

STUDENTS AND TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF SPEAKING ASSESSMENT AT UPPER-HIGH SCHOOLS IN VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

It is a fact that the new English textbooks written by Pro. Hoang Van Van and co-authors have made the context of English language teaching (ELT) in Vietnam an enormous shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered which focuses on communication. The introduction of the books, however, has posed many teachers of English at upper-high schools challenges, especially speaking teaching and assessment. From those backdrops, it is necessary to conduct studies to explore teachers and students perceptions of the issue aiming at providing a theoretical framework for assessing speaking. The purpose of this study is to investigate the task types of speaking and criteria for speaking assessment that teachers at upper-high schools used to assess speaking.

Key words: *perception; speaking assessment; language assessment; language learning; marking criteria*

INTRODUCTION

Speaking has an important role in human beings life because speaking is a productive skill in which the speaker produces to communicate among people in a society in order to keep the relationship going well. Speaking is the thing that we use to express ideas at the same time he/she tries to get the ideas from others. Rivers [1] says that through speaking, someone can express his ideas, emotions, attentions, reactions to other person and situation and influence other person. Therefore, through speaking, everyone can communicate well or express what he/she wants from other and responds to the speaker. The teaching of speaking has been neglected for many years in foreign language teaching, including English as a foreign language (EFL), for various reasons (*e.g.* the strong influence of the grammar translation method, lack of English native speaker teachers and EFL teachers with near-native English proficiency, large class size).[2]

Statement of problem

The move from teacher-centred to learner-centred teaching style brings along many changes in assessment format. That is from discrete points testing to communicative testing. However, it is seemingly that in Vietnam there are incongruities between the

teaching practice and testing activities. Inbar-Lourie [3] notes that:

The move from an atomized view of language knowledge to what is known as communicative competence, and to communicative and task-based approaches to language teaching has accentuated the incongruity of existing assessment measures. Calls for matching language learning and evaluation have been repeatedly made since Morrow (1979) urged language testers over three decades ago, to bridge the gap between communicatively focused teaching goals and the testing procedures used to gauge them.

Textbooks include of speaking sections, but the types of assessment as well as criteria for assessment of speaking is not mentioned in any teaching materials at this level. In addition, the final exam is paper-based not oral-based so the assessment of oral English has not received sufficient considerations.

There have been many attempts to bridge the gap between teaching and testing, especially with the approval of the National Project 2020 and the development of VSTEP. However, the assessment of speaking skill at high schools is still a limitation for many teachers of English at this level in Vietnam.

Scope of the study

The study will focus on the application of speaking assessment at high school level whose learners are studying the new national

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textbooks namely English 10 (Tiếng Anh 10), English 11 (Tiếng Anh 11), and English 12 (Tiếng Anh 12) written by Prof. Hoang Van Van and co-authors (2018).

Research questions

From the above mentioned aims, the study attempts to answer the following questions:

- *What kinds of task do teachers use to assess speaking at upper-high schools?*
- *What assessment criteria are employed to assess speaking?*
- *What problems do teachers encounter when assessing students' speaking performance?*

LITERATURE REVIEW

Principles of language assessment

According to Brown [4], there are five principles which are practicality, reliability, validity, authenticity and washback.

Practicality

An effective test is practical when, it is not expensive, it stays within appropriate time constraints, it is easy to administer and it has a scoring/evaluation procedure that is specific and time-efficient.

Reliability

Reliability means when the teacher presents a test and after, she/he gives the same test to the same student, the test should yield similar results; it is what reliability consists on.

Validity

Validity is when the results of the test are appropriate, meaningful, and useful in terms of the purpose of the assessment. In other words, a test or task measures what teachers want to measure.

Authenticity

A test that shows a natural language as is possible, contextualized items, meaningful topics and real-world tasks is what shows that a test is authentic.

Washback

It refers to the effect of assessment on teaching and learning. Washback gives the opportunity to teachers and students to give

feedback to realize problems language learning and improve them.

Speaking assessment

Speaking and listening, by nature are almost always closely interrelated. It is very difficult to isolate oral production tasks that do not directly involve the interaction of aural comprehension. Only in limited contexts of speaking people can assess oral language without the aural participation of an interlocutor. As a productive skill, speaking can be directly and empirically observed. Brown [4] stated that the interaction of speaking and listening challenges the designer of an oral production test to tease apart, as much as possible, the factors accounted for by aural intake.

Criteria for speaking assessment

Pronunciation

According to Scott Thornbury [5], pronunciation is in the CEFR included in an illustrative scale for phonological control. Pronunciation is the ability to produce individual sounds and to link words together, as well as using stress and intonation to communicate meaning.

Vocabulary

The CEFR includes illustrative scales regarding the range of vocabulary knowledge and the ability to control that knowledge. A person on the highest level of proficiency (C2) has “a good command of a very broad lexical repertoire including idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms; shows awareness of connotative levels of meaning” A person on this level also has a “consistently correct and appropriate use of vocabulary.”[6]

Grammatical accuracy

In addition to vocabulary, grammar is the building blocks in a language; the basis one can construct a language from. All languages have patterns and rules one must apply in order to produce language. Bachman & Palmer [7] state that grammatical knowledge contains vocabulary, syntax and morphology, i.e. knowledge of how utterances and sentences are organized.

Fluency

'Fluency' is a term that requires further clarification, as it includes two different meanings; one general and one technical. The general meaning covers the ability to speak various languages, as in 'she is fluent in five languages', whereas the technical meaning is applied to characterize a student's speech. What makes it difficult to assess fluency is that features such as flow and smoothness in language, as well as the use of pausing and hesitation markers are complex; they do not just describe a person's speech but also include the listener's perception of the speech. [8]

Turn-taking

In all natural speech more than one partaker is required, and to keep a conversation going it is important to manage turn-taking. As stated, mastering turn-taking is important in spoken interaction, and the CEFR has described this competence in two different illustrative scales.

Types of speaking assessment**Formative and summative assessment**

Formative assessment is based on what the students achieve during the whole course, and the teacher gives feedback to the students with the aim of improving learning. The definition of formative assessment is thus assessment for learning as opposed to summative assessment which is assessment of learning. [9]

Self-assessment

Self-assessment is another assessment method to employ in the classroom, and it is certainly assessment for learning as it entails that the students are concerned about their own learning progress. Brown [10] defines self-assessment as all assessment that involves the learners to evaluate their own competence and performance against a set of criteria.

Criterion-reference assessment

Criterion-referenced assessment means that the students' performances are measured against certain criteria and not against other student's performances [11]. The principle of

not comparing students to one another is absolute and very significant. This entails, for example, that any student may attain the highest mark if she/he has scored very highly on all criteria in a test.

Speaking assessment practice in Vietnam

In Vietnam, there have also been many researches in the field of speaking assessment. N. H. H. Thuy & T. T. T. Nga [12] explored EFL teachers' perceptions of in-class English speaking assessment. The constructs of teachers' perceptions investigated in the current research included their general understanding of speaking assessment, the task types of in-class speaking assessment, and the teachers' work involved in the assessment implementation.

Phan. N.H.N [13] has mentioned some constraints in English language teaching in Vietnam in her research. One of which stems from the exam-oriented curriculum, the teaching practice focuses on receptive skills only. She carries out some interviews for her qualitative research and the finding is that two-thirds of the participants indicated that their students did not have any opportunities to practise their English, and or to interact with different speakers from all over the world. As a result, they were quite bookish and were not really motivated to learn English.

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Speaking in the new textbooks in Vietnam

As mentioned in the previous part, the assessments of oral proficiency in Vietnam, using the new textbook by Prof. Hoang Van Van have posed many constraints for teachers of English at upper-high schools. At upper-high schools, the English curriculum consists

of three courses, namely English 10, English 11 and English 12. Each course utilizes one of the three textbooks in the series, which are Tiếng Anh 10, Tiếng Anh 11 and Tiếng Anh 12; and is taught in 105 45-minute periods, which makes the total amount of time for the whole curriculum 315 periods (approximately 236 hours).

METHODOLOGY

The research design

In this study, the qualitative research design is selected as the main approach to conduct the study because the main aim is to investigate the types and criteria that teachers at upper high schools used to assess speaking.

Participants

126 students from three classes in Luong Ngoc Quyen, Chu Van An, and Dong Hy upper-high schools were selected to participate in the study. 15 teachers of English at three high schools were invited to answer questions in the questionnaires and giving response in semi-structured interviews to explore possible problems they may have when conducting speaking activities and assessing practice.

Procedures

The data collection process was carried out in two stages for a period of about 12 weeks. The questionnaire was carried out first, and then the interviews were carried out at each school, first the teacher interview followed by the student interviews.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results from questionnaires for students

• How often do you have speaking test?

There are 70 answers as *hardly ever*, that takes up about 55% of the total. 36 answers as *sometimes* that accounts for 28.5% of the total. 20 answers as once or twice a term that accounts for 15.8 % of the total. Data obtained from the first question shows that most of the students hardly ever have speaking test during the school terms.

• What types of task you are required to do?

There are 80 answers as *questions and answers*, which accounts for 63.5% of the

total. 20 answers for *read aloud task* which takes up 15.8% of the total. 10 students said that they *played in roles* which accounts for 7.9% of the total. Few answers for the other options. The data reveals that teachers used questions and answers mostly when they conduct speaking task types.

• Do you know how you are assessed?

126 responses are negative. That means students do not know on what criteria they are assessed during the speaking test. That also means that they do not know what to focus on while doing the speaking test.

• Do you like speaking test?

92 students said they do not like the speaking test, which is 73% of the total. 12 answers are positive. That means only 9.5% of the students said that they like speaking test. 24 answers are negative which accounts for 17.4%. The data shows that most of the students do not like the speaking test.

• Do you think that speaking ability is more important than other language skills?

The answers are surprising that 112 students said that other skills are more important which takes up 89% of the total. Only 3 students said that speaking is more important that accounts for only 2.3%. 15 students did not have an idea about the importance of speaking.

Results from questionnaires for teachers

• Have you had any trainings about assessment?

12 out of 15 teachers said that they have very limited knowledge about language assessment, which takes up 80% of the total. Only one teacher said that she had learned about assessment at university but did not remember much about it. Two of the teachers said that they studied English in an in-service program so they did not learn about language assessment. The data show that teachers at upper-high schools have very limited knowledge about language assessment in general and speaking assessment in particular.

• What are the types of task do you use to assess speaking?

10 teachers said that they just used questions and answers as the popular task type (67%). Three teachers said that they used role-play tasks (20%). Two teachers said that they used other types of task. The data shows that teachers used just few task types. Most of the tasks are responsive type.

• ***What criteria do you use to assess speaking ability?***

8 out of teacher said that the speaking assessment criteria are on grammar and vocabulary (53%). Four teachers said that they used both macro and micro criteria when marking students. Three teachers said that they give marks holistically that means they combined varieties of criteria of assessment. The data reveals a fact that teachers take serious attentions on grammar when assessing non-grammar aspects of language.

• ***Do you know about these types of speaking assessment?***

Only two teachers know a little bit about criterion assessment because they had just took an exam on CEFR. Most of the interviewers have no ideas of the listed speaking assessment.

Results from interviews

Three teachers of English at different schools are selected for the semi-structured interview. They are selected because they have just passed the C1 level exam and they seemed to have better understanding of speaking task types and assessing speaking criteria. The researcher asked the first teacher some questions about problems she encountered when conducting speaking assessment. She confessed that she does not do many speaking activities as well as speaking test while teaching. The reason for that is that the students are not interested in speaking. They just want to do the written test to strengthen grammar and reading ability. The other reason is that the large class size prevents her from doing speaking activities. She wants to teach a smaller class so that she can help students develop oral skills.

The second teacher said that he ignores most of the speaking activities in class because he

did not have enough time to do the task. Besides, he has limited understanding about language assessment. He would like to attend a course specified on language testing and assessment.

The third teacher said that she is aware of the importance of speaking skill and she really want to help students to talk in the class but the constrains of the curriculum prevents her from doing time-consuming speaking activities. She said that she expect some changes in the way of graduation exam so that the focus of teaching will be on oral skills.

CONCLUSION

By conducting a research to investigate speaking practice at three upper-high schools in Thai Nguyen province with 126 students and 15 teachers of English, the conclusion is that:

- Teachers do not spend much time and energy on the speaking skill. In other words, the focus of teaching is not on oral communication just because of the exam-based curriculum.
- Teachers do not have sufficient understanding of speaking and assessment as well as speaking task types.

Implication

The influence of the exam-based curriculum has had bad washback on both teaching and learning of oral skills at upper-high schools. This is the cause of unbalanced attention has been paid to teaching and learning of speaking and listening which are the main attentions of communicative teaching. In coming years, there should be alternative forms of assessment for those who expect to develop their oral skill. One of the possible solutions is that we can have oral exams through out the school year. Those who gain good achievement in those exams will not be required to take the final exam for graduation, or they may still sit for the exam if they want some plus marks for the other subjects. There should be changes in the way language is test in the final exam so that the focus of teaching shift from exam-based to competence based to develop full language ability.

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TÓM TẮT

NHẬN THỨC CỦA GIÁO VIÊN VÀ HỌC SINH TRONG VIỆC ĐÁNH GIÁ KỸ NĂNG NÓI TẠI CÁC TRƯỜNG THPT Ở VIỆT NAM

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Thực tế cho thấy bộ sách giáo khoa tiếng Anh mới được biên soạn bởi GS. Hoàng Văn Vân và các cộng sự đã tạo ra một sự chuyển biến lớn trong bối cảnh giảng dạy tiếng Anh ở Việt Nam từ định hướng lấy người dạy làm trung tâm sang lấy người học làm trung tâm, tập trung vào khả năng giao tiếp. Tuy nhiên, việc sử dụng bộ sách đã đặt ra nhiều thách thức cho giáo viên dạy tiếng Anh tại các trường trung học phổ thông, đặc biệt là việc dạy và đánh giá kỹ năng Nói. Từ bối cảnh trên, chúng tôi nhận thấy cần có những nghiên cứu nghiêm túc để tìm hiểu cảm nhận của giáo viên và học sinh về vấn đề đó nhằm tạo ra một khung lý thuyết cho việc đánh giá kỹ năng Nói. Mục tiêu của nghiên cứu này là điều tra các loại loại hình bài tập mà giáo viên sử dụng cũng như các tiêu chí để đánh giá kỹ năng Nói.

Từ khóa: nhận thức; đánh giá kỹ năng Nói; đánh giá ngôn ngữ; học ngôn ngữ; tiêu chí đánh giá

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