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Lindsay Brooks
OISE/University of Toronto

Paired performance in a test of oral proficiency

In a test of oral proficiency, the interaction between test-takers and their co-participants makes their performances inextricably linked (Luoma, 2004; McNamara, 1997; Weir, 2005). Studies have shown an interlocutor effect when a test-taker and tester interact (Brown, 2003, 2005; Lumley & Brown, 1996; O'Sullivan, 2000; Ross & Berwick, 1992) as well as when two test-takers interact in a paired test of oral proficiency (Berry, 2007; Iwashita, 1996; O'Sullivan, 2002). Although performance is co-constructed regardless of whom the test-taker interacts with (Chalhoub-Deville, 2003; Deville & Chalhoub-Deville, 2006; McNamara, 1997; Swain, 2001), in the paired format, the potential variability and unpredictability is thought to pose more of a challenge in terms of some of the psychometric considerations in testing in which test performance is viewed as a product of an individual. However, in examining co-constructed performance, different perspectives are needed and as McNamara (1997) suggests, there should be "a renewed focus on the social dimension of interaction" (p. 459) rather than the cognitive perspective, which has until recently dominated in language testing. Embedding performance within Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) theories, in which "the boundaries between social and individual functioning are quite permeable" (Wertsch, 1998, p. 110), provides this different perspective.

Framed within a sociocultural theory of mind (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986), with its emphasis on social mediation and interaction, the study I will present in this talk compares the differences in performance between adult ESL test-takers participating in an oral proficiency test, in which they interacted with an examiner, and the same test-takers participating in a paired oral proficiency test, in which they interacted with another student. The data in the study are drawn from a larger thesis study comparing the two test formats in the context of relatively high stakes exit testing from an Academic Preparation Program at a large Canadian university. All of the participants (N=72) were tested both individually and in pairs as they engaged in discussions with comparable speaking prompts. Following a brief overview of the theoretical framework and some key references in the literature, I will present the study and the co-constructed performances and interaction in both test formats. I analyzed test performance through quantitative and qualitative methods and I investigated test-taker perception through semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. After presenting both the qualitative and quantitative analyses, I will finish the talk by discussing pedagogical implications and implications for test theory and practice based on the findings.