

# Maximising Student Involvement in Interview Tests

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Interview tests are a common feature of many foreign language communication courses. In this article I describe an approach to interview tests that aims to maximize student involvement by having students produce the question items, play the roles of both interviewer and interviewee, and assess the performance of their peers. Through participation in every part of the interview test, students are provided with more opportunities to showcase their language skills and have greater motivation to review lesson materials.

**O**ral Proficiency Interview tests are a form of productive language tests used in many language courses and as components of commercial language tests including EIKEN, IELTS (the International English Language Testing System), and TEAP (Test of English for Academic Purposes). The flexible format of interview tests allow instructors to assess a range of language skills and non-verbal forms of communicative competence, commonly through question-and-answer and role-play tasks (Okada & Greer, 2013, p.288). However, when an interview test is conducted by a professional, such as a member of the teaching staff, power becomes primarily invested in the interviewer over that of the interviewee (Kormos, 1999, p.164), and it has been suggested that when East Asian students are placed in an interview situation they tend to subordinate themselves to the interviewer, which can serve to limit the language they produce (Young, 1995). Furthermore, while there are two roles in an interview, students generally only get to play one of them—that of the interviewee. This is quite distinct from many tasks students experience in the EFL classroom, which often require them to participate in multiple roles. In this article, I describe a peer interview approach implemented in a Japanese university that attempted to increase students' creative input into, and to maximize their involvement in, the interview assessment.

## Participants

The interview tests were conducted at a private university in Chiba Prefecture, Japan, with a total of 135 first- and second-year students from eight classes, 61 from the Faculty of Education (22 female, 39 male), and 74 from the Faculty of English and IT Management (38 female, 36 male), with a modal age of 20 years. The majority (106) of the students were Japanese, with 29 students representing several other Asian countries (Nepal, China, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines). Class sizes ranged from four to twenty-eight students and their respective English levels ranged from false beginner to upper-intermediate.

## Oral Proficiency Interview Format

### 1. Preparing the Interview Questions

The lesson prior to the interview test was set aside for preparation. In order to maximize student participation in the interview test, the students were asked to generate interview questions based on the topics and language studied during the course. Students were asked to prepare three or four interview questions for each of the four topics that had been covered in the course.

### 2. Interview Practice

Once the questions had been prepared, some time was spent eliciting and practicing language for both for the interviewer and interviewee roles. For instance, interviewers practised how to move from one topic to another (e.g. "Let's talk about fashion now"), and what to do to encourage answers (e.g. "Tell me more"). Students assuming the interviewee role practised asking for repetition and clarification (e.g. "Do you mean clothes?"). The students then practiced both interviewing and being interviewed by each other. Finally, the students were informed that they would be interviewing each other in the test. After this, I collected the question lists prepared by the students. To prepare for the interview tests with lower-level classes, I collated the student-prepared questions into a single set of interview questions. Example questions for one topic have been reproduced in Table 1.

**Table 1. Interview Questions for a Lower-level Class**

Music
1. What kind of music do you like?
2. Do you like J-pop or K-pop better? Why?
3. While you are doing homework, do you listen to music? If YES, What do you listen to?

With questions produced by students in higher-level classes, I corrected each student's interview questions. Some questions produced by a student for one of the topics have been reproduced in Table 2.

**Table 2. Interview Questions by a Higher-level Student**

Superstitions
1. What kind of superstitions do you believe in?
2. Do you believe in fortune telling? What kind of fortune telling do you think is true?
3. Do you believe in aliens? Why/Why not?
4. Do you believe that ghosts exist? Why/Why not?

### 3. Conducting the Peer Interviews

The peer interviews took place face-to-face in front of the rest of the class. They were conducted in a chain-like fashion, whereby Student A interviewed Student B, Student B then interviewed Student C, and so on, until student Z interviewed Student A to complete the chain. Students were allowed to refer to their question sheet when playing the interviewer's role, but not when playing the interviewee's role. The interview questions used depended on the level of the class and are outlined in Table 3.

**Table 3. Interview Questions Used by Different Classes**

Class Level	Interview Questions	Preparation Time
Low	Collated questions produced by the class	Yes
Mid	Corrected questions produced by the student	No
High	Corrected questions produced by another student	No

### 4. The Rest of the Class

One reason I decided to have the interviews take place in front of the rest of the class was to help re-

duce the anxiety the students may feel speaking in front of other people. However, I gave students who had been identified as suffering from social phobias, autism, or who found face-to-face communication especially challenging the option of taking the test individually with me. None took advantage of this option, instead they opted to re-arrange the test space to improve comfort levels. This, for instance, was achieved by increasing the distance between interviewer and interviewee, or by changing the angles of the chairs so that they could control the amount of eye contact.

Since I did not want the rest of the class to passively observe their classmates' interviews (as this can lead to boredom and disruptive noise), each student was given a mark sheet requiring them to evaluate each of their classmate's performances as both interviewer and interviewee. Sivan (2000) found that as well as maintaining focus on the test takers, many students consider peer marking to be an activity that is fair, valuable, and enjoyable. The students were informed that their overall score for the test would be a combination of the marks I awarded them and the average of the total marks from their peers. A sample cell of the peer marking task is provided in Table 4.

**Table 4. Peer Marking Cell**

Name: _____	
Interviewer	Interviewee
Pronunciation Score: /5	Pronunciation Score: /5
Delivery Score: /15	Content Score: /10
Total Score: /20	Delivery Score: /15
	Total Score: /30
<b>Comments:</b>	

### Student Feedback

After the peer interviews and after the students had been informed of their scores, they were asked to reflect on their experiences of the peer interview by completing a seven-item questionnaire.

The results obtained from the multiple option items and the binary items are presented in Tables 5 and 6, respectively.

**Table 5. Multiple Option Item Results**

Response	1. How did you feel when your teacher told you about this activity?	3. How did you feel about being interviewed by your classmates?	4. How did you feel about interviewing your classmates?
Interested	26	25	20
Excited	12	13	19
Happy	5	6	6
Worried	21	14	15
Nervous	25	28	29
Surprised	25	17	11
No Feeling	17	23	20
No Response	4	4	6

In response to Item 1 (How did you feel when your teacher told you about this activity?), the students' responses indicated that the peer interviewing component was unexpected, but it was an activity that interested them, while also creating a sense of trepidation. In response to Item 3, which concerned the students' feelings about being interviewed by each other, students expressed roughly equal amounts of unconcern, trepidation, and interest in doing so. The results from Item 4 (How did you feel about interviewing your classmates?) revealed that students were more likely to feel trepidation about interviewing their peers than unconcern. In addition, feelings of interest and excitement were also common.

**Table 6. Binary Item Results**

Item	Yes	No
2. Have you done peer interviewing before?	0	135
5. Was it difficult to do peer interviewing?	90	45
6. Do you think you needed more training in how to peer interview?	41	92
7. Would you like to do peer interviewing again?	80	55

In response to Item 2, which asked the students if they had done peer interviewing before, all students stated that they had no such prior experience. This suggests that they did not seem to connect their interactions during lesson tasks with the assessment. Item 5 followed up on the questions regarding the students' feelings by asking them if they felt that interviewing their peers was difficult. A vast majority of students responded that this was the case. Feedback included comments such as "I was worried that my English was not good enough to allow me to interview others," and, "I didn't have confidence, so I was nervous and worried."

The responses to Item 6 (Do you think you needed more training in how to peer interview?) clearly indicate that the students felt the training was sufficient. Feedback included comments such as "I cooperated and I was able to do it," "We needed to think for ourselves," but also, "I didn't know if my way of thinking was correct." The response to Item 7, which asked whether the students would like to undertake peer interviewing again, was relatively positive. Feedback included comments such as "Sometimes is okay," and "I want to do it more."

With regard to the peer marking component, the majority of students paid careful attention to their classmates' performances, and took the activity seriously, which may have influenced their responses to Item 5 of the questionnaire. When the total peer marks for an individual were averaged, they were found to be close to the marks that I assigned, but the students' assignment of points tended to be five to ten percent lower. In other words, my students were slightly less generous in their marking than I was.

## Discussion

Peer interview tests are easy for students to understand, require little additional preparation on the part of the teacher, and are well-received by the students. Having students generate the questions for the interview test encouraged them to review past material from the course more effectively than they would have done for a teacher-generated interview test, and also provided the students with writing practice that they would not otherwise have had. In this sense, peer interview tests allow teachers to use assessments as an opportunity for learning (William et al., 2004) instead of being just an objective measure of competence (Easen & Bolden, 2005). Requiring each student to play both the interviewer and interviewee roles substantially increases the language they produce (by giving the teacher a greater sample on which to base their

assessment) and also creates authentic opportunities for students to demonstrate their abilities when repair organization occurs during discourse (Kasper & Ross, 2007). In addition, removing the teacher from the interview itself means that students can share power equally by playing both interviewer and interviewee roles. Furthermore, the peer interview format offers flexibility to teachers. Whether teaching alone or with an assistant teacher, I have used these kinds of peer interview tests in high schools as well as in university classes. The format can also easily be adapted and combined with other approaches to improve the students' interview skills. An example of such is Nutt's (2017) approach which involves repeating the task with multiple teachers. Furthermore, the inclusion of the peer assessment component gives students the opportunity to closely scrutinize their classmates' performances, guided by criteria and standards of desired performance. Both assessor and assessee benefit from this process by working actively with the criteria (van den Berg, Admiraal & Pilot, 2006), and this can deepen the students' understanding of what is considered high and low performance (Vu & Dall'Alba, 2007).

## Conclusion

In this article, I have described an approach to interview testing that maximizes student involvement in all steps of the interview process. That is, students are responsible for making the questions, acting as both interviewers and interviewees and also evaluating their peers. The approach is flexible, easy to implement, and was well received by the students. In this respect, I recommend teachers try to implement it as part of their language courses.

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