DESIGNING SPEAKING TEST

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ABSTRACT

Speaking in a classroom involves the interaction between teachers and students or among the students which depends on how classroom activities are organized. There are at least three challenges faced by the teachers who assess speaking in the classroom i.e. determining the time allotment, selecting assessment activities and determining evaluation criteria. Assessing speaking in well organized or systematic ways is rarely conducted by teachers in the language classroom. They give more concerns to assess written language. This happens because they probably don't receive a training on how to assess speaking or they lack of oral proficiency.
The primary aims of this paper is to describe some steps in assessing speaking which covers some areas ; identifying purpose of the test, planning the test, designing rubrics an scoring procedures and setting standards. Last but not least, selecting materials for speaking test is also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Language is a means of communication. It varies in two forms, oral and written communication. Oral communication or in another term, oral language, is a form of oral correspondence between the speaker and the hearer in transforming ideas for reaching the goal of communication. Oral language is commonly assumed as the productive skill of language. The primary job of the teacher working with English language learners is to enable the students to communicate effectively through oral language. This is actually a big challenge for the teacher since it rarely gets serious attention in its assessment. Let us see a child's development in acquiring a language, he first acquires listening and speaking rather than reading and writing. He passes a sequential order in acquiring language starting from distinguishing and identifying sounds until producing complex utterances. When he goes to school, he first learns written language. Since the learning process focuses on both reading and writing skill, the assessment follows the given materials. This phenomenon shows that assessing speaking in classroom instruction is less paid attention and lack of researches on that matter conducted by researchers.

Moreover, comparing with the other skills, speaking is the most difficult to assess. O'Malley and Pierce (1996:58) state that there are at least three challenges faced by the teachers who assess oral language in the classroom, determining the time allotment, selecting assessment activities and determining evaluation criteria. Teachers do not give systematic assessment on oral language since they get difficulties in finding the time or selecting the proper activities or procedures relating to the materials in the lesson plans. This paper addresses two main issues ; some steps in assessment and selecting speaking test materials.

Discussion

A. The Nature of Speaking

Because oral communication involves the negotiation of meaning between two or more persons, it is always related to the context in which it occurs. Speaking means negotiating intended meanings and adjusting one's speech to produce the desired effect on the listener(O'Malley and Pierce (1996:59). It means anticipating the listener's response and possible misunderstandings, clarifying one's own and other's intention, and arriving at the closest possible match between intended, perceived, and anticipated meanings (Kramsch 1986:367). Speaking is also categorized as productive skill, the skill in which we produce utterances that is observable as stated by Brown (2004:140) that speaking is a productive skill that can be directly and empirically observed, those observations are invariably colored by the accuracy and effectiveness of a test taker's listening skill, which necessarily compromises the reliability and the validity of an oral production test.

Speaking in a classroom involves the interaction between teachers and students or among the students which depends on how classroom activities are organized. Compared with writing and reading skill (commonly assumed as written language, receptive skills), speaking has some distinctive characteristics. In speaking, speakers do not typically speak complete sentences, use less specific vocabulary than in written language. They also use syntax in a loosely organized manner and make frequent use of discourse markers (e.g. uh, well, ok, etc) (Brown and Yule : 1983). In addition, speaking varies depending on the age, gender and dialect of the speakers. Speaking assessment varies in some models depending on the learners' proficiency as Brown (2004:141) stated that there are some basic types of speaking in the following taxonomy :

1. *Imitative.* At one end of a continuum of types of speaking performance is the ability to simply parrot back (imitate) a word or phrase or possible a sentence. While this a purely phonetic level of oral production, a number of prosodic, lexical, and grammatical properties of language may be included in the criterion performance.

2. *Intensive.* A second type of speaking frequently employed in assessment context is the production of short stretches of oral language designed to demonstrate competence in a narrow band of grammatical, phrasal, lexical, or phonological relationships.

3. *Rensponsive.* Responsive assessment tasks include interaction and test comprehension but at the somewhat limited level of very shorts conversations, standard greetings and small talk, simple requests and comments, and the like.

4. *Interactive.* The difference between responsive and interactive speaking is in the length and complexity of the interaction, which sometimes includes multiple exchanges and/or multiple participants. Interaction can take the two forms of transactional language, which has the purpose of exchanging specific information or interpersonal exchanges which have the purpose of maintaining social relationship.

5. *Extensive (monologue).* Extensive oral production tasks include speeches, oral representations, and story telling, during which the opportunity for oral interaction from listeners is either highly limited (perhaps to non verbal responses) or ruled out together.

B. Some Steps in Assessing Speaking

1. *Identifying the purposes of speaking assessment*

Speaking test is intended for some purposes such as measuring one's oral competence when he wants to attend a certain level of language training requiring oral proficiency. In English course, English conversation becomes one of the major programs offered which varies in some levels starting from the beginners until advanced or post advanced level. When one wants to attend such a program, he has to pass an oral proficiency test which is usually conducted in the form of interview. The result is used to place him into a certain level of conversation class. Another example could be seen when one in a certain level of any language class intends to move into the higher level, he also has to pass the same test.

O'Malley and Pierce (1996:63) explains three main purposes of speaking assessment as follows:

1. For initial identification and placements of the students in need of a language-based program.
2. For movement from one level to another program within a given program.
3. For placement out of an ESL/bilingual program in to a grade-level classroom.

Among the three purposes above, there is no specific purpose of speaking assessment in the classroom. The assessment is rarely conducted by teachers either to diagnose the student's progress in oral proficiency or to design instructional planning. This happens because they probably don't receive any training on how to conduct speaking assessment in the classroom. They think that assessing speaking is not as important as reading and writing.

Analyzing Learners' needs is a crucial effort in identifying the purposes of speaking assessment. Conducting surveys or interviews is also helpful in determining the learner' needs (Richards:1983). When the purposes of speaking assessment based on the learners' needs and individual language assessment profiles are combined, this helps teachers to produce and elicit appropriate instructional goals, objectives and assessment activities.

2. *Planning Speaking Assessment*

Creating a direct link between instruction and assessment in identifying the purposes of speaking assessment will be helpful in planning the assessment. O'Malley and Pierce (1996:59) state that there are several steps regarding planning in speaking assessment :

-   Identifying instructional activities or tasks

    This is actually the most crucial part when we want to plan speaking assessment. Assessment and instruction are integrated parts in classroom activities. On this matter, teachers should be able to determine the conditions when they have to assess the students' speaking performance individually or in group. The teachers should also select the proper techniques and tasks referring to the type of assessment (individual, pairing or group).

-   Outlining the major instructional goals or learning outcomes and matching these to learning activities and performance tasks

Teachers must previously set up the general objectives of their speaking instruction which then be developed into the specific ones. This will be a point of departure for the teachers to select the proper materials, techniques, tasks in teaching leading to its assessment.

- Deciding whether or not to make an audio or video recording of student's performance

    Brown and Yule (1983) suggest that a tape for each student be used if oral language is an essential part of instruction. They also suggest that students be recorded conducting different types of tasks, such as describing a picture or event, telling a story, or expressing an opinion. By assessing different kinds of performances the teacher gets valuable feedback on student needs and is able to focus instructional goals accordingly.

- Deciding how often to collect information

    Teacher whose purpose is to monitor student's progress will need to collect information more often than those whose purpose is for reclassification decisions, which may require assessment only twice a year. Teachers who wish to monitor student's progress should plan to incorporate assessment into their instruction regularly so that a small amount of information is collected on individual students periodically over time and across variety of oral language tasks.

- Deciding when and how to provide learners with feedback

    The feedback has more meaning and perhaps makes more impact. The feedback can be best provided verbally in a mini-conference with the student but can also be provided by ratings on a scoring rubric with annotated comments that help the student in preparing for the next oral performance. The comments can be written on an individual student rating form and distributed after the performance is observed.

3. *Designing Speaking Test Rubrics*

Among the other skills, speaking is regarded as the most difficult to score, administer and prepare. One of the reasons is that it is difficult to determine what criteria to choose in evaluating the oral communication. In assessing speaking there are some components which are usually tested ; pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, listening comprehension, appropriateness, etc.

Besides the above components that have to be taken into consideration when assessing speaking, the examiner has also to think of the amount of students to be tested individually and the problems of objectivity. As teachers of English, we often come across students who can speak effectively and fluently without ever shifting tense or worrying about grammar. We also come across other students whoa are so intent on accuracy that their speech is full of hesitation false starts and self correction. Besides the above elements of speaking that have to be put into consideration, we are also concerned with how to get students to speak and how to evaluate so many things at once. On top of that there is also a practical problem of testing each student individually.

Assessing speaking should be based on the given materials of instruction referring to the goals and objectives of instruction. When it has already been

conducted, based on the students' performance, teachers can revise assessment tasks and standards as well as instructional objectives and activities that should meet learners' needs. O'Malley and Pierce (1996:59) state that the followings are several steps for developing rubric or scoring procedure :

- Establish criterion levels of speaking proficiency based on the goals and objectives of the classroom instruction before using instructional activities for assessment.

- Operationalize these criteria based on actual student performance.

- Set criterion levels of performance by designing a scoring rubric and rating scale or checklist. Begin by using a model rubric or scale; revise it to reflect your instructional objectives and then ask colleagues for feedback. Check the dimensions or aspects of oral language that you want to assess. These might be typically include communicative effect or general comprehensibility, grammar and pronunciation. If overall communicative effect is more important than communication, then it should be given more importance in the rubric. Share your rubric with the students, and get their input on it. Revise the rubric until both you and the students agree on what it means and how it looks in terms of students performance.

Brown and Yule (1983) suggest rating procedures that describe essential elements of effective communication; these can become the highest level of performance, with less effective performance listed at lower levels on the rating scale. Gonzales Pino (1988) reminds us that the dimensions or features of oral language to be assessed depend on the level of proficiency of the class and instructional goals. For example, beginners can be rated for overral communicative effect, with vocabulary and grammar being slightly less important and pronunciation and fluency being least important. Wherever possible, rubrics should highlight what students can do rather than what they cannot do. Of course at lower levels of proficiency, what students can do with oral language will be limited.

When you use a holistic scale, you may discover that the students do not always fit neatly into one category into another. If scoring holistically, you need only about three to six levels of performance; you do not want to use more levels than you need. Meanwhile, analytic rating scales which are complicated and time consuming to use, are the most effective ways for diagnosing the communicating information, such as student's strength and needs. You may want to save these for making placement decisions. Underhill (1987) suggest a balanced approach to using holistic and analytic rating scales, as in assessing for communicative effect or grammatical accuracy (see figure 1 and 2).

Figure 1: Holistic Oral Language Scoring Rubrics

Rating	Description
6	- Communicates competently in social and classroom settings - Speaks fluently - Masters a variety of grammatical structures - Uses extensive vocabulary but may lag behind native-speaking peers - Understands classroom discussion without difficulty
5	- Speaks in social and classroom settings with sustained and connected discourse; any errors do not interfere with meaning - Speaks with near native fluency ; any hesitations do not interfere with communication - Uses a variety of structures with occasional grammatical errors - Used varied vocabulary - Understands simple sentences in sustained conversation ; requires repetition - Understand most spoken language including classroom discussion
4	- Initiates and sustains a conversation with descriptors and details; exhibit self-confidence in social situations; begin to communicate in classroom settings - Speaks with occasional hesitation - Uses some complex sentences; applies rules of grammar but lacks control of irregular forms (e.g., runned, mans, not never, more higher) - Uses adequate vocabulary ; some words usage irregularities - Understand classrooms discussions with repetition, rephrasing, and clarification
3	- Begins to initiate conversation; retells a story or experience; asks and responds to simple questions - Speaks hesitantly because of rephrasing and searching for words - Uses predominantly present tense verbs; demonstrate errors of omission (leave words out, word endings off) - Uses limited vocabulary - Understands simple sentences in sustained conversation; requires repetition
2	- Begins to communicate personal and survival needs - Speaks in single-word utterances and short patterns - Uses functional vocabulary - Understands words and phrases; requires repetitions
1	- Begins to name concrete objects - Repeats words and phrases - Understands little or no English

Adapted from a rating scale developed by ESL teachers Portfolio Assessment Group (Grades 1-12), Fairfax County Public Schools, Virginia.

Figure 2 Analytic Oral Language Scoring Rubric

Focus/ Rating	1	2	3	4	5	6
Speaking	Begins to name concrete objects	Begins to communicate personal and survival needs	Begins to initiate conversation; retells a story or experience; asks and responds to simple questions	Initiates and sustains a conversation with descriptors and details; exhibit self-confidence in social situations; begin to communicate in classroom settings	Speaks in social and classroom settings with sustained and connected discourse; any errors do not interfere with meaning	Communicates competently in social and classroom settings
Fluency	Repeats words and phrases	Speaks in single-word utterances and short patterns	Speaks hesitantly because of rephrasing and searching for words	Speaks with occasional hesitation	Speaks with near native fluency ; any hesitations do not interfere with communication	Speaks fluently
Structure			Uses predominantly present tense verbs; demonstrate errors of omission (leave words out, word endings off)	Uses some complex sentences; applies rules of grammar but lacks control of irregular forms (e.g., runned, mans, not never, more higher)	Uses a variety of structures with occasional grammatical errors	Masters a variety of grammatical structures
Vocabulary		Uses functional vocabulary	Uses limited vocabulary	Uses adequate vocabulary ; some words usage irregularities	Used varied vocabulary	Uses extensive vocabulary but may lag behind native-speaking peers
Listening	Understands little or no English	Understands words and phrases; requires repetitions	Understands simple sentences in sustained conversation; requires repetition	Understand classrooms discussions with repetition, rephrasing, and clarification	Understand most spoken language including classroom discussion	Understands classroom discussion without difficulty

4. Setting Standards

When you have established rubric and rating procedures. Then you have to set the standards of oral language performance. Setting standard will enable teachers to classify the students into certain level of oral proficiency. From the rubric and rating scale describe above, it is said that when the students gain scale rate 5 or 6 , it means that they have high level of oral proficiency.

B. Selecting activities of speaking assessment

There are a lot of activities we could carry out when assessing speaking starting from the simple activities until the complex ones. Below is some of the activities which are commonly selected by teachers when assessing speaking in the classroom.

- *Interview*

  Teacher and student gather in face to face exchange and proceed through a protocol questions and directives. The interview, which may be tape-recorded for re-listening, is then scored on one or more parameters such as accuracy/pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, task accomplishment, comprehension, etc.

- *Picture Cued-Tasks*

  One of the more popular ways to elicit oral language performance is a picture-cued stimulus that requires a description from the test taker, in the classroom, teacher. Pictures may be very simple, designed to elicit a word or a phrase, somewhat more elaborate and busy , or composed of a series that tells a story or incident.

- *Paraphrasing*

  This is a combination between speaking and listening. Students listen to a story, text read by teacher or from the tape recorder, and then the students retell or paraphrase the story or text.

- *Role Play*

  Techniques in role play are proved to be effective in assessing speaking in the classroom. These activities are authentic because they involve language use in contexts. As an assessment device, a role play opens some windows of opportunities for the students to use discourse that might otherwise be difficult to elicit.

- *Games*

  This is a type of speaking assessment device which is informal and brings the students in relaxed and enjoyable situation during the test.

- *Oral Presentation*

  For oral presentations, a checklist or grid is a common means of scoring or evaluation. Holistic scores are tempting to use for their apparent practicality, but they may obscure the variability of performance across several sub categories..

- *Debates*

  Debate can present the opportunities for students to engage in using extended chunks of language for a purpose; to convincingly defend one side of an issue. A debate is a type of role-play where students are asked to take sides on an issue and defend their positions.

CONCLUSION

As the most difficult skill to score and administer, speaking assessment in the classroom should be conducted in systematic ways such as creating some assessment steps which include identifying objectives of instruction, assessment planning and developing rubrics or score procedures. Selecting proper activities is also helpful for the teachers to reach the goal and objective of the assessment.

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