

EXAMINING SPOKEN ENGLISH

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For centuries the teaching of English in the United Kingdom has been very largely confined to teaching children to write their language and to study its literature from the printed text. Learning to speak their own language has been largely left to chance - the chance of social background. A middle-class house has provided much richer linguistic opportunities than a working-class environment. This has tended to a rigid stratification of class structure, with educational opportunity and career achievement unfairly tilted in favour of the English middle-class.

Now there is a belated recognition of the importance of spoken English in the world of today; and for the first time in our educational history its backing is everywhere being taken seriously.

To test a subject in our schools is to give it importance and to fix its status. Written examinations are part of our educational tradition. Now, in the last few years, we have the novelty of tests in spoken English for our school children. This is giving status to the oral language in our schools.

Official tests are in operation at three levels: General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (within the area of the Joint Matriculation Board), Ordinary Level (organised by the London University School Examinations Department), and at the level of the Certificate of Secondary Education. (C.S.E. examinations are taken in most schools in England that do not take G.C.E. O Level examinations). The J.M.B. 'A' level test in Spoken English can be taken only by those candidates taking General Studies, the London 'O' level test by those taking the English Language paper; in neither case is it compulsory. Candidates taking C.S.E. English must take a test in oral English unless excused by reason of speech defect.*

The aims of these various oral examinations can be summed up in the words "communicate, communication". This is implicit in the syllabuses of the 'A' and 'O' level authorities and is made explicit in those of most of the 13 C.S.E. boards. Probably all intend "Communication" to be understood as two-way. The North Regional Board (covering schools in the northeast of England) states: "The English Language examination will attempt to ascertain the candidate's ability (i) to communicate clearly with other people and (ii) to understand other people when they attempt to communicate with him, both orally and in writing".

The most important use of speech deliberately made audible is as a means of communication between human beings. The aims of the various

* In 1969 approximately 2,000 candidates took the 'A' level test in spoken English, and approximately 20,000 the 'O' level test. It is not possible to give the total for the C.S.E. test in spoken English, but in one region alone - the Metropolitan - the figure was 11,000.

examinations clearly recognise this; and their forms of examination are coming to be - as they should - a reflection of these aims.

At first the examining boards played safe. They had to their hand a well-trying test-item in reading aloud. The reading by pupil to class has been a popular form of educational activity in schools from ancient times, and teachers have always felt impelled at intervals to give a mark for attainment. From the inception of the teacher-training system in the 1840s students had been tested in prose reading by Her Majesty's Inspectors on their annual visitations and marks had been awarded. Reading aloud is still a popular classroom activity.

It is thus easy to understand why the Examining Boards included a test of prose reading in their new spoken English examinations. Reading aloud is a good test of a candidate's ability to interpret and present the ideas and words of others. What was also needed was a test of his ability to present his own ideas and words. Thus Conversation came to be chosen as the second item of a ten-minute test. The J.M.B. developed these forms of tests at 'A' level in the early 1950s, the University of Durham Examinations Board used them for several years until its demise in 1964, London has used them for its 'O' level examinations since their inception in 1964, and they are by far the most popular forms of spoken English test with the new C.S.E. authorities, which instituted examinations in 1965 and 1966.

A test composed of these two items has certain advantages. They are nicely balanced with a contrast of oral interpretation and oral composition. They make for a pleasant variety, and together they test a candidate's ability to communicate ideas and feelings to others. They are easy to administer and need not take more than ten to twelve minutes per candidate. Research has shown that in the hands of competent examiners they have a reasonable statistical validity and reliability.

These tests in Reading and Conversation are, in general, private affairs between the single candidate and the examiner, with no other people present. The Boards have been experimenting for some time with examinations in a group situation and, at the same time, with items other than Reading and Conversation. Conversation is, in its nature, talk between two persons. If three or more take part its form and nature are subtly changed; it becomes Discussion. For the last two years Conversation in the J.M.B. tests has been a three-handed affair - it has become a discussion (on any subject chosen by the candidates) involving two candidates and the examiner. The London Board has also been experimenting and proposes to introduce in 1971 (in addition to its single-candidate Conversation) a Discussion involving three candidates and an examiner. In these two examinations all candidates in any one discussion are being tested. In the 13 regional C.S.E. areas Group Discussion is a compulsory part of the oral English test in two areas and optional in five (which means that candidates can take some other option if they wish). Of the seven syllabuses involved two have group discussion in which all candidates are being tested; in the others each candidate is tested separately, talking with the group.

The London Board is retaining Reading in its new 1971 examination, but as a group activity, each candidate being required to read aloud to a group comprised of the examiner and other candidates. In the J.M.B. tests Reading is now also a group activity, but optional to the giving of a Talk. A new feature is that the candidate sits after his reading and answers questions from members of the group on any matter arising. Reading aloud

is still a very important test item in the C.S.E. examinations, appearing in 12 of the 13 syllabuses, sometimes compulsory, sometimes optional; sometimes a private affair between candidate and examiner, sometimes in the presence of a group of other candidates. In three regional areas the reading tests are conducted with the candidate sitting at a table close to the examiner, in others he stands and speaks at a distance; in one or two areas sitting or standing is at the choice of the candidate. (The South East region also tape-records its candidates for purposes of moderation.)

The size of group for the 'A' level J.M.B. tests is six or seven, for the 'O' level London three. This means that each member of a group spends much more time in his examination than if he were tested solo - in the former test one and a half hours (instead of 12-15 minutes), in the latter half an hour (instead of ten minutes). This is excellent for the generation of a group rapport. The size of the C.S.E. groups varies. In the Metropolitan region Group Test the size is twelve. (This test is unique. The candidate introduces the passage to the other eleven in the group, answers questions on it, and then reads it to the group a second time, two marks being given, one for either reading, and one for the quality of his answers.)

The last important development is the institution of the Talk as a test-item. In the J.M.B. tests it is optional to Reading and is delivered to an audience of six or seven (the rest of the group and the examiner). Questions and answers from the candidate follow. The candidate is handed a printed card containing three topics, from which he chooses one. He is allowed a few minutes to prepare his talk and five minutes to deliver it. He can speak from notes. His audience then questions him on matters arising. The Talk is a compulsory element in the C.S.E. test in four regions and optional in four. Where it is compulsory the syllabus states that the candidate will talk on a topic of his own choice. In all areas but one the talk is delivered to an audience. In five of the eight areas, Question and Answer form part of the test.

Thus the tests now in existence comprise Reading, Conversation, Group Discussion, the Talk to an audience. We have moved from the private to the group situation. Tests are coming to be more realistically based; that is to say, they are concerned more with what people actually do in real life situations - they talk to each other singly or in groups, they lead a discussion (or are led), and they stand up and address an audience.

The tests in spoken English most usually taken by candidates for whom English is not the mother-tongue are those for the Cambridge Proficiency Certificates - comprising Prose Reading and Conversation with the examiner. Among the speech elements the examiner is concerned with in those tests are those that help him to answer the very important question - how English does this candidate sound? They are his pronunciation (his use of vowels and consonants), his intonation (or tune-patterns), his articulation, and, perhaps most important of all, his pattern of stressing, a complicated alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables. These are the major elements in the English speech rhythm. In Conversation the examiner is also looking for the use of an acceptable vocabulary, acceptable grammar, word-order and idiom.

Now the English candidate, however poor his speaking in other respects, at least sounds English - he can't help it. So the examiner in the tests in England under discussion is not primarily listening for the way

these speech elements are used. In Reading the examiner is looking for the candidate's ability to interpret the page before him, to communicate to the audience the author's meaning and mood. He is asking the candidate to exercise his imagination as well as his communication skills of voice and speech. In the other test elements - conversation, discussion, the talk - the examiner is considering the candidate's ability to use the English Language efficiently in face-to-face communication - that is, to make a statement clearly, to develop a theme, to rebut an argument, to inform, to persuade. He is, of course, also considering the various aspects of delivery (the use of the voice, diction, bodily stance and gesture).

It will be seen that judgments made by an assessor about a candidate's speaking are necessarily highly subjective - he has to make the decision as to whether a speaking performance is a good one or a poor one and thus whether to award a high or a low mark. This means that examiners may disagree sharply about the performance of particular candidates. In fact the quality of the examiner is of crucial importance. As much as possible is done by test-designers, by the examining body and by chief examiners to minimise the possibility of disagreement. This is done by "standardising". A rating scale is prepared which shows what qualities are being looked for in a candidate's speech and what mark is to be awarded for the strongly positive presence of a quality and what for the almost total absence of this quality (e.g. CONTENT and ORGANISATION OF TALK: Main points made clearly in a logically developing argument. Content clearly organised to show an introduction, a middle and a conclusion. Material interesting, relevant, sufficient, of good quality - AWARD 7 to 10 marks. Talk badly arranged. No logical development or argument: main points do not stand out clearly. Material of poor quality, uninteresting, irrelevant, insufficient - AWARD 0 to 3 marks). Then there will be a briefing meeting at which the Chief Examiner will take the assistant examiners carefully through the rating scale so as to establish an identity of understanding as to what is intended. It is probable that a few "guinea-pig" candidates will be examined by the Chief and the other examiners so that the latter can have a preliminary experience of both examining and marking, and so that standards shall be set and absorbed. When the examiners are in the field examining the Chief will pay each a visit for a day or half a day and make his own assessments of the candidates. Later these will all be scrutinised and the assistants' assessments raised or lowered or left as they are. It is a chancy business. But research has suggested that the judgments of experienced examiners in spoken English (at least in Reading, Conversation and the Talk) are at least as valid and reliable as those of written essay-type examinations. (There is considerable doubt about the reliability of group discussion assessments).

If examinations (over the whole range of educational activities in school) are to remain as a vital element in assessment it seems certain that the assessment of spoken English will become a "growth" industry. Perhaps the most important problem will concern the calibre and training of potential assessors. (In the C.S.E. testing of spoken English almost all teachers of English are likely to be drawn into assessment.) There will also be the search for new and appropriate test-elements that test achievement in school courses in spoken English, which must themselves be geared to the needs of human beings in adult society. Finally, there will be continuing research into methods of assessment and their attendant problems of validity and reliability.