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The RR Speaking Test as a Harmonious System

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Preface

This paper about the RR speaking test (part one) aims at exploring its characteristic as a *harmonious system* (part two) posits two hypotheses as proof (part three), checks them in examples from a case study in part four, and mentions future tasks in the conclusion in part five.

1. The way to the RR speaking test

Answering to students' requests for a "conversation" course, the author, teaching at non-elite Ehime University in Matsuyama, southern Japan, has been conducting a German for Beginners course in the general studies part (first term at university, students age 18-19) which, while taking care that all four skills and university-adequate abstractions are duly learned e.g. in outsourced learning management systems such as *moodle*, vacates class time for practicing speaking extensively. After using spacing while introducing and repeating language and culture content in the first 12 classes of 90 minutes each (and the same number of classes with another teacher, whose teaching content cannot be controlled), the author uses the thirteenth class for a students' general repetition of everything learnt so far in the form of one long talk, usually lasting for well over 10 minutes of German only. In the penultimate class, students solve a writing task and are randomly called one by one to a simultaneous oral exam of 2 to 4 minutes (depending on class size etc.). In the first semester, the speaking partner is a randomly chosen student from the same or a parallel class with similar course content, in the second semester (after about 20/40 hours of instruction) an unfamiliar, non-(foreign language teaching)specialist, German native speaker. In order to secure spontaneity, no material is allowed and no topics are prepared.

The oral exam and the writing test are followed by an anonymous class questionnaire. The last lesson is a reserve in case there are problems, for make-up and administrative matters and introducing future German courses.

Student numbers vary considerably from 10 to 40 in the first semester and 4 to 20 in the second term. More detail on this course is available in the author's publications in the references.

2. What kind of test is it: A harmonious system?

In the course final oral exam at the end of the second term, students usually reach A1 on the European Framework of reference after only a very small number of hours of instruction in comparison to other such oral exams under similar or even much better circumstances (Niflar (2011): 3rd year; elite universities with 3 to 4 German classes per week, German majors, or speaking with German as FL teacher trainees (Hoshii & Schumacher 2010)). After a bumpy start (Reinelt 2008b,c, f), even the overall acceptance rate has increased (Reinelt 2011e).

Characteristics

Since at the author's university, second foreign language (after English) courses are an elective (with in the extreme no students at all) except for a few humanities subjects, no concrete planning was possible beyond the required syllabus description. On the other hand, the need to react to sudden changes and opportunities as well as daring slight additions led to the oral exam as it is presently, but it has not followed any pre-considered systematic development. This leaves the question: What kind of system is this test?

At least two system aspects have to be taken into account:

The test is

- on the one hand difficult to explain in terms of existing systems,
- but on the other hand features
 - a valid inter-rater correlation
 - a strictness rate (cf. statistics for ratings)
 - CEFR A1 fulfilling speaking productions which are thus commensurate with an objective instrument.

Then, the aim of this paper is to locate the speaking test as it has been administered at the end of the author's one-year German for beginners courses at Ehime University (here for short: RR speaking test) in a context of systems. In order to find out what kind of system the test is, its players – and in part their actions - are briefly introduced and characterized. From the importance of the balance between and within its components, the test can be considered something Ohuchi (2010) has called a “harmonious system”. For this we will briefly introduce as characteristics the necessary par(ticipan)ts in this part. The next part posits two hypotheses which we will prove from a case study in part four.

Definition

Ohuchi (2010) technically defines a harmonious system as a “*system where various attributes that are complementary to the system are in balance*”. This paper gives an example of how this is achieved in one part of the social sciences, in a speaking test in foreign language learning, with the peculiarity being that its parts have to be volatile (speaking) and variegated (spontaneous, not imitating) while at the same fulfilling fixed text (and) criteria (vocabulary, grammar and pragmatics). The parts of the test, questions, answers and algorithms which are realized in words and chunks belong to the fundamentals of learning German (in a one year course) and are in harmony (=balance?) over the whole time of the test. If this is the case it finds appreciation in the point attributions which the raters give to the learner in the test.

Complementary parts and players

As most constituents preceding the oral exam itself (such as the minimalist approach taken here, the students' motivation, age of acquisition, contents, teaching conditions, outsourcing and vacating time for speaking in class, test hints, pre-penultimate class long test run, etc.) have been discussed in other publications, we can here focus on parts in the test situation itself.

After starting the simultaneous writing test, the learners are called upon and come to take a seat in the (back of the) speaking exam room and may be able to see one or two other students' dyads. The following part(icipant)s exist there:

- the teacher as organizer of the test,
- the learners/students in the test (dyad)
- the speaking partners
 - present in the test (dyad)
 - (alternatively: video conferencing –partner in the target language country -)
- after its start: the speaking dyad where
 - learned FL contents has to be remembered
 - and activated in speaking production,
 - the partners utterance(s) have to be understood at least partially
 - appropriate reactions to the partners utterances are required
- the speaking dyad: managing 3 min.

- flow of the text in the dyad.
- with e.g. the turn taking system etc.
- the raters, since they are present, probably play a role, too.

Further constitutive part(icipant)s which become important mainly after the test dyad include

- the assessment
 - in (learners) and
 - of the test (inter-rater correlation)
- the raters (grading holistically or according to criteria) (exchange students, others)
- the written examination, and
- the final grading for and with the “team teacher”

There may be other complementary parts, but according to chaos theory (de Bot, Lowie, Verspoor 2007) they are difficult to limit and accordingly disregarded below.

3. Two hypotheses

After introducing the participants, we have to define how they actually can be in balance in the oral test. From the beginning we should note that in balance in this case may mean disagreeing, adversive or (with words) fighting, as long as it is considered an action with a balanced result by the relevant participants. This is especially true in the case of German and some, though certainly not all, European countries and/or parts of their speech behavior (Marui et al. 1996).

How can we then say that constituents are “in balance”? And in how far can they be said to be in balance.

For the dyads in the oral exams this should at least mean:

- no intimidating dominance by one of the partners, but
- an inspiring variety (as a German particularity?)
- with mechanical production of algorithms only being considered boring
- with diversity seen positive.

Concretely for German this would mean that the following are estimated highly and very welcome, especially in the case of raters serving as native speakers to several students:

- first talk, but diversity welcome (inserting different talks/topics/questions before, in between or after initial parts);
- beyond the first talk: introduction of new/ different topics;
- introducing a completely new topic no other student has addressed so far.

In sum, the learner has to aim at attaining harmony for exchanges with target language (TL) speakers while at the same time coping with the diversity of partners that the exchanges enable.

The case study in part four below attempts to demonstrate all three points through examples for what constitutes a “balance” in the German oral exam, although this may not seem so if observed from other languages.

In order to do so, the learner has to have a minimal speaking ability of the TL. Also, in order to limit the discussion, out of the five criteria available for scoring only harmony and diversity are considered as establishing them is vital for the conversational dyad. In the test, the student has to (find out how to) establish harmony in the exchanges with the native speaker. Doing this, he/she has to cope with diversity as the partner is different from all previous partners.

So far, there seems to be no discourse analytic theory available for “harmony”, let alone for exchanges with

target language native speakers.

Methodology

The study where the example in part four is taken from this examination as administered in all classes in the winter term 2009/10, where this exam was possible.

In the oral exam, students sit with a native speaker and speak for 3 minutes and are then rated by this partner as well as by other raters present in the room or over Skype in the target language country.

A minimalist approach is taken for speaking partners and raters. They are German present or former exchange students at Ehime and neighboring Matsuyama University. They have already had ample experience in learning and being tested in two foreign languages (which are required for entering a German university). There was no training. Fluency (Fluessigkeit) and dialogicity (Gegenseitigkeit) are not extra defined for them (so they should use common sense).

In the exam dyad, the following means for establishing harmony should be useful:

- A) The default: Going through the first talk algorithm
 - (name, place of origin, living, job)
- Even better: Not just mechanically, but rather in separate parts
- B) Diversity: integrate (intersperse) other speaking parts in the algorithm
- C) Initiate exchange topics

This leads to hypothesis

H1:

- The learners can acquire sufficient German to establish enough harmony in the speaking situation in a reasonable time. This should show in the exam dyad. Example for A), B), and C) from the transcript are given as proof in part four below.

The harmony in the dyad should also show in how the raters' assessment and the student him/herself sees the test. The assessment is part of the test itself and discussed there. **In the oral exam rating, harmony is operationalized as the average of fluency and dialogicity.** The German rating system (familiar to the native speaker raters) is used (1 excellent to 5 fail).

Fluency and dialogicity taken together should be at least 3 (mediocre) or even better 2 (good) or 1 (excellent) on average. All data are converted to the 100 point system in Japan.

The student's feelings lead to hypothesis two:

H2:

- The examination was stimulating for the students.

This will be supported with data from the course final questionnaire: Stop or retain this exam for the following year. Since this class was the last with this cohort of students, the answer was operationalized as recommendation for the next year's students (his *kouhai* 後輩): If the student was positive about the examination, he would recommend the course including this oral exam. If he did not think so, he would not recommend his *kouhai* to take this course.

4. Study case: Example

This part contains a demonstrative example and proof for the two hypotheses from this case, both from the dyad assessment as well as from the transcript and also from the student questionnaire. It shows

- how the student established harmony by keeping the dyad reasonably in balance, and b) how the abilities

of a first-year non-German-major in an oral exam at Ehime University, Matsuyama, Japan were evaluated.

Classes

In the WS2009/10, the German beginners classes were taught and rated as in table1 below.

Table 1: Class data

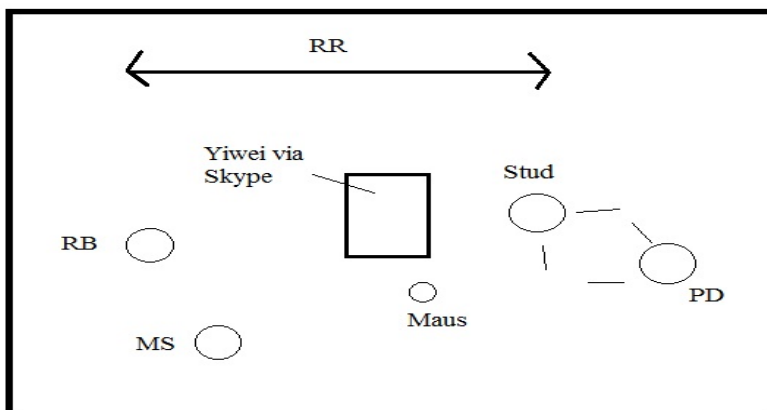
Day/ Course name/nr of students/ NS

日付 Day	コース Course	学生数 No. of Students	Raters scorecard/holistic
27. 1.	Mi2(Wd., science)	4	1/1
29. 1.	Fr3 (lit and ped)	14	4/1
1. 2.	Mo2 (science)	10	3/1
2. 2.	Di3 (Tu.,Lit and ped)	12	4/1

The dyad

The dyad can be demonstrated in the arrangement (table 2), a scene shot, the video taken for proving reasons, the transcript (table 3), and the assessment (tables 4). Scene shot and video are only available for educational purposes on request from the author.

Table 2: The arrangement



• **Figure 2: The arrangement of student, conversation partner, and raters for the speaking examination**

The transcript

The transcript (table 3) has only been adjusted for easier readability.

Table 3. the transcript

Utterance number	Student S10's dialogue contributions <i>Original in German</i>	Remarks on S10's actions (see Note)	Utterance number	Tester PD's dialogue contributions <i>Original in German</i>
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	<time line> (English translation)			<time line> (English translation)
004	004 S10 Wie gehts? <00:00:59> How are you?	→	003	Guten Tag (Good afternoon)
006	Hm, ich.... sehr gut <00:01:04> (Well... I ..fine)	←	005	Hm, mir gehts ganz gut. Wie gehts dir? <00:01:02> (I am fine. How are you?)
009	Hm, ich, ich esse Wurst gern <00:01:14> (I like sausage.)	008 beide lachen <00:01:08> (both laugh) →	007	Sehr gut, hm <00:01:05> ((good answer))Well, o.k. hm)
010a	Hm, ja (nickt) (Eh, yes(nods))	(P confirms her understanding)	010	Du isst gern Wurst, <00:01:16> (You like sausage.)
011	Und Sie? <00:01:18> (And you?)	→	012	Ähm, ich esse gern, puh <00:01:20> ich mag auch Wurst <00:01:23> (Eh, I like to eat, huh I also like sausage)
		013 beide lachen <00:01:24> (both laugh)	014	ich esse gern okonomiyaki <00:01:26> (I like o-konomiyaki (fried noodles with various toppings))
015	nickt zustimmend, beide nicken <00:01:28> (nods acknowledgingly, both nod)			
016	Entschuldigung, eh, ich heiße C Y (I am sorry, eh, my name is CY)	S10 starts first part of first talk algorithm	017	Ah! <00:01:32> (Oh!)
018	Und Sie? <00:01:33> (And you?)	→	019	Ich heiße P <00:01:34> (My name is P)
020	Ich/ich wohne/ ich komme aus <00:01:41>T. , im Osten in Matsuyama. <00:01:45> (I/ I live/ I come from.....T., in the east of Matsuyama)	S10 starts second part of first talk alg.	021	Hm! <00:01:45> (Oh!)
022	und ich/ ich wohne in Ushibuchi <00:01:52> (and I/I live in U ((a suburb of M.)))	starts third part of first talk alg. →	023	Ushibuchi (Ushibuchi)

024	Ja <00:01:55> (Yes)			
025	Ah, in Mittag von To-on (eh, in the midday of To-on)		026	In der Mitte von To-on? (In the middle of To-on)
026a	Ja yes		027	Aha,eh! <00:02:04> (ahah, well)
028	Und Sie? (and you?)	P answers second part of first talk alg.	029	Ah,ehm, also ich komme aus Freiburg <00:02:07> (oh, eh, well I come from Freiburg)
		P answers third part of first talk alg.	030	und jetzt wohne ich eh in Matsuyama, in Teppochō <00:02:11> (and now I live eh in Matsuyama, in Teppochō)
031	Ich trinke Tee und Milch gern <00:02:22> I like to drink tea and milk			031a??
032	und Sie? <00:02:23> (and you?)	→	033	ah, ich trinke eigentlich ganz viel sehr gern, Bier, Tee, Kakao, Kaffee <00:02:33>
			034	ich liebe Kaffee. <00:02:33> Mögen Sie Kaffee? <00:02:35> (I like coffee do you like coffee?)
035	Ja (Nickt zustimmend) <00:02:37> (Yes (nods consenting))		036	He <00:02:38> Er..
037	Ehm, was machen Sie .. in der Freizeit? <00:02:45> (Eh, what do you do ... in your freetime?)	S10 initiates independent topic (follow-up to the first talk alg.)	038	In meiner Freizeit? <00:02:46> Ehm, in Freiburg gehe ich immer klettern <00:02:51> (In my free time? Eh, in Freiburg, I use to go climbing)
			039	Berg und klettern (demonstriert das mit den gehobenen Armen). <00:02:55> (mountain and climbing (demonstrates this with raised arms))
040	sieht das und nickt (sees that and nods)			

042	sieht nach oben, keine erwartete Reaktion (looks up, but no expected reaction)		041	ja, aber jetzt gerade <00:02:55> ähm, spiele ich Koto <00:02:58> (yes, but right now ... ehm, I play the Koto)
044	nickt (nods)		043	Koto?, o-koto <00:03:01> (Koto? (you see) the Koto)
046	Hm, ich höre Musik <00:03:08> (Well, I listen to music)	answers his own question extensively 046 to 53	045	044 PD was machen Sie/ was machst du in deiner Freizeit? <00:03:05> (what do you do/ what do you do in your free time?)
047	und lerne Deutsch <00:03:11> (and learn German)			
048	und schlafen <00:03:14> (beide lachen leicht) and sleep (both laugh slightly)		049	(lachend) Du lernst in deiner Freizeit! <00:03:16> ((laughing) What do you learn in your free time)
050	und lese Bücher <00:03:20> (and read books)		051	du liest Bücher <00:03:20> (you read books)
053	((Nicht))?? ((No))??		052	Liest du/ liest du auch deutsche Bücher?..Äh,äh deutsche Autoren? <00:03:29> (Did you read/ do you also read German books? ...eh,eh German authors?)
055	Entschuldigung, ..ähm was machen Sie? <00:03:45> (I'm sorry...eh what do you do?)	S10 introduces fourth and last part of first talk	054	(nur) japanische <00:03:32> ((only) Japanese)
057	Äm ich studiere Humanwissenschaft <00:03:55> (I major in human sciences)	→	056	Ähm, ich studiere ähm Psychologie, was/was studierst du? <00:03:52> (Ah, I major in ah psychology. What/what do you major in?)
			058	Humanwissenschaft ((leise.....)) <00:03:57> (human Sciences ((in a low voice)))
059	und ich <00:04:04> / ich habe einen braunen Mantel und der Sportwear (zeigt seine Kleidung) <00:04:13>ooh!	S10 introduces talk about clothes (implicit →)	060	Äh, ich trage heute eine äh blaue Jeanshose und einen ??farbenen Pullover, und einen Schal (winkt damit) <00:04:26>

	(and I I wear a brown coat and sports wear (shows his clothes))			(eh, and today I wear ah a blue jeans and a pullover, and a shawl (waves with it))
061	Danke schön, ja, der erste mit Kleidung <00:04:30> (thank you, well, the first (speaking) about clothes)			

Assessment

In our look at assessment, we this time only consider fluency and dialogicity, answering to the question: Has harmony been attained in the dyad? Table 4 gives the data for the whole class as well as for comparison for the student in the dyad:

Table 4.

Assesment: Fluency, dialogicity and total by each rater (RB, PD,MS, YG and RR holistic) for each student in this class (S10: student in this study)

	Flue ssig keit	Dial ogizi taet	RB	Flue ssig keit	Dial ogizi taet	PD	Flue ssig keit	Dial ogizi taet	MS	Flue ssig keit	Dial ogizi taet	YG	R holistic
	35%	15%		35%	15%		35%	15%		35%	15%		
HS													
1	3	3	80	1	1	100	2	2	88	1	1	100	92
2	2	2	92	1	1	100	1	1	95	1	1	97	95
3	1	1	100	1	1	99	1	1	100	1	1	98	92
4	2	1	90	3	1	81	2	3	86	4	4	65	76
5	2	1	92	1	1	93	2	1	88	2	1	95	89
6	1	1	98	1	1	98	1	1	93	1	1	95	86
7	3	2	83	3	1	81	3	2	83	3	3	80	78
8	2	2	91	2	1	87	2	2	88	3	3	80	88
9	1	1	98	1	1	98	1	1	100	2	1	92	92
10	1	1	98	2	1	91	2	1	90	3	2	80	96
11	1	2	96	2	1	83	2	2	86	2	1	85	96
12	1	2	96	2	1	88	2	2	87	3	3	77	95

The inter-rater correlation is 0.81, certainly not very high, but still within the bottom limit.

Dyad balance

Returning to the speech actions, we can ask in how far the example dyad is “in balance”.

The following points can be gleaned from the transcript:

- questions were mostly answered (and thus not monologic);
- new parts were initiated by the student;
- there were no excessive breaks (longer than 10 sec.);
- not all things matched perfectly, but overall it came out balanced, so that the problematic issues did not influence the whole dyad too much. At times there was little recursion to what the partner said.

Testing for hypothesis: H1

H1, acquiring sufficient German for establishing harmony, is visible in the following three examples for three kinds of harmony establishing speech actions by S 10:

A) *Default*

All four parts of the first talk are realized in 016, 020, 022 and 055. S10 does even better by reacting to his partner's reaction on initiating talk about food in 014, and then coming to the name exchange in 016 (as demonstrated in table 5). He similarly includes parts about free time in 037, and follows the initial talk up with initiating an exchange about clothes in 059.

Table 5: Initial talk preceded by food talk (016)

Transcript example: 016

		013 beide lachen <00:01:24> (both laugh)	014	ich esse gern okonomiyaki <00:01:26> (I like o-konomiyaki (fried noodles with various toppings))
015	nickt zustimmend, beide nicken <00:01:28> (nods acknowledgingly, both nod)			
016	Entschuldigung, eh, ich heisse C Y (I am sorry, eh, my name is CY)	S10 starts first part of first talk algorithm	017	Ah! <00:01:32> (Oh!)
018	Und Sie? <00:01:33> (And you?)	→	019	Ich heisse P <00:01:34> (My name is P)

B) *Diversity*

S10 increases the diversity in the dyad by inserting talk about free time into the first talk, as shown in table 6.

Table 6: Increasing diversity by inserting talk about free time: 037

Transcript example: 037

			034	ich liebe Kaffee. <00:02:33> Mögen Sie Kaffee? <00:02:35> (I like coffee do you like coffee?)
035	Ja (Nickt zustimmend) <00:02:37> (Yes (nods consenting))		036	He <00:02:38> Er..
037	Ehm, was machen Sie .. in der Freizeit? <00:02:45> (Eh, what do you do ... in your freetime?)	S10 initiates independent topic (follow-up to the first talk alg)	038	In meiner Freizeit? <00:02:46> Ehm, in Freiburg gehe ich immer klettern <00:02:51> (In my free time? ... Eh, in Freiburg, I use to go climbing)

C) Initiating an exchange topic

S10 keeps up diversity even after finishing the first talk by introducing a topic for exchange so far no other student used, clothes, by describing himself in 059 (table 7) . His partner can only answer likewise, and the exchange is established.

Table 7: Initiating an exchange topic

Transcript example 059

059	und ich <00:04:04> / ich habe einen braunen Mantel und der Sportwear (zeigt seine Kleidung) <00:04:13>ooh! (and I I wear a brown coat and sports wear (shows his clothes))	S10 introduces talk about clothes (implicit →)
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Individual assessment

For all of his efforts, he was attributed the rating as in table 8, gaining him 91points on average, the second lowest within the excellent band (90 to 100).

Table 8 Individual fluency and dialogicity scores

H1 from oral exam rating:

- Statistics for S10 for Fluency and dialogicity

Student	Fluency	Dialogicity	Rating	Fluency	Dialogicity	Rating	Fluency	Dialogicity	Rating	Fluency	Dialogicity	Rating	RR	Yglo	bal
	35%	15%		35%	15%		35%	15%		35%	15%				
10	1	1	98	2	1	91	2	1	90	3	2	80	96		

Testing for hypothesis: H2

H2 checks whether the examination was stimulating for the students. Only if it was stimulating (Yes in table 9 below), the student would recommend next year's students to take this course.

Table 9 Stimulating?

- *Stimulating*
- Stop (No) or retain (Yes) the oral exam
- For all classes in WS09/10:

Classes % recommendation	Mo 2	Di3 (this class)	Mi3(Wd)	Fr3
Yes	4	8	1	10
No	3	2		4
	57%	75%	100%	70%

As can be seen from table 9, the result was overly positive, although not unanimous. This is even more surprising if we consider that work-intensive courses with foreign teaches usually get an about 25% points reduction in graded student questionnaires at Ehime University.

5. Conclusion

In sum, we can say that S10, as did most students in that class, achieved an excellent test, and it stands to reason that his able, fluent and dialogic managing of the conversation dyad led to this result. Of course,

research on a larger cohort is necessary. It will also be necessary to show cases where the balance was not achieved, and how the native speaker partners reacted in such cases. They are however few and difficult to document, since they mostly terminate for excess time reasons (over 10 seconds of silence).

This *oral exam* was moderately stimulating, and the results could certainly be better, considering that even Cambridge tests usually pair learners rather than native speakers and learners. We simply have to see how this develops.

In this paper, only two areas could be explored. Eventually, all parts of the test and finally all their interrelations will have to be researched.

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