Developing Speaking Skills Assessment at University Level: Insights from Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

The present study aims at investigating and developing the assessment of oral /speaking skills by the university teachers who teach the conversation at Al Noor University as well as three colleges in the University of Mosul (College of Education for Humanities, College of Arts, College of Basic Education) . The study is conducted in the academic year 2024-2025. To achieve the purpose of this study, a questionnaire is utilized to collect data from the university teachers. Two types of questionnaires are used: the structured and semi-structured. Then, the given answers are analyzed. The sample of the study is (80) EFL university teachers who are teaching conversation . The focus of the current research is on the ways used by the teachers when assessing the speaking skills. Moreover, the study aims to identify ways to enhance assessments of this type, as speaking skills are considered receptive skills. In the light of the findings, the researcher concluded that EFL teachers do not assess students' speaking accurately and logically as they neglect some important aspects. The findings show that the Iraqi university teachers should reinforce the teaching approaches to effectively assess and develop receptive skills .

تطوير تقييم مهارات التحدث في المستوى الجامعي : رؤى من منظور المدرسين

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الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى تقصي وتطوير مهارات التقييم الخاصة بمهارات التحدث باللغة الانكليزية في المستوى الجامعي من قبل اساتذة الجامعة. شملت هذه الدراسة ثلاث كليات من جامعة الموصل /اقسام اللغة الانكليزية وهي كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية و كلية التربية الاساسية وكلية الاداب بالاضافة الى جامعة النوروقد تمت الدراسة في السنة الاكاديمية 2024–2025 تم استخدام الاستبانة لجمع البيانات من الاساتذة المختصين بتدريس مادة المحادثة البالغ عددهم 80. تم تحليل البيانات احصائيا .هدفت هذه الدراسة الى معرفة الطرق المستخدمة من قبل اساتذة الجامعة لتقييم مهارات التحدث لطلبة الجامعة اضافة الى تقديم مقترحات لتطوير مهارات التقييم المعتمدة من قبل اساتذة الجامعة. نتائج الدراسة اثبتت ان اساتذة الجامعة لايتبعون التقييم المنطقي لمهارات التحدث وان هناك جوانب مهمة في تقييم اداء الطلبة قد تم اهمالها اثناء التحدث باللغة الانكليزية بالاضافة الى ذلك الاساتذة المختصين بتدريس مادة المحادثة يتوجب عليهم التاكيد على استخدام اساليب تدريس حديثة لتطوير مهارات التحدث وتعزيزها.

1-Introduction

Language is a tool used to transfer ideas and thoughts as well as meanings. Communication takes place when the opinions and psychological states of the parties involved are fully understood. Oral skills are an essential component in the teaching process. It is crucial because it is viewed as one of the critical skills, such as reading, writing, and listening. In addition to this skill, assessing oral skills requires a great interest in teaching the English language. Accordingly, more attention should be given to this portion of language communication; i.e., speaking proficiency skill. Teaching and assessing oral skills at universities is not an easy job. Channel and Swain (1980) claim that oral performance has been conserved as the fundamental goal of language teaching, and its suitable growth has developed the importance of attention of both teachers and learners.

2-Statement of the Problem

Teaching language entails teaching all its components; that's to say reading, writing ,speaking and listening. Each component is the corner stone in the language. Traditional forms of assessments focus on writing. Recently, mastering writing as a skill does not mean mastering the language. The focus shifts to be on speaking to ensure the mastery of oral aspects of the language. Assessing speaking is one of the important goals of education in Iraq besides other skills. Thus, in order to achieve effective communication, students should speak English language fluently and interact effectively.

Although   there is an unavoidable criticism of existing methods, techniques or resources, speaking is commonly perceived as the most fundamental skill to acquire. However, it is a generally known fact that achieving aptitude in foreign language speaking inside classroom environments is not an easy task. Even advanced learners regularly finish a given course with the belief that they are not sufficiently equipped for speaking outside the classroom. This difficulty basically is the consequence   of inadequate frequency of speaking opportunities in the classroom in contrast to the plenty of regular varieties and categories of oral communication. Selecting and preparing then assessing speaking activities is a hard decision. English teachers often face difficulties in terms of how they plan to assess. Teachers should consider the pivotal role speaking assessment can play. They have to categorize the learners' need, determine their progress then plan to measure the students' outcomes.

In the field of language teaching, assessment is mandatory. It entails observing the strengths and weaknesses of the learners' language production. Teaching oral /speaking skills is problematic. It is challenging because speaking abilities are difficult to assess. To assess speaking skills means to observe the learners' performance on previously given tasks. There should be a specific procedure to elicit the oral performance. The assessment should be well-selected. University students have lectures in their regular courses, where conversation is a vital component of the curriculum in English Departments in many colleges (College of Education for Pure Sciences, College of Basic Education, College of Arts). The syllabi of the first and second years of these colleges include conversation. The goal of the lecturers is to enable the EFL learners of the above colleges to speak, discuss, and use the English language correctly and fluently. Unfortunately, lectures lack the proper procedure to assess speaking skills. There is no specific procedure to be adopted by lecturers to evaluate the EFL performance. The task is not easy in the sense that assessing it entails systematically assessing many speech features.

3-Research Questions

1-What are the criteria utilized by EFL teachers when assessing speaking skills in the classrooms?

2-What are the teachers' perspectives on improving the assessment of speaking skills?

4-The Objectives of the Study

This study attempts to display the importance of oral skills in the conversation lectures. Another critical issue of this study is to show and investigate the methods used by teachers to assess speaking skills through the lectures. Moreover, the study's primary objective is to develop a comprehensive assessment tool to evaluate student performance concerning their oral skills.

5-The Significance of the Study

The importance of this study lies in its attempts to display the importance of oral skills in the conversation lectures. Another critical issue of this study is to show and investigate the methods used by teachers to assess speaking skills through the lectures.

Moreover, the study's primary objective is to develop a comprehensive assessment tool to evaluate student performance concerning their oral skills.

6-The Importance of the Notion Assessment

Many scholars in the literature define this term. For Brindley (2001), the term is used to describe ways of gathering information from students to assess their achievement in relation to a specified academic topic. According to Brown (2000), the term "assessment" is viewed as an ongoing process that covers a wider area whenever the student is asked and the response is evaluated by the teacher. Teaching, learning and assessment are interconnected aspects in the educational field. Thus, assessment is the viewed as the integral part of this triangle ; it is seen as a leading component in the sense that it influences the other two components .A key concept of understanding how well the students learnt and progressed in linguistic skills is through effective and regular assessment. The term "Assessment" carries special importance in teaching as well as learning fields. Sofa & Sulistyo (2017) point out that there are three tasks of assessment; assessment of learning, for learning, and as learning.   For teachers assessment means the progress or failure of the students within specific period of study. Concerning the students, assessment is the clue that they know how they grasp the given materials and how much they learnt . Many scholars in the literature define this term according to their interest. Most of the researchers define it as the systematic way which gives the required information to reach to the right decisions (Amua-Sekyi, E.T.2016) For Brindley (2001), the term is used to describe ways of gathering information from students to assess their achievement in relation to a specified academic topic. According to Brown (2000), the term "assessment" is viewed as an continuing process that covers a wider area whenever the student is asked and the response is evaluated by the teacher. Mainly, assessment is of two types ;formative and summative .The former is a type of feedback of an ongoing process to boost learning and teaching. The latter, is originated to know student achievement and confirms accountability within the education organization.

7-Speaking is Difficult to Define

For teachers and lecturers whether they are in schools or universities, designing and assessing a test for speaking is challenging. On the other hand, such type of assessment or topics are under –developed skills (Madsen, 1983). The elusive nature of the speak makes it hard to define, administer , prepare and assess.Experts or educators are in

disagreement on the nature of assessing this skill. Teachers nowadays prepare tests to examine students considering knowledge of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar as the main ingredients of the test as well as the evaluation. In fact there are many linguistic element concerning speaking skills are very important but they are neglected by teachers. Unfortunately speech features such as the tone of the speaker; expressing happiness /sadness/astonishment / appropriateness of the expressions/ negotiation of meaning in addition to the reasoning of the ability because speech is a joint of co-construction. Teacher should focus on other forms when assessing speaking abilities. The emphasis should shift to many other linguistic features such as the contextual variables , politeness expressions forms of speech act theory and the like. if all these ingredients found concerns of assessments to this skill is added in a valid and reliable manner.

8-Types of Academic Speaking

Teachers and lecturers are responsible to equip EFL learners with the academic skills. The teaching process comprises four main skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking.Two of these skills are productive, such as speaking and writing. The other skills are receptive skills: listening and reading. In the academic setting, the focus is on teaching academic information. Academic topics differ from everyday ones. Consequently, teaching academic speaking is the goal of the education program. (Brown, 2004) argue that to achieve good speaking skills in academic settings, the student should be able to recognize the difference between micro and macro skills of speaking abilities. **Micro** abilities involve knowledge of producing chunks of linguistic components, and how to utter the words using the stress, rhythm, and intonation. It also means manipulating utterances using the pragmatic aspect of language, in addition to using the correct grammatical classes (verbs, nouns, etc.). **Macro** use of speaking skills encompasses knowledge of the language's discourse, which is essentially the style of speaking, including linking events, using gestures and body language, and employing effective and meaningful strategies. Besides, there is another classification made by Brown , H.D.& Abeywickrama, B (2010). They argue that speaking types differ in relation to the tester. In other words speaking types are classified into five types as the following:

1-Imitative; the testers here copy the word or the phrase .No special treatment to the grammatical component but the focus here on pronunciation and to achieve the information only.

2-Intensive: The emphasis here not on the phonological structure but on understanding the meaning of the speech to respond to a limited interaction. Read aloud task, translation of limited discourse, picture-cued ,etc. are some examples of speaking assessment.

3-Responsive:the speaker is motivated to speak promptly. The speaker can make short commands or respond to some comments . Giving direction and paraphrasing are instances of this type of assessment.

4-Interactive: unlike the above mentioned types, the sentences   become more complicated and the phrases are extended to longer stretches. Some situation demands more than two speakers . Conversations , role play as well as interviews are major instances of this type.

5-Extensive: It can be said that this is the main target of speaking assessment. 2L are required to speak the target language . In a nut shell, the goal is to assess the communicative competence. Games and discussions are ways to express ideas and thoughts.

9- Functions of Speaking

To achieve effective class interactions, there must be a smooth transaction and information about the function of the linguistic elements .Knowledge of speech function has immense value in developing speech production. Spoken language is a means to express ideas and share thoughts . Accordingly, the speech has distinguished features. Spoken language has the following functions:

1-Informative Function; it is used to reveal ideas about real life.
2-Emotive Function: is used to express emotions by using ejections.
3-Conative Function used directly to the addressee in the form of vocative.
4-Phatic Function ,used to preserve   social relations among speakers.
5-Poetic Function it is used by poets by implementing imaginary language.
6- Heuristic Function used to express past events and for reasoning(Das, 2023).
 The Role of teacher in Teaching Speaking

The pedagogical role of teaching is to master the educational skills effectively. Speaking is one of the four skills needs to be practiced well. Due to the fact that this skill is difficult to acquire by the 2L on their own, the task will be on the teachers to

help students master it. Needs and interests of the students should be considered . Teachers should recognize the students' cognitive and social from theoretical thoughts as well as observation. Through observation teachers can achieve deep understanding about linguistic background knowledge of the students. Teachers can interfere to support whenever it is possible to smooth the conversations inside the class. Teachers can provide the required linguistic input ,plan the spoken activities and prepare the suitable feedback (Christine C.M. Goh & Anne Burns 2012) . It is a difficult task on the teachers to control conversations of spoken activities in order to get the spoken message across. The essential job of teachers is to structure 2L learning experiences to gain the development of the 2L speaking skills. All these can be achieved when teachers train students to speak the language in an accurate way . Teachers can enhance speaking abilities through providing contextualized authentic practices and all these must be followed by a reliable assessment to show the progress of the students.

10-Features of Speaking Assessment

During and after any program or course of teaching assessment is crucial. Students' outcomes should be taken into consideration when assessing speaking. The students' responses are indicators about their level of proficiency. Generally, for teacher assessing this activity is challenging. In spite of the fact that speaking as one of the receptive skill in the teaching syllabi, yet it is difficult to assess. Measuring speaking is difficult in terms of its preparation and administration .

The challenge lies in the preparing the material to be tested and assessed. The important aspects to be measured and are they assessed fairly ? this is the hardest task on English teachers. Many facets should be ensured to assess correctly.

The next step is grading. Brown (2004) states that pronunciation, focusing on grammar, establishing fluency ,having a good amount of vocabularies as well as comprehending the oral activity well.

11-Criteria for Assessing Speaking

Speaking in academic settings is regarded as a complex ability to practice. According to (Harmer,2007), this skill is essentially grounded on the five main components, which are:

A- Comprehension: This component is pivotal, as it ensures that whenever a spoken message is conveyed, the information is received and understood.

B- Grammar: It is crucial to build the structure of the speech. To ensure the messages are delivered correctly, they should be organized and grammatically correct. Although arranging words, phrases, and sentences is essential, students often struggle to do so while speaking correctly.

C- Vocabulary: learning vocabulary items is challenging. The core of any language is vocabulary items. Mastering this element is essential, whether in writing or in speaking. Having sufficient vocabulary storage in the source language is a good indicator of recall in speaking.

D- Pronunciation refers to the correct pronunciation of words to gain a proper understanding. This component, which accomplishes the previously mentioned ones, is important. This aspect of speaking is crucial because it plays a major role in achieving successful comprehension. Pronunciation helps EFL learners to be understood.

E- Fluency: it means the ability to send the message smoothly whether it is written or spoken. Moreover, fluency entails the ability to clarify the speak and make it expressive and help the communication takes place in learning process.

12-Related studies

Several studies have been presented in the literature about the oral component and its assessment. Najib Muhammad and Bardakçı surveyed in 2019. It is found that educators lacked a systematic awareness of inappropriate assessment

procedures. This indicates the serious need for adjustments to teacher training

programs as well as teacher-focused specialized development training courses.

Another study was carried out by Azeez (2023). Their study was 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 focus of the study was on exploring the factors contributing to the students' low performance and the solutions to such cases. A

questionnaire and interviews were used to collect data for the study, which achieved its goals. The study reveals that personal, linguistic, and environmental factors were the main factors that hinder the learning process.

13-Population and Sampling

The research population refers to all individuals, objects, or people who are the subject of the research problem (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2021). The population of the present research comprises all male and female English language teachers at the English Departments in the College of Education for Humanities, College of Basic Education, College of Arts in the University of Mosul, as well as Al-Noor University College totaling (142).

Leavy (2017) refers to the sample as the number of individual cases (person, group, or nonliving item in which the researcher is interested) that ultimately draw and from which/ you generate data. The researcher selects randomly a sample of 80 male and female English language teachers to represent the population. The study instrument and collecting data took place online.

14-Instrument

To achieve the aim of the study and answering its questions, a questionnaire has been set by the researcher to collect data. The questionnaire has been set according to the standard model of assessing speaking. The questionnaire presented to a number of jurors and experts in linguistics and language teaching to verify its validity and practicality and it was accepted by them all. It includes 6 basic items with two alternatives for responding. It comprises all the aspects of assessing speaking. The questionnaire has been administered to the sample of the study and data has been collected . The collected data analysed statistically using percentage formula.

15-Findings

In light of the study questions, the collected data has been analysed and verified using the percentage formula. The first question concerned the criteria utilized by EFL teachers when assessing speaking skills in the classrooms. The collected data shows in the table bellow:

Table 0 EFL College Teachers Responses on the Questionnaire

No.	Items	Yes	No
1	**Fluency:** Ability to speak smoothly and continuously without excessive hesitation. It focuses on speech rate, flow of ideas, and minimal long pauses.	62 %77.5	18 %22.5
2	**Pronunciation:** Clarity and correctness of word pronunciation, including stress, intonation, and articulation.	74 %92.5	6 %7.5
3	**Accuracy:** Correct uses of grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure during speaking. It focuses on proper verb tenses, sentence formation, and minimal grammar errors.	67 %83.75	13 %16.25
4	**Coherence:** It refers to the logical flow and clarity of ideas in a spoken presentation, ensuring that each point is connected and contributes to the overall message. Coherence involves: Logical Organization of Ideas, Connecting Ideas, and Providing Sufficient Detail and Explanation.	42 %52.5	38 %47.5
5	**Vocabulary:** It refers to the words one actively uses and understands when speaking. It encompasses both the words one can readily recall and use in conversation (active vocabulary) and the words	22	58

	one recognizes and understands when heard or read (passive vocabulary). A strong speaking vocabulary is essential for clear, effective, and confident communication.	%27.5	%72.5
6	**Interaction Skill:** It refers to the abilities needed to communicate and engage with others in spoken conversations effectively. These skills encompass both verbal and non-verbal communication, including active listening, asking questions, providing feedback, and adapting your communication style to different situations and individuals.	18 %22.5	62 %77.5

It is clear that EFL teachers focus on assessing pronunciation at first as it scored %92.5. It is the essential aspect in speaking (from teachers' perspectives), so they focus on assessing pronunciation at first when assessing students' speaking. Students should use clarity and correctness of word pronunciation, including stress, intonation, and articulation. Then, EFL teachers focus on correct uses of grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure during speaking. They focuses on using proper verb tenses, sentence formation, and minimal grammar errors. So accuracy comes in the second step in assessing students' speaking scoring %83.75. In the third step, fluency; ability to speak smoothly and continuously without excessive hesitation, scoring %77.5. It focuses on speech rate, flow of ideas, and minimal long pauses. It is clear from the Table above that EFL teachers pay neautiral attention on coherence. They do not care for the logical flow and clarity of ideas in a spoken presentation, ensuring that each point is connected and contributes to the overall message. Although, it is clear that EFL teachers do not care for using vocabulary and interaction skills as those items scored low value %27.5, %22.5 respectively.

Accordingly, we can say that the criteria set by EFL college teachers to assess students' speaking includes pronunciation, accuracy, fluency, and coherence in gradation. This can be attributed to the fact that most of the teachers who teach conversation are specialized in phonetics and phonology. Accordingly, they focus on pronunciation and fluency as an essential aspects in speaking. They neglect the importance of words one actively uses and understands when speaking. They also do not pay much attention to the abilities needed to communicate and engage with others in spoken conversations effectively.

The second question of the study concerned teachers' perspectives on improving the assessment of speaking skills. EFL teachers' responses have been analysed qualitatively and categorized as follows:

1. teachers should make their students able to interact and engage in conversations of different topics and fields.

2. Teachers should utilize more speaking tests, fun activities, and better ways to help shy students talk.

3. Teachers should adopt more authentic assessment methods, use clear and fair rubrics, increase speaking opportunities in class, integrate technology, and focus on continuous assessment.

4. Applying continuous assessment and increasing students' confidence of themselves.

5. using more practical activities like presentations, role-plays, and group discussions, creating a relaxed classroom environment to help students speak more confidently.

16-Conclusion

In the Light of the findings listed above, the researcher concluded that EFL teachers do not assess students' speaking accurately and logically as they neglect some important aspects. To enhance the assessment of speaking skills, many believe that the focus should shift from merely evaluating grammatical usage to assessing actual language use in real communicative contexts. This does not imply ignoring accuracy, but rather prioritizing fluency in the initial stages of learning and gradually incorporating both fluency and accuracy in later evaluations. Instructors can adopt a progressive approach by starting with simple oral questions and increasing the difficulty gradually to challenge students and promote oral development. Furthermore, pronunciation should be addressed from the very beginning, as early neglect of pronunciation may lead to persistent errors that can hinder communication and alter meaning, especially when learners confuse words with similar sounds.

EFL teachers can create supportive environment to improve assessing oral skills for college students by providing mimic real life and authentic context such as fruitful discussion within classroom. Regular assessment and ongoing feedback can improve the students' oral skills continuously. Encouraging peer assessment will foster a sense of community and allow learning from different perspectives. Adopt clear, standardized assessment criteria, contextualize oral tasks, shift from Product-Oriented to Process-Oriented Assessment .Also, increase frequency of speaking practice Teachers should make use of technology in assessment. Teachers are in need to effective training in oral assessment techniques. In order to enhance teaching oral skills teachers should rely on peer and self-assessment, and reduce focus on grammar-only evaluation, all these may foster assessing speaking.

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