I. Introduction.

This is the first step of a multi-pronged project to streamline the University of Hawai‘i’s English Language Institute’s (the “ELI”) oral interview procedure (the “ELIOIP”). Currently, students who do not meet the university’s ELI exemption criteria are placed into the respective ELI listening and speaking classes after a comprehensive placement exercise (known as the ELI placement test, or the “ELIPT”), according to each student’s approximate listening proficiency. On occasion however, a student might be thought (usually by his or her ELI teacher) to be better suited to a different class, or if sufficiently proficient, to be exempt from such classes. An oral interview by either the ELI director or coordinator may then be conducted with the student to determine whether the student should be enrolled in a different class, or to be exempt from such classes, as the case may be.

Overall Project Goals

As part of continuing efforts to improve the overall efficiency of the ELI, and especially the ELIPT, the primary goals of the whole project are to:

A. standardize and formalize the existing oral interview procedure so as to make it more transparent;

B. facilitate, and enhance the consistency of, expert judgment that forms the basis of such determination; and

C. maintain the professionalism of the ELIPT, and with specific regard to its listening and speaking component, to ensure that its results are as accurate as they can be, and thereby establish greater accountability on the part of the ELI.

Outcome & Intended Use of this Project Part

The main outcome of this part of the project is a test specification which aims to guide the formalizing and documenting of the ELIOIP and by extension, a placement exercise vis-à-vis the listening and speaking component, so that they are as valid and reliable as they can be. Further work to be carried out to complete the ELIOIP review would include setting up a
bank for the interview questions themselves and categorizing them, and a grading or rating system for the various parts and questions of the interview; as well as guidelines and training to use each of these.

II. Procedure.

I first had an informal discussion with the ELI director to ascertain the feasibility of the project and a conference with the course instructor to delineate a possible construct for the ELIOIP. Upon ascertaining that the project is feasible, and having come up with a potential construct with the assistance of the instructor, I then signed a confidentiality agreement in respect of the project with the ELI so that I might start with the documentation. I sought the assistance of, and obtained all necessary forms and relevant materials (viz., a copy of the ELI’s placement procedures and course completion policies, a blank copy of the ELI information card which records the student’s personal particulars and the result of each section of the ELIPT, as well as the ELI’s interview questionnaire) from, the ELI director.

The next steps were to review and evaluate the documents and existing procedure as well as the pertinent literature available, and to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the documents and existing procedure. This is found in the section that immediately follows this. The findings are then presented to the ELI director and the course instructor in this report. I also include my suggestions and comments on any other appropriate course of action to be taken by the ELI at the end of this report.

III. Literature Review and Analysis of Existing ELIOIP.

I carried out a review and evaluation of the existing ELIOIP and extract here the five steps proposed by Luoma (2004:119-121) to write an oral test specification to assess listening and speaking, but especially the latter skill:

1. Describing the assessment context.
This step involves general, introductory questions about the assessment such as the purpose, the institutional context, the students, the tester, and the students’ second language background.

2. *Characterizing the assessment procedures.*

This step involves general questions about the assessment procedure itself, such as the broad expectations or requirements for what the procedure should be like, as well as the practical limitations as regards what is possible in terms of available resources.

3. *Describing the construct.*

This step focuses the test developers’ attention on learner language to help describe the skills to be assessed. The answers are useful for creating and refining rating criteria for the test.

4. *Relating the construct description to models and frameworks.*

The test developers should use ideas developed in the third step to direct them to theoretical and other frameworks that are relevant, and use these frameworks to evaluate and refine the construct definition. Aside from using the models they are familiar with, the developers can also consult colleagues and textbooks to consider both the aspects of speaking that are involved in this particular assessment procedure as well as the aspects which are not covered in it.

5. *Summarizing the construct definition.*

The test developers should review their answers to questions in each of the foregoing steps and summarize them in a clearly worded statement about what will be assessed and how.

In accordance with the confidentiality agreement I had signed with the ELI before undertaking this project, which also allowed me access to the interview questions currently in use, I understand that I am obliged to keep the content of the specific questions confidential. Nevertheless, I am allowed to describe the questions in general. They relate to academic
topics such as the interviewee’s school life, both present and in the past, and what issues she might have encountered in her academic career. The four questions listed in the questionnaire are open-ended, and allow the student being interviewed a fair amount of leeway to construct an answer which does not have to be factually accurate, so long as it answers the question. As well, the questionnaire is limited content-wise. I believe I am unable to comment more on the questionnaire without breaching the confidentiality agreement. I turn now to the next section in this report, and respond to the guidelines provided in this section, and elaborate on each of the items mentioned in the test specification.

IV. Addressing the test specification item by item.

Before I continue, I should state that the purpose of a test specification is primarily to act as a signpost for the test developers, who may each be writing specific sections and questions, so that the test follows an agreed overall framework that ensures that the test is valid, i.e., that it actually tests what it purports to test, and the results of the test may be relied upon because the results are consistent and not random or arbitrary. This is particularly important in the light of the severe academic, financial and other impact the results of the test are likely to have on the relevant students.

1. Describing the assessment context.

In this case, the purpose of the ELI oral interview is to allow the ELI director or his representative to make a discretionary, impartial and informed decision to either confirm or overrule the preliminary decision that had already been taken as to which listening and speaking class the student was to be placed in, usually at the recommendation of the student’s listening and speaking class teacher who believes that the class the student had been placed into was not most appropriate for her. Therefore, this should be included in the description, so that if the incumbent director or coordinator (the director’s assistant) leaves or becomes
otherwise unavailable to conduct the interview, firstly the substitute knows the existence of, and secondly the reasons for having, this oral interview; and understands how to conduct it and use its results. Additional comments, particularly on the institutional context, the interviewer’s as well as the student’s second language background, may well be included to complete the picture.

2. Characterizing the assessment procedures.

In this next step, we want to state the broad requirements and practical limitations of this interview. For example, what I understand to be important to the ELI is the right and freedom to decide whether or not to grant the student who had been recommended by her teacher, or who had herself appealed to the director or coordinator, the interview in the first place. This is in part due to the administrative and logistical difficulties involved in having to interview a large number of students, not to mention to avoid the nightmare of opening the floodgates, which would in effect say that the results of the existing placement exercise that led to the student being placed in a certain listening and speaking class are unreliable, thus undermining the ELI’s own credibility. In other words, the interview is (meant to be) discretionary and exceptional.

Moreover, the interview is granted, if it is, only to students already in an existing listening and speaking class at the ELI, and not, for example, to students who are exempt from such classes who might otherwise wish to take such a class for whatever reasons. The interviewer is also entitled to retain maximum flexibility to modify the questions, to elect not to ask all of them, or in each section or category, and to select which to ask for example, in the questionnaire to take into account the smooth and natural flow of the interview. And finally, the director or his representative should also retain the right to set up a preliminary meeting between a student and either the director himself or his representative(s) to ascertain if there is a need for the director or his representative(s) to conduct an interview to begin with, at the convenience of the director or such representative(s). Sometimes, perhaps all the
student needs is an attentive and sympathetic pair of listening ears to help her understand why
she has to take such classes, which may have a pejorative implication in her mind. Again,
this is to emphasize that the interview is and is intended to be a discretionary and an
exceptional one for the reasons stated above.

3. Describing the construct.

As I understand it, the general skills to be assessed relate to the ability to “make
sense” of “academic” spoken language, such as more complex sentence patterns and
“academic” vocabulary than is common in more casual conversation; in other words, the
general ability to aurally understand, and respond appropriately, especially orally to, the
interlocutor in an academic or classroom context, including the ability to negotiate meaning
in order to (better) comprehend the interchange, skills which the interview is supposed to
elicit. What this really means is subject to further research, but anecdotally, the skills can be
further broken down into areas that experienced ESL practitioners have come to commonly
accept as helpful in such a context, if not crucial, such as grammatical accuracy and
intelligible delivery, in terms of pronunciation, intonation, diction, rhythm, speed and
audibility, as well as a range of lexical knowledge and conceptual ideas relevant to the
context. Of course, any experienced practitioner would also tend to include a general
category that includes eye contact, facial expressions, tone of voice, demeanor, style, register,
pragmatic knowledge and the like to cover most if not all the relevant “soft” skills. At the
same time, it is also important to determine what constitutes each of grammatical accuracy
and mutual intelligibility for instance, and what an acceptable level thereof is, given that this
is a spontaneous, rather than rehearsed, oral interchange.

4. Relating the construct description to models and frameworks.

The construct description in the foregoing paragraph should then lead test developers
to the pertinent theoretical and other frameworks, including the appropriateness of using a
spontaneous oral interview in this case, to evaluate and refine the construct definition. For
example, a planned and/or even an impromptu 10-minute oral presentation in a scholarly field related to the student’s course of study, followed by a short feedback session where questions or comments may be posed, may be more appropriate in an academic context. Certainly, it is very helpful to rely on familiar models, so that this presentation may be combined in some shape or form with the existing interview; however, test developers are at liberty to be creative and constructive, and to consult the expertise of colleagues who have knowledge and/or experience in the field, such as the actual listening and speaking teachers in the ELI, and find out what they actually do in their classes, and crucially, what they do not do; as well as text- and other reference books, always taking into account the tremendous time pressure and other logistical constraints the ELI has to work under.

5. **Summarizing the construct definition.**

Finally, the test specification ends with a clear statement summarizing the construct definition as to what is to be assessed, and how, as detailed in each of the aforementioned steps. This then concludes the test specification. Next, I discuss what else needs to be done to conclude this part of the larger project and make it usable, as well as my reflections on working on this piece of assignment, as required for this paper.

V. **Recommendations.**

As stated at the beginning of this report, the first step after this would be to come up with a formal document incorporating sections III and IV here in writing. This is to provide a clear signpost to the test developers who will come up with the bank of questions for the interview, and criteria and guidelines on how to grade or score the answers delivered, as well as to encourage greater professionalism and accountability on the part of the ELI, and to improve the transparency of the ELIOIP for both the ELI administration as well as the students concerned. This would also mean opening to the SLS student body at large the opportunities to take this project further.
More specifically, I would like to make a brief comment on the grading or scoring rubric. Given that the primary purpose of the ELIOIP is for the director or his representative to either confirm or overrule the preliminary decision that had already been taken as to which listening and speaking class the student was to be placed in, it would be appropriate in this case, after delineating the categories of skills related to this assessment, such as grammatical accuracy and intelligible delivery, to have a 3-point scale, each point corresponding to a decision that should be made with respect to each of the skills in each skill category, viz., whether the decision in each case is to have the student (1) downgraded to the next class, if there is one, and if not, to remain in the class she is currently placed in; (2) upgraded to the next class, if there is one, and if not, to be exempt from the ELI’s listening and speaking classes altogether; or (3) remain in the same class as she is currently placed in. An example below might clarify the unwieldy prose:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill Category: Grammatical Accuracy</th>
<th>Point-total:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Subject-verb conjugation</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. *-ending for plurals</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Tense</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The points in the individual skills are taken into account to form a holistic point-total in each of the skill categories, and the various skill-category point-totals are then added up and the overall score used to determine whether the student should be downgraded (rarely ever, in view of the policy considerations concerning the grave impact such a course of action would likely have on the student, which then seek to give the student the benefit of any doubt) or upgraded to the next class, or if she should remain in her current class, or be totally exempt from the ELI’s listening and speaking classes (each of these three holistic, overall decisions called a “band” hereafter for ease of reference).
To ensure maximal flexibility, since the whole idea of this exercise is to capture the remnants of what had previously been allowed to slip by, there should be a narrow range of scores, say plus/minus one or even half a point, for each band, depending on how many skill categories there will eventually be, so that the director or his representative can, in borderline cases especially, make better choices, particularly if after taking into account the student’s other listening and speaking results on her ELI information card, the sum of all these listening and speaking results then points to a certain direction.

VI. Reflections.

I have found this project a challenging and exciting one. Challenging because the existing procedure, which I believe has been in use for a number of years now, while familiar to the ELI administration, remains sketchy to the extent that it has yet to be institutionalized by way of an official document; and exciting because I am able to contribute to what is hopefully a monumental piece in the ELIPT puzzle by taking the first step toward realizing it.

As with all such projects, it is important to document it just so that there is a clear and transparent overall framework as to what is needed to complete the project. Resources can then be allocated to address the issues, and the ultimate beneficiaries are the ELI students who should be placed differently and more appropriately at another level as regards their listening and speaking skills, the ELI as a professional outfit, as well as the student population in the SLS department. After all, we ESL professionals are in the business of providing (re)solutions to linguistic difficulties, real or perceived.

Reference: