



Assessment of Oral English Ability at the Tertiary Level in Bangladesh

Research Paper

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Abstract

‘Useful’ and ‘necessary’ information about the language ability of a student is expected to be known through some language tests which give statement of what the learner has achieved in a second or foreign language. Here, in Bangladesh, good grade does not always certify whether the student can communicate spontaneously or not. Previous research claims that the problem is not in the teaching learning method only, negligence in the testing and evaluation of different skills are also responsible. This study aims to find the present circumstances of English oral ability assessment at tertiary level in Bangladesh. For the purpose of the study, data were collected from secondary sources only and analyzed carefully. The findings of the paper show that the assessment of oral English ability at tertiary level is neglected in Bangladesh. The study displays that the marks allotted and the testing techniques used for the assessment of oral ability at tertiary level are insufficient. The study recommends to allocate more marks on the assessment of oral ability and to incorporate more testing techniques in the assessment of oral ability.

Keywords: Assessment, oral ability, tertiary level, test techniques.

1. Introduction

In this communicative era, learning a language is successful only if an individual can ‘function’ well in that language. Though Bangladesh is not an EFL country, English is practiced widely in different sectors here. A student in Bangladesh is taught English with the highest importance since the first day at school. But due to the existing teaching and learning method, the grade a student gets at the end of educational life does not reflect the true ability of a student. At secondary and higher secondary level, practice and assessment of speaking skills are neglected till date. Being one of the vital skills of language learning, though sometimes speaking is practised in the classes, it is not tested until tertiary level in Bangladesh. A student is thought ‘not learning anything’ (Madsen, 1983) if he is not being evaluated. Hughes (2003) assumes that the objective of teaching spoken language is the development of the ability to interact successfully in that language.

Hughes (2003) also maintains that the teaching and learning of speaking should involve comprehension as well as production’ of the language. In Bangladesh, the techniques practiced for testing the oral ability of students at tertiary level are insufficient for the proper testing of the

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language. Based on the secondary research, this paper discusses the current situation of English oral ability assessment as well as presents some suggestions for improving the current assessment techniques of speaking at tertiary level.

2. Limitations and further Study

This paper is based on secondary data and contemporary research papers available on testing speaking ability at tertiary level in Bangladesh. Ample research has been done on teaching speaking in the language classes. However, little attention has been given on the 'assessment' of this crucial skill. If there were primary data, the research would have been further enriched.

3. Objectives

The main objective of the paper was to depict the status of oral English ability assessment at tertiary level in Bangladesh. Accordingly, the paper also aims to present some recommendations that can help to improve the assessment of English oral ability at tertiary level in Bangladesh

4. Literature Review

This section of the paper elaborates the importance of testing oral ability and the reasons that make testing oral ability challenging.

4.1. Language Testing

It is all known that language teachers can assess their students' progress from class participation, and from different activities inside and outside the classroom. Again, if a learner can speak English well it is thought that he knows English well. However, none of these are enough to certify a learner's language ability. That is why; the question of language testing arises. Madsen (1983) mentions testing as an important part of every teaching and learning experience. Madsen (1983) believes that well-made tests of English can help students in two ways; firstly, by creating positive attitudes toward instruction and secondly by helping students master the language. Tests point out what each person has mastered and point out those items that need further attention (Madsen, 1983). Hughes (2003) says that in order to make meaningful comparisons, tests provide a 'common yardstick'.

4.2. The importance of testing oral ability

According to Richards (2008), the mastery of speaking skills is viewed as a necessity for most EFL and ESL learners. Hughes (2003) believes that at the earliest stages of learning speaking, formal testing of oral ability is not that much needed. However, the necessity of testing oral ability is undeniable. Speaking assessments can take many forms, for oral sections of standardized tests such as the Basic English Skills Test (BEST) or the English as a Second Language Oral Assessment (ESOLA) for authentic assessments such as progress checklists, analysis of taped speech samples, or anecdotal records of speech in classroom interactions. Assessment instruments should reflect instruction and are to be incorporated from the beginning stages of lesson planning (O'Malley and Pierce, 1996 as mentioned in Alam and Khan, 2014).

4.3. The reasons that make speaking tests challenging

In language teaching, the process of speaking assessment is considered as very contentious and intricate (O' Sullivan, 2006 as mentioned in Ounis 2017). Madsen (1983) identifies the following problems in designing speaking tests:

- a. The nature of the speaking skill is not well defined.
- b. What criteria to choose in evaluating oral communication are not agreed upon.

- c. There are some questions about how to test fluency.
- d. Another concern related to the testing of speaking is how to get students to speak.
- e. A practical problem is to test each student individually.
- f. Another complication is the range of oral communication.

Hughes (2003) compares that the basic problem in testing oral ability is essentially the same as for testing writing.

- a. 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.
- b. The tasks should elicit behavior which truly represents the candidates' ability.
- c. The samples of behavior can and will be scored validly and reliably. (Hughes, 2003)

5. Methodology

This exploratory research is a preliminary investigation based on secondary resources. For the purpose of the study, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from secondary sources in the form of books, journals, scholarly articles and other materials related to the field. Information about the testing and evaluation system of different universities was taken from the curricula of the respective universities. All the data collected from different sources are acknowledged.

6. Findings and Discussion

This section first discusses the state of English oral exam at tertiary level and then discusses the test techniques used and allocation of marks for oral exam in the final examination.

6.1. No Assessment of English Oral Ability until Tertiary level

Apart from some exceptions, Bangladeshi students get their speaking skill assessed for the first time at tertiary level. A student, who has been learning English since the first day at school, faces the first oral exam at the university. Research shows that the prestige of English in Bangladesh is yet high, though in terms of official or daily life usage, Bangla gets prioritized. With the advancement of the world, the demand for English for communicative purposes is increasing. In Banking, telecom industry, retailing and mining, above all, in the country's economy, English proficiency plays an extremely important role now. To make a competent manpower with good functional knowledge of English, CLT has been incorporated. But the reality is that, not all the skills are practiced and assessed here with equal importance. Written tests are yet the solo medium of assessing the students' proficiency in English up to higher secondary level.

Alam and Khan (2014) observed that, 'spoken English' is taught only by some skilled teachers of English language in some of the Dhaka City based English medium schools, in some of the private Universities, in the twelve Cadet Colleges, and also in some very few well-programmed institutions. But this is not the total picture of the country. Jahan (2008) finds out that most of our tertiary learners cannot speak English fluently even when they have learnt and have been taught the language for minimum 13 to 15 years of their life i.e. from nursery to Higher Secondary level.

Jahan (2008) further mentions that the methods and techniques used for teaching spoken English are responsible for this. Though the textbooks of English at secondary and higher secondary level in Bangladesh, contain exercises for practicing speaking in the classes, speaking is not assessed at all in the final examinations. Therefore, teachers and students both emphasize on reading comprehension and writing, not on speaking the language.

6.2. Limited Test Techniques Employed for Limited Marks in Oral Exams

In BA honours, according to the *Student Handbook* (2016), an English Department student of Dhaka University is assessed on total 3000 marks which are 120 credits. Only 200 marks or 8 credits are assigned for the oral exam, which is only 7% of the total marks allotted. At Jahangirnagar University, “the courses offered in the Department of English for the degree of BA (Honours) spread over four years, and carry a total of 134 credits and 3400 marks” (Department of English, Jahangirnagar University, 2016). However, only 8 credits or 200 marks are allotted for the assessment of oral ability. In both cases, the only assessment technique used for oral exam is ‘viva- voce’ at the end of each semester or at the end of each year. Even the courses that cover all the language skills of English, have written tests only as medium of summative assessment. It can be mentioned here that summative assessments are used at the end of each semester or year to measure what the learner has acquired throughout the course of study. Formative assessments are used to check on the progress of the students’ performance and if needed make any improvement in teaching learning method.

The findings of the study show the negligence in the assessment of English oral ability at tertiary level. The study also mentions that the testing technique used to measure the oral ability is limited. Total marks assigned in the final examination to measure oral an important skill like oral ability are also insufficient.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, a few recommendations have been presented in this section of the paper:

7.1. Increasing Marks for Oral Exam as Summative Assessment

In Bangladesh, the classroom activities are designed to secure good position in the examination. All the teaching learning activities evolve round grades in the final examination. So, at tertiary level, if the oral ability is assessed in the final examination, only then both teachers and students will focus on the speaking skill being practiced along with reading and writing. That is why; the present study recommends allocating more marks on oral exam in the final examination.

7.2. Incorporating Some Innovative Test Techniques

From the examples of some public and private universities’ final assessment system, it is seen that oral interview is the widely used traditional technique of assessing speaking ability at tertiary level in Bangladesh. However, speaking can be assessed through as various techniques feasible for the students because this will show more what they have actually learnt and also it will break the monotony. In this section of the paper, some techniques are discussed that are compatible with the teaching learning method at tertiary level in Bangladesh. As the socio-economic situation and teaching learning method have great impact on the assessment method, the techniques are recommended keeping that in mind. Again, though some techniques mentioned in the existing literature may seem very wonderful, they cannot be effective as much in this context as a student at tertiary level here faces a speaking test for the first time in the whole academic life.

7.2.1. Guided Oral Interview

The purpose of testing speaking is to know whether the candidate can communicate spontaneously or not. Oral interview in this case is a trusted and traditional way for testing speaking. The oral interview can provide ‘a genuine sense of communication’ (Madsen, 1983). In the traditional practice of oral interview, the candidate usually speaks before the senior teachers and therefore just answers the questions asked by them. As a result, it ends up as a ‘series of

questions and answers' (Madsen, 1983). Guided oral interview can be an effective technique in this case. Madsen (1983) thinks 'rapport is important' as most of the candidates become ineffectual on occasion when feeling threatened or talked down to. Duration of the oral interview should also be considered in Bangladesh as here each class has a large number of students to test.

7.2.2. Presentation

In a study conducted on Japanese graduate students at Keio University, Nakamura & Valens (2001) employed presentation as a form of assessment of speaking ability, which was formally named as 'the Monologue Speaking Test'. Students were asked to perform some tasks such as; show and tell, where they talk about anything they choose. This gave the students a chance to mini presentation (Nakamura and Valens, 2001).

In Bangladeshi perspective, presentations can be effective and feasible technique for assessing oral ability. However, the students will have to be informed much ahead of time about the nature and scoring method of the presentation. There can be individual or group presentations. The topic of the presentation can be chosen by the students or can be selected by the teacher. A moderate way can be to ask the students to come up with their ideas and then the teacher guiding them with further correction on the topic. This flourishes creativity and makes students enthusiastic. The content of the presentation, the language and eye contact can be taken into consideration for scoring the test.

7.2.3. Interaction with Fellow Candidates

In Bangladesh, the teacher is an authoritative figure and an examination always makes students nervous to the utmost level. That is why; many students cannot answer in the viva voce properly even if they know the answer. But this same candidate can converse freely with the fellow candidate in an informal situation. So, speaking ability can be assessed when two carefully selected candidates interact between themselves on a given topic. In this way, it may elicit 'better performance' as the candidates may feel 'more confident than when dealing with a dominant, seemingly omniscient interviewer' (Hughes, 2003). Setting a task that demands discussion and also employing natural role play can be effective for this purpose.

7.2.4. Responses to audio-or video- recordings

In Bangladesh, speaking tests are avoided with the excuse of testing large number of students. An economical technique for this purpose where a language laboratory is available can be using the same computer generated or audio/video recorded stimuli. This technique is reliable and large number of students can be tested at the same time (Hughes, 2003). Some studies find using the taped oral proficiency test for testing a large number of students can be beneficial for the teachers. But this method has the disadvantage of being 'less formal' as 'examinee is talking to a machine and not to a person' (Cartier, 1980). In comparison to taped oral proficiency test method, response to audio-video recordings are more communicative.

Other techniques that are found in the existing literature are testing speaking using visual material, employing dialogue and multilogue speaking test, conversational exchanges, role play tests and many more. Above all, the testers need to choose 'the appropriate methods and techniques of testing' based on 'the situation and the purpose of the test'.

8. Conclusion

How competent a student is in communicative English depends on both the teaching learning method and the evaluation system. Therefore, only written tests cannot certify the total capability of a learner in this communicative era. English oral ability needs to be practiced and assessed with equal importance to make the tertiary level students competent for the upcoming

race. This study brings forth the existing negligence in the assessment of oral ability at tertiary level. The paper recommends to allocate more marks on oral exam and to employ few more testing techniques in the assessment of oral ability. However, further research can be conducted on the evaluation and scoring of speaking tests at tertiary level in Bangladesh.

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