What do you enjoy doing?
16. What do you like doing?
17. What do you do in your free time?
18. Tell me about yourself?
19. Describe your personality?
20. Who do you look like?
21. What are you like?
22. What is your hair like?
23. How tall are you?
24. What is your height?
25. How much do you weigh?

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- |     |   |     |  |
|-----|---|-----|--|
| 26. | How many brothers /sisters/ children/cousins does/do you/your father/mother have? | 51. | Tell me about your neighbourhood.                    |
| 27. | What school do you go to?   | 52. | What's your phone number?                            |
| 28. | Who is your favourite singer?   | 53. | What did you do in elementary school?                |
| 29. | Who is your best friend?  | 54. | What did you do in Jr. High school?                  |
| 30. | How often do you .....  | 55. | What did you do in high school?                      |
| 31. | Describe your apartment/house?  | 56. | What did you do when you graduated from High School? |
| 32. | Is there a TV in your room?   | 57. | When did you start University?                       |
| 33. | Is there <u>a desk</u> in your room?  | 58. | How many times have you moved?                       |
| 34. | Where is your home?   | 59. | How was the first term?                              |
| 35. | Does your home have a <u>garden</u> ?   | 60. | Where was your best vacation?                        |
| 36. | What do you say when you can't hear someone?                                      |     |  |
| 37. | What time do you eat dinner/lunch, breakfast?                                     |     |  |
| 38. | What time do you get up?  |     |  |
| 39. | What time do you go to bed?   |     |  |
| 40. | What colour is your hair?   |     |  |
| 41. | What is your mother like?   |     |  |
| 42. | What is your father like?   |     |  |
| 43. | How old are you?  |     |  |
| 44. | What does your mother look like?  |     |  |
| 45. | What does your best friend look like?   |     |  |
| 46. | Where do you go to school?  |     |  |
| 47. | Where do you usually shop?  |     |  |
| 48. | What department are you in?   |     |  |
| 49. | What is your major?   |     |  |
| 50. | What are you studying?  |     |  |

### Appendix 3 Answer Sheet

1. I **come from**...../I'm from.....
3. I was born **in**.....
4. I was raised **in**.....
5. I live **in**..
6. I live alone. OR I live with....
7. I am a student.
- 8.-12. My father/he is a/an.....my mother/she is a /an....
13. I have....brothers and ...sisters. I am an only child.
- 14-17. I **like**....I **enjoy**....I am **interested in**...
- 18-19, 21. I am shy/quiet/talkative/bossy/friendly....
20. I look like my \_\_\_\_
22. **It's** short/wavy/curly/..
- 23-24. I'm ....cm .

25. I weigh...kg.
26. He/she has.....brothers and ...sisters.
27. KINKI University
28. \_\_\_\_\_is my favourite singer. Or I really like\_\_
29. My best friend is\_\_ or His/her name is\_
30. I ...once a week./usually/sometimes/hardly ever etc
31. **There is a small bed** in my room. It's messy. It's clean.
- 32-33. Is there is/no there isn't.
34. It is near/beside/ in front of etc a school
35. Yes it **does**/no it **doesn't**.
36. pardon.
- 37-39. I .....**at**....
40. It's black etc It is dyed brown/black...
- 41-42. He /she is quiet, small, talkative he/she has brown hair/glasses...
43. I'm 18/19/20..
- 44-45. He/she has a nice smile/a big nose.....\*
46. I go to Kinki University.
47. I usually shop at\_\_
- 48-50. ....engineering.
51. There is a ...near my house/apartment.[next to, beside..]
52. 078-678-7878
- 53-55. I **started playing** baseball. I **went** to Canada.
56. I **started** university. I got my driver's license.
57. right after high school.... This spring
58. **Never, once, twice**....
59. **It was** great/hard/easy/boring...
60. **When** I went to Fiji.