



# Investigating the Speaking Examiners' Challenges in a Synchronous Online Test

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**Abstract.** This study examines the challenges faced by speaking examiners in assessing students' speaking performance conducted virtually. Data were collected by distributing questionnaires to speaking examiners to identify challenges they faced in administering the online speaking test. A focus group discussion to twenty five examiners were also conducted where they shared further about the challenges and how they dealt with the challenges. To confirm this, a questionnaire was distributed to 197 online speaking test takers. The study showed that the challenges the examiners faced were related to the poor internet connection and the technical problems from the participants' ends. These two factors caused some information delivered by the participants or examiners to be unclear or missing. This led the participants to ask the examiners to repeat some questions or vice versa. Although these challenges happened once in a while, they could interrupt the flow of the test itself and distract the focus of both examiners and participants. To deal with these two challenges, the examiners usually asked the participants to change their network or devices. There was this concern regarding the scoring of the participants' speaking performance if the troubles happened, but most examiners stated that the connection and technical problems did not really interfere with the scoring because they could identify the participants' speaking performance from their overall answers. Based on these findings, the institution could add some steps for device readiness check prior to the test to minimize the occurrence of the connection or technical problems that might inhibit the assessment.

**Keywords:** Challenges · speaking examiners · online speaking test

## 1 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has spread rapidly around the world and has interrupted many sectors. One of which is the education system that is forced to transform from face-to-face to online [1]. This shifting to online requires the integration of technology to support the teaching and learning process. However, since it just happened at once, prior information, understanding, and specific models of good practice for such a broad change was not available [2]. Thus, this transformation to online activities exposed teachers and students to challenges they had to cope with.

The sudden change to online due to the outbreak has also affected the testing and evaluation system to some extent for language skill tests [3]. Khan, et.al. [3] stated that

institutions ought to administer the test online during pandemic. The same experience also happened in the institution that became the object of this study. It has a speaking test called English Communicative Competence Test (ECCT) that aims to measure the English-speaking performance of the participants taking it. Before the pandemic the test was conducted offline, and the examiners met one participant at a time face-to-face in person. However, since the occurrence of the pandemic, the test has been administered online where the examiners (an interviewer and a rater) meet one participant at a time face-to-face in real-time using Zoom videoconference. For this test, the videoconference is used because it offers face-to-face communication in real-time interaction.

Some previous studies have been conducted to investigate the use of videoconference for speaking test or interview. Kim & Craig [4] carried out a study concerning validation of a videoconference speaking test. The study included 40 test-takers that had face-to-face as well as video conference interview. The result showed that to the participants the video conference interview was corresponding to the face-to-face interview in terms of comfort, computer familiarity, non-verbal linguistic cues, etc. and they were similar regarding the reliability, construct validity, authenticity, interactivity, impact, and practicality. However, a study carried out by Nova [5] showed a contrary result. In his study involving 44 students and a lecturer about videoconferencing for speaking assessment medium, Nova [5] figured that most of the students had negative views towards the use of videoconferencing as a speaking assessment tool because they were anxious and nervous during the test. There were also some barriers the students experienced during the test, such as the bad internet connection, technical problems, and surrounding disturbance that impacted how students received the questions asked by the teacher and how they produced the language to answer the questions.

Seeing the results of the previous studies concerning the use of videoconference medium for conducting an oral test online from the students' or participants' perspective, this study would dig into the speaking examiners' challenges in a synchronous online test and their strategies to cope with the challenges. That is because in such a remote testing situation, the grading process relies on some factors that could interrupt the learner's speaking skills during the examiners and participants' engagement through the online platform [2]. Hence, this study aimed to find it out and formulated the questions as follows:

1. What are the challenges faced by speaking examiners in assessing student's speaking performance conducted virtually?
2. What are the strategies the examiner used to deal with the challenges?

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Speaking Assessment**

Language assessment plays a key role in a language teaching and learning process because it could act as a monitor for ensuring the quality of the process [2]. Language assessment usually covers the four skills, namely listening, reading, writing, and speaking. As for the speaking assessment, it is often used to measure the speaking ability of participants. It comprises a number of language learning areas to evaluate, such as

vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, fluency, task completion, and comprehension [6]. Speaking assessment can take many forms depending on its types and purposes. One of its forms is an oral interview.

An oral interview is usually carried out with a participant and two examiners who assess the participants' speaking ability [3]. This form allows the examiners to get a comprehensive idea of the participants' speaking ability [3]. It usually has several stages to go through [6]. The first stage is warm-up where the examiners usually have a small talk with the participants to establish rapport and reduce anxieties. It usually takes the form of self-introduction and gets the participants familiar with the test format. The second stage is the level check. It usually takes the form of questions in which expected or predicted forms and functions could be anticipated. The response length depends on the entry level of the participants. The third stage is called the probe. This part usually contains difficult questions in which the examiners could identify the limitation of the participants' proficiency. The last stage is wind-down. In this part, the examiners give the participants easy questions that are meant to make them relaxed. Examiners usually inform the participants considering the test result. The English Communicative Competence Test (ECCT) that becomes the assessment tool used in this study also implements those four stages.

## **2.2 Synchronous Online Speaking Assessment**

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, teaching and learning activities have been forced to shift from face-to-face to online. Some online platforms, such as mobile applications, learning applications, learning management systems, etc., are used to support the teaching and learning activities. The use of online platforms is also implemented in the administration of language tests, and the type of platform used for administering the test should be in line with the nature of the test itself.

For the speaking test taken in this study, the nature of the test is interactive speaking in the form of an interview. In the test, an interviewer as well as a rater has a face-to-face interaction with a participant through a set of questions and directives [6]. Seeing the nature of the test, one type of platform that can be used to accommodate the test during the pandemic is video conferencing. It enables people from distant locations to be in the same virtual meeting place [7]. Kim and Craig [4] mentioned that for oral assessment, video conferencing technologies give a closer experience as a face-to-face medium. It allows examiners and participants to have face-to-face communication in real-time interaction or synchronous [5, 8] and they are able to see, hear and interact with each other through cameras, monitors, microphones, and speakers [9]. Moreover, since for the interview there is this need for immediate response, videoconferencing is suitable for the context because it is very close to a real-life authentic situation [10].

## **3 Research and Methodology**

### **3.1 Methods of Research**

This study was aimed at finding out the challenges faced by the speaking examiners in assessing the students' speaking performance conducted virtually and how they dealt

with the challenges. In order to find those out, this study employed a qualitative approach to investigate and discuss the phenomenon being researched.

This study was conducted at a language center of a higher educational institution that administers an online speaking test called ECCT (English Communicative Competence Test) to assess students' English-speaking performance. The online test was conducted by using a videoconferencing platform called Zoom. In its implementation, an interviewer and a rater examine one student at a time and the speaking test lasts for 10–15 min for one student. Prior to being assigned as examiners, the interviewers and raters had to participate in a training to administer the speaking test. They were given the procedures to follow, several sets of questions to ask, and a speaking assessment rubric. As for the students, they got themselves familiar with the test and the procedures once they registered for the test.

This study involved 25 examiners who have administered the online speaking test. 14 of them have an experience of being online speaking examiners for more than a year, 7 of them have a 5-month to a year experience, and the rest have less than 5-month experience.

### **3.2 Techniques of Collecting and Analyzing Data**

To figure out the examiners' challenges in assessing the students' speaking performance conducted virtually and the ways they handled the challenges, an open-ended questionnaire was distributed to 25 examiners. The questionnaire consisted of 1 closed-ended question to find out how long they have an experience as a speaking examiner, and 2 open-ended questions to explore the challenges and the ways the examiners dealt with those challenges. Furthermore, a focus group discussion with those examiners was conducted via a videoconference to clarify and confirm their answers on the questionnaire and to get further information. Moreover, a questionnaire was also distributed to 197 participants who took the online speaking test to get further insights about the implementation of synchronous online speaking test.

Data from the questionnaire distributed to the examiners were categorized into two topics, namely challenges and the ways they are handled. Data from the focus group discussions were transcribed and categorized based on the key issues of this study. The data were presented to support or refute the examiners' statements on the questionnaire to uncover more information that was not mentioned in detail on the questionnaire.

## **4 Findings and Discussions**

### **4.1 Speaking Examiners' Challenges in a Synchronous Online Test**

Based on the answer of the open-ended questionnaire and the focus group discussion, the challenges the examiners encountered during the synchronous online test are related to the internet connection and the technical problems. Table 1 presents the summary of the challenges the examiners faced.

The majority of the examiners stated that bad internet connection became the main problem during the online speaking test. This is also supported by 9 respondents from

**Table 1.** Challenges the Examiners Faced during the Synchronous Online Speaking Test

Challenges	Percentages	Excerpts from the Focus Group Discussion
1. Bad Internet Connection	21 responses	“The biggest challenge for me is the internet connection which could sometimes become unstable, both from the test-taker and the interviewer and it cannot be predicted. I’m afraid that due to that condition, the scoring could be less objective.”
		“When the wi-fi signal was not that good, the voice of the test-takers could not be heard clearly.”
		“The challenge that I faced was more to the bad connection from the test-takers’ ends. Sometimes I got confused to assess the Task Completion aspect because I could not tell if the test-takers really had trouble with the internet connection or not, or if they just wanted me to repeat the questions because they did not understand the question.”
2. Technical Problems	5 responses	“I experienced a time when the test-taker had his laptop crashed. So, I needed to wait for a while.”
		“There was a power outage in the test-taker’s area during the test.”
		“The test-taker’s audio was low because his laptop was broken.”

the participants who admitted that they experienced bad internet connection during the test. Since internet connection is the most important factor in this synchronous online test, its instability hindered the assessment process. Poor internet connection caused some information delivered by the participants or examiners to be unclear or missing. This led the participants to ask the examiners to repeat some questions or sometimes the examiners to ask the participants to repeat some of their answers. This could interrupt the flow of the test itself and distract the focus of both examiners and participants. Few examiners even expressed their concern regarding the objectivity of the scoring. Apart from that, since the test was conducted online, some of the examiners reported during the focus group discussion that there were times when some low-proficient participants pretended to lose internet connection just to get the examiners to repeat the questions.

In addition to the bad internet connection, technical problems experienced by participants became the other obstacle during the online test. Two examiners stated that there were few participants who experienced power outages in their area during the test, so they needed to reschedule the test. This was confirmed by 2 respondents from the participants who reported that there was a power outage in their area during the test. Besides that, there were also some participants who had their laptops freezing or crashed for a while, but they could resolve it immediately. Moreover, bad quality audio due to the broken devices also happened that caused the participants’ voices to be low. All of these

technical problems happened and slightly disturbed the assessment, but the examiners understood it since the test was conducted online.

These findings were in line with the study conducted by Nova [5] in which the in online speaking test some hindrance such as bad internet connection and technical problems might happen and could affect the process of the test itself.

#### 4.2 The Strategies to Handle the Challenges

Table 2 provides the response summary of the strategies the examiners used to deal with the challenges that covers how they usually dealt with the bad internet connection and technical problems.

When there was interruption from internet connection, most of the examiners usually asked the participants to change the network connection to see if other connections were better. For example, they asked the participants to use tethering from their smartphones which usually worked. During the focus group discussion, the examiners who experienced this during the online speaking test usually did the same. Besides that, there were few examiners who usually asked the participants to find a spot with better connection. For example, they asked the participants to move closer to the wi-fi source router. Moreover, if the examiners found that the internet connection caused the delay or the interruption during the participants' responding to the questions, they usually asked the participants to repeat their answers. Although the examiners also found it uncomfortable to do so, they had to make sure that they got the answers and could grade the participants' speaking performance accurately.

During the focus group discussion, few examiners admitted their concern regarding the scoring of the participants' speaking performance due to the poor internet connection. That was because if the participants asked for assistance, then it would affect the score in the Task Completion aspect. However, most of the examiners stated that poor connection did not really interfere with the scoring process since it did not happen all the time during the test, and they could assess the participants' speaking performance from their overall answers. As for the assistance they gave to the participants, they could tell if the participants needed it due to the poor connection or not. Some examiners stated that if they asked a question and the poor connection interrupted it, the way the participants

**Table 2.** Strategies to Deal with the Challenges

Challenges	Strategies	Percentages
1. Bad Internet Connection	a. Ask participants to change the network connection	3 responses
	b. Ask participants to find a spot with better connection	7 responses
	c. Ask participants to repeat their answers if there is a delay in responding to the question	3 responses
2. Technical Problems	a. Ask participants to change the device, such as laptop or headset	3 responses

asked them to repeat the question also reflected their proficiency. They usually stated it as well as the reason using proper English expressions, and the examiners usually repeated the same exact question as it was. However, if the participants did not get the question and pretended to lose connection and asked the examiners to repeat the question, the examiners could decide if it affected the scoring because the participants stated the reason using limited English expression and they could not understand the same exact question as it was stated previously. So, for this case, the examiners would paraphrase the questions and of course this one affected the score.

Besides the ways the examiners did to deal with the connection problem, there were also some procedures to do if technical problems occurred during the test. When the participants' laptops froze or crashed, the examiners usually asked the participants to change their laptops or pcs. If this took a minute to fix, then the test would proceed, but if it took some time, then the participant's turn would be adjusted. The similar procedure also applied when the participants had troubles with low audio quality with their laptops or pcs. When it happened, the examiners asked the participants to use other headsets. The examiners stated that these technical problems rarely occurred and could be resolved immediately. This was also confirmed from the participants' questionnaire responses, and there were only 2 out of 197 participants who experienced technical problems with their laptops.

## 5 Conclusion and Suggestions

Based on the data responses from the examiners that are also confirmed by the questionnaire distributed to the participants, the challenges faced by the examiners during the synchronous online speaking test include the poor internet connection and technical problems. Although these rarely happened based on the responses from the examiners and participants, these two challenges could interrupt the flow of the test and distract the focus of both examiners and participants. To cope with these challenges, the examiners usually asked the participants to change the network connection or the device if such things occurred during the test. They even asked the participants to repeat the answer if needed. Moreover, although few examiners expressed their worries about the scoring of the participants' speaking performance, most of the examiners stated that the internet connection and the technical problems did not hinder the scoring because they could identify it based on the participants' overall answer.

To minimize the interference of internet connection and reduce the technical problems during the test, some suggestions are offered to the institution. First, prior to the test registration, the institution could send the participants a link to check their internet connection and send them back for the admin staff to see if the participants are eligible to take the test considering their connection. Second, prior to the start of the test, the examiners could gather all test takers at once and check for their connection and devices.

This readiness check hopefully could lessen the problems that might arise during the test due to those two factors.

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