

Speaking about Speaking: English Teachers' Practices and Views regarding Part A of the English National Test

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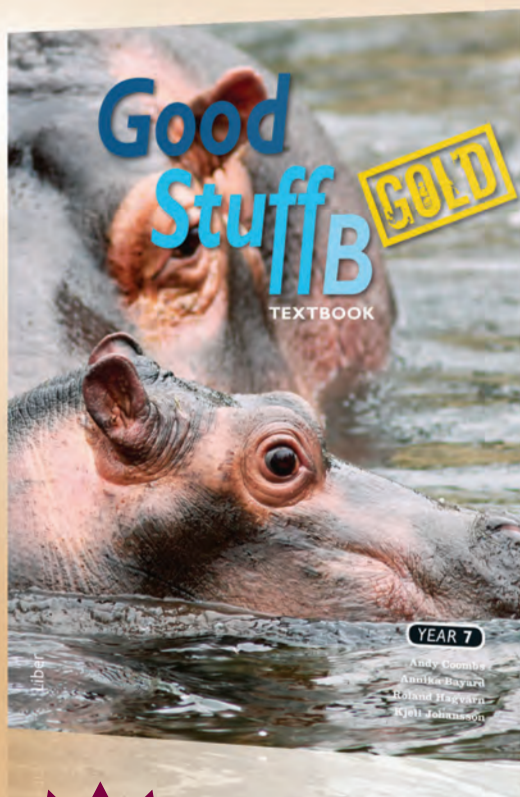
Another round of national tests in English has been completed and school is currently out for summer. It has been a year since we promised to return to the readers of *Lingua* with news about the latest findings from the research project "Testing Talk", in which we investigate Part A, Speaking, of the national test in English in 9th grade. The project aims to provide an overview of issues at the heart of performance and assessment of oral language, and in this article, we sum up some findings from a nationwide questionnaire and interviews with English teachers. We focus on results about how teachers group the students for the speaking test and recording practices, and view this paper as a contribution to the ongoing discussion about national tests among English teachers.

Teachers as examiners

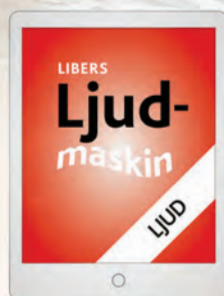
From a global perspective, it is relatively uncommon that countries adopt a procedure in which the students' own teacher functions as the examiner in high-stakes speaking tests, but this is what we do in Sweden. Here, the National Agency for Education and the test constructors put a high level of faith in teachers, who administer the test and score their own students. After all, it is the teachers who know their students best. Thus, our national testing system can be said to add a very important dimension to the profession, since teachers' demanding work of conducting, assessing, and grading national tests clearly are consequential for learners in many ways. For instance,

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acceptance to higher education relies on grade point averages and, to a certain extent, scores on the national test influence the final subject grade. Teachers are also put under pressure from various authorities (and at times also from guardians), mainly due to the fact that results on national tests and final grades at school level are commonly used for marketing purposes. Two examples of other countries that use teachers as examiners in high-stakes *speaking* tests are Norway and New Zealand. In New Zealand, an innovative large assessment reform called *interact* was recently implemented in foreign language education. Teachers are required to collect "three instances of interaction for



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summative grading purposes” over the school year (East, 2014, p. 5) and various resources have been made available to assist teachers in assessment. Assessment resources are also available to teachers here in Sweden, where the NAFS project (responsible for constructing the English test) provides supplementary material on their web page, free to use by anyone (<http://nafs.gu.se/>).

Treating the English national test in a standardized way

As most readers know, the English national test is a summative test aimed to measure overall language competence, and the speaking part is designed to measure general oral proficiency. Furthermore, although the test is not referred to as a standardized test by the test constructors, it carries the characteristics of standardized tests and is perceived and treated as such by teachers, as indicated by numerous comments from members of the 2,600+ members of the Swedish Facebook group “Engelska i åk 6–9”. Lyle F. Bachman, a renowned test scholar, lists characteristics of standardized tests, and we find his criteria to be applicable to the national test in English. For example, standardized tests should (1) build on the core content of the subject curriculum; (2) provide teachers/examiners with instructions for preparation, administration, and scoring that need to be abided by, and (3) be carefully tried out in a rigorous development process before used in high-stakes contexts. As our findings presented below reveal, English teachers in Sweden are ready to go to great lengths to fulfill what is required of them in terms of carrying out and assessing the speaking part of the national test in a manner consistent with standardization of test conditions.

”Interestingly, despite annual recommendations in the booklet, the proportion of teachers who record the test decreased from 41 % in 1998 to 22 % in 2007 ”

Part A – Focus: Speaking

The English national speaking test format is well known: teachers divide students into pairs or small groups, and, after a short warm up, so-called topic cards (with statements or questions) are used to elicit spoken output intended to resemble natural conversation between the students. Through a detailed booklet and a CD with test recordings, teachers are informed about how to conduct the test session. For example, teachers may prompt students if they run into difficulties, but as a general principle, the teacher should remain fairly passive (e.g. Swedish National Agency for Education, 2013). Further, teachers are strongly recommended to use recordings, but this is not a requirement. Interestingly, despite annual recommendations in the booklet, the proportion of teachers who record the test decreased from 41 % in 1998 to 22 % in 2007 (Velling Pedersen, 2007). According to Erickson (personal communication), the percentage of recordings has remained stable at 20–25 % for a long time. In sum, the faith put in teachers’ professionalism by the National Agency for Education and test constructors is thus strong, and for the sake of stakeholders, not least our students, it is important that our system works.

The study and research questions

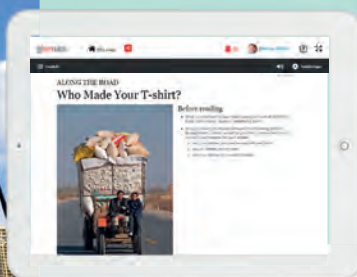
In a recent study, we examine English teachers’ practices and views regarding four aspects of the speaking test: *test-taker grouping, recording practices, the actual test occasion, and teacher/examiner participation in test conversations*. Results from the first two aspects and research questions are discussed here: (1) How are students grouped together in the speaking test? (2) Are audio recordings used? (If so, for what

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purpose(s)?) We will also briefly address the extent to which teacher certification, work experience, and gender may explain possible differences found in teachers' practices and views.

A web-survey and teacher interviews

A nationwide web-survey and teacher interviews were used to find the answers. The survey participants constitute a random sample of 204 English teachers in grades 7–9 from schools across Sweden. All but six reported having a teachers' degree and the mean age was 45. The teachers we interviewed (eleven women) participate in the Testing Talk project and have long teaching experience. They work at four different schools (two in a sparsely populated municipality and two in a large city).

Results

How are students grouped together?

The results revealed that the majority of teachers (60.8 %) use groups of three students (pairs: 23.5 %; groups of four or more: 15.7 %). About half (51.5 %) of the teachers decide which students to group together after consulting with the students. Whereas almost as many make the decision on their own (46.6 %), few let the students decide (2.0 %). More than six out of ten teachers (66.2 %) think it is "important" that students are at a similar proficiency level (14.7 % responded "very important"). In other words, the majority follows the recommendation. The rest said "somewhat important" (17.6 %) or "not very important" (1.5 %).

The interviews revealed several underlying reasons for how students are grouped. One teacher said: "*Eftersom vi spelar in nu så valde*

vi att ha eleverna i par, det är lättare med bara två röster på inspelningen" [Lärare 2]. Another argued that groups of three work better: "*Det blir fler bidrag till samtalet, det blir mer av ett samtal*" [Lärare 3]. Other teachers strongly

prioritize social relations when grouping their students. In sum, it is fair to say that all teachers treat the grouping of students seriously, mentioning that grouping matters for how comfortable students feel, which in turn may affect their production.

"There were no statistically significant differences between certified and non-certified teachers in terms of how they group students or whether they record the test or not"

Are audio recordings used? If so, for what purpose(s)?

Teacher practices differ greatly when it comes to recording the speaking test. About a quarter of all teachers (26.0 %) have made it a habit to record the test, but the majority does not use recordings (see Fig. 1):

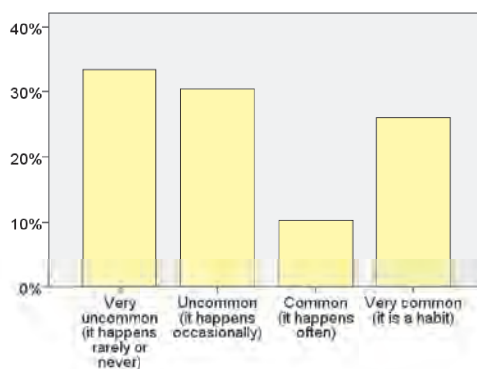


Figure 1. Frequency of responses to "Do you usually record the speaking test?"

Survey findings also showed that for a majority (72.3 %), co-assessment is uncommon.

We had one open-ended question where teachers were asked to elaborate on the use of recordings or not. Several comments dealt with



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Maggan Sundqvist, ämnesansvarig i Engelska och förstälärare vid Ljungstedts gymnasium i Linköping

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Main Issues ECHO Short Stories

arguments against recording, and the single most common of these was lack of time for re-listenings: “*Proven tar oerhört lång tid att genomföra. Jag har inte möjlighet att dessutom lyssna igenom ytterligare en gång.*” Others wrote that the technical aspect of recording requires extra work and many do not have access to recording equipment. There is also a concern that students would feel less relaxed if recorded. Quite a few claim that detailed notes made during the test (in combination with other speaking tasks during the year) are enough to make an informed decision on the spot. On the other hand, some teachers also state that they prefer to record and re-listen, since they want to be able to focus on the social situation during the test rather than assessment, and that the recordings help them isolate the students’ linguistic production and make more solid assessments. Interestingly, some were not familiar at all with the test constructors’ recommendation to record the speaking test.

To what extent do teacher certification, work experience, and gender explain possible differences found in teachers’ practices/behaviors/views?

There were no statistically significant differences between certified and non-certified teachers in terms of how they group students or whether they record the test or not. Likewise, there were no significant differences between male and female teachers with regard to grouping and recording practices. In comparison, work experience bore some relevance: the more experienced teachers were found to be more likely to let their students have a say in deciding how the groups should be composed. In other words, these three background variables do not help much in explaining why

teacher practices differ. (The background variables did, however, explain some differences found for teachers’ assessment and grading practices, but that is beyond the scope of the present article.)

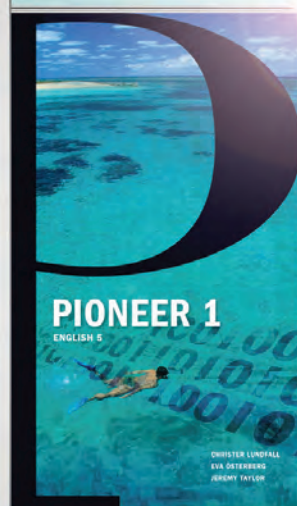
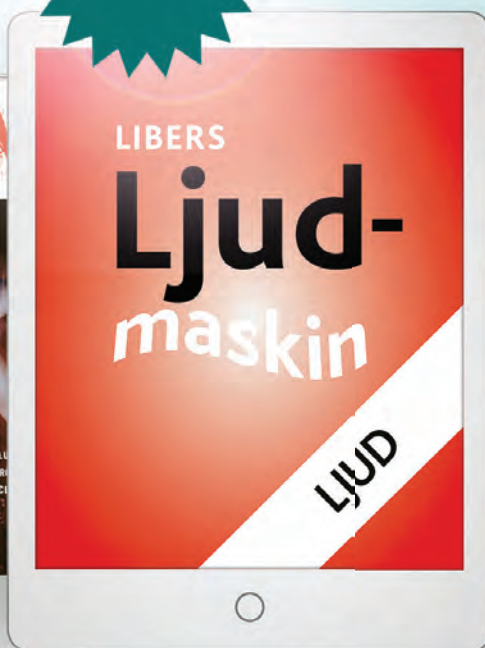
Discussion and conclusions

The results of our study pertaining to teachers’ practices and views regarding *grouping students* and *recording the speaking test* signal that interpreting and adhering to test instructions (given in the booklet and CD) present a challenge to teachers, for several reasons. Based on statistical and content analysis of survey and interview data respectively, it is possible to conclude that teacher practices and local conditions differ greatly. Some teachers test their students in pairs, others in groups of three, yet others in groups of four or even more students. At some schools, teachers have easy access to recording equipment (others have none). At some schools, substitute teachers are brought in to cover the regular teaching, while the class teacher administers all speaking tests (others have to administer the class and the test simultaneously). At some schools, a specific set speaking test date is employed (others spread out the test during the spring semester and conduct them in in-between empty slots). Altogether, it is possible to conclude that English teachers make the best test arrangements they can in accommodating for the differing needs among their students – something which we view as a high degree of professionalism among English teachers in Sweden – but from the perspective of standardization and individual students, testing conditions are certainly not the same.

Considering the fact that the test is perceived as standardized, and that test materials look very similar year after year, it is possible that teachers

”from the perspective of standardization and individual students, testing conditions are certainly not the same ”

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skim rather than carefully read the booklet. Thus, important new instructions from the test constructors may simply be missed. In our research we have noticed that the instructions for how to group students may be phrased differently from one year to another, only to give one example. As for recording practices, there are certainly vast differences in terms of the possibility for re-assessment, or collaborative assessment – recordings would be a prerequisite for, for example, re-assessments by the Schools Inspectorate. We can also see a potential problem with varying test dates for the speaking test. In other words, in terms of assessment, it might be a disadvantage to take the test very early in the spring compared to late; previous oral proficiency research (e.g. Sundqvist, 2009) has shown that learners may improve significantly over a period of two months (the “window” for schools to offer the speaking test is 20 weeks in the spring).

”Our study reveals many and major differences in teachers’ practices and views regarding the speaking test. We also see that the conditions at local schools strongly influence practices ”

Our study reveals many and major differences in teachers’ practices and views regarding the speaking test. We also see that the conditions at local schools strongly influence practices. As is the case with other national tests used in Sweden, an official aim of the national test in English is to contribute to equity in assessment and grading. If politicians and the National Agency for Education are serious about this aim, suitable testing conditions must be guaranteed for students as well as teachers.

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Testing Talk är ett projekt finansierat av Vetenskapsrådet [dnr 2012-4129]. Mer information och länkar till publikationer och respektive forskarprofil finns här: <http://www.kau.se/testing-talk>

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