Speaking assessment: How well is the task taking place at the department of foreign languages in the University 20 août 1955 Skikda?

تقييم الكلام: ما مدى نجاح المهمة في قسم الآداب واللغات الأجنبية

بجامعة 20 أوت 1955 سكيكدة

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Abstract

It is widely agreed upon the fact that speaking a language means mastering that language. For that reason, a great deal of importance has been given to teaching and assessing speaking. Because the task of speaking assessment is so difficult and challenging many approaches were developed and test specifications were set. The purpose of the literature provided about speaking assessment is to ensure some degree of reliability of the tests and results.

In the present paper we aim at finding about how well the task of speaking assessment is taking place at the department of foreign languages in the university 20 août 1955 Skikda. A descriptive research was fostered. A questionnaire was administered to all the teachers of the department. After analysis of the data gathered, the results showed that speaking assessment task at the above-mentioned department is acceptable to a far extent.

Keywords : speaking assessment, assessment approach, test specifications, test reliability.

ملخص

من المتفق عليه أن التحدث بلغة يعني إتقان تلك اللغة ولهذا السبب أولي قدر كبير من الأهمية لتدريس وتقييم الكلام. ولأن مهمة تقييم الكلام صعبة للغاية كما تعتبر تحديا للأساتذة وضعت العديد من المناهج ومواصفات الاختبار، والغرض من الأدبيات المقدمة حول تقييم التحدث هو ضمان درجة معينة من الموثوقية من الاختبارات والنتائج.

وتحاول هذه الدراسة بحث عملية التحدث داخل الأقسام من خلال دراسة عينة في بعض قاعات الدراسة بقسم اللغات الأجنبية بجامعة سكيكدة، عبر التقييم للوصول إلى نتائج محددة حول طبيعة الحديث المستعمل.

الكلمات المفتاحية : تقديم النطق، نمج التقييم، مواصفات الاختبار، موثوقية الاختبار.

Introduction

Speaking is the most important means of human communication. When someone speaks a language, he is presumed to know that language. Celce-Murcia (2001, p. 103) acknowledged: "The ability to speak a language is synonymous with knowing that language since speech is the most basic means of human communication". Also, thanks to speaking one can know a lot about the speaker's personality, identity and his culture. Speaking tells a lot about the speaker. Luoma asserts "Our personality, our self-image, our knowledge of the world and our ability to reason and express our thoughts are all reflected in our spoken performance in a foreign language" (2004, p. 10).Besides that, speaking is considered as an integrative skill. It comprises all the other skills. To be able to speak well, you need to have a good control over the other skills. For that speaking skill is considered as the most important amongst all the other skills. Ur (2000, p. 12) argues that: "Of all the four skills(listening, speaking, reading and writing), speaking seems intuitively the most important: people who know a language are referred to as 'speakers 'of the language, as if speaking included all other kinds of knowing".

As much as speaking is an important skill to teach, as much it is considered as the most challenging and most difficult of the other skills to asses. Speaking is a complex construct. When someone speaks many aspects of speaking interfere simultaneously. One has to watch the choice of words, their pronunciation; the correctness of the utterances used and even assures a certain level of fluency. Similarly, in assessing speaking all those constructs are to be taken into account. Referring to Pennington, the testing of pronunciation (both segmental and suprasegmental), spoken grammar, spoken vocabulary, and even sociolinguistic applications of speech all fall into the construct of speaking and consequently require distinct test designs and measures(1999).Therefore, understanding the assessment of speaking requires examination of assessment methods, scales, and raters. This implies that A method for assessment must be carefully chosen, rating scales must be developed, and interviewers and/or raters must be trained.

Speaking assessment methods

Clark (1979) classifies language assessment methods into three types. These are the indirect, semi direct, and the direct method. Direct methods are defined as "procedures in which the examinee is asked to engage in face-to-face communicative exchanges with one or more human interlocutors" (Clark,1979, p. 36).In the direct method, the speaker is evaluated on the spot i.e. a face to face assessment is taking place. Speaking skills and abilities are evaluated in authentic and actual performance. A standard model of the direct method is an interview that happens between the interviewer and the interviewee where the former is supposed to make judgments and attribute scores to the latter. Speaking assessment methods centered on interviews are collectively referred to as OPIs or Oral Proficiency Interviews.

In the semi direct method, the interviewer's presence is not compulsory yet not required. The interviewees who are actually the examinees are explained the fact that they are going to be recorded for subsequent evaluation. They are presented with a set of prerecorded questions or tasks. Actually, semi direct methods of assessment require the use of some technological devices such as recorders or language labs. It is important to instruct the examinees that they are talking to a teacher for the purpose of evaluation not for anything else. In this respect Clark (1979) explains: "In the interview situation, the examinee is certainly aware that he or she is talking to a language assessor and not a waiter, taxi driver, or personal friend" (p. 38). Semi direct methods are a very efficient means for saving time and energy and for having a more reliable test results.

In fact, indirect methods are practically not adequate for speaking assessment. Ditto, but at a lesser degree for the direct method, only a holistic assessment is affordable. This means an evaluation based on general impressions of the speakers' performance by the assessor who is obliged to be present during the test. For that many testers render themselves to using semi direct methods which allow analytical assessments thanks to recorded responses for subsequent rating.

Speaking assessment approaches

When speaking about speaking assessment approaches we can talk about two main approaches the holistic approach and the analytical one. The holistic approach as the name implies focuses on the whole. Hornby (2000)defines "holism" as: "Considering a whole thing or being to be more than a collection of parts". (p. 620). Thus, the term "holism" refers to the whole of anything. Holistic assessment in this respect fosters the principle of the Gestalt theory where it considers the whole rather than the sum of the parts constituting that whole. Holistic assessment relies on the general impression that the examiner builds about the overall performance of the examinee. In this type of assessment, the skill that is tested is considered as a unified one entity, where splitting it into its constituent components is not feasible nor possible. In this regard, Xi et al (2006) explain:

> In holistic scoring, raters consider the combined impact of delivery, language use, and topic development, and make a judgment about a person's performance on a particular task. During this process, raters attempt to weigh the impact of different dimensions on the overall effectiveness of communication to come up with a holistic score". (p. 32).

According to this view, the components of speaking namely fluency, accuracy, vocabulary, pronunciation… etc. are considered as a whole and the scores given are based on the overall performance and its impact on the tester's views and impressions. An alternative way of assessment is the analytical method or approach. This approach is exactly the opposite of the previous one. The analytical method of assessment bases its evaluation on splitting the speaking skill into its constituent features i.e. fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation …etc. then a score is given to each constituent separately… (Hughes (1989), Alderson et al. (1995), Mertler (2001)). In a definition of analytic assessment, Xi and Mollaun (2006) claim that:

> An alternative scoring approach, analytic scoring, can be used to assess examinees' performance on each of the three dimensions. In other words, separate delivery, language use, and topic development scores can be reported. (p. 1).

We can see from this definition that the analytic assessment is based on separating the components of the skill under testing into its components before proceeding to any form of scoring.

Speaking assessment scales

A scale represents the range of values that is associated with particular levels of performance (Crocker&Algina, 1986). Assessing speaking means attributing scores to students based on the performance so as to rank them into ordinal   Assessing speaking is generally considered an endeavor that ranks students into ordinal groups and classes. In fact, researchers into the world of linguistics and particularly speaking assessment categorize rating scales into two types; the holistic scale and the analytical scale.

Holistic scale.

The holistic scales are actually a tool used by the holistic approach so as to evaluate examinees, score and rank them in an ordinal way.Most of the time the scores vary from one (01) to four (04) or five (05) where one is poor and five is excellent. The examine then has to decide where to place the student being tested according to the characteristic of each score or level. See the example below.

Holistic Rubric Example: Oral Presentation

4 Excellent	The speech demonstrates thorough and accurate knowledge of the subject matter. Key points are well organized. Eye contact is made throughout the presentation, and gestures are effectively used to emphasize important points. The speaker is articulate and uses memorable language that is grammatical correct. The visual aid is correct and concise and is used to make the presentation more effective. Questions from the audience are clearly answered with specific and appropriate information.
3 Adequate	The speech demonstrates accurate knowledge except in minor details. Organization is, for the most part, effective. Eye contact is made throughout most of the presentation and some gestures are used to provide emphasis. The speaker uses clear language that is grammatically correct. The visual aid is correct but may not be used to add to the presentation. Questions from the audience are answered with basic responses.
2 Limited:	The speech demonstrates some knowledge of the topic, but there are inaccuracies in important details. Organization is inadequate and ineffective. Limited eye contact is made, and although a few gestures may be used, they are not tied to points of emphasis. Language is somewhat vague and may contain some grammatical errors. The visual aid is mentioned, but it is not clearly tied to the presentation. Answers to questions from the audience are basic and are often unclear or ineffective.
1 Poor:	The speech demonstrates little to no knowledge of the subject. There is no discernable organization. Speaker does not make eye contact with the audience, and no gestures are used. Language is confusing and contains many grammatical errors. There is no visual aid or it is not mentioned. Questions from the audience are answered ineffectively or are not answered.

Analytical scales

As the name reveals, the analytical scale is used to provide more accurate and reliable scoring and evaluation of the speaking skill. The skill under assessment is split into its various components. Each and every component is divided into levels. Each level is provided a standard description of the performance required. Descriptors are associated with the different components of speaking: pronunciation; grammar/accuracy; fluency; vocabulary…etc.

Yet, for the purpose of providing teachers and speaking test makers with valid and reliable speaking assessment material, many institutions concerned with that matter have come up with some evaluation scales. In terms of international testing, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) offers a face-to-face speaking task in which a test taker and an interviewer interact for approximately 11-14 minutes. the *American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages* (ACTFL), is the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), which is used extensively in both English and foreign language assessment.). Also, *Cambridge ESOL* has offered a speaking component for nearly all of their examinations from their inception. Another influential framework is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001). The CEFR is a collection of descriptions of language ability, ranging from beginning to advanced, across and within the four main skills. The most familiar part of the framework presents six stages of proficiency from A1 (Breakthrough) to C2 (Mastery) in general terms. Descriptors are provided in a series of tables for each skill and then each skill is additionally broken down into sub skill descriptions that can be adapted for use in the creation of scales for specific purposes within specific contexts. See sample tables below.

ALTE Can Do statements for listening and speaking				
CEFR Levels (ALTE Levels)	**Listening / Speaking Can Do Statements**			
	Overall general ability	**Social and tourist typical abilities**	**Work typical abilities**	**Study typical abilities**
C2: mastery (ALTE Levels 5 good user)	Can advise on or talk about complex or sensitive issues, undertaking colloquial references and dealing confidently with hostile questions	Can talk about complex or sensitive issues without awkwardness.	CAN advise on / handle complex delicate or contentious issues, such as legal or financial matters to the extent that she/ he has the necessary special knowledge	Can understand jokes, colloquial asides and cultural allusions
C1 effective operational proficiency (ALTE Levels 4 competent user)	Can contribute effectively to meetings and seminars within own area of work or keep up a casual conversation with a good degree of fluency, coping with abstract expressions	Can keep up a conversation of casual nature for extended period of time and discuss abstract/ cultural topics with a good degree of fluency and range of expression.	Can contribute effectively to meetings and seminars within own area of work and argue for or against a case.	Can follow abstract argumentation for example the balancing of alternatives and the drawing of conclusions
B2 vantage (ALTE Levels 3 independent user)	Can follow or give a talk on familiar topic or keep up a conversation on fairly wide range of topics	Can keep up a conversation on fairly wide range of topics such as personal or professional experiences, event currently in the news.	Can take or pass on most messages that are likely to require attention during a normal working day.	Can give a clear presentation of a familiar topic, and answer predictable or factual questions.
B1 threshold (ALTE Levels 2 threshold user)	Can express opinion on abstract/ cultural matters in a limited way or offer advice within a known	Can express opinion on abstract/ cultural matters in a limited way and pick up nuances of meaning /	Can offer advice to clients within own job area on simple matters.	Can understand instructions on class and assignments given by a teacher or lecturer.

	area and understand instructions or public announcements	opinions.		
A2 waystage (ALTE Levels 1 waystage user)	Can express simple opinions or requirements in a familiar context.	Can express likes and dislikes in a familiar context using familiar language such as 'I don't like.'	Can state simple requirements within own job area such as 'I want to order 25 of …'	Can express simple opinions using expressions such as 'I don't agree'.
A1 breakthrough (ALTE breakthrough Level)	Can understand basic instructions or take part in a basic factual conversation on a predictable topic.	Can ask simple questions of a factual nature and understand answers expressed in simple language.	Can like and pass on simple messages of a routine kin, such as 'Friday meeting 10am'	Can understand basic instructions on class times, dates and room numbers, and on assignments to be carried out.

Source: Council of Europe (2001 pp. 249, 257)

The Cambridge ESOL common scale for speaking

LEVEL	MASTERY
C2	CERTIFICATE OF PROFICIENCY IN ENGLSIH
	Fully operational command of the spoken language • Able to handle communications in most situations, including unfamiliar or unexpected ones. • Able to use accurate and appropriate linguistics resources to express complex ideas and concepts and produce extended discourse that is coherent and always easy to follow. • Rarely producing inaccuracies and inappropriacies. • Pronunciation is easily understood and prosodic features are used effectively; many features, including pausing and hesitation are 'native- like'
LEVEL	EFFECTIVE OPERATIONAL PROFICIENCY
C1	CERTFICATE IN ADVANCED ENGLSIH
	Good operational command of the spoken language • Able to handle communication in most situations. • Able to use accurate and appropriate linguistic resources to express ideas and produce discourse that is generally coherent • Occasionally produce inaccuracies and inappropriacies • Maintain a flow of language with only natural hesitation resulting from consideration of appropriacy or expression. • L1 accent may be evident but does not affect the clarity of the language.
LEVEL	VANTAGE
B2	FIRST CERTFICATE IN ENGLISH
	Generally effective command of the spoken language • Able to handle communication in familiar situations. • Able to organize extended discourse but occasionally produces utterances that lack coherence and some inaccuracies and inappropriate usage occur. • Maintain a flow of language although hesitation may occur whilst searching for language resources. • Although pronunciation is easily understood L1 features may be intrusive. • Does not require major assistance or prompting by an interlocutor
LEVEL	THRESHOLD
B1	PRELIMINARY ENGLISH TEST
	Limited and effective command of the spokenlanguage • Able to handle communication in most familiar situations • Able to construct longer utterances but I not able to sue complex language except in well-rehearsed utterances • Has problems with searching for language resources to express ideas and concepts resulting in pauses and hesitation • Pronunciation is generally intelligible but L features may put a strain on the listener • Has some ability to compensate for communications difficulties using repair strategies but may require prompting and assistance by an interlocutor
LEVEL	WAYSTAGE
A2	KEY ENGLISH TEST
	Basic command of the spoken language • Able to convey basic meaning in very familiar or highly predictable situations • Produces utterances which tend to be very short- words or phrases-with frequent hesitation and pauses • Dependent on rehearsed or formulaic phrases with limited generative capacity • Only able to produce limited extended discourse • Pronunciation is heavily influenced by L1 features and may at times be difficult to understand • require prompting and assistance by an interlocutor to prevent communication from breaking down

Source: Examinations Handbooks (2008)

Test specifications

Test specification is the blueprint of the test. It sets the details of the test; how it is operationalized through the task and the rating

procedures employed. Test specifications contribute in elevating the validity and reliability of the test. (Luoma, 2004) argued that good tests have clearly defined specifications; construct, assessment, and task. Also, Richards (2012) explained that assessment specifications involve considering questions such as the following:

- What is the purpose of the assessment,
- Who are the students to assess?
- What is the level of the assessment?
- What skills or knowledge are being assessed?
- How many tasks do the students need to undertake to complete the assessment?
- How long will they have to complete the task?
- Are all of the tasks weighted equally?
- What communicative situation does the assessment target?
- What type and length of texts are involved in the assessment?
- What language skills and knowledge are being assessed?
- What language features are being assessed?
- What tasks do students have to perform?
- What instructions will be given to the student to complete the task?
- What criteria will be used to assess the performance?
- How will the performance be rated and scored? (Richards, 2012 pp. 264 265)

Richards explains that not all of the above-mentioned specifications are to be sued. Nonetheless, every testing context requires explicit specifications. It is agreed upon that every teacher must set a series of specifications which are to consider as they prepare their speaking tests. Those specifications "link assessment to the teacher and learning process, as well as the goals and objectives for the course" (Richards, ibid). test specifications determine the kind of speaking the test maker will focus on, what method to use and the rating criteria it fosters. The written version of these ideas is called the test specifications.

Analysis of the questionnaire

Questions	Frequency	Percentage	Questions	Frequency	Percentage
Gender			**Component of**		

Speaking assessment: How well is the task taking place at the department of foreign languages in the University 20 août 1955 Skikda?

			speaking ***		
Male	05	50%	Pronunciation	00	00%
Female	05	50%	Grammar	00	00%
Level of education			Vocabulary	00	00%
Licence	00	00%	Fluency	01	10%
Master	02	20%	All of them	09	90%
Magister	08	80%	**Way of assessing speaking**		
Phd	00	00%	Holistic	03	30%
Speciality			Analytical	05	50%
Linguistics	04	40%	Both	02	20%
Literature	02	20%	**Use of speaking rubrics**		
Civilization	02	20%	Always		
Others	02	20%	Often	02	20%
Training			Sometimes	06	60%
			Rarely	01	10%
Yes	05	50%	Never	01	10%
No	05	50%	**Focus when assessing**		
Duration of teaching speaking/year			Pronunciation		
1-3	06	60%	Vocabulary	02	20%
3-6	00	00%	Flow	02	20%
6-9	03	30%	Correctness	03	30%
9-12	01	10%	G. impression	03	30%
Importance of speaking			**Type of test**		
Very important	05	50%	Subject of choice	00	00%
Important	01	10%	With interaction	04	40%
Equally important	04	40%	Conversation like	06	60%
Not important	00	00%	**Use of computer***		
Type of speaking taught			Yes	03	30%
Interaction	08	80%	No	07	70%
Performance	01	10%			
Transaction	01	10%			
Others					

Nb. When a question is followed by ******* this means that it is followed by an open- question where explanations are required.

Analysis of the date gathered from the questionnaire

The first thing noticed is the fact that the department contains the same number of female and male teachers of speaking i.e. 50% for each for a total of 10 teachers. Those teachers have different levels of education; 20% have the master degree while 80% have the magister degree. No teachers with a license degree are recruited in the department because of the belief that it's better to hire teachers who are of a certain level. However, we notice also that PhD teachers constitute 00% of the faculty of teachers. The variety of teachers of speaking in the department extends to the specialties of the teachers. 40% of them are specialized in linguistics, 20% in literature, 20% in civilization and the other 20% have a mixture degree between linguistics and literature and literature and civilization. In fact, teachers specialized in linguistics are supposed to be more qualified and ready to teach speaking. The other specialties are rather content specialties where the focus is on the information delivered unlike the first group which focuses on the language side of the target language. However, we see that some teachers have been through a training while others not. The percentage attributed for each is 50%. The question arises here; are these trainings the initiative of the teachers themselves or are they imposed by the institutions? In both cases trainings are always beneficial for teachers. They help develop skills and have a better control over the task at hand. As it seems, trainings are not given to everyone. Yet, this problematic could be compensated by the experience of the teachers in teaching the speaking skill. 60% of the teachers claimed that they spend between one to three (1-3) years teaching English speaking. 30% taught it between six and nine years (6-9) while only one teacher did for over nine (9-12) years. Experience is sometimes better than training as the teacher is living in real the didactics of speaking. In fact, 50% of the population under investigation thinks that speaking is a very important skill, 10% think it is just important while 40% presume it is equally important to the other skills.

Regarding the function of speaking being taught at the department of foreign languages at Skikda university 80% of the teachers questioned declared they teach speaking as interaction which is a very adequate skill to teach as the students are supposed to learn the language to communicate and to leave good impression on their interlocutors and establish social relationships through the act of

speaking. 10% said they teach speaking as performance i.e. this teacher focuses on developing presentation skills within his students. The other 10% presume teaching speaking as interaction. This latter is a bit bizarre and unhealthy way of teaching along with a wrong objective targeted. This very teacher is a problem to be cured.

The components of speaking are of a great importance each. However, the teachers still have their own preferences and beliefs about the fact that some are more important than the others. Indeed, one teacher thinks that fluency is the more important skill in teaching speaking. He argued; "Fluency is primary. The others, though important, are relegated to a lower position". This teacher is not wrong in fact as speaking fluency encompasses many other components to as to reach it. It requires a large vocabulary stock, a mastery of the English pronunciation and a good control over the pauses used purposefully during communication. In the same respect 90% agreed that a combination of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and fluency are all important skill to master. Those teachers justified their answers as follows: (1) all these components are mutually equal in building a comprehensive structure. (2) Because both fluency and accuracy are important. (3) Speaking should represent a whole. Therefore, all these components are equally important. (4) Speaking is one of the productive skills of language. Hence, when we produce language, it must be correct and appropriate and to do so, we need the four aspects mentioned above. (5) All the components are equally important. Nevertheless, we should focus on making sure that students use correct grammar and pronunciation first, then, we should help them to develop/ enrich their vocabulary and to improve their fluency. (6&7) To be a good speaker you have to get bit of everything as they are needed components when it comes to speaking skill. Then, everyone tries to develop himself step by step and enhance the way he speaks to be well understood. (8) The lack of one of the above components will harm the speaking. (9) They are complementing each other; the lack of one will harm the others

The focus on one component of speaking (fluency in the present research) or on all its components entails a lot of teaching from the part of the tutor. Those efforts are supposed to be fruitful. That fruitfulness or success of the teacher to meet his target should be checked and assessed. A teacher assessment is a very important practice for EFL teachers. It's only thanks to it that he can evaluate his

students' success in the language. We explained earlier that there are two main types of speaking assessment holistic and analytical. In the present research 30% of the teachers declared they use holistic assessment while 50% stated they use analytical one. A 20% announced they rather use both of them. The use of either way of assessment entails using rubrics. These help the evaluator have more reliable assessment. However only 20% said they often use rubrics. The majority which constitutes 60% declared they sometimes do while some teachers, a total of 20% declared they rarely and never use rubrics. The use of rubrics gives more details that the teacher can rely on to assess his students in a more focused and beneficial way. Focus when using rubrics means that the teacher will split the speaking skill into its constituents and concentrate on each so as to be as accurate as possible when assessing. We can see also that those who use the analytical means of evaluation are more expected to use rubrics and consequently focus on each element separately. The answers to this question confirm this fact. A total of 70% state they focus on separate components of the speaking skill. Those 70% are distributed as follows: 20% focus on vocabulary, 20% focus on the flow of speech and 30% on correctness. The other 30% left presume they rely on their general impression. This confirms what has been stated in the previous question where teachers where asked about whether they use holistic or analytical assessment.

The type of test provided by the teacher will reveal about the approach he uses in the class. The answers to this question will provide us with the type of speaking being taught in class. Speaking is in fact divided into three types or functions (Lazaraton, 2002): "talk as transaction", "talk as performance" and "talk as performance" each has its own features and its context to be used in. however within the communicative approach foster nowadays all over the world, speaking as interaction should be the one to teach more than any other type. Skikda University, relying on the answers of the teachers we notice that 60% undertake a conversation like tests while the other 40% interact when needed during the students' performance i.e. interaction is still involved. This can prove a healthy means of teaching and assessing of the speaking skill.

The use computer nowadays to assess speaking is a trendy way to. The use of computer will facilitate the task of assessment and give

more reliability and validity to the test and the results as well. in the present research only 30%of the population under investigation declared they use computers when assessing speaking. The other 70% declared they do not. Of the 30% who use the computer 100% of them stated that they use it to listen to recorded speech delivered by students during the test. This question tells us at the same time about the method used for assessment; whether it is direct, semi-direct or indirect. From the present research we can see that 70% use a direct method where students are attributed scores on the spot while 30% use a semi-direct method where they record then subsequently listen to the recording for evaluation and scoring.

Conclusion

From the results explained above, we can conclude that speaking assessment at the department of FL at Skikda University is quite well. a considerable number of teachers have had a training in speaking assessment. Yet, they have enough experience that enable them to master the task to some extent. Speaking as interaction is their focus and the analytical scale is the main tool of scoring. Besides, a semi direct method of testing is used which justifies the use of computers when assessing for some teachers. Thus, we can conclude that the speaking assessment task is acceptable to a far extent.

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