

Preface

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 <https://doi.org/10.1075/sibil.14.01cel>

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Talking and Testing: Discourse approaches to the assessment of oral proficiency

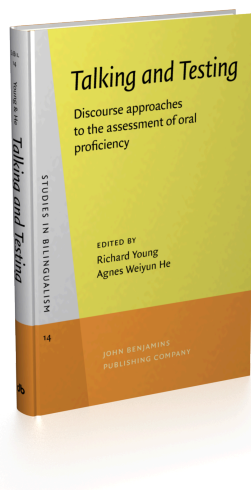
Edited by Richard Young and Agnes Weiyun He

[*Studies in Bilingualism*, 14] 1998. x, 395 pp.

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Preface

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This volume is a unique contribution to applied linguistics in that it brings together assessment and discourse analysis. The editors have compiled a remarkable collection of current research that documents various dimensions of the ways in which the language learner and the language proficiency interviewer use language to accomplish oral language assessment tasks.

Rather than speculate as to what will happen or what might have happened in language proficiency interviews (henceforth LPIs), all contributions to this volume are based on audio- and/or videotaped data from actual LPI sessions. All data have been carefully transcribed prior to analysis. This is particularly significant in view of the fact that, although there exists a literature on using interviews for the assessment of second language oral proficiency, until very recently studies of LPIs ignored the central validity issue of oral proficiency assessment—namely, the ways in which the LPI is accomplished through discourse.

The introduction and thirteen chapters in this book address various questions, including:

- How do participants locally manage the activity of the LPI?
- How do participants construct their linguistic identities and linguistic competence through language use?
- How do participants draw on their social, cultural, and interactional resources?
- How do interviewers form their knowledge of and judgments about the learner's interactional abilities?
- What does an LPI mean to the participants?
- Does the meaning of an LPI change from one speech community to another? If so, how?

To answer such questions, the authors contributing to this volume draw on a variety of analytical perspectives, including the ethnography of speaking,

ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, second language acquisition, language socialization, sociolinguistic variation theory, sociological human interaction research, systemic functional linguistics, and discourse domain theory. The book also examines LPIs conducted in several languages other than English, including French, German, Korean, and Spanish.

At least two guidelines emerge from this collection that can serve others working in similar areas: (1) record, transcribe, and analyze the actual talk that takes place between the interviewer(s) and the learner; and (2) adopt a multidisciplinary approach to research in language assessment.

This book will be of considerable interest to language testers, discourse analysts, second language acquisition researchers, foreign language teaching specialists, and anyone who is concerned with oral proficiency issues in language teaching. I commend the authors and editors and hope that this collection will be a stimulus to others doing cross-disciplinary research. We need further related research if we are to arrive at a richer and more complete understanding of what oral proficiency means in a second/foreign language in particular and what constitutes communicative competence in general.