

Interview Testing: An Exploratory Study into the Use of Method Adjustment Strategy to Compensate for a Less Structured Interview Test

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An exploratory study was formulated to see whether instruction in strategic competence would better help students manage a less structured version of the pre-existing bi-semester interview test (B-test). Furthermore, the author hoped to determine whether the structured nature of the test was actually detrimental to the students' communicative ability.

A study group of four higher-level English classes from two departments (two classes from each department), as determined by TOEIC bridge placement tests, was formed. One class each from both departments was designated a control group, and the other a strategy group that was instructed in method adjustment strategies. All four groups were given a supplementary interview test (S-test) made up of two each of five types of question variations of the original B-test questions. Students were then interviewed by the author and another teacher, and their scores and the strategies employed were recorded. Analysis revealed that while overall both strategy groups managed the S-Test better than their corresponding control group, the most revealing difference was that both the strategy and control group from one department scored significantly worse in the S-test than those in the other department (although they achieved higher scores in the B-test), despite that strategy group employing a wide variety of message adjustment strategies. It was therefore concluded that the message adjustment strategies taught should be mostly limited to utterances and shadowing, and the structured nature of the B-test be adjusted to accommodate alternative question types.

既存のあまり体系的ではないインタビュー式試験 (B試験) に、2学期にわたって学生が対処する際、戦略的能力をつけることが彼らの助けになるかどうかを調査するため、探査的研究を行った。さらに、試験の体系的性質が実際には学生のコミュニケーション能力に有害かどうかを検討した。研究の対象として、TOEIC BridgeのプレACEMENTテストから判断した2つの 学科の学生から、比較的レベルの高い4 つの英語クラス (各学科から2 クラスずつ) のグループを作った。各学科で1 つのクラスを基準グループとし、もう1つのクラスは戦略グループとして調整戦略法を教えた。全4 グループは補足のインタビュー式試験 (S試験) を受けた。S試験は、元のB試験の設問のうち2 つに、それぞれ5タイプの設問のバリエーションを設けたものである。その際学生は、筆者と他1 名の教員によるインタビューを受け、得点と用いられた戦略が記録された。分析の結果、両戦略グループは全体として、比較対象となる基準グループよりS試験にうまく対処できたことが明らかになった。さらに最も顕著な違いは、1 つの学科の戦

略グループと基準グループが共に、S試験においては他学科のグループより明らかに低得点であったことだ。(彼らはB試験においてはより高得点を達成していたし)、戦略グループは多様なメッセージ調整法を用いたにも関わらず、である。ゆえに結論付けられたことは、メッセージ調整法の教授は発話と復唱にほぼ限るべきであり、B試験の体系的性質は、別の設問タイプに対応するために調整されるべきであるということである。

Previous Studies

This paper follows on from my two previous papers published in the March 2017 and September 2017 issues of *TLT*, respectively (Nutt, 2017a; Nutt, 2017b). The first paper addressed the difficulties that my non-English-major students had with study abroad programs. The root causes were primarily problems with language retention and anxiety when communicating with people outside of their culture. I hoped to partially alleviate the problem of retention by conducting bi-semester interview tests (henceforth referred to as B-Tests) in the compulsory English conversation classes, where interview test questions were chosen from an expanding pool of pre-taught questions over the year-long course for first-year students. Second-year students only have one semester of English conversation, and the same questions were asked in that course but in a more condensed format. Each test was conducted by a different guest teacher on a rotation system in the hope of reducing anxiety by increasing exposure to different cultures and accents. The whole student body expressed their support for this approach in B-Test structure and execution as recorded in Likert-type questionnaires given upon completion of the course. The second paper (Nutt, 2017b) assessed whether success in a simulated environment would translate to a real-world scenario by seeking feedback, through open-ended questionnaires, from students returning from study abroad programs. Again, the responses were on the whole positive, but areas that needed addressing became apparent.

Reasoning

This research builds upon the first two studies. Although the B-Tests brought about an improvement in students' perceived ability and confidence in oral communication, there are obvious limitations to the rote learning approach. Over the course of the program, teachers commented that some students were unable to deal with any slight deviation from the structured format of the B-Test. An example of this would be a student unable to answer where their hometown is—a question that had previously only been taught in conjunction with where they are currently living. I wanted to see if instruction in strategic competence would help them better manage unstructured, real-life situations and, in doing so, determine whether the teaching of communication strategies would allow for a less structured format of the test. Additionally, I wanted to establish whether this structure itself has negative consequences on a student's communicative performance.

Strategic Competence

Due to their limited linguistic ability (CEFR A2), message adjustment strategy, "which involve(s) the tailoring of one's message to one's resources" (Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1991, p. 18), was identified as the key focus area in order for students to be better able to communicate. This strategy (see Table 1) encompasses methods such as stalling for time by using fillers, utterances, and shadowing; negotiating meaning by redirecting or clarifying, utilizing the confessional strategy by admitting weakness or directly asking for help; and simply asking for repetition.

Table 1. Message adjustment strategies [adapted from: Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, & Thurrell (1995)]

Type	Example
1) Filler	1) Let me see...
2) Utterances	2) Err / Umm
3) Shadowing	3) Repeat key words
4) Redirection	4) Do you mean "_____"?
5) Clarification	5) Did you say "_____"?
6) Confessional	6) I'm sorry. I don't speak English well.
7) Repetition	7) Sorry?/ Pardon?

Type	Example
8) Repetition	8) Can you say that again?/ Can you repeat that?
9) Clarification	9) What do you mean?
10) Negotiation	10) Please say that in another way.

The Study Group

Two first-year classes from the Management Department and two second-year classes from the Sports Health Department took part in this study, with 52 students in total. There are typically about twenty students per class, but students who were absent from one or both parts of the study were removed, leaving fourteen students in both Management control and strategy classes and fourteen and ten students in the respective Sports Health control and strategy classes. All of the classes in this study were in the highest level English-language band and had a mean TOEIC Bridge score of 131 ($n=50$, $SD=7.43$; two students were not administered the placement test). All four classes were given a supplementary speaking test (henceforth referred to as the S-Test) designed to test how effective types of message adjustment strategies helped them manage questions that differed from the B-Test. Two classes (one class from each department) were chosen as the strategy groups and henceforth referred to as M1S and SH2S (where M and SH refer to the Management and Sports Health departments; 1 and 2 to the year; and S to strategy). In the week prior to the test, half of the strategy group's classes were dedicated to practicing the ten strategies (see Table 1) through various activities designed to be fun. The other two classes, the control groups (MIC and SH2C; where C refers to control), were not taught communication strategies and had a regular class, but they were told that they would be participating in a pilot study aimed at developing the curriculum. To motivate the students, all the students who completed the test were told that they could leave class early. Additionally, they were informed the results would not affect their final score, but that a prize would be given to the highest-scoring student in each class to ensure active participation.

Methodology

In the hope of limiting the effects of students conferring with each other, two separate S-Test question sheets were prepared (see the Appendix) for interviewing alternating students participating in the test. Each test had ten questions, in accor-

dance with the original B-Test (see Nutt 2017a; Nutt 2017b), composed of two questions from each question type (see Table 2 below and the Appendix).

Table 2. How S-Test questions differed from B-Tests

S-Test Types of Variations	Explanations
Pathway (p)	The follow-up question is different to the one it was taught in conjunction with.
Wording (w)	The question has a similar content-based meaning, but the wording is different.
Form (f)	The question form changes from Wh? to Yes/No? or vice versa.
Form + Wording (fw)	Both the question wording and form differ from the pre-taught questions, but the content is similar.
Original (o)	An original question, not based on a pre-taught question, which is of a similar level that would be expected to be understood by the student, and is a natural follow-up question.

S-Tests were conducted by myself (the class teacher; Teacher A), and one other teacher (Teacher B). Each of the four classes was divided into two, with half of the interviews conducted by Teacher A, and the other half by Teacher B. Teacher B has only been a resident in Japan for four years and has limited Japanese-language ability. He was chosen as the closest possible approximation of a native speaker likely to be encountered by a student on a study abroad trip, but with the appropriate skills to be able to conduct the interview. He was familiar with the program, having taught at this university for three years, but he was unknown to the students who participated in the test. The ideology and methodology behind the test was explained to Teacher B, but he was not told which classes were the control groups and which were the strategy groups, and it was simply assumed that the different groups would become apparent to the teacher during the course of the test.

All participating students were evaluated in accordance with the standard testing rubric for the B-Test: two points for a grammatically correct full-sentence answer, one point for a word answer or an answer containing a grammatical mistake,

and zero points for a content mistake or Japanese answer (see Nutt 2017a). As well as the score, alongside each question, if a strategy was used (for example, confessional), its type was noted and the interviewer recorded whether its usage was appropriate. The S-Test was given two weeks after an official midterm B-Test, and students were expected to be familiar with the test themes as the test design focused on retention (see Nutt2017a).

Results

Table 3. A comparison of TOEIC Bridge, midterm B-Test, and S-Test results

	Mean Test Scores (SD)			
	SH2C	M1C	SH2S	M1S
TOEIC Bridge	134.3 (3.98)	128.0 (8.08)	137.0 (5.90)	126.4 (6.24)
Midterm B-Test	16.5 (3.51)	19.3 (0.91)	17.3 (2.65)	18.5 (1.75)
S-Test	15.2 (3.10)	14.0 (3.61)	17.1 (4.72)	14.7 (2.05)
Difference	1.3	5.3	0.2	3.8

Looking at the midterm B-Test results, we can see that the first-year Management students scored higher than the second-year Sports Health students, despite having lower TOEIC Bridge scores. A comparison between the B-Test and S-Test for each class reveals some surprising differences. Although both strategy classes scored higher than their corresponding control class in the S-Test, the difference between both tests was negligible for the Sports Health classes, whereas the Management strategy and control classes dropped 3.8 points and 5.3 points, respectively. When interpreted as percentages, the drop becomes more apparent—nearly 20 percent and over 25 percent, respectively.

Nevertheless, as a class employing all but one of the strategies taught (see Figure 1), the M1S class were ambitious in their attempts to apply message adjustment strategies. However, as Table 3 reveals, they were less successful than the SH2S class, which tended to concentrate on utterances (2) and shadowing (3), and to a lesser extent, strategies 1, 8, and 9 (see Table 1). Another point of interest is that utterances and shadowing were employed by the control groups despite not having had a class on strategic competence. Teacher B and I noted that students tended to mumble words from the questions put to them, often not properly articulated and in a quizzical tone. Independently, we recorded

this as shadowing. It should be pointed out that, as is typical with most conversation classes, strategies 7 and 8 (repetition) were taught as part of the orientation for the class and have been used throughout the course. Furthermore, although not taught, an additional repetition strategy—where students said, “Once more”—was noted (and assigned as no.11).

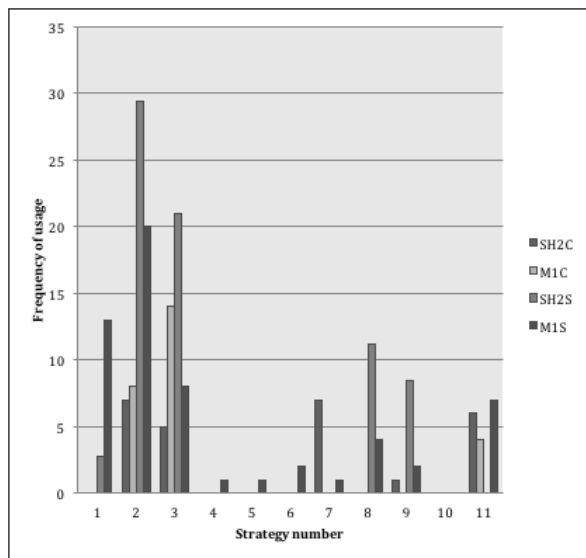


Figure 1. Frequency of strategy usage per class (SH2S adjusted $n \approx 14$).

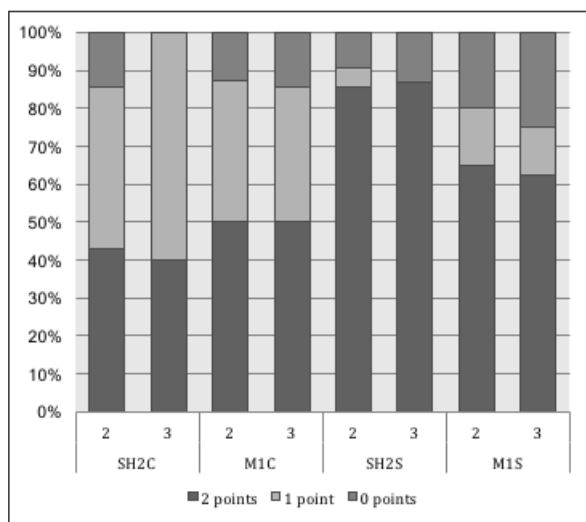


Figure 2: Proportion of points awarded for strategies 2 (utterances) and 3 (shadowing) per class

The employment of message adjustment strategies is only worthwhile if it aids communication. Figure 2 reveals that both strategy classes obtained more maximum-point answers than their corre-

sponding control classes. However, the difference is more marked in the Sports Health classes, which received double the amount of full-point answers for both strategies. Moreover, although the Management classes obtained more full-point scores, their overall score did not differ significantly, owing to the number of zero points awarded.

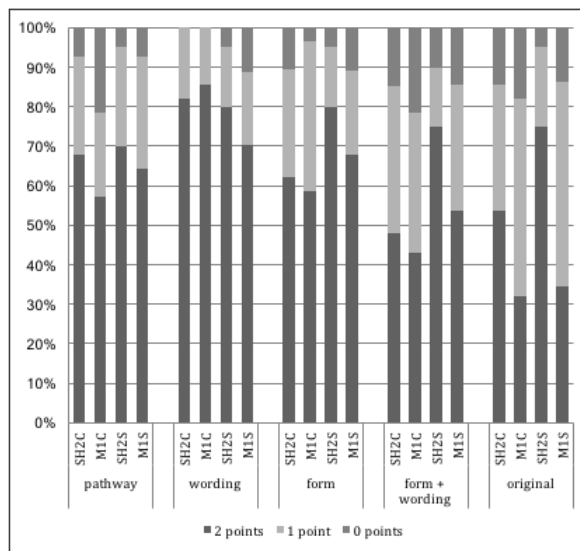


Figure 3: Proportion of points awarded per question type for each class

A look at the points awarded for each alternative question type (see Figures 2 and 3) is revealing. What one would assume are the more manageable alternatives—pathway, wording, and format—were answered competently by all students. The differences became more marked when both the format and wording were changed and where the question was an ‘original’ question, as it had no resemblance to a pre-taught B-Test question. This was expected, and it is here where we see the strategy classes outperforming the control classes, especially with the SH2S class where few points are dropped (as seen in Table 3). The M1S class, for the most part, achieved better results than their counterpart across the board, except when the question wording was changed.

Discussion

As can be seen in their midterm B-Test results, the Management classes were very capable of handling the structured speaking B-Test format to the point that they were nearly achieving full marks. However, they struggled with the S-Test, although the strategy class did achieve better overall results

than their control class, who had scored higher in the B-Test. M1S were ambitious in their usage of message adjustment strategies although they were less effective than SH2S who focused on fewer strategies and barely dropped any points (in comparison to their midterm B-Test) even with regards to the more complicated alternative questions.

There may be other reasons for the differences between the two departments' scores in both tests such as age advantage, familiarity with the testing method, or the general character of the classes, but without further research, these cannot be confirmed.

It is also worth mentioning—and as has been noted by Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, and Thurrell (1995)—there can be a tendency to misuse certain strategies, both unnaturally and inappropriately. One such usage is the response “Let me see” or an equivalent to an answer that, if the speaker had understood the question, requires no reflection. A good example of this is being asked where one lives. Both Teacher B and I observed this misuse. Encouragingly, I did observe students using the phrase term correctly. Additionally, some students were able to use a combination of two strategies, utterance (2) and shadowing (3), to give a natural-sounding response to a question and then produce a correct answer.

Conclusions and Developments

This exploratory study confirms what was previously thought by myself and other teachers participating in the compulsory conversation language program. Although I believe the B-Test, with its focus on language retention, is a marked improvement from the previous speaking tests that lacked structure or coherence (see Nutt 2017a), it is arguably too structured. There is a tendency for students to pick out a key word in the question, then repeat that predetermined answer and give little thought to the question asked. Furthermore, there have been situations when a natural follow-up question was not included in the B-Test (see Tables 2 and 4). From the next academic year, I will alter the test slightly by allowing alternative question types within the B-Tests—one will be permitted in both of the two B-Tests held in the first semester, and two each in the second semester B-Tests. Benefits will include making the B-Tests more authentic while still encouraging language retention and aiding our lower-level students who rely on the test's structured format and who have shown the greatest improvement. Furthermore, we hope that with an awareness that questions will not be exactly the same as those prepared, students will pay closer attention to the interviewer rather than reeling off

answers.

Table 4. *Appropriate alternative questions*

Form	Pathway
Teacher: What do you do after school?	Teacher: Where do you live? Student: I live in Kurozasa. (near the university)
Student: I do my part-time job.	Teacher: Where are you from? Student: I am from Kanazawa. (not near the university)
Teacher: What is your part-time job?*	Teacher: Where is that?*
*Previously “Do you have a part-time job?” was permissible, but not “What is your part-time job?”	*Previously “Where is that?” was only taught as a follow-up question to “Where do you live?”

As mentioned earlier, both interviewers noted a tendency to use shadowing and utterances by the control groups, albeit mumbled. Should our students harness this inherent ability by properly voicing what they believe they have heard, this puts the onus on the interlocutor to bridge the gap in communication. Therefore, I will encourage the teaching faculty to teach these basic negotiation strategies—strategies that should not be beyond the grasp of even the lowest-level students. Bearing in mind that the study groups were comprised of the highest-level English-language groups in their years, it would seem prudent to limit the scope of strategies taught.

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Appendix

Interview Question Sheets

(p = pathway, w = wording, f = form, fw = form and wording, o = original)

S-Test question sheet 1

Question	Score	Strategy no.
Are you (full name)? (f)		
Should I call you (first name)? (f)		
Did you come to school by train today? (fw)		
So, where's your house? (w)		
How do you spell that? (p)		
Is (place name) near Nagoya? (fw)		
Do you like living there? (o)		
How many people are there in your family? (w)		
And, do you live with your family? (o)		
And finally, what do you want to do in the future? (p)		

S-Test question sheet 2

Question	Score	Strategy no.
What's your full name? (w)		
Is that spelled (mistake)? (f)		
And you are a second-year student, right? (f)		
And, you are studying business management, correct? (fw)		

Question	Score	Strategy no.
What are your future plans? (w)		
So, what do you do after school? (p)		
Where do you (work/practice/~)? (o)		
I see. Do you have any (other) hobbies or interests? (o)		
How often do you do that? (p)		
And finally, how do you spend time with your family? (fw)		

First-year B-Test question sheet (2017)

First-year English Conversation (I/II) 2017 Interview Test Questions

Note: *In the 2nd semester, Questions 1, 2, 11, and 12 will only be used as warm-up questions and not be counted as part of the test score.*

1. What's your name?
2. How do you spell that?
3. Where do you live now?
4. Where are you from?
5. What do you do?
6. What university do you go to?
7. What do you do in your free time?
8. Do you have a part-time job?
9. Tell me about your family.
10. What does your _____ do?
11. What should I call you?
12. What's your student number?
13. Where is _____ (that)?
14. How long have you lived (in _____ / there)?
15. What are you studying?
16. What do you want to do in the future?
17. How long have you been playing tennis?
18. Do you like your job? / Do you want to have a part-time job?
19. How old is your _____?
20. Where does your _____ (work / go to school)?
21. How do you come to school?
22. How long does it take?
23. What year are you in?
24. What do you think of Tokai Gakuen?

25. What do you do after school?
 26. How often do you _____?
 27. Do you get along well with _____?
 28. Do you often go out with your family?
 29. What did you do on the weekend?
 30. Who did you _____ with?
 31. What else did you do?
 32. Did you have a good time?
 33. Do you have any plans for the spring vacation?
 34. Who are you _____ with?
 35. Are you going to (study)?
 36. What else are you going to do?
- 1st semester midterm: 1-10
 - 1st semester final: 1-20
 - 2nd semester midterm: 3-28 (not 11 & 12)
 - 2nd semester final 3-36 (not 11 & 12)

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