Original Paper

Assessing EFL Learners' Consecutive Interpreting Skills

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Abstract

Interpreting is taught to senior EFL learners in Saudi Faculties of Arts. Since it is a branch with a vast number of skills, the present study seeks to evaluate EFL learners' interpreting skills. Forty graduate-level majors at Uqlat Asoqour Faculty of Arts, Qassim University were chosen randomly to sit for an interpreting test. A consecutive interpreting skills rubric was used to assess twelve interpreting skills over six points scale. Results of the statistical analysis showed variances among the subjects' interpreting skills, with a need to tackle some of interpreting skills intensively in the translation and interpreting courses presented to EFL students in Faculties of Arts.

Keywords

translation, simultaneous interpreting, consecutive interpreting, interpreting skills, testing interpreting

1. Introduction

Translation is the most obvious activity in EFL/ESL learning due to its embracement of interlingual practices to transmit meaning from one language to another. It is a set of actions performed by the translator while rendering a Source Language (SL) into a Target Language (TL). These actions are largely intuitive and the best results are naturally achieved by translators who are best suited for the job, who are well-trained or have a special aptitude, a talent for it and gain the needed tools. The eminent feature of translation is that the translator has to deal with works of great authors of the past or outstanding writers of today bearing in mind the elegant style of writing or the formal expressions of specialised contexts. In other words, the translator, has to preserve and fit into a different linguistic and social context a gamut of shades of meaning and stylistic nuances expressed in the original text by a great variety of language devices: neutral and emotional words, archaic words and new coinages, metaphors and similes, foreign borrowings, dialectal, jargon and slang expressions, stilted phrases and obscenities, proverbs and quotations, illiterate or inaccurate speech, and so on and so forth (Shkurskaya, 2008).

Translation is a polysemous word, which is often used in different senses, even in the same text. It can be considered, based on (Roberts, 2002) as a genetic term, referring to both the written and oral transfer of message from one language to another, or as a specific term designating most often written transfer.

This distinction between oral transfer and written transfer is now clearly made with "interpretation" being used for the former and "translation" being limited to the latter. Distinguishing "process" from "result", Bell (1995) introduces three distinguishable meanings for the word translation: a process (to translate; the activity rather than the tangible object); a product of the process of translation (i.e. the translated text); and finally, the abstract concept that encompasses both the process of translating and the product of that process.

Gutt (1991, 1996, & 2000) sought to resolve the assumption that there is no unified theory of theory of translation that can provide a theoretically sound and practically viable explanation of how translation functions. He has shown that relevance theory provides a means of predicting for the communicative success in translation, thus empowering translators to predict more effectively whether or not a given rendering will communicate effectively with the target audience. Relevance theory provides sound theoretical reasons for adapting the translation principles used to produce a translation to suit the target audience's expectations and the contextual assumptions with which the target audience will interpret a translation.

Based on the relevance theory, Gutt distinguished two types of translation; direct and indirect, while maintaining theoretical unity in his account of translation, because in the final analysis both approaches prove to be forms of interpretive use. Together these two approaches account for all instances of genuine translation, that is, all instances where the translator is consciously trying to convey the meaning of the source text. Consequently, translation can endorse anything from literal to free translation (Smith, 2002).

Oral interpretation, the focus of this study, has some inimitable attributes. It imposes a number of important restrictions on the translator's performance. Here the interpreter receives a fragment of the original only once and for a short period of time. His interpretation is also a one-time act with no possibility of any return to the original or any subsequent corrections. This creates additional problems and the users have sometimes to be content with a lower level of equivalence.

EFL tutors face variant problems while teaching oral interpretation. In the Arab context, in general, and in Saudi Arabia in specific, oral interpretation is neglected in research despite the fact that it is one of the obligatory courses to be taught for English majors. To the best knowledge of researchers, no study in the Arab context tried to assess or tackle the problems faced by EFL learners while interpreting. Consequently, the study receives the contextual as well as the academic rationale to be administered.

2. Literature Review

Since it's an interlingual craft with different phases of decoding, comprehending and recoding, interpreting includes varied stages and skills. According to Meifang (2012), there are five stages in the process of consecutive interpretation: hearing and listening; analysis and comprehension; memorizing and note-taking; loading from memory and notes; and finally, delivery.

In practical terms, professional interpreting is the process of listening to a spoken statement in one

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language, analysing its content and responding exactly the same message with spoken words in another language. Such process may be simultaneous or consecutive. Obst (1993, p. 2) differentiates between simultaneous and consecutive interpreting saying:

Consecutive interpreting (CI): the interpreter waits for the speaker to stop after a number of sentences before rendering the statement in the target language from memory and special notes, based largely on what are called symbols or ideograms. *Simultaneous interpreting (SI)*: the interpreter does not wait for the speaker to complete a statement or even a sentence in the source language, but talks at the same time in the target language, just seconds behind the speaker.

Consecutive interpreting has been classified by Christoffels (2004), into two types; discontinuous and continuous, based on the time allowed for the interpreter to interfere and translate. However, the process in both types is the same and the difference is only in timing. Other types of interpreting are added by Phelan (2007) in her report to the NCCRI (National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism). This includes face to face interpreting, telephone interpreting, relay interpreting, whispered or sight interpreting. Obviously, these are just how interpreting is performed rather than types of interpreting.

Regarding the difficulty of interpreting, Christoffels and Groot (2004) state that interpreting is a complex task where the interpreter is routinely involved in comprehending, translating and producing language at the same time. They assessed two components that are likely to be major sources of complexity in Interpreting: The simultaneity of comprehension and production, and transformation of the input. Output performance and ear–voice span suggest that both the simultaneity of comprehension and production and the transformation component affect performance but that especially the combination of these components results in a marked drop in performance.

Gile (1997) investigated the difficulty of interpreting from a different angle. She compared simultaneous to consecutive interpretation and reached the result that simultaneous interpreting is more difficult than consecutive interpreting. Justifying this result, she commented that simultaneity of the multiple processes taking place concurrently during the implementation of the task imposes high demands on the capacity of the working memory of the interpreter. Here, differently from the processes of normal comprehension and that of comprehension and translation, working memory and especially the control component (attention) makes an additional effort, since the task is performed without the help of an important component for comprehension. As for consecutive interpreting, here the demands of capacity are not determined by the simultaneity of the processes of production and comprehension, even though the delay in production means that both short- and long-term memory play a more significant role.

Gile's model of investigation has turned the attention of researchers towards the role of memory and note taking in interpreting. Hanh (2006) and Meifang, (2012), for instance, examined the role of note-taking in consecutive interpretation utilising Liu Minhua's process model and Gile's effort model on consecutive interpretation as basic theoretic frameworks. Hanh states that notes improve

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concentration; prevent distraction, thus facilitating the reception and analysis of the speech. Secondly, notes help the interpreter relieve the memory. Thirdly, as mnemonic, notes activate the memory of the interpreter with cues or signals that call up the information in the speech. With notes, the main ideas, the secondary elements and the links among them become clear and easier for the interpreter to visualize. Finally, notes can also be used to highlight missing details, inconsistencies within the speech and anything implausible that needs attention latter. Meifang added that behind the competitive relationship between memory and note taking, there is actually cooperation among both elements with comprehension; and that note-taking has been built as an image of "a necessary helper" in consecutive interpretation.

With more details on note taking role in oral interpretation in general the consecutive mode on particular, an empirical study conducted by Windiari (2012) probed into the practice of interpreting by Translation students of Udayana University in Indonesia, class of 2010 conducted in March and April 2011. There were eight groups and each group consisted of three people each. The mode of interpreting used was consecutive and almost all members of the groups did note taking during the interpretation process. The study reached the result that the use of note taking was proven to be very beneficial since human being has limited ability to do multi tasks at once which include registering information, comprehending the meaning, arranging / mapping that information, thinking about the lexical choice while remembering another message, connecting it with the previous message (when needed) and producing the interpretation.

Campus, Visintin and Baruch (2009) realised that interpreters, trainee or professionals, face many difficulties while performing their jobs. They tried to learn about the main problems of language and oral communication with which students of interpretation deal the most. The methodology of the study consisted of a bibliographical research on consecutive and simultaneous interpretation. Field work consisted in the design of a questionnaire to be answered by a sample of students in advanced courses of interpretation. The information was compiled and analysed using the data collecting technique of the qualitative research. The findings indicated that the main language and oral communication difficulties face by advanced students of interpretation are: memory, note-taking and listening, followed in less proportion are fidelity and unfamiliar topic.

Sakamoto (2011) realized that the aforementioned difficulties are consistent with Japanese students' interpretations but on the text level only rather than on the sentence level. For his study, the problem very often arises from the student's failure to explicate cohesive relationships between sentences.

3. Method

3.1 Subjects of the Study

A total of 40 students participated in the study. These students were eighth level English majors, taking up the course Interpretation, and enrolled in the English and Translation Department, Science and Arts College, Qassim University, KSA. They had learned English for 9 years and by the time the study was

conducted. In addition, their programme in interpreting involved intensive skill development, exercise and building a repertoire of strategies in the face of certain constructions. So the overall better performance should come without surprise.

3.2 Tools of the Study

A consecutive interpreting test and a grading rubric were conducted by the researchers (see the appendix). The consecutive interpreting test included five audio extracts from VOA (Voice of America) Special English Education Report CD1. Testees had to listen to each extract, take notes then start translating it into Arabic language. Interpretations of the subjects were video-taped in order to be analyzed later. Researchers made and used the English/Arabic Interpreting Grading Rubric to assess the subjects' interpretings. Interpreting skills were assessed according twelve skills that are: (a) memorization, (b) pronunciation/enunciation, (c) vocal variety, (d) volume, (e) pace, (f) Introduction, (g) poise, (h) eye contact, (i) cutting (j) Body Posture- physicalization, (k) Facial expressions and (l) Effectiveness . The previous interpreting skills were graded over a detailed six points scale; (1) unacceptable performance, (2) missing skills, (3) skills not refined, (4) acceptable performance, (5) outstanding performance and (6) superior performance.

3.3 Test Reliability & Validity

Cronbach's alpha was computed for checking test reliability. Cronbach's alpha is 0.930 suggesting that the items have relatively high internal consistency.

In order to investigate the dimensionality of the test, "factor analysis" was used. The resulting output is presented in the following table (table 1).

Table 1. Factor analysis for interpreting test

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	6.880	57.334	57.334	6.880	57.334	57.334
2	1.249	10.412	67.746	1.249	10.412	67.746
3	.945	7.872	75.618			
4	.602	5.013	80.631			
5	.449	3.743	84.374			
6	.395	3.291	87.666			
7	.339	2.829	90.495			
8	.294	2.446	92.941			
9	.269	2.243	95.184			
10	.224	1.866	97.049			
11	.196	1.631	98.681			
12	.158	1.319	100.000			

Looking at the previous table we see that the eigenvalue for the first factor is quite larger than the eigenvalue for the next factor (6.88 versus 1.24). Additionally, the first factor accounts for 57.33% of the total variance. This suggests that the test items are unidimensional and that the test has construct validity.

3.4 Procedure of Data Collection

First the subjects were taught the consecutive interpreting course during the second semester of the academic year 2012-2013. After three months of training the subjects sat for the consecutive interpreting test. Finally the results of the test were tackled statistically to assess the skills of EFL learners in consecutive English/Arabic interpreting.

3.5 Data Analysis & Hypothesis

One sample *t*-test was used to test the following hypothesis: The sample's mean in consecutive interpreting skills test is lower than 60%.

4. The Results of the Study

As it has been indicated earlier, one sample *t*-test was used to verify the validity of the research hypothesis. Tables (2 & 3) indicate the sample's mean score and p-value.

Table 2. One-sample statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Total	40	38.1750	8.84014	1.39775

Table 3. One-sample test

	Test Value = 43					
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
Total	-3.452	39	.001	-4.82500	-7.6522	-1.9978

Tables (2&3) indicate that the sample's mean is 38.1750, "*t*" value is -3.452, and p-value is .001 which means that the hypothesis is accepted.

Since the total grade of consecutive interpreting skills test is 72, the researchers used the grade "43" as the test value to represent 60%. The sample's mean is lower than the test value (43) with mean difference -4.82500. Furthermore the researchers used 95% confidence interval of the difference and it ranges between -7.6522 lower and -1.9978 upper which means the lower mean of the sample was with minus 7.6522 and the upper with minus 1.9978 from proposed test value (43).

The previous result is presented graphically in the following "Error Bar" (figure 1) which indicates that the mean of the sample in consecutive translation skills test is 38 and the sample means ranges from 35 to 41 with 95% confidence interval.
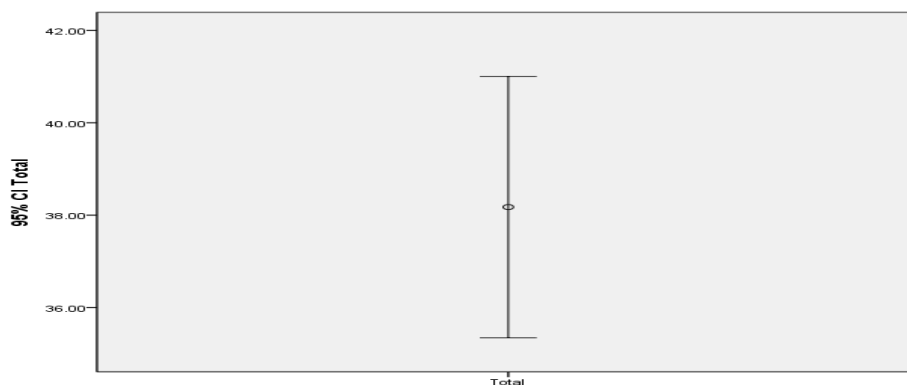
Figure 1. Sample's confidence interval of the difference with zero test value

5. Discussion

Based on the analysis of the recorded CI outputs produced by the participants of the study, this paper attempted to clearly assess the CI skills. The skills investigated were grouped into two categories; personal (eye contact, body posture, facial expressions and effectiveness), and linguistic (memorization, pronunciation, vocal variety, volume, pace, introduction, poise and cutting). The results revealed that the subjects' mean did not exceed the acceptable statistical level. This indicates that the subjects lack the consecutive interpretation skills assessed in this study.

The aforementioned results indicated that language interpretation is a difficult and complex task. Different factors might influence the output reached by researchers. In the current study, the results obtained can be attributed to different attributes, or dimensions that are proved to have relationship with subjects' performance; linguistic, affective or cognitive. In the following paragraphs, those dimensions will be highlighted with reference to the participants of the study and the review of literature.

5.1 The Linguistic Dimension

Language competence is the most distinguished factor revealed by literature. The linguistic competence of the participants, in both source and target languages, was not high enough to take advantage of the syntactic and semantic features of the text. Clahsen and Felser (1996) and Chen (2005) pointed out that L2 learners typically perform shallow parses only, leading to a kind of encoding not as rich as they would when parsing discourses in their L1.

It is well known that languages differ in their phonology, grammar and meaning systems. Any language is able to describe things, notions, phenomena and facts of life. This ability of language ensures cognition of the outside world. But the ways of expressing these things and notions usually vary in different languages. That means that different languages use different sets of semantic components, that is, elements of meaning to describe identical extra-linguistic situations. The situation between English and Arabic is the same. Different equivalents are used to denote the same object. That is why we have to bear in mind the three types of meaning associated with words; referential, emotive and stylistic.

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In their English to Arabic interpretation, participants encountered thorny problems in rendering style with different meaning, referential, emotive, and stylistic. participants' errors in translating stemmed largely from the fact that they focused on words as isolated items whereas their main task ought to be directed to "*perform a given function in the best possible way, and the details concerning the translation of individual words ought to be subordinated to this task*" (Bakir & Lazim, 2004). An example to that is their translation to the term "*executive functions "الوظيفة التنفيذية* " or "*National Centre for Learning Disability*" "المركز الوطني لتعلم الصعوبات" or "*representation in the House*" "التمثيل في المنزل". Students' attention, thus, need to be aimed at "complete discourse, which in turn is incorporated into a particular context of situation".

One more problem caused participants' weakness in oral interpreting is the phonological pattern of speaking. One main reason to that is the juncture problem caused by the transition from one sound to another while speaking. In other words, it is participants' failure to recognise pauses. Despite the different listening courses participants studied, they failed to develop listening habits and their skills are still not developed to a professional level. This is a common problem among EFL learners in the Arab context because they hear combinations of sounds that do not exist due to the glide of phonemes while talking (Al-Alwan et al, 2013). This phenomenon was available most of the time while interpreting the text.

Hasan (2000) and Jdetawy (2011) are of the same opinion. Both stated that Most of the Arab EFL learners are unable to fully comprehend natural spoken English delivered at normal speed. They attributed this result to different reasons such as: English is not their mother tongue, the use of Arabic as their formal language of communication, the lack of the target language exposure as spoken by its native speakers, the habitual act of Arab EFL learners to use Arabic in EFL classrooms rather than English, the lack and weakness of the input in their language teaching context, the lack of personal motivation, the inappropriateness and weakness of the English language curricula adopted by some academic institutions and many other reasons.

Text topic and length is one more factor that might lead to the ambiguity of the text to the interpreter. Texts allocated for students to translate ranged their length from one sentence to three sentences long. It was found out that the longer source-language utterance, the more difficult memory process becomes. And as cited by Doung (2006), "Well dealing with long speeches (usually found in real context of interpreting), students need to pay more attention to short—term memory usage for information store" (p. 21).

Topics also played a role. Since the topics used for interpretation were mainly chosen from VOA (Voice of America), participants' background knowledge was not familiar with the American culture which in turn negatively influenced their proficiency in interpretation. Chamot (1998) argued:

Nowhere is the role of prior knowledge more important than in second language educational contexts. Students who can access their prior knowledge through the language and culture most familiar to them can call on a rich array of schemata, whereas students who believe they can only use that knowledge

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they have explicitly learned in the second language are limited in their access. (p. 197)

5.2 The Affective Dimension

Test anxiety, distress and frustration are factors that proved to be inhibitors of getting high scores in interpreting. A review of the literature on anxiety and interpreting performance finds that there is a positive relationship between both aspects. Horwitz et al (1986) have emphasised this idea. They indicated that language anxiety with its three dimensions; communicative, test and fear of negative evaluation, can deter students from pursuing academic or professional careers in which knowing a foreign language is essential. Anxiety can also be beneficial. That is why we have to distinguish between "inhibitory/debilitating anxiety" and beneficial/facilitating anxiety.

These results go in line with those reached by Chiang (2010) who examined the relationship between Taiwanese student interpreters' FL anxiety and their learning outcomes in Chinese-English interpretation courses. Results indicate that the students' FL anxiety had significant and negative relationships with both their mid-term and final achievement in interpretation courses. In the Arab context, similar to that where the current study was conducted, Abed and Mohammed (2011) have similar results. They indicated that anxiety is an important factor that influences students negatively while they are interpreting into/from the foreign language. They suggested that interpretation with its unique and peculiar features has a strong link with anxiety and named that as interpretation anxiety.

5.3 The Cognitive Processes Dimensions

Another area that is believed to be influential in interpreting the text is that pertaining to information processing. Spoken word recognition, processing speed, information retention, processing distraction, interpretation and fatigue are effective factors that might lead to failure in interpretation. Waters et al. (2003), Ruiz et al. (2008) and Jin (2010) are of the same opinion. They highlighted the importance of comprehension in interpreting, and complexity in selecting, interpreting and retaining long passages. They emphasised that working memory is required when participants appeared to use parallel translation when resources were available to them. However, they also affirmed that when working memory capacity was taken into consideration, the statistics indicated that perhaps word order and translation direction were not determining factors for their memory performance. It is possible that participants with larger working memory capacity can encode the incongruent passages more effectively (deeper level of processing), and therefore, they show a bigger advantage for word order change than do low working memory capacity people.

The aforementioned interpretation can be linked to the lack of strategy use while interpreting, especially note taking. Santiago (2004) explains that during the process of interpretation, there is a lot of information that is registered to the interpreters' short term memory. If the interpreters do not do anything with this information, it will soon disappear. This is one of the reasons why the interpreters discard the form of the source text. In the current study, despite the fact that students were trained on the use of note taking as a facilitating strategy, they rarely used it. They pondered over their short term memory, missing the incoming messages, and consequently were unable to activate the long term

memory and secondary or coming elements were lost. Note taking, if employed, can activate the memory of the interpreter with cues or signals that call up the information in the speech. With notes, the main ideas, the secondary elements and the links among them become clear and easier for the interpreter to visualize (Hanh, 2006).

6. Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions

As mentioned in the beginning of this study, interpreting is not an easy task to do. It requires a complex knowledge, skills, and experience. The current study has allowed a glimpse into EFL learners' oral interpretation skills. Document analysis and assessment rubric has been used for the sake of analysis. The findings indicated that EFL learners in the Arab context are in a dire need to extend their views and practices regarding those skills. They lacked the minimum level needed for advanced performance in interpreting. The results obtained in this study have been attributed to different areas that are of concern; linguistic, affective and cognitive. The study concludes with the idea that for the interpreter to listen, comprehend and take down a processed transformed version of the utterance, she/he has to run ahead of the utterance being received and anticipate its morpho-phonemic, syntactical and semantic structure.

For the sake of pedagogy, interpreters and their tutors should understand that the process of interpretation has two stages or phases. The first phase being completed when the semantic representation is achieved in the form of notes, and the second phase being started when this semantic representation is utilized for programming and producing the message in the TL (target language). Teachers should endeavour to eliminate anxiety and fear by allowing students to have more practice and use in the early stages texts that are culturally familiar to them. Strategies such as note taking and mind mapping are crucial for developing their interpreting skills and hence successful performance.

Based on the results obtained in the current study, the role of working memory in how the advantage of parallel translation can be fully demonstrated by participants is a theoretically relevant question but remains to be examined. Research on fluency in interpretation, is another exciting area of study. It offers considerable interest, not only for purposes of academic debate but also for what should surely be the ultimate goal of interpreting studies – increasingly informed insight into how trainee interpreters can be helped to negotiate the many difficulties of the learning process.

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Appendix

English/Arabic Interpreting Grading Rubric

Student's Name:

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Skill ⟋ Performance	6- Superior Performance	5- Outstanding Performance	4- Acceptable Performance	3- Skills not refined	2- Missing skills	1-Unacceptable Performance
Memorization	The student remembers the entire extract without mistakes	The student remembers the entire extract with few mistakes	The student remembers the entire extract with several mistakes	The student struggle to remember the entire extract	The student has lapses in memory	Do not remember the extract
Pronunciation/ Enunciation	Precise, easily understandable	Most words understandable	Some words and phrases unclear	Words run together	Consistent slurring	Cannot understand
Vocal Variety	Reflects message of the speech	Shows enthusiasm for speaking	Moments of enthusiasm	Tones inappropriate for message	Mostly monotone	Monotone
Volume	Easily heard by entire audience	Easily heard most of the time	Decreasing volume at end of sentences	Significant periods of low volume	Difficult to hear most of the time	Can't hear
Pace	Conversational, easy to listen to	Moments of speeding and/or	Moments of speeding or long	Speeding most of the time	Speed hurts clarity	Words run together
Introduction	Attention getting, previews, gives reason to listen	Attention getting and previews	Attention getting or previews	One quick statement or question	Announces topic	None
poise	No signs of nervousness	A few signs of Nervousness	Occasional nervous habits	Some notable nervous habits	Constant fidgeting	Can't speak, gives up
Eye contact	Always looks at entire audience	Looks at entire audience most of the time	Looks at a few people most of the time	Occasionally looks at a few people	Looks up infrequently	Eyes always on script
Cutting	Edited for time, dialogue, and effect	Edited for time limits and dialogue	Edited for time limits	Editing seems confused	Minimal editing	No editing
Body Posture- physicalization	Posture reflects moods, action, and characters	Posture reflects moods and action	Some attempt at physicalization	Posture is neutral	Posture shows some nervousness	Posture shows significant nervousness

Facial expressions	Expressive and reflects moods, characters, action of scene	Reflects the action of the scene	Reflects moods	Minimal attempts at variation	Neutral	Shows nervousness
Vocal characterization	Characters distinguished by clear vocal differences	Characters attempted vocally	Inconsistent vocal characterization	Reading with some vocal variety	Reading with minimal vocal variety	Reading in monotone
Effectiveness	Feelings, emotions, and message of speaker clear	Audience understands speaker, message clear	Message clear	Speaker lacks ethos	Non-believable, Audience confused	Speaker appears bored