How should be Speaking Assessed?

Tamar ASLANISHVILI

Abstract

The ever –growing need for good communication skills in English has created a huge demand for English teaching around the world. Millions of people today want to improve their command of English. In the article is discussed the problems and barriers which are very often met in the speaking process and the ways of assessing the communication process properly. Setting and marking a written test of grammar is relatively easy and time-effective. A test of speaking, on the other hand, is not. There are discussed very interesting and essential types of assessing: interviews, live monologues and recorded monologues, are shown their advantages and disadvantages as well. The author touches the problems of error and mistake correction and shows the way to the well organized exam. Analyzing what errors have been made clarifies exactly what the students have reached and helps to set the syllabus for future language work. In dealing with errors, teachers have looked for correction techniques that, rather than simply giving students the answer on a plate helps them to make their own correction. This may raise their own awareness about the language they are using. All the above mentioned types of assessing were experimented at Telavi State University on the freshman and sophomore students, who study the General English Course. In the article is also described the evaluation system which exists at Telavi state university and ways of verification of this system according to the teacher's desire.

Keywords: assessing; evaluation system; interviews; error correction.

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Introduction

The ever –growing need for good communication skills in English has created a huge demand for English teaching around the world. Millions of people today want to improve their command of English. And opportunities to learn English are provided in many different ways such as through formal instruction, travel, and study abroad, as well as through the media and the internet. The world wide demand for English has critical and enormous demand for quality of language teaching and quality of language teaching materials and resources. Learners set themselves demanding goals. They want to be able to master English to a high level of accuracy and fluency. When the parents are preparing adults for the National Entrance Exams, their teachers, private and/or school are providing them with the different issues of grammar, vocabulary as well as skills how to write the essays. As soon as they pass the entrance exam and become the students, very big problem arises for them; they cannot speak with the foreigners as well as with the group mates and teachers in English. This is the lack of communication skills which has the reason itself and that reason is the lack of knowledge of the target language.

One thing is we have not got the well prepared students, and another thing is assessing them properly. Assessing speaking on the exam was chosen. Why? Because, the results gained on the exam will show the weak sides of our students' communication skills and it will help to plan the learning process and mid oral testing properly.

Setting and marking a written test of grammar is relatively easy and time-effective. A test of speaking, on the other hand, is not. If all the students of a class have to be interviewed individually, the disruption caused, and the time taken, may seem to outweigh the benefits. Moreover, different testers may have very different criteria for judging speaking, differences that are less acute when it comes to judging writing or grammar knowledge, for example. The assessment should be done according to the number and type of errors made by the students.

I certainly remember my own school days, when I was wary of making a mistake and thus didn't often volunteer answers to the teacher's questions. Mistakes were definitely a "bad thing"- not really to be encouraged- evidence that I had not been working properly, or was lazy or a little bit stupid. Yet in most things, humans largely learn by trail and error, experimenting to see what works

and doesn't. And if fear of getting it wrong prevents you doing something in the first place, then you are very unlikely to move forward or learn anything at all.

Many teachers nowadays regard student errors as evidence that progress is being made. Errors often show us that a student is experimenting with the language, trying out ideas, taking risks, attempting to communicate, and making progress. Analyzing what errors have been made clarifies exactly where the students have reached and helps to set the syllabus for future language work. In dealing with errors, teachers have looked for correction techniques that, rather than simply giving students the answer on a plate helps them to make their own correction. This may raise their own awareness about the language they are using. Often, a brief pause or a nonverbal cue is sufficient for students to recognize and then correct mistakes they make while speaking. The teacher simply has to allow the pause to occur. Students sometimes cannot correct errors themselves, but that doesn't mean the teacher must. Because well known saying says- "What you tell me, I forgot; what I discover for myself, I remember".

William Ancker, (2000). an English Language Officer with the U.S. department of State, Washington, DC, in his research found out very interesting opinions about the error correction. The modern methodology of Teaching English suggests not correcting the mistakes and errors in the speaking activity. But in his research very big number of the teachers and students (mostly students) still prefer immediate correction by the teacher, despite its lack of efficacy and its punitive nature. Here are some frequent reasons why teachers should not correct errors:

"1.Correction may develop something like a barrier, and the students will be afraid of making mistakes and will not speak or study English with pleasure (Kyrgyz teacher).

2. If the teacher corrects all the errors students make, then the students will think that they are dumb and not good enough to speak English (Azeri student).

3. Correcting every mistake would take too much time (Guatemalan teacher trainee).

4. The students cannot even process all of those corrections (Panamanian teacher.)……"(Ancker, 2000. p.22)

And here are the frequently cited reasons why teachers should correct every error and mistake:

"1.The teacher should correct the errors in order to let the students

know what's wrong and what's right (Georgian teacher).

2. If nobody corrects our errors, we will never learn good English (Ecuadorian student).

3. Every mistake should be taken care at the moment it is made, otherwise students will keep on making the same mistake over and over again (Colombian teacher).

4. If a teacher doesn't correct errors, he is not a real teacher (Uzbek teacher). " (Ancker, 2000. p.22)

It's very important when to correct. If the objective is accuracy, then immediate correction is more likely to be useful; if the aim is fluency, then immediate correction is less appropriate and any correction will probably come after the activity or speech has finished or later.

Among the varied types of spoken test types, we consider those as the most interesting ones:

1. *Interviews* - these are relatively easy to set up. The students are called one by one for their interview. Such interviews are not without problems. The rather formal nature of interviews means that situation is hardly conductive to testing more informal, conversational speaking styles. A casual chat at the beginning can help out candidates at their ease. The use of pictures or a pre-selected topic as a focus for the interview can help, especially if the candidates are given one or two minutes to prepare themselves in advance.

2. *Live monologues* - the candidates prepare and present a short talk on pre-selected topic. This eliminates the interviewer effect and provides evidence of the candidates' ability to handle an extended turn, which is not always possible in interviews.

3. *Recorded monologues* - these are perhaps less stressful than a more public performance and, for informal testing, they are also more practicable in a way that live monologues are not. Learners can take turns to record themselves talking about a favorite sport or pastime. The advantage of recorded test is that the assessment can be done after the exam.

There are two types of scores: *holistic* and *analytic*. When the teacher is giving a single score on the basis of an overall impression we have the case of holistic scoring, and analytic scoring is the case when separate scores for different aspects of the task are given by the teacher. Analytic scoring takes longer, but compels tester to take a variety of factors into account and, if these

factors are well chosen, is probably both fairer and more reliable.

There are four categories which should be assessed during the speaking exams. These are: Grammar and Vocabulary, Discourse Management, Pronunciation and Interactive communication.

On the scale of Grammar and Vocabulary, candidates are awarded marks for the accurate and appropriate use of syntactic forms and vocabulary in order to meet the task requirements at each level. The range and appropriate use of vocabulary are also assessed here.

On the scale of Discourse Management, examiner is looking for evidence of the candidate's ability to express ideas and opinions in coherent, connected speech. The candidate's ability to maintain a coherent flow of language with an appropriate range of linguistic recourses over several utterances is assessed here.

Pronunciation refers to the candidate's ability to produce comprehensible utterances to fulfill the task requirements, i.e. it refers to the production of individual sounds, the appropriate linking of words, and the use of stress and intonation to convey the intended meaning.

Interactive Communication refers to the candidate's ability to interact with the interlocutor and the other candidate by initiating and responding appropriately and at the required speed and rhythm to fulfill the task requirements. It includes the ability to use functional language and strategies to maintain or repair interaction, e.g. in conversational turn-taking, and a willingness to develop the conversation and move the task towards a conclusion. Candidates should be able to maintain the coherence of the discussion and may, if necessary, ask the interlocutor or the other candidate for clarification.

It is worth emphasizing that grammatical accuracy is only one of several factors, and teachers need to remind themselves when assessing speaking that even native speakers produce non- grammatical forms in fast, unmonitored speech. It would be unfair, therefore, to expect a higher degree of precision in learners than native speakers are capable of.

Experiment

We took into account the above-mentioned information and conveyed the experiment at Telavi State University on freshman and sophomore students.

They agreed on taking part in the experiment as they were interested in the results and level of their knowledge of foreign language. Before explaining the process of the experiment, I want to describe the evaluation system at Telavi State University.

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The written activities dominate in pre-exam 75% of scores (which are obligatory) and the rest 25% are also written activities.

All those scores are themselves divided into several parts:

30% is divided into 3 midterm writing tests;

24% is divided into 8 short writing tests;

10 % is divided into 2 written homework;

11% is the presentation, which should be handed to the teacher in written form, either in pp presentation or poster, but to present it is up to the student. If s/he has enough scores and is satisfied with them then s/he refuses of presenting presentation in front of the teacher and group mates. The topic for the presentation is chosen by the student from the offered topics. Maximum score for the presentation is 11%, which is divided into the following components:

1. Logical concept- maximum 3%.

2. Clear presentation of the topic- maximum 3%

3. Answering the questions- Maximum 3%

4. Using the visual aids- Maximum 2 %

The overall picture of the evaluation system is like in graph 1.

The distribution of the gained scores is the as in table 1.

The General English Course, which is taught in our University for the freshman and sophomore students, is based on the development of the communicative skills, and to assess the communication with the written form is, to our mind, incorrect. As a PhD student I am working on overcoming the psychological stress in the process of communication. Very important part of my

research consists of speaking and its assessment. We could not do anything to the obligatory 75% and decided to switch oral assessment in the 25% of scoring.

Graph 1. Evaluation system at Telavi State University.

100 Scores

75 %   **25 %**

30 %   **24 %**   **10 %**   **11 %**

10 % 10 % 10 %   **3 3 3 3 3 3 3**   **5 %   5 %**
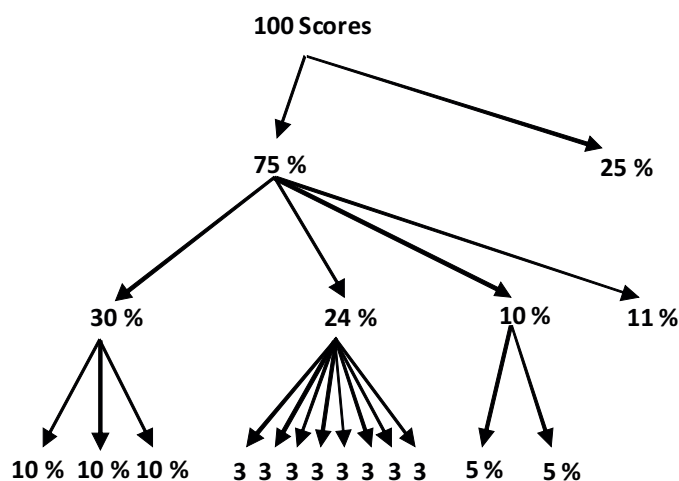
Table 1. The distribution of the gained score.

Scores	Evaluation
91-100	(A) Excellent
81-90	(B) Very good
71-80	(C) Good
61-70	(D) Satisfactory
51-60	(E) Enough
41-50	(X) non-satisfactory; has the right to retake the exam
0-40	(F) Failed ; has to retake the course

We used interviews and live monologues to assess the speaking. We divided the students into three parts (beginner, elementary and pre-intermediate level) and asked each level to come on different day. We were having the exams for three days. Students of all levels were taught the same text-book "Enterprise" but for the appropriate level. 5 volunteer students had to enter the exam room first. They took the unknown text with an exercise and the name of the topic, which was prepared by them in advance.

Unknown text was chosen according to their level and they were the authentic texts as well. Questions were prepared beforehand by us and we asked

and directed the interview according to our desire. The next step was the live monologues. The topics were based on already learnt units and by retelling it they also expressed their own point of view on this or that issue. Unknown text had maximum 10 scores, and the free topic had also 10 scores, as about 5 % from 25 %, we decided them to write a little exercise on the base of the unknown text. It was either the true- false sentences, or the answering questions about the text.

In spring semester (2009/2010) we examined approximately 200 students, 120 were girls and 80- boys. The results are in table 2.

Table 2. Assessment of speaking in spring semester of 2009/2010.

Total number of students(200)	51-60 (E)	61-70 (D)	71-80 (C)	81-90 (B)	91-100 (A)
Girls (120)	40%	30%	16%	12%	2%
Boys (80)	35%	40%	22%	3%	0%

Then we used the next semester for the additional speaking activities, which to our mind should fill the gaps and arise the errors, we met on the spring semester exam. Assessing the learning process was again impossible, because of the obligatory written tests. The autumn semester (2010/2011) was the second time, we examined the same students and we've got the results shown in table 3.

Table 3. Assessment of speaking in autumn semester of 2010/2011.

Total number of students(200)	51-60 (E)	61-70 (D)	71-80 (C)	81-90 (B)	91-100 (A)
Girls (120)	20%	20%	30%	20%	10%
Boys (80)	25%	30%	30%	10%	5%

The first attempt didn't have the result we were waiting for. The reason of this was one, the students were used to the written exams and the oral exam was strange and a little bit difficult for them. The results of the students for the autumn semester were better. The live monologues were more effective than the interviews, because interviews were directed by us and several unprepared questions confused some of them time by time.

Conclusion

As a conclusion the gained results made us thinking, that if we plan the learning process properly, use the speaking activities and recorded monologues in our lectures, the final result of the exam will be better. It will help the students to feel free at first in front of the group mates and teachers, and then in front of

the foreigners. Step by step they will overcome the psychological barrier in communication.

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