

Assessing Speaking Skill in English Language Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

The ability to assess speaking in English language teaching is very important for English teachers because as one of language productive skills, speaking cannot be assessed directly and objectively by unqualified and inexperienced English teachers. This is in line with the teachers and lecturers law No. 14, 2005 which states that one of main duties of professional teachers is assessment. Therefore, this paper seems to be useful to improve their knowledge and understanding in assessment to avoid and reduce their subjectivity in assessing this productive skill. This paper also describes how to assess speaking skill, definitions of assessment, speaking, measurement, evaluation and test, characteristics of assessment and measurement, the difference between traditional assessment and alternative assessment. Besides, several purposes of assessment are also described in the paper to improve teachers' insight in this topic.

Keywords: assessment, speaking, evaluation, measurement, and test

INTRODUCTION

The ability to assess speaking in English language teaching is very important for English teachers because as one of language productive skills, speaking cannot be assessed directly and objectively by unqualified and inexperienced English teachers. This is in line with the teachers and lecturers law No. 14, 2005 which states that one of main duties of professional teachers is to assess their students in teaching and learning process. In addition, it is generally accepted that the majority of teachers and learners also get confused to understand and make distinction between the terms of 'assessment' and 'evaluation'. Other important terms such as 'speaking', 'measurement', 'test', 'teaching' and 'learning' are also described in this paper. Therefore, this paper tries to describe them in details in order to get full understanding about them.

Experts especially educators, and curriculum designers, define the key terms found in this paper such as 'assessment', 'evaluation', 'measurement', 'test', 'teaching', and 'learning' in a number of different ways. However, the writer tries to select some definitions as shown in the discussion and description.

This paper is intended to answer the following questions: (1) What is assessment?; (2) What is the difference between assessment and evaluation? (3) What are the purposes of assessment done by language teachers? (4) What is the difference between traditional assessment and alternative assessment? (5) How do language teachers assess speaking skill?

From the above questions, the purposes of writing this paper are to be able to define assessment, to differentiate between assessment and evaluation, to know the purposes of assessment done by language teachers, to know the difference between traditional assessment and alternative assessment, and to know the ways and the indicators used to assess speaking skill as one of the productive skills.

METHODOLOGY

In describing and discussing this topic, library research is used to collect all relevant information needed especially to discuss and describe about assessment, evaluation, measurement, and test as mentioned in the following:

DESCRIPTION AND DISCUSSION

The following are described, the definition, the purpose, the difference between assessment and evaluation, the difference between assessment and measurement, the difference between teaching and learning, assessing speaking as the productive skill and other important description about traditional and alternative assessment.

Assessment as described by **Puhl** (1997:3) is the process of collecting and integrating information about learners from various sources to help us understand these students and describe them. While **Richards, Platt, and Platt** (1992:23). in the one hand, define assessment as the measurement of the ability of a person or the quality or success of a teaching course, etc. Then, assessment according to **Print** (1993:215) involves the interpretation of measurement data. It makes sense of the data collected on student performance. It can be seen from the definitions that to know the information about what students can do or cannot do needs measurement by using the appropriate instrument such as test, interview, questionnaire, observation, etc. The general purpose of the assessment as described by **Cohen** (1994:23) can be categorized into administrative, instructional, and research functions as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The Purpose of the Assessment

General Purpose of the Assessment	Specific Reason for the Assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Administrative 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> general assessment placement exemption certification promotion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instructional 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> diagnosis evidence of progress feedback to respondent evaluation of teaching or curriculum
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> evaluation experimentation knowledge about language learning and language use

The next term is evaluation. In this paper evaluation refers to a process which consists of the sub-processes of measurement and assessment providing adequate and useful data upon which the final judgments are made. **Puhl** (1997:3) defines evaluation as 'the process of making a judgment of a product, a response, or performance based on criteria.' Evaluation in our schools is essentially concerned with two major approaches to making judgments: *Firstly*, product evaluation which means an evaluation of student performance in a specific learning context. Such an evaluation essentially seeks to determine how well the student has achieved the stated objectives of the learning situation. In this sense the student's performance is seen as a product of the educational experience. A school report is an example of product evaluation. The *second approach* is known as process evaluation which includes the experiences and activities involved in the learning process i.e. making judgments about the process by which students required learning or examining the learning experience before it has been concluded. In most cases, process evaluation is used when making judgments about school effectiveness, classroom interactions, the curriculum and about the effectiveness of specific programs. For example, process evaluation may be carried out upon the nature of student-teacher interaction, instruction methods, school curricula, and so forth.

According **Print** (1993:190) Evaluation has several functions: to provide feedback to learners, to determine how well learners have achieved the stated objectives, to provide information to improve curricula, and to clarify the stated objectives by the curriculum developers. From the above the definitions, it can be concluded that evaluation refers to a

process of collecting information or data about anything (student, school, teacher and program) to make decision about it based on value judgment.

Measurement, on the other hand, is defined as the collection of data or information, usually in quantitative terms, of student performance. It can be also described that to measure means to convert information into numbers or figures. It can be seen from this definition that measurement needs figure or a certain scales such as nominal, ordinal, interval and ratio scales.

The differences between assessment and measurement are as follows: Assessment is *interpretative* which means that assessment gives information about something through measurement, for example, people whose height are 165 centimeters are ideal heights for Indonesian people. Assessment is also *qualitative*. This means that the information of the assessment determines the quality of something such as **excellent, sweet, tall**, etc. The last characteristic of assessment is *subjective*. The information of the assessment is dependent on situation and condition of assessor, for example, a person with 165 centimeters tall is categorized short for western people. Measurement, on the other hand, is *descriptive, quantitative, and objective*. Descriptive measurement refers to information shows the real fact of the object or person. For example, his brother is 150 centimeters tall. The second characteristic means that measurement provides information in figure or number. Measurement is objective because it presents information as it is without changing the information or data.

A test can be defined as an instrument which is used to determine a learner's ability, knowledge or performance in language skills or language aspects. **Brown** (2004:3) defines a test as 'a method of a person's ability, knowledge, or skill, or performance in a given domain'. In order to know learner's ability, knowledge, and skills, s/he is asked some questions. In other words, a test may refer to a number of questions asked to a student to be answered based on the instruction given.

Teaching in traditional understanding means transferring knowledge, skill, and experience from a teacher to his students usually in and outside the classroom. From this definition it can be concluded that when teaching learning process takes place in or outside the classroom there must be a teacher, and students who discuss a topic to teach and learn. Teaching according to **Brown** (1987:7) refers to guiding and facilitating learning, enabling the learner to learn, setting the condition for learning. It is implied from this definition that a teacher has function to guide, facilitate, and enable students to learn in order to get knowledge, skill, and experience.

Learning in a broad sense can be stated as the change of students' behavior because of reinforced practice. Learning can be done by students with or without a teacher. In other words, students can apply their learning style how to acquire or get knowledge of a subject or skill by study, experience, or instruction. This is in line with the definition stated by **Knight et al** (1992:430). They describe learning 'as gaining knowledge of or acquiring skill in (something) by study, practice and teaching.'

Assessing Speaking as the Productive Skill

As has been mentioned earlier, as one of language productive skills, speaking cannot be assessed directly and objectively by unqualified and inexperienced English teachers. Speaking in this paper is described as the ability of a person to express his feelings, ideas and opinions in spoken communication or in oral form. Based on the writer's knowledge, experience, and observation, English teachers have difficulty in assessing speaking. In other words, English teachers need clear criteria to assess this skill known as rubric as suggested by **Mukminatien** (2000). To help teachers assess speaking skill, they can use Tables 2 and 3. It is clear in the table that there are some aspects to be considered in assessing speaking such as *pronunciation, grammar accuracy, vocabulary, fluency, and interactive communication*. The scoring guide consists of two parts: (1) a description of the aspects of speaking ability to be assessed, and (2) the scale criteria based on the rater makes a judgment as shown in Table 3.

Table 2: The Scoring Guide of Speaking Assessment

1. Description

Aspects to be evaluated	Description
1. Pronunciation	1. Pronunciation of individual sounds and words 2. Pronunciation of sentences: the right intonation and stress
2. Grammar Accuracy	Accurate use of structure, or how the learner get his/her utterance correct
3. Vocabulary	The learner's ability in choosing appropriate words and how to solve the problems when he/she cannot find suitable words by explaining around the word.
4. Fluency	1. The ability to keep the conversation going 2. Read a text smoothly without hesitation, or inappropriate pause, or repeating words or lines
5. Interactive communication	The ability to get the meaning across the listener

Table 3: Scale Criteria

Scale	Proficiency	Category	Description of Criteria
0	10-39	Very poor	P: many wrong pronunciation G: No mastery of sentence construction V: Little knowledge of English words F: Dominated by hesitation I: Message unclear
1	40-50	Poor	P: many wrong pronunciation G: No mastery of sentence construction V: Little knowledge of English words F: Dominated by hesitation I: Message unclear
2	60-70	Average	P: Occasional errors in pronunciation G: Several errors in structure V: Occasional in word choice F: Occasional hesitation I: Ideas stand but loosely organized
3	75-80	Good	P: Some errors in pronunciation G: Minor problems in structure V: Minor errors in word choice F: Minor hesitation I: Clear and organized ideas
4	85-100	Very good	P: No errors/ minor errors G: demonstrate mastery of structure (few errors) V: Effective/appropriate word choice F: No hesitation I: well organized and clear ideas

Some Differences of Traditional and Alternative Assessment

Brown (2004:13) describes some differences of traditional and alternative assessment as shown in table 4.

Table 4: Traditional and Alternative Assessment according to Brown (2004:13)

Traditional Assessment	Alternative Assessment
One-shot, standardized exams	Continuous long-term assessment
Timed, multiple-choice format	Untimed, free-response format
Decontextualized test items	Contextualized communicative tasks
Score suffice for feedback	Individualized feedback and wash-back
Norm-referenced scores	Criterion-reference scores
Focus on the 'right' answer	Open-ended, creative answers
Summative	Formative
Oriented to product	Oriented to process
Non-interactive performance	Interactive performance
Foster extrinsic motivation	Foster intrinsic motivation

Puhl (1997:5), on the one hand, also describes some differences between traditional and alternative assessment, however, she uses the term of continuous assessment instead of alternative assessment. In addition, she describes the differences based on dimension which includes purpose, focus, feedback, test task, classroom management, frame of references, and stakeholder as can be seen in table 5 below.

Table 5. Traditional and Continuous Assessment according Puhl

Dimension	Traditional Assessment	Continuous Assessment
Purpose of test	Summative; it "sum up" what has been happening Judgmental; forces learner to study	Formative: it generates input to inform and guide teaching Developmental; diagnostic: directs instructional attention
Focus	Product of instruction Teacher-created activity Heavy on memorization De-contextualized	Process of instruction Learner-created activity Heavy on thinking, integration holistic
Feedback	A score or mark: final, no changing it	A range of comments from peers, teachers: happens the process while still time to change
Test task	Typically written work Medium: paper and pencil Narrow focus Exercises (for the future) Formal	Typically a range of tasks Multimedia Multidimensional Authentic (real life tasks for now) informal
Classroom management	Intrusive; interrupts class process "one-shot;" only one change to show competence Results need time to be determined Books closed	Integrated; part of class routine Overtime; change to revise, improve, add Feedback comes quickly References available
Frame of Reference	Norm-referenced Learner compared against norms based on other test takers	Criterion-referenced Learner compared against specified criteria of achievement

Stakeholders	Learners, parents, principal receive results	Learners, parents, principal invited to help assess
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CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Measurement and assessment have different characteristics. Three characteristics of measurement are descriptive, quantitative and objective. Three different characteristics of assessment, on the other hand, are interpretative, qualitative, and objective. Assessment can be done when measurement has been done. As one of the CTL components, assessment is known as authentic assessment which means a process of collecting information or data from various sources during and after teaching learning process. A test, in the one hand, is the instrument which is used to know the ability of student in language skills. Evaluation in English language teaching can be described as making a decision on something through measurement and assessment. Based on the teachers and lecturers law, evaluation and assessment are the two of the seven main duties of professional educators in educational world.

Teachers and learners must be able to understand the difference between assessment and evaluation by looking at the function, the feature and the purpose of these two terms. The teachers and learners can assess speaking as one of the language productive skills by taking into account their pronunciation, structure, vocabulary, fluency, and interactive communication.

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