

Quality of Oral Production in English through Online Communication: the Case of Business English in Spain

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ABSTRACT: The quality of oral production in English varies depending on the context in which the communicator is found, either in a face-to-face setting or in a virtual environment. Particularly in the business world, the quality of communication in English is an essential factor in assessing the communicator. It is precisely in this environment where online communication has prevailed over face-to-face communication in recent years due to savings in travel costs and time. However, such production and oral interaction is not always done with the desired level of quality. In this article, we discuss precisely what is meant by quality of oral production in English and carry out a statistical analysis on how that capacity increases or decreases when communication occurs through a webcam and over the Internet.

Keywords: oral production and oral comprehension, communicative competence, Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

Calidad de la producción oral en inglés a través de la comunicación en línea: el caso del inglés empresarial en España

RESUMEN: La calidad de la producción oral en inglés varía dependiendo del contexto donde se encuentre el comunicador, ya sea en un entorno presencial o en un entorno virtual. Especialmente en el mundo empresarial, la calidad de la comunicación en inglés constituye un factor fundamental a la hora de evaluar al comunicador. Es en este entorno precisamente donde en estos últimos años ha prevalecido la comunicación en línea sobre la comunicación presencial, debido al ahorro en costes de viajes y tiempo. Pero no siempre esa producción e interacción oral se hace con la calidad deseada. En este artículo analizaremos precisamente qué es lo que se entiende por calidad de la producción oral en inglés y haremos un análisis estadístico de cómo aumenta o se reduce dicha calidad cuando la comunicación se produce a través de una cámara web y a través de internet.

Palabras clave: Producción oral y comprensión oral, competencia comunicativa, Tecnologías de la Información y la Comunicación (TIC).

1. INTRODUCTION

English has undoubtedly become the common language in the international business world (Graddol, 2006). In fact, companies that have implemented internationalisation strategies of their production process of market services are those that are best positioned to withstand the current economic situation in Spain (Danvila and Sastre, 2007). Good communication

amongst participants is the best tool for promoting an internationalisation strategy, and such communication occurs almost inevitably in English.

The main reasons for the need to achieve an English level that enables negotiating with all of the language's difficulties and nuances (conveying the values and benefits of the company, expressing innovation and new ideas) are, according to Neeley (2012), professor at the Harvard Business School: competitive pressure, which forces one to communicate with many people from different backgrounds for the business undertaking to work; globalisation of tasks and resources, with geographically dispersed teams working to achieve certain goals; and, finally, management of international mergers and acquisitions, where nuances are crucial in reaching an agreement or not. In the present article, we will review the situation of oral production—its quality and assessment— particularly in the business world in Spain. We will also present the results of our research carried out in the multinational business environment, with participants who claim to use the English language as a working tool in their companies.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Oral production and its assessment

Assessing oral expression in a second language tends to be a difficult and problematic task, as it cannot be assessed as objectively as written expression. As Alderson, Clapham and Wall (1998) observe, it may be due to factors such as variation in the different ways the assessment may be conducted.

That type of ambiguity or subjectivity tends to be key in the difficulty of conducting oral evaluation of a second language. This does not occur with the evaluation of written language, since in this case it is easier to identify and quantify the factors that comprise its quality.

In assessing oral proficiency, many communication factors come into play, since oral communication involves negotiation of meanings between two or more people in a particular context (O'Malley and Pierce, 1996). These factors are not only linguistic, such as pronunciation, grammar, fluency or comprehension; they are also pragmatic, which make the verbal message effective from a communication standpoint, especially in professional contexts. Hence, the evaluator has a great responsibility that is ethically indispensable. Alarcón (2007: 191) addresses three conditions that must be present at all stages of evaluation: reliability, validity and viability. These three conditions must be taken into account by both the evaluators and the evaluated participants, and are indeed set out in the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001). According to Piñeiro (2007), validity is the degree to which a test actually measures what it purports to measure. For example, in an oral expression test, logically the level of the student's mastery of this skill is meant to be measured and should not interfere with anything else, such as, for example, the epistemological ability to interpret a graph. Reliability explores to what extent the test results are consistent: if candidates were to take the test tomorrow after having done it today, would they get the same marks? (Alderson, Clapham and Wall, 1995). The viability is related to the scope of the test and the circumstances to which it applies.

One of the most renowned organisations for second language assessment, ALTE (Association of Language Testers in Europe, www.alte.org), in its code for good practice, *Principles of Good Practice for ALTE Examinations* (2001), sets four key points when evaluating quality: validity, reliability, impact and practicality. Impact, in this case, refers to the fairness of the evaluation carried out for the person being assessed. If we consider, as we have said earlier, that one of the problems of oral evaluation is subjectivity, impact becomes a key factor in avoiding it.

The parameters involved in the interpretation of an oral statement are numerous and concomitant: to the morphosyntactic and semantic elements we must specifically add prosody, such as intonation, cadence changes or pauses (Garcia - Debenc, 2010: 105). Many linguists and researchers have defined oral production from a standpoint of communication and effectiveness. According to Widdowson (1978), all oral communication must be measured from two perspectives: formal and functional. The formal use of language, which he calls usage, refers to the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences placing emphasis on the prescription when speaking. The functional perspective refers to what he calls use: the ability to use knowledge so that effective communication occurs. It is, in brief, how language is used.

If we analyse this distinction, it is reminiscent of the one postulated by Saussure in 1916, between language and speech. According to Saussure, language is the system used as a means of communication. It lies in the subconscious of individuals and is comprised of signs. Speech is the realisation of the communicative act of using language. It is the voluntary and social act of the speaker, and depends on the context in which he or she is communicating (Saussure, 1916). From our point of view and that of many experts, communication success in a second language lies in effective communication, and not in the formal correctness of language (Boonkit, 2010; Graddol, 2006). This effective communication can be achieved with proper use of language without involving its perfect use with no mistakes. However, we have to ask ourselves if effective communication occurring in a less-than-perfect second language meets the objectives of functionality or, conversely, if both communicative and linguistic quality are required to achieve functionality. The business environment, in which we have conducted the research presented here and analysed effective communication and quality with which it occurs through the evaluation of such oral production.

2.2. Oral proficiency assessment in individual oral production and interactions

Charles (2007) distinguishes two types of verbal communication: as an individual process and as a reciprocal process. In individual communication, the communicator normally produces a monologue that is conditioned by time, the audience or the given context, whether it is a monologue, a speech or a presentation. However, whenever there is reciprocity in which a process of continuous joint communication exists, other additional aspects must be taken into account, such as mutual understanding, empathy, turn taking and the ability to express oneself.

To test speaking ability, we should require candidates to demonstrate their ability to use language in ways which are characteristic of interactive speech. Obviously, for certain contexts we are also interested in their ability to perform extended monologues where informational routines are likely to predominate. (Weir, 2005: 103)

In assessing individual oral production, we must consider whether it occurs spontaneously or if the speech has already been prepared beforehand. In the first case, the use of language is more natural and improvised, so it is reasonable to expect the appearance and natural acceptance of certain features (stutters, lack of morphological coordination, etc.) that would not be admitted in planned speech. According to Hughes (2011), spontaneous oral production is full of pauses and hesitations, even for native speakers. Although one may appreciate more the expressive power of language in real time, vocabulary will be more limited, grammar mistakes will be more common and repetitions to fill the speech will be more commonly used.

Language interaction takes place through individual actions that involve engaging with others. Therefore, having a cognitive negotiation of meanings and messages, the assessment cannot be based solely on individual components such as pronunciation, grammar, fluency and coherence; it should also take into consideration the bilateral or multilateral development of a conversation, the reaction of the speakers at the discursive reciprocity and the intention of continuing the conversation (Douglas, 1997). As in the use of their own language, certain factors must be taken into account in this assessment, such as the context of real application, which should be appropriate from the point of view of the approximation to the prototypical real situations of use (Hughes, 2011). Regarding this last point, we believe that it is essential for oral assessment to simulate a context similar to the reality that the evaluated speakers may be facing. That way, one will manage to assess oral proficiency from a pragmatic standpoint.

When evaluators must make these types of decisions, and in order to reduce subjectivity in oral evaluations, the use of common and reasonable criteria in this process is crucial. This approach must be valid for both an individual assessor and a community of evaluators who need to reach a consensus together. Hence, the need to use scales of assessment or evaluation, as discussed in section 3.3 of this article.

2.3. Importance of verbal communication in the business world

Verbal communication is indispensable in the business world, not only in a second language, but also in the mother tongue, in order to achieve business goals (Bargiela-Chiappini et al, 2007). However, with respect to the second language, usually English, it has been found that workers are not prepared to face the most common business situations (Crossling and Ward, 2002). For these authors, oral discourse in business English is related to the immediate effect. Scollon and Scollon (1995) characterise the verbal business discourse as one with a goal or purpose (goal-directed) based on rationality and objectivity, although it should be added that discourse is not usually trivial, but purpose-driven. These authors confirm the importance of the influence of context and the participating communicators, by stating that '... the type of communication seems to depend on the nature of the relationship between the parties communicating' (p.187). To Bargiela Chiappini (2009) and Poncini (2007), the importance of verbal speech in Business English is how to accomplish or conduct business via presentations, negotiations, meetings, etc., in different cultural contexts. In fact, they establish a connection between language, culture and organisation of discourse, saying that due to these causes, the analysis of oral discourse in Business English is not a mere analysis of a conversation in the broad sense of the word, but must serve multiple external and internal factors such as business objective, social relationships, appearance or company prestige.

When we speak of verbal language in the business world, we cannot forget a type of complementary language to the words formed by gestures, posture, looks that express moods, wittingly or not: non-verbal communication. It is so important that, in face-to-face communication, up to 65% of the information can be considered non-verbal (gestures, movements, signals, etc.) (Ongallo, 2007). Non-verbal and verbal communication tend to be used together and not in a contradictory way. Non-verbal communication often acts as a regulator of the communication process, helping to expand or reduce the intensity of the message or refine its meanings (Reinsch, 1996).

All these factors related to verbal business communication and its context are what have led us to conduct research on communicative quality in terms of the environment in which it occurs. In this case, the environment is one of the most common to the business world: online web conference communication. If verbal communication is so tied to the business world and we want to analyse its quality in such an environment, we must know how to evaluate it.

In the following section, we will explain the methodology that has been implemented in the experiment carried out with Spanish employees from different multinational companies who need to communicate online in English for work.

3. METHODOLOGY

The experiment carried out in this study is the last phase of a previous study also conducted on oral production in the business world within Spain.

The first phase of research was carried out through interviews with HR department managers who valued the importance of English communication within their companies. This phase aimed to study the needs of English language use within companies, following variables such as the profile of the following: the company and workers that needed to communicate in English (subject variable); the most frequent communicative situations in which workers have to communicate in English (contextual variable); and the necessary communicative skills for efficient communication (linguistic variable).

Since it was shown in this phase that communication quality was the characteristic that predominated over the functionality of English communication, that the speakers had the same profile (higher education, between the ages of 35 and 45) and that the most frequent communicative situations in the business world were presentations and meetings, it was decided to broaden the study and put it in practice.

With this aim, the participating companies' workers were offered the possibility of taking oral tests; one individual (a presentation) and another involving interaction (a meeting) that would be recorded online for later evaluation. The final sample was 19 subjects in the individual oral production test and 12 in the interaction test. It may seem like a small representative number but given the exploratory nature of this research, the sample selection methods have not been probabilistic. We had certain difficulty in finding subjects who would voluntarily speak in English in front of a camera, allowing their errors to be observed, recorded and documented. On the other hand, it was necessary that the subjects had skills regarding the use of new technologies, since they were going to use them for online meetings, which had to be observed and studied in detail (Silverman, 2004). That way,

we would be able to reduce to a minimum the possible conflicts or problems not strictly related to the aim of our research.

The technique that was used in the oral test was a simulated real-work situation, that is, simulating a situation that a participant can find in his or her real work life, making it appear to be real despite knowing that the situation is not actually happening (Cabré and Gómez de Enterría, 2007). Cabré and Gómez de Enterría (2007) highlight the importance for learners to be able to carry out tasks that are directly related to their professional field because, in the language-teaching framework with professional goals, simulation provides us with an excellent methodological exercise that allows us to perform simultaneous tasks in order to teach particular aspects of specialised communication, in a way that the students/participants can acquire the necessary linguistic and functional skills. Following the guidelines recommended by Rising (2009), the simulation to be used in this research had to be pertinent to the participants' field in order to motivate them to engage and participate. The subsequently described tasks were designed with the intention of following the previously explained guidelines, which were then explained to the participant-volunteers, so that they understood the research goal of the test.

3.1. Participant Profile

All the participants who took part in the research study were workers from multinational corporations who communicated in the English language in a one-directional way or through interaction at least once per week, with an age range of 35-50 years and with higher education.

The first 19 participating volunteers were reduced to 12 in order to record the interaction tests; the remaining five could not participate due to scheduling difficulties and the insecurity they felt when speaking in English with strangers who were not part of their work environment. This number was accepted, since we wanted the participants for the interaction test to be the same ones who had performed the previous individual test.

3.2. Test Setting

In the case of our research, we have chosen online communication, since it is today an effective and economical communicative tool. In the case of the tests of this study, as the participants from different companies also belonged to different sectors, communication via the Internet saved participants and the researcher from having to travel to conduct the meetings or interviews, which could have taken up an excessive amount of time (Grau-Perejeoan, 2008). But the use of new technologies does not always facilitate immediate communication. The sessions also had to be recorded in order for us to conduct an exhaustive evaluation and observation, which added more difficulty to the research and, at the same time, provided the analysis with more reliability. Below we will explain how the oral production evaluation process was carried out.

3.3. Valuation scales used in the evaluation of individual production and in interaction

According to Valcárcel and Verdú (1995), the content of the communication is not enough to measure the student's communicative linguistic capacity; it is important to specify with

what accuracy that student is able to express both the notions and the functions, and this implies judgements of objective value. That level of accuracy is measured through valuation scales or oral evaluation rubrics. The design of these scales, according to Luoma (2004), depends on the type of test and its evaluative goals. In the case of this evaluation, and with the aim of facilitating this type of evaluation to possible companies that would like to have a simple and quick evaluation method in a situation of mass evaluation or staff hiring or promotion, a rubric or holistic marking criteria scale had to be made through a simple scale of three values, with the aim of being able to be used by non-linguistic evaluators. Because the oral test would be based on performing an actual task, in addition to accuracy, the following must also be taken into account: coherence, language proficiency and interaction skills, pronunciation and body language. As such, in addition to adding to the scale evaluative concepts of CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) and taking into account how much importance companies give to pronunciation and body language for quality in communication, we added these two last descriptors to the valuation table, which are not included in the framework. The following table shows the rubric model followed for the individual evaluation carried out by the researcher and co-evaluators, used to provide more coherence and reduce their subjectivity (Taylor and Galaczi, 2011). We will explain more on this point further on.

Figure 1. Valuation scale used in the oral evaluation of the participants.

DESCRIBERS	1(poor)/2(good)/3(very good)
Range of language	Knowledge of words and sentences to communicate effectively
Accuracy	Correct use of grammar in communication.
Fluency	Fluent expression without pauses or hesitation.
Coherence	Coherence in speech and use of connectors.
Pronunciation	Appropriate intonation and correct articulation of English sounds.
Body language or facial expression	Use of non-verbal language or gestures to attract the attention of the audience.

With respect to the valuation scale of the interaction test, we decided to maintain the same scale of individual production, since this way we could perform a contrastive study of a speaker’s production in a conversation in which he or she has to alter the script in real time, and therefore in which the preparation of the output is minimal. It is important to take into account that within the description that we have made on the concept of interaction, we must include the characteristics specified by CEFR, which are the following: respect of turn taking, collaboration, thematic development and conversation maintenance.

3.4. Oral tests

The tests to be designed for the different participants had to involve topics that were relevant for all of them, as the participants pertained to different professional sectors and had to feel motivated to speak with coherence in front of a camera (Volle, 2005). At the same

time, the tests also had to be in line with the results obtained in previous studies on the use of Business English that found presentations and meetings to be the most frequent communicative business situations in which the English language was used with business objectives.

Thus, a PowerPoint presentation was designed on a fictitious product based on nutritional meal-replacement pills. The participants, from this presentation, had to sell the product in the most effective way in English based on the presentation and record themselves.

3.5. Oral test evaluation

Considering that the content of the communication was not enough to measure the students' communicative linguistic capacity and it was necessary to be able to objectively specify with which level of accuracy the student was able to express him or herself (Valcárcel and Verdú, 1995), it was decided that, in addition to the researcher's evaluation, it would be appropriate for more evaluators to participate in the evaluation of the recording, in order to unify criteria and guarantee objectivity. "The validity and reliability of an instrument can only be revealed when it is applied by different evaluators and in different contexts" (Valcárcel and Verdú, 1995: 104). The evaluators were chosen according to the following criteria: having a high knowledge of the English language, having more than five years of teaching experience in the English language, having been evaluators of English language oral skills for specific purposes, and not knowing the participants involved in the oral test. Now the general results obtained will be explained.

4. RESULTS

At this point, it must be remembered that the evaluations performed in this study are descriptive and holistic, with a general diagnostic goal, and therefore the characteristics and their descriptors aim to provide a general and qualitative vision. However, a general statistical analysis has also been performed in order to complete the exploration from another perspective.

The results presented here consist of a summary of the study performed of the different descriptors and contrasted with the results of the co-evaluators, both in individual production and in interaction.

4.1. Analysis of data obtained in the oral evaluation

As has been previously explained, the number of participants was reduced to 12 in the interaction test, as a few of the 19 participants in the individual production were not available or willing to show their English level in front of strangers. In addition, there was also difficulty in agreeing on days and times to hold the online meeting, since the tests were going to be performed during non-working hours and from their own home. Statistically it provides few data to perform an inferential analysis, but enough to perform a descriptive study.

1. Range of language: knowledge of words and sentences to communicate effectively.
Regarding language proficiency, in general, the speakers were not shown to have had

sufficient vocabulary to communicate in a situation of formal interaction. We also observed repetition of ideas and words or basic expressions in the communication such as 'I agree', 'Yes, yes', 'You understand?*', 'You see?*', 'Well'. Expressions were also used incorrectly, such as 'on the one side' instead of 'on the one hand'. The participants also used false friends in the recorded presentations and meetings, such as 'actually' as a substitute for 'actualmente', which means 'currently' in English.

2. Accuracy. Grammatical correction in the use of the language.

Regarding the accuracy in the use of the language, 70% of the participants obtained the lowest score. Accuracy worsened even further when they interacted with one another and had to produce an answer without planning in advance, as opposed to in the individual oral presentation. Examples of lack of accuracy in interaction include the lack of the auxiliary verbs when asking questions: 'You understand me?*', lack of agreement: 'People is?*', or incorrect use of the verbs: 'As I told before?*', I 'prefer have more time?*. Lack of knowledge of plural forms: 'Childs?*', 'Childrens?*' or uncountable forms: 'People are many time?*'.

3. Fluency. Fluent expression with few pauses and hesitations.

Regarding the fluency with which the analysed workers communicated orally in an interaction, we must highlight that a high number obtained a low score (1/5 or 2/5) and no participant received a high score. If we compare these data with that obtained in the individual test, we can note that fluency begins to disappear in the case of interaction. As in the case of individual production, there were many doubtful pauses and fillers such as 'mmm', 'ok', 'well'. There was also the Spanish-influenced use of 'no?' instead of question tags at the end of a statement or indirect question. Some participants paused communication because they could not find the appropriate word or said, 'Let me think', 'I don't know how to say it' or they thought about the answer they were going to give for too long.

4. Coherent and cohesive speech

Regarding the coherence of the workers in interaction, it is shown to be reduced when there is a need for an immediate answer from the speakers. In general, there is not a great difference regarding the average results that were obtained in the individual test, but the number of participants with a minimum score did rise. In the interaction test, we observed that there were fewer connectors and that communicative flow was complemented by fillers. The agreement between the subject and the verb is reduced; the structure of communication is lost and the speakers do not unify ideas, so instead of using linear structures, random words are used.

5. Pronunciation. Appropriate intonation and accentuation, and well-articulated sounds.

In this skill we observe that almost 60% of the speakers obtained a minimum score (1/5) in pronunciation, which, if added to the average score, leads us to 90% of participants, bringing us to a negative result. This skill does not necessarily have to affect communication, and it does not necessarily have to vary depending on the communicative situation in which the speaker finds him or herself, since it is an acquired skill in learning a second language, remaining implicit in the production of a language (Alarcón, 2007). However, poor pronunciation in a professional environment can harm one's image, as it occurred in the case of our participants, for example, those who have a Spanish-influenced pronunciation when it comes to sounds like /p/, /t/, /sh/, or the pronunciation of the /e/ before words starting with the letter 's' as in Spanish or the pronunciation of the English /h/ like the Spanish /j/. We have also observed that a 'contagious' effect is produced with regard to poor pronunciation

in interaction, since when one person pronounces a word incorrectly, the other speaker does so as well.

6. Body/facial expression. Use of gestures to attract the audience's attention.

Regarding intonation and body language used in the communication, a high percentage obtained a low score. As such, we can conclude that the use of body language and facial expression in online interaction is scarce. On the one hand, this seems to be a logical outcome, since the communication is being performed before a web camera and the vision of other people is done through a monitor, which leaves little space for body language to be used. Some speakers made a nervous movement in their seat, rocking back and forth, or continuously moving towards the camera, which in some cases produced noise in the microphone that interfered with communication. Some put their hands on their face and others did not make a single facial expression.

7. Interaction. Maintaining conversation flow, participating, respecting others' turn to speak and collaborating.

Regarding interactive communication as such, only one worker obtained the lowest score and 11 obtained an average level. We consider this skill to be crucial, since it is key in this communicative situation in which there is a necessary flow of questions and answers, as in any communicative channel in which there is a transmitter and a receiver (Yus, 2007). In general, the communication has shown to be individualised, listening to each other but without maintaining a connection between the speakers. This lack of interaction has been observed due to lack of gestures such as nodding one's head in agreement. Between the speakers keeping the conversation, they say 'OK' yet they express different ideas and with no connection to what had been previously mentioned. Interruptions were not carried out correctly, either; each speaker spoke when they felt it was convenient. Here it is important to remember that response delay (due to the technology) has to do with these communicative overlaps.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Although our intention is not to extrapolate the data from this research, it is indeed an indicative research, providing a descriptive example of what happens in the Spanish business world. What the participants indicated as effective communication and quality in their professional world—a fact refuted by the HR managers, themselves, of the companies they worked for—proved to be of poor quality when that communication is done online. Users of online communication need to have knowledge of the tools or new technologies that will be employed. Participants who are not familiar with new technologies need more help and advice, as their lack of skills can delay online communication and interaction. Another drawback of this type of communication is that an individual giving a presentation through a webcam can easily read from a document, without leaving room for improvisation and without the evaluator even noticing, due to the lack of their physical presence. A limitation of synchronous online communication can be the lack of synchronisation between voice and image, which may sometimes cause the voice to delay in reaching the partner and may also produce overlapping turns in speaking and difficulty in communicating between several people.

In the case of interaction tests, although participants were aware of this impediment to synchronous communication, one or more participants spoke at the same time, which influenced the assessment of respect for turn taking, important fact in oral assessment and interaction.

Quality is essential, especially when competing in the international business world, and simple communication—without cohesive elements, without good pronunciation, without a rich vocabulary, without enough fluency and without the ability to interact and influence effectively—should not be considered valid, as it does not provide the necessary competitive edge. If we add the lack of expressive body language, particularly in the case of individual presentations in which it is fundamental for communicating and attracting the audience's attention, then speakers turn into mere producers of content without meeting a communicative business goal.

Regarding the analysed communicative skills, as seen in the issued evaluations, practically all show quality to worsen in online interaction, due to the character of immediate answering without previous preparation transmitted online.

All of this should lead us to reflect on and study how we can improve the communicative quality demanded in the business world when speakers have meetings online.

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