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Enhancing Assessment of Speaking Skills in the Interaction-Based Curriculum of "English for Iraq": A Secondary School Perspective

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Abstract

The Ministry of Education in Iraq has recognized the paramount importance of enhancing learners' speaking abilities in the English language, surpassing other language skills. Consequently, they have initiated an English teaching project across all Iraqi schools, focusing primarily on a communicative approach. Given the inherent challenge of developing speaking skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes, it is imperative for teachers to employ effective teaching and assessment methodologies. Assessing a student's capacity to communicate verbally is crucial, as it reflects their ability to express themselves fluently.
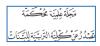
This research aims to delve into teachers' perceptions regarding their role in assessing EFL students in the classroom, along with the methodologies employed to evaluate speaking skills in EFL classes. Specifically, it seeks to address two key questions: What role does the teacher play in the assessment process? And what are the procedures for evaluating speaking skills in EFL classes?

To gather data, interviews were conducted with both teachers and students at a secondary school in Baghdad. A series of questions were posed to elicit their perspectives on the significance of speaking skills within the overall assessment framework.

Key words: Assessment, Speaking Skill, EFL, Secondary School, English for Iraq.

159.Introduction

The term 'Assessment' may be best understood as the general process of attempting to determine what there is to know about student learning with the specific intent of making decisions about such learning (Butler, Y., & Lee 2010; Sadler, 1989). Typically, some sort of judgment is made about whether students have achieved objectives or goals specific to whatever learning task is at hand. For example, although formative assessment is generally understood as the kind of assessment that teachers can conduct while students are learning so that they can provide feedback to support their revision in order to improve their performance, while summative assessment is typically that which we reserve for making decisions about whether students attained a particular aim or objective in some actionable sense, and for reporting that information to others, such as parents or teachers. (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

The idea of interactive teaching and learning in the classroom comes from the concept of constructivism. However, before explaining constructivism, it is important to understand a child's role in the learning process. Piaget (1973) claims that a child is an agent in its development by actively involving in the surrounding environment and affords experience to understand a phenomenon. Another educational theorist, Lev Vygotsky (1978), emphasized the process of interaction and collaboration in the learning process. These theorists' ideas have led to a more human-like and inclusive way of teaching, which includes the idea of interactive teaching which learners can freely dialogue and have interaction with teachers and focus on learning through questioning and working on tasks together with their peers. One such example of this learning is cooperative learning, which is based on social constructivism. Cooperative learning has been explored as an effective strategy for active learning (Johnson et al., 1998).

Many scholars, such as Howard Gardner's influential theory of multiple intelligences (1983), emphasize learners' varied means of understanding and processing information. Gardner's work supports the practice of interactive teaching by imploring teachers to incorporate diverse activities and materials that cater to the workings of the multitude of "smarts". Armstrong (2009) describes how teachers can integrate multiple intelligences in the classroom to enhance the potential for interactive learning to flourish for all students.
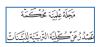
Nowadays, the interactive teaching and learning teaching methods have been more and more widely applied in school due to their effectiveness at promote student's active mental participation for the improvement of their studies. Based on the constructivist theories that proposed by two educational psychologists Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget & Cook (1952) saw the key to effective learning is students' active thinking construction aided by interaction with their peers and actively experiencing with real activities. In addition, Technologies are also employed in promoting interactive teaching and learning, such as the use of interactive whiteboards, PowerPoint presentations, classroom internet and others teaching platforms.

With this constructivist approach to education, students not only take active roles in constructing their own knowledge but they also develop critical thinking, problem-solving and collaboration skills. Classrooms become interactive teaching and learning environments, which motivates students to think critically. Students also learn more

deeply and remember what is learned over the long term, as a result of these interactive teaching and learning environments (Jonassen et al., 1993).

While it is undeniable that traditional teaching method is effective for some particular learners, it cannot be denied that interactive teaching method has shown evident benefits for learners in the classroom. On balance, the take up of interactive teaching method is recommended since it is proven effective to promote student engagement, motivation and knowledge retention (Hattie, 2009; Means et al., 2009). Learning by doing empower students to learn critical thinking, problem solving and communication skills which crucial in today interdependent world (Shulman, 2004). Moreover, the process of learning is student-well centered. It enables learning become owned by students and that would help students make independent thinking. Ultimately, students can develop a better understanding as well as mastering the subject matter (Bransford et al., 2000). Undoubtedly, the incorporation of interactive approach to education would involve employing alternative method like group discussion, hands-on experiences and technological tools such as short videos and slide sharing etc. Such change for a healthy balance between learning traditional and interactive approach is the needs of both teachers and students. Educators are then having an alternative to prepare teaching-learning materials that is more suitable to different learning styles and preferences for. Further, the teaching idea of interaction can also build students' cultural competence and improve their intercultural communication skills. Because students will meet with many foreign counterparts, they may gain a deeper understanding of others' outlook on life and experience that kind of languages and cultures, which help them break through their limited way of thinking. From this perspective, in the English learning process, the teaching idea of interaction can provide good theories and viable practices to strengthen peoples' comprehensive ability of English language.

Traditional teaching and learning methods may not be bad, however in this modern era students can benefit more from interactive teaching compared to the old way of learning. Interactive teaching can help students to be more effective in their learning with high communication skills, problem solving and critical thinking (Princ ,2004; Hmelo-Silver ,2004). Students have more chance to participate the class and improve their knowledge by talk with other students and do things together (Bonwell,1991). Moreover, interactive learning methods encourage a student-centered environment where students got what they need or their level by asked them to do something they

interested in or they like to (Dochy et al., 2003). In the class, students with different learning styles could have lesson in that way, they also have a chance to work with other students build relationship and learn more from each other's (Johnson et al., 2000). Thats why interactive way of teaching is more beneficial and improve student's learning skills, communication and critical thinking. It is also a good way to prepare them those things they will deal with in their grown-up life as they learn to communicate with another students, as they work in a group, as they do something with their own ideas in the class.

Finally, in comparison with traditional teaching in school, the activating teaching method could allow students get more chance to get involve in learning and fully take benefit of the learning progress.

2.literature review

2.1 Assessment strategies

A good strategy of incorporating interactive teaching methods requires a range of approaches that extend assessment way beyond the 'tried and tested' methods. Instead, interactive teaching requires more formative assessment through giving feedback and support for learners to monitor their progress and make necessary changes in order to improve their learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998). There are many opportunities for peer assessment discussions, self-assessment, and completing reflections in a learning journal. When students become their own critical assessors, then they can begin to compare their work with an expert's opinion to identify what they do well, and figure out aspects that they can improve while assuming more responsibility for their own education (Sadler, 1989).

One of the benefits of interactive assessment is that they give formative feedback to learners as they learn their topics. Black and Wiliam (1998) argue that feedback at the right time during learning is a valuable tool for learners to 'progress to the next stage' of their learning. For example, when the teachers use interactive approaches such as peer assessments or teacher-student conferences in their assessments, the teachers also provide formative feedback to learners on what they have done well so far and identify areas for improvement. When the teachers incorporate interactive assessment approaches into their teaching methods, educators gain a better picture of what each student is capable of doing well and can ensure that learners are more engaged in the course material to achieve deeper learning. These approaches reflect constructivist

ideas of Vygotsky (1978), because, 'teachers empower students to participate equally, regardless their introvert or extrovert nature. They create an environment for students to share their learning by demonstrating an interdependent culture of learning.' This approach will help schools to design ongoing assessment methods 'that can help to establish a culture and practice of learning'.

2.2 Types of Assessment

There are several types of assessment methods that can be used in the classroom. Formative assessments are ongoing throughout the teaching and learning process where students receive feedback on their learning and make changes to improve it (Sadler, 1998). There are many opportunities for learners to work in partnership with their peers to assess each other's learning during the teaching cycle. This could include written formats such as question and answers, reviews of responses to questions, or through verbal methods depending on what they are learning and their age appropriateness. The feedback is ongoing so learners can adjust their work as they complete their assessments in class. Summative assessments are administered at the end of a unit or course to reflect back on the learning that took place during that unit or course (Sadler, 1998). These assessments can be in the form of exams, projects, or presentations. These assessments guide teachers in understanding what their students have learned. They can be used for grading purposes and to determine whether learners are ready to move on to a new session or course.

Diagnostic assessments are done at the start of a learning session, such as a unit or course. These types of assessments give teachers information about what learners already know (Wiliam, 2011). Teachers can use this type of assessment to understand learners' knowledge gaps before they start teaching to adjust their methods so that content is targeted to students' knowledge level. Diagnostic assessments can take place through pre-testing, interviews, or other informal conversations. Authentic assessments are done inside and outside of class where learners apply knowledge and skills in real-life contexts in meaningful ways (Wiggins, 1998). This type of assessment involves learners answering problems and tasks in ways that are similar to their future careers and lives in 'real-world' contexts. Authentic assessments can include simulations, projects, or portfolios. Assessment methods are designed in ways to simulate real-world problems that learners will face in their future careers and lives (ibid).

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Oral tests can be used as a type of test for determining a student's proficiency in speaking and using the language (Lynch, 2001). With regard to assessment, oral tests can be utilized to evaluate students' command of the speaking mode, quick-thinking, and vernacular expression in common situations (Brown, 2004). By means of oral tests, educators can evaluate the degrees of students' pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary application and overall oral proficiency, to get a fuller picture of the student's language competence (Luoma, 2004). Such tests are also beneficial to students in sorting out their own ideas in a manageable way of speaking, therefore raising students' confidence for using the target language in spoken forms (McNamara, 1996).

The oral exam holds significant importance because it assesses students' ability to communicate well, to use their language skills out of the classroom and in real-time situations, and to express themselves with fluency (Bachman, 1991). First, the oral examinations are able to provide an authentic sense of students' linguistic achievements/competence in oral examinations such as their speaking and listening skills (Weir, 2005). Through which, the development of their language ability is assessed and practical communication competence is ensured. Second, oral exam contributions to assessment not only measure students' linguistic ability but also their confidence in oral expression, so their linguistic ability will be more complete and they will be able to communicate more effectively (Fulcher, 2003).

2.3 Related Studies

The interconnectedness between these two concepts is clear: interactive techniques provide opportunities for a range of formative and summative assessments and provide options for assessments that are not only authentic to the learning opportunities they create, but are relevant to students' current ideas, interests and dispositions for learning (Johnson et al., 2000). For example, engaging students actively as they grapple with and work through problems allows for ongoing formative assessments every time they raise their hands to ask a question or present an alternative solution (Black & Wiliam, 1998). And engagement in authentic tasks with grade-level peers that involve students in processes such as creating, performing, reflecting and interacting, allows for project-based assessment (Wiggins, 1998). When the teachers use interactive techniques, students are engaged as they investigate problems, solve problems and question problems as well as their own assumptions (Prince, 2004). In other words, interactive teaching is deeply intertwined with interactive assessment. Interactive methods help

students stay engaged, and provide for and encourage teachers to assess levels of understanding in real time. This can include formative assessment, or ongoing feedback including observation of participation or engagement, comprehension or application of concepts through experiments, projects or other similar products of the learning process. Different sorts of assessment are also made possible by interactive education, including discussions and product evaluations.

A 2019 study by Najib Muhammad and Bardakçı clarified the significance of assessment literacy in Iraqi English language instruction. According to the study, educators lacked a thorough awareness of unethical and inappropriate assessment procedures. This highlights the critical need for modifications to teacher preparation programs and teacher-focused professional development training courses. The ability to use contemporary assessments to make decisions about students' learning and give feedback to parents and other stakeholders in the educational process is referred to as assessment literacy. Assessment literacy is an important component of instructional leaders' overall contributions to developing their teachers' pedagogical expertise, with assessment serving as a primary criterion of teacher quality. Given the importance assessments play in guiding educational decisions about learning, there is a pressing need to improve teachers' assessment literacy. By developing a strong assessment competence, instructors will enhance the quality of education by strengthening specific goals and student outcomes based on the objectives of the discipline. As instructors become stronger in their assessment literacy competence, they will also strengthen students' learning objectives and outcomes. Today's learning environment needs more than ever strong, knowledgeable and competent assessment literate teachers who can make learning meaningful for all their students across all disciplines.

A recent research paper conducted by Abdulrahim and Abdullah (2019) is about evaluating the efficacy level of fifth-grade teachers in teaching oral language skills from the curriculum called 'English for Iraq'. In this study, they aim to determine whether there is a statistical difference between the pre-test result and post-test result of listening and speaking skills. The results shed a light on a big difference between listening and speaking tests, which reveal a huge impact that English foreign language (EFL) teachers play within a new educational system to teach using the essential modern methods of communication (English language). This review motivates people to have a look at the

evidences shown in the case of interactive learning methods in teaching proved able to build spoken ability.

A recent study by Abbas and Chragh (2020) investigated the usefulness of assessment tools that are used in high school classrooms, those extracted from the Sunrise textbook. The results of the study are eye-opening: the assessment tools and methods currently used by teachers are characterized by serious deficiencies. Teachers themselves are faced with challenges of understanding and interpretation. And a chilling conclusion from the study is the following: while written assessment makes up the majority of the instruction most of the time, oral activities found in the textbook are remarkably left unattended. Apart from the disconcerting findings pertaining to assessment practices, the next shocking revelation is that the Ministry of Education deliberately over emphasizes assessment tools and grading proportions to be followed according to the feedback they have officially released, without clear explanation on why such guidance on assessment is needed at all, without considering a thorough examination of the implications the intended policy might have on the learning and teaching environment. As such, in addition to other indications of dubious pedagogical practices followed by the current policy and reform, the assessment policy unveiled by the Ministry is as insufficient as it is unfair. This study highlights the importance of a pressing modern issue with regard to how the current children are being evaluated based on assessments given to high school students using Sunrise curriculum textbooks. Some of outcomes included that the evaluations are too difficult and create a sense of confusion on the part of the teachers. Additionally, much of the emphasis in Sunrise curriculum textbooks is on written examinations to the neglect of verbal discussion.

The purpose of this study by Al-Khazaali (2022) is aimed to identify the problems and difficulties of acquisition the skills of speaking among Iraqi high school students. This study is conducted by drawing on data gathered from the learners' interview and observations of lessons provided at the high school class. The main result indicated that speaking skill was not acquired due to the variety of challenges that learners are facing in terms of that skills, such as teachers' qualification, educational policy and evaluation system of schools, in addition to the lack of audio-video aids for learning. The results of this study demonstrated the importance of using the interactive method as it can help to deal with the challenges that learners are experiencing when using those suggested different styles of lessons. Interactive approach can offer learners the chance to practice

their speaking by various activities of communication with the instructors and also realistic communicative tasks, either as monologue or dialogues with other learners or instructor.

According to the interactive teaching manner, the instructor can offer learners with assistive environment and feelings that aim to help learners build their confident in communication by trimming their weaknesses and preparing learners with the skills they need.
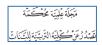
Azeez (2023) carries out a study on 'oral participation problems in English lectures in Cihan University-Erbil, discussing the main reasons why English-language students do not speak or contribute to discussions in classes.' The objectives of this study are; 'to identify the factors associated with students' lack of speech in the classes' and 'to propose solutions for improving speaking skills of the students. Why do Iraqi students do not participate actively in the English lectures. A questionnaire with the students and interviews with lecturers in English language class were designed and carried out. The study confirms the factors of personal, teacher, environmental and linguistic as main reasons of students' lack of participation in the English classes. However, it is clearly indicated that the personal and the teacher influence factor can be main determinants in students engaging in the classroom activities.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

- **Study Objective**: The study aims to explore students' and teachers' experiences with oral examinations in an English language subject within the current curriculum.

- **Research Approach**: Utilizing a qualitative research approach, the study employs interviews with both teachers and students to comprehensively investigate the administration, preparation, and student coping mechanisms related to oral tests.

- **Methodology**: Interviews with teachers and students serve as the primary data collection method. The qualitative technique facilitates a detailed examination of the oral examination process, including its administration and preparation.

- **Key Insights**: Through analysis of interview responses, the study seeks to identify critical deficiencies in oral examination practices, shedding light on students' weaknesses in speaking skills.

3.2. Participants

Participants were chosen from a public girls' secondary school in central Baghdad, Iraq. The session included 20 female eighth-grade students (aged 14-15 years) and two English teachers. Both teachers have a bachelor's degree in English from an Iraqi university and over 20 years of experience teaching English as a foreign language. As for the pupils, have been studying English as a foreign language (EFL) for a number of years, beginning in elementary school.

3.3. Context and Curriculum

The school adopts the national EFL curriculum, utilizing the Ministry of Education's standardized "English for Iraq" textbook series. This method uses communicative language teaching (CLT), with a structured student book, activity book, and teacher book for six grade levels. Students participate in five 45-minute EFL lessons per week. Classes normally include roughly 45 pupils. The incorporation of technology and supplemental materials remains minimal. Lectures, question-and-answer sessions, and occasional pair/group exercises based on textbooks are the primary instructional modalities.

3.4. Data Collection

The data collection approach included interviews with both teachers and students. Prior to the interview, all participants provided informed consent. The importance of confidentiality was emphasized in order to encourage open and truthful responses. The interviews collect information on teachers' beliefs as well as students' experiences with oral exams. All interviews were conducted in English and Arabic, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. This method to data collecting was intended to provide rich insights into the study questions.

Data was gathered through interviews with two English teachers and twenty students from a secondary school in Baghdad, Iraq. Teachers have a wide range of experience (10-25 years). Student interviews focused on eighth-grade pupils.

Teacher interviews explored opinions about the importance of oral exams, how they are prepared for students, their number during the school year, and whether they are based on the topics in the curriculum or are they about general topics as well as students' interaction with this type of exam. The interviews with students examined the extent of their preparation for the oral exam and what problems do they face, and is the oral test as important as the written test.

Interviews were done in English and Arabic, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. This qualitative technique yielded valuable insights into teachers' and students' experiences with oral tests.

3.5. Research Questions

The following questions were used to elicit the data for analysis:

- What is the explanation for the lack of fluency in English among most English teachers?
- What do you think about using the teacher's mother tongue to teach English?
- The majority of students are regarded as having limited ability to speak. What is the reason for this fact?
- What are the students' feelings about learning the language? Do you think the pupils desire to study it?
- What obstacles do English language teachers face?
- Do teachers take part in a lot of training courses when they are employed as English language teachers?
- Do you think there are any problems with the curriculum?
- What resources are utilized to teach the English language?
- Is the teacher free to decide what should and should not be taught?
- How are pupils evaluated? Are there many types of evaluations, and if so, which one do you prefer?

3.6. Results of the Study:

The results of the study might be summarized in the following:

1.Teacher Preparation and Language Instruction:

- Many teachers feel that their training did not adequately prepare them to teach English speaking skills.

- There's a debate among teachers about whether teaching in the mother tongue initially helps or hinders students' language learning.

- Some attribute students' lack of proficiency in speaking English to teachers instructing primarily in their mother tongue, alongside limited session time focused mainly on exam-oriented grammar instruction.

2. Teaching Methods and Student Engagement:

- Teachers emphasize the importance of diverse classroom activities like stories, songs, and audios to make learning enjoyable and increase student motivation.

- Challenges faced by teachers include overcrowded classrooms, insufficient lesson time, and a lack of access to technology and training opportunities.

3. Curriculum and Assessment:

- Teachers generally agree that the curriculum is rich in activities and skills but cite institutional resource limitations and large class sizes as major hindrances.

- Evaluation methods range from formal written tests administered monthly to informal daily conversational questioning, with debates regarding the efficacy of each method.

4. Institutional Support and Autonomy:

- Because there is little institutional support and resources available to them, teachers rely primarily on instructional materials.

- Teachers have little control over curricular choices, and the emphasis is more on getting pupils ready for standardized tests than on their overall language development.

3.7. Discussing the Results:

The results show that there is a serious shortage of training for teachers, especially when it comes to giving them the tools they need to teach English speaking. Divergent pedagogical perspectives are highlighted by the controversy surrounding the use of mother tongue in instruction. Some feel that it should be used initially to help with comprehension, while others think it could be detrimental to language learning. The correlation observed between students' inadequate English language skills and predominantly mother tongue instruction, along with an emphasis on grammar specific to exams, indicates the necessity for modifications in programs for teacher training to tackle these deficiencies. Instructors are aware of how crucial stimulating activities are to motivating and enjoying studying in the classroom. Nevertheless, obstacles like overcrowded classrooms, condensed session lengths, and limited technology availability make it difficult for them to successfully integrate a variety of teaching strategies. These results highlight the necessity of institutional assistance in addressing resource constraints and developing supportive learning environments that encourage participation and engagement from students.

Large class sizes and institutional resource limitations are two challenges that teachers must overcome in spite of the curriculum's seeming richness in fostering language proficiency. The variety in assessment techniques draws attention to the continuous discussions over the relative merits of formal written examinations and casual oral inquiry in evaluating student learning. This indicates that in order to support a variety of learning styles and guarantee thorough skill development, assessment procedures may need to be more flexible. Due to institutional resource constraints, there is a significant reliance on curriculum materials, which betrays a lack of support for teachers in providing high-quality education. Restrictions on curricular autonomy

combined with an emphasis on exam preparation rather than comprehensive language development point to structural issues in the educational system. In order to address these problems, educators, legislators, and educational institutions must work together to prioritize teacher preparation, supply sufficient resources, and encourage curriculum creation autonomy in order to support comprehensive language learning results.

4. Conclusion

The research employed a methodology designed to comprehensively explore the encounters of educators and learners with oral assessments in an English language course under the current curriculum. Interviews with students from a public secondary school for girls in central Baghdad, Iraq, provided us with important new information about the planning, administration, and coping strategies associated with oral examinations.

The findings showed that there were substantial training gaps for teachers, especially when it came to teaching English speaking abilities. The argument over whether or not to teach in one's native tongue highlighted different pedagogical strategies that affect language learning. In addition, the association between students' low levels of English competence and instruction mainly in their home tongue, along with an emphasis on grammar specific to exams, suggests that teacher preparation programs require revision. Teachers face obstacles such institutional resource limitations and huge class sizes, even if the curriculum is thought to be rich in developing language skills. The variety of assessment techniques brought to light current debates over the relative merits of unstructured oral inquiry vs rigorous written examinations for gauging student learning. This highlights the need for adaptable assessment procedures in order to accommodate a range of learning preferences and guarantee comprehensive skill development.

The study also stressed the need for institutional support in order to overcome resource constraints and create stimulating learning environments that promote student engagement. To support complete language learning outcomes, this entails allocating sufficient resources, encouraging autonomy in curriculum development, and placing a high priority on teacher preparation.

All things considered, this study's issues require cooperation between educational institutions, legislators, and teachers. We can get closer to a more efficient and inclusive educational system that promotes holistic language development and

gives teachers and students more authority by giving teacher training top priority, providing sufficient funding, and allowing autonomy in curriculum development.
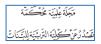
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