

Testing Oral Skills An Innovative Approach to Promote Fluency

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Introduction

English language is a ‘complex skill’ comprising four basic skills (skill of listening, skill of speaking, skill of reading and skill of writing). The four language skills are also known as the different modes of communication. Listening and reading are the receptive skills which are involved in the decoding process of communication. The other two skills are the productive skills which perform the encoding process of communication. Language teachers strive to impart the requisite four skills by adopting innovative approaches depending on the state and minds of their learners.

Among the four skills, writing was given the major focus in teaching till 1990 but with the liberalization of Indian economy and with the entry of Multi-National Companies, Call Centres, Business Process Outsourcing companies, and so on, there is a shift in focus in favour of the spoken skills. Now-a-days there is a huge need for young employees fluent in spoken English. ‘Today only twenty five percent of India’s technical graduates and ten to fifteen percent of other graduates are employable at once,’ comments Kiran Karnik, President, NASSCOM in *Business* November, 2007. This means that seventy five percent of all those who graduate even

from technical colleges and reputed institutions cannot be employed. This he attributes largely to the inability to communicate fluently in English.

Need For Testing Oral Skills

In the present scenario, career opportunities depend on the candidate's communicative ability in English. Even those who are interested to shift their base to the developed countries need professional help to succeed in tests like TOEFL, IELTS and so on. Hence improving speaking skills is of paramount importance. Testing oral skills becomes an indispensable facet in this context.

According to Penny Ur (1996), of all the four key language skills, speaking is the most important in learning a second or a foreign language. She states that speaking includes all the other skills of knowing (learning) that language. Though speaking is a crucial part of Second Language Learning and Teaching (SLLT), it is the one that gets the least attention in classroom teaching. Teacher Speaking Time (TST) is generally more than the Student Speaking Time (SST) even in the Communicative Language Classes.

Most of the learners at the tertiary level secure a minimum pass through cramming and rote learning in the Semester Examinations. However, success in English examination does not ensure fluency and independent use of English. Learners from rural areas are diffident to speak in English to communicate their thoughts. They therefore do not perform well in job interviews and are easily branded as 'unemployable'.

In the syllabus design, equal importance may have been given to all the four skills but when it comes to testing, it is restricted to written skills of the learners. Testing other skills is never given importance. The second productive skill, speaking, remains unassessed in most of the schools and colleges. This shows that there is a dearth of one to one correlation between what is taught and what is tested. There is also the absence of models for assessing speaking skills.

Testing Spoken Language Skill

Testing is the process mainly used in educational institutions to assess the performance of the learners, thereby evaluating the performance of the course taught and the performance of the teacher. According to Carrol (1990), it is ‘a process designed to elicit certain behavior from which one can make inferences about certain characteristics of an individual’. The learners’ oral skills are assessed for the first time in the campus interviews. This is one of the significant reasons why the placement record suffers in most of the colleges. Oral tests must be periodically administered to advance the learners’ spoken skills. Testing oral skills not only serves to promote fluency but also makes the learners realize that mastering fluency would make them employable in the job market and change their life for better.

Hindrances to Spoken Language Testing

Constraints are unavoidable in any progressive activity. Oral testing is no exception to this standard rule. Speaking skills have not attained the status of being qualified to be included in the evaluation system prevalent at the undergraduate level in Indian Universities. One of the

reasons for the non-inclusion of this spoken skill seems to be the complexity of speech act itself and also the unmanageable number of learners – say, a class with sixty learners.

Spoken language tests are considered to be the most difficult to administer in large classes. Factors like time limit, compulsion to complete the syllabus within the semester framework, shortage of faculty in the department, lack of required infrastructure are cited as reasons for the non-conduct of spoken language tests.

A Few Methods to Elicit Spoken Language

According to Underhill (1990), there are more than sixty techniques and variations in testing spoken language. But only those that are suitable and appropriate for our classrooms are listed and discussed in this research paper. In General English Classrooms, Role-plays and Group Discussions can be exploited to teach and test spoken language. Through these oral practice activities, the learners not only get a chance to speak but also gain a sense of achievement as they perform in front of their peers. The teacher acts as a facilitator in every activity and guides the learners. Slow learners are encouraged to shed their inhibitions and express their ideas in the target language “with more confidence.”

Role -Play between Learners

In role play the learners are asked to take on a particular role in a given situation. In other words, the learners are expected to converse in a way that is appropriate to their assigned role and to the specified situation. They are informed with written instructions a few minutes before the commencement of the task. The teacher also briefs the learners on what they are supposed to do. In role-plays, the teacher never has the complete control of the activity and he intervenes only in an emergency. Teacher also helps the learners sharpen their language skills. Some of the examples of the fascinating roles are mentioned below:

- Interviewer and interviewee
- reporter and sportsman
- teacher and learner

-father and son

Depending on the learner's imagination and familiarity with role-plays, these situations are either explained in detail in the instructions or the details are left entirely to the learners to invent. In apposite situations the learners are asked to make up the details among themselves. However, in order to balance the language produced and the difficulty of each role, some extra tasks are given such as, 'Ask at least two questions...' or 'at the end, summarize to make sure you have understood what the other person has said'. These role-play situations are found to be a great fun in which the learners get involved with greater spontaneity and creativity than in any other classroom activity. Role play activity also brings out the learners' real language.

Group Discussion

Group discussion is an informal discussion conducted in a formal manner. According to Prof Kev Nair, the father of fluency lexicography, Group Discussion is one of the techniques which can promote oral skills and fluency. He calls Group discussion a 'Discourse Building Technique'. Group Discussion involves six to eight learners who comprise a group. A general topic is introduced among the members for a discussion and they may be asked to come out with a conclusion at the end of the task. The participants seated in semi-circle should be encouraged to take part actively with their ideas. Topics which may be given for discussion are:

Is the implementation of dress code in college justified?

Should strict punishment be awarded to people harassing women?

Are extra-curricular activities like NCC and NSS helpful in shaping personality?

Should voting be made compulsory in our country?

This activity is very useful because Group Discussion is an integral part of almost every selection process. When learners discuss in front of their peers, they gain confidence required for the interview. The teachers should ensure that the topics chosen for the discussion are of interest to all the learners. This task like role-play is very handy to elicit 'real' language of the learners. The teacher during the discussion may participate to encourage the learners and at the end of the session can focus on how the learners can enhance their spoken language.

Scale Used for Testing Spoken Language

Testing by itself is a challenging task. It is more difficult for a teacher when it comes to testing oral skills in a classroom. Lado (1964) recommends five components for the analysis of spoken language. They are Pronunciation, Grammar, Vocabulary, Fluency and Comprehension. As the learner's skill in speaking a second language refers to his ability to communicate formally as well as informally, all the five factors can be given equal weightage in the rating scale and twenty percent can be given to each component.

The scale devised by Lado can be used to test the learners' oral skills. The learners' fluency can be rated based on the criteria like a) Speed of delivery b) Ability to speak with expression c) Comprehension and d) Pronunciation. In Role Play, the teacher has to assess the pair's spoken skills and also the oral skills of the learners in isolation. In Group Discussion, the teacher assesses the learner's oral skills as and when the learner interacts.

The Impact of Testing Oral Skills

The testing gives the teacher a fair idea of the learners' capability to speak in the target language. It also gives the teacher certain clues to the remedial measures which every learner needs for his language acquisition and enhancement. The classroom teaching can be modified according to the remedial measures required so that every learner benefits and thus teaching can be geared towards testing the oral components. Testing also creates a compulsion for the learners to learn the essentials of spoken language. Not only do they learn how to perform in oral tests, but also get an opportunity to practice what they learnt in the oral tests.

Spoken language tests act as a launch pad for giving exposure to their oral skills. The testing helps the learners to shed their inhibition and fear of speaking. It also teaches them how to perform in every oral task and the strategies they have to adopt in order to execute well in the target language. In this way, testing influences the learning process.

Conclusion

There may be several ways to test oral skills for the learners at the tertiary level. The tasks like Role Plays and Group Discussions are found to be very useful in making the learners come out of their inhibition and use their acquired language. The purpose of the test is to measure the learners' ability. Testing oral skills achieves not only the basic purpose but also serves as a platform for the learner to showcase his spoken language and to know where he 'stands' in language. The enthusiastic involvement of the learners can also be found as the learners are given a chance to interact with their peers. The activities also boost the morale of the learners and develop the learners' overall personality.

Spoken language tests also promote peer learning and generally augment cohesiveness among the learners. If these tests are made regular, the teacher can find the learners preparing for the tests in their group even during their free hours. Thus, testing oral skills in classrooms prompts learners to use language even outside the learning environment which results in better language acquisition. Moreover, the learners learn the skills in a happy environment and they cheerfully anticipate language classes.

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