

TOWARDS OBJECTIVITY IN THE EVALUATION OF THE ENGLISH ORAL PRODUCTION OF THE ALGERIAN LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the pedagogical principles of connecting the way the oral skill in English language is taught with the way it is evaluated. The researcher intended to suggest a possible way of providing solutions to the problem of English oral testing for students in the Preparatory School of Economics, Commerce and Management. For such purposes consideration of the students' needs, the programme, the evaluation test, and the marking system are taken into consideration. This article suggests a new way of testing students' oral performance which the researcher believes that the proposed idea of group testing on a marking sheet under the four categories: pronunciation, lexis, grammatical structures, and use can usefully and easily be implemented to give reliable and valid results to the testing of the speaking skill. In addition to this the researcher focuses on the importance for a need for guidance to the teachers in order to make English teaching, learning and testing truly communicative in nature.

KEYWORDS: Speaking Skill, Teaching and Evaluation, Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

With the global expansion of English as an international language the ability in spoken English has become more important than previously. However, the general lack of the Algerian learners in English oral ability has revealed that they are in great need of guidance on how to improve this ability. EFL researchers may ask themselves the reasons why Algerian students may not develop the speaking skill even after several years of the study of this language and why the evaluation of this ability is limited in the classrooms.

Evaluating the speaking skill in English classes remains an elusive challenge for many teachers because of the complexity of the speaking skill itself. In many classes, the evaluation of the speaking skill; if done at all; is sometimes reduced to simple informal evaluation interviews. Evaluation as it is used in the classroom involved gathering information about learners' performance in order to ascertain what they have learned. The speaking skill is probably the most difficult skill to evaluate. It involves a combination of skills. Thus, a clear need for research on beliefs and practices regarding the teaching, learning and evaluation of speaking in English classrooms has emerged these last years. And, since the issues are so deeply embedded in classroom practices, it would seem imperative to engage the teachers and learners in the research effort.

This research is concerned with the description of the evaluation process in addition to the different variables and characteristics of the learning situation of a particular population selected for this study. In other words, the present research attempts to give a systematic description of the educational context, with a close reference to the speaking skill evaluation specifically to first-year students at the preparatory school of economics in Tlemcen. This research on the evaluation of the speaking skill at the university level is stimulated by the absence of previous research at this level and on

account of its importance in foreign languages, and for the fact that it is the skill the most neglected by our learners and teachers alike.

AIMS AND PROCEDURES

Evaluating learners' speaking proficiency has become one of the most important issues in language evaluation since the role of speaking ability has become more central in language teaching with the educational reform introduced in our curricula since 2003 and on which the emphasis is on communication abilities of the learners. It is worth noting that learners' evaluation can be used to improve teaching and help students take control of their own learning. That is more likely to be accomplished when evaluation is authentic and tied to the teaching goals of the curricula. However, there are many difficulties involved in the construction and administration of any speaking examinations. There is a great discrepancy between the predominance of the communicative approach to language teaching and the accurate evaluations of students' communication abilities.

The need for teachers of English to be equipped with some evaluation tools to evaluate students' speaking skill is becoming more and more important. The speaking skill in itself has become a vital part of language teaching approaches used in all the Algerian levels of education; teachers are required to perform learners' speaking abilities. Algerian teachers, find it difficult to evaluate learners' speaking proficiency in a way which reflects authentic interaction. Thus, there is a contradiction between their approach to language teaching and their evaluating methods which do not reflect authentic speaking interaction.

There seems no prominent research on speaking evaluation from the point of view of the teachers. In particular, the perceptions of Algerian teachers in conducting speaking evaluation remain largely unexplored. Yet, teachers' perceptions of the feasibility of a speaking evaluation in a particular context are crucial in determining the ultimate success or failure of that evaluation. This study focuses on the congruence between the teaching approach and the evaluation methods used in the Algerian context as well as on the objectivity in the evaluation of the oral production or the speaking skill.

Students and Their Needs

Our concern in this research is with first year students in the Preparatory School of Economics, commerce and management in Tlemcen, and to whom the English module is a minor though important part of their studies. Those students have all studied English at the middle and secondary school for seven years. We may mention at this point that the focus in school was more on the written language than on the oral one, which give the teachers at the university level the task of developing their passive knowledge of the English language into an active one.

All the students in the preparatory school are in need of a practical grasp of the English language which they are going to use it in their future jobs and career. Indeed, we may notice the requirement in some job advertisements is on the ability to communicate in English not only in writing, but orally as well. Thus, as being students of economics, commerce and management they need to know the English spoken in formal international situations as well as the social aspect related to it.

COMPREHENSION AND PRODUCTION OF THE ORAL EXPRESSION COURSES

In this part the researcher will give a brief description on a suggested way the courses of the comprehension and

production of the oral expression have been given for the sake of this research. The first year students at the preparatory school of economics, commerce and management have been divided into groups of no more than 12 students. As a first step, the course is controlled by the teacher in order to help the students to accustom themselves to a total English language situation in order to develop their abilities to speak the language freely and without switching to their mother tongue. The teachers teach some aspects of the language that can be used in everyday language situations so that by the end of the semester they are able to hold a discussion by themselves.

As a second step of these comprehension and production of the oral production courses, the teacher will no more control the group discussions. At the second semester the course will be controlled by the students themselves and the role of the teacher at this stage is to guide and help his/ her students with vocabulary to ensure fluency and movement in the discussions hold by the group. The students at this stage are encouraged to choose their own topics though they should be on specialized topics such as commerce, economics, business, and management. Concerning the evaluation of the oral production, the students are evaluated at the end of their first year as we can say that at this point they will have had enough experience and time to acclimatize themselves using the foreign language in group discussions covering variety of topics.

COMPREHENSION AND ORAL PRODUCTION EVALUATION

The comprehension and the oral production evaluation is part of the whole English test. The other aspects of the language which are evaluated are reading and writing comprehension. All the different parts are of equal value as the aim is to have a valid examination which is reliable for their future needs.

The Existing Methods of the Evaluation of the Oral Production

The way the comprehension and the oral production are evaluated is in the form of a teacher-student interview or a role play performance. In the first evaluation, the discussion is widely dominated by the teacher and the evaluation is based on subjective judgment rather than an objective one. As for the second method used to evaluate the students which is the role play performance, the students are asked to prepare themselves before the day of the examination they can even learn the presentation by heart and perform it in front of the teacher the day of the exam; in this case there is no realistic and assessable discussion.

The Suggested Evaluation of the Oral Production

The students are evaluated in groups of five to seven students who have already attended the courses and discussion groups during the whole university year. Each student of the group should be given about five minutes without interruption. The teachers are asked to leave the students in free discussions, the teacher can evaluate their students in different situation which should be as close as possible to a real life situation not keeping the usual classroom and educational context, and on the contrary they are encouraged to create realistic situations for the day of the exam.

The teachers can either give the topic of discussion to their students or use some supports for that such as a text or a pre recorded tape after which the main points should be discussed by the students. The teacher should ensure a wide range of topics and to be sure that the linguistic content is within his students' abilities. At this point the students are encouraged to take note after what they are given few minutes to warm-up before being under the pressure of being evaluated. The teacher has to pay attention to readymade sentences. The evaluation of the comprehension and the oral

production is very important as it shows the students practical language abilities and it puts the examiner in a better position to evaluate and judge his students as objectively as possible in a reliable and realistic context.

Arguments against Oral Examinations

The major criticism against the evaluation of the oral production concerns the marking system which is not clearly defined and the judgment is rather subjective on behalf of the teachers. However the grading system rely on error notation with some reward pluses to the most fluent ones, then we consider the suggested way of testing to be able to provide an objective record of how well the learners have been using the language.

On the other side, another criticism is that there are plenty of possible situations where language is used as a medium of communication and the teachers cannot examine all the different aspect of the language as the students may not be competent in all of them, for this reason the teacher needs to examine the future needs of his/her students before the beginning of the courses. The teacher should be aware that an arranged situation can provoke a performance from the part of the examinee.

GRADING

For the purpose of the research the students have been evaluated under four categories which are the grammatical structures, the vocabulary, fluency in speaking and pronunciation. The examiner should record the grades on a marking sheet with a space where problems can be noted for further discussion at the end of the evaluation. In the evaluation of the oral production minor and major errors should be taken into account, sometimes students may produce utterances which are grammatically correct but which are meaningless in the actual situation. The students should be evaluated according to the number of utterances produced (one utterance is about eight words). The teachers are free to add extra pluses for the students who show a certain linguistic performance and a relevant contribution during the conversation.

Major Errors

A major error is defined to be the one which causes:

- Non-comprehension of the entire utterance or a part of it;
- Misunderstanding;
- The students is unable to produce a fully and clear utterance, the examinee might stop or miss a part of the utterance.

Minor Errors

On the other hand, we may consider minor errors as when the students:

- makes some errors in speaking, but they do not impede communication;
- makes some errors of grammar;
- makes some errors of pronunciation;
- makes some errors of lexis.

CONCLUSIONS

The act of evaluation cannot be reduced to score learners or to certify studies, applying a set of rules and conditions, although these are essential; evaluation must be based on the teacher's judgment. In this respect, it can only be carried out by teachers who are specifically responsible for evaluating pupils and who have the required competencies. It is of great importance to recognize that evaluation is a major component of the curriculum. The vision presented here places evaluation at the centre of learning. This constitutes a powerful factor in helping pupils learning and supporting teachers as evaluation could guide pupils in their learning. Thus, training for teachers plays a central role in every teaching /learning situation, and it is for researchers to consider the purposes of language evaluation, since it cannot be denied that the first function of learning a language is for a meaningful message delivery rather than the use of language form.

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