Defining the Construct of Second Language Speaking Ability

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This article summarizes how language ability in general and speaking ability in particular have been defined over the years in the field of second language assessment. It further describes how previous definitions have emerged and influenced the evolution of our current understanding of second language speaking ability. The article first introduces the theories of second language ability in general, which implicate the construct definitions of second language speaking ability. It argues that the notion of communicative competence or communicative language ability has greatly changed the view of language teaching/learning and testing. It then describes two approaches to performance assessment (construct-centered and task-centered approaches) focusing more on speaking ability, to demonstrate how these different approaches have influenced second language speaking assessment. Finally, the article discusses topics of future importance for defining and testing second language speaking ability.

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I. Introduction

The construct of speaking ability is the primary focus of second language speaking tests since the way in which a construct is defined for a particular test becomes the basis of inferences derived from the test performance (AERA, APA, & NCME, 2014; Bachman & Palmer, 1996, 2010; Luoma, 2004; McNamara, 1996). Theoretical definitions of speaking ability have affected both how to test (i.e., operationalization) and how to measure (i.e., measurement procedures) speaking ability for a particular testing purpose. In addition, continuous attempts have been made to provide theoretical and operational definitions of the construct of speaking ability by eliciting components of the construct from linguistics theories or based on testing purposes/contexts. Previous research has attempted to explain speaking ability in general-purpose second language tests. However, at present, it seems that there is still no agreed-upon model of the construct of speaking ability. Therefore, different arguments about the components of speaking ability need to be reviewed first.

An initial study of the theories of second language ability in general shows that, although these theories do not define speaking ability apart from other skills/areas of language, they possess definite implications for speaking ability. Thus, these theories must first be explored, along with their possible applications to speaking ability. Then, the current review defines speaking ability within the context of performance assessment since the evolution of performance assessment has greatly affected the constructs of language tests (Bachman, 2002; McNamara, 1996; Purpura, 2016). Moreover, the introduction of a new perspective on second language performance assessment, namely the task-centered approach, has distinguished itself from the previous, more construct-based, approach (Brown, Hudson, Norris, & Bonk, 2002; Long & Norris, 2004; Norris, Brown, Hudson, & Yoshioka, 1998). Thus, I review how these two approaches (i.e., the construct-centered and task-centered approaches) define speaking ability differently for performance assessment.