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Lynell Chvala

EXAMINING ORAL SKILLS IN LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOL IN NORWAY – A CLOSER LOOK AT GENRE AND SITUATION

Introduction/background

The current National Curriculum in Norway introduced in 2006 (hereafter referred to as LK06) identified five basic skills which were to permeate all subjects for the ten years of mandatory education in Norway. The ability of pupils to express themselves orally is one of these five basic skills. Some research has been done on the development of oral skills in Norwegian classrooms, but the majority of this work has focused on oral skills in Norwegian across the different subject classrooms. How oral skills are understood and assessed in English classrooms in lower secondary school, however, is an area in need of further inquiry.

English as a subject in school is included in the Norwegian National Curriculum from the first to the final year of compulsory education. English is also currently defined as a *prioritized subject*, together with Norwegian and mathematics, by the Ministry of Education (St. meld. Nr 11, 2008: 17–18).

One of the primary aims of English in Norwegian schools, as defined in general introduction to the subject, is that it should enable pupils to interact globally, in a variety of contexts, and use spoken and written English in a number of different communicative situations. These general aims are specifically reflected in the aims for the 8th – 10th grade where pupils are meant to be able to *adapt their spoken English to specific genres and situations* (LK06). This paper will then examine the degree to which local, teacher-produced oral exam tasks for English from 2010 provide pupils with the necessary information to do just this. The oral exam is viewed as the final, summative assessment of pupils' oral skills and is meant to be directly related to the continual assessment of pupils' oral skills over the previous three-year period.

In this study, a sampling of oral exam tasks from three different schools in Oslo will be analyzed in relation to the following questions:

- To what degree are genre and the context of situation defined in the exam tasks?
- Which genres and situations are most frequent, and how does this reflect the general aims of the English curriculum?

Theoretical background

In Norway, oral exam tasks are required to include both spoken presentation, as well as spoken interaction. This is in line with the framework of spoken language competences as described in the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR 2001). Speaking as a separate language skill readily lends itself to a dialogic understanding of language as developed by scholars such as Vgotsky and Bakhtin, both of whom assert that language is "hardly ever a totally individual affair" (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008: 161). Furthermore, in Halliday's systemic functional theory of language, speaking as a productive language skill is viewed as the result of a perceived need to communicate something to someone within both the immediate context of situation as well as the less tangible context of culture which permeates the situation (Butt, Fahey, Spinks and Yallop 1995).

Arguing for a discourse-based approach to second language learning and teaching, Celce-Murcia and Olshtain argue that "the process of enabling learners to become competent and efficient users of a new language" (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain 2005: 729) is the primary aim of second language instruction. In their article, they propose that of all competences identified in the work on communicative competence of Hymes, Canale and Swain, the "core" or central competence is discourse competence. They argue that the four competences which comprise communicative competence – the linguistic, sociocultural, discourse and strategic – do not exist as separate or independent competences, but are instead a part of a larger whole. At the center or "core" of this whole is discourse competence, which involves, from a top-down perspective, the necessary sociocultural competence to understand the cultural context of the discourse, while, from a bottom-up perspective, the necessary linguistic competence to provide the building blocks or the bottom-up resources necessary to produce the discourse. Strategic competence, in their model, refers to how well learners can apply the knowledge and resources available to them (including communicative strategies) in order to communicate intended meanings (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain 2005: 730–731). Understanding communicative competence in this way requires an explicit definition of discourse which Celce-Murcia and Olshtain define as:

[...] an instance of spoken or written language that has describable internal relationships of form and meaning that relate coherently to an external communicative function or purpose and a given audience/interlocutor. Furthermore, the external function or purpose can only be determined if one takes into account the context and the participants (i.e., all the relevant situational, social and cultural factors) in which the piece of discourse occurs). (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain 2005: 730)

Celce-Murcia and Olshtain's definition reflects Halliday's understanding of spoken or written texts as "harmonious" collections of meanings which are appropriate to the context, where a successful text must take into account the three basic aspects of language use: 1) the field (the topic and purpose of the text), 2) the tenor (the relationship between the producer of a text and its recipient), and 3) the mode (the type or form of the text that is being produced). Halliday's definition of mode and the notion of text types are also closely tied to Bahtia's definition of genre as:

[...] language use in a conventionalised communicative setting in order to give expression to a specific set of communicative goals [...] which give rise to stable structural forms by imposing constraints on the use of lexico-grammatical as well as discoursal resources. (Bhatia 2004)

In essence, all of these approaches to and theoretical understandings of discourse and language use are tied to an ability to respond appropriately to the context of situation or, in other words, to the demands of the topic, the purpose, the audience and the form of the language to be produced – be it oral or written. In this study, therefore, I will examine the degree to which these contextual clues are identified or defined in a sampling of oral exam tasks issued to pupils in 2010. This, in turn, will lead to a discussion of what type of oral texts these tasks may illicit from pupils and, therefore, gain insight into how this corresponds with the development of pupils' discourse competence in English and how it is related to the overall aims of this subject in Norwegian schools.

Materials/method

The materials for analysis in this study are a sampling of oral exam tasks from 2010 from three different schools in Oslo. These schools are geographically spread throughout the city and are referred to in the analysis in the following way: 1) school 1 which is located on the east side of the city and is referred to as the **Eastside school**, 2) school 2 which is located not far from the Aker River (which historically has divided the east and west sides of the city) and is referred to as the **Midtown school**, and, finally, 3) school 3 which is located on the west side of the city and is referred to as the **Westside school**.

It is also worth mentioning that, as there is no specific requirement as to the number of tasks a teacher can present to their pupils for this locally administered exam, the number of tasks from individual schools varied. The Eastside school submitted three tasks, while the Midtown school submitted only one and the Westside school a total of six.

As mentioned above, the aim of this study was to describe how genre and context of situation, analyzed as field, tenor, and mode were defined in the oral exam tasks provided to the pupils. In order to achieve this aim, discourse analysis was the method chosen to analyze the different task descriptions.

Analysis

The detailed analysis of individual tasks from each school is displayed in Appendix 1. Here I will discuss the similarities and differences found across the different schools in relation to the context of situation as specified in the different tasks.

We begin with the part of field which is meant to define the topic of the oral text which the pupils are to produce. For all of the tasks the topic of the oral text is, for the most part, clear. Some of the tasks provide a more open topic than others. Consider, for example, the difference between Shakespeare's tragedies as a topic, as opposed to "Being Young" or "the USA." In the tasks presented for the Westside and the Midtown schools, pictures were used in the text in order to support the

text in relation to the intended topic – or possible topics to choose from – of the presentation. The pictures are referred to explicitly in the task from the Midtown school (“Feel free to get inspiration from the pictures above.”); while previous work in class, as well as a field trip, are mentioned to help guide pupils in narrowing down the topic of the presentation. The oral task descriptions from the Eastside school were the only of the three which did not provide any pictures as a visual support for the topic of the presentation. There was, however, a picture inserted into each task description, but this picture did not have any direct relevance to the topics proposed in the task. It is also worth noting that the tasks for all schools provided pupils with a heading in bold which identified the overarching or overall topic of the oral text.

Secondly, the part of field which refers to the purpose of the oral task varied from school to school and, in some cases, from task to task at individual schools. All schools and all tasks used variations on the verb “to present”; for example, “present the topic,” “make a presentation,” and “prepare a presentation.” In addition, the Westside school had included in the task the description: “Remember to name your sources, and be prepared to talk about them and how you have worked and cooperated at the end of your presentation.” Aside from making and/or preparing a presentation, there was little else to find in terms of what the purpose of the oral text was. On examination of the assessment criteria, it became clearer that the purpose of the presentation was to provide information on the topic(s); it was moreover clearly stated that personal reflection and/or a personal opinion were necessary for the highest marks for all tasks from all schools. This information, however, was not in the task descriptions themselves.

So what possible conclusions can we draw from the analysis of the field of the oral text for the oral exam? Firstly, it is clear that the teachers writing these tasks have clearly connected them to topics taken up both in the teaching and in relation to the curricular aims for this subject. Often, they have provided pupils with clues in order to help them in recognizing the topic or possible topics of their presentations and, in one case, they have included information from past experiences in order to support the pupils. In relation to the purpose of the oral text, the purpose as defined in the tasks seems to be that of making an informative presentation. If we look, however, at the aims from the curriculum, we find that the only aim that specifically uses the word “present” is the following: “The pupil shall be able to present and discuss current events and interdisciplinary topics.” As both “current events” and “interdisciplinary topics” are very wide, overarching terms, we can see that – for the most part – all of the topics fall within this range. The question that arises, however, is how wide the topics provided by the teachers actually are. For example, where the Eastside school specifies “Shakespeare’s tragedies” and “Conflicts and Peace – Northern Ireland” as their topic, the Midtown school chooses “The USA – The Land of Opportunities” with then a list of possible sub-topics, whereas the Westside school presents the pupil with the topic “War” and leaves it to the pupil to “Prepare a presentation on one or more aspects of this subject.” What seems to come to light here is the differing demands on the pupils for determining the final topic of the presentation. It is important to note, however, that in the example with war as the theme, the teacher has tried to provide background clues in the text by referring them to previous work in class for the previous year. The following line is

also present in two of six tasks from the Westside school: "You are free to angle your presentation any way you want." It is a bit confusing what this actually means. Is this referring to determining the purpose of the presentation; for example, is the pupil to inform, to describe, to explain, to argue, to persuade, etc., or is this a statement referring to how the pupil will/should/could design the presentation ("angle it") to fit an audience or listener that the pupil has defined him/herself?

In terms of the mode or the type or form of the oral text, the Westside school defines it in the following way: "You can present your work in different ways using ICT, overhead, role play or music." Then there is a line included in all task descriptions which reads: "Still, don't forget that content is much more important than glitz." There are clues given that suggest that the intended oral text is meant to take the form of an informative presentation. The assessment criteria identify the need for an introduction, conclusion and a clear connection between the Power Point presentation and the oral presentation. However, from the task description, there is the suggestion of: 1) different tools and/or mediums of communication that can be used, i.e. ICT overhead, and/or music and – interestingly enough – 2) a different form of oral text which is not that of an informative oral presentation, i.e. a role-play.

Finally, in terms of the tenor or the relationship between the producer of a text and its recipient, the oral exam tasks were examined for a description or reference to who the intended audience or recipient of the text was meant to be. Here the results were conclusive. In the eleven oral exam tasks, there was no explicit reference to who the audience of the task was intended to be. In the task from the Midtown school, however, some contextual information was given in relation to the different roles the pupils could take. For example, the task description says: "You may present it as historian, a lecturer, a journalist, a guide, a TV reporter, etc." This was the closest that any of the oral exam tasks came to identifying the role of either the speaker or the recipient. It is interesting to see that the teacher writing this task has provided some contextual information to the pupils on their own role in the oral text, and through this information, it is then possible to determine to some degree if they have produced language which is appropriate for this particular role. What is still unclear, however, is the audience for this pupil-in-role. For example, is the *historian* presenting to *students*, *other historians/scholars*, at a press conference to *journalists*, etc.? This information, as far as I can ascertain, is meant to be determined by the pupil, either on their own or in collaboration with the teacher in the 48-hour preparation time. In terms of the analysis of the description of the context of situation, the analysis yielded the following conclusions:

The topics (field) included were quite wide and overarching in two of the three schools, namely the Midtown and the Westside schools. In terms of the Eastside school, however, the topics of the oral tasks were much more clearly defined – in some instances, defined to the extent of references to specific stories or texts.

The purpose (field) of the oral texts seems to be overwhelmingly that of delivering an oral text as a presentation or "to present" information and, perhaps, a reflection or opinion to an undefined audience.

The form of the oral text (mode), as reflected in the assessment criteria, seems to be that of an informative presentation. In many cases, however, there is variation

from specifying that the pupils are to produce an informative presentation or, for example, to perform a role-play (and then, further, what is the purpose of the role-play?). This lack of clarity is clearly shown in the oral exam task from the Midtown school where the task description states "Make clear how you choose to present it."

Finally, the audience of the text (which determines the tenor), as mentioned above is not explicitly defined in any of the oral exam tasks submitted. The audience, therefore, seems to consist of the two participants who are actually in attendance at the oral exam, namely, the teacher and the external examiner.

Discussion

Based on these findings, I would like to refer back to the aim of this study posed at the beginning of this article: To what degree are genre and the context of situation defined in the exam tasks? Based on the analysis of this small sample, the first general conclusion that could be drawn is that the exam tasks reflect a quite broad selection of topics for the oral text and that some teachers provide supporting visual clues meant to guide the pupils to possible subtopics, while others give their pupils a clear and more precise topic from the very start. Secondly, the purpose of the oral tasks seem to be "to present," and this can be found in every one of the tasks submitted. What is unclear in the different tasks, however, is what they are meant to present in the oral text. In other words, are the pupils in the process of presenting meant to *inform*, to *describe*, to *compare*, to *explain*, to *argue*, to *persuade*, etc.? In the assessment criteria for all of these tasks, pupils are to present their knowledge and to reflect and/or present an opinion or personal evaluation of the topic to achieve the highest mark, though neither of these are written explicitly in the tasks. Finally, it is noteworthy that the audience or the intended recipient of the oral text is not identified in any of the oral exam tasks submitted. If we refer back to the general aims for the subject of English in the Norwegian national curriculum, we find the following quote which was generally referred to in the beginning of this article:

To succeed in a world where English is used for international interpersonal communication, it is necessary to master the English language. Thus we need to [...] listen, speak, read and write, and to adapt our language to an ever increasing number of topics, areas of interest and communication situations. We must be able to distinguish between [...] informal and formal styles. Moreover, when using the language in communication, we must also be able to take cultural norms and conventions into consideration. (LK06)

It is interesting, therefore, to consider how well these oral exam tasks potentially illicit the functional use of oral English in communicative situations. Using a functional approach, language is meant "to do" for the person using it – and it is meant to do for a reason or a purpose and for a recipient or audience, in other words: in a communicative setting. What is perhaps worth taking away from this study is the degree to which the communicative settings, as reflected in the tasks submitted, reflect, thus far, a quite limited and school-centered context of situation.

Conclusions

As educators, it is always important to critically reflect on and question our own practices in relation to the purpose and competency demands of the subject in a real-life context. In this light, we must ask if the oral tasks submitted reflect the intermediate stage of development of discourse competence in relation to: 1) international interpersonal communication, and 2) adapting language (discourse) to communicative contexts, including formal/informal styles and the cultural norms related to defined audiences. As Celce-Murcia and Olshtain propose, developing pupils' communicative competence requires – at its very core – the development of pupils' discourse competence. From what is reflected in these tasks, there is quite a lot of inconsistency in relation to the top-down and/or bottom-up processing demands of discourse production as it is not entirely clear what the communicative situation is. This can be especially difficult for pupils who may not share an implicit understanding of what the context of the situation is or what the demands upon them are. The question can also be raised about the degree to which these oral exam tasks reflect overall pupil work with oral English in 8th to 10th grade. This reflects the need for further research into this area into: 1) what type of oral texts are pupils creating in lower secondary school, 2) how do these texts reflect the overall aims and/or the specific aims for this subject in the English curriculum, 3) how does the development of oral skills in English reflect a connection to the development of oral skills as a basic skill in other subjects in Norwegian schools. All of these questions are outside of the scope of this study, but all reflect a need for further research into this area.

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Ocena sprawności mówienia w norweskim gimnazjum – bliższe spojrzenie na gatunek i sytuację

Streszczenie

W Norwegii egzaminy ze sprawności mówienia są przeprowadzane samodzielnie przez szkoły. To powoduje, że nauczyciele sami muszą przygotować zadania egzaminacyjne oraz kryteria oceny. Chociaż narodowy program nauczania wskazuje na wiele celów związanych ze sprawnością mówienia, artykuł ten skupia się na jednym z nich: „uczniowie powinni być w stanie dostosować swój język mówiony i pisany do płci i sytuacji”.

W oparciu o system sformułowany przez Halliday'a (1994), lokalne egzaminy ze sprawności mówienia oraz kryteria ich oceny zostały przeanalizowane pod kątem stopnia, w jakim odnoszą się do wspomnianego wyżej celu, w oparciu o podstawowe aspekty dynamicznej teorii językowej (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008), oraz definicję płci sformułowaną przez Bahtia (2004). Materiały badawcze pochodzą z egzaminów przeprowadzonych w rejonie Oslo w latach 2009 i 2010.

Wyniki wskazują na szeroki zakres tematyki, częste użycie słowa 'present' bez wskazania celowości jego użycia, oraz brak jednoznacznie zdefiniowanego odbiorcy wypowiedzi.

Appendix

	TASK 1	TASK 2	TASK 3
Eastside school			
Part A – Presentation of a known topic			
Field – Topic	Shakespeare’s tragedies	Conflicts and Peace – Northern Ireland	Racism and segregation
Field – Purpose	“present the topic in any way you find appropriate” “present your sources and tell how you used/ worked with them” “in any way you find appropriate”	“present the topic in any way you find appropriate” “present your sources and tell how you used/ worked with them” “in any way you find appropriate”	“present the topic in any way you find appropriate” “present your sources and tell how you used/ worked with them” “in any way you find appropriate”
Mode – Form	Not defined	Not defined	Not defined
Tenor – Audience			
Part B – Individual conversation			
Field – Topic	<i>Blackadder meets William Shakespeare</i> – “Blackadder: Back and Forth,” scene 6	<i>The Sniper</i>	<i>The Boy who Painted Christ Black</i>
	OR	OR	OR
	The novel you have read this year	The novel you have read this year	The novel you have read this year
	OR	OR	OR
	Present the career of your dreams	Present the career of your dreams	Present the career of your dreams
Field – Purpose	Prepare a presentation	Prepare a presentation	Prepare a presentation
Mode – Form	?? (Subheading is <i>Individual Conversation</i> , but asks for a presentation)	(same)	(same)
Tenor – Audience	Not defined	Not defined	Not defined

Midtown school		TASK 1	
Field – Topic	The USA – The Land of Opportunities (feel free to get inspiration from the pictures above) Keywords: Immigration – Ellis Island The Civil War/slavery Segregation/Martin Luther King Jr. Different states/stopovers/stories The American Dream Famous Americans Music, film, TV, literature, etc. Pictures: Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, Barack Obama, Martin Luther King, Jr., Plains settlers, Dutch settlers, the KKK, Route 66 sign, picture in relation to Death Row in Texas, a map of the USA, a Coca-Cola ad, the Hollywood sign, American flag, picture of a Japanese interned during WW2, picture of a Northern soldier facing a Confederate soldier, Marilyn Monroe, John F. Kennedy		
Field – Purpose	Make a presentation on the given topic using some of the keywords below		
Mode – Form	Make clear how you choose to present it		
Tenor – Audience	Partially defined, but unclear Contextual clues: (student in role) You may present it as a historian, a lecturer, a journalist, a guide, a TV reporter, etc.		
Westside school		TASK 3	
Field – Topic	Film/Theatre/Music (integrates all three, or choose whatever focus you want within one or two of the topics) Pictures: Red Hot Chili Peppers, Bridget Jones Diary, drama performance	Field – Topic War (read texts, watched documentaries, visited concentration camps in Poland and Germany) The theme of war Pictures: concentration camp entrance, Mi Lai in Vietnam	Field – Topic War (read texts, watched documentaries, visited concentration camps in Poland and Germany) The theme of war Pictures: concentration camp entrance, World Trade Center, buildings on fire
Field – Purpose	Prepare a presentation Remember to name your sources, and be prepared to talk a bit about them and how you have worked and cooperated at the end of your presentation	Prepare a presentation Remember to name your sources, and be prepared to talk a bit about them and how you have worked and cooperated at the end of your presentation	Prepare a presentation Remember to name your sources, and be prepared to talk a bit about them and how you have worked and cooperated at the end of your presentation
Mode – Form	You can present your work in different ways using (CT, overhead, role play or music	(same)	(same)
Tenor – Audience	Not defined	Not defined	Not defined

	TASK 4	TASK 5	TASK 6
Field – Topic	USA The themes which you believe represent “The American Way of Life” in a typical way (You have read a few texts about the United States of America this year, and you have watched documentaries and films showing different aspects of USA) Remember to name your sources, and be prepared to talk a bit about them and how you have worked and cooperated at the end of your presentation Pictures: Barack Obama, a skyscraper, baseball	Being young The theme of “Being Young” (We have read texts and watched documentaries this year which in different ways focus on growing up and being a teenager) Pictures: from <i>Home Alone</i> , a teenager sitting at a computer, two teenage girls talking to one another	English speaking countries (The presentation) should contain one or more of the following aspects: – Culture – History – Geography Pictures: David Cameron, The Beatles, aboriginals, U2, a man playing bagpipes, Doris Lessing
Field – Purpose	Prepare a presentation	Prepare a presentation You are free to angle your presentation any way you want	Prepare a presentation You are free to angle your presentation any way you want
Mode – Form	You can present your work in different ways using ICT, overhead, role-play or music Still, don’t forget that content is much more important than glitz	You can present your work in different ways using ICT, overhead, role play or music Still, don’t forget that content is much more important than glitz	You can present your work in different ways using ICT, overhead, role-play or music Still, don’t forget that content is much more important than glitz
Tenor – Audience	Not defined	You are free to angle your presentation in any way you want Not defined	You are free to angle your presentation any way you want Not defined