

Testing of Oral English Language in the Intensive English Program at the College of Languages (University of Aden)

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***Abstract:** To speak well in English is an integral part of language learning. This research used a questionnaire to find out the types of tasks a group of 20 EFL teachers in the intensive English program at the College of Languages (University of Aden) used to promote their students' speaking. This research also investigated which tasks they used to test their students' speaking, which features of spoken language they paid attention to most, whether they used rubrics when scoring students oral ability, and finally if these teachers had received training in assessing/testing speaking during their undergraduate program. Findings of this research indicated that teachers used communicative tasks to both teach and test their students' speaking. However, when testing students' oral language, teachers focused more on students' accuracy and based students speaking scores on personal observation. Finally, it was also found that teachers had not received any training in assessing speaking. This research recommended that there is a need for training these instructors in the use of scoring rubrics as well as in EFL assessment.*

***Key Terms:** speaking, testing, rubrics, oral language, Faculty of Languages (Aden),*

Introduction

The ability to speak well in English is widely recognized as an important skill. Richards (2008) states that learners often consider improvement in their spoken language proficiency as a measure of their success in language learning and the effectiveness of the English course (p. 19). Therefore, instruction and assessment of the oral language should have a central role in the foreign language classroom (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2001, p. 73). This could be a strong reason why the academic administration at the College of Languages at the University of Aden expects from the instructors teaching in its intensive English program to help students

improve their English speaking skill. The administration also requires the instructors to assign their students a numerical score which reflects the students' overall English speaking ability.

Although the spoken component forms a 10% of the overall 100% grade of students, it is still essential to know whether these instructors are clear as to what they are evaluating and if they have clear criteria to measure their students' oral language. The following research is meant to gain insight into the types of tasks these teachers use to promote students' speaking skill as well as the tasks they use to test their students' oral language. This research also focuses on finding out which areas teachers pay attention to most when evaluating their students' speaking, the scoring tools they use to measure their students' oral ability, and whether or not they had received training in evaluating oral production in their undergraduate program.

The results obtained from this study will shed light on the effectiveness of both teaching and testing of the oral language in the intensive English program at the College of Languages as well as provide insights into what needs to be improved in this area

Research Questions

1. Which tasks ¹instructors use for instructional purposes?
2. Which tasks do they use for testing ²purposes?
3. Which features of speaking do they focus on when testing their students' speaking?
4. Do they use rubrics when evaluating their students' speaking?
5. Did these instructors receive any training in assessing/testing during their teacher education program?

Methodology

Context of the Study

The following research was conducted in the intensive English course program at the College of Languages (University of Aden). There are 6 levels of English courses offered in this program ranging from elementary to intermediate. Each level lasts for 6 weeks. The students enrolled in these courses come from different educational backgrounds--those who have recently completed their high schools and are preparing for college entrance exams of English, as well as those who are preparing for higher studies in different majors at the University of Aden--the latter is required by their respective programs to complete an English proficiency course.

¹ Luoma (2008) defines tasks as "activities that people do, and in language learning contexts, tasks are usually defined in terms of language use" (p. 30).

² Wiggins (2003) distinguishes testing as being part of the assessment process---more like a snapshot.

The English language course is an integrated course where the textbook *World View* is used. Instructors are required to focus on all four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In-class evaluation is 50% which is based on: attendance, orals, writing, grammar quizzes, and spelling/vocabulary quizzes. The other 50% is based on a final exam that students are required to take at the end of each session. The passing score is 60%.

Participants

Twenty EFL teachers of English in the intensive course at the College of Languages took part in this study. The participants were selected using sample of convenience meaning that the questionnaire was given to all those teachers at the College who were available. All the participants in this study were graduates of the College of Education (University of Aden).

Data Collection and Reporting

A questionnaire with both close and open questions designed by the researcher was used for data collection. The questions aimed to identify the types of tasks teachers used to develop their students' speaking, the types of tasks teachers used to test their students' speaking, the areas they focused on in their evaluation as well as whether they used rubrics and whether or not they had received training in assessment/testing speaking during their teacher education.

To ensure credibility of the questionnaire, a second opinion was taken from instructors who have been in the field of English language teaching for more than 10 years. In addition, the questionnaire was piloted in another institute where intensive English language courses are taught. The ambiguities that came up during the piloting phase were fixed before giving out the questionnaire to the teachers at the College of Languages.

Responses obtained from the teachers were reported in both number and percentage.

Background to the Study

In the past, speaking was taught by mechanical drilling and rote learning of dialogues in students' textbooks. However, research in language acquisition during the late twentieth century "made us reconsider some long-standing beliefs about how people learn to speak" (Bailey, 2003, pp. 49 - 50). For example, the communicative language teaching approach emphasizes authentic interaction, student-centered learning, task based activities, and communication for real world, and meaningful purposes. Students have to use the language productively and receptively in unrehearsed contexts in which teachers could guide but not control the students (Brown, 2007, p. 242). Learners need to be provided with different opportunities to demonstrate their oral communicative abilities.

Equally important to teaching the oral skill is its assessment. Assessment acts as a link between classroom objectives and instruction; it also provides instructors with valuable information on the effectiveness of their teaching and the extent to which the objectives are being met. Therefore, when evaluating and scoring learners' oral language, teachers first may need to specify the level of language they are targeting and then decide to target one or more of the following criteria:

- pronunciation
- fluency
- vocabulary
- grammar
- discourse features (cohesion, sociolinguistics, appropriateness, etc)
- task (accomplishing the objective of the task)

(Brown, 2007)

Brown (2004) enumerates the various components of the speaking skill under two categories: microskills and macroskills. Microskills "refer to producing the smaller chunks of language such as phonemes, morphemes, words, collocations, and phrasal units" (p. 142). On the other hand, macroskills "imply the speaker's focus on the larger elements: fluency, discourse, function, style, cohesion, nonverbal communication, and strategic options" (p. 142).

For scoring purposes, holistic and analytic rubrics may be used. It is difficult to say which one is better. A holistic rubric assesses performance across multiple criteria as an integrated whole. For instance, when holistically assessing a student's performance the teacher assesses the extent to which the student meets the descriptions on the rubric and gives an overall score that reflects the range of that performance level. An analytic rubric separates levels of performance and assesses the speaker's performance for each criterion. Each element of a student's oral ability is scored separately, for example, a separate score is put on pronunciation, word choice, task completion, level of discourse, fluency, and grammar.

Hughes (2003) warns that the accurate measurement of oral ability is not an easy task and obtaining valid and reliable results needs time, effort, and training. "Public Schools of North Carolina" sees that assessment of the oral language is the most problematic skill, and divides teachers' concerns into: 1) What to assess: form or content 2) How to assess: subjectivity vs. objectivity and 3) When to assess and how to manage assessment. Similarly, O'Malley and Pierce (1996) mention that there are at least three challenges that teachers face when assessing their students' speaking ability in the classroom: "making time, selecting assessment activities, and determining evaluation criteria" (p.58). In light of such concerns, there is a true need for investigating the teaching and testing of speaking as it helps improve the instructional quality of speaking.

Results and Discussion

(1) Which tasks instructors use for instructional purposes?

In response to question (1), pair/group discussions (100%) seemed to be the most common type of task used by all the teachers involved in this study. This was followed by role plays (95%), oral interviews (90%), and short individual presentations (70%) as shown in table 1. Tasks such as pictures descriptions, storytelling, retelling story or news event, debate, information gap activities were also used by teachers to promote their students' speaking but to a lesser extent.

Task /Activity	(number)	(%)
pair and group discussions	20	100
role plays	19	95
oral interviews	18	90
short individual presentations	14	70
pictured descriptions	11	55
story telling	11	55
retelling a story or news event	11	55
debate	9	45
information gap activities	8	40
Others	0	0

Table 1: Task types used for instructional purposes

As apparent in table 1 teachers did provide their students with opportunities to use the language in different situations. Such as an approach seemed to be in consistence with the communicative language teaching.

(2) Which tasks do they use for test purposes?

In questions (2), the teachers were asked to mention the type of tasks they used for testing purposes. Results showed that (60%) of the teachers used short oral presentations, (40%) used oral interviews and (40%) used role plays. Other tasks such as picture descriptions, information gap activities, storytelling, debate, and retelling a story or news event were utilized by about half of the teachers involved in this study. (10%) of the teachers stated that they based their scoring on students' in-class participation as well (see table 2).

Task /Activity	(number)	(%)
short oral presentations	12	60
oral interviews	8	40

pair and group discussion	8	40
role plays	7	35
picture descriptions	3	15
information gap activities	2	10
story telling	2	10
class participation	2	10
Debate	2	10
retelling a story or news event	1	5

Table 2: Task Types used for scoring purposes

Results showed that students' speaking was tested through tasks similar to those teachers used for instructional purposes. It could be concluded that the type of tasks that teachers used to evaluate their students' speaking to a larger extent seemed to be a valid assessment, and reflected what the students were taught.

(3) Which areas of speaking do teachers focus on when assessing their students' speaking?

Pronunciation (73%), vocabulary (63%), and grammar (58%) appeared to be the three areas that the majority of the teachers stated that they focused on when evaluating their students' speaking. It seemed that teachers focused more on the microskills features of speaking; features such as fluency, discourse features, task accomplishment seemed to be of lesser importance for teachers when scoring students' speaking ability (table 3).

Areas of Focus	(number)	(%)
Pronunciation	14	73
Vocabulary	12	63
Grammar	11	58
Fluency	6	32
discourse features (cohesion, sociolinguistic appropriateness, etc)	4	21
task (accomplishing the objective of the task)	2	11

Table 3: Areas of focus when scoring speaking

This approach did not appear to be consistent with the communicative approach to language teaching which emphasizes meaning. "Public Schools of North Carolina" (2001) states that when assessing and grading students' oral language, the focus should be more on the message (what has been said) and its component. However, this does not mean that teachers

should not assess their students' accuracy (how it is said), it just means that priority should be given to whether the message is comprehensible---regardless of the few grammar mistakes in grammar, pronunciation, and word choice.

(4) Did teachers use rubrics to score their students' oral language?

About half of the teachers (50%) expressed that they were not aware of rubrics as scoring tools, (15%) said they did not use rubrics, and only (35%) said that they did (table 4). Most of the teachers stated that they based their students' scoring on their personal observation of students' performance. Observation can provide teachers with rich information on their students' progress, however, they lack the clearly spelled out criteria that rubrics normally have.

	Number	(%)
Yes	7	35
No	3	15
I don't know what this is	10	50

Table 4: Rubrics

Using rubrics for scoring purposes can help students know their areas of strength and weakness. An analytic rubric, for example, with its clearly and separately spelled out criteria of the speaking skill has the advantage of providing students' with feedback about which features of their spoken language are strong and which need improvement. Hence, analytic rubrics not only serve the purpose of scoring but they can also diagnose a student's speaking ability.

(5) Did teachers involved in this study get any training in assessing students' speaking skill?

The majority (75%) said that they had not received any training during their undergraduate program at college related to assessing students' speaking ability (table 5).

	Number	(%)
Yes	1	5
No	15	75
Left unanswered	4	20

Table 5: Training or No Training?

In this light, there seems to be a need for the teacher training program at the College of Education (University of Aden) to incorporate in its curriculum assessment sessions to help the future-teachers develop better skills to assess and test their students' language skills in general and speaking skill in particular.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper investigated the type of tasks a group of EFL teachers at the College of Languages (University of Aden) used to teach and test their students' speaking skill. It also focused on finding out which features of the spoken language teachers focused on most, if they used any rubrics, and whether or not they had received training in EFL assessment during their undergraduate teacher training program at the College of Education (University of Aden). Findings of this research showed that teachers used communicative activities to promote their students' speaking and they also used similar activities to test their students' oral language. However, there are still areas that need to be improved to make the teaching and testing of speaking more effective.

The first and foremost recommendation that one can make is that teachers need to learn to pay more attention to the macroskills. The focus should be more on the meaning and message of oral communication and then on language accuracy as this approach is more consistent with the communicative language teaching. In addition, it is recommended that instructors should either be provided with rubrics which they can use to score their students' oral language or they can be trained to design their own rubrics. Rubrics, particularly the analytic rubric, can serve not only as a scoring tool but also as a learning tool for students and help them match their speaking goals against the clearly spelled out criteria on the rubrics. Preferably, rubrics should be given to students before any test so they can have a clear idea of the areas they will be evaluated on.

Finally, the benefits of assessment cannot be ignored: assessment guides teachers' instructional practices, provides teachers with information about their students' progress, and determines the extent to which learning goals are being met. Since the majority (75%) of teachers involved in this study claimed that they had not received any training in assessment or testing during their undergraduate studies, it is essential that assessment as a course become an integral part of teacher education at the College of Education (University of Aden). In this way, *all* future teachers of English enrolled in the College of Education will be provided with the necessary support needed to improve not only their teaching skills but also their assessing skills.

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