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# OPIc-based Speaking Test for English Classes in Korea*

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The purpose of the current study is to analyze a model of OPIc-based speaking test for Korea English classroom. The research questions were (1). What is the English teachers' opinion on the current speaking teaching and testing? (2). Is the OPIc speaking test appropriate in the Korea English class? and (3). What are the English education students' perceptions of the OPIc-based speaking test for English classes? To answer the first research question, a survey was conducted targeting one hundred and forty-seven teachers. The result of the survey shows that Korea English teachers' great concern on the English teaching and speaking test are "communicative competence," "scoring and criteria," and "condition and need." To answer the second research question, the OPIc speaking test for the class was analyzed and it was found that in terms of the communicative competence," "scoring and criteria," and "condition and need" issues, OPIc based speaking test is appropriate in Korea English class. For the third research question, Q methodology was used targeting English education students and the result shows that most English education students strongly agree to the statements that the OPIc-based speaking test has the advantage to improve communicative competence. This study may provide the information about creating and adopting tests for English classes and relating standardized test and the English classes.

**[OPIc/ English speaking test/Korea English class]**

## I. INTRODUCTION

In Korea, English education's ultimate goal has been "improving communicative competence" since 6th English curriculum, especially from the inception of the 7th and revised 7th National curricula. While communicative competence is derived from the

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four skills--speaking, writing, reading, and listening--the emphasis has been on the productive skills, especially communicative competence in speaking. In TOEFL and TOEIC tests, a speaking test module was added also. At the same time, interest in speaking tests and the need for research into them has increased since teaching methodology is inevitably affected by assessment and as more attention is paid to communicative competence, assessment of performance is equally important. In keeping with such a need, research into the assessment of English speaking has been conducted by many researchers and current standardized speaking proficiency tests, such as TSE(The Test of Spoken English), SEP(Spoken English Proficiency Test) have been analyzed and other oral tests have been suggested and developed for use in Korea.

However, the research into the speaking tests which are appropriate to the Korea English class, and in line with the Korea English curriculum, is limited. In a survey questionnaire administered as part of this study, many teachers claimed that using a speaking test in class is very difficult due to the issues of practicality and reliability. Also, measures of student' speaking ability is based on an individual teacher's subjective judgments even though they know the importance of the reliability of the assessments. Even the teachers who try to alter their teaching style to become more communicative and focused on speaking and the use of more communicative and task-based activities, seem not to include a speaking test in their English class assessment.

When the speaking test is applied to an English class, its relation to the Korea curriculum and achievement goals and appropriateness to Korea education system should be considered along with the issue of practicality and reliability. Even though there are several tests which have been developed in Korea that consider the Korea educational setting, such as the tests developed by Seoul National University and Sook Myung University, ESPT(English Speaking Proficiency Test) and recently NEAT (National English Ability Test) which is developed by the government, a general and less official assessment for the class is still needed(Kim, 2010).

The main purpose of the current study is to analyze a model of a speaking test appropriate to the Korea English classroom environment and to relate one of the standardized speaking tests, Oral Proficiency Interview-computer(OPIc) with the less official speaking test for the class. For this purpose, a survey was conducted and English teachers' opinions on the current speaking teaching and testing models and their needs were analyzed. Based on the findings of this survey, the current study suggests the OPIc-based assessment for the English class, and offers an analysis of the issues raised by the

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survey results.[1] Following a review and an analysis of this model, the English education students' perceptions of an OPIc-based speaking test for the English classes in Korea are discussed using Q-methodology. The research questions of the current study were as follows:

1. What is the English teachers' opinion on the current speaking teaching and testing?
2. Is the OPIc speaking test appropriate in the Korea English class?
3. What are the English education students' perceptions of the OPIc-based speaking test for English classes?

## II. RESEARCH ON ENGLISH SPEAKING TESTS IN KOREA

In terms of testing, researchers have tried to enhance the accuracy, reliability and validity of tests and have discussed the scoring process or criteria, and subjective interference(Chalhoub-Deville, 1995; Choi, 1994; Lee, 2006; Shi, 2001; Upshur, J. A & Turner, C.E., 1995, 1999; Weigles, 1998). Some research has been done in Korea on specific issues surrounding the issue of rating. As an example, Kim(2007) investigated the effects of raters' language backgrounds and their attitudes toward World English and found out that these had a significant impact on their rating perception, rating criteria and the assessment process.

Several researchers analyzed English speaking proficiency tests used in Korea. For example, Lee and Kim(2007) compared two English speaking proficiency tests, IELTS and MATE and Koo and Kim(1997) have also examined the LATT Junior with the intention to improve English tests for primary school students. Some research discusses the testing model or rubrics involved in assessment. Lee(1999) suggested a working model of primary English language that would direct assessment; in this research, he considered both a process assessment and a product assessment based on the elementary curriculum. Lee and Kim(2007) have reviewed current speaking assessments and analyzed rating scales and proposed a speaking performance test manual with assessment criteria.

Other researchers have analyzed test tasks. Shin(2006) analyzed story-telling task samples in a speaking test to provide useful information in speaking test development.

[1] Even though Oral Proficiency Interview(OPI) is relatively recently known in Korea, it has been widespread for language testing and researched by various researchers in other countries since 1982(Bechman & Savignon, 1986; Halleck, 2005; Lantolf & Frawley, 1985; Lazaraton, 1996; Meredith, 1990; Salaberry, 2000; van Lier, 1989). Hence the current study used OPIc for the English speaking test in Korea English classroom.

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Ryoo(2010) provided qualitative analysis of a discussion task as a method for creating an oral proficiency test. All of this is useful research establishing a foundation of knowledge regarding Korea oral assessment efforts.

In addition to this body of research, Kim(2007) has examined the correlation between the scores of the listening and the speaking tests and claims that English speaking testing using computer technology in Korea secondary school is inevitable, given its reliability and the reduction in staffing and education of test raters. Kim(2006) has discussed the context validity of the Speaking Proficiency English Assessment Kit(SPEAK) test. More recently, Lee(2010) has suggested the ways in which to develop an English-speaking testing tool using a speech recognition system to enhance the practicability and reliability of the speaking testing.

## III. OPIC

The Oral Proficiency Interview(OPI) is an interactive and learner-centered assessment and a global assessment of functional speaking ability.[2] The OPI assesses a test taker's ability to use the language effectively and appropriately in real-life situations. While some scholars including Bachman(1991) have criticized the validity and reliability of the ACTFL OPI, the test in general is considered a useful tool to test students' speaking ability(Clark & Clifford, 1988; Dandonoli & Henning, 1990; Kuo & Jiang, 1997). It is conducted with a face-to-face or telephonic interview to determine how well an examinee speaks a language by comparing his or her performance of specific communication tasks with the criteria of ten proficiency levels as described by the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Speaking. The ten proficiency levels are: Superior, Advanced High, Advanced Mid, Advanced Low, Intermediate High, Intermediate Mid, Intermediate Low, Novice High, Novice Mid and Novice Low. It is a holistic description of language competence that assesses areas of use, function/global tasks, comprehensibility, contents/context, language control and text type. The following is the example of the description of competence:

- ***ACTFL proficiency guidelines(Revised 1999)***

***Novice Low***

*"Speakers at the Novice-Low level have no real functional ability and, because of their pronunciation, they may be unintelligible. Given adequate time and familiar cues, they*

[2] 'The OPI, formerly the FSI, was developed for use by the US government but has been adapted by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL).

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*may be able to exchange greetings, give their identity, and name a number of familiar objects from their immediate environment. They are unable to perform functions or handle topics pertaining to the Intermediate level, and cannot therefore participate in a true conversational exchange."*

***Novice Mid***

*"Speakers at the Novice-Mid level communicate minimally and with difficulty by using a number of isolated words and memorized phrases limited by the particular context in which the language has been learned. When responding to direct questions, they may utter only two or three words at a time or an occasional stock answer. They pause frequently as they search for simple vocabulary or attempt to recycle their own and their interlocutor's words…."*

Due to the limited availability of certified and qualified ACTFL OPI raters, and other constraints such as time, cost, and location, the Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview(SOPI) was developed. SOPI is basically tape-mediated, and it relies on audio-taped instructions rather than individual test givers. Recently, the use of computer technology into the language classroom has been rapidly increasing and the Oral Proficiency Interview-computer(OPIc) was developed to increase scoring efficiency in the assessment, which has the advantage of reducing some of the difficulties in administering the OPI or SOPI. When taking the OPIc, the examinee logs onto a website and completes a survey to gather information about their interests, education, work, etc., then chooses a set of statements that assesses their language ability. The levels of OPIc are from novice-low to advanced-low.

## IV. MAIN STUDY

### 1. Teachers' perception on the current speaking test

The first research question was "What is the English teachers' opinion on the current speaking teaching and testing?" To answer on this research question, a survey was conducted. The participants for this survey consisted of one hundred and forty-seven teachers(sixty-three elementary teachers who are teaching English, sixty middle school English teachers, and twenty four high school teachers) in Seoul, Kyungki and the Kangwon area. The number of years respondents had worked as teachers varied but most of them have been teaching for 5 to 20 years. Participants' responses were presented in a five–point Likert scale for several questions, while some questions were open-ended(See

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Appendix A). These questions substitute the interview. The questionnaire was written to focus on what teachers know about the current English curriculum; what teachers do related to the speaking tests; and the difficulty of administering a speaking test in the Korea educational system. The questionnaire was written in Korean to ensure understanding and accurate responses. A survey of the major findings is as the follows:

**What teachers know:**

1) Most teachers know the English curriculum well(47%); relatively familiar(40%); know it very well(7%); or, don't know it well(6%); Most teachers(90%) agreed that the key point of the English curriculum is "improving communicative competence."
2) Most teachers answered that communicative English teaching is important or very important(very important 42%; important 49%; relatively important 9%); and teaching speaking is important(very important 41%; important 54%).
3) Most teachers believed that the ideal speaking teaching methodology is communicative, task-based, activity based, subject based, situation based, with creative, debate style, or fluency focused speaking components. Some teachers answered that speaking practice should be accomplished with group work, pair work, or 1-to-1 speaking practice; teaching methods should provide a lot of speaking opportunities, and should be aligned to a student' level and be assisted with CALL(Computer Assisted Language Learning).

**What teachers do:**

1) 52% of elementary teachers focused on speaking the most and 40% of their focus was on listening. On the other hand, 77% of middle and high school teachers focused on reading practice; only 7% of the teachers focused on speaking with a focus on teaching listening and writing at 14% and 2% respectively.
2) Many elementary teachers focused on speaking, and answered that they teach speaking enough in their classrooms, but with regard to the speaking test, only 9% of teachers answered that they administer speaking test assessments often enough. The teachers answered that the most frequently used test method was an observation while students were performing a speaking activity or a performance(i.e., skits, dialogues, plays, etc.); in addition, some teachers used picture description, dialogues, and interviews as assessment tools.
3) Only 7% of middle and high school teachers answered that they are were administering a speaking test with enough frequency using short speeches, observations of students while performing a speaking activity, recorded speech, or observations during team-teaching with native-born English speakers.

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**Difficulties with administering a speaking test:**

The most acknowledged concerns on the speaking test were criteria issues such as unreliable scoring, the absence of objective, reliable, clear and valuable test criteria, followed by institutional concerns among middle and high school teachers that speaking assessments are not included in entrance examinations, the low levels of English competence among elementary school teachers, time consumption, the number of students, and diverse levels of competence in their students.

The survey results are qualitatively analyzed and the results in general revealed that the words “communicative competence,” “scoring and criteria,” “condition and need” as applied in speaking assessments are of great concern to Korean teachers of English.

## 2. OPIc-based speaking test for the English class

The second research question was "Is the OPIc speaking test appropriate in the Korea English class?” To answer this research question, a model in which the OPIc speaking test was used and analyzed within three categories: communicative competence, scoring and criteria, and condition and need as shown in the survey results(IV.1). The analysis was based on the previous studies including those of Brown(2007) and Ramirez(1995); the issues of reliability, validity, authenticity and washback, which are regarded as workable, finite number of principles for evaluating the efficiency of the test. Based on such an analysis and discussion, adaption of the OPIc-based speaking test in English classes in Korea and a modified OPIc based speaking test model for Korea conditions is suggested. Table 1 shows a model of an OPIc speaking test for English classes in Korea.

**Table 1**

**Model for OPIc-based speaking test in English class**

| | **OPIc-based speaking test in English class** |
|---|---|
| **Teaching method** | Task-based speaking teaching(for test validity) |
| **Level** | Novice Low ~ Intermediate High(same to the OPIc Junior) |
| **Scoring** | Holistic scoring |
| **Rating area** | Function/ Global Tasks; Text Type;<br>Contents/ Context;<br>Comprehensibility;<br>Language Control(Grammar; Pronunciation) |
| **Criteria** | ACTFL proficiency guidelines |
| **Test tasks** | Based on the class tasks(what students have learnt) |
| **Rated by** | Trained teachers or certified raters |

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The difference between this model and the official(as a standardized test) OPIc is that test tasks are based on the class tasks(what students have learnt), while the official OPIc is based on a background information survey. Furthermore, this test is rated by trained teachers or certified raters while the OPIc is rated by only certified raters. Below, the proposed model outlined in Table 1 is analyzed with regard to communicative competence, scoring and criteria, and condition and need.

1) Communicative Competence

In the results of the survey(IV.1), it was noticed that most teachers answered that the key of the English curriculum is "improving communicative competence" and most of them answered that communicative English teaching is important or very important. Savignon(1972) uses the term "communicative competence" to characterize the ability of language learners to interact with other speakers to make meaning. In other words, in order to have effective communication, one should not only know grammatical features of the language, but also the social and cultural constraints of the language. Canale and Canale and Swain(1980) proposed four components of communicative competence: grammatical competence; sociolinguistic competence; discourse competence, and strategic competence. Grammatical competence means one's knowledge of lexical items, morphology, syntax, semantics, and phonology in a language. In terms of the testing of the communicative competence, Ramirez(1995) mentions that grammatical competence tends to be associated with global ability(i.e., integrating the different elements of language: grammar, vocabulary, etc.) involved in performing communicative acts(giving directions, apologizing, etc).

Table 2 shows the characteristics of communicative testing and analyses whether the model of OPIc properly assesses these characteristics. When we consider that OPIc describes speaking proficiency based on language control, function global tasks, text type, contents context, comprehensibility, and uses the ACTFL proficiency guidelines and tasks reflecting real-life settings, it can be said that it meets the characteristics of communicative testing as shown in table 2. Therefore, it can be said that OPIc based speaking test reflects the definition of communicative competence as generally used in language assessment.

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**Table 2**

**Checklist of characteristics of communicative testing**

| **Characteristics of communicative testing (Brown, 2007; Ramirez, 1995)** | |
|---|---|
| global ability | **o** |
| emphasis on actual use of language in real-life settings | **o** |
| actual performance task | **o** |
| intertwining of the organizational(grammatical, discourse oriented) aspects of the language with the pragmatic(functional, sociolinguistic, strategic) aspects | **o** |
| pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes | **o** |
| fluency focused | **o** |

In addition to the characteristics of communicative testing in table 2, Bachman(1991) mentions that communicative language testing has the following characteristics: information gap, task dependency, integration of test tasks and content within a given domain of discourse, and attempts to measure a much broader range of language abilities. Bygate(1997) also claim the importance of interactional tasks to improve communicative competence. The interactional tasks include information gap, interviews(pair; individual), role-play, group discussions(Bonk & Ockey, 2003). Hence, to make OPIc more communicative, more interactional tasks will be needed. For the test validity, the teacher may need to use Task Based Language Teaching for communicative language teaching since the OPIc test is a communicative test and it uses test tasks. The test task will cover the class tasks(what students have learnt).

2) Scoring and criteria

In the results of the survey(IV.1), with regard to the difficulty with the speaking test, the most acknowledged concerns were criteria issues such as unreliable scoring and the absence of the objective, reliable, clear and valuable test criteria.

A reliable test is consistent and dependable so the results are not greatly affected by conditions. In the case of the OPIc, it can be regarded as reliable in that it has been used and verified for 40 years, rated by certified OPI raters, and the descriptions of competence are clear and statements are unambiguous, even though some scholars have criticized the validity and reliability of the ACTFL OPI(Bachman, 1990; Halleck, 1992). Until recently, there has not been a consistent reliable speaking criteria for the speaking tests conducted in Korea English classes. For the tests in English class, if teachers use ACTFL proficiency guidelines, used in many countries at different instructional levels, the speaking test may be more reliable.

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ACTFL proficiency guidelines offer a holistic approach to the scoring students' language. Holistic descriptions have practicality, but are difficult to organize feedback and to provide a washback effect. Hence, in the class, a detailed scoring report may be needed for each student, separately rating language control(grammar and pronunciation), function global tasks, text type, contents context, and comprehensibility. In other words, the modified model of the OPIc-based speaking test should include a more detailed scoring of feedback.

3) Condition and need

In addition to the scoring and criteria issues, the condition and need issues were prominent in survey results(IV.1). To recapitulate, the condition and need issues included the following: speaking is not included in entrance examination for middle and high school students, the lack of teachers' English skill among elementary school teachers, time consumption, number of students, and diverse English levels in students. In table 3, the OPIc-based speaking test is discussed with regard to each speaking test difficulty issue raised by members of the survey group.

**Table 3**

**OPIc-based speaking test in terms of the perceived difficulties**

| Speaking test difficulties raised in survey | OPIc-based speaking test in English class |
|---|---|
| **Number of students; time-consuming** | use computer/ Internet for testing → can save the testing time |
| **Diverse English levels of students** | Test task's levels can be diverse according to students' level |
| **Lack of teachers' English skill** | Test tasks are given; Trained teachers or certified raters→ Teacher training may be inevitable |
| **Speaking component is not included in middle and high school entrance examination** | National English Ability Test(NEAT) is planned to be used. NEAT's 5 principles: connection, authenticity, interactiveness, IBT Compatibility, Washback effectiveness are satisfied by OPI-based speaking test. |

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## 3. Prospective Teachers' Perceptions of the OPIc-based speaking test

The third research question was "what are the English Education students' perceptions of the OPIc-based speaking test for English classes?" To measure the perception of the advantages of the OPIc-based speaking test for the Korea English language classes as suggested by this study, Q methodology(Stephenson, 1953) was selected.

- **P sample:**

The Q sort was administrated to forty-nine students majoring in English education. They have been taught about the communicative competence, communicative language teaching, and other issues in English teaching and OPIc.

- **Q sample:**

The statement used in the Q sample represented three areas: communicative competence, scoring and criteria, and condition and need, all of which were posed in survey questionnaire. Eight statements for each of the three categories were created, for total of twenty-four statements. All statements are about the advantages of the OPIc-based speaking test suggested in this study for Korea English language classes(See appendix B).

- **Procedure:**

Participants were asked to sort the statements according to their agreement and disagreement with a statement. After that they were asked to rank the statements according to the strength of the agreement. The Q-sort by forty-nine participants were coded and entered into a computer. The QUANL program was used to analyze the data.

**Table 4**

**Q Sort Distribution of the perception of the prospective teachers**

| | **least** | | | **neutral** | | | | **most** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **points** | -4 | -3 | -2 | -1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| **N** | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

The result shows that there are three types as the follows:

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**TYPE 1**(N=22): **most-Communicative competence/ least- Condition and need**

This group as a type strongly agreed with the statements that the suggested model has the advantage to improve communicative competence, while they do not agree to the statements that the suggested model has the advantage related to the condition and need.

**TYPE 2**(N=11): **most-Scoring and criteria**

This group as a type strongly agreed with the statements that the suggested model has the advantage related to scoring and criteria.

**TYPE 3**(N=16): **most-Communicative competence/ least- Scoring and criteria**

This group as a type strongly agreed to the statements that the suggested model has the advantage to improve communicative competence, while they did not agree to the statements that the suggested model has an advantage related to scoring and criteria.

In addition, participants mostly agreed with the statement that "this model will improve students' ability to convey meaning rather than form"; and agreed with the statement that "the criteria are clear and easy to understand" least. Therefore, is can be concluded that most prospective teachers as users of the test think that the OPIc-based speaking test for the English class is most likely to improve the students' communicative competence rather than other methods, even if they find it deficient in condition and needs. Therefore, English education students, prospective teachers may use this model to improve students' communicative competence, while they may hesitate to use this model for other reasons related to condition and needs, but overall it will represent a benefit in assessment of Korea English speaking classes.

## V. CONCLUSION

The purpose of the current study is to analyze a model of OPIc-based speaking test for Korea English classroom. The research questions were 1. What is the English teachers' opinion on the current speaking teaching and testing? 2. Is the OPIc speaking test appropriate in the Korea English class? and 3. What are the English education students' perceptions of the OPIc-based speaking test for English classes? The answer on each question is as follows: 1. Korea English teachers' great concern on the English teaching and speaking test are "communicative competence," "scoring and criteria," and "condition and need." 2. In terms of the communicative competence," "scoring and criteria," and "condition and need" issues, OPIc based speaking test is appropriate in English classes in Korea. 3. Most English education students strongly agree to the

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statements that the OPIc-based speaking test has the advantage to improve communicative competence.

This study may provide the information about creating and adopting tests for English classes and relating standardized test and the English classes. In the future research, the speaking test suggested in this study will be actually conducted in the class and the efficiency of the test and the perception of teachers and students will be investigated.

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## APPENDIX A
Questionnaire

- This questionnaire substitutes the interview, so please answer in as much detail as possible.

1. In which type of school are you teaching?
   Elementary middle school high school
2. How long have you been teaching?
   Less than 3 years 3-5 years 5-10 years 10-20 years more than 20 years
3. How well do you feel you know the Korea English curriculum?
   Know very well know well relatively familiar don't know well not at all
4. What do you think is the key point of English curriculum?
5. Do you think teaching speaking is important?
   Very important important relatively important
   not important completely unimportant
6. What do you think is the ideal English teaching methodology?(in detail).
7. What do you think is the ideal English speaking teaching methodology?(in detail).
8. In your class, what skill do you focus on the most and for what reason?
   Listening writing reading speaking
   Reason:
9. Do you think you are teaching English speaking enough and what is the reason for your answer?
   More than enough enough relatively enough not enough not at all
   Reason:

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10. When you teach speaking in your class, what teaching method do you usually use?
11. Do you think you are administrating English speaking tests enough and what is the reason for your answer?
    More than enough enough relatively enough don't enough not at all
    Reason:
12. When you administrate speaking tests in your class, what test method do you usually use?
13. What is your opinion about administrating English speaking tests in Korea ?(in detail)
14. What do you feel are the difficulties with administrating a class wide speaking test? (in detail)

## APPENDIX B
### Statements for the Q test

The benefit of this test is that…

1. This model is effective for improving communicative competence which is the key component of the English curriculum.
2. The test criteria is clear and easy to understand.
3. The test result is reliable since the test is graded by trained testers.
4. This test is good for testing many students at one time since it is computer and internet based.
5. This model will improve students' ability to convey meaning rather than form
6. This model is good for focusing on meaning rather than the form of the language.
7. The test results based on this test criteria will not be affected by the tests.
8. This model is good for the communicative language teaching in terms of validity.
9. This model is cost effective.
10. This model is effective in eliminating teachers' worry about their English speaking skill and ability of testing English speaking.
11. This model is reliable in that it provides a global standard by using ACTFL Guidelines.
12. The test time can be saved since the test is computer and internet based.

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13. Scoring is simple since ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines is holistic scoring.
14. The test areas, function/global tasks, text type, contents/context, comprehensibility, grammar & pronunciation are good to evaluate communicative speaking skill.'
15. This model can also evaluate English grammar, sociolinguistic and functional areas at a time.
16. Teachers can save time from having to make-test tasks.
17. For the feedback, if detailed scoring is combined with the current analytic scoring, it will be more beneficial for the teacher and students.
18. This model is related to authenticity of English.
19. This model is good at improving students' fluency.
20. There is continuity from elementary to high school since there are various levels.
21. This model is good at testing actual speaking performance.
22. If a speaking test(i.e., NEAT speaking) is included for the entrance exam, OPIc based speaking test will be helpful for entrance exam.
23. The test level is determined by the level of students, therefore it is good for a class that consists of students with varying English levels.
24. ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines is appropriate to the achievement goal of our students.

**Examples in:**
**Applicable Languages:**
**Applicable Levels:**

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