



Watch Them SOAR: Student Oral Assessment Redefined

Linda Paulus

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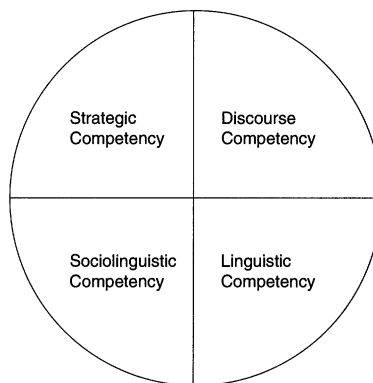
Linda Paulus
Mundelein High School

Abstract: An approach to oral assessment at the first year high school level that results in a strong sense of student and teacher satisfaction consists of evaluating students' oral performance in three domains: Strategic, Sociolinguistic, and Discourse Competences. This Competence assessment model drives instruction in a way that facilitates the creation of an immersion classroom and enables students to acquire language in a more meaningful way than by use of models in which students are globally evaluated, or evaluated on linguistic competence alone.

Key Words: oral assessment (authentic), communicative approach, communicative strategies, oral proficiency, immersion, strategic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, linguistic competence, block schedule

Since more and more secondary teachers recognize the proficiency rewards that result from providing their students with maximum input in the target language, the challenges posed by assessment inevitably arise and must be addressed. High school teachers expect students to take oral participation and communicative competence seriously. By the same token, they know that unless they build oral testing into the curriculum, many students may pay only lip service to communication skills as a desirable goal. At the very least, they expect the teacher to "teach how to speak Spanish," and little thought is given to the students' own responsibility for their language development. The challenge to building meaningful assessment into the curriculum comes from many directions: class sizes that are too large, topics that must be covered by the end of the year, the problematic logistics of individual testing (e.g., what to do with students who are not being tested), when to use English and when not to, and the testing tools themselves (e.g., what test will best help students receive feedback on how well they will do in a native environment? What test can give useful teacher feedback for teaching purposes?).

One oral evaluation instrument that helps Mundelein High School teachers address all of these concerns is based a model of communicative competence¹ that is broken down into four components described by Lee and VanPatten (1995): Strategic, Sociolinguistic, Discourse, and Linguistic Competences (149). These components not only guide instruction by suggesting teaching and learning strategies but also become acquisition goals so that students may have a better understanding of and take a greater responsibility for their own progress. Teachers set the components as a wheel for ease in posting the information in the classroom in order to convey to the students, in a visual sense, that those are all parts that contribute to an overall concept:



Using this model, our department provides Spanish I (and beginning the fall of 1997, Spanish II) students with formal feedback on their oral competence twice per course in the form of benchmark testing. Such feedback implies the need for special preparation for student success on the benchmark tests.

While immersion in Spanish is the norm for the majority of first year class time, instruction in English about learning strategies and acquisition theory relevant to high school students takes place from time to time during the first weeks of class.

During the first day of Spanish I class, students learn that one of the primary goals of their high school program is to develop their communicative competence so that they are well equipped to deal with the linguistic challenges of a native environment; rapid acquisition and true competence depend upon speaking in Spanish as much as possible. The program will teach them to survive, and thrive, in an authentic setting in which no English is spoken. To achieve such a goal, students have to learn more than grammar and vocabulary; they must learn strategies for using only Spanish and for seeking more input to further their own language development. They must examine the meaning of successful “communication,” and, through discussion, come to an understanding of a working definition: communication is the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning in an authentic conversational setting (Lee and VanPatten 1995, 148).

During the first week, immersion in Spanish is interrupted for short segments of classroom time so that students learn about three hypotheses of L2 acquisition (Krashen and Terrell 1983, 26–38) that are most relevant to their high school success: Acquisition vs. Learning, the Input Hypothesis, and the Affective Filter Hypothesis. These hypotheses form a basis for class rules and structure: the Acquisition vs. Learning Hypothesis implies that the majority of class time focuses on meaningful exchange of information in Spanish to facilitate acquisition. Most grammar study is

done outside of class, but students are held accountable for grammar practice via homework review and grades. The Input Hypothesis implies that this meaningful exchange of information has to approximate an immersion situation as much as possible so that students will achieve listening and speaking competence. Students are graded on the extent to which they contribute to (or detract from) an immersion classroom. Finally, the Affective Filter Hypothesis at the high school level boils down to a firm class rule: no “cut-downs” of anyone, ever; mutual support and encouragement in such a risk-taking endeavor is an absolute must for everyone to succeed.

A Secondary School Model for Student Oral Assessment

First the teacher and class discuss Krashen’s hypotheses and their implications for classroom behavior. Then the teacher posts the “Wheel of Competence” chart on the classroom wall and refers to it often throughout the course as a rationale for various activities that occur in class. Since beginners have the largest language gaps, students learn that *Strategic Competence* is vital for those times when the conversation is at risk for breakdown due to language or cultural limitations on the part of either conversation partner. Students start by learning to manipulate the conversation with phrases such as “Hable más despacio, por favor”; “Repita, por favor”; “¿Qué quiere decir/qué significa eso?”; “Entiendo/No entiendo.”

Next, students learn the important role that circumlocution plays in accelerating students’ language development (Berry-Bravo 1993). When words are forgotten, or topics and experiences are shared that are not easily recognized across cultures, circumlocution kicks in to bridge the gap. First year students are encouraged to avoid translation and define in Spanish new vocabulary orally and in writing whenever possible to practice for those times when a conversational partner might not be bilingual. Instead of *zapato* = *shoe*, students start

to think in Spanish when they communicate *zapato* = "ropa para los pies." Typical *definiciones* by first year students include explanations such as *una peluca* = "pelo falso"; *un autobús* = "un carro largo y grande y amarillo para muchas personas"; *una iglesia* = "casa de Dios"; *clase de geometría* = "clase donde estudiamos problemas de números, círculos, triángulos y líneas." Early definitions are characterized by a great number of grammatical and orthographic errors, but the meaning of the definitions are usually quite clear, e.g., one Spanish II student defined *la playa* thus: "Es una lugar para tomar el sol y nadar. Está cerca de un océano o un lago." One obvious challenge to teachers who consider this approach is to resist the temptation to correct homework papers for grammatical and/or orthographic errors when they set up an activity to focus on development of *Strategic Competence*, such as defining new vocabulary for homework. In a typical foreign language class, there are plenty of other opportunities to raise a student's consciousness about linguistic accuracy.

Students learn quickly that *Strategic Competence* encompasses the non-verbal as well: when a word is forgotten, a gesture or pantomime often fills the communication gap and enables partners to avoid English. Teachers refer to the Wheel of Competence chart to acknowledge students' attempts to give a circumlocution, to use a gesture to communicate, or to ask for clarification as a way of validating their own efforts at developing their *Strategic Competence*.

The payoff for encouraging explanations and definitions of new vocabulary rather than translation is obvious throughout the four-year program. During one third-year Spanish class, for example, non-native speakers depended heavily on *Strategic Competence* to communicate with native speaker classmates about a topic that the latter had raised, the news of the *chupacabras* scare in Puerto Rico. Students who are fortunate enough to work with native speakers often share, with great excitement, their growing success at communicating with colleagues at work who are lim-

ited-English speakers.

Next, first year students learn that *Discourse Competence* is the ability to converse in Spanish by asking and answering questions, giving commands, explaining, narrating, and describing. *Discourse Competence* provides an easily understandable rationale for vocabulary study: the greater the students' vocabulary, the more proficient they are at discourse or conversation. The less their vocabulary, the more they will have to rely on *Strategic Competence* strategies in order to get their needs met. Naturally, very early beginners' ability to participate in discourse is limited to routines and patterns learned in the course of daily conversational exchanges (Krashen and Terrell 1983, 42-43): "Hola, Buenos días, ¿Cómo está usted?" However, if both teachers and students discuss from time to time the central role that *Discourse Competence* plays in students' overall communicative competence, then lesson planning is facilitated and student motivation to participate in class is greater. Since input ultimately drives output (Krashen and Terrell 1983), the notion of *Discourse Competence* suggests that teachers provide students with as many opportunities as possible to converse with as many partners as possible, to expose them to maximum input opportunities.

Beginning students learn that *Sociolinguistic Competence* is a measure of their ability to say and do the right thing at the right time in an authentic situation. A reasonable goal for *Sociolinguistic Competence* for beginners consists mainly of an awareness of the *tú* and *usted* distinction, and, when appropriate and arising naturally in class, the introduction of words and phrases that are culturally appropriate for a variety of settings. Typical first year exposure to *Sociolinguistic Competence* has ranged from the use of ¡Ay! for *Ouch!* to learning appropriate contexts for expressions such as ¡Qué barbaridad! ¡Chévere! ¡Qué va! to discussion of some appropriate (and inappropriate!) gestures to accompany common expressions. In addition, students learn to appreciate the linguistic diversity of the Spanish-speaking world via the variety of words that

denote the same object: *autobús* / *camión* / *guagua* or diverse objects, as *guagua* in some countries denotes a baby.

Finally, students receive instruction on the *Linguistic Competence* component of their studies, the component most recognizable to high school Spanish teachers: the ability to recognize and use the correct forms and structures of Spanish. Every time students work on grammar, they are working on *Linguistic Competence*. In addition to teaching these structures, however, caution must be exercised: student motivation to study grammar and to participate in classroom conversation is greatly enhanced if they are also given realistic expectations for their ability to control grammar in their speech. Classroom experience supports research familiar to us on this topic (VanPatten 1986; Lee and VanPatten 1995, 21–23): it is inevitable that learners make particular kinds of errors throughout all stages of the acquisition process. High school students' speech errors appear and subsequently disappear as long as students attend to comprehensible input and do their part to work with at-home assignments to support classroom activities. Acknowledgment of this simple truth about acquisition may disturb some who still fear the fossilization bogey, but for many teachers it can be liberating. The teacher's satisfaction no longer depends on student mastery of *ser* vs. *estar*, for example; rather, it comes from providing as many opportunities as possible for students to hear, read, and use *ser* and *estar* in context so that acquisition of correct forms takes place in a permanent way.

Immersion, High School Style

As students develop the foundation for success in the acquisition process they apply theory and learning strategies immediately as they plunge into an immersion classroom. Actual percentage of time spent in Spanish varies among seven Spanish teachers, but the Departmental consensus is that we try for total immersion from day one in Spanish I. The text in this case is ¡*Bravo!* (Terrell et al. 1995) and is based on

a communicative approach to instruction. Typical classroom activities include a wide variety of games, TPR activities, activities that provide comprehensible input (Picture File, video segments, focused listening practice in which students make inferences about overheard conversations on the CD program), partner and small group interviews, surveys, whole and small group discussions, linguistic practice in class and on a computer tutorial, singing, reading authentic texts and texts written for students, homework evaluation, exploration of cross-cultural issues, and introduction to Big C culture across the Spanish-speaking world. The teacher's role as "sage on the stage" rapidly diminishes as students become familiar with the classroom routines and their growing production facilitates their shift to center stage.

Mundelein High School is on a block schedule in which students complete one year of Spanish in the equivalent of a semester (two terms of nine weeks each, meeting daily for ninety minutes.) First year Spanish students are evaluated twice per course for oral competence at the end of the first and second term of each course. To give students more objective feedback, teachers from a *different* class evaluate students, i.e., no students are evaluated by their own instructor. Teachers take turns creating the evaluation schedule and volunteer their preparation time over the course of two to three days to evaluate their assigned class. Thus, students leave regular class to be tested and return to class when testing is over (approximately five minutes), missing a minimal amount of instruction time.

Because first year students demonstrate sufficient output in the *Strategic*, *Sociolinguistic* and *Discourse* domains, Mundelein Spanish teachers agreed to measure first and second year Spanish students in all competences except the *Linguistic* component (Appendix). Teachers feel that free-write samples and traditional tests elicit more information regarding students' knowledge about *Linguistic Competence* at this stage of acquisition than do oral evaluations; our preliminary hypothesis (after

considerable hours watching student videotapes of benchmark tests) suggests that there is sufficient output and need for feedback to students regarding the extent of grammar control *in their speech* starting at third year.

Testing during the first term focuses on *Strategic*, *Sociolinguistic*, and *Discourse Competences*. Students are tested and audio taped individually by another teacher-evaluator. In some cases, for the Department's own information, students are videotaped as well. The evaluator advises students that they will mark the rubric for successful competences—what they do well—rather than for errors. Linguistic errors do not factor into the students' score unless they interfere with communication of the message. The evaluator begins with a simple warm-up activity of an interview, asking questions that are based on topics explored in the chapters of the text to date, e.g., *¿Cómo te llamas?*, *¿Cuántos años tienes?*, *¿Dónde vives?*, *¿Qué te gusta hacer los fines de semana?*, *¿Cómo es tu familia?*, etc. Questions are selected from a pool of general questions, but are determined by the conversation rather than dictate to it. The evaluator checks appropriate areas on the evaluation rubric (Appendix): Does the student greet the evaluator when s/he enters the room? Is there any evidence of the use of *usted*? To what extent does the student answer questions? Is there evidence that the student goes beyond the core vocabulary provided in the text as a result of attention to daily conversational input? When the evaluator feels s/he has a sufficient language sample to score the student in *Discourse* and *Sociolinguistic Competences*, the evaluator and student turn to the "Explain It, Please" activity (Lee and VanPatten 1995, 163) to measure *Strategic Competence*.

In this segment of the test, students select a slip of paper at random from a basket. The slip contains instructions such as "Explain what a 'hippopotamus' is to someone who has never seen or heard of one," or "Explain what a 'telescope' is to someone who has never seen or used one." Items to explain are chosen specifically to include

those vocabulary words that students are *not* likely to encounter in a first year class. The purpose is to demonstrate to teachers and to students the extent of the student's *Strategic Competence*: how well does the student make the most of the language that he or she has when faced with a conversation in which the topic has not been covered in Spanish I? A pool of some thirty cues was created for the "Explain It, Please" task, with words and phrases like *wig*, *cash register*, *pointer*, *bridge*, *diving board*, *Chandler's notebook*, *graffiti*, *football helmet*, and *receipt*, among others, as the cues for the circumlocution task. Evaluators listen, watch carefully, and try to guess as students communicate the secret cue on the paper they have pulled. Highly competent students are encouraged, if time permits, to pull as many papers as they can explain, in order to give the evaluator a larger language sample to evaluate.

The second-term evaluation task is focused primarily on *Discourse Competence*, with other areas noted when apparent. In this end-of-course task, students work in pairs on a role-play situation. They pull their respective roles just a few minutes before they are to be tested. While the students study their instructions, the evaluator cues up their audiotapes in front of each student. Then, given approximately three to four minutes, students act out the roles they were assigned. The following is typical of role-play situations given (separately) to first-year students:

Partner A: You are a student in Spanish I who needs to get help from your Spanish-speaking friend who is in an advanced Spanish class, because you have a big exam coming up. Hints: Try to convince your friend to help you. Tell how you feel! Set up a time and place to study. Tell the friend what help you need.

Partner B: You are very good in Spanish. Your partner is a friend who is studying beginning Spanish, and needs your help. But you don't have time! You are very busy with your own school work and a party

you've been waiting to attend all year. Try to come to some agreement so that everyone is happy.

Reactions and Conclusions

Over the past two years, feedback from students as well as observations of an obvious rise in quantity and quality of classroom participation suggest that benchmark testing using the above-described rubric has had a significant impact in our classrooms. Although at this time benchmark scores are not figured into the students' grades, students take the benchmark testing quite seriously and are eager to see and discuss their results. Some teachers use the benchmark data as a prompt for teacher-student correspondence throughout the course in which students reflect on their efforts and progress to date. Students who don't do well usually are able to articulate why: "I haven't been practicing enough defining, describing, or using circumlocution"; "I haven't studied enough vocabulary to do well in Discourse Proficiency"; "I forgot to greet the evaluator"; "I blanked out, so I need to study more vocabulary," and so on. Students who do achieve a 2 or above in each category are quite proud of themselves. In their letters, they relate how their zeroing in on specific strategies throughout the course pays off, not only during the benchmark tests, but in their jobs and social situations where they encounter native Spanish speakers.

From a teacher's perspective, lesson planning becomes purposeful with the communicative competence rubric as a model and guide. Each potential activity for the week's plan is checked against the four competences; if the connection is not clear, the activity is rejected in favor of something more clearly connected to the rubric outcomes. Homework is no longer busywork; it is practice for one or more competences. For homework, students frequently use

semantic mapping, defining, describing, and using circumlocution in addition to the more traditional fill-in-the-blank grammar exercises. Once the competence model was incorporated into her own teaching, this writer became more aware of the lack of regular attention to *Sociolinguistic Competence* in her plans; new and fun activities to develop this competence resulted.

High school Spanish teachers face ever-increasing challenges to their success as teachers and their students' success at acquiring a second language. At the same time, social and career opportunities for students who become competent in Spanish are growing exponentially in much of the United States. Students who receive meaningful feedback on their progress are likely to accept greater responsibility for their own learning and develop their competence way beyond what many lay people believe is possible in high school. The current assessment model used by Mundelein High School teachers is one example of how theory applied to practice results in greater student success, so that students learn not only to flap their wings, but to soar.¹

■ NOTE

¹The author thanks Mary Rogers of Friends University, Kansas for comments on a draft of this article.

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Appendix

Mundelein High School, International Studies For: _____
 Language Proficiency Scale: Spanish I, II Interviewer: _____
 Term 1 2 3 4 Yr _____ Student's Teacher _____

Quality & Extent of Communication (Discourse Competency)

Extensive comprehension and vocabulary. You communicate easily & with confidence on a range of topics *beyond* what is typical for a language learner at your level. Your meaning is clear; when necessary, you know how to explain what you mean. You rarely, if ever, miss or search for a word. You stay in Spanish to meet your needs.

Key words: extensive communication/elaborates/flexible/confident/actively engaged.

| | |
|--------|--------|
| Task 1 | Task 2 |
|--------|--------|

3 3

Good comprehension and a large vocabulary enable you to communicate with confidence on the topic(s). Occasional gaps in vocabulary may cause you to search for a word or use a wrong word, but your errors do not interfere with your meaning or the flow of the conversation. Like a 3, you don't need English to communicate effectively.

Key words: good communication w/o elaboration/confident/actively engaged.

2 2

You comprehend most or all of what your conversational partner says. You communicate somewhat on the topic(s), but conversation is hindered by gaps in basic vocabulary. These gaps cause you to miss words, and/or have to search for words you need, and/or your ideas don't always flow logically. There may be evidence that you rely on English to get your ideas across. **Key words:** limited communication/vocabulary gaps/potential conversation breakdown/somewhat engaged

1 1

Inability to comprehend your partner and/or a small vocabulary means communication is limited to a few words & memorized phrases. Conversation is too short, too difficult and/or there is too much interference from English to get a reasonable language sample.

Key words: little or no communicative ability/extensive gaps in vocabulary

0 0

Verbal & Non-Verbal Communication Strategies (Strategic Competency)

| Strategies Used by Speaker to Negotiate Meaning | |
|--|--|
| Checks to verify comprehension _____ _____ _____ _____ | Asks for help in L2 (Repita/¿Cómo?/¿Qué significa?/etc.) _____ _____ _____ _____ |
| Uses gestures/mimes/acts _____ _____ _____ | Circumlocutes _____ _____ _____ |
| Creates/approximates a word _____ _____ _____ | Other (note down here): _____ _____ _____ |

Speaker utilizes two or more different strategies to keep the conversation going.

2 2

Speaker uses at least one strategy to keep the conversation flowing.

1 1

No evidence of either verbal or non-verbal strategies used to sustain conversation.

0 0

Culturally Appropriate Language & Behavior (Sociolinguistic Competency)

| | |
|---|--|
| Appropriate control of <i>tú</i> vs. <i>usted</i> : _____ | no use evident ___ emerging ___ consistent |
| Appropriate phrases and/or body language for: _____ | ___ greeting ___ leave-taking ___ reacting |
| Notes: | ___ interrupting ___ giving an opinion |

Consistent control of culturally appropriate language & behavior.

2 2

Emerging control of culturally appropriate language & behavior.

1 1

No evidence of culturally appropriate language or behavior.

0 0