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SOME USEFUL WAYS TO ASSESS STUDENTS' SPOKEN ENGLISH ABILITY

Summary. *The article is devoted to the analysis of the useful ways to assess students' spoken English ability. It looks at what a speaker needs to be able to do in order to use spoken English as an effective form of communication. The need for using authentic spoken tasks and tests is highlighted. The peculiarities of the BEC Vantage Speaking test are considered. It is emphasized that BEC is a challenging exam and using appropriate techniques should help students to perform to the best of their ability and get the level they deserve.*
Key words: *assessment for learning, assessment of learning, spoken English, speaking skills, speaking test.*

Although assessment for learning, or AfL, is nothing new to mainstream education in the UK, in the world of English language teaching and teaching English to speakers of other languages it remains a less familiar and practiced approach. Traditional approaches to assessment are generally based on assessment of learning. Assessment of learning is carried out by the teacher to collect information about attainment. It is usually done at the end of a course or school year and takes the form of an exam or test which is used to assign grades and report achievement or failure.

Assessment for learning, on the other hand, occurs at all stages of the learning process. Students are encouraged to take an active role, become self-regulated learners and leave school able and confident to continue learning throughout their lives. Assessment for learning is also referred to as formative assessment, i.e. the process of collecting and interpreting evidence for use by teachers and learners to decide where they are in their learning, where they need to go, and how best to get there. It is a process by which assessment information is used by teachers to adjust their teaching strategies and by students to adjust their learning strategies. AfL encourages learning and promotes motivation by emphasizing progress and achievement rather than failure [1].

The key underlying principles of AfL which are used to guide classroom practice are as follows:
- Communicate confidence that every learner can improve.
- Empower learners to take an active part in their own learning.
- Develop learners' confidence in peer and self-assessment.

These principles of AfL help teachers to: collect information about individual learners to better understand their needs; adjust teaching in response to their observations or assessment results; share learning objectives with learners; share success criteria with learners; use questioning; give specific and useful feedback; introduce peer feedback; introduce self-assessment [1].

The aim of this article is the analysis of the ways to assess students' spoken English ability. This article looks at what a speaker needs to be able to do in order to use spoken English as an effective form of communication. For example, speakers need to pronounce individual sounds clearly, understand the functions of language, and follow the conventions of turn-taking. This article also looks at whether these different elements can be evaluated formally, and what ways there are to do this. Then we will look at how these competencies can be evaluated, with specific discussion of the BEC Vantage Speaking test.

To begin with, it is necessary to point out that speaking is a complex act with many different elements interacting to produce effective communication. In order to evaluate this skill accurately, we need to identify and isolate each of these elements. We can then develop frameworks to evaluate them. Below is a list of the things that speakers need to be able to do in order to communicate effectively.

1. Phonological features of speech. Speakers need to be able to produce the phonological features of speech well enough to be understood, and understand them when they hear them. These features include: individual sounds; the stressed and weak sounds in words; the stressed and weak words in speech; the rhythm of speech in general; the intonation patterns in speech; the features of connected speech, i.e. things that happen when we connect sounds together.

2. Following the rules of language. Speakers need to be able to understand and follow the rules of language at a word, sentence and text level. This includes choosing the right vocabulary and using grammar structures to put clauses and sentences together.

3. Paralinguistic devices. Speakers need to be able to understand and use paralinguistic devices as a communicative tool. There are different definitions of paralanguage, but if we say that it does not involve words in any way, then this includes: non-verbal tools such as gestures and facial expressions; other body language, such as eye contact, posture, positioning and movement of the head; verbal tools such as changes in volume, e.g. whispering and shouting.

4. Communicative functions. Speakers need to be able to recognize, understand and use the communicative functions of speech. This includes: understanding the communicative functions of vocabulary and grammar; understanding the functions of intonation and moving stress; recognizing features such as repetitions, re-phrasing, pauses, and noises and understanding their function; recognizing non-linguistic features such as changes in volume and tone.

5. Social meaning. Speakers need to be able to understand and use the social meaning of speech. This includes thinking about:
- When to use formal and informal language.
- What connotation language might have, for example, the difference between thin, slender and skinny.
- What social factors are important, e.g. social status, age, gender.
- Conversational principles such as turn taking and exchanges — these can be different in different cultures and societies.
- The rules to start, maintain, manage, and close conversations [2].

As we can see from the lists above, spoken communication involves many things and communicative success depends on the speaker's ability to use them. Therefore, evaluation of a learner's spoken English must involve looking at these different issues.

It is worth noting that most aspects of spoken language can be evaluated formally. The challenge is to find a form for testing which enables us to do so. An effective format for evaluation should enable us to isolate and analyze various elements, possibly under a series of general headings, but also use tasks which allow us to measure the speaker's communicative competence in general. Clearly if we want to measure a speaker's language, we want them to perform to their best ability, so we also need to consider the best ways to reduce the impact of emotional factors such as stress and nerves. Finally, we need to think about practical concerns around available resources, such as time, examiners, equipment if we are going to record the speaker, and space.

There are a wide range of test types and elicitation techniques available. In this article, we are limiting discussion to formal evaluation by an examiner, as opposed to self-assessment or informal evaluation during classes. Below we review some of the most common ways for a teacher or examiner to evaluate speaking formally; many speaking tests use a mixture of different types.

- Discussions. The candidate has a conversation with the examiner, or with another candidate with the examiner observing. Natural conversation gives the examiner an opportunity to evaluate a wide range of areas (and helps the candidate produce a relaxed and so realistic performance) but this is very difficult to achieve and requires skilful handling by the examiner.
- Joint tasks. A discussion activity can be given more focus and drive by asking the candidates to complete a task which requires them to talk together and then make a decision. This is an effective way to evaluate functions such as agreeing and disagreeing, and making suggestions, as well as conventions of conversation such as turn-taking.
- Presentations and descriptions. The candidate has to give a short presentation on a topic, or describe or explain something. The examiner just listens. Topics can include personal experiences and current issues. Candidates can be asked to describe a process or a machine, give advice and provide instructions for how to do something. The amount of time candidates are given to prepare this presentation can vary from one minute to days before, depending on the language focus and resources.
- Role plays / making appropriate responses. The candidate is given a role or a situation and has to complete a task in an appropriate way. This can be carried out with the examiner, or with other candidates while the examiner listens. The advantage of this kind of activity is that certain candidates will feel more comfortable in a role and so perform better; the reverse is, of course, also true.
- Interviews / questions and answers. The examiner asks the candidate a series of questions. In an interview these may be related and changeable, depending on what the candidate says. In questions and answers these are usually unrelated, although usually increasingly complex, and fixed. Interviews have a similar potential to produce useful samples as conversations, but questions and answers focus on specific aspects of speaking, require less training for the examiner, and are easier to evaluate against a marking framework.
- Using visual prompts. The candidate is required to describe a visual prompt such as a photograph or a diagram. This can be developed by asking the candidate to compare, order or link a sequence of pictures. This kind of test is suitable for all levels of candidate and enables the examiner to focus on a wide variety of language across a range of levels.
- Re-telling a story. The candidate is required to re-tell a story which they have read or listened to before

the test, or based on notes which the examiner gives them. They can also be asked to comment on an extract from a set text that they have read before the test. This kind of evaluation not only tests spoken language but also the ability to retain, organize and recall information; how much this is emphasized depends on the time between receiving the information and having to reproduce it, and on the marking scheme used.

- Reading aloud. The candidate is given a text to prepare and then read aloud to the examiner. The advantages of this kind of evaluation are that it can be controlled very easily, so the examiner can focus on specific items of language, such as minimal pairs or sentence stress, and that it is highly consistent, as all candidates work with the same or similar tasks. The disadvantage is that reading aloud is not a realistic task to evaluate communicative competence and can be challenging even for native speakers [3].

It should be stressed that different types of tests and elicitation techniques available need to be matched to testing aims, types of candidates and the resources available. In this article, we will analyze the Speaking test of the Cambridge Business English Certificate Vantage examination which is aimed primarily at individual learners who wish to obtain a business-related English language qualification. Set in a business context, BEC tests English language, not business knowledge. The Speaking test is conducted by two oral examiners (an interlocutor and an assessor), with pairs of candidates. The interlocutor is responsible for conducting the Speaking test and is also required to give a mark for each candidate's performance during the whole test. The assessor is responsible for providing an analytical assessment of each candidate's performance and, after being introduced by the interlocutor, takes no further part in the interaction [4].

The Speaking test consists of three parts, which take the form of an interview section, a short presentation on a business topic, and a discussion.

In the first part of the test, the interlocutor addresses each candidate in turn and asks first general, then more business-related questions. This part of the test takes about three minutes and during this time candidates are tested on their ability to talk briefly about themselves, and to perform functions such as agreeing and disagreeing, and expressing preferences.

The second part of the test is a 'mini presentation'. In this part, the candidates are given a choice of topic and have a minute to prepare a presentation of approximately one minute. After each candidate has spoken, their partner is invited to ask a question about what has been said.

The third part of the test is a discussion between candidates. The interlocutor gives candidates a business-related situation to discuss. The candidates are asked to speak for about three minutes. The interlocutor will support the conversation as appropriate

and then ask further questions related to the main theme [4, p. 14].

It is important to familiarize candidates with the format of the test before it takes place, by the use of paired and group activities in class. Teachers may need to explain the benefits of this type of assessment to candidates. The primary purpose of paired assessment is to sample a wider range of discourse than can be elicited from an individual interview.

In the first part of the test, candidates mainly respond to questions or comments from the interlocutor. Students need practice in exchanging personal and non-personal information; at Vantage level, it may be possible for students to practise talking about themselves in pairs or groups with or without prompts (such as written questions). However, prompt materials are necessary for Parts Two and Three, and students could be encouraged to design these themselves or may be provided with specially prepared sets. In small classes, students could discuss authentic materials as a group prior to engaging in pairwork or group activities. Such activities can familiarize students with the types of interactive skills involved in asking and providing factual information, such as: speaking clearly, formulating questions, listening carefully and giving precise answers.

In the 'mini presentation', candidates are asked to show an ability to talk for an extended period of time. Discussion activities, as well as giving short talks or presentations, can help to develop this skill.

In the final discussion in the Vantage Speaking test, candidates are also tested on their ability to express opinions, to compare and contrast, to concede points and possibly to reach a conclusion (although it is perfectly acceptable for candidates to agree to differ). Any discussion activities on a business theme that encourage students to employ these skills are likely to be beneficial. Group or class discussions can be valuable ways of developing these skills [4, p. 15].

Candidates are assessed on their own performance and not in relation to each other according to the following analytical criteria: Grammar and Vocabulary, Discourse Management, Pronunciation and Interactive Communication. These criteria are interpreted at Vantage level. Assessment is based on performance in the whole test and is not related to particular parts of the test.

Both examiners assess the candidates. The assessor applies detailed analytical scales, and the interlocutor applies a Global Achievement Scale, which is based on the analytical scales. The analytical criteria are further described below.

- Grammar and Vocabulary. This refers to range and accuracy as well as the appropriate use of grammatical and lexical forms. At BEC Vantage level, a range of grammar and vocabulary is needed to deal with the tasks. At this level, candidates should be accurate enough, and use sufficiently appropriate vocabulary, to convey their intended meanings.

- Discourse Management. This refers to the coherence, extent and relevance of each candidate's individual performance. Contributions should be adequate to deal with the BEC Vantage level tasks.
- Pronunciation. This refers to the candidate's ability to produce comprehensible utterances. At BEC Vantage level, meanings are conveyed through the appropriate use of stress, rhythm, intonation and clear individual sounds.
- Interactive Communication. This refers to the candidate's ability to take an active part in the development of the discourse. At BEC Vantage level, candidates should be sensitive to turn-taking and sustain the interaction by initiating and responding appropriately.

Global Achievement Scale refers to the candidate's overall performance throughout the test. Throughout the Speaking test, candidates are assessed on their language skills and, in order to be able to make a fair and accurate assessment of each candidate's performance, the examiners must be given an adequate sample of language to assess. Candidates must, therefore, be prepared to provide full answers to the questions asked by either the interlocutor or the other candidate, and to speak clearly and audibly. While it is the responsibility of the interlocutor, where necessary, to manage or direct the interaction, thus ensuring that both candidates are given an equal opportunity to speak, it is the responsibility of the candidates to maintain the interaction as much as possible. Candidates who take equal turns in the interchange will utilize to best effect the amount of time available [4, p. 16].

Conclusions. Assessment goes hand in hand with the teaching-learning process. A major challenge faced by English language teachers is to enable their learners to use oral skills for effective communication and assess it. Learners must also understand the assessment tools and techniques well in advance. Therefore, the need is felt for assessment literacy on part of the teachers. In addition, it is necessary to use authentic spoken tasks and tests to assess learners' spoken skills. BEC is a challenging exam and using appropriate techniques should help students to perform to the best of their ability and get the level they deserve.

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