

The Devolvement of Assessing Speaking Skill: An Empirical Study

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ABSTRACT

The ability to speak in a foreign language involves what it means to use a foreign language. To speak in a foreign language, learners must master the sound system of the language, have an access to appropriate vocabulary, and be able to put words together intelligibly. Speaking is also the most difficult language skill to assess reliably. A person's speaking ability is judged during a face-to-face interaction. Speaking skills are an important part of the curriculum in language teaching.

Keywords: foreign language, learner's outcome, sound system, speaking skills

INTRODUCTION

The Speaking skills are described in applied linguistics. It covers linguistic description of spoken language, speaking as interaction, and speaking as a social and situation-based activity. In fact, speaking is an integral part of one's life. When people hear someone speak, they pay attention to what the speaker sounds like almost automatically. On the basis of what they hear, they make some tentative and possibly subconscious judgements about the speaker's personality, attitudes, and so on. By using speed and pausing, and variations in pitch, volume and information, they also create a texture for their talk that supports and enhances what they are saying.

While speaking, the second language users' progress is often tracked according to the grammatical forms that they can produce accurately (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991 : 38-41). In general, learners are seen to proceed from knowing a few structures to knowing more and more, from using simple structures to using more complex ones, and from making many errors to making if any at all. However, the grammar that was evaluated in assessing speaking was specifically related to the grammar of speech.

PLANNED AND UNPLANNED SPEECH

A major difference between speech and writing is that speakers do not usually speak in

sentences. Rather, speech can be considered to consist of idea units, which are short phrases and clauses connected with 'and', 'or', 'but' or 'that' or not joined by conjunctions at all but simply spoken next to each other, with possibly a short pause between them. The grammar of these strings of idea units is simpler than that of the written language with its long sentences and dependent and subordinate clauses. Idea units are usually about two seconds or about seven words long or shorter. Many idea units are clauses with a verb phrase, a noun phrase, and a prepositional phrase but some of them do not contain a verb. However, complex grammatical features and a high degree of written language influence the speakers in special speeches, lectures, conference presentations, and expert panel discussions. These situations involve planned speech (Ochs, 1979), where the speakers have planned their speech or rehearsed their presentations in advance. Contrary to the planned speech, unplanned speech is spoken on the spur of the moment, often in reaction to other speakers. In unplanned speech alone, the short idea units and incomplete sentences are common. The concepts of planned and unplanned speech are closely connected to another factor that affects the grammar of speech, namely the level of formality of the speaking situation. Planned speech situations are formal. Unplanned speech situations can range from formal to informal. Formal situations require more

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written-like language where as the informal situations require more oral-like language. For assessing speaking, it is in fact useful to see that the differences between spoken-like and written-like languages as a continuum, with highly oral language at one end and highly literate language at the other (Tannen, 1982). To illustrate the nature and function of grammar in speech, two examples are given below. The first one is from Brown et. al (1984) where a young postgraduate student is describing what happened when she ordered a snack from room service in an American hotel

and + er + I was pretty exhausted and I phoned up room service and said that I wanted a sandwich + + nothing's over straightforward in America (laugh) – 'what kind of sandwich' + + I said 'well' er + hummed and hawed + and he said 'well + there's a list in your drawer' + 'in your chest of drawers' + so I had a look at it and gawd there was everything (laugh) you know + and I saw a roast beef + so I phoned back and said I would have a roast beef sandwich (laugh) + and a glass of milk + so an hour later + + nothing happened you see + so I phoned him up again and yes + they were coming + and in walked this guy with a tray + an enormous tray and a steel covered + plate + dinner plate you see + so I lifted that up + and I've never seen anything like it + + there was three slices of bread lying on this plate + and there was I counted eight slices of roast beef + hot roast beef + with gravy and three scoops of mashed potato round the outside + an enormous glass of milk and a glass of water.

(Brown et al. 1984 : 17)

In the above transcribed talk, the second word 'er' is a voiced hesitation sound. A single plus sign (+) indicates a short pause and two plus signs (+ +) a longer pause. Further, Brown et al point out that the speaker is a competent storyteller. The speaker uses conjunction and or follow one another without conjunctions. The vocabulary is simple. There are short phrases, pauses, repetitions, and reformulations. The speaker fails to follow number concord. It is a natural sample of native speaker storytelling.

The second is from unplanned and informal dialogue between three British female students who are chatting in the kitchen of their rented house.

<S01> Does anyone want a chocolate or anything ?

<S01> Oh yeah yes please

<S02> Yes please

<S02> [laughs]

<S03> [laughs]

<S01> You can have either a Mars Bar, Kit-Kat or erm cherry Bakewell

<S03> Oh erm it's a toss-up between [
<S02>[laughs]]the cherry Bakewell and the Mars Bar isn't it ?

<S01> Well shall I bring some in then cos you might want another one cos I don't want them all, I'm gonna be

<S03> Miss paranoid about weight aren't you ?

<S01> Yes but you know

<S03> You're not fat Maud

<S01> I will be if I'm not careful

<S02> Oh God

It is a casual talk. It has short meaning units. It changes quickly. Coherence is created by thematic linking. It also sometimes omits the subject and the verb. The use of 'you know' and 'its' and 'isn't it' make the speech characteristically spoken-like and informal.

STRATEGY INSTRUCTION IN ORAL COMMUNICATION

The teach ability of strategies for learning oral communication skills to less successful learners is a contentious issue in language learning research (Dornyel, 1995). According to Cohen, Weaver, and Li (1995) there have been "relatively few studies investigating the benefits of providing second language learners with formal training in the applications of strategies for speaking" (3-4). The effect of strategy instruction on speaking ability was investigated by O'Malley and Chamot (1990). High school students studying English for speakers of other languages were divided into three groups. The first group was taught metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective strategies. The second group was taught cognitive and social/affective strategies. The third group (the control group) did not receive strategy instruction. Audiotaped pre-rest and post-test speaking tasks were rated by two judges on a five-point scale that examined delivery, accuracy, and organization. The results indicated that the group that was taught all three strategies outperformed the other two. The group that was taught two strategies came next and the third group, the control

group, which did not receive strategy instruction, was rated the lowest.

Another investigation which studied the effect of strategy instruction on improving speaking ability was conducted by Dadour and Robbins (1996). A College English speaking course in Egypt conducted explicit strategy instruction. Experimental groups received strategy instruction, and control groups did not. Oral proficiency tests incorporating role-plays were conducted as pre-test and post-test. The results indicated that the experimental groups outperformed the control groups on the oral proficiency test, and that the experimental group also utilized more language learning strategies.

Thus, based on these studies, there is evidence to suggest that strategy instruction can improve performance in oral skills. However, the number of empirical studies is still limited. In order to accumulate useful information regarding how good language learners develop oral skills, ongoing research studies are essential.

Although interest in oral communication is alive and active, it is not a novel focus. In fact, the development of speaking skills in a target language has long been a central issue in the minds of learners, teachers, and researchers. The linguistic studies around the turn of the twentieth century (Sweet, 1899) were linked to the development of oral skills. This emphasis on speaking rather than writing was also stressed in audiolingualism (Fries, 1945), in input-based instruction (Krashen and Terrel, 1983), and in interaction-based (Long, 1983) or output-based theories (Swain, 1985). In the communicative approach (Widdowson, 1978; Brumfit and Johnson, 1979; Littlewood, 1981;), the development of oral skills is no doubt the focal point of language instruction (Lazaraton, 2001). The development of oral skills has always been a paramount importance, since “a large percentage of the world’s language learners study English in order to develop proficiency in speaking” (Richards and Renandya, 2002 : 201).

However, developing oral skills in a second language is not an easy task. When the learner is not in the target language environment, it is likely that learning to speak that language will be especially difficult, since learners have minimum exposure to the target language and culture, which is crucial to understanding sociolinguistic traits (such as genre and speech styles), paralinguistic traits (such as pitch, stress,

and intonation), nonlinguistic traits (such as gestures and body language) and cultural assumptions in verbal interaction (Shumin, 2002).

Studies conducted in China, Japan, and the USA indicate that good language learners use a variety of strategies to develop speaking ability. Those who develop good oral skills appear to be frequent strategy users regardless of culture and learning context. Huang and van Naerssen (1987) investigated tertiary level students of English in China. Subjects were given an oral test and a learning strategy questionnaire that included formal practice (such as listening to and doing pattern drills, listening in order to improve pronunciation, memorizing and reciting texts, imitation, re-telling stories, reading aloud, and reading in order to learn vocabulary items or grammatical structures which can be used when speaking); functional practice (such as using language for communication, thinking or talking to oneself, and using listening or reading to provide models for speaking); and monitoring (such as paying attention to the use of linguistic forms and modifying language responses). The results indicated that the high performers on the oral test used more functional practice than the middle and low performers.

A series of investigations of “expert” second language speakers in Japan was conducted by Takeuchi (2003). He asked 18 expert English speakers including simultaneous interpreters, professors, and diplomats about their learning experiences in the course of language development. Common responses were; practising phonological aspects in the beginning stage; memorizing formulaic expressions and illustrative sentences with pattern practice in the beginning and early intermediate stages; listening practice using dictation, reading aloud repeatedly, utilizing context and multimedia in building oral vocabulary in the beginning and intermediate stages; engaging in intensive, periodical, and continuous self-study in the late beginning to intermediate stages; trying to find opportunities to speak English including naturalistic communication with native speakers, self-talk, and simulated conversation practice with peers in the intermediate stage.

Varela (1999) investigated the effect of grouping, selective attention, cooperation, note-taking, self-assessment, and self-talk on the development of oral presentation skills in sixth, seventh and, eighth grade classes of English for speakers of other languages in the USA. Forty-

one students were divided into the experimental group with strategy-instruction and the control group without it. Videotaped pre-test and post-test oral presentations were rated on organization, clarity, vocabulary choice, eye contact, volume, and pace. Strategy use was investigated by means of interviews. The results indicated that the experimental group improved their oral presentations significantly more than the control group. The experimental group also reported an increase in strategy use and there was correlation between strategy use and presentation performance.

These three studies indicate that good language learners frequently use a variety of strategies to develop speaking ability. However, despite the wide interest in strategy use and the development of oral skills, there are very few lists of strategies for developing speaking skills in the literature, although two lists labeled strategies for speaking do exist. The first list by Rubin and Thompson (1994) addresses nine potential problems that arise during speaking tasks, including pronunciation problems, dealing with recurring mistakes, managing correction, creating practice opportunities, accuracy issues, communication breakdowns, conversation difficulties, comprehensibility, and rules of interaction. The second speaking strategy list was developed by Weaver, Alcaya, Lybeck, and Mougel (1994). This list includes strategies to be used before conversation, during conversation, and after conversation. However, it is noted from the earlier studies on strategies that it is one of the key decisions in task design which is what the speakers will be asked to do with language. In an early study on the nature of talk, Brown and Yule (1983) made distinctions between four different types of informational talk; description, instruction, storytelling, and opinion expressing/justification. Their main point was that each of the types follows its own routines of organizing information for easy comprehension, and with practice learners can improve their control of these routines and thus increase their language use skills.

SPEECH / VOICE

Voice is a non-verbal cue that affects communication. Good speakers should learn to use a voice. Some of the aspects that one should take care of are loudness, clarity, speed, intonation, and tone and pitch. Speakers also need to know words, phrases, and strategies for creating time to speak. They are sometimes

called fillers or hesitation markers. They include expression such as 'ah', 'you see', 'kind of', 'sort of', and 'you know' as well as whole expressions such as 'That's a good question' or 'Now let me see'. Speakers often use repetition of their own words or of those used by the previous speaker. However, the phrases like 'what a nice thing to say' or 'what a horrible thing to say' are called lexicalized sentence stems by Pawley and Syder (1983) and lexical phrases by Nattinger and Decarrico (1992). As they come automatically, it is easy for the speaker(s) to use.

Correct pronunciation of a word requires stress on the right syllable. Learners of languages with fixed stress will have a simpler task than learners of a language like English where the place of stress is variable (e.g. pho'tograph, photo'graphy, photogra'phic) and has to be learned as part of the word's spoken form. Moreover, the weakening of unstressed vowels (e.g. labour 'leibð and laborers le'bɔ:r:əs) introduces yet another factor of difficulty. Hymes (1972) has drafted the SPEAKING framework which lists the potential social and contextual factors influencing speech as follows

SPEECH FUNCTIONS

Van EK (1975) and Wilkins (1976) put an emphasis on notional / functional syllabuses to teach speaking in a second language and it paved way for the arrival of the communicative syllabus in the 1980s. At the same time, the shared focus on using language to do things made it easier for the language education community to apply work from discourse analysis into classroom contexts (Douglas and Smith, 1997 : 10). The combination of both strands can also be seen in common European Framework of Reference (CEF) (Council of Europe, 2001). The CEF divides functional competence into two categories.

- Macrofunctions - referring to chunks of spoken language such as description, narration, commentary, explanation, and demonstration.
- Microfunction - related to individual actions, such as inviting, apologising, or thanking.

(Council of Europe, 2001:125)

Further, microfunctions are divided into six categories.

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- giving and asking for factual information – describing, reporting, and asking.
- expressing and asking about attitudes – agreement / disagreement, knowledge / ignorance, ability, permission.
- Suasion – suggesting, requesting, warning.
- Socializing – attracting attention, addressing, greeting, introducing.
- Structuring discourse – opening, summarizing, changing the theme, closing.
- Communication repair – signalling non-understanding, appealing for assistance, paraphrasing.

SPEECH ACTS

Another way of looking at what the speakers have to do in speaking tasks is by analyzing the actions they perform when they say something. It is called by J.L. Austin (1962) as speech acts, for example requesting or confirming. The following are the characteristics of speech acts :

- Speech varies in speed and loudness. It uses intonation and stress to support the meaning conveyed by words, for example to mark whether a sentence is a statement or a question and to show the speaker's attitudes, such as surprise or doubt. It is usually accompanied by body language, such as gestures made with hands and facial expressions. .
- Spoken language, used both in formal and informal situations, is usually unplanned and spontaneous. Therefore, when one speaks one's thoughts are not always well organised, and there are pauses, repetitions, and rephrasing of words. There are breaks caused by speakers pausing for breath or to think.
- Speech also most often involves communication happening between two or more people, either face to face or on the telephone, so there is active interaction, with responses and interruptions from the listeners'. Speakers often use single words or groups of words that make sense.
- When people have a conversation, they use words such as 'well', 'now', 'by the way', 'incidentally', 'besides', 'anyway', 'okay', 'you know', 'I mean', 'right', 'you see', 'I don't know', 'like', 'so', 'actually' and 'I think' to

take a turn, end a turn, and start a new topic or finish a topic.

- Colloquialisms are a typical feature of spoken language. They could be words such as 'baby', used to refer to something, a person is responsible for (e.g. 'The garden is my sister's baby') and, 'dad', for 'father'.
- Structures that would not be acceptable in written language are sometimes used when speaking English. Examples are 'We decided to immediately buy it' instead of 'We decided to buy it immediately'.
- Another feature of spoken English is the use of contracted forms, such as 'wasn't', 'it's' and 'don't'.
- Spoken language is less complex in its structure than written language. Simple sentences and coordinate clauses linked by words such as 'and', 'but' and 'because' are more common in speech.
- Sentences in spoken English, though simple, are often longer because they are not tightly packed with content words but use more grammatical words.
- Phrases that are verb based are more common in spoken English.
- Verbs used are more often inactive.
- The use of tag questions to seek agreement, as in 'It's a well-made film, isn't it?'.
- 'The first person pronoun 'I' is used more often in spoken.

FLUENCY

Fluency in speaking is very much a required skill. It is commonly one of the criteria for selection in job interviews and for judging personality in general. Learners find it difficult to achieve fluency in English. Exposure to language use and usage alone can make the learners achieve fluency in English. Oral fluency exercises such as role-play, pair work activities, and group discussions alone aim to provide exposure to and practise in the use of language. In conversation and dialogue, one cannot always use fully constructed sentences. One can use broken sentences to get the message across. Fluency, therefore, needs to be emphasized more than accuracy as in real life situations. The correct pronunciation with the appropriate accentual and tonal variations can be gently pointed out while practising language use. In fact, less proficient speakers

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are to be encouraged to speak freely so that rich input becomes available to them from fellow participants while interacting with them.

CONCLUSION

The concept of communicative competence was introduced into applied linguistics in reaction to highly grammar-focused theories of language competence, which analyses the nature of language as a system independently of its users. Communicative competence emphasizes the users and their use of language for communication. The models of communicative competence that are currently used in language education and assessment are largely based on Hymes's (1971, 1972) theory of language use in social life. He suggested that there are four levels of analysis in language use :

- the first level is what is possible in terms of language code, i.e. the grammatical level.
- the second one is what is feasible for an individual to produce or competent.
- The third one is what is appropriate in various language-use situations.
- finally, language use is shaped by what is actually done, i.e. by convention and habit – some formulations just happen to be commonly used by a community of speakers.

However, the most frequently used communicative mode in language testing is Bachman and Palmer's (1996) modes of language ability. Bachman and Palmer consider language use as interaction between language users and their context. It includes five components.

- Language knowledge refers to various kinds of knowledge about language in the user's memory.

- Topical knowledge refers to the knowledge about different topics that the user brings to a language – use situation.
- Personal characteristics are basic features of the person such as sex, age, and native language.
- Strategic competence refers to the users' metacognitive organization and monitoring of the situation.
- Affective factors comprise the user's emotional responses to the given situation.

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