The impact of assessment reform on teachers' constructs of oral interaction in English in Hong Kong

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Background

In 2006 a team of researchers at the University of Hong Kong, led by Dr. Chris Davison and Prof. Liz Hamp-Lyons, were contracted to develop for the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA) a new form of assessment of student speaking for the senior secondary school system, which has been called a 'School-based Assessment' (SBA). The dual aim of this development was to incorporate aspects of assessment for learning within the formal examination system. While this is a goal of assessment reform in general in Hong Kong, it was particularly appropriate for assessing speaking, which is difficult to assess well in traditional exam situations. Experience of the first three years of this innovative speaking assessment has been encouraging (Lee, 2008).

Two elements have been key to the degree of success this assessment innovation has achieved: a rigorous professional development accessible to every teacher across Hong Kong who teaches students at this level; and a carefully developed and validated set of assessment criteria and standards. In addition to the key concepts and principles of AfL, the PD programme has focussed on helping teachers to unpack and understand the structure of the assessment instrument so that they can not only use it for assessing students in their own classes at the appropriate times, but use or adapt it within the teaching and learning they do during instructional units (Davison & Hamp-Lyons, 2009).

SBA 2006-2009

In the SBA as introduced from 2006, there are two broad task types for assessment: individual presentation (IP) and group interaction (GI). In an IP, an individual speaker presents ideas or information over a sustained period (2-3 minutes), which can be quite informal, depending on the specific task and audience. The IP requires comparatively long turns and hence requires a somewhat explicit structure to aid the audience's comprehension and interest. The IP may be followed by questions or comments from the audience. In practice it is usually followed by at least one question from the teacher, since the assessment criteria make reference to 'asking for and

answering questions from the audience <u>when required to by the task</u>: many, if not most, Hong Kong teachers have it more reassuring to require this element on all assessment occasions. This is a reasonable decision since otherwise that aspect of the domain of Communication Strategies would not be assessed, and audience awareness and a sense of interactivity even in an IP is something the team, and the HKEAA, has always encouraged. (Refer to Appendix A, from the 2007 SBA Handbook, for the IP assessment domains, criteria and levels).

In a group interaction (GI), a dialogue or exchange of short turns between two or more speakers takes place: in practice these are in the region of 3 minutes of speaking time for each group member, for example, a group of 3 would spend about 8-10 minutes on their GI. Turns are expected to be comparatively short and quite informal, and therefore need less explicit structuring than the IP. A GI needs attention to turn-taking skills, and planning of how to initiate, maintain and control the interaction through suggestions, questions and expansion of ideas. These interactive skills are deliberately mentioned and rewarded in the assessment domains, criteria and levels (Refer to Appendix B, from the 2007 SBA Handbook).

The SBA Handbook (2007) also makes clear some other key skills required for effective communication through spoken English, which are expected in assessed in both text-types:

- capacity to speak intelligibly and reasonably fluently with suitable intonation, volume and stress, using pauses and body language such as eye contact appropriately and effectively.
- a range of vocabulary and language patterns that are accurate and varied.
- some use of formulaic language when appropriate for structuring (but overuse of set phrases is discouraged).
- language that is natural and interactive, not memorised or read aloud.

For Hong Kong teachers, there was much that was unfamiliar in these assessment expectations. However, the differences did not stop there, because the emphasis on assessment for learning principles meant that students were expected to complete some teaching and learning activities within the normal teaching cycles in preparation for assessment: they were required to:

- select and read/view at least three texts over the course of two years
- keep a log book or brief notes of comments/personal reflections on their reading/viewing
- undertake a number of activities to develop their independent reading, speaking and thinking skills
- take part in a number of discussions with classmates on what they have read/viewed
- make individual presentations on the books/videos/films that they have read/viewed
- respond to questions from their teacher, which will be derived from the student's written notes/personal responses/comments in their logbook. (SBA Handbook, 2007)

It can be seen from the above that the speaking assessment in designed to be built into classroom instruction and not treated as a separate activity. It requires that both teachers and their students know how to listen to and look at language performances and then talk about them. Reading books (in original form or in simplified format for less proficient students) or viewing films is a vehicle for speaking experiences, practices, feedback **and assessment.** The SBA Handbook (2006) emphasizes that:

The SBA component is designed to assess only the students' oral language skills and ability to make use of their extensive reading/viewing. It is NOT designed to assess any of the following:

- the students' attitude or effort
- the number of texts the students have read/viewed (beyond the minimum requirements)
- the students' ability to provide highly specific factual details about what they have read/viewed
- the students' ability to conduct literary analysis of the texts or their drama skills. (2007 SBA Handbook)

The distinction between reading/viewing as assessable material versus as vehicle for the use of the spoken language was difficult for some teachers to grasp. In the first three years of implementation, however, issues and questions about this distinction have stopped and it has seemed that teachers

have understood the intentions behind the structure, both through the text/DVD introductory material and through the programme of professional developments course that are offered every school term. A four-year longitudinal study of the implementation of the SBA, shortly to be completed, is suggesting that teachers and students are more confident in the new process and have a greater understanding of what constitutes 'good' speaking proficiency (Hamp-Lyons, 2007; Hamp-Lyons & Davison, forthcoming).

SBA revisited for 2009 implementation
In addition to the contractual development and validation work carried out for the HKEAA, Chris Davison and I have conducted a number of research studies funded by the Hong Kong Research Grants Council or the Hong Kong Quality Education Fund. In several studies we have focussed particularly on teachers' understandings of the fundamental constructs underlying "oral interaction", and their willingness and ability to provide direct instruction, feedback and other support to students in the process of engaging in speaking activities that will be assessed. The invitation to revisit the SBA in the light of a restructuring of the Hong Kong secondary-tertiary education system to 3+3+4, to be introduced to the educational structure beginning in September 2009 has provided the opportunity and challenge to explore whether this new oral assessment, only three years old, can adjust well to adaptation and expansion as a three year instead of two year programme. The HKEAA have mandated that the revised SBA must incorporate an elective component, and have continued their commitment to SBA by providing support for further development and for extension and renewal of the professional development materials and courses.

Working with teachers on the adaptation is providing an opportunity to evaluate the ways that teachers' understandings of the fundamental construct underlying "oral interaction" have changed in these four years, whether not the changes may be attributed to the assessment reform, and whether they seem to be robust enough to transfer smoothly into the extended SBA which includes an apparent content-specific element through the introduction of 'electives'.

In the rest of this paper, to be presented at the conference, I will draw on data collected during teacher-involved assessment development activities in order to explore and illustrate Hong Kong teachers' understanding, attitudes and practices of what characterizes good oral interaction in spoken ESL

assessment interactions. The patterns that will be described include: evidence of deeper understanding of key metalinguistic concepts/constructs, suggesting that teachers are now more expert at articulating what it is that students are and are not doing well; a clearer understanding of the priorities in effective spoken proficiency, so that many teachers are less fixed on low-order issues such as dropped word-final consonants, or subject-number errors, than they were, and more concerned to ensure that students employ key interactive strategies such as eye contact, back-channelling and turn-taking.

Summary
A key concern as we began the revision to the SBA to a 'core' SBA (that is, maintaining the 2006-2009 version) plus teachers' choices among eight electives, was whether the assessment instruments would be transferable to multiple electives, from the technical and the practical (ie., the teachers') viewpoints.   Early signs as we work through the changeover are that although some teachers are concerned about application of the instruments to multiple electives, many are content to see the electives as simply additional vehicles for students to display their English speaking proficiency. Importantly, no teachers have expressed a belief that the key principles of assessment for learning cannot be applied in the context of the electives. From the evidence of focus groups, seminar discussions, and work with a core group of teachers specifically involved in instrument (re-) validation, it would seem that there are two principal reasons for this. First, teachers are now much clearer about the constructs that underpin the domains and criteria used to both teach and assess students' oral interaction than they were when the SBA was first introduced. Second, many of the teachers now fully understand and embrace the principles and values of AfL for their own classrooms, although evidence from other studies where we have looked into what actually happens in classrooms suggests that there is often quite a way to go before teachers' classroom practices embody these principles. This development and teachers' movement through fairly typical 'stages of concern' will be reported in papers after the final report of the 4-year longitudinal study has been accepted by the HKEAA. At this stage it can be said that, while the teachers as a whole fall into the common pattern of stages of concern (Hall & Hord 2000), there are encouraging indications of teachers' increasing confidence in moving into more collaborative advisory roles in their classrooms.

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	I. Pronunciation & Delivery	II. Communication Strategies	III. Vocabulary & Language Patterns	IV. Ideas & Organisation
6	**Can** project the voice appropriately for the context. **Can** pronounce all sounds/sound clusters and words clearly and accurately. **Can** speak fluently and naturally, with very little hesitation, and using intonation to enhance communication.	**Can** use appropriate body language to show focus on audience and to engage interest. **Can** judge timing in order to complete the presentation. **Can** confidently invite and respond to questions or comments when required for the task.	**Can** use a wide range of accurate vocabulary. **Can** use varied and highly accurate language patterns; minor slips do not impede communication. **Can** choose appropriate content and level of language to enable audience to follow, without the use of notes. **Can** self-correct effectively.	**Can** convey relevant information and ideas clearly and fluently without the use of notes. **Can** elaborate in detail on some appropriate aspects of the topic, and can consistently link main points with support and development.
5	**Can** project the voice appropriately for the context. **Can** pronounce all sounds/sound clusters clearly and almost all words accurately. **Can** speak fluently with only occasional hesitation, and using intonation to enhance communication, giving an overall sense of natural NN language.	**Can** use appropriate body language to show focus on audience and to engage interest. **Can** judge timing sufficiently to cover all essential points of the topic. **Can** appropriately invite and respond to questions or comments when required for the task.	**Can** use varied and almost always appropriate vocabulary. **Can** use almost entirely accurate and appropriate language patterns. **Can** choose content and level of language that the audience can follow, with little or no dependence on notes. **Can** usually self-correct effectively.	**Can** convey relevant information and ideas clearly and well. **Can** elaborate on some appropriate aspects of the topic, and can link main points with support and development.
4	**Can** project the voice mostly satisfactorily. **Can** pronounce most sounds/sound clusters and all common words clearly and accurately; less common words can be understood although there may be articulation errors (e.g., dropping final consonant clusters). **Can** speak at a deliberate pace, some hesitation but using sufficient intonation conventions to convey meaning.	**Can** use appropriate body language to display audience awareness and to engage interest, but this is not consistently demonstrated. **Can** use the available time to adequately cover all the most essential points of the topic. **Can** respond to any well-formulated questions that arise.	**Can** use mostly appropriate vocabulary. **Can** use language patterns that are usually accurate and without errors that impede communication. **Can** choose mostly appropriate content and level of language to enable audience to follow, using notes in a way that is not intrusive**.** **Can** self-correct when concentrating carefully, or when asked to do so.	**Can** present relevant literal ideas clearly and in well-organised structure. **Can** expand on some appropriate aspects of the topic with additional detail or explanation, and can sometimes link these main points and expansions together effectively.
3	**Volume** may be a problem. **Can** pronounce all simple sounds clearly but some errors of sound clusters; less common words may be misunderstood unless supported by contextual meaning. **Can** speak at a careful pace and use sufficient basic intonation conventions to be understood by a familiar and supportive listener; hesitation present.	**Can** use some appropriate body language, displaying occasional audience awareness and providing some degree of interest. **Can** present basic relevant points but has difficulty sustaining a presentation mode. **Can** respond to any cognitively simple, well-formulated questions that arise.	**Can** use simple vocabulary and language patterns appropriately and without errors that impede communication, but reliance on memorised materials or written notes makes language and vocabulary use seem more like written text spoken aloud. **Can** choose a level of content and language that enables audience to follow a main point, but needs to refer to notes. **Can** sometimes self-correct simple errors.	**Can** present some relevant literal ideas clearly, and can sometimes provide some simple supporting ideas. **Can** sometimes link main and supporting points together.
2	**Volume** may be a problem. **Can** pronounce simple sounds/sound clusters well enough to be understood most of the time; common words can usually be understood within overall context. **Can** produce familiar stretches of language with sufficiently appropriate pacing and intonation to help the listener's understanding.	**Can** use a restricted range of features of body language, but the overall impression is stilted. **Can** present very basic points but does not demonstrate use of a presentation mode and is dependent on notes. Audience awareness is very limited.	**Can** appropriately use vocabulary drawn from a limited and very familiar range. **Can** read notes aloud but with difficulty. **Can** use some very basic language patterns accurately in brief exchanges. **Can** identify some errors but may be unable to self-correct.	**Can** make an attempt to express simple relevant information and ideas, sometimes successfully, and can attempt to expand on a few points. **Can** link the key information sequentially.
1	**Volume** is likely to be a problem. **Can** pronounce some simple sounds and common words accurately enough to be understood. **Can** use appropriate intonation in the most familiar of words and phrases; hesitant speech makes the listener's task difficult.	Body language may be intermittently present, but communication strategies appropriate to delivering a presentation are absent. The delivery is wholly dependent on notes or a written text. There is no evident audience awareness.	**Can** produce a narrow range of simple vocabulary. **Can** use a narrow range of language patterns in very short and rehearsed utterances. **A restricted sample of language makes full assessment of proficiency difficult.**	**Can** express a main point or make a brief statement when prompted, in a way that is partially understandable.
0	**Does not** produce any comprehensible English speech.	**Does not** attempt a presentation.	**Does not** produce any recognisable words or sequences.	**Does not** express any relevant or understandable information.

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	I. Pronunciation & Delivery	II. Communication Strategies	III. Vocabulary & Language Patterns	IV. Ideas & Organisation
6	**Can** project the voice appropriately for the context. **Can** pronounce all sounds/sound clusters and words clearly and accurately. **Can** speak fluently and naturally, with very little hesitation, and using intonation to enhance communication.	**Can** use **appropriate** body language to **display and encourage** interest. **Can** use **a full range** of turn-taking strategies to initiate and maintain **appropriate** interaction, and **can draw others** into extending the interaction (e.g. by summarising for others' benefit, or by redirecting a conversation); **can avoid the use of narrowly-formulaic expressions** when doing this.	**Can** use a wide range of accurate vocabulary. **Can** use varied and highly accurate language patterns; minor slips do not impede communication. **Can** self-correct effectively.	**Can** express a **wide range** of relevant information and ideas without any signs of difficulty. **Can** consistently **respond effectively** to others, sustaining and extending a conversational exchange. **Can** use the **full range of questioning and response levels** (see Framework of Guiding Questions) to engage with peers.
5	**Can** project the voice appropriately for the context. **Can** pronounce all sounds/sound clusters clearly and almost all words accurately. **Can** speak fluently with only occasional hesitation, and using intonation to enhance communication, giving an overall sense of natural NN language.	**Can** use **appropriate** body language to **display and encourage** interest. **Can** use **a good range** of turn-taking strategies to **initiate and maintain** appropriate interaction (e.g. by encouraging contributions from others' in a group discussion, by asking for others' opinions, or by responding to questions); **can mostly avoid the use of narrowly-formulaic expressions** when doing this.	**Can** use varied and almost always appropriate vocabulary. **Can** use almost entirely accurate and appropriate language patterns. **Can** usually self-correct effectively.	**Can** express relevant information and ideas clearly and fluently. **Can respond appropriately** to others to **sustain and extend** a conversational exchange. **Can** use a **good variety of questioning and response levels** (see Framework of Guiding Questions).
4	**Can** project the voice mostly satisfactorily. **Can** pronounce most sounds/sound clusters and all common words clearly and accurately; less common words can be understood although there may be articulation errors (e.g. dropping final consonant clusters). **Can** speak at a deliberate pace, with some hesitation but using sufficient intonation conventions to convey meaning.	**Can** use **some features of appropriate** body language to encourage and display interest. **Can** use **a range of appropriate** turn-taking strategies to participate in, and **sometimes initiate**, interaction (e.g. by responding appropriately to others' comments on a presentation, by making suggestions in a discussion). **Can** use **some creative as well as formulaic** expressions if fully engaged in interaction.	**Can** use mostly appropriate vocabulary. **Can** use language patterns that are usually accurate and without errors that impede communication. **Can** self-correct when concentrating carefully, or when asked to do so.	**Can** present relevant literal ideas clearly with well-organised structure. **Can often respond appropriately** to others; **can sustain and may extend** some conversational exchanges **However: Can** do these things less well when attempting to respond to interpretive or critical questions, or **can** interpret information and present elaborated ideas, but at these questioning levels coherence is not always fully controlled.
3	**Volume** may be a problem. **Can** pronounce all simple sounds clearly but some errors of sound clusters; less common words may be misunderstood unless supported by contextual meaning. **Can** speak at a careful pace and use sufficient basic intonation conventions to be understood by a familiar and supportive listener; hesitation present.	**Can** use appropriate body language to **show attention** to the interaction. **Can** use **appropriate but simple and formulaic** turn-taking strategies to participate in, and **occasionally initiate**, interaction (e.g. by requesting repetition and clarification, or by offering praise).	**Can** use simple vocabulary and language patterns appropriately and without errors that impede communication. **Can** sometimes self-correct simple errors. **May suggest a level of proficiency above 3 but has provided too limited a sample.**	**Can** present **some relevant ideas sequentially** with **some links** among their own ideas and with those presented by others. **Can** respond to some simple questions and **may be able to expand these responses when addressed directly.**
2	**Volume** may be a problem. **Can** pronounce simple sounds/sound clusters well enough to be understood most of the time; common words can usually be understood within overall context. **Can** produce familiar stretches of language with sufficiently appropriate pacing and intonation to help listener's understanding.	**Can** use **appropriate** body language **when especially interested** in the group discussion or **when prompted to respond**. **Can** use **simple but heavily formulaic** expressions to respond to others (e.g. by offering greetings or apologies).	**Can** appropriately use vocabulary drawn from a limited and very familiar range. **Can** use some very basic language patterns accurately in brief exchanges. **Can** identify some errors but may be unable to self-correct. **Provides a limited language sample.**	**Can** express **some simple relevant information** and ideas, sometimes successfully, and may expand some responses briefly. **Can** make some contribution to a conversation **when prompted**.
1	**Volume** is likely to be a problem. **Can** pronounce some simple sounds and common words accurately enough to be understood. **Can** use appropriate intonation in the most familiar of words and phrases; hesitant speech makes the listener's task difficult.	**Can** use **restricted features** of body language **when required** to respond to peers. **Can** use **only simple and narrowly-restricted** formulaic expressions, and only to respond to others.	**Can** produce a narrow range of simple vocabulary. **Can** use a narrow range of language patterns in very short and rehearsed utterances. **A restricted sample of language makes full assessment of proficiency difficult.**	**Can** occasionally produce **brief information and ideas** relevant to the topic. **Can** make some brief responses or statements **when prompted.**
0	**Does not** produce any comprehensible English speech.	**Does not** use any interactional strategies.	**Does not** produce any recognisable words or sequences.	**Does not** produce any appropriate, relevant material.