

Techniques Used by College Level English Teachers to Assess Interactive Speaking: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

Interactive speaking is a crucial component of speaking skill. It is essential for effective and successful communication. Assessment of students' interactive speaking helps teachers to enhance students' overall speaking proficiency in a second or foreign language. Several techniques can be used to evaluate interactive speaking and the application of techniques may vary according to the forms of speaking. The present article focuses on exploring the techniques used by college level English language teachers to assess the interactive speaking of the students who study major English at the bachelor's level. The study was conducted using qualitative approach and descriptive phenomenology design. The sample population included 13 English language teachers who taught English at affiliated colleges in the Banke district. I used convenience sampling to select the colleges and simple random sampling to select the sample population. The only technique used for collecting data was structured interview. Each of the interviews was recorded using an audio recorder and transcribed verbatim. The data was analyzed using thematic approach to qualitative data analysis. The study revealed that oral question and answer, formal and informal debates, interviews, role plays, and discussion are the most commonly used techniques to assess interactive speaking skill at the college level. The study concluded that the techniques used in assessing interactive speaking may slightly vary depending on the level of the students but the teachers can use these techniques to the students of all levels.

Key words: assessment, college level, interactive speaking, technique

Introduction

Assessing interactive speaking is an integral part of teaching speaking skill in a language. The goal of assessing language learners' interactive speaking is to discover students' communication skills (Martin, 2020). Similarly, Lam (2019) also views that the information obtained from the assessment of students' interactive speaking helps teachers to determine the types of feedback needed for the students to foster their interactional competence and improve their speaking skill. Furthermore, assessment of interactive speaking skills can improve students' language proficiency and participation in learning. It is also argued that assessment of interactive speaking helps teachers to determine the students' level of proficiency in a second or foreign language and place them in a particular programme (Cheng & Fox, 2017). Assessment of students' interactive speaking, if assessed properly, can ensure monitoring of speaking ability and progress in speaking ability and permit adjustments to instruction to address problematic areas of teaching speaking (Martin, 2020). It is therefore critical to assess interactive speaking alongside second language classroom instruction. Thus, the most prevalent method for determining students' interactive speaking skill.

However, many college teachers believe that assessing speaking implies the testing of speaking proficiency and competence (Hazen, 2020). Furthermore, a large number of teachers are unfamiliar with the techniques used in assessing different types of speaking, i.e., imitative, intensive, responsive, interactive and extensive speaking (East, 2016). The assessment techniques used to evaluate one type of speaking are never the same as those used to evaluate another type of speaking. Most of the research studies conducted about testing speaking concentrated their focus on exploring the strategies used in testing speaking proficiency in general, and only a very few research studies have attempted to discover the techniques used in assessing a type of speaking skill. So, this paper seeks to answer the question of what techniques college level English teachers use to assess interactive speaking.

Literature Review

The following section deals with the review of the theoretical and empirical literature related to the study.

Assessment of Speaking

Assessment of speaking implies the systematic collection, review, and use of information about students' speaking ability undertaken for the purpose of improving students' language proficiency (East, 2016). Likewise, Marsh (2005) also views speaking assessment as the process of gathering information and making inferences about students' skills, knowledge, and attitudes toward speaking. Similarly, Brown (2004) also defines speaking assessment as the act of interpreting students' oral performances. Cheng and Fox (2017) consider speaking assessment as one of the most significant, complex, and demanding tasks in language teaching. Assessment of speaking skill is necessary for students to achieve and justify classroom participation (Hidri, 2018). Furthermore, it is used to gain information about students' ability

to use language, to analyze and interpret their ability to use language., to provide feedback on their language use, and to use this information to inform decisions that will improve teaching and learning (Turner, 2012).

Forms of Speaking

According to Brown (2004), there are five different forms of speaking skill. The first is imitative speech. It refers to the students' ability to imitate what they hear. Moreover, the students merely make an attempt to repeat what they hear in an understandable manner. To use the imitative speaking skill, students do not need to understand and express the content or message of the speaker. The second one is intensive speaking, which implies the students' ability to construct brief oral passages that exhibit grammatical, phrasal, lexical, or phonological links. The third one is responsive speaking, which means the students' ability to engage themselves in a brief, limited conversation like greetings and small talk, straightforward requests and comments, etc. The fourth one is interactive speaking, which refers to the students' ability to communicate for longer periods of time and in more detail. The last one is extensive speaking, which requires students to speak extensively in a one-directional flow like speeches, oral presentations and recount personal experiences.

Assessment of Interactive Assessment

Assessment techniques vary according to the type of speaking. Even within the same type of speaking, there may be some variations in assessment techniques. Lengthier and more complicated tasks are needed to assess interactive speaking. It requires relatively long durations of interactive conversation, either between the students or between teachers and students (Oliver et al., 2005). O'Malley and Pierce (1996) note that there are eight types of interactive speaking assessment techniques, namely: oral interview, picture-cued descriptions or stories, radio broadcasts, video clips, information gaps, story/text retelling, role plays, oral reports, and debates.

The dramatic task is one way to test a student's ability to talk with other people. According to O'Malley and Pierce (1996), teachers can use three different types of dramatic tasks to assess the students' interactive speaking skills. They are improvisations, role plays, and simulations. Among these three types of dramatic tasks, role playing is a common example of an interactive speaking evaluation. It is a real-world language activity that can evaluate several pupils at once. Role-playing, for instance, is another illustration of an interactive speaking assessment.

Oral interview is the most frequently and commonly used technique to assess the students' interactive speaking skills. An interview is considered appropriate for determining students' interactive speaking skill (Lam, 2019). Its advantages over other strategies lie in the fact that the student benefits from the expert guidance of the teacher when delivering the responses. If students stray from the topic, the teachers can bring them back. The activities that can be asked during oral interviews include decision-making, explanation and prediction tasks, instruction, comparison and contrast, and narrative tasks.

According to O'Malley and Pierce (1996), the next common technique used in assessing interactive speaking is information gap activities. These are the activities in which students are given discrete pieces of information, which they then share in order to accomplish a task. This exercise can be conducted in pairs or groups. For example, a teacher can ask any student to ask questions to his or her colleagues about towns and cities, their location, population, and climate, and fill up the information sheet. Each student should be given a certain amount of time to ask questions, and they should be told not to exchange their information sheet. The information gap includes both informational and interpersonal tasks. Students must use a variety of linguistic functions, including querying, eliciting information, and describing, requesting, expressing preferences, making choices, etc. The work requires taking rounds and providing turns to others.

Discussions and conversations are the next techniques to assess interactive speaking (Brown, 2004). These two speaking activities convey a degree of genuineness and spontaneity that other evaluation methods may not. Also, they have problems that are similar to those of drama-like tasks in terms of how predictable the answers are and how consistent the scoring is.

Several studies have been undertaken about the techniques used to assess speaking skill for EFL students. A study conducted by Kenyon (1998) explored the practice of elementary level English teachers practice of speaking assessment. The participants of his study consisted of 14 elementary English teachers. His study highlighted that teachers could use open ended questions, role play and dialogue to assess students' speaking skill. The premise of this research is that the selection of techniques for assessing speaking is based on the students' capacity to complete speaking. A similar study conducted by Nakamura and Valens (2001). The participants of his study were secondary level English language teachers. He collected data employing focused group discussion and the finding of the suggested that teachers could assess students' interactive speaking skills using presentation, dialogue, discussion, and interview techniques. In a similar vein Ugiljon et al. (2018), based on his comprehensive study have suggested reading aloud, direct response, picture cues, conversational exchanges, oral interviews, group or pair activities and group or pair activities as the major techniques used in assessing interactive speaking of the students.

All the research studies which I have reviewed focused their study on elementary and secondary level teachers' practice of assessing speaking. But this study is concentrated its focus on exploring the assessment techniques used by college level English teachers employing phenomenological design. Therefore, the study is different from other research studies which I have reviewed so far.

Methodology

The researcher has adopted qualitative approach and descriptive phenomenology to present the lived experience of college level English teachers' use of the techniques in assessing interactive speaking. I employed descriptive phenomenology as the design of the study because it is

appropriate for studying the lived experiences of research participants. The primary objective of phenomenology is to comprehend the essence of the shared experiences among participants (Sinwongsuwat, 2012). This study also aims at exploring the rich and detailed description of college teachers' use of the techniques in the assessment of interactive speaking. The study's sample population included 13 college-level teachers who had been teaching English at the bachelor's level at various TU affiliated campuses in the Banke district. I employed convenience sampling to select the colleges and simple random sampling to select the sample population of the study. I selected the colleges in Banke District as my field of study because I was familiar with the English teachers who have been teaching English in those colleges. A familiarity with the informants would enable me to interact with them in an expressive way during the data collection. In this regard, Bernard (2002) notes that when choosing locations and samples, the participants' acquaintance with the researcher plays a crucial role in enabling them to articulate their experiences and thoughts in a clear, expressive, and thoughtful way. Participants would be reluctant to share their ideas in the interview if I did not know them. There were a total of 13 affiliated colleges in the Banke district. I selected one teacher from each of the colleges. So, the total number of participants became 13. After selecting the school, I listed the names of the English teachers alphabetically by school and employed the fishbowl technique of simple random sampling to select the sample. After selecting 13 participants, I again listed their names in alphabetical order and coded them from T1 to T13 for confidentiality.

I employed unstructured interview to collect the data since only an unstructured interview could provide the rich or in-depth information needed for the study. Interviews were conducted in English because all the participants agreed to be interviewed in English. Interviews were conducted in face-to-face mode, and each interview was audio recorded. No time restriction was imposed so that informants may share their viewpoints for as long as they wish. The average duration of an interview was 23 minutes. Initially, I did verbatim transcriptions of audio-recorded interviews based on Turner (1931). Then, I listened to and re-listened to each interview and reviewed the transcriptions to confirm the accuracy of the data. Then, I provided the participants with the printed verbatim transcriptions of the interviews for verification. Additionally, they were requested to examine and confirm the accuracy of the transcriptions. In addition, the participants were also requested to identify the portions of the transcripts that they wanted omitted from the data. It was done to enhance the reliability and validity of my research (Doyle, 2007). After data preparation, the data were analyzed thematically using the six steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2013). Throughout the study, I tried to adhere to all ethical guidelines and standards. I made every effort to be free of prejudice and all other kinds of preconceptions. Each participant was informed that their participation was optional and that they might leave the study at any moment and without prior notice. I was always conscious of the need for originality, secrecy, impartiality, and legal considerations.

Findings and Discussion

The interview data revealed that the college teachers use six different techniques to assess college level students' interactive speaking. These six different techniques are presented and discussed as the themes of the research in the following section.

Oral Question Answer

All the teachers mentioned that the question answer technique is the most frequently used technique to assess interactive speaking skill in language classrooms. The participants said that they used this technique in every lesson. In this context, T7 stated that it provided students with a great deal of opportunity to express themselves, so he always used that (the question answer technique) to assess interactive speaking. In a similar vein, T5 further added that:

I always use the question answer technique to assess the students' interactive speaking. I frequently ask students questions and expect lengthy and elaborative responses. This [question and answers] allows me to determine whether students are good at or weak at interactive speaking or not. When they answer my questions correctly, I conclude that they have good interactive language skill.

Three of the participants, i.e., T4, T9, and T12, commonly stated that the questions and answers technique become effective when a teacher permits students to provide elaborate responses. One of the participants, i.e., T5 added that the teacher should provide them opportunities to express factual responses to assess interactive speaking. Only a few participants stated that the teachers should carefully plan the questions to be asked to elicit lengthy responses from the students. T9 stated that short answer questions could not assess the student's interactive speaking in this context. So, the teachers should ask such questions that require very long and elaborative oral responses. Regarding the effectiveness of the question answer technique in assessing interactive speaking at the college level, T7 shared that:

It [question and answer] is only appropriate for upper-class students. Small children cannot make lengthy responses. It is different from questions asked to check understanding. Our intent in asking questions is to check students' interactive speaking skill but not merely the subject matter of the lesson taught.

This finding is like that of Khamkhien (2010), who mentioned that EFL teachers frequently use question answer strategies to assess students' interactive speaking skill. According to Onchera (2013), oral speaking assessment in the form of question-answer sessions helps teachers to check the speaking ability of the students. The findings of Tzou (2020) are also in line with this research. His research concluded that the question answer technique is more effective than other strategies of interactive speaking assessment. Onchera (2013) also found that question answer is a widely used technique to measure the speaking proficiency of the students. His study further suggested that EFL teachers should not ask difficult questions since the purpose of question answer is to check students' speaking ability but not knowledge.

Therefore, the teachers should not ask difficult questions to the students. If we ask difficult questions, students will not speak. If they do not speak then how we can assess their speaking. Similarly, Lam (2019) discovered that the question-answer technique of speaking assessment is equally applicable to students at the secondary and advanced levels. Ahmad and Eltom (2020) also discovered that the teachers, knowingly or unknowingly, use the question answer technique to assess the speaking skill of the students.

Oral Interviews

The participants mentioned that they asked the students to conduct interviews with each other while the assessment is being administered. One of the participants shared that although an interview seeks to simulate a conversational setting, it might be challenging to have a genuine, natural interview because of the interview's testing nature and role-specific restrictions.

The findings of the study indicate that four teachers, i.e., T5, T6, T11 and T13 use interviews to evaluate interactive speaking. In this connection, T7 stated that he conducted interviews three to four times per year for assessment purposes. She further stated that it was nearly impossible to use in large classes. She claimed that a class consisted of more than 100 students in a single classroom. So, it was impossible to use this technique daily, though it was the best technique to assess interactive speaking. Another participant, i.e., T3, who believed interviews as inclusive technique said:

Interviews allow for interaction with all students. When practicing interviews, it is required that you interact with each student. Other strategies, such as presentations and debates, involve only students who volunteer. Through interviews, each student is evaluated individually.

The teachers reported that conducting interviews with each student in such a class was challenging. The teachers complained that their classes were too large and that interviewing each student would take too much time. Furthermore, the results demonstrated that interviews had no positive effects in such large classes. During the interview, one of the participants, i.e., T5 expressed his displeasure with the size of the class and the length of time that would be required to speak with each student. Furthermore, T8 said:

It is essential that the interviewer should be well-trained to prevent issues and to ensure that the interviewer is consistent from one interview. The interviewer should avoid talking too much (though giving some personal information may help break the ice and put the students at ease). And should not interrupt the interviewee.

This finding agrees with Hazen (2020), who claimed that interviews were beneficial because students prepared more than they would for a written test to avoid embarrassing themselves in front of the teacher. Students were advised to consult with one another and rehearse their answers in order to be ready for interviews. In this way, the assessment of interactive speaking via interviews encourages students to engage in more active learning and put out more effort

to understand the subject matter. A study conducted by Järnström (2019) suggests teachers to encourage students to use shorter and simpler sentences in interviews as opposed to lengthy and sophisticated ones. Additionally, Tzou (2020) found that college students taking English as foreign language classes were motivated to participate in interviews. So, it is one of the best techniques for assessing students' interactive speaking. Its advantages were due to how well it worked in a one-on-one setting between the student and the teacher. Additionally, the students get quick feedback during the interview, which provides the chance for improved student speaking.

Formal and Informal Debate

The finding demonstrated that the majority of the (T1, T3, T4, T5, T8, T9, T11 and T12) teachers used debates as a strategy for interactive speaking skill. They said that debate was a convenient way for students to demonstrate their interactive speaking. Teachers indicated that debate functions as a method of teaching interactive speaking as well as a technique of assessing interactive speaking. Thus, debates were used to evaluate oral communication skills. One of the participants, i.e., T8 remarked that he conducted two debate sessions per week. Another teacher, i.e., T11, stated the importance of debate as an assessment in the following way:

I frequently conduct formal and informal debates in the classroom. It is the most effective method for assessing interactive speaking skill because it gives students the opportunity to argue, make recommendations, and express their opinions and feelings on the given topic.

In this regard, T3 mentioned that debate is an effective method for assessing interactive speaking skill because it allows students to use the target language more naturally. She further stated that when they participate in debate, they converse, criticize, and argue, and they become proficient in the target language. Another teacher, T7, stated that debate is the best technique for assessing interactive speaking skill because students are not bored in the classroom because of their participation in the task. In addition, another teacher viewed debate as beneficial because of the inherent competition, and the students' desire to demonstrate their command of the language, which makes it an effective strategy. Another teacher, T12, told me that debate is the best technique for assessing students' interactive speaking skills because of its competitive nature.

The finding of this study is in line with the study conducted by Huxham (2012). His study revealed that the teachers tend to favor debate as a method of evaluation due to its ease of implementation. His study further highlighted that the teachers' roles are limited to guiding students in selecting a motion and dividing them into two groups for debate.

Discussions

All teachers shared that they used discussions to evaluate interactive speaking. Teachers believed that discussion is beneficial since students got the chance to work in groups. One of the participants, i.e., T4, remarked that he consistently uses group discussion to assess the interactive speaking skill of the students. He further added that group discussions provide sufficient time for students to speak in the target language, another participant, T9, thought that discussion was the most effective method for assessing interactive speaking because it gave students more opportunities to interact with one another, and a teacher could easily assess their interactive speaking by listing their discussions.

This finding of the study agrees with Yuan and Ellis (2003). Their study highlighted the fact that fluency, appropriateness, and correctness of students' speaking can be assessed using the discussion technique. Similarly, Louma (2004) also suggests that teachers can use discussion to assess speaking proficiency. The classroom environment becomes more alive while engaging in discussion activities. Teachers can easily assess students' interactive speaking skill because they are more involved in discussions.

Dialogue

Interview data revealed that the eight teachers frequently assessed their interactive speaking skill frequently through dialogue. The participants viewed that dialog, which allowed students to take their turn while the instructor monitored their oral language use. They further viewed that the skills of taking and giving turns are also assessed through dialogue. Regarding this one of the participants i.e., T9 said that:

The assessment procedures are based on the way the students argue and defend their positions. Even those who believe they are incapable of speaking participate in a dialogue. They may use their partner's style ideas to keep the conversation going. Since dialogue involves student-to-student conversation, it is flexible and has a low level of anxiety, as the teacher simply monitors and evaluates while students exchange ideas. In this regard, dialogue would be a suitable method for evaluating students' oral abilities.

The debate is a very innovative technique of assessing students speaking proficiency. It can assess students' capacity to use speaking in creative way. This finding is in consistent with those of Lam (2019), who discovered that student interactions were marked by cooperative unplanned conversations in which students interacted with one another's thoughts and integrated their partners' ideas into their own utterances to keep the discussion continuing. According to Galczi and Tylor (2018) speaking with others is an essential yet challenging activity. Tzou's (2020) research indicated that dialogues among students were more helpful in assessing oral language abilities of students because students prefer to talk with their fellow students than to a teacher.

Role Plays

The participants who used this technique commonly said that the student and a confederate are provided with information on which to develop a role play, and the student's ability to perform the task in the role play is assessed. For instance, role play may include obtaining information on course prerequisites. The participant in a role play is required to use different communication skills that he or she may need in real life. Six teachers stated that they used role play techniques to assess interactive speaking. They said that role play Role-playing also improves learners' collaboration abilities since they must team up and work in groups, which forces them to collaborate. In this regard T13 shared that:

It is one of the best techniques to assess speaking since students actively participate in role playing. This technique is beneficial for assessing students' ability to use both linguistic and paralinguistic features. I think that other teachers also prefer this technique.

The participants said that the teachers can use this technique to assess correct pronunciation which is one of the most important aspects of assessing interactive speaking. One participant, i.e., T6 stated that

Though it is the most effective technique for assessing interactive speaking, I rarely use this technique because students do not want to speak in their target language in the classroom. It is difficult to assess the students' interactive speaking if they do not speak English in role-playing. So, I rarely use this technique even though I know it is an effective technique for assessing interactive speaking.

This finding is also in line with the findings of other studies. Shohamy (2013) highlighted that role play is a good way to assess interactive speaking if the teacher lets the students give long answers. The teacher should also let the students say what they want to say instead of telling them they must give short, factual answers. For this technique to work better, the teacher should ask follow-up questions to get students to talk for a long time. Ndalichako (2018) also asserts that role play is a technique for assessing integrative speaking in which students are instructed to assume the role of someone else in a specific circumstance to grasp the topic from a different viewpoint than they would typically have. It is a hands-on technique to assess the speaking ability of the students. Calfee and Sutter (1982) also explored that it can develop students' communication abilities by encouraging them to communicate and engage more than they would typically do in a classroom atmosphere.

Conclusion

Students' interactive speaking skill is one of the basic requirements for the majority of jobs. Therefore, assessment of students' interactive speaking is the demand of the day. Speaking assessments can also be used to help students develop interactive speaking skills. Timpe-Laughlin and Park (2019) argue, however, that teachers should be careful while designing and

selecting the types of questions that are used to assess interactive speaking. Otherwise, assessment cannot reflect expected outcomes. The main difficulty in assessing interactive speaking skill is that the students do not want to speak English in the classroom. But the teachers should assess the speaking proficiency of the students to get information about the overall speaking proficiency of the students. By doing so, teachers can give feedback to improve the students' speaking skills. Assessing speaking in a real sense is the act of assessing the students' interactive speaking skill. Therefore, teachers need to be familiar with the techniques used in assessing each form of speaking, namely, imitative, intensive, interactive, and intensive. Teachers can use several techniques to assess the speaking ability of the students. Moreover, teachers need to be very careful while using the best techniques according to the level of the students. Besides the level of the students, many other factors like the class size, the teachers' interests, the environment of the school, and the teachers' proficiency in a second language affect the appropriate choice of the assessment.

Many teachers avoid interactive speaking because it is not necessary in the final examination. Therefore, teachers require training in the application of assessment strategies based on the availability of resources and class size. To improve the interactive speaking skills of college level students, it is necessary to systematize oral language assessment, which currently appears to be conducted haphazardly and according to the teachers' whims. Several measures can be taken to systematize it, including making it a required task for classroom teachers, a required testable component in English internal school examinations, and a testable subject in national examinations.

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