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Oral Proficiency Interviews and Student Motivation

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Introduction

This article looks at the motivational benefits of conducting an Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) with younger EFL students, aged 12 to 15, and especially how teachers might approach the planning and administering of a successful OPI. My co-teacher and I became very interested in OPIs while investigating ways to provide our EFL students with distinct short-term goals for their studies.

Although at this age some students may entertain vague ideas of study abroad, for most students The EIKEN STEP test second stage, perhaps the most influential and well known oral test for younger EFL learners in Japan, contributes much more substantially to concrete student interest in their oral communication studies. We hoped that by introducing regular OPIs we could set a clear goal for all students and to some extent simulate the extrinsic motivating effects of the EIKEN test. Unlike the Eiken test however, which primarily seeks to evaluate students, our emphasis was on providing a goal through which students could build confidence and experience success in their EFL course.

Student Motivation and OPIs.

For the past five consecutive years my co-teacher and I have conducted OPIs with our students, EFL learners aged from 12 to 15, as one way to provide students with a purpose for their study regarding the spoken elements of their EFL study program. Each term the classes finish with an OPI designed to test the oral components covered in the term. For the students this represents a final evaluation, however, from a teacher perspective it is also important to have students complete the OPI with a feeling of success and



progression.

Through questionnaires and informal feedback from students after taking the OPIs we have seen a steady increase in the positive feedback. We asked students to complete short evaluation forms directly after each interview in an attempt to gauge whether students felt they were enjoying the interview process and whether it was having a positive influence on their motivation regarding their attitudes toward their study of English. In our last recorded data we found that in a group of 200 third year JHS students 88% of students indicated that they strongly agreed that they had enjoyed the process of taking the interview, while 96% indicated that after taking the interview they felt they would like to become more proficient English speakers. Furthermore, from a qualitative point of view we feel strongly that since incorporating these interviews into our curriculum on a regular basis, oral communication classes in general have improved in student focus and participation. Many educators have commented on the links between achievement and motivation. Littlejohn (2008) comments: “opportunities for learners to see what they can do are important in developing a sense of competency and purpose” (p.219). By implementing OPIs teachers can give each and every student such an opportunity to achieve well and thus gain in motivation.

That language testing provides students with considerable short term extrinsic motivation is clearly visible in the hours of effort and study students spend preparing for such tests. However, our particular aim was to give individual students positive and confidence building experiences that would bring them to our oral communication class with greater motivation and interest. We have, over the past five years constantly tested and refined the various elements of the interview to come up with a set of basic strategies for designing and carrying out the interviews successfully.

Strategies for Conducting Successful OPIs

1. Keep pressure to a minimum.
2. Gradually increase difficulty but finish at a level comfortable for the student.
3. Thorough preparation.
4. Positive body language.

To avoid unnecessary pressure on students, teachers should schedule sufficient



time to conduct the interviews. In my experience a 2-minute OPI is sufficient for younger EFL learners. As classes in Junior High are limited in time it is important that the rotation of the students through the interviews runs smoothly and efficiently. Rather than calling students up, which wastes time locating and getting them to the interview room or space, arrange for the next student to be interviewed to be ready and waiting just outside the interview room or close nearby to the interview area. This will greatly help to facilitate the process. Also, to reduce pressure on students, try to use an empty available room close to the classroom so that students feel more at ease. Many students feel very self-conscious speaking a foreign language in front of their peers and will behave nervously if forced to do so, seriously diminishing the positive effect of the process. If the class is large in numbers schedule the OPI over 2 lessons, providing other students with textbook activities or some other appropriate class work.

During the OPI itself care should be taken that the OPI increases in difficulty until the student is no longer answering questions with confidence. At this point the Interviewer should return to a level the student is comfortable with to allow the OPI to finish on a positive note. To develop a feel for when students are no longer feeling challenged but threatened by the difficulty admittedly takes plenty of practice administering the interviews, however considering you may administer 20 interviews in a 45 or 50 minute class new teachers will quickly develop a sense for when the difficulty of interviews needs to be adjusted to avoid discouraging students.

Preparation is vital to students completing the OPI successfully and leaving with a sense of satisfaction and achievement. Teachers should give out simple and thorough outlines of what is expected, well in advance and run practice interviews, with the class as a whole. As students become more familiar with the situation and challenges of taking OPIs, more responsibility can be shifted onto them to prepare for the interview individually and creatively. For example, with our first year students we ran interviews consisting of very simple question and answer routines, however by their third year students were creating original short talks with the teacher's role being to ask some follow up questions based on the short talk (see appendix 1).

When conducting the OPI teachers should greet the student with a welcoming warm smile and a friendly greeting using the student's name. I have found that by simply



using the student's name the atmosphere of the OPI is greatly improved and the student feels much more at ease. Teachers should also consider the factor of seating arrangements when conducting interviews. *The Book of Definitive Body Language* describes sitting directly opposite someone as, “defensive”, “likely to argue”, and “competitive”. Thus it may be better to sit at a slight angle to the student to avoid these feelings of negative pressure.

Conclusion.

Providing students with a clear short-term goal and feelings of success through regular OPIs can help give focus to an EFL course of study especially for younger learners. By careful planning and implementation of Oral Proficiency Interviews teachers can also expect to see higher and more engaged participation in regular class communicative activities. I highly recommend all teachers to try out using OPIs with their classrooms following these simple guidelines, by doing so both teacher and student should finish the interview with a big smile on their face.

References.

- Littlejohn, A. (2008). The Tip of the Iceberg: Factors Affecting Learners' Motivation. *RELC Journal* 39(2). 214-255.
- Norris-Holt, J. (2001), Motivation as a Contributing Factor in Second Language Acquisition. Retrieved on January 14th 2011 from <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Norris-Motivation.html>
- Pease, A. and Pease, B. (2004). *The Definitive Book of Body Language*. New York: Bantam

Further Reading.

- Hughes, R. (2005). The Need for Oral Proficiency Testing As A Motivational Tool in Japanese Universities. *Journal of Regional Studies*. 347-352.

Appendix 1.

Possible OPI outlines.

Example: First Year JHS Students OPI, Term 1.



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Goal: Student are required to ask the teacher 5 different questions from a list of ten.
Students must initiate all questions.

Example Third-Year JHS Students OPI, Term 3.

Goal: Students talk about their plans/goals and hopes at High School next year for 1 minute and respond to 3 spontaneous and undecided questions from the teacher.

