

From Testing to a Teaching Device: The Personal Interview

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Abstract

In spite of the fact that specialty literature considers the personal interview as a testing device, which it really is, some experiments carried out, even with large groups of students, started to consider this device as a teaching one as well.

The objectives, their implementation, some comments on the experiment dealing with the personal interview as a teaching device, as well as a suggestion of rating the speaking skills of the students (vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, speed, comprehension) are presented in the paper.

Key words:

personal interview, testing interview, teaching device, testing device, communicative skills.

Over the years, the language teaching methods as well as the teaching conditions in general have changed, new and exciting trends being employed with reference to large classes of students.

Meanwhile, some teaching methods which used to work well with small groups or individuals have started to be neglected with predictable consequences.

Such a method is the ***personal interview*** which, with the introduction of the written test as a sole form of assessment, has been entirely banned from the student life.

However, the value of the personal interview as a teaching device cannot be disputed by any language teacher. Among its valuable features we can mention:

1. it is student oriented
2. it allows the learning of the foreign languages in a communicative way.
3. it offers the students the practice in the listening and speaking skills
4. it creates good relations between the trainer and the students.

In what follows we would like to describe the way in which the personal interview has been experienced as a teaching device and an evaluation one as well, on a group of 2nd year students of the Romanian-American University.

The project suggested that each student of the group be present for a 15 minutes' personal interview with their trainer twice every semester. As all students of the University are required to complete six English courses during their academic

studies each student is going to be exposed to at least 12 interviews, totaling three hours of personal interview during their undergraduate studies.

The objectives of the project are: ❶ to acquaint the students with the trainer in a more direct way ❷ to provide all the students practical opportunities in using the English language, ❸ to help students with the problems they individually may encounter during the English classes, ❹ to offer the trainer the possibility of directly and individually assess each student in the speaking skill, even those who are shy during the classes.

Implementation: the interview could be conducted either in the trainer's office (the Chair location) or in the classroom, the students being present at the interview according to a schedule announced in advance. In our case the first interview took place in the course of the first semester of the respective academic year and the second at the end of each semester, during the classes of the last two weeks of the semester. The climate should be an informal, relaxed one. Trainers should be requested to assure the students that the aim of the interview is to help them develop their language skills rather than to test their ability or lack of it in spoken English. All trainers should provide a set of possible topics that may be used during the course of the interview related to the material studied during the semester. However, they should not stick to those topics only, and be flexible enough in determining the direction of the interview.

Here are some examples of skills/topics to be taken into consideration by the trainers according to the level of the students' knowledge.

Level	(Skill to be developed) (according to the 6 semesters of study)	Topics for Discussion (Examples)
I	Talking about themselves / environment / interests etc	▪ Why have you decided to be a student of this university? ▪ How do you enjoy student life? ▪ How is Bucharest different from your native town? ▪ Which are your hobbies?
II	Giving directions/ describing something / commenting	▪ Can you tell me how you start a business? ▪ What is the organizational chart of a company?
III	Narrating a story / comparing two or more things etc	▪ Tell me about the latest article / book you have read on economics. ▪ How is Romania different from other countries from the point of view of tourist development?
IV	Reflecting / expressing opinions about a given topic etc	▪ What do you think of the VAT tax system in our country? ▪ Why should the disabled be given equal opportunities for employment in some professions?
V	Arguing / convincing on a given topic	▪ Why should I buy the product you sell? ▪ How can I believe that your complaint is justified?
VI	Negotiating / presenting figures / products / companies etc	▪ What is special about your product? ▪ Explain the ups and down of this graph

At the end of each interview, the trainer should discuss with the students the assessment of their performance without dwelling on the students' areas of weakness, but highlighting the strong points made obvious; in this way the students may be encouraged to continue to speak in the foreign language.

In case that more trainers/groups of students are involved in such a project, uniformity in assessment should be ensured by the use of a similar assessment sheet by all of them.

Here is a model of assessment sheet that can be adapted depending on the teaching needs/skills to be assessed or developed.

Rating Language Proficiency in Speaking and Understanding English

Name of student **Date**

I. Vocabulary (0-5)

- ☐☐ 0. Vocabulary is inadequate or scarce even in case of a simple conversation, which makes it impossible.
- ☐☐ 1. Very limited/simple vocabulary and misuse of words make comprehension quite difficult.
- ☐☐ 2. Wrong words and limited speech are frequently used.
- ☐☐ 3. Inappropriate terms sometimes used; roundabout language is necessary because of inadequate vocabulary.
- ☐☐ 4. Appropriate vocabulary and idioms are generally correctly used.
- ☐☐ 5. Vocabulary and idioms are that of a native speaker of the foreign language.

II. Pronunciation (0-5)

- ☐☐ 0. Pronunciation virtually unintelligible to "the person in the street".
- ☐☐ 1. Hard to understand because of sound, accent, pitch errors.
- ☐☐ 2. Serious errors in pronunciation of sounds, words, accent and pitch.
- ☐☐ 3. "Foreign accent" requires concentrated listening; occasional misunderstanding of words, make sentences be sometimes repeated.
- ☐☐ 4. Pronunciation understandable but with a "foreign" accent.
- ☐☐ 5. Few traces of a "foreign accent".

III. Grammar (0-5)

- | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|----|--|
| ☐ | ☐ | 0. | Grammar errors make understanding unintelligible. |
| ☐ | ☐ | 1. | Grammar errors make comprehension difficult. |
| ☐ | ☐ | 2. | Unsatisfactory grammar usage; need to rephrase; use of only basic structural patterns. |
| ☐ | ☐ | 3. | Grammar errors which occasionally change the meaning. |
| ☐ | ☐ | 4. | Uses the foreign language with occasional grammar errors but without changing the meaning. |
| ☐ | ☐ | 5. | Uses the foreign language with few grammar errors. |

IV. Speed of Speech (0-5)

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|--------------------------|--------------------------|----|--|
| ☐ | ☐ | 0. | Speech is so fragmentary that makes conversation almost impossible |
| ☐ | ☐ | 1. | Speech speed is below the normal rate and makes conversation difficult |
| ☐ | ☐ | 2. | Speech speed is strongly affected by language difficulties |
| ☐ | ☐ | 3. | Speech speed is obviously affected by language difficulties |
| ☐ | ☐ | 4. | Speech speed is slightly affected by language problems |
| ☐ | ☐ | 5. | Speech speed is that of a native speaker |

V. Comprehension (5-0)

- | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|----|---|
| ☐ | ☐ | 0. | No understanding even for simple conversations in the foreign language. |
| ☐ | ☐ | 1. | Understands only very simple conversation topics at slow speed with frequent repetitions. |
| ☐ | ☐ | 2. | Trouble in understanding, with frequent adjustments in speed and vocabulary. |
| ☐ | ☐ | 3. | Understands well at a slower speed with some repetition. |
| ☐ | ☐ | 4. | Understands nearly everything at normal speed, with occasional repetition. |
| ☐ | ☐ | 5. | Understands everything without any adjustments in speed or vocabulary. |

Note 1: Put a tick in the square for each of the two annual interviews

First interview

(25 possible points)

Rating:

Comments:

Total Rating: (50 possible points)

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Second interview

(25 possible points)

Rating:

Comments:

Note 2:

- Multiply by 2 to obtain a converted score (percentage).
- Percentage can be converted into a mark.

As students come to an interview twice during each semester, it is relatively easy to measure their progress or lack of it. For those students with poor results, a remedial interview can be provided.

In conclusion, some observations and comments regarding the carrying out of this experiment are worth being mentioned.

Thus, there are cases when students considered shy in the class, who hardly say a word in the presence of their colleagues, become able to chat enthusiastically face to face with an encouraging trainer.

Their reserved attitude in class may be explained by their fear of making fool of themselves in front of their colleagues, in case of some mistakes; left alone with a benevolent trainer who is encouraging them to speak, such students could prove to be talkative persons, eager to communicate in a foreign language.

Besides, the result is determined by the informal, relaxed atmosphere required for the personal interview. It diminishes the image of the trainers as unapproachable persons, caused by the formal atmosphere existing in the class, making them some friendly figures open to listen and ready to help with any problem of communication that might arise. Hence, the efficiency of the device, which can become a positive teaching one to a resourceful trainer.

The combination of the two possibilities – that of assessing and teaching at the same time – represents a better way of developing the students' skill of oral communication in a foreign language.

Bibliography

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