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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### ISSUES IN TESTING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE SPEAKING SKILLS: A CASE OF SAUDI SCHOOLS

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#### ABSTRACT

Speaking is one of the most essential skills of language usage. In general, teaching and testing speaking ability is both difficult and time consuming. This paper will concentrate on the different methods used to test speaking ability. It starts by presenting a brief summary of the methods of testing speaking skills used in Saudi schools. It then discusses several of the problems and difficulties associated with testing speaking skills and describes some of the practical methods used. For example, it explains how computers can be used when testing speaking ability. The purpose of this research is to help teachers to both design adequate speaking tests and improve their testing methods.

## INTRODUCTION

There are four main aspects to consider when testing a learner's speaking ability in a second language: vocabulary, grammar, semantics and phonology. Evaluating the ability of a language learner with little language knowledge involves understanding their competency from several perspectives including the effectiveness of their communication, their knowledge of appropriate language usage and understanding of the language's linguistic structure, in a variety of social contexts (Silverman, Noa, and Russel, 1977). Conventional evaluation of a student's language skills has focused on the student's knowledge of the language. More recently, the focus has changed towards the ability of the learner to use and communicate effectively with the language. This paper examines the ways communicative skills can be taught and the problems associated with their measurement with a particular focus on spoken language skills. It will also discuss the importance given to testing of these skills in Saudi Arabia.

### Difficulties in Testing Speaking Skills

English language teachers are aware that they are responsible for designing and administering English speaking tests and that testing speaking skills is not easy. Designing a test to evaluate speaking entails a significant amount of time and effort.

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There are many difficulties related to testing a learner's speaking ability. In some cases, people can produce sounds correctly, but they may be unable to communicate with each other appropriately or successfully. In other cases, people can make different types of errors in phonology and syntax, but can still communicate effectively. Thus success in communication depends on both the listener and the speaker. It is difficult to separate speaking skills from listening skills as they are interdependent. When testing speaking, a tape recorder is normally used to help examiners refer back to the learner's answers and allows them to evaluate the student's skills from the oral record at a later time. This is necessary because the examiner is under great pressure during the test and needs to make immediate subjective judgments throughout (Heaton; 1988). According to Hughes, "the basic problem in testing oral ability is essentially the same as for testing writing. We want to set tasks that form a representative sample of the population of oral tasks that we expect candidates to be able to perform. The tasks should elicit behavior which truly represents the candidate's ability and which can be scored validly and reliably". In addition, Heaton suggests that testing speaking skills of a large number of students at the same time can prove difficult. Testing large numbers of students thus needs a large amount of time.

### Methods used to test EFL speaking

There are many important issues related to testing speaking skills. The following are the most important factors that can improve the testing of speaking ability. This list can be used by teachers when designing tests.

### Suggestions to encourage students to speak

Students may be reluctant to speak because they are afraid of making mistakes and failing to find suitable words to express themselves. The teacher should try to encourage them to speak using a variety of methods and by creating a comfortable speaking environment. Students are more likely to speak actively, willingly and naturally if there are in a suitable environment. Speaking, as one of the four main language skills, can be mastered only through practice. There are many important factors that affect a person's speaking including the environment, encouragement, and the methods that are used to help them practice (Baobin Zhao, 1998).

### What to test with regards speaking skills

When testing speaking ability, attention should be given to the following:

- Fluency:
  - Speed and Natural Flow
  - Elimination of Translation
  - Omission of Filler Words
- Accuracy (Grammar):
  - Verbs
  - Noun Phrases
  - Sentence Structure
  - Individual Grammar Problems
  - Functional Phrases
- Pronunciation:
  - Individual Sounds
  - Stress and Intonation
  - Pausing and Phrasing
  - Reductions
- Task completion
- Vocabulary:
  - Word Choice
  - Idioms and Phrasal Verbs
- Appropriateness
- Comprehension
- Communicative competence
- Content
- Substance and Details
- Topic Elaboration
- Organization

### Types of speaking tests

The following are types of test formats for evaluating speaking skills:

- Discussing pictures or other graphic aids
- Answering questions
- Describing
- Telling a story
- Commenting
- Comparing
- Discussing
- Giving instructions
- Problem solving
- Role playing
- Debating
- Situation/response

- Short talk
- Formal presentation
- Free talk
- Debating
- Storytelling
- Short play
- Speaking and acting
- Speaking and drawing
- Watching and speaking
- Acting as an interpreter
- Games

### Assessment

The final assessment of a learner's speaking skills can be either global or itemized. Global assessment is applied with or without instructions or scales whereas itemized assessment gives marks for defined aspects. There are many ways to maintain Assessment Standards. For example, there should be at least two assessors for each learner tested. In addition, descriptive criteria and examples of performance at different levels should be well defined (Fulcher, 2003).

### Using Computers to Test Speaking

Testing speaking without computers needs more time and effort from the teacher. Computer testing software can help a teacher to construct computerized speaking tests, to administer the tests and to assess the students' responses. There are many benefits of using computers for test speaking. The quality of the voice recordings obtained using digital sound systems through a computer is better than the quality of tape recordings. Another advantage computerized oral testing has over traditional interview assessments is that all students examined receive the same questions in the same way. In addition, all students have the same length of time to respond to individual questions (Larson: 2000). According to Larson (2000), staff members from the Humanities Research Center at BYU have been developing Oral Testing Software (OTS) that facilitates computerized oral testing. There are three main parts to the OTS as follows:

#### One: The preparation module

In the preparation module, teachers can specify which test items they wish to test and what type of prompt technique they wish to employ for each item. This stage also allows the teacher to set the length of time to be allowed for students to respond to a given question.

#### Two: The administration module

The administration module administers the test to each student individually. During the test, examinees do not have to perform any tasks other than speaking into their microphone. The software automatically displays or plays all question prompts e.g. audio, video, graphics, etc.

#### Three: Results assessment module

The results assessment module provides teachers access to students' responses, which are included in a results file compiled separately for each student. There are many other computer programs available that are designed to help test

speaking skills including the Winthrop College Model; the Student Oral Assessment Redefined (SOAR); the Classroom Oral Interview Procedure (RSCVP); the Keene State College Model; the Boylan's Monologues, Conversational Cards and Interviews Model; the University of Illinois Conversation Cards and Interviews Model; and the Brigham Young University FLATS Model.

### Testing EFL Speaking in Saudi Schools

It is obvious that speaking is one of the most difficult language skills to learn. Many students can read, write and listen well, however their speaking abilities are weak. As a result, speaking is a difficult skill to test. The other language skills such as reading, writing and even listening are much more easily tested. Testing speaking is one of the major challenges for teachers of English in Saudi Arabia. In the past, there was one oral test at the end of each semester. This oral test was administered and evaluated by the English language teachers. It focused on speaking and listening skills and the speaking portion was worth only five marks towards the total final evaluation mark for the student. Since 1998, there has been no English speaking test in Saudi schools and the Ministry of Education has neglected to test speaking skills. During the course of this research, I have interviewed many English language teachers and I have asked them about their testing of speaking ability. Some of these teachers feel there should be English speaking tests to encourage students to improve their speaking ability and some believe that it is the difficulties with testing speaking which have led to the current lack of testing. Many of the teachers felt that it would be beneficial to once again include speaking tests in Saudi schools. There is clearly a need to test English speaking skills as testing will encourage the development of speaking skills. Teachers should have the ability to accurately test speaking and the Ministry of Education should work to improve the efficacy of this testing.

### Conclusion

It is obvious that evaluating a learner's speaking ability is not easy. The difficulty of testing speaking ability is exacerbated by the fact that speaking in a second language is difficult in itself.

In this paper, I have attempted to provide advice for teachers and speaking test designers. As noted above, using computers to test speaking is one of the best ways to save teaching time and effort and computers can give precise grades based on scoring and assessment. In the past, advice regarding methods of evaluating learners' speaking skills have considered the most effective types of testing and methods of scoring answers. There has also been some discussion of the most efficient ways of testing large classes of students. However, to date, there has been no agreement with regards the most appropriate measure of students' overall language ability based on either research or best practice in the field of second language teaching. It is recommended that the Ministry of Education re-introduce speaking tests in Saudi schools. It is not sufficient to depend on the results of reading and writing tests for evaluating students' communicative competence. As there are no speaking tests in Saudi schools, Saudi students are generally weak at speaking in English and this is an area which requires improvement.

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