

Using Technology for Measuring Proficiency in Oral Skills at College Level in India

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ABSTRACT

Oral skills are one of the most neglected skills in classrooms where English is taught as a second language. Despite the best efforts of teachers to focus on all language skills, it is the reading and the writing skills which take most of the time and energy. The present paper examines the employment of different technology-based tools such as computer, podcast, and chat for assessing oral proficiency in EFL classroom at the college level in India. Referred to as alternative assessments tools, the technology-based assessment incorporates innovative methods and techniques to measure improvements in oral proficiency. This kind of assessment is effective when it gives the language learners a chance to use what they have learnt. On the contrary, traditional methods of assessment fail to show what learners can do with their acquired language. This paper aims at illustrating several activities that teachers can use with the help of technology to measure and monitor their students' achievements in oral skills. The paper focuses on the probable activities that can be used in the Indian condition and what criteria teachers can use to assess oral proficiency.

Keywords: Assessment, proficiency, oral skills, technology, internet

1. INTRODUCTION

Assessment is an important part of the learning atmosphere and this is true even for classes where English is taught as a Second Language (ESL) or as a Foreign Language (EFL) http://www.everythingsl.net/inservices/essential_vocab.php. ESL and EFL are abbreviated terms and are now used under the umbrella term ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages). The Central Board for Secondary Education (CBSE), New Delhi has introduced assessment of speaking skills at class IX and XI across the country where students will be test for various sub-skills,

1. Speaking intelligibly, using appropriate word stress, sentence stress and intonation patterns.
2. Narrating incidents and events, real or imaginary in a logical sequence.
3. Presenting oral reports or summaries; making announcements clearly and confidently.
4. Expressing and arguing a point of view clearly and effectively.
5. Taking active part in group discussions, showing ability to express agreement or disagreement,
6. Summarizing ideas, eliciting the views of others, and presenting own ideas.
7. Expressing and responding to personal feelings, opinions and attitudes.
8. Participating in spontaneous spoken discourse in familiar social situations.

<http://indiatoday.intoday.in/education/story/cbse-2014-assessment-in-speaking-and-listening-skills/1/343078.html>

CBSE talks about Formative and Continuous Assessment and gives detailed guidelines for measuring language skills like listening and speaking. But at the college level, the scene changes. Generally in the Indian context, there are written exams during and at the end of the semester to assess the learners. But these written exams test the writing skills and the comprehensibility of the learners. The oral skills are not tested. At the college level, students are offered courses in Communication but speaking skills, which are one of the important communicative skills remain unassessed. This paper looks at the Indian context. It gives the situation in college as far as teaching English is concerned and whether there is scope for testing oral skills. What is the condition under which students are tested? The paper then goes on to make a case for using technology to assess oral skills at the college level.

As far as I have observed, in India English is taught to college students either as a Major (Honours/Compulsory) course or as a Minor (Subsidiary/Elective) course in Colleges at the Undergraduate level. Also English Language course is compulsory in Technical institutes for the students pursuing bachelors' degree in engineering, known as B.Tech. . The students who take up Honours in English study all aspects of English Literature but hardly any grammar. Whatever technical aspects they learn about the language is through the papers on Linguistics. On the other hand, students who take up the subsidiary course study poetry, prose and plays, fiction and non-fiction written in English along with what is called Functional English. The B.Tech. students study Communicative or Functional English with a slight mixture of Literature. At some point in the course of study all these groups of students face an oral test. Oral examinations are considered important because they are supposed to test the applicability of the knowledge gained vis-à-vis the written examination. The latter does not represent the usage of language for communication with other people in informal settings outside the classroom (Underhill, 1987). For students doing their Honours in English, this exam tests their knowledge and their ability to apply the concepts they have learnt in the classroom. On the contrary the oral examination for the second group tests almost the same thing – their knowledge of what they have learnt in the classrooms and sometimes the examiners test the students' ability to communicate in the English language. This is true for the B.Tech. students as well.

Generally for such oral examinations, students are called in groups of 2-4 or 6 depending on the number of students registered for the course. And each group gets almost 5-7 minutes of time with the examiners. In these 5-7 minutes, students are either given portions of texts to read to test their pronunciation and intonation. My personal experience shows that this is not very reliable as correct pronunciation and intonation do not give a realistic picture of the students' oral abilities. In such a setting, it is hard to believe that the assessment of oral skills would be authentic and reliable. Authenticity, reliability and validity are considered to be the traits of successful assessment in the field of language teaching (Hughes, 2003; Creswell, 2003). Apart from this, a lot of time is taken up by these tests. Normally an entire day goes a waste. This paper discusses how assessment of oral skills can be made authentic and reliable compared to the earlier manner of group discussion/ interview. Can technology play any part in this? What kind of technology can be adapted in the Indian context to measure proficiency in oral skills?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Ben Knight (1992) in his article states that due to difficulty in testing oral skills, teachers use inadequate tools or do not test oral skills at all. He talks of the practical problems like time, facilities and personnel for testing, problem of designing productive and relevant tasks and the problem of consistency (on different occasions, with different testes and between different assessors). Dhalhoub-Deville (2001) talks about Computer-based testing and focused on the other skills but speaking. Swanson and Nolde discuss the various tools teachers have at their disposal but these papers focus on teachers in developed countries. There is no discussion about the situation in India. Day and Shampson (1987) talk about measuring fluency but do not mention pronunciation or accent. Warschauer(1996) and Chun (1994) in their papers have studied the effect of voice chats in improving speaking skills. They focus on computer-mediated language learning in contrast to the traditional method.

3. TECHNOLOGY AVAILABLE FOR ORAL ASSESSMENT

According to Dhalhoub-Deville, ‘Technology is increasingly being promulgated as a powerful mechanism that can transform education.’(2001) And she talks in detail about the use of technology in testing in her paper where she focuses on Computer Based Tests and says, ‘Technology provides an excellent capability to trace test takers’ language development thus enabling researchers to better understand how aspects of the construct evolve across different ability levels.’ (Dhalhoub-Deville, 2001). With this idea in mind one can see that oral proficiency assessment capabilities are enhanced through the use of digital artifacts and out-of-class recording tasks. Swanson and Nolde address the benefits and ease of using different multimedia tools to assess students’ oral language proficiency regardless of grade level. What teachers and students have at their disposal are software, web ware and hard wares (Swanson and Nolde; Early and Swanson, 2008).

a) Software for this article is executable computer applications installed on workstations with free audacity recorder or the windows sound recorder on computers utilizing windows operating system.

b) Web ware encompasses online applications of software that do not require downloads or installation on individual computers. Users can create gcast accounts to record and share their audio files. Another program is Yackpack which is an effective communication web-based tool, serving various purposes ranging from business, education, to individuals. It provides a private space to connect with clients, students or friends. With Yackpack, it is possible to communicate with an entire group of students or an individual with one simple “click, talk, send”. It is fast, easy and overcomes time zones, geography, language and age barriers that typical solutions do not adequately address. From the perspective of language teaching and learning, it provides an innovative way of communicating, speaking, listening and sharing in a private space on the net. With the help of Yackpack, it is easy to record and leave voice messages in addition to talking live in any language. Via recorded or online talk, Yackpack provides the simplest way for people to communicate online. More importantly, without installing any kind of software and dealing with plugins or waiting for friends or students to be online, teachers or learners can easily share their opinions or feelings on a given topic whenever and wherever they would like to. (<http://www.web20erc.eu/node/192>) One associated disadvantage is that teachers will have to create ‘packs’ for a class and ask students to join in.

c) Among hardware this paper looks at the potential to use portable hardware which is available at comfortable price. This would include items like the iPods, MP3players, Voice recorders and even cameras/ android phones. The programs and tools mentioned here samples of technological items that are affordable, readily available and simple to use in a language classroom.

d) There are companies creating products suited to language assessment. One such company is 'Aspiring Minds' which claims to have launched India's first adaptive speech assessment test for employability called - SVAR. SVAR is a telephone based, automated evaluation tool which provides a fair, consistent and a completely automated way to scientifically assess a person's English speaking, listening and comprehension skills. This provides a method to filter and interview suitable candidates by not only increasing interview convert rates but also significantly reducing bad hires and increasing overall quality of talent. (http://aspiringminds.in/researchcell/articles/scientific_assessment_to_measure_english_speaking_understanding_and_listening_skills.html) Though these products are very interesting and helpful both to students and faculty, their price keeps them out of reach of most institutions.

4. TECHNOLOGY BASED ASSESSMENT

Teachers have at their disposal various technologies available to use and implement for assessing oral proficiency. Teachers need to keep in mind several factors while designing assessment based on technology. Some of those factors outlined by Bahrani (2011) are as follows:

Does the activity require the student to be creative?

Does the activity reflect real world communication?

Does the activity allow the student to use what s/he has learnt?

Does the activity increase motivation?

Is the activity reliable enough?

Is the activity valid?

Is the activity authentic?

One can safely say that activities designed to assess oral skills with the help of technology should be creative in order to increase the motivation of students for learning the language. But one should bear in mind the validity and reliability of the activities to present an accurate picture of the proficiency of the learner as far as oral skills are concerned.

5. TECHNOLOGY BASED ASSESSMENT ACTIVITIES

Some of the activities that can be easily implemented in the Indian context are described here:

a) Chats: Chats are beneficial if conducted in an oral form. Studies by Warschauer(1996), Chun (1994) have shown that chat conversations for one hour daily go a long way in improving speaking proficiency. Teachers can raise a topic or issue or ask students to raise one and ask them to enter chat rooms and keep a record of the things they speak. And assessment will be based on this record.

b) Mobile /android phones have today emerged as an educative tool to provide quick access to authentic language inputs. Normally every student has a mobile phone with a simple voice recorder. Teachers can ask students to record themselves over their phones and bring it to class where other students may be asked to comment on the presentation. Alternatively, such recordings may be given to the teacher before the class if the teacher wants to keep the identity of the student hidden from the class to encourage genuine feedback. Applications like WhatsApp can be used to measure speaking proficiency. Students can be asked to record their voice and send it to the teacher across whatsApp and the teacher can evaluate it at his/her convenience.

c) Videos: if a teacher intends to measure not only oral proficiency but also the non-verbal skills, videos play a very useful role in that. Students, with the help of their friends can make videos on topics/issues given by the teacher or fellow students. These videos can be uploaded through YouTube or intranet (if the college or institute has this facility). These videos can be used for evaluation by the teachers. Teachers, for the purpose of assessment, can set time limits and can also observe whether the student is speaking naturally or reading from prepared material. Such videos also give the teacher an idea of the students' vocabulary level and ability to construct sentences.

These activities are well-suited to the Indian situation. If an institute or college has computer systems for maximum students then web wares like yackpack will be an ideal platform to store and evaluate audio files. Almost everyone has a mobile phone and access to the internet at home or outside through cyber cafes and recording and uploading files does not take too much of one's time. Apart from this such activities increase students' motivation in language learning and also encourage peer work.

As far as formal examinations are concerned, examiners can be given the recordings (audio files or video files) to analyze and allot marks. This would not only save the time of the examiners but also of the students who wait for hours to face a 5-6 minute interaction which tests his/her memorizing ability rather than his/her speaking proficiency.

6. WHAT TO MEASURE

Whether it is knowledge of the subject or the ability to perform in the target language, oral proficiency is seen by many teachers as synonymous with oral fluency. Day and Shapson (1987) defined fluency as 'the ease and flow of the student's speech in comparison with native speakers (p. 242). Consequently, they elaborated a four point fluency rating scale with corresponding descriptors. The four levels are:

1. Halting, slow speech, noticeable breaks between words, seems to require much effort.
2. Speech is uneven, some noticeable breaks between words, seems to require effort, occasionally halting, tend to but not necessarily have slower speech rate than level three.
3. Relatively smooth and effortless speech but rate of speech is slower than native or perceptibly non-native; and

4. Relatively smooth, native-like rate of speech.

Apart from using these criteria, examiners/evaluators can also measure oral proficiency on the following lines: pronunciation, creativity in language usage.

Aspiring Minds in its article ‘*Scientific Assessment to Measure English Speaking, Understanding and Listening Skills*’ defines the traits its programme measures and they are as follows:

TRAITS	DEFINITION
<i>Pronunciation</i>	ability of uttering with articulation
<i>Fluency</i>	ability to speak smoothly, easily and with good prosody so that time can be allocated to comprehension processes
<i>Active Listening</i>	ability of understanding the listening process (i.e. perception and action), and the ability to anticipate the upcoming words using the current syntactic information
<i>Spoken English Understanding</i>	ability of the person to interpret and evaluate spoken English
<i>English Grammar Skills</i>	ability to understand inflections, syntax and word formation of English Language
<i>English Vocabulary Skills</i>	ability to understand words and phrases used in English Language
<i>Job Suitability</i>	Trainable/Hirable/Non-Trainable
<i>English Language Proficiency</i>	Overall English Conversational capability of candidate

Ben Knight (1992) mentions the following assessment criteria: Grammar (range and accuracy), Vocabulary (range and accuracy), Pronunciation (individual sound, stress and rhythm, intonation, linking/elision/assimilation), Fluency (speed of talking, hesitation while speaking, hesitation before speaking), Conversational Skill (topic development, initiative, cohesion, conversation maintenance), Sociolinguistic skill (distinguishing register and style, use of cultural references), Non-Verbal (eye contact and body posture, gestures and facial expressions) and Content (coherence of arguments and relevance).

After critically studying these aspects and looking at the ground reality in most colleges, one can safely suggest that the following should be assessed for speaking skills: Pronunciation, Fluency, Clarity, grammar and Authenticity.

7. How to Measure

Oral assessments at the college level are generally for achievement testing or proficiency testing. Depending on the reason, testers may choose either the form of interview or presentation on a

prepared topic or group discussion. Once the assessment criteria and the main area are defined by the examiner/ teacher concerned, students should be made aware of these criteria so that transparency may be ensured in the assessment process. Provision may be made to record the activity of the students. Unless students are recorded, oral production is ephemeral; it gets lost. Teachers then may grade the students on the Likert scale of scale of 1-5 where 1 is very poor, 2 is poor, 3 is average, 4 is good and 5 is very good and allot marks accordingly.

8. Conclusion

Assessment at any point is time consuming. Only if we use the laboratory programmes, teachers may be able to save time for themselves. Using recordings to assess speaking skills save time for the students but teachers nevertheless have to spend a major part of their time in listening to the recordings and assessing them on the pre-decided guidelines. While the present study highlights new and interesting options for language instructors, this research does have its limitations. No data were collected to investigate if using any of these digital tools led to improvement in speaking and listening ability. There is a need for more research in the area of digital technology for assessment of oral language skills. The main aim of the paper was to introduce activities which can be incorporated with the technology that we possess to assess speaking proficiency of ESL and EFL learners. Accordingly teachers can advise students to use the computer, internet, mobile phones to learn English and also use these for assessing the learners. This will lead to a connection between language assessment and real world communicative needs. Language teachers need to investigate these tools for assessing students' oral language competence and implement more technology in the second language classroom.

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