

# Effects of the Written Test Form and Content with Pragmatic Meaning in the Validity of English Speech Test

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**Abstract:** *Many teacher-training universities only adopt a single form (read aloud) and content without pragmatic meaning in English Speech Test. However, some scholars show queries on this issue because they worry about whether a single form (read aloud) and content without pragmatic meaning bring about low validity or not. This essay focuses on effects of the written test form and content with pragmatic meaning in the validity of English Speech Test. And through the experiment and analysis, it can be seen that when the written test form and content with pragmatic meaning are added, it comparatively whether plays an important role in English Speech Test or not.*

**Keywords:** *Validity, The Written Test Form, Content with Pragmatic Meaning, A Single Form, Content without Pragmatic Meaning, English Speech Test*

## 1. Introduction

Language Testing Studies, also known as the testing of language, were formed in the early 1960 and was a new interdisciplinary integrated science. Previous research showed that the emergence of language test was related to language teaching <sup>[1]</sup>. The tests served the purpose of examining the mastery of knowledge and the effectiveness of teachers' teaching in the school, and the content and form of the tests provided the orientation of the students' learning goals and directions.

At the same time, test results provided valuable feedbacks for teaching and learning. Both teachers and students became an important basis for adjusting the direction of teaching activities. And timely appropriate tests were also a good stimulus for students' learning motivation. Language tests had three major functions: detection function (also known as the assessment), pointing role (also known as anti-pull effect) and the feedback effect <sup>[2]</sup>. Therefore, either test should try to meet the quality indicators---validity, reliability, feasibility, sensitivity and etc.

Validity referred to how accurately the examination reflects the student's ability to use the language, which was the most important indicator of the level of test quality <sup>[3]</sup>. Obviously, the role of validity in English teaching could not be ignored.

With the development of society, the globalization of English led to a new understanding of the teaching of English phonetics in the international academic community. Nernery and Mendelssohn (1992) had a new understanding on English phonetics teaching. Firstly, the local accent was not the only criterion. Secondly, hyper-tone compositions (suprasegmentals) had replaced intonation (segmental). Thirdly, it was necessary to pay attention to pragmatic meaning and communicative function <sup>[4]</sup>. The revised syllabus of the college English major phonetics course in 2000 pointed out that the specific requirements were "oriented to students' practice, starting from cultivating the ability of synthesis differentiation and adjustment of listening sounds, closely integrating listening, pronunciation and speaking training, emphasizing both basic skills training and paying attention to lexical practice. In other words, the central task was to guide students from imitating accents to using their phonological knowledge flexibly for the purpose of successful communication. Hughes (1989) showed that students were required to use phonological knowledge and skills directly to assert their communicative competence in the practical application of language environment <sup>[5]</sup>. That is, students were required to use phonetic knowledge and skills to judge the information you input and to produce accurate information output. However, at present, many English phonics tests in some general universities are simply in the form of reading aloud words, sentences, and paragraphs, and the score depends mainly on

the impression made on the examiner. Is the test in accordance with the validity or not? That is why many studies (Du, 1999; Clennell, 1997) call for accelerated testing through a four-level scoring system. Should the listening test component of the written test be involved in the English phonics test? Can phonics tests with a single format (read aloud) and content with no pragmatic meaning truly reflect students' levels? [6] [7]. This paper attempts to test whether a single form (read aloud) and content without pragmatic meaning lead to inefficiency or not. When the written test form and content with pragmatic meaning are included, it comparatively whether plays an important role in English phonics tests or not.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Participants

Forty freshmen (one class) have been recruited separately from the College of Foreign Languages of Hangzhou Normal University, which pursues a brand-new strategy of making itself a first-class university and now among China's top 100 key universities. Their major is English for teaching purpose. They have finished the phonetics lessons, have mastered all phonetic knowledge required in the syllabus and have done a great deal of practice and lexicographical differentiation exercises.

### 2.2 Materials and procedure

Forty freshmen (one class) have been scheduled to take two English speech tests on two consecutive days. These tests aim to test the students' mastery of language knowledge and skills required in the syllabus. The speaking test on the first (Oral Test 1) is the traditional type with 100 points. The first part of the test consists of reading aloud the words containing 44 phonemes; the second part of the test includes reading aloud sentences; and the third part of the test consists of reading interesting passages. The second and third parts are covered stress, rhythm, assimilation, intonation and weakness. The marks for these three parts are distributed by 40%, 30%, and 30% respectively.

The second exam consists of an oral and a written part, allocated at 70% and 30% respectively. The first and third parts of the oral exam are words reading and paragraph reading, which are of the same level of difficulty as the first day's oral test. The second part is a free conversation based on a pre-determined scene and the teacher's request. The written test on the second day has been divided into three sections: sound differentiation, judging the semantics based on the tone of the dialogue, listening to the movie dialogue as well as marking the underlined accents and the tone of the sentences. The written test includes a variety of phonological knowledge, the original recorded material of which is taken from textbooks. Both the oral and written tests are 100 full marks and are divided into three parts, 40%, 30% and 30% each. In order to ensure reliability, the oral portion of both exams has begun at 2:40 p.m. and the written portion has started from 8:00 to 8:30 p.m. in the language lab to minimize noise distractions. Listening materials could be heard twice. In addition, examiners should not be reassigned during the two oral exams and there was a live recording. And the scores of the oral exams should be verified.

### 2.3 Analysis

Table 1: Part of Oral Tests and Written Test

Oral Test 1			Oral Test 2			Written Test		
Part I			Part I			Part I		
1-10	2 persons	5%	1-10	1 person	2.5%	1-10	3	7.5%
11-20	5	12.5%	11-20	6	15%	11-20	12	30%
21-30	18	45%	21-30	19	47.5%	21-30	17	42.5%
31-40	15	36.5%	31-40	14	35%	31-40	8	20%

Looking at the words reading sections in oral test 1 and oral test 2, scoring rate can be seen from the table. The figures in 11-20 and 31-40 are fairly close to each other, which imply the high reliability. However, the difference between the written test and oral test 2 is noticeable. Paragraphs 1-10 in oral test 2 accounts for only 2.5% (1 person) in oral test 2, but rises to 7.5% (3 persons) in the written test; Paragraph 11-20 in the oral test 2 occupies 15%, while in the written test the score rises up to 30% (12 persons), 15% more than that of the oral test; The figure in subparagraph 21-30 of the written tests is 5%

lower than in the oral test; The figure in 31-40 of the written test is only 20% (8 persons), 15% lower than in the oral test 2. It could be seen that the students' ability to hear and recognize phonemes was not consistent with their ability to read aloud.

In both tests, only the form of the second part of each test is different. The second part of Oral Test 1 is a single-sentence reading, which is designed to test students' knowledge of stress, weak reading, consecutive reading, assimilation, rhythm, intonation, and other phonological knowledge. The second part of Oral Test 2 is a free conversation in a situation, which tests students' basic phonetic knowledge and their ability to use it in a context. The second part of the written test 2 is to listen to a conversation to determine the meaning of a sentence, which is also a test of the ability to the ability to detect differentiation and pragmatic competence.

Table 2: Part II of Oral Tests and Written Test

Oral Test 1			Oral Test 2			Written Test		
Part II			Part II			Part II		
1-10	1 person	2.5%	1-10	5 persons	12.5%	1-10	6	15%
11-20	5	12.5%	11-20	30	75%	11-20	31	%
21-30	20	50%	21-30	3	7.5%	21-30	2	5%
31-40	14	35%	31-40	2	5%	31-40	1	2.5%

The difference between the figures in the first and third parts of oral exam 1 and 2 is the same, only 2.5 % (1 person). However, for the second parts of oral exam 1 and 2, the figures are quite different: the statistics for oral exam 2 with 21-30 points are 42.5% less than those for the oral exam 1. And for the written test, all three parts have lower high scores than the oral test. Based on the scores of the second parts, the number of high level score in the written test is quite different compared to oral test 1. But compared to oral exam 2, but the difference between Oral 2 and the written test is very small, only 2.5%. These numbers indicates that the stronger the student's reading ability, the worse the pragmatic ability. When a student reads aloud, he focuses more attention on correcting his pronunciation, so he makes fewer errors and gets higher scores. Whereas in a real conversation, the student should carefully consider the expression of the content, but also listen to what others are saying and respond appropriately, which shows his own ability.

Table 3: Part III of Oral Test and Written Test

Oral Test 2			Written Test		
Part III			Part III		
1-10	2 persons	5%	1-10	10 persons	25%
11-20	6	15%	11-20	16	40%
21-30	10	25%	21-30	10	25%
31-40	22	55%	31-40	4	10%

Table 4: Part III of Oral Tests

Oral Test 1			Oral Test 2		
Part III			Part III		
1-10	3	7.5%	1-10	10 persons	5%
11-20	7	17.5%	11-20	16	15%
21-30	9	22.5%	21-30	10	25%
31-40	21	52.5%	31-40	22	55%

### 3. Results

The single form (read aloud) does not fully reflect the phonological features and brings inefficient results. Students can only read and pronounce correctly, but do not detect phonological differences or give accurate responses. How students can succeed in communication? Hughes (1989) said that tests with negative impacts waste a lot of time and effort and let teachers miss the real teaching objectives [8]. In contrast, the new requirements of this lesson are based on the idea of developing and training students' listening, pronunciation, and oral expression skills in communication. Therefore, if contents of the test are incomplete, the acquisition of knowledge is not fully reflected, that is, the validity of the test is low. Moreover, students majoring in English for teaching purpose are more likely to become teachers in the future. If students' competence cannot be improved, it will certainly affect the level of English pronunciation teaching in China, and vicious circle will continue to exist in the field of

phonetics teaching.

The single content (only reading) does reflect inefficiency. English phonetic tests do not define the strength of imitation but does test students' knowledge of phonetics, competence to obey the rules, and ability to adapt to the context. Phonics tests are not definitions, but comprehensive tests. Linguist John W. Oller proposed that context plays an important role in determining the meaning of ambiguous sounds or words in a sentence, in some daily linguistic communication. Thus, the ability to determine the ambiguity of a sentence, word meaning or pronunciation in the context is far more important than the ability to do so in isolated phonological material without context [2]. Reading only checks students' mastery of pronunciation rules, and does not monitor their ability to apply the rules to real-world communication and their grasp of pragmatic meaning. This form of phonics tests does not correspond to the current purpose of communicative instruction and has low validity.

#### 4. Discussion

In the process of phonetics teaching, teachers should not only instruct students to imitate according to the syllabus, but also strengthen their ability of phonetic differentiation, which could lay the foundation for their communicative competence. The question of whether a phonological differentiation component (written test) should be included in the test to improve validity has attracted the attention of scholars. In addition, it is true the form and mode of the test should indeed be contextual that Bradford (1988) pointed out that current teaching advocate "teaching pronunciation in context and testing pronunciation in context" with the principle of making the test contextually designed to develop students' pragmatic competence communicative competence, improving the validity of test [9].

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