

ANALYSIS ON ASSESSING TEACHING AND EVALUATING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

The importance of speaking as a productive skill has been echoed in the literature. Indeed, it is viewed as a crucial “part of the curriculum in language teaching ... and ...an important object of assessment as well” (Luoma, 2004, p. 1). Thus, the prime aim of this study is to explore the prevailing conceptions and actual practices of the assessment of EFL learners’ speaking skills at the tertiary level. The respondents of the current research were 20 instructors who taught at the Higher Institute of languages in Gabes and at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities in Sfax, Tunisia. To collect the necessary data, a questionnaire survey was utilized. The analysis of the course material was also used to supplement the data obtained in the other tools. The findings of the study revealed that the teaching of speaking skills mainly relied on activities like discussions, debate, brainstorming, presentation, dialogue and occasionally on role play. The finding of the study also indicated that there is imbalance between the accuracy and fluency aspects of speaking skills. Most of the classroom activities are accuracy oriented. The same is true for the assessment of speaking skills done. The analysis also revealed that there has been a mismatch between the practices of teaching implemented by the teachers and the pedagogical procedures favored in the assessment of learners’ speaking skills. The study also identified the students’ poor language background and fear of making mistakes and lack of encouragement from the teacher as challenges to the teaching and learning of speaking skills.

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of English in the academic and professional domains as well as the need for communication among people of different cultures and languages, triggered by travelling and globalization, puts pressure on people to learn languages more quickly and efficiently. Indeed, learning a foreign language is a challenging effort for those whose goal is effective communication. Learning a new language, today, is also substantially different from what it used to be in the past: people are more in need to communicate orally, and we cannot wait for years before they engage in real communication. Because of the growing importance of English as a world language and the advance of technology, there is an urgency to learn languages which is felt everywhere within societies all over the world. The search for new and more efficient teaching methods is a consequence of the requirements for fluid communication. Thus, the education reform is believed to be a key determinant for new developments in English language teaching. English teaching in Algeria is often criticized on the grounds that it has been slow to progress. Indeed, although the English language is studied during seven years starting from the age of eleven and continuing up until graduation from secondary schools at the age of eighteen and that the primary objective of the syllabus prescribed by the Algerian Ministry of Education is to stress the importance of developing pupils’ ability to use English for the purpose of oral communication, the Algerian learners continue to experience difficulty in using the language for purposeful communication.

Therefore, as the calls for a more communicative approach increase, there has been much debate with regard to the best way to achieve this objective and thus to improve the speaking ability of Algerian learners, which represents the one of ultimate target of the Ministry of Education. The latter has, since 2003, implemented the Competency Based Approach (CBA) methodology on a multilevel scale and part of this educational reform concerns EFL teaching and learning.

Teaching and evaluating speaking a review on Teaching and evaluating speaking

1.1 How to Assess Speaking Skills

Learning how to teach and assess speaking skills is probably one of the biggest challenges compared to the other three language skills because you have to pay attention to aspects such as:

- **Fluency:** This means *speaking* easily, reasonably quickly and without having to stop and pause a lot.
- **Pronunciation:** The act or result of producing the sounds of speech, including articulation, stress, and intonation.
- **Vocabulary:** The body of words used in a particular language.
- **Accuracy:** This refers to how correct learners' use of the language system is, including their use of grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary.
- **Interaction:** This refers to the ability to interact with others during communicative tasks.
- **Communication:** This refers to the students' ability to transmit her/his ideas.

Now that you know the aspects that you have to pay attention to, it is time cover some of the different types of speaking activities that you can use to evaluate speaking skills.

1.2 Developing speaking skills

Second language follows the same pattern of learning as the first language follows: preproduction (the learner only listens), early production (can use short language chunks), speech emergence (they try to initiate short conversation with friends), intermediate fluency and advanced fluency (the students are nearly-native in their ability) (Urlaub et al. 2010). Use of target language to talk about language is the best strategy for learning spoken language (Maguire et al., 2010). But in Pakistan apart from external constraints teachers do not attain sufficient oral English proficiency during teacher education program (Bilal et al., 2013; Karim, 2012; Khushi & Talaat, 2011; Sarwar et al., 2012; Tariq et al. 2013). Teacher education programs need to be strengthened for effective oral English instruction and assessment (Wedell, 2008).

1.3 Assessment of English speaking skills

Assessment is an activity that engages both students and teachers in judgment about the quality of student achievement or performance, and inferences about the learning that has taken place (David Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Sadler, 2005). Second language assessment is done either to gauge a participant's actual level of competence/proficiency or to assess language development over a period of time (Alam, 2012; Bruton, 2009). Assessment does have an impact on the students' approach to learning. The nature of the assessment determines the learning behaviour of the students as well as the teaching behaviour of teachers. Strong impact of assessment on the language learning process has been noted by a large number of researchers like (Crooks, 1988; Heywood, 1989; Newble & Jaeger, 1983). There are many challenges in the assessment of oral skills in a second-language including: defining language proficiency, avoiding cultural biases, and attaining validity (Sánchez, 2006). Assessment of speaking skills often lags far behind the importance given to teaching those skills in the curriculum (Knight, 1992). Assessment drives university teaching in Pakistan. During the teaching learning process, the orientation of both the teacher and students remains towards assessment (Ali et al., 2009). The grading system is based only on achievement scores. So, the teachers, students, administration and other stakeholders focus only on the areas of the syllabi that bring good credit to them in terms of achievement scores in examinations. If

assessment is limited to written examinations then the students will only learn how to write (Ahmad, 2011; Akiyama, 2003; Ali et al. 2012).

1.4 Challenges about assessment of spoken English

The use of oral assessment motivates students to practice and improve their English speaking skills (Huang, 2012; Huxham et al. 2012; Lee, 2007). In spite of all these benefits the experts in Pakistan are facing the problem of finding experts in assessing spoken skills in English (Ahmad, 2011). This situation is mainly due to three reasons:

insufficient training, lack of public trust on oral assessment and issues of test validity. The teachers are not properly trained to conduct oral assessments in Pakistan. The teachers are either reluctant to test oral ability or lack confidence in the validity of their assessments (Knight, 1992). The lack of public trust on oral examination makes the situation more complex (Bashir, 2011). Validity has been identified as the most important quality of tests, which concerns the extent to which meaningful inferences can be drawn from test scores (Best & Kahn, 2005). Like other tests spoken skills tests need to ensure seven test qualities namely: reliability, validity, authenticity, inter-activeness, impact, practicality, and absence of bias (Akiyama, 2003; Bilal et al., 2013; Lee, 2007).

The purpose of this study was to assess the development of English speaking skills among prospective teachers undertaking one year teacher education program in the public sector universities of the Punjab, Pakistan.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

However, in the practice of teaching English as a foreign language, all skills do not seem to have been treated fairly equally. In line with this view Brown and Yule (1983, p.1) state, that “For most of its history, language teaching has been concerned with the study of written language”. Similarly, Myhill, Jones and Hopper (2006, p.1) confirm that “we value reading and writing more highly than oral competence and our assessment system is still conducted predominantly in the written mode”. A research article by Liao (2009, p. 11) also states that “the percentage of time devoted to activities in which students can communicate with each other in speaking English remains small in the whole class” despite the fact that speaking has been included in the educational plan for teaching English in colleges and Universities.

In reality, however, teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) requires mastering speaking as one of the most important skills in the language. For instance, Nunan (1998, p. 39) states “mastering the art of speaking” as the most important aspect of learning a language and claims that speaking is also the most frequently used mode of communication to express opinions, make arguments, offer explanations, transmit information, and make impressions upon others. Students need to speak well in their personal lives, future workplaces and political endeavors. They may have meetings to attend, presentations to make, discussions and arguments to participate in, and groups to work with. Similarly, Yang (2010, p. 339) argues that “the ability to maintain natural conversation in real working or daily life setting is undoubtedly the fundamental purpose of oral English training”. Given this fact, there have been efforts made by scholars in the field to come up with a well-designed classroom teaching procedures and techniques to promote the learners’ language skills development (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

The material surveyed directly in this review was gathered and selected between June 2005 and February 2007, through a combination of means, including Internet searches on key words, suggestions from colleagues, bibliographical trails, and personal knowledge and experience. We started with a number of overview studies of adult learning, including Edwards *et al.* (1998), Cullen *et al.* (2002), and in particular found **Tusting and Barton (2003)** and **Zachry and Comings (2006)** very useful. But finding relevant material has not been a systematic process, because attempts to search systematically for material on formative assessment and adult learning produced few results, except in relation to teaching and learning in higher education. These we decided to exclude in order to ensure this review had its main focus clearly in the learning and skills sector, (that is, in adult learning in post-compulsory education not

provided in universities and in workplaces), in informal adult learning, and in adult basic education; we hope however, that this review will complement other research focusing directly on higher education. Of course, the fact that relevant material was not found through systematic searches does not mean that „formative assessment“ is a topic which is irrelevant to, or which has been ignored by writers on adult learning, but that the term „formative assessment“ has only rarely been used until recently in the context of adult or lifelong learning.

Researchers like Zhou (2009) who conducted a study on “Cooperative Principle in Oral English Teaching” also argue that the ultimate aim of teaching oral English is to develop students’ communicative competence. He found that the best way to do this is to apply the cooperative principle to oral English teaching in the classroom. Yang (2010) as well conducted a study on “How to Achieve Authentic Context in Classroom Oral English Teaching”. In his article, Yang discusses some methods to achieve authentic context in classroom oral English teaching, including ways to optimize classroom setting and classroom instruction. He concluded that in spite of giving the student the correct ways to learn English, oral English classes should create natural and authentic environment for the student to speak English. In general, it seems that the practice of teaching and assessing speaking skills needs to be given more emphasis.

3. EVALUTING SPEAKING

For example, speakers need to pronounce individual sounds clearly, understand the functions of language, and follow the conventions of turn-taking.

3.1 What speakers do

Speaking is a complex act with many different elements interacting to produce effective communication. In order to evaluate this skill accurately, we need to identify and isolate each of these elements. We can then develop frameworks to evaluate them. Below is a list of the things that speakers need to be able to do in order to communicate effectively.

3.2 Phonological features of speech

Speakers need to be able to produce the phonological features of speech well enough to be understood, and understand them when they hear them. These features include:

- Individual sounds – consonants, vowels, diphthongs such as in *day* and triphthongs such as in *here*.
- The stressed and weak sounds in words; for example, the second syllable of 'banana' is stressed and the first and third are weak.
- The stressed and weak words in speech; for example, in the order "*Go to bed!*" 'Go' and 'bed' are stressed and 'to' is not.
- The rhythm of speech in general. English is stress-timed, meaning that in general stressed syllables have an equal amount of time between them.
- The intonation patterns in speech, falling, rising, flat, etcetera
- The features of connected speech, i.e. things that happen when we connect sounds together. For example, connected speech produces contractions such as doesn't, linking sounds such as the /j/ in '*I am*', lost

sounds such as the /t/ in '*I don't know*', and changed sounds such as the /t/ in '*white bag*' changing to a /p/.

3.3 Following the rules of language

Speakers need to be able to understand and follow the rules of language at a word, sentence and text level. This includes:

- Choosing the right vocabulary. Speakers need to think about the meaning of a word, its connotations, the level of formality, the type of register and genre, and the words it normally goes with (collocations).
- Using grammar structures to put clauses and sentences together.
- Using features of discourse to give long and short turns cohesion and coherence. For example, speakers need to use referencing "*This is the problem*" and connectors "*so...*".

3.4 Paralinguistic devices

Speakers need to be able to understand and use paralinguistic devices as a communicative tool. There are different definitions of paralanguage, but if we say that it does not involve words in any way then this includes:

- Non-verbal tools such as gestures and facial expressions.
- Other body language, such as eye contact, posture, positioning and movement of the head.
- Verbal tools such as changes in volume, e.g. whispering and shouting, and noises such as whew! and tsk!

3.5 Communicative functions

Speakers need to be able to recognise, understand and use the communicative functions of speech. This includes:

- Understanding the communicative functions of vocabulary and grammar. For example, why this is a normal exchange:
 - A: "*Did you walk the dog today?*"
 - B: "*I've been in bed all day with a cold.*"

Or what a speaker means when he says: "*Do you know who I am?*"

- Understanding the functions of intonation and moving stress. For example, intonation and stress can show attitude: "Oh, really?" Emphasis: "I said *three* bananas", and structure, e.g. a falling intonation at the end of a list of items.

- Recognising features such as repetitions, re-phrasing, pauses, and noises and understanding their function.
- Recognising non-linguistic features such as changes in volume and tone.

3.6 Social meaning

Speakers need to be able to understand and use the social meaning of speech. This includes thinking about:

- When to use formal and informal language.
- What connotation language might have, for example the difference between thin, slender and skinny.
- How direct they can be, for example when to say; "*Help me with this.*" and when to say; "*Would you mind helping me, please?*"
- What social factors is important, e.g. social status, age, gender.
- Conversational principals such as turn taking and exchanges – these can be different in different cultures and societies.
- The rules to start, maintain, manage, and close conversations.

4. DESCRIPTIVE FRAMEWORKS AND THE TEACHING OF SPEAKING

Hughes (2002) takes the view that, in general, insights from disciplines such as discourse analysis and CA have been slow to filter through to the teaching of speaking. However, increasingly, applied linguists are addressing the applicability of such insights. Slade (1997) rejects the notion that casual conversation cannot be taught explicitly because it is unstructured. Explicit features that can be taught, she argues, include generic descriptions at the macro-level and moves and speech functions at the micro-level (however, see Lee, 2001, on the as-yet inadequate generic modeling of speech; see also Hughes, 2002, p. 36). Shumin (2002) also supports the view that speaking needs to be taught explicitly, and a number of authors point to the active promotion of language awareness as a way forward (Carter, 1997; Clennell, 1999; O’Keeffe & Farr, 2003; van Lier, 1998). Hughes (2002) notes that awareness-raising approaches should not be judged by the amount of speech learners produce but more in terms of depth of understanding of speaking and of why speakers make the choices they do.

Burns (2001) surveys the potential contribution to the pedagogy of speaking of systemic functional linguistics (SFL), exchange structure (IRF) analysis, CA, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and speech act theory and pragmatics. She sees these as relevant “tools” that can “underpin communicative language teaching” (2001, p. 125) and that the teacher can draw on depending on student needs and the types of discourse features to be foregrounded.

SFL, according to Burns, can provide a framework for analyzing samples of spoken discourse to highlight key aspects of a text, for example, its genre, as well as the relationship between the Hallidayan notions of *field*, *tenor*, and *mode* and lexicogrammatical choice. Burns sees IRF analysis as a useful complement to SFL because it focuses on the moment-by-moment process of interaction in context. She suggests that it can help students to increase their linguistic repertoire (e.g., an awareness of follow-up moves) as well as equipping them with skills to renegotiate their positions in encounters outside of the classroom.

Within a CA framework, Burns suggests, language tasks can be developed to explore features of conversation such as turn-taking organization and sequencing (e.g., discussing speaker roles, rights to turns, etc.) and turn types (e.g., observing the nature of preferred and dispreferred responses, and developing strategies such as repair and reformulation). Burns also sees potential for pedagogical applications from CDA (see Coffin, 2001), which offers opportunities for classroom focus on aspects of power and gatekeeping roles within spoken interactions. Speech act theory and pragmatics, like CA, according to Burns, focus on the microstructures of conversation and can offer teachers the opportunity to highlight for students the appropriateness of utterances, how speakers negotiate certain situations (e.g., accepting/rejecting invitations) as well as providing a framework for the performance of speech acts, for example, through role plays and simulations (see also Burns, Joyce, & Gollin, 2001).

4.1 The Importance of Speaking

In the traditional approaches the emphasis was mainly on reading comprehension and written production. The Grammar-Translation method is one example, Richards and Rodgers (2001) mention that reading and writing are the

essential skills to be focused on however, little or no attention is paid to the skill of speaking and listening. The major goal of all English language teaching should be to give learners the ability to use English effectively, accurately in communication (Davies & Pearse, 1998). In the communicative approach, speaking was given more importance since oral communication involves speech where learners are expected to interact verbally with other people. Moreover, the teachers' talk will be reduced; that is to say learners are supported to talk more in the classroom. Ur declares also that people who know a language are referred to as "speakers" of that language, as if speaking included all other kinds of knowing.

Foreign language learners give the speaking skill priority in their learning because if they are fluent speakers in the target language then they will be considered as they have mastered the other skills. Moreover, the main question often given to foreign language learners is "do you speak English?" but not "do you write English?" We understand that most of people take speaking and knowing a language as synonyms. Celce-Murcia (2001: 103) argues that for most people the ability to speak a language is synonymous with knowing that language since speech is the most basic means of human communication. The importance of speaking is revealed with the integration of the other language skills. For instance, learners' vocabulary and grammar can be improved by speaking and then improving their writing skill. Furthermore, the speaking skill, helps the learners to express their personal feeling, emotions, opinions or ideas; tell stories; inform or explain; request; converse and discuss i.e. through speaking, we can display the different functions of language. Mastering a language and being able to communicate orally in English is very important in real life as well if we consider that many companies and organizations look for people who speak English very well for the purpose of communicating with other people around the world. So, speakers of foreign languages have more opportunities to get jobs.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1. Research Design

The purpose of the study is an investigation of the practice of teaching and assessing speaking skills in the actual spoken English classroom. Thus a descriptive research design was used. This is because descriptive study is helpful when a researcher wants to look into a phenomenon or a process in its natural contexts (McDonough and McDonough, 1997).

5.2. Research Setting

The site of this study was Dilla University. This University was selected as a study site for two reasons. In the first place, the researcher has relatively better exposure to the practice of teaching speaking skills in the university. The second reason is the proximity of the University to the researcher's work place.

5.3. Target Population

The primary sources of the data were second year English major and third year Afan oromo major students taking Spoken English course and the instructors offering the course during the first term of the

academic year 2011/2012 in Dilla University. Thus, the total population of the study includes 118 students taking the course and three instructors offering the course.

5.4. Sampling Technique

The recommended sample size for the precision level of 95% confidence level and 5% confidence interval is 90 for a population of 118 students (Isaac and Michael, 1981 as cited in Taylor-Powell, 1998). When calculated in percentage this covers 77% of the total population. In order to give equal chance of being selected for every member of the population, simple random sampling technique was used to draw this sample size of the study. On the other hand, since the number of teacher population was small all were taken as a sample. Thus, the study included 93 participants as a sample. Purposive sampling was also used to select students for the interview.

5.5. Data Collection Tools

To collect the required data for this study, four types of instruments: questionnaire, classroom observation, interview and content analysis were used. The reason for using such multiple data collection tools is to triangulate the data and to increase the credibility of the study.

5.6. Data Collection Procedure

The task of the data collection was started with the classroom observation. Then administering the questionnaire to both teacher and student participants of the study followed. After the classroom observation was finalized, the interview with selected participants was done. These procedures help to avoid the risk of sensitizing the participants to show behaviors different from the usual ones. The data collection in terms of speaking skills was not an easy job. At one time, only one student was assessed. The average time for each student was 10 minutes. So, keeping in view the time constraint, the researchers trained three of their students who were doing internship in the Department of English, University of Sargodha. One of the researchers got the consent from the head of the departments through personal preliminary visit of all the three departments of education. He also discussed the availability of the student in the departments and appropriate time for data collection. The data collection team consisted of one of the researchers and three research assistant trained for the purpose. The data collection team personally visited all the three sampled universities and collected data as per schedule. The prospective teachers were called one by one and each was briefed about the data collection process including dialogue and monologue and asked for consent to collect the data. Only a few prospective teachers did not agree mainly due to personal engagements. After the warm-up activity, the dialogue was conducted followed by monologue. In monologue each of the prospective teachers was given one minute to write the points on the topic of their own choice. Each of the prospective teachers was informed that after one minute s/he would speak on the topic (independent task, monologue) for two to three minutes. They were also told that they might be interrupted during their speech and the assessor might ask them some questions. The researchers rated each of the prospective teachers against the rubrics.

5.7. Method of Data Analysis

The data that was collected from the participant teachers and students through questionnaire was analyzed descriptively in terms of the percentage, frequency distribution and mean score of the frequency of the students and teachers response. SPSS 16.0 was used to do this. The data from the classroom observation was also carefully recorded in to Yes/No category and rating scales (always, usually, sometimes, rarely, never) as they happen in the speaking classes. Then, the frequency distribution of the observed practices was summarized and interpreted together with the data obtained in the questionnaire and the activities of speaking skills in the course material.

6. ACTIVITIES OF TEACHING SPEAKING SKILLS EMPLOYED BY THE TEACHERS There are a number of activities that encourage and require a learner to speak with and listen to other learners: to find information, break down barriers, talk about self, debate etc. Students also need to be engaged in relevant tasks within a dynamic learning environment rather than in traditional teacher-led classes. These activities include role-play, simulation, information gap, brainstorming, storytelling/completion, picture narrating, problem solving, presentation, discussion and debate among others. Bringing in such a wide

range of activities into a classroom is beneficial to learners offering a wider opportunity of practicing variety of the language in different contexts.

The application of various speaking skills teaching activities obviously helps students to capitalize on the language output they produce. Similarly, the first leading question of this study was concerned about identifying the activities used by teachers for teaching the speaking skills. Regarding this point, the analysis of the data indicated that discussion, debate, brainstorming, presentation and dialogue are the frequently used activities for teaching speaking skills. Role play is occasionally used activity for teaching speaking skills and simulation is used in rare cases. Other activities like information gap, problem solving, storytelling and picture narrating has never been used for teaching speaking skills in the spoken English classes of the target University.

The second point was about the aspects of speaking skills emphasized in the practice of teaching and assessing speaking skills in spoken English classes. Here the data obtained indicate that the emphasis put on the accuracy aspect of speaking skills is much more than the emphasis put on the fluency aspect in both the teaching and assessment of speaking skills in spoken English classes.

In the third place, the question raised by the study was about identifying the techniques of assessing speaking skills used by the teachers. In this case, the analysis of the data indicated that the assessments employed by the teachers are of two types: continuous assessment and written final exam. The continuous assessment, which covers 40% of the total mark, employed techniques like presentation, discussion and assignment. It is also indicated that role play is used in rare cases. The subject teachers have never used other assessment techniques such as oral interview, self and peer assessment and picture description and the like. The remaining 60% was found to be covered through written exam, which is unlikely to address the fluency aspect of speaking skills.

The last point was about the problems that impeded the teaching learning process of the speaking skills. Teachers faced the problem of having passive students who show no willingness to speak in class, or students who seem interested enough to speak but find it difficult to express themselves which is directly and indirectly associated with the students' language background. It was also noted that when students work in pairs or groups they just end up chatting in their own language/mother tongue. It was also motioned by the students that there is lack of reinforcement and motivation from the teachers. The students also indicated shortage of practice time as one challenge to their learning.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the assessment of speaking has received much consideration at the tertiary level. Its implementation serves in improving the students' learning process and in boosting their speaking potentials. In addition to their resort to analytic rubrics, the teachers relied on a number of interactive, authentic, communicative activities that guaranteed an ongoing sustainment of the learners' speaking proficiency. The creation of meaningful opportunities for oral language evaluation to be held during the English sessions incites both teachers and learners alike to assume active roles in the assessment process. Despite the existence of some problems related to affective/ psychological, knowledge, performance and technical reasons, teachers strive to implement both types of classroom assessment which revolve around the use of formative and summative use of speaking assessment.

The lack of training in conducting speaking tasks was initially a deterrent for Teachers to use authentic communicative speaking task. This finding seems to indicate that additional training, particularly for those whose initial teacher training is not recent, is necessary if they are to be expected to introduce new ways of teaching and evaluating speaking in their classrooms. There is a big gap between theory and practice. Teachers feel frustrated by the reality which doesn't allow them to conduct authentic speaking teaching or evaluation for their pupils.

Another difficulty faced by the EFL teachers is that of ensuring reliability in evaluating their pupils' speaking performance, the respondents cited reliability in scoring as a constraint on their attempt in authentic speaking activities. One respondent stated that he has 38 students. So he can't assign one pupil enough time to judge his speaking ability. Teachers are just scoring after listening to pupils' two or three

responses. Thus it is rather difficult to be fair and some teachers stated that they feel guilty as the speaking skill evaluation remains subjective if done at all.

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