

The Effective Speaking Testing Techniques in Teaching English

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Abstract: The testing of speaking is widely regarded as the most challenging of all language exams to prepare and score. For this, many people don't even try to measure the speaking skill. The language learners don't know where to begin the task of evaluating spoken language. The main purpose of the article is that to remove a good deal of the mystery surrounding speaking tests. Another purpose of the article is to present the most effective classroom approaches available for measuring oral proficiency.

Keywords: Directed Response, Picture Cues, Reading, Loud Effective Speaking Testing Techniques, Measuring Oral Proficiency

1. Introduction

There are some reasons why speaking tests seem so challenging. The first reason is that the nature of the speaking skill itself is not usually well defined. There is some disagreement on just what criteria to choose in evaluating speaking. Grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation are often named as its ingredients. But matters such as fluency and appropriateness of expression are always regarded as equally important.

In an international survey of speaking tests which was carried out by Randall L. Jones and Harold S. Madsen, it was found that of 74 exams evaluated, 81 percent measured grammar, 71 percent fluency, 67 percent vocabulary, 66 percent pronunciation, 63 percent appropriateness, and 37 other matters [2, 147].

Still other factors to be identified in oral communication include listening, correct tone (sadness or fear) reasoning ability, and such things as initiative in asking clarification.

When a speaking criterion like fluency is widely agreed, there is a question about how to test it. In brief, the elements of speaking are many and not always easy to identify. Also there isn't very wide agreement on how to test each factor such as fluency or grammar. Another concerns related to the testing of speaking include how to get students to speak and

how to evaluate so many things at once. There is also the practical problem of having to test students' speaking ability individually.

For the longest time, the idea of testing language have always revolved around testing the knowledge of the language itself but now, the idea of testing for communicative competence is getting more and more famous. In testing communicative competence, speaking and listening tasks are commonly used. Those require tasks such as the completion of an information gap and role play.

As teachers of ESL, it is imperative for us to enhance the students' delivery skills, increase their confidence, and develop their methods of organization and critical thinking skills. In order to do this, a valid and reliable way of assessment to determine whether the set goals were met is required. The oral communication field needs a clear-cut method of evaluation as can be found in discrete language skill classes such as listening comprehension. Language teachers and language testers need a method which takes subjective qualitative observations and then transforms them into objective quantitative measures.

A critical issue in the assessment is the selection of criteria for evaluating performance. Most scholars point out that the selection of these criteria should be one of the first steps in designing performance assessments. Students should understand ahead of time what is expected of them. This can

actually help them determine on what basis their performance will be judged. When students are actively involved in establishing assessment criteria for tasks, they do not only have a better understanding of what is expected of them when they perform the tasks, but they will be able to more fully appreciate why the criteria are important.

Yet another complication is the range of oral ability. In elementary level we find several per-speaking activities, such as pronunciation and vocabulary identification. We can test beginning-level students by using informal evaluation techniques.

2. Method

There are lots of advanced applications of speaking: Besides its use in professions like teaching, business, and law, there specialized uses such as spoken translation by simultaneous translators, professional oral reading by radio newscasters, and some dramatic roles on TV. However, we will not discuss how to test very advanced or specialized students. Few students become this proficient, and commercial tests are available for such purposes.

The way that we can simplify the task of evaluating spoken language is to limit the range of speaking activities tested. It is suggested that teachers be cautious about using formal tests of speaking at very early stages of instruction. Instead, the relatively nonthreatening measures that follow are recommended. There are given some activities in the article what include how to elicit appropriate speech samples and then how to evaluate these samples.

3. Result

One of the best for testing speaking is limited response. Students with limited speaking skill can be evaluated by using rather controlled testing methods. Three of the most useful ways are through directed responses, questions about pictures, and reading aloud. All of these can produce connected speech, and all three appear in everyday communication [2].

Directed Response

Some forms of directed – response cues are very artificial – very close to imitation. For example,

1) “Tell me she went home.”

The response would be, “She went home,” simply a repetition of the last part of the examiner’s sentence. Yet such requests should always be adapted to the student if possible. Any native speaker might say

2) “Tell me that you speak English.”

Here at least some modification is required in order to get “I speak English.” As mentioned in the dictation discussion, greater skill is required to make longer sentences. So we can introduce a more challenging sentence like this one:

3) “Tell me that you are planning to attend extra English courses for the next term.”

Here, in addition to make up the longer sentence, the student must change the subject and the verb as well as the

contraction in “you are” to “I am”. In addition, the sentence needs to keep the normal speed, stress, rhythm of the original. A more lifelike situation can be created if you are able to use another person while giving the speaking test. This can be an advanced student, a community volunteer, or another teacher. The volunteer or a teacher could also help with the scoring. And now, as in real life, you can have the student give a message to another person. For example, you could say,

4) “Tell her I can see her in the morning.”

More advanced students would be expected to give a socially appropriate message: “Pardon me, Ann. Mr. John says that he can see you in the morning.”

Instructions would indicate that appropriate social phrases might be used. Correct answer might vary from “Pardon me. What is the weather like today?” to “Could you tell me the weather, please?”

Another directed request might be,

5) See if she can come back later.” (Could you come back later, please? or Would it be possible for you to come back later?)

Still another form of directed request provides more context and demands students’ initiative answering. To respond properly, students would probably need practice with communicative activities such as problem solving. In it, the problem that students have to solve is how to make an appropriate excuse.

6) Your friend has just brought you one of your skirts. But the color is terrible for what you are wearing. As kindly as possible, get her to bring another skirt instead.” (Thanks a lot, Mary. But could you please get my black skirt instead? I’m afraid it will be too cool for this red one).

Picture Cues

As we know, pictures and objects can be used with young children, and with young people or adults who have limited skill in English. One approach is to use simple line drawings, such as cartoons from a newspaper or simple line drawings like this. You can then ask questions such as the following:

7) “Tell me about these pictures. What is happening here?”

Correct answers might be, “They are having dinner” or “They are studying in cafeteria.” How we phrase our question can be very important. If we had said, “What are they doing?” we might have had one-word “vocabulary” answers such as “having” or “studying”. In connection with the second picture, we might ask

8) “Where are they?”

We would accept a short- form answer such as “at the cafeteria” or “at university.”

More extended speech and transitions can be used with a picture sequence. We can illustrate what the students are to say by beginning the story ourselves. The tense we use would depend in students’ background. We might make the activities like this way:

9) “Let’s use these pictures and tell a story. I’ll begin it. A boy named Jack went to beach. There he took off his clothes. And then he put on his swimming suit. Now you tell the rest”

You have to prepare to provide additional cues where

necessary. If your students need further help, you can ask,

10) "When Jack finished swimming, what did he look for?"

When using pictures, it is best to prepare your questions ahead in time. Write them down, and then read them aloud as the student moves through the test. This can improve the quality of your questions, and it helps with the scoring of the test.

Reading Aloud

One of the best effective ways is testing students by having them read something aloud. It offers several advantages and some significant disadvantages. This technique provides good control. All your students respond in the same way, and so we can make comparisons quite simply. Tests of this kind are generally easy to prepare and to administer, and they avoid our having to find a suitable topic for students to discuss. Besides checking pronunciation, we can see how well our students have mastered the sound – symbol relationships in the English language.

In some programs oral reading is important, and this test technique is obviously a good, direct way to measure oral reading ability. It can even provide a little help in checking fluency. In addition, for these, reading aloud can give us some idea how well our students mastered grammar and vocabulary. Like grammatical errors in dictation, errors in reading aloud sometimes reflect confusion about the structure of English.

Conversational Exchanges

Another simple type of test is a test in which students are given particular situation and instructed to respond in a certain way. These tests are usually highly structured and require only a limited response, not connected discourse.

Type 1. Students are asked to construct a sentence following a certain pattern using the information that they are given. They are usually given two or three examples first. For example:

Tom has been working at the same job for ten years. He is tired of his job and would like to do something more interesting. (He wishes he could find a more interesting job.)

Type 2. In another type of conversational exchange test, a situation is given but no guidance is given as to how to answer, and the student can respond freely. For instance:

A friend of yours has been tired a lot recently. What do you say to her?

You have been served coffee in a restaurant but you haven't been given any cream or sugar, and you would like some. What do you say to the server? (Could I have some cream and sugar.)

Type 3. In another type of text, the student is given a stimulus sentence and can respond in any appropriate way. This type of test usually depends on conventional responses, such as responses to requests, invitations and etc.

Could I borrow your book? (Sure, go ahead./ Sorry, I'm using it.) Hey, how are you doing? (Just fine, how are you?)

This may also be done as part of a longer dialogue, where there are pauses for the tester's responses to questions on a tape. The problem with this sort of test is that the dialogue on

the tape keeps going along, no matter what the tester says, whether the next line on the tape is appropriate or not. In addition, it is testing listening at least as much as it is testing speaking. However, this type of test does make it possible to test large numbers of people at the same time in a way that is at least somewhat communicative.

Testing Speaking Using Visual Material Pictures, maps, diagrams, and other types of visual material can be used to test speaking without requiring the tester to comprehend written or spoken material. Through careful selection of the material, the tester can control the vocabulary and, to some extent, the grammatical structures required.

Various types of material are appropriate for this type of test, depending on the language that the tester wants to elicit. One common type of stimulus material is a series of pictures which tell a story, often with a few sentences of introduction to get the tester started. This requires the tester to put together a coherent narrative. A variation on this is to give the pictures in random order of the narrative to a group of testees. The students describe their pictures and decide on their sequence without showing them to each other, and then put them down in the order that they have decided on. They then have an opportunity to reorder the pictures if they feel it is necessary.

Another type of test using a visual stimulus is one in which two testers are given pictures that are similar but have several differences. Without seeing each other's pictures, they describe their own pictures and find the differences.

In addition to using pictures, it is possible to use charts, graphs, or other ways of visually organizing information, and the tester has to describe them. One possible problem with this type of visual stimuli is that the material has to be something that all the testers can interpret equally well, since if a tester has difficulty understanding the visual information, that will influence the way he/she is evaluated.

Oral Interviews

Oral interviews are testing situations in which the tester and the testees carry on a conversation. The tester generally has a list of questions to ask the testee, and someone—either the interviewer or another person but preferably another person—assesses the language proficiency of the testee. The advantage of an interview is that it attempts to approximate a conversation situation, but the knowledge that it is a test and the constraints of the roles in the interview make it difficult to have a real natural conversation.

The interview protocol needs to be carefully considered. It might be best to start with yes/no questions or factual questions that are easily answered to put the interviewee at ease, but these can be inhibiting, so this stage should not last too long. The questions should be interesting, easy to respond to, and give the tester some range in answering.

When doing an interview test, it is very important that the interviewer be well trained in order to avoid problems and so that the interviewer is consistent from one interview to another to help make the evaluation of the testee more reliable. The interviewer, for example, should avoid talking too much (though giving some personal information may help break the ice and put the testee at ease), should speak

clearly, should not interrupt the interviewee to give answers, should maintain eye contact with the interviewee, and should not correct the interviewee during the interview.

Role Play Test

Another type of test is a role play. In a role play the testee and a confederate are given information on which to base a role play, and the testees are evaluated on their ability to carry out the task in the role play. For example, the role play might be getting information about course requirements. Role plays require the testee to use various functions that he/she might need in real communication.

Group or Pair Activities

To avoid the types of problems associated with oral interviews, sometimes students are put together in pairs or groups that are given some task, such as the ones mentioned above in the section on using visual materials. They might also be given a quiz to work on together, a puzzle to work out, or a task. The point of these is not to find the "right" answer but to stimulate speech for the tester to evaluate. This is intended to be a less inhibiting situation than an interview test, but it also has the problem of lack of control. How the activity goes depends to a great extent on the mix of testees that are put together. If their level of English proficiency is widely different, or if one testee is particularly dominant, this will influence the interaction. A well-trained interviewer can provide similar environments from one interview to another, but this is not possible in testing a group of testees in a group activity. In addition, successful group discussions depend on factors other than speaking, including active listening and eliciting the opinions of all of the group members.

Assessment

One of the great difficulties in testing speaking is, of course, the assessment. It is necessary to develop a system of assessment that can be applied as objectively as possible, though it is probably never possible to avoid some subjectivity in assessment. The scale can be one general scale for overall speaking ability, or it can be divided between several aspects of the skill of speaking, such as pronunciation, grammar, organization, etc. The scale also depends on the speaking task that is used for the test. A test that uses public speaking as the task would be different from one that uses a group discussion.

If possible, the speaking task should be recorded and the scoring done from the tape. In addition, the marking should be done by more than one person and their reliability checked. If the task is an interview, the interviewer should not be required to score the test at the same time as conducting the interview, if this is avoidable.

Among the aspects of speaking that might be considered in the assessment scale are grammar, pronunciation, fluency, content, organization, content and vocabulary.

The band descriptions for a general scale might be as follows. The number indicates the level, and it is followed by a description of the characteristics of a speaker at that level.

Spoken communication is fluent, appropriate, and grammatically correct, with few if any errors.

4. Discussion

The limitations of having students read a passage aloud are equally numerous. Something is important to say that oral reading technique can't be used with young children who haven't yet learned to read English, or with young people and adults whose speaking skills are much more advanced than their reading skill. Also there is a tendency for people using the reading- aloud approach to focus almost exclusively on pronunciation. While this is an ingredient in speaking, it is a minor matter at intermediate and advanced levels; pronunciation is certainly not the same as speaking. For example, it doesn't measure interaction skill or appropriateness of response.

5. Conclusion

Finally, people who have the same skill in speaking often vary a good deal in their ability to read aloud. Even native speakers themselves vary considerably in this skill. Paying less control of spoken utterances is necessary for intermediate and advanced students. But some guidance is needed so that students perform the same kinds of tasks. Consistency in what we have students say helps us to compare their performance over a period of time and to compare the skill of one student with that of another. Some of the techniques that we have already discussed in our article can provide relaxed control.

Our research on classroom testing of ESL speech skills provides several models of both task types and rubrics for rating, and suggestions regarding procedures for testing speaking with large numbers of learners. However, there is no clear, widely disseminated consensus in the profession on the appropriate paradigm to guide the testing and rating of learner performance in a new language, either from second language acquisition research or from the best practices of successful teachers. While there is similarity of descriptors from one rubric to another in professional publications, these statements are at best subjective. Thus, the rating of learners' performance rests heavily on individual instructors' interpretations of those descriptors (Pino, 1998).

In spite of the difficulties inherent in testing speaking, a speaking test can be a source of beneficial backwash. If speaking is tested, unless it is tested at a very low level, such as reading aloud, this encourages the teaching of speaking in classes.

To sum up, testing speaking skills could be a very interesting experience, and it gives teachers an opportunity to be creative in selecting the test items and materials. Moreover, it has a great impact on students by making them enjoy taking the test and feel comfortable doing so if the teacher chooses the materials that interest their students and that is suitable to their age and levels of knowledge.

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