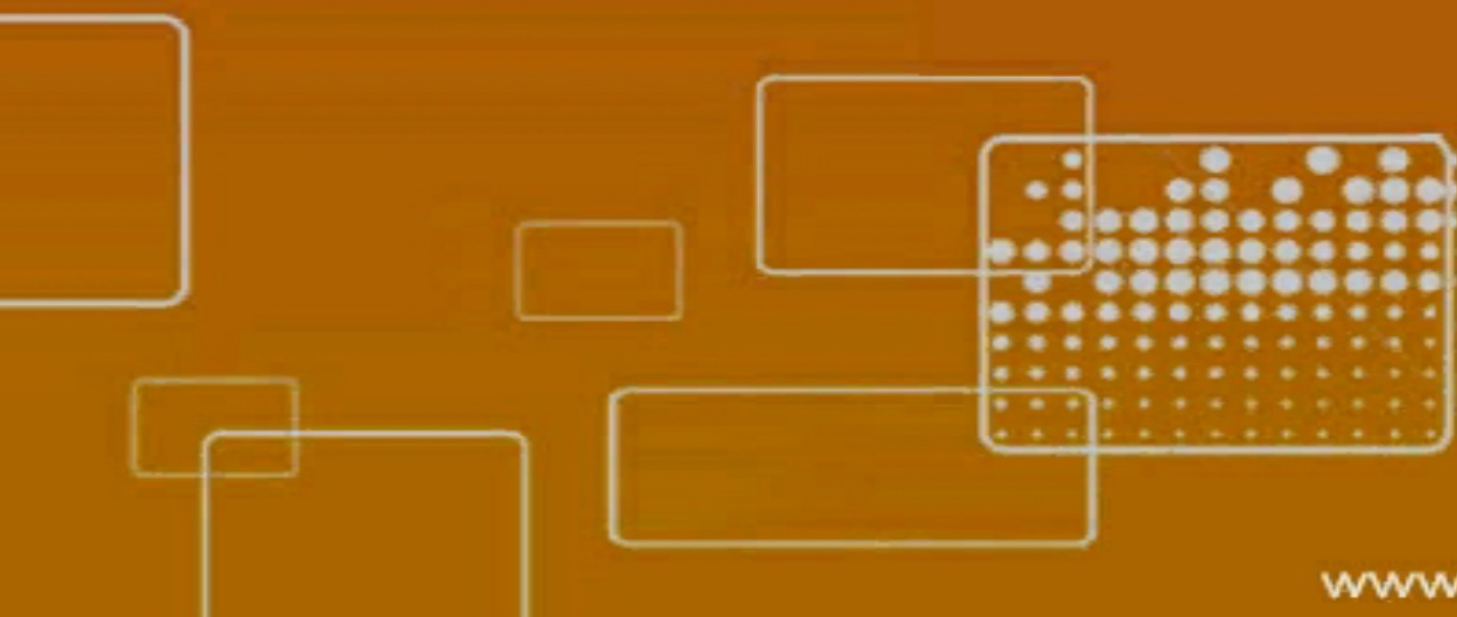


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Problem of Assessing Speaking as a Second Language

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Abstract—This article is devoted to the innovative methods of teaching English and assessing speaking in the B1 level students' knowledge in non-philological higher educational system.

Index Terms— assessing, develop, respond, review, proficiency, technique, stage.

1 INTRODUCTION

The ability to speak in a foreign language is at the very heart of what it means to be able to use a foreign language. Our personality, our self-image, our knowledge of the world and our ability to reason and express our thoughts are all reflected in our spoken performance in a foreign language. Although an ability to read a language is often the limited goal of many learners, it is rare indeed for the teaching of a foreign language not to involve learners and teachers in using the language in class. Being able to speak to friends, colleagues, visitors and even strangers, in their language or in a language which both speakers can understand, is surely the goal of very many learners [1,2]. Yet speaking in a foreign language is very difficult and competence in speaking takes a long time to develop. To speak in some foreign language learners must master the sound system of the language, have almost instant access to appropriate vocabulary and be able to put words together intelligibly with minimal hesitation. In addition, they must also understand what is being said to them, and be able to respond appropriately to maintain amicable relations or to achieve their communicative goals [3]. Because speaking is done in real-time, learners' abilities to plan, process and produce the foreign language are taxed greatly. For that reason, the structure of speech is quite different from that of the written language, where users have time to plan, edit and correct what they produce. Yet teachers often focus narrowly on the development of grammatically accurate speech which may conflict with a learner's desire to communicate and be understood.

2 METHODS OF RESEARCH

Speaking is also the most difficult language skill to assess reliably. A person's speaking ability is usually judged during a face-to-face interaction, in real time, between an interlocutor

and a candidate [4,5,6,7,8]. The assessor has to make instantaneous judgments about a range of aspects of what is being said, as it is being said. This means that the assessment might depend not only upon which particular features of speech (e.g. pronunciation, accuracy, fluency) the interlocutor pays attention to at any point in time, but upon a host of other factors such as the language level, gender, and status of the interlocutor, his or her familiarity to the candidate and the personal characteristics of the interlocutor and candidate.

Moreover, the nature of the interaction, the sorts of tasks that are presented to the candidate, the questions asked, the topics broached, and the opportunities that are provided to show his or her ability to speak in a foreign language will all have an impact on the candidate's performance.

In addition to all the factors that may affect performance, the criteria used to assess the performance can vary enormously, from global assessments to detailed analytic scales. The ways in which these scales are interpreted by an assessor, who may or may not be the same person as the interlocutor, are bound to have an impact on the score or scores that the candidate is ultimately awarded. There are, of course, ways of overcoming or at least addressing some of these problems, by careful construction of the tasks used to elicit speech, by careful training of both assessors and interlocutors, through audio or video recording of the speech event and by allowing assessors time to review and revise their judgments. Assessing speaking is thus not impossible, but it is difficult. Testing the oral proficiency of foreign language students is a complex task which may cause considerable problems at any stage of the process. The difficulties concern not only the choice of the appropriate elicitation technique and form of assessment, but they may also emerge while designing or administering the test. Practitioners and researchers are divided in their opinions as to the validity of oral testing and put forward arguments for and against it [9,10,11]. The most common arguments in favour of testing oral fluency are as follows:

- Each general language test should include all aspects and areas of the language; therefore, it should include speaking;
- Speaking is generally considered to be the most important

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language skill, that is why it should take priority in any language test;

- An oral proficiency test at the end of the course will guarantee that teachers and students devote more time to speaking practice during the course (the wash back effect), otherwise a tendency to neglect extensive speaking practice or not to give it enough time and effort can be observed;

- There are many students who speak well but write badly, a test based on writing may discriminate such learners and their overall assessment will not reflect their actual skills and abilities. However, there are also numerous convincing arguments against oral testing (Ur 1995: 134):

- Designing valid and reliable tests that make learners improvise speech in the target language is very difficult,

- Speech is very difficult to assess quickly and objectively, recordings can be made but this form of evaluation is extremely time-consuming and it does not guarantee objectivity;

- There is a problem of finding the right balance between accuracy and fluency testing. It is often not clear what criteria should be selected for assessment of the speaking skill or which should be given priority and why;

- Even a well-balanced selection of a set of criteria does not mean that testers will apply them in an identical manner, consistent and objective assessment may be extremely difficult to reach;

- Oral testing is a very time-consuming procedure, students are tested individually or in pairs in real time, educational institutions have problems with ensuring the adequate amount of time for every student to be tested appropriately. Problems and challenges in teaching and learning speaking at advanced level 47 The above arguments show that an assessment of learners' speaking skills is a very complicated process which involves taking many binding decisions as early as at the stage of planning the language course. Yet, despite all the difficulties, oral testing procedures constitute an important part of overall student evaluation in most institutional language courses. Testing may in fact be the starting point of the course (placement tests) and usually occurs at the end of it, too (achievement tests). There are also tests administered at various times during the course which are meant to measure student progress. Oral testing is practically implemented by means of the following spoken test types :

- Interviews – learners are interviewed individually or in pairs but the formal nature of such interviews hardly ever allows for testing informal, conversational speaking styles and affects the interviewee's performance (the interviewer is also the assessor).

- Live monologues – students present a talk or presentation on a preselected topic. The interviewer effect is then eliminated but the test provides rather restricted information on the speaker's actual skill as it does not check students' ability to handle a casual conversation.

- Recorded monologues or dialogues – they are less stressful than live performance and give examiners more opportunities

to work out consistent and possibly more objective assessment.

- Role-plays – this test format may be particularly reliable if it matches the needs of learners and aims of the language course, however the influence of the interlocutor on the performance of the testee is hard to predict and control.

- Collaborative tasks and discussions – learners act as themselves, but similarly to role-plays, the testee is influenced by the interlocutor or interlocutors, the test enables examiners to assess learners' interactive skills and their ability to express personal views. Deciding on the particular spoken test format entails choosing the relevant set of assessment criteria. There are two basic types of scoring employed in oral testing.

3 CONCLUSION

Consequently, holistic scoring reflects the overall impression the learner made on examiners and it takes the form of a single score, therefore it is often used in informal testing of individual progress. Analytic scoring is more time-consuming as it involves giving a separate score for different aspects of the learner's performance. As a result, it takes longer but offers a more complete, varied and, consequently, more reliable picture of students' skills. For these reasons it is more valuable in terms of the received feedback for higher level students.

Learners at the advanced level of language proficiency are more likely to benefit from detailed descriptions of their speaking skills than from a single score which depicts their ability to 48 Magdalena Aleksandrak communicate in general. The criteria used for any type of scoring usually take into account the categories of grammar, vocabulary, discourse management and interactive communication (Thornbury 2007: 127). The specific, more detailed criteria may be defined within each category with respect to the aims and character of the general evaluation procedure and the chosen spoken test format.

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