

SST: Testing Spoken English in Japan

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Date: Wednesday March 21, 2007

Time: 3:40 p.m.

Location: 212 Ross Hall

The SST (Standard Speaking Test) was created in 1996 by ACTFL (The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) and ALC Press of Tokyo, as a variant on the widely-used ACTFL-OPI. It was felt that the SST would better serve the needs of the academic community in Japan by focusing more finely on the Intermediate range of speakers, into which most Japanese learners of English fall. The most notable differences between the SST and the ACTFL-OPI are that the former features a more structured format within a prescribed time limit and that the SST utilizes non-native testers whose English speaking ability is at the level of Intermediate-High or above (as tested by ACTFL-OPI).

Since the test was first introduced in 1997, close to 10,000 SST's have been successfully administered for both commercial and academic clients, and the SST database represents the most comprehensive corpus of spoken English samples in Japan. There are presently over 100 active SST testers and the administrative, training and quality control aspects of the SST are fully developed. The SST was the first speaking proficiency test available in Japan, and with its strong emphasis on adaptive and interactive elicitation technique, as well as holistic evaluation, it remains the most valid for effectively measuring the speaking skills of examinees.

The presenter has been the Head Trainer for the SST since its inception. Concurrently, he manages the International Training Section of Itochu Corporation, in which the SST is used to assess all employees' English speaking skills, as proficiency in speaking in English is considered mandatory for this worldwide trading firm. Although the SST is beginning to be used consistently as a high-stakes test by certain institutions, and has been the base for various other related speaking tests (e.g. for airline pilot training), it is not widely known in the academic community. The focus of the presentation will be to introduce the SST and to give a general overview of its twin aspects: elicitation technique (the interview) and evaluation (rating). A demo interview will be performed and analyzed during the seminar.