Testing Oral Proficiency in Greek as a Foreign Language

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Abstract
The increased interest in learning Greek as a Foreign Language (GFL) has brought with it the need of standardised tests in Greek in all skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) and at all levels. This paper proposes a SOPI (Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview) as an appropriate instrument for testing oral proficiency in GFL. The structure, the advantages and disadvantages of the proposed SOPI is described and discussed. Moreover, the proposed SOPI is compared with the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) which is currently the most popular instrument for testing oral proficiency.

1. Introduction
The aim of this paper is to propose a test of oral proficiency for Greek as a Foreign Language (GFL). It will be argued that the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) may not be the best instrument for testing oral proficiency, in general, and in Greek in particular. The proposed test is in the form of a SOPI (Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview). The advantages and disadvantages of this test format will be presented along with ways of validating the proposed test.

2. The need for teaching and testing of GFL
During the last few years we have witnessed an increased demand for Greek as a foreign language. As a result of this demand many textbooks for GFL have been published many of which are really praiseworthy. Many of these books are based on sound theoretical principles of the field of foreign language teaching, reflect recent findings of the scientific study of the Greek language and linguistics as well as the long and valuable experience of the authors. These characteristics of the new books along with the existing curricula and teaching staff of the schools that have seriously undertaken the teaching of GFL have made the learning of the Greek language more accessible and effective in and out of Greece and Cyprus. As is the case with every skill and ability a person possesses, a learner of GFL should have the chance to prove his ability to use Greek and obtain a certificate for it when needed. This need creates the necessity of tests of GFL in all skills and at all levels. The availability of such tests gives the chance to existing learners of GFL to obtain a certification of their knowledge of Greek. Moreover, it will motivate and encourage additional non-native speakers of Greek to learn GFL since they will know that their often laborious effort to learn Greek can eventually be acknowledged and proven officially. There is a need for tests
in all four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) as well as for tests for Greek for academic, professional or specific purposes. This paper proposes a test of Oral proficiency for general purposes in GFL.

3. Testing Oral Proficiency
According to Shohamy et al. (1985) the earlier tests of oral proficiency can be termed "pre-communicative". The reason for that is that earlier tests "were administered mostly in language laboratories where the speaking tasks, the test takers were required to perform, were mostly mechanical repetition of words and sentences, the supplying of pattern answers to pattern questions and substitution drills." However, with the advent of the communicative competence movement such tests were considered unauthentic. The need for direct and authentic tests of oral proficiency that would duplicate real life settings was imperative. This need gave rise to the Oral Proficiency Interview.

4. The Oral Proficiency Interview - Description
Madsen (1980) and Underhill (1987) state that the most common form of spoken language elicitation technique is the oral interview. Weir (1990) differentiates between free interview and controlled interview. In a free interview, there are no preset procedures or a pre-established agenda. The conversation unfolds naturally - the structure and topics being decided "en route". This is not the case, however, with a controlled interview where an agenda on the part of the examiner is apparent.

In a controlled or structured interview, on the other hand, a set of predetermined procedures is apparent. The most renowned technique of this type is the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). The rationale of the FSI oral interview is to guide the student into a face-to-face conversation with the examiner. Usually it takes the form of a structured conversation (Lazaraton 1992; Van Lier 1988) in which the examiner poses several questions to the student on different topics aiming at different levels of proficiency. Underhill (1987:54) offers an insightful description of the procedure:

The interviewer sets out to find out certain things about the learner and to get answers to certain questions. She maintains firm control, and keeps the initiative as well; whatever the learner says is in more or less direct response to her questions or statements. However, the learner still has the freedom to answer, as he likes, or to develop his comments and opinions. When he has finished his answer or his comment, it is then up to the interviewer to make the next move; to develop the topic further or raise a new one.

The questions posed and the topics broached during the interview are carefully chosen according to their appropriateness in eliciting a
representative sample from the candidate. Certain questions and topics aim at specific grammatical features or vocabulary (e.g. One of the objectives of the question "What do you do every day after school?" is to elicit present tense forms). In order to achieve consistency, the tester has at his/her disposal a list of possible questions to ask. The major components of the FSI oral interview, according to Lowe (1982), are warm-up, level-check, probing, and wind-up. What follows is a description of the components based on Shohamy et al. (1986), Lowe, (1982) and Underhill (1987).

**Warm-up:** Phase during which the examiner tries to create a pleasant atmosphere and put the test taker at ease and obtain an initial indication of the examinee's level of proficiency.

**Level-check:** Phase during which the examiner establishes the approximate level of the candidate i.e. level where the candidate's level is most stable and accurate.

**Probing:** Phase in which additional questions and topics of higher level than the one established in the previous phase are broached in order to give the candidate the opportunity to improve his rating.

**Wind-up:** Phase in which questions and topics which correspond to the candidate's previously assessed level of proficiency are posed and the interview is concluded in a formulaic way. In this way the candidate is left with a good feeling about his performance.

### 4.1 Advantages

Since there is a predetermined set of questions either written or in the examiner's mind, it is easier to compare the performance of various candidates. Studies such as Clark and Swinton (1979) have shown that the ratings of such a procedure can have high intra- and inter-rater reliability. Another advantage is that since the examiner controls the content of the interaction, s/he can help the candidate (through probing) to demonstrate his/her higher level of proficiency.

### 4.2 Disadvantages

Regardless of its popularity the OPI has attracted a lot of criticism. Some language testing experts, for example, have questioned its validity. Shohamy (1983) contested that the OPI assesses only one aspect of oral interaction namely face-to-face conversation. Shohamy et al. (1986) and Pavlou (1997) showed that in order to obtain a more valid score for oral proficiency we need to gather information from other oral interactions such as oral reports, discussions, role plays etc.

The major disadvantage of the task is that it is falsely thought to be representative of the whole spectrum of oral interaction and, therefore, its presence excludes other kinds of techniques such as oral report and group
discussion. Raffaldini (1988: 199) criticizes this false assumption by stating that "it (the OPI) provides only a partial assessment of his/her (the target language speaker) discourse competence. This is because the OPI presents the learner with a limited number of discourse contexts". Van Lier's (1988) study was an effort to offer qualitative evidence against the false assumption mentioned above. Van Lier (1988:489) questions whether OPIs are examples of conversational language use and whether conversational language use is the appropriate (or the only or the best) vehicle to evaluate oral proficiency. He compared conversations and interviews in order to discover their similarities and differences. Some of the differences he found were that the OPI is pseudo-social and asymmetrical because it does not emphasise conversation but elicitation of language (Van Lier, 1989:501). Many studies such as Shohamy, (1983), Shohamy et al. (1986) showed that students' scores or the language produced Pavlou (1997) on oral proficiency tests differ significantly depending on the discourse type. Other kinds of oral interactions lend themselves better to reproducing certain contextual features, which can influence the candidate's performance. For example, in a role play the tester can adjust or manipulate the contextual feature of relative status between interlocutors. Underhill (1987) mentions that often the interviewer is unable to discriminate among high level candidates. Weir (1990) warns that even though the elicitation procedures are specified in advance, the possibility of candidates being asked different questions is not excluded, thus constituting a threat to the consistency of the results across candidates.

Another possible objection to the OPI is that it potentially mixes the speaking with the listening modality and therefore the ratings we get do not reflect solely the candidate's speaking ability but his/her listening ability as well. The reason for that is that the OPI takes place entirely in the target language. When a student is unable to understand a word in the prompts then s/he may answer incorrectly. The examiner, however, cannot know whether the speaker failed to understand the question because of poor listening or whether s/he understood the question but answered inadequately or incorrectly because of limited speaking ability. It is obvious that the OPI mixes two modalities (speaking and listening) and assesses only one of the two namely speaking. Even though it is understood that both speaking and listening are necessary for oral communication some critics of the OPI argue that in order to accurately determine one skill (either listening or speaking) the two skills must be isolated.

Shohamy et al also raised questions about the effect of a number of contextual variables that may influence oral production. Personality and gender of the participants, topic, purpose of interaction, and the setting are some of these variables that need to be controlled so that oral test can be conducted in a uniform way. This in turn would secure the validity and reliability of the tests without jeopardising their communicative nature.
A final drawback of the OPI relates to its practicality of administration. The OPI is a rigorous and expensive process and must be administered by a trained interviewer with ACTFL certification. Since it is time consuming, many institutions can not afford to sponsor the training of one or more language teachers. Moreover, there may be no certified interviewers for “exotic” or less commonly taught languages.

5. The SOPI
A test that responds to some of the problems mentioned above is the SOPI. The SOPI is a semi-direct, tape mediated test of speaking proficiency (Stansfield, 1989). The SOPI is not a direct measure like the face-to-face oral interview. The instructions and the elicitation of the candidate's speech are accomplished not by an interviewer but by means of a tape recorder and a test booklet. The SOPI was originally developed by the Centre for Applied Linguistics (CAL) in Washington DC in the USA as a response to the logistical difficulties posed by the OPI. The two needs that the SOPI tries to accommodate are interestingly enough opposing. The first is that the SOPI can be useful for large scale testing and for small scale testing i.e. for the testing of less commonly taught languages. The CAL has so far developed such tests for Chinese, Portuguese, Hebrew, Indonesian, Hausa, Spanish, French and German. The SOPI system also takes care, to a certain degree, of the interviewer/interviewee problem. Because the examinee speaks only to a tape the danger that the interviewer's personality may adversely affect the examinee's performance is eliminated.

Another advantage of the SOPI is its practicality. First of all, a SOPI is an affordable test and can be administered very easily. Because there is no need for a trained interviewer, students from any place can take it and send the tape to a designated place (for example the institution that has developed the test) and have it scored at a nominal fee. It can be even taken at the candidate's house but for security reasons it should be administered at a cooperating university, an embassy or consulate.

The SOPI format also takes care of the problem of mixed abilities. All the instructions of the SOPI are in the test taker's mother tongue so that s/he is completely aware of what is expected from her/him. After the instructions in the speaker's native language, there is a prompt in Greek, which indicates that the student may start speaking. In that way the test taker can be assured that only her/his speaking ability is evaluated and not her/his listening ability.

6. Disadvantages
The main disadvantage of the SOPI format is its lack of face validity. Face validity is how the test looks to the people involved in testing i.e. the examinees, test administrators, educators, prospective employers, etc. It is certainly unnatural to talk to a machine.
A disadvantage that the SOPI shares with the OPI is that neither of them represents the whole spectrum of spoken interaction. As stated earlier the oral spectrum consists of other interactions such as monologues, oral reports, group discussions and role-plays. Tests on all these different speech interactions provide different kinds of information on a speaker’s oral proficiency and provide the test users with a better performance profile of the test taker. (Pavlou, 1997).

Other disadvantages that were present in previous test of the SOPI format have been eliminated through application of research and taking into account test takers' comments and suggestions. Such disadvantages included the long pauses between tasks and prompts.

Finally, the SOPI is not appropriate for learners below the Intermediate level and may not be capable of detecting fine differences among very high levels such as Advanced, advanced-Plus and Superior of the ACTFL scales (appendix 3). The reason for not being suitable for lower levels is that the questions require the test taker to speak in full sentences and produce connected discourse. This is something that a novice or beginner student cannot do. Moreover, the SOPI format does not allow extensive probing (like the OPI does) which is often necessary to distinguish among the highest levels of proficiency.

7. Content of proposed SOPI in Greek
As stated earlier the proposed test is a test of GFL for general purposes and follows the format of SOPIs developed by the Center for Applied Linguistics in the USA. Usually a SOPI consists of 14-15 tasks. Each task aims at eliciting test taker speech as described by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. (ACTFL). (Appendix 3). All the tasks have a prescribed ACTFL level associated with it (Intermediate, Advanced, Superior). These levels correspond to the level of proficiency that is considered necessary in order to perform the task adequately. Like in all SOPIs, the tasks in the proposed Greek SOPI are grouped into three sections (Appendix 1). The three sections are: picture-based tasks, topic-based items, situation-based items. An example from each group is provided in appendix 2. In these examples the instructions and the description of the tasks is in English. This means that this version of the test is addressed to native speakers of English. In versions of the test that are addressed to different nationalities the instructions and the description of the tasks are in the native language of the targeted population. (German, French, Italian etc.)

8. Validation Procedures
The investigation of test validity is the examination of the extent to which a test measures what is supposed to measure. In this case, we want to examine the degree to which the proposed test measures oral proficiency in GFL. A
study that focuses on the validation of the proposed test has been designed and is currently conducted. The study will seek answers to the three following interrelated questions.

a) Are the language samples produced in the SOPI scored in the same way as the language samples from an OPI?

b) Can the test be scored reliably by different raters using the same rating scales?

c) Do the parallel forms of the test produce similar results?

9. Conclusion

As stated earlier in this article, in the last few years, there has been an increase in the demand of teaching and testing GFL. This new situation has created the need for the development of tests of GFL in all skills, at all levels, in various areas and various targeted populations. The proposed test is an effort to respond to this need and promote the development of similar tests. As it has been shown the advantages of SOPI over the OPI make the former an appropriate and useful instrument for testing oral proficiency in GFL.

References


**APPENDIX1: Suggested Content of a SOPI**
(based on Texas Oral Proficiency Test, Centre for Applied Linguistics, 1991)

**Picture-based Items**
- Give Directions
- Describe a Place/Activities
- Narrate in Present Time
- Narrate in Past Time
- Narrate in Future Time

**Topic-based Items**
- Give Instructions
- State Advantages/Disadvantages
- Give a Brief Factual Summary
- Support an Opinion
- Hypothesise on an Impersonal Topic

**Situation-based Items**
- Speak With Tact (e.g. Apologise, Lodge a Complaint
- Persuade Someone
- Propose and Defend a Course of Action
- Give a Professional Talk
- Give Advice

**Intended Level**
Intermediate
Intermediate
Intermediate - Advanced
Advanced
Intermediate - Advanced
Advanced
Advanced
Superior
Superior
Superior
APPENDIX 2: Examples form the Greek SOPI

A: Instructions for Picture 1
Imagine that you are walking home from work when two Greek-speaking businessmen in front of their hotel ask you how to get to the Archaeological Museum. You know that the museum is within walking distance. The dotted line on the map provided shows the route from the hotel to the museum. You will have 15 seconds to study the map. Then, after one of them asks you for directions, you will have 45 seconds for your answer. Study the map now and wait for the request before you explain to them how to get from the hotel to the museum.

(30-60 seconds)

Prompt: Με συγχώρειτε, που είναι το αρχαιολογικό μουσείο;

B: Instructions for Topic 1
A group of high school students has arrived from Greece to spend a summer at your university in England. You have been asked to give a brief talk as a part of their orientation on two or three recent events in England that you feel are important. After your talk is introduced, brief the group on these recent events.

(30-90 seconds)

Group leader: Τώρα η κυρία Johnson θα σας μιλήσει για μερικά πρόσφατα σημαντικά γεγονότα στην Αγγλία.

C: Instructions for Situation 1
You are leading a group of 12 high school students on a tour of Greece. When you arrive at a hotel in Athens, where you had already made a deposit, the clerk tells you there are no rooms available. You ask to speak with the manager, Mr. Ioannou. After he asks you what the problem is, explain the situation to him. Ask him to remedy it, conveying both your feelings about what has happened and your urgent need to find accommodations for the group.

(30-60 seconds)

Mr Ioannou: Ο υπάλληλος μας στην ρεσεψιόν μου είπε ότι ζητήσατε να με δείτε. Τι συμβαίνει;

APPENDIX 3: ACTFL SCALES
Generic Descriptions - Speaking
NOVICE The Novice level is characterized by the ability to communicate minimally with learned material.
Novice-Low
Oral production consists of isolated words and perhaps a few high-frequency phrases. Essentially no functional communicative ability.

Novice-Mid
Oral production continues to consist of isolated words and learned phrases within very predictable areas of need, although quantity is increased. Vocabulary is sufficient only for handling simple, elementary needs and expressing basic courtesies. Utterances rarely consist of more than two or three words and show frequent long pauses and repetition of interlocutor's words. Speaker may have some difficulty producing even the simplest utterances. Some Novice-Mid speakers will be understood only with great difficulty.

Novice-High
Able to satisfy partially the requirements of basic communicative exchanges by relying heavily on learned utterances but occasionally expanding these through simple recombinations of their elements. Can ask questions or make statements involving learned material. Shows signs of spontaneity although this falls short of real autonomy of expression. Speech continues to consist of learned utterances rather than of personalized, situationally adapted ones. Vocabulary centers on areas such as basic objects, places, and most common kinship terms. Pronunciation may still be strongly influenced by first language. Errors are frequent and, in spite of repetition, some Novice-High speakers will have difficulty being understood even by sympathetic interlocutors.

INTERMEDIATE
The Intermediate level is characterized by the speaker's ability to:
- create with the language by combining and recombining learned elements, though primarily in a reactive mode.
- initiate, minimally sustain, and close in a simple way basic communicative tasks; and
- ask and answer questions.

Intermediate-Low
Able to handle successfully a limited number of interactive, task-oriented and social situations. Can ask and answer questions, initiate and respond to simple statements and maintain face-to-face conversation, although in a highly restricted manner and with much
linguistic inaccuracy. Within these limitations, can perform such tasks as introducing self, ordering a meal, asking directions, and making purchases. Vocabulary is adequate to express only the most elementary needs. Strong interference from native language may occur. Misunderstandings frequently arise, but with repetition, the Intermediate-Low speaker can generally be understood by sympathetic interlocutors.

Able to handle successfully a variety of uncomplicated, basic and communicative tasks and social situations. Can talk simply about self and family members. Can ask and answer questions and participate in simple conversations on topics beyond the most immediate needs; e.g., personal history and leisure time activities. Utterance length increases slightly, but speech may continue to be characterized by frequent long pauses, since the smooth incorporation of even basic conversational strategies is often hindered as the speaker struggles to create appropriate language forms. Pronunciation may continue to be strongly influenced by first language and fluency may still be strained. Although misunderstandings still arise, the Intermediate-Mid speaker can generally be understood by sympathetic interlocutors.

Able to handle successfully most uncomplicated communicative tasks and social situations. Can initiate, sustain, and close a general conversation with a number of strategies appropriate to a range of circumstances and topics, but errors are evident. Limited vocabulary still necessitates hesitation and may bring about slightly unexpected circumlocution. There is emerging evidence of connected discourse, particularly for simple narration and/or description. The Intermediate-High speaker can generally be
understood even by interlocutors not accustomed to dealing with speakers at this level, but repetition may still be required.

**ADVANCED**

The Advanced level is characterized by the speaker's ability to:
- converse in a clearly participatory fashion;
- initiate, sustain, and bring to closure a wide variety of communicative tasks, including those that require an increased ability to convey meaning with diverse language strategies due to a complication or an unforeseen turn of events;
- satisfy the requirements of school and work situations; and
- narrate and describe with paragraph-length connected discourse.

**Advanced**

Able to satisfy the requirements of everyday situations and routine school and work requirements. Can handle with confidence but not with facility complicated tasks and social situations, such as elaborating, complaining, and apologizing. Can narrate and describe with some details, linking sentences together smoothly. Can communicate facts and talk casually about topics of current public and personal interest, using general vocabulary. Shortcomings can often be smoothed over by communicative strategies, such as pause fillers, stalling devices, and different rates of speech. Circumlocution which arises from vocabulary or syntactic limitations very often is quite successful, though some groping for words may still be evident. The Advanced-level speaker can be understood without difficulty by native interlocutors.

**Advanced-Plus**

Able to satisfy the requirements of a broad variety of everyday, school, and work situations. Can discuss concrete topics relating to particular interests and special fields of competence. There is emerging evidence of ability to support opinions, explain in detail, and hypothesize. The Advanced-Plus speaker often shows a well developed ability to compensate for an imperfect grasp of some forms with confident use of communicative strategies, such as paraphrasing and circumlocution. Differentiated vocabulary and intonation are effectively used to communicate fine shades of meaning. The
Advanced-Plus speaker often shows remarkable fluency and ease of speech but under the demands of Superior-level, complex tasks, language may break down or prove inadequate.

**SUPERIOR**

The Superior level is characterized by the speaker's ability to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, professional, and abstract topics; and
- support opinions and hypothesize using native-like discourse strategies.

**Superior**

Able to speak the language with sufficient accuracy to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, professional, and abstract topics. Can discuss special fields of competence and interest with ease. Can support opinions and hypothesize, but may not be able to tailor language to audience or discuss in depth highly abstract or unfamiliar topics. Usually the Superior level speaker is only partially familiar with regional or other dialectical variants. The Superior level speaker commands a wide variety of interactive strategies and shows good awareness of discourse strategies. The latter involves the ability to distinguish main ideas from supporting information through syntactic, lexical and suprasegmental features (pitch, stress, intonation). Sporadic errors may occur, particularly in low-frequency structures and some complex high-frequency structures more common to formal writing, but no patterns of error are evident. Errors do not disturb the native speaker or interfere with communication.

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