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Continuous and comprehensive assessment of speaking skills in English in schools and colleges provides a holistic approach to English language acquisition

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Abstract

Foreign language proficiency is measured by the ability to communicate effectively in the language. This ability is demonstrated in the understanding of authentic aural materials and in the ability to generate spoken language for real-life purposes. A competent user of the language must be equally proficient in all the four skills of the language. Teaching a skill at the exclusion of other skills is impossible because language is an integrative activity and it is wise to teach more than one skill at a time. It has become almost a necessity to be competent in speaking in English in all professions, hence, it is imperative for teachers to teach and assess speaking skills. But, language testing has taken the form of testing knowledge about the language: grammar and vocabulary. The main purpose of communicative language tests is to assess the learner's ability to use the language in real-life situations. In testing speaking skills, the focus should center on producing the appropriate and meaningful messages rather than grammatical accuracy (Kitao & Kitao, 1996). In the Indian education system, assessing the speaking skills of students is not a priority because of the absence of a well-accepted speech curricula. Assessment must support instruction and assessments must be well motivated and well administered to produce desirable results. Communicative language tests are those which make an effort to test language in a way that reflects the way that language is used in real communication; they focus on language meaning and function rather than language form. An analytic rating like the rating scaling of IELTS and BEC assesses and capture the speaker's performance on a variety of categories, such as delivery, organization, content, and language. There is a dire need for assessment of speaking skills in the curricula as it will serve as a potent force in promoting the quality of communication education in schools and colleges.

Keywords: communicative language tests, continuous and comprehensive evaluation, analytical rating.

Introduction

An expert user of any language must be competent in all the four skills of the language – listening, speaking, reading, and writing. But the knowledge that language is primarily speech has brought into focus oral work in the classroom. Although, all the four skills should be integrated into the curriculum, speaking is at the heart of second language learning. Foreign language proficiency is measured by the ability to communicate effectively in the language. This ability is demonstrated in the understanding of authentic aural materials and in the ability to generate spoken language for real-life purposes.

Teaching a skill at the exclusion of other skills is impossible because language is an integrative activity and it is wise to teach more than one skill at a time. Many teachers teach mainly grammar and vocabulary because these areas are tested in the classrooms. Students may have a good knowledge of grammar and a wide vocabulary; they can use this knowledge to pass examinations, but they find it very difficult to converse in English both inside and outside the classrooms. It has become almost a necessity to be competent in speaking in English in all professions, hence, it is imperative for teachers to teach and assess speaking skills. Speaking activities can reinforce the learning of new vocabulary, grammar or functional languages. Moreover, speaking activities also give students the chance to use the new language they are learning. Finally, speaking activities give more advanced students the chance to experience with the language they already know in different situations and on different topics, including abstract emotions and experiences.

No curriculum model would be complete without an evaluation component and it is universally recognized as an essential part of any educational endeavor. A major reason for carrying out assessment and evaluation is to determine whether learners are progressing satisfactorily or not, and, if they are not, to diagnose the causes and suggest remedies. Traditionally, language testing has taken the form of testing knowledge about the language: grammar and vocabulary. However, there is much more to using a language than just knowledge about it. Hymes (1974) argued that a

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language learner should not only have the ability to form correct sentences, but also to use them at appropriate times. The main purpose of communicative language tests is to assess the learner's ability to use the language in real-life situations. In testing speaking skills, the focus should center on producing the appropriate and meaningful messages rather than grammatical accuracy (Kitao & Kitao, 1996). For instance, for those EFL learners who learn the target language for specific purpose situations, the tests should reflect what they actually need and what is useful to apply in those specific communication situations, such as occupational or professional areas. While some learners do not have a specific purpose—such as those students who learn English as a required academic subject—the language tests for them can be directly focused on general social situations where they might have the chance to use English (Kitao & Kitao, 1996).

In the Indian education system, assessing the speaking skills of students is not a priority. The most obvious reason is the absence of a well-accepted speech curricula. Hence, in our educational context, assessment of speaking skills would be the most ignored and under-estimated compared to other skills. Assessment must support instruction and assessments must be well motivated and well administered to produce desirable results. But, the best way to approach the teaching and assessment of oral skills in the classrooms has been the focus of debate.

The method for assessing oral communication skills depends on the purpose of the assessment. A method that is appropriate for giving feedback to students who are learning a new skill is not appropriate for evaluating students at the end of a course. However, any assessment method should adhere to the measurement principles of reliability, validity, and fairness. The instrument must be accurate and consistent, it must represent the abilities we wish to measure, and it must operate in the same way with a wide range of students.

Communicative language tests are those which make an effort to test language in a manner that reflects the way that language is used in real communication; they focus on language meaning and function rather than language form. If students are encouraged to learn the target language through more communicative ways, it would make a positive effect on their language learning. The role of the evaluators is extremely important in the process of oral language assessments. Not only does their professional judgment impact decision-making in scoring, but their reliability also influences the meaning and quality of the scores. The test scores of oral language proficiency reflect how well the learner can speak the language being tested on a rating scale.

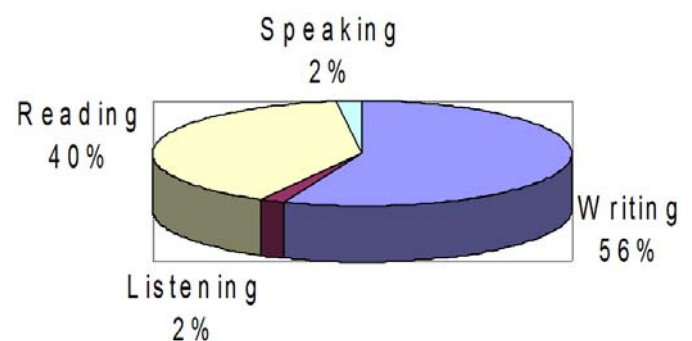
At present, India has a very strict examination system which is in essence knowledge - rather than skill-based. Students' language competence is assessed only based on written examinations where neither listening nor speaking skills are tested. This has had a substantial impact on teaching practices since, overall, teachers find themselves teaching to a test rather than helping their learners to develop their basic language skills. The consequence of this is that, although many students manage to get very high marks in English in their tests, most of them do not succeed in using the language to communicate effectively.

External examinations are very largely inappropriate for the knowledge society of the 21st century and its need for good communicators and for innovative problem solvers. Examinations create a lot of stress on the students for demonstrating their intelligence, creativity, understanding and applications of the concepts in a very short time interval of two

or three hours. External examinations fail miserably in assessing the communicative ability of the students. The high marks students score in the English examinations, both in schools and colleges, has no direct bearing in their ability to communicate in the language, in fact in many cases it has found to be on the contrary.

The inclusion of speaking tests in the curriculum would represent a positive increase in authenticity, and the tests would document the student's progress and assessment scores would motivate the students to perform better, however, this is possible only if the tests reflect the curriculum content. Moreover, including speaking tests could engage students to complete tasks interactively, and such tests would be more interactive than the current examination. Introducing speaking tests in schools and college examinations would also have great impact on teachers and students. The writer is aware that speaking tests require many resources such as, state of the art infrastructure, well qualified and competent language teachers, cooperation of the institution administrators, and authentic framework for assessing and so on. The inclusion of speaking tests might present problems in terms of practicality, but teachers, curriculum developers and institutions should find ways to integrate speaking tests as that would greatly enhance the speaking skills of the students.

The writer produces a pie chart which reflects the skills evaluated in schools and colleges. It is evident that speaking and listening skills are not assessed; the only test of their performance in these skills is their understanding of the lesson taught and speaking is required sometimes when they are questioned randomly to test their understanding. Evaluation in reading is also only based on their comprehension of the lesson from the point of examination. Writing is assessed only based on their capacity to reproduce what they have internalized and the examination does not require any creative writing on the part of the students, except perhaps in schools where they are required to write an essay or letter. It is not uncommon that in most situations students are given stock essays to reproduce in the examination and grammar is extensively tested, but mostly in isolation. By and large, students are motivated only if marks are awarded.



1. The proportion of skills tested in schools and colleges

The abilities to listen critically and to express clearly and effectively contribute to a student's success in school and later in life. Teachers concerned with developing the speaking and listening communication skills of their students need methods for assessing their students' progress. These techniques range from observation and questioning to standardized testing. However, even the most informal methods should embrace the measurement principles of reliability, validity, and fairness. The methods used should be appropriate to the purpose of the assessment and make use of the best instruments and procedures available. Oral assessments should be holistic and

analytical in their approach and should bring out the latent language ability to the fore, and students should feel that they have been justly assessed. Communicative language tests are those which make an effort to test language in a way that reflects the way that language is used in real communication; they focus on language meaning and function rather than language form. Further, such assessments should be measurable, transparent and objective.

In conclusion, the writer recommends the IELTS and BEC rating scale for speaking which consist of an ascending series of levels, and each level provides a statement as a scale descriptor to describe what each level or score meant. One of the traditional distinctions between the holistic and analytic rating scales is that the holistic rating captures an overall impression of the speaker's performance and assessed the speaker's abilities to achieve a specific communication purpose. In a holistic scoring, the rater reacted to the speaker's oral production as a whole: one score is awarded for his or her speech performance. Normally, this marked score is on a scale of 1 to 5, or even 1 to 10. Often each level on the scale is accompanied by a verbal description of the performance required to achieve that score.

An analytic rating assesses and captures the speaker's performance on a variety of categories, such as delivery, organization, content, and language. The analytic rating tends to identify sub-skills such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. Generally speaking, the holistic scales are more practical for decision, however, the advantages of the analytic rating are due to the detailed guidance that is offered to the raters, and the rich information as criteria is provided on specific strengths and weaknesses of the test-taker's performance. The writer agrees with Bachman and Savignon (1986) that a holistic rating, along with an analytic

rating, should be assigned to provide a precise profile of the learners' speaking ability. Any assessment carried out should test the students in a variety of contexts. The assessment situations must not deviate from naturalistic situations, if the assessment is carried out in contrived environments, the test scores of the students will not reflect the true competence of the students. The writer emphasizes the need for assessment of speaking skills in the curricula as it will serve as a potent force in promoting the quality of communication education in schools and colleges.

Continuous and comprehensive evaluation of speaking skills covers all aspects of a student's development. The two fold objectives of this type of evaluation are – continuity in evaluation and assessment of broad based learning and behavioral outcome. It is a process to provide holistic profile of the learner through regular assessment of scholastic and co-scholastic domains of development. Such assessments will aim at making evaluation an integral part of teaching-learning process and will focus on all round development of personality of the learners. It will result in higher level of learning due to timely diagnosis of learning gaps and remedial intervention and will facilitate in enhancing the speaking skills of students. Language acquisition is possible only over a period of time and continuous practice helps the learners retain and enrich their language. Continuous assessment of speaking skills in schools and colleges will enable the students to use the language effectively and comfortably without inhibitions. Finally, a comprehensive syllabus for teaching skills and a holistic and measurable assessment criterion should be included in the curriculum. If the classroom speaking activities are varied and interactive, students will eagerly participate and perform well which will automatically improve their speaking skills in English.

Score	Fluency, Coherence & Spontaneity	Grammatical Range, Vocabulary & Accuracy	Pronunciation	Interactive Communication & Comprehensibility
7-8	The candidate responds fully and is able to develop the interaction with considerable ease. Speaks coherently with fully appropriate cohesive features.	The candidate uses a wide range of appropriate vocabulary and structures. Uses vocabulary with full flexibility and uses idiomatic language naturally and accurately. Produces consistently accurate structures apart from 'slips' characteristic of native speaker speech.	The candidate is easily understood and demonstrates accurate pronunciation. Uses a full range of pronunciation features with precision and subtlety. Is effortless to understand	The candidate fulfils all of the task requirements without the need for prompting from the interlocutor. Never reverts to L1 when "thinking aloud" or interacting. Develops topic fully and appropriately.
5-6	The candidate responds well but hesitations and pauses sometimes affect the listener's understanding of the message. Occasionally develops the interaction beyond the minimal requirements. Produces simple speech fluently but more complex communication causes fluency problems.	The candidate uses a good range of vocabulary and structures although a few errors do occur. Shows some awareness of style and collocation, with some inappropriate choices. Is able to adopt suitable coping strategies in order to tackle unknown vocabulary / structures. Uses a mix of simple and complex structures, but with limited flexibility.	The candidate is understood, although a few obvious pronunciation errors occur which occasionally affect successful communication. Uses a range of pronunciation features with mixed control. Can generally be understood throughout, though mispronunciation of individual words or sounds reduces clarity at times.	The candidate fulfils most of the task requirements without the need for prompting from the interlocutor. Sometimes reverts to L1 when "thinking aloud". May demonstrate language related hesitation at times or some repetition.
3-4	The candidate is able to respond but hesitations and pauses tend to strain the listener. Unable to develop the interaction beyond the minimal requirements. Links basic sentences but with repetitious use of	The candidate uses an adequate range of vocabulary and structures although some are inappropriate for the task. Is able to talk about familiar topics but can only convey basic meaning on unfamiliar topics and makes frequent errors in word choice.	The candidate is understood with some strain on the part of the listener. Obvious pronunciation errors occur which affect successful communication. Mispronunciations are frequent and cause some difficulty for the listener.	The candidate fulfils some of the task requirements, but prompting from the interlocutor is sometimes required. Sometimes reverts to L1 when "thinking aloud" and interacting.

	simple connectives and some breakdowns in coherence.	Struggles to implement coping strategies to tackle unknown vocabulary / structures. Errors are frequent and may lead to misunderstanding	Uses a limited range of pronunciation features.	Cannot respond without noticeable pauses and may speak slowly.
1-2	The candidate is often unable to respond and frequently fails to meet the minimal requirements of the task. Gives only simple responses and is frequently to convey basic message. Pauses lengthily before most words.	The candidate uses a limited range of vocabulary and structures which are often inappropriate for the task. Uses simple vocabulary to convey personal information and has insufficient vocabulary for less familiar topics. Makes numerous errors and cannot produce basic sentence forms.	It is difficult to understand the candidate. Obvious pronunciation errors occur which frequently affect successful communication. Speech is often unintelligible.	The candidate is unable to fulfill the task requirements without frequent prompting from the interlocutor. Often dependent on L1 to achieve successful communication. Little or no communication possible.
0	Insufficient amount of language produced for assessment			

2. IELTS Speaking Rubrics

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