Automatic Large-Scale Oral Language Proficiency Assessment

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1. Background
- Oral proficiency tests are an important aspect of language skill assessment
  - Listening skills
  - Speaking skills
- Human assessment is the usual approach
  - Highly labour-intensive
  - Very subjective
- Reading and writing skills can be computerised
  - Fast
  - Reduced manpower
  - Objective and transparent
- However, good results in written tests are not necessarily reliable predictors of corresponding performance in oral tests

AIM: Develop automatic system for the assessment of oral language proficiency

2. Context
- Students at Stellenbosch University’s Education Faculty must enrol in a language module appropriate to their level of proficiency
- Progress must be monitored regularly thereafter
- 100–200 students per staff member: human assessment is impractical

3. Test design

Reading task: Subjects read a sentence from a provided test sheet
EXAMPLE: "School governing boards struggle to make ends meet."

Repeat task: Subjects repeat a sentence spoken by the system
EXAMPLE: "Student teachers don’t get enough exposure to teaching practice."

Open-ended task: Subjects respond spontaneously to a general question
EXAMPLE: "What is your biggest fear when entering a classroom?"

4. Test administration
- 106 students completed test in the 1st semester 2006
- Spoken dialogue system guides students through test and captures replies for subsequent assessment
- Calls made from a dedicated telephone in quiet surroundings
- English mother-tongue speakers generally found test manageable; Afrikaans-speaking students found it challenging
- All 106 tests transcribed orthographically by human experts
- Reserve 16 as development data, use remaining 90 as test set
- Test set is assessed automatically as well as by human raters

5. Human assessment
- 5 human raters, each teaches English as a foreign language
- Each student was assessed by at least 2 raters
- Each rater assessed 50 tests, 5 of which were repetitions to test for intra-rater consistency

5-point Likert scale used by human raters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Assessment criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Read</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Pronunciation, intonation and rhythm almost mother-tongue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 Speech difficult to understand and poorly articulated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeat</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Repetition accurate and prompt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 No attempt was made to repeat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Confident and fluent reply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 Only a feeble attempt was made to formulate a reply</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Consistency of raters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Human rater</th>
<th>Intra-rater correlation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.74</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.30</td>
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<td>0.73</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Marks awarded by raters

- Fairly high marks awarded
- Range of scale not evenly exploited

Agreement among raters

Intra-task correlation

Predicting human assessments using estimated ROS

Task | Average ROS | Correlation between est. ROS and true ROS | Correlation between est. ROS and human scores |
-----|-------------|-------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
Read | 6.0         | 0.98                                      | 0.52                                        |
Repeat| 5.0        | 0.94                                      | 0.58                                        |
Open | 4.8         | 0.86                                      | 0.48                                        |

6. Automatic assessment
- ASR system uses speaker-independent cross-word triphone HMMs with 8 mixtures/state trained on approximately 6h of telephone speech
- Rate of speech (ROS) was taken as a measure of fluency:
  \[
  \text{ROS} = \frac{N}{T_{sp}}
  \]
  \(N\) = speech phones / utterance duration of utterance (including pauses)
- Reading task: Finite-state grammar allowing correct utterance with pauses and speaker noises between words
- Repeat task: Zerogram LM (one per utterance) using words in manual transcription of development data
- Open-ended task: Single zerogram LM obtained by pooling development transcriptions

7. Conclusions
- Human raters are surprisingly inconsistent
- Correlation between automatic scores and human assessments is not particularly high, but compares well with other published figures
- Rate of speech (ROS) is promising as a consistent measure of fluency
- Other automatic measures are being investigated