

# **The TEPOLI test: construct, updated tasks and new parameters to assess EFL teachers' oral proficiency**

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In this paper we report on results from an ongoing research project (henceforth PROJECT) that aims at analysing the oral proficiency in English of EFL teachers in contexts of teacher education programmes in Brazil. Data have been collected by means of an oral proficiency test - the TEPOLI (in Portuguese, *Teste de Proficiência Oral em Língua Inglesa*), a test being piloted and used as a research instrument within the PROJECT. The data obtained by means of the TEPOLI have indicated that further investigation in the direction of parameters to assess teachers' language is necessary, and supported updated versions of test tasks and rating scales. We also report on the descriptors that constitute the rating scales for the test, which vary from a level of proficiency minimally adequate for such professionals, to higher levels of performance that can be realistically attained by students who graduate from Letters courses in Brazil.

The issues of the oral language proficiency required for teachers of English as a foreign language (henceforth OLP-EFLT) and how to assess student-teachers' and acting EFL teachers on such proficiency have been discussed in a number of studies and publications (for example, Baghin-Spinelli, 2002; Elder, 1993, 2001; Fortkamp and Massarollo, 2002; Martins, 2005; Rajagopalan, 2005; Silva, 2000). To contribute for such discussion, on how to achieve a proper definition of the OLP required for those teachers, we first present a theoretical review of concepts such as competence, fluency and proficiency, and then report on some findings from a larger ongoing investigation<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Consolo, D. A. (2005). *Competência Lingüística em Língua Inglesa de Alunos de Letras: definição de Parâmetros na Formação e Avaliação da Proficiência Oral do Professor de Língua Estrangeira* [Linguistic competence in English of Letters students: Defining parameters in teacher education and in

that aims at defining the language domains, the language levels to be considered to assess OLP-EFLT in such domains and within such levels of language.

We report on some results from the aforementioned ongoing research project (henceforth PROJECT) (Consolo, 2005), as well as from a previous one (Consolo, 2001), which aims at analysing the oral proficiency in English of EFL teachers-to-be in teacher education courses - 'Letters courses' - in Brazil. The data encompass results from an oral proficiency test - the *TEPOLI* (in Portuguese, *Teste de Proficiência Oral em Língua Inglesa*), a research instrument developed for collecting data within the PROJECT but which may evolve into a test in ELT that may be used for other purposes as well.

In section two we present a summary of the theoretical background on oral language proficiency and oral language testing that supports the construction of *TEPOLI*. Section three contains a description of the test and of a revised version of the rating scales being used to assess the test takers, followed by results and suggestions for further investigation on OLP-EFLT.

### **Oral language proficiency: a brief review**

Some studies have contributed towards the process of (re)defining the characteristics of OLP-EFLT and a few of those studies are reviewed here.

Baghin-Spinelli (2002) collected data among students of Teaching Practice courses (usually taken in the last year of the course program for a degree in Letters) and

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they reveal the strong influence of imaginary representations and idealized views of oral proficiency among student-teachers based on the standards of the 'native speaker'. She reports on the problematic 'relationship' those students have with the English language, its cultural aspects and native speakers, and the issue of their linguistic-communicative competence.

Silva (2000) contributes for a review of what fluency means as a descriptor of OLP for a non-native speaker of English. Fluency, as a component of OLP, stands in a large scope of linguistic aspects involved in spoken language and yet it is also interpreted as a synonym for the overall competence in speaking skills required or 'desirable' for EFL teachers.

Elder (2001) takes up issues identified by Douglas (2000) and discusses the problem of assessing teachers' language as a type of LSP (Language for Specific Purposes) by presenting the complexity of language skills required of teachers. She states that specialist language skills for language teachers include "command of subject specific/metalinguistic terminology" and "the discourse competence required for effective classroom delivery of subject content" (p.152) which is in turn dependent on linguistic competence. Elder (2001) suggests that one operational solution to deal with the "multidimensional" aspects of teacher [language] proficiency "would be to separate the purely linguistic and the more classroom-specific aspects of performance" (p.163) and leaves the ground of assessing LSP and its implications for defining OLP-EFL open for further research.

For the concept of language proficiency, which is central to this discussion, we draw on Scaramucci (2000). She adopts two senses of the concept with regards to terminology: a technical and a non-technical sense. The non-technical sense generally encompasses impressionistic judgements based on a holistic view and values a concept

of proficiency that can be regarded as monolithic, stable and unique. This concept is usually pre-defined and represents a boundary that distinguishes proficient and non-proficient learners. However, Scaramucci emphasizes that such a concept of proficiency is to be understood as dependent on other variables like the teaching context, its characteristics and objectives, which also makes it relative and variable as well. In its technical sense, the concept of language proficiency encompasses levels within which the descriptions of language ability and use fall in order to indicate what and under which circumstances a language user is able to do. In this sense, proficiency takes into account the real aims of using language in social contexts.

In a similar way, Bachman and Savignon (1986) and Bachman (1988) criticize the view of proficiency as a “unitary language ability” since such a view was not supported by any theory or research. These criticisms are in line with Lantolf and Frawley’s (1988: 10) words: “Proficiency is derived from policy and not from science or empirical inquiry.” This argument helps towards a better understanding of the myriad of factors and the difficulty in defining OLP-EFLT. In her final considerations, Scaramucci (*op.cit.*) discusses the distinction between the terms ‘ability’ which is related to processes of language use, and ‘competence’, which is related to a state or standard. And she recommends replacing the label ‘communicative competence’ for ‘linguistic and communicative ability’. The concept of proficiency would then represent a process-like ability to use language competence, as well as a theoretical construct strictly dependent on the aims for language development and in accordance with the approach adopted in teaching and learning a language.

## **Description of TEPOLI**

### ***Version 1 (Year I and Year II)***

The first version of the test consisted of an interview based on a set of pictures, some of which were accompanied by short texts, taken from EFL course books and magazines. These were the visual prompts on which the topics for the oral interaction between examiner and examinee were largely based. Each examinee took the test individually.

In the first trial of TEPOLI (year I) a larger variety of pictures was piloted, ranging from materials and topics related to elementary/basic command of English, such as personal information and daily routine, to pictures which allowed for a conversation about more complex or abstract issues. After the audio-recorded data obtained in year I were analysed, and for purpose of developing a more reliable instrument, it was decided to give the test again in year II based on a standardized set of six visual prompts chosen from the ones piloted the year before: BS-1, BS-2, BS-3, AV-1, AV-2 and AV-3. The instructions for TEPOLI test task 1 and a report on its application are presented below:

#### **Test task 1**

(a) Show the candidate **three** visual prompts previously selected from the four prompts indicated below:

BS-1: "A walk up Fifth Avenue"

BS-2: "Three famous artists"

AV-1: "Couple in studio"

AV-2: "Skydiving"

These were the prompts most chosen or preferred by the students in PUB1-FOR2002 (see V.P. columns in Table 1 below). Prompts BS-1 and BS-2 contain pictures and short texts for him or her to choose the one to talk about. Prompts AV-1 and AV-2 depict a picture each. (b) Give the candidate one or two minutes to study the page and (c) start the conversation about the chosen text(s) or the picture and motivate the examinee to exploit the page by departing from factual aspects – for example, a description of what he or she sees and expanding to more

abstract topics or connections between the topical content of the prompt and the examinee's background experience.

Suggested questions (based on data from TEPOLI interviews in PUB1-2002):

- BS-1** What's this page about?  
Which of these places has most called your attention?  
If you could go to New York, which of these places would you like to visit and why?  
How does New York and (A CITY THE EXAMINEE KNOWS) compare?
- BS-2** Why did you choose this picture?  
Which painting do you think was produced by (ARTIST'S NAME)? Why?  
Would you like to have any of these / those pieces? Why (not)?  
Do you have/Have you got a favourite artist? (DEVELOP ON THIS)
- AV-1** What kind of ideas do you think about when you look at this picture?  
What do you think the movie is about? OR  
What do you think the commercial is for? Why?  
(FILM) Have you seen any romantic film recently? Which one?  
Is it the kind of film you would like to see? Why (not)?
- AV-2** Where were those people just before this picture was taken?  
Which sport is that?  
Have you ever tried any extreme sport?  
Do you know anyone who does any extreme sport?  
What type of message does this picture bring?

All the interviews in year II were recorded on audio, as well as on video in PUB1, one of the three contexts of Letters courses investigated.

As from 2003, the TEPOLI has also included a second test task, which consists of a role-play between the examiner and the examinee. This task aims at assessing the production of oral language that encompasses the metalanguage EFL teachers are expected to use in teaching contexts, for example, when they explain or talk about the English language with their students. The assumptions for test task 2 are the following:

- One example of the use of metalanguage is when teachers correct mistakes made by their students;
- EFL teachers are more likely to make use of metalanguage in English (instead of speaking in the students' L1) with students who are at or above the intermediate level;

- Newly graduated (or graduating) students from Letters courses are more likely to start (or have started) teaching EFL lessons at basic or intermediate levels;
- Although the oral performance of examinees is rated under the conditions of a role-playing task instead of in a real classroom situation, the use of realistic data, that is a segment from a real EFL lesson contributes to making more valid claims about the examinee's language competence and the characteristics of his or her oral proficiency to produce metalanguage in spoken English.

### Data from TEPOLI2002

Data from TEPOLI collected in PUB1-FOR2002 are displayed in Table 1: students, duration of each interview, duration of the assessment phase (including *conclusion and parting remarks*), visual prompts (V.P.) chosen by each examinee, levels and numerical marks, and examiner. Each examinee was asked which of the two visual prompts he or she had enjoyed most and the students' choices are shown in bold:

STUDENTS	TEPOLI	Assess. Phase	V.P. 1	V.P. 2	LEVEL / MARK	EXAMINER
1. St1	15m 16s	14m 40s	BS-3	<b>AV-2</b>	B / 7.7	ED
2. St2	14m 42s	13m 16s	BS-2	<b>AV-2</b>	C / 6.0	DC
3. St3	16m 38s	14m 57s	BS-1	<b>AV-1</b>	A / 10.0	DC
4. St4	18m 04s	16m 03s	BS-1	<b>AV-1</b>	B / 8.0	DC
5. St5	14m 34s	13m 43s	BS-3	<b>AV-3</b>	A / 9.0	ED
6. St6	18m 43s	17m 49s	BS-1	<b>AV-2</b>	A / 9.0	ED
7. St7	15m 13s	13m 35s	BS-1	<b>AV-1</b>	B / 8.7	DC
8. St8	13m 58s	12m 40s	BS-1	<b>AV-2</b>	B / 8.0	DC
9. St9	17m 20s	16m 00s	<b>BS-1</b>	AV-2	C / 7.5	DC
10.St10	18m 30s	17m 02s	<b>BS-2</b>	AV-1	B / 8.0	DC
11.St11	19m 26s	18m 10s	<b>BS-2</b>	AV-1	A / 9.5	ED

<b>12.St12</b>	17m 27s	16m 00s	BS-1	AV-1	A / 10.0	DC
<b>13.St13</b>	16m 11s	14m 41s	BS-3	AV-2	A / 9.0	ED

**Table 1: Data from TEPOLI - PUB1-FOR2002<sup>2</sup>**

### **The general rating scale for TEPOLI**

The scale used to rate students in PUB1-FOR2002 contained levels A, B and C only (Consolo, 2004). A revised version of the rating scale was developed in 2003. Two new levels have been added – one for the highest and one for the lowest levels of oral proficiency expected for the oral performance of students graduating from Letters courses who intend to work as EFL teachers in Brazil, as shown in Fig. 1. below (from Consolo, op. cit.).<sup>3</sup>

The new level A describes a level of oral proficiency in English of a very competent speaker, nearly ‘idealized’ for non-native EFL teachers. Levels B, C and D derive from the first version of the scale, and level E describes a level below the minimum requirements for a teacher’s oral proficiency.

Two numerical marks are suggested for each level. These can stand as a reference criterion based on a scale between 10.0 and zero, for the levels described, as well as be assigned to the examinee together with the letters A - E. According to this numerical criterion, the ‘pass mark’ is 6.5.

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<sup>2</sup> Translated from ‘Quadro 1’ in Consolo (2004: 274-275). For the full version of the scale (in Portuguese), see Consolo (op.cit.).

<sup>3</sup> Indexes A1, B1, etc have been added to the 2003 version of the scale so as to facilitate reference to specific descriptors.



<b>LEVEL</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>MARKS</b>
<b>A</b>	A1) Reaches all goals concerning communication and verbal interaction, displaying excellent fluency and ability for oral production.	10.0
	A2) Uses syntactic structures correctly and does not make grammatical mistakes.	
	A3) Uses complex syntactic structures and a large variety of lexicon.	
	A4) Displays features of pronunciation nearly identical of those produced by competent English speakers, almost without interference from his or her native language.	
	A5) Does not have any difficulty to understand the examiner's speech when he or she speaks at a normal rate.	
		9.5
<b>B</b>		9.0
		8.5
<b>C</b>		8.0
		7.5
<b>D</b>		7.0
		6.5
<b>E</b>	E1) Does not reach some of the goals concerning communication and verbal interaction, displaying lack of fluency and of competence in oral production.	6.0
	E2) Uses simple syntactic structures only and makes grammatical mistakes.	
	E3) Uses a limited range of lexicon, which prevents him or her from expressing his or her ideas clearly.	
	E4) Displays pronunciation features (sounds and intonation) clearly distinct from those produced by competent English speakers, with strong influence from his or her native language.	
	E5) Has difficulty to understand the examiner's speech, which interfere in the development of the interactive process.	

**Figure 1: TEPOLI – Levels added to the revised version of the rating scale**  
(Translated and adapted from Consolo, 2004:280-282)

### **Scales to assess teachers' metalanguage**

The following scale, which focuses specifically on the use of classroom language and metalanguage, as required in the second test task, has been proposed so as

to provide examiners with more valid criteria to mark examinee's oral proficiency in relation to the domain of teacher's oral competence:

<b>LEVEL</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>MARKS</b>
<b>A</b>	A6) Task fully accomplished using language structures and lexicon appropriately. A7) Very clear speech indicates that it would probably be fully understood by real students. A8) Shows proper knowledge of the linguistic content in English and ability to decide what information s/he is expected to provide for the student(s).	10.0
		9.0
<b>B</b>	B6) Accomplishes task but is likely to make mistakes in language structures or have some difficulty to use the specialized lexicon in ELT. B7) Her/his speech is clear most of the time but may contain aspects which could be difficult for real students to understand. B8) Shows proper knowledge of the linguistic content in English but her/his talk may lack some relevant information for the student(s).	8.5
		7.5
<b>C</b>	C6) Task is accomplished within some limits due to some difficulty in language structures, use of the specialized lexicon in ELT or deviations from pronunciation patterns. C7) Her/His speech is only partially clear and displays aspects which would probably not be fully understood by real students. C8) Shows lack of linguistic knowledge in English, and of knowledge about relevant language rules and information which should be provided for the student(s).	7.0
		6.0
<b>D</b>	D6) Only part of the task is accomplished due to difficulty in language structure, lack of lexical competence (general vocabulary and specialized lexicon) and deviations from pronunciation patterns. D7) Her/His speech is only minimally comprehensible and contains several aspects which would probably not be understood by real students. D8) Shows limited knowledge of the linguistic content and does not know rules and information which are important for the student(s).	5.5
		5.0
<b>E</b>	E6) Task is not accomplished due to difficulty in handling even simple language structure, basic vocabulary and specialized vocabulary, and pronunciation patterns. E7) Her/His speech is hardly understood and would probably be mostly	4.5

	incomprehensible to real students. E8) Does not know important aspects of the linguistic aspects in English, and does not make any reference to rules or important information to be provided for the student(s).	
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The total marks in TEPOLI are to be calculated by means of weighing the marks given separately for test task 1 and test task 2. The weight attributed to each task may vary according to local or institutional decisions, for example,

graduating students of Letters and teachers with teaching experience up to one year	task 1 = 70% & task 2 = 30%
teachers with 1 – 2 years of professional experience	task 1 = 60 % & task 2 = 40%
teachers with more than two years of teaching experience	task 1 = 50% & task 2 = 50%

By the same token, the cutting scores can be established at level D or level C.

### **Concluding remarks**

The data collected by means of TEPOLI has indicated that the test tasks may benefit from improvement so as to assess specific language areas within the domain of FL teachers' oral language proficiency. Special attention needs to be given to test task 2. A number of examinees have not been able to accomplish this task properly because they either find it very artificial or engage in a discussion on error correction with the examiner, instead of actually correcting the mistakes found in the lesson transcript.

We conclude that further investigation in the direction of parameters to assess teachers' oral language is necessary.

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