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On oral exam in Britain

THE WORD "oracy" has not long been in the dictionaries, but by next year thousands of schoolchildren in UK will know what it means, since it will be a compulsory element of the GCSE English examination.

"The assessment objectives must provide opportunities for candidates to demonstrate their ability to communicate effectively in spoken English," say experts.

Unfortunately, the business of testing the spoken word is full of hazards. So until assessment techniques can be made reliable candidates will get a double certificate : a main grade, and a separate one for oracy. But everyone will need at least Grade 5 in it to pass the exam as a whole.

An example if the hazards : examinars who mark written scripts do their best not to be influenced by handwriting, though they may subtract marks for bad "presentation" and spelling. How very much harder to ignore their oral equivalents : not only the examinees' accents, but also their facial expressions and, indeed, their whole body language.

Tapes might seem the answer, but in practice they can take up an unmanageable amount of time. Perversely, too, they may do candidates less than justice because, unless they are transcribed and edited so as to cut out the hesitations, false starts ellipses and repetitions we all use when we are talking, they can make even a very intelligent speaker sound inarticulate; this is as true of ex-Pdesident Nixon as it is of a bright fifthformer. But a transcription will not do either, since we bring to it the expectations of a reader rather than a listener, thus presumably defeating the object.

Just as tricky is the problem of how to set up an oral exam in the first place. CSE English had an oral element, though not a compulsory one. Pupils were required to read from a text or to conduct among themselves a debate on some issue of the day in the inhibiting presence of the examiner. Or it might be done by formal talks or interviews.

Examiners will try to order things better. One idea is to get away from those "random exchanges of views" of the sort which one hears in the BBC's Stop the Week. There must be a purpose, say the National Criteria. To avoid the artificiality of a debate, pupils must be given a feeling that they have a reason for spouting, apart, of course, from the mere desire for marks.

But the examiners must also be clear what their purpose is. "There is likely to be uncertainty," said a guide for teachers put out last year by the Secondary Examinations Council, "over what to assess, and how." Those last two words are not a colloquialism, though they might well have been.

A syllabus devised last year by the Midland Examining Group carried a seven-point list of things for which candidates would be awarded marks in group discussions. They included; organisation of ideas, clarity of delivery, directness of communication, giving convincing expression to thoughts and feelings, ability to develop ideas and so on.

How are all these qualities to be identified and evaluated? The Government's Assessment of Performance Unit has been trying out various techniques, as part of its Language Monitoring Project, for judging oracy. The APU points out that not all of the exercises it has used for these dummy runs would be right for the national exam. In some the pupil was encouraged to talk about "the most interesting thing learned recently," or to describe a complicated bridge structure, or an experiment he or she had just done, or to explain, say how a spider makes her web. Assessore are advised not to prompt the pupil.

In other exercises, two or more pupils were asked to imagine they were in different jobs and to discess which was the most valuable: a somewhat "artificial" set-up. In another, two pupils were each given a map, one of which was out of date and the pupil with the upto-date map was asked to give directions, as though on the telephone, to the other.

Some of the transcribed results have geen published and in many of them it seems clear that what is being tested is imagination and intelligence rather than a detachable quality called "oracy". The assessment routines suggested are remarkably cumbersome. Nevertheless, the APU claims "a significant advance in the testing of spoken language". Meanwhile, the School Curriculum Development Committee is about to launch a monster project in schools; it will cost £1.5m and take six years.

Its object is not only to find ways of making children talk better, and of testing them at it, but also to "raise the status of talk in the classroom for pupils of all ages", and "enhance the role of speech in the learning process", in the words of Keith Kirby, the Committee's energetic principal professional officer.

A considered attack on the whole concept appeared at the beginning of this year in the Salisbury Review, the Tory quarterly. Its author, Jonathan Worthen, called the oral element "particularly meretricious" and "opposed to real learning". Arguing that "good spoken English results from good teaching based on written English", he declared: "The aim of the GCSE is in fact to breed out traditional literary study by surrounding it by a mishmash of other 'ways' of 'responding' to literature," and he feared for "the traditional discursive essay".

Keith Kirby at the SCDC, and the oracy project's director, John Johnson, indignantly defend their position, pointing to the part speech has always played in teaching, from Socrates's time, through the medieval schools down to the Oxford tutorial. "What are undergraduates' supervisions and seminars if not a verbal interchange?" Mr Johnson said.

Both deny that oral learning need temper the wind to weaker pupils. Mr Kirby said: "I see talking and writing having similar aims. We tend to use writing for things we already know but speech can often be a more effective way of learning. The APU found that pupils could solve problems in science by talking together which baffled them when they tacked them alone.

"Most people would agree that their ability to talk has been far more closely connected with their success in life than writing has. The schools reverse this. We're trying to get rid of the idea that 'talk isn't work'."

Courtesy: The Independent