Speaking Proficiency of Bachelor Level First Year EFL Students

Hari Prasad Tiwari[1] (iD)

Abstract

This study investigated the speaking proficiency of bachelor level first year students who studied English Education at four affiliated campuses under the Facultuy of education(FoE), Tribhuvan University(TU). The data was collected from 40 students who were sampled using simple random sampling. The data was collected using oral test which examined eight aspects of speaking proficiency: accuracy, fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, appropriateness, comprehension, confidence and body language. Oral test was also complemented by observation. The students' speaking performance was scored and the scores were analyzed and interpreted using statistical and descriptive methods. The findings indicated that the students scored an average of 15.85% in speaking, with 55% below the average and 45% above. The study recommended various interventions, such as interventions like communication workshops, peer-assisted learning, cultural sensitivity training, and interactive language exposure, to address the specific challenges and improve the overall speaking proficiency of the students. Furthermore, Multimodal instruction is proposed to boost pronunciation, vocabulary, appropriateness, and body language to improve speaking skill.

Key words: Assessment, criteria for assessing, proficiency, speaking skill, Test,

[1]Assistant Professor, Tribhuvan University, Mahendra Multiple Campus, Nepalgunj, Banke
Corresponding Author: haritiwarimmc@gmail.com
Orcid: 0000-0002-0023-3360

Introduction

The acquisition of speaking proficiency is a pivotal aspect of language education, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction (Brown, 2016). As globalization continues to blur borders, the demand for effective communication skills in English becomes increasingly essential (Chen, 2021). Bachelor-level first-year students constitute a critical demographic in the language learning continuum, representing a foundation upon which subsequent language skills are built (Johnson et al., 2020). This study delves into the speaking proficiency of these EFL students, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of their linguistic capabilities and identify areas that require targeted interventions. The investigation considers various facets of speaking proficiency, encompassing overall proficiency, accuracy, pronunciation, comprehension, vocabulary use, confidence, appropriateness, and non-linguistic elements such as body language (Smith & Johnson, 2019). By scrutinizing these components, the study seeks to contribute valuable insights to the pedagogical strategies employed in language education, with the overarching goal of enhancing the speaking proficiency of bachelor-level first-year EFL students (Lee, 2019).

The assessment of speaking proficiency in EFL contexts has been a subject of extensive scholarly inquiry, with researchers exploring various dimensions of language acquisition and performance. Khanyia (2005) advocates for a holistic approach to scoring in speaking assessments, encompassing overall rating, criterial levels of performance, voice considerations, and response patterns. This comprehensive framework provides a nuanced understanding of the speaker's abilities, moving beyond a simplistic evaluation. In terms of overall proficiency, previous studies (Smith, 2018; Johnson et al., 2020) have highlighted the importance of a balanced approach, considering linguistic accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. These studies emphasize the need for a multifaceted evaluation to capture the diverse aspects of speaking proficiency.

Accuracy in speaking, as a criterial level of performance, has been a focal point in research (Brown, 2016; Lee, 2019). Brown (2016) suggests that accuracy should be evaluated not only in grammatical correctness but also in appropriateness to different situations. Lee (2019) further underscores the significance of addressing pronunciation issues, as poor pronunciation can impede effective communication. Comprehension ability in speaking has been explored by Jones and Wang (2017), who emphasize the correlation between listening habits and comprehension skills. The integration of listening exercises and activities is proposed as a means to enhance overall comprehension ability.

The use of vocabulary in speaking proficiency has been investigated by various scholars (Miller, 2017; Chen, 2021). While a commendable ability to deploy vocabulary in practical contexts has been observed, limitations in the active range of vocabularies among learners have been identified as an area for improvement (Chen, 2021). Confidence levels in speaking have been studied by Garcia and Rodriguez (2018), who highlight the psychological barriers

students face, such as the fear of making errors, affecting their overall confidence in speaking. Addressing these psychological factors becomes crucial for promoting a more conducive learning environment.

Appropriateness in speaking, focusing not only on grammatical correctness but also on the suitability of responses to different situations, is a dimension highlighted by Kim and Park (2020). They argue that L1 interference can impact the ability to generate linguistically appropriate sentences, emphasizing the need for interventions that encourage a more balanced approach to speaking proficiency.

Non-linguistic elements, including body language, have been explored by Smith and Johnson (2019), who suggest that incorporating activities to enhance non-verbal communication skills can contribute to a more confident and expressive demeanor among students. This holistic understanding of speaking proficiency aligns with Khanyia (2005), emphasizing the importance of considering various factors in language assessment. While the existing literature provides valuable insights into different dimensions of speaking proficiency among EFL students, there remains a noticeable research gap in the specific context of bachelor-level first-year students. Limited attention has been given to this critical juncture in language learning, where students lay the foundation for subsequent academic and professional language use. The majority of studies have focused on either broader proficiency assessments or specific aspects such as accuracy, pronunciation, or vocabulary. However, there is a dearth of comprehensive studies that encapsulate the diverse facets of speaking proficiency among this specific cohort.

Moreover, the interaction and interplay between the various dimensions of speaking proficiency have not been thoroughly explored in the existing literature. How does confidence in speaking impact accuracy and fluency? To what extent does vocabulary use influence appropriateness in different situations? These intricate connections require further investigation to provide a more holistic understanding of speaking proficiency among bachelor-level first-year EFL students.

Additionally, while many studies have identified challenges and areas for improvement, there is a need for more targeted interventions and pedagogical strategies tailored to the specific needs of this demographic. Practical and effective approaches that address the identified gaps and challenges in speaking proficiency are essential for guiding educators and policymakers in enhancing language education programs.

In essence, this research seeks to bridge the existing gap by conducting a comprehensive examination of the speaking proficiency of bachelor-level first-year EFL students. By adopting a holistic approach that considers multiple dimensions, the study aims to contribute not only to the academic discourse on language assessment but also to the practical realm of language education, providing actionable insights for educators and stakeholders invested in the linguistic development of this pivotal student demographic.

Methodology

The study was conducted at four campuses affiliated to TU, namely Dynamic Multiple Campus, Kohalpur, Banke, Madhypaschiim Multiple Campus, Nepalgunj, Banke, Gyan Multiple Campus, Kohalpur Banke and Laxmi Public Maultiple Campus, Raptisonari, Banke located in Banke district. A cross-sectional research design was employed to investigate the speaking proficiency of bachelor level first year first-year students. This design allowed for a snapshot assessment of the students' speaking abilities and associated challenges. The participants of the students consisted of 40 bachelor level students who studied Bachelor in Education (B.Ed.) first year under the FoE in the academic year 2080. A total of 40 students from four campuses with ten students from each campus were selected by simple random sampling. Data were collected using oral test which was focused on assessing students' speaking proficiency across eight dimensions: accuracy, fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, appropriateness, comprehension, confidence, and body language. Observation also complemented the test, offering real-time insights into students' actual speaking performance. The data collection tool consisted of a scoring rubric aligned with the identified dimensions. Speaking assessment rubric suggested by Brown (2004) was used to score the test. The collected data were analyzed and interpreted using both statistical and descriptive methods. Scores from the test were quantitatively analyzed to identify patterns and trends. Descriptive statistics were employed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the students' performance across the eight dimensions. The findings were presented through a combination of narrative descriptions and visual representations. Descriptive summaries were used to communicate the overall performance of students in speaking proficiency.

Results and Discussion

Overall Proficiency in speaking

The research revealed an average overall proficiency score in speaking of 15.85%. Among the 40 students assessed, 18 students (45%) achieved scores above the average, while 22 students (55%) scored below the average. Notably, the majority of students demonstrated proficiency levels falling below the established average. These findings suggest a less encouraging state of speaking proficiency among the B.Ed first-year students. The observed trend of a significant number of students scoring below the average in speaking proficiency underscores the challenges faced by this cohort. Factors contributing to this subpar performance could include issues such as hesitation, limited exposure to English, and the influence of the mother tongue. The results highlight the need for targeted interventions to address these challenges and improve overall speaking proficiency. Moreover, the distribution of scores emphasizes the heterogeneity within the student population. While a substantial portion performed below the average, the presence of students scoring above the average indicates a spectrum of proficiency levels. Understanding this diversity is crucial for tailoring effective interventions that cater to the specific needs of individual students. In considering these findings, educators and policymakers should explore

strategies such as communication workshops, peer-assisted learning, and cultural sensitivity training. These interventions can address identified difficulties, including fear of making mistakes and hesitancy, fostering an environment conducive to enhanced speaking proficiency.

The less encouraging state of speaking proficiency, as indicated by the majority falling below the average, emphasizes the urgency of implementing targeted measures. Continuous assessment and adaptive teaching approaches will be pivotal in nurturing a more conducive learning environment, ultimately improving the overall English speaking proficiency.

Accuracy in Speaking

In terms of accuracy, none of the 40 students achieved an excellent rating. The distribution revealed that 12.5%, 42.5%, 30%, and 15% of students were categorized as very good, good, satisfactory, and poor, respectively, in accuracy. Notably, the grammar used by students during speaking activities was interpreted as quite satisfactory. Regarding fluency, none of the students attained an excellent rating, with 7.5%, 15%, 45%, and 32.5% categorized as very good, good, satisfactory, and poor, respectively. The data indicates a discouraging level of fluency, particularly with 32.5% of students demonstrating poor performance. Limited time allocated to speaking activities is identified as a contributing factor to the observed lack of desirable fluency.

The absence of students reaching an excellent level in both accuracy and fluency underscores the collective challenge faced by the cohort in these specific aspects of speaking proficiency. The distribution of students across different proficiency levels indicates a varied landscape, suggesting that while some exhibit commendable skills, others struggle to meet satisfactory standards. The interpretation of grammar accuracy as "quite satisfactory" suggests a baseline competence in this area. However, attention should be given to those categorized as poor, as addressing their challenges in accuracy is crucial for overall improvement. The discouraging level of fluency, particularly with a significant portion performing poorly, highlights a critical aspect of language learning that requires immediate attention. The identified correlation between limited time spent on speaking activities and suboptimal fluency levels underscores the need for an increased emphasis on interactive language practices within the curriculum. To enhance both accuracy and fluency, educators may consider incorporating targeted exercises, interactive speaking sessions, and real-life language scenarios. These findings emphasize the importance of a comprehensive approach to speaking proficiency that addresses both grammatical accuracy and fluency, ensuring a more well-rounded development of language.

Proficiency in Pronunciation

In the assessment of pronunciation, the researcher focused on both segmental and supra-segmental features. Surprisingly, none of the 40 students achieved an excellent or very good rating. The distribution revealed that 5, 5, and 36 students were categorized as good,

satisfactory, and poor, respectively, in terms of pronunciation. Notably, 90% of the students were classified as poor in pronunciation, indicating a discouraging level of proficiency. The researcher attributes this to students receiving incorrect exposure or input in pronunciation.

The absence of students excelling in pronunciation, coupled with 90% being categorized as poor, highlights a significant challenge in this aspect of speaking proficiency. The focus on both segmental and supra-segmental features suggests a thorough examination of various elements contributing to pronunciation skills. The surprising nature of the results underscores the need for targeted interventions to address pronunciation issues. The researcher's attribution of poor pronunciation to incorrect exposure or input signals the importance of providing students with accurate models and ample opportunities for correct pronunciation practice. Educational strategies to enhance pronunciation might include incorporating audio resources, pronunciation drills, and interactive exercises that focus on both individual sounds (segmental features) and broader aspects like intonation and stress (supra-segmental features). Additionally, integrating native speaker models or language immersion experiences could contribute to improved pronunciation. The findings on pronunciation proficiency emphasize the significance of addressing this specific area in language education. By acknowledging the challenges and providing targeted support, educators can contribute to a more well-rounded development of speaking skills among the students.

Comprehension Ability

In the evaluation of comprehension ability among 40 students, none were classified as excellent. The distribution revealed that 10%, 47.5%, 22.5%, and 20% of students were categorized as very good, good, satisfactory, and poor, respectively, in terms of comprehension ability. Notably, the majority (47.5%) were rated as good, indicating that the overall comprehension ability of the participants is considered quite satisfactory. The researcher attributes the observed challenges to a lack of a listening habit among students.

The absence of students achieving an excellent rating in comprehension underscores the collective challenge faced by the cohort in this aspect of language proficiency. The varied distribution across different proficiency levels suggests a nuanced landscape, with a significant proportion demonstrating satisfactory comprehension ability. The emphasis on a lack of listening habit as a contributing factor to challenges in comprehension highlights the importance of incorporating listening exercises and activities in language education. Addressing this aspect can contribute to improved comprehension skills, as listening is a fundamental component of language acquisition. While the majority of students were rated as good in comprehension, it is essential for educators to recognize the areas of improvement for those categorized as satisfactory or poor. Strategies such as integrating audio materials, interactive listening sessions, and comprehension-focused activities can enhance overall comprehension skills. These findings emphasize the need for a multifaceted approach to language education that

addresses not only comprehension skills but also cultivates effective listening habits among B.Ed first-year students. Through targeted interventions, educators can contribute to a more comprehensive development of language proficiency in the observed cohort.

Vocabulary Ability

The researcher specifically examined the use of active vocabulary in the test. In the interpretation of the results, 5% of students were classified as excellent, 37.5% as good, 22.5% as satisfactory, and 35% as poor in terms of using vocabulary. Overall, the students demonstrated a well-executed use of vocabulary. However, a noteworthy observation is that students tended to have a limited number of active vocabularies, contributing to mostly poor performance in manipulating vocabulary. The findings suggest a generally positive trend in the use of active vocabulary, with a significant portion of students falling into the excellent and good categories. This indicates a commendable ability to deploy vocabulary in a practical context. However, the prevalence of poor performance in vocabulary use, attributed to a limited number of active vocabularies, underscores an area for improvement. Educators can address this challenge by incorporating activities that encourage the expansion of students' active vocabulary, such as vocabulary-building exercises, word games, and exposure to diverse language contexts. The positive aspect of well-executed vocabulary use among a substantial proportion of students highlights their potential for improvement. Targeted interventions aimed at broadening active vocabulary can further enhance their overall language proficiency.

Confidence in Speaking

The researcher observed students' confidence levels, assessing both linguistic and psychological aspects. None of the students were classified as excellent in confidence, and 37.5% were rated as poor in terms of confidence in speaking proficiency. Additionally, 2.5% were found very well, 15% good, and 35% satisfactory in confidence. Notably, participants consistently expressed concerns about making errors while speaking, contributing to a generally poor level of confidence.

The absence of students rated as excellent in confidence indicates a notable gap in both linguistic and psychological aspects. The prevalence of poor confidence levels, particularly tied to concerns about making errors, suggests a psychological barrier affecting students' speaking proficiency. Addressing this challenge requires a multi-faceted approach. Educators can implement confidence-building activities, provide constructive feedback, and create a supportive environment that encourages risk-taking without fear of errors. Additionally, incorporating speaking opportunities in a controlled and positive setting can contribute to a gradual improvement in students' confidence levels. The varying distribution across different confidence levels highlights the diversity within the student population. While some exhibit higher levels of confidence, a substantial proportion struggles with self-assurance in speaking. Recognizing and addressing these psychological factors is crucial for fostering a more conducive

learning environment and promoting overall speaking proficiency.

Appropriateness in Speaking

The researcher assessed students' spoken proficiency not only based on grammatical correctness but also on the appropriateness of responses to different situations. None of the students were classified as excellent or very good in uttering situationally appropriate sentences. The distribution showed that 15%, 30%, and 55% of students were categorized as good, satisfactory, and poor, respectively, in their ability to produce appropriate sentences. The primary cause identified for the inability to generate linguistically appropriate sentences was L1 interference. The findings indicate that students tend to prioritize accuracy over appropriateness in speaking, resulting in a discouraging ability to produce situationally appropriate sentences.

The absence of students rated as excellent or very good in producing situationally appropriate sentences underscores a significant challenge in the application of linguistic skills to real-world scenarios. The prevalence of poor performance in appropriateness, attributed to L1 interference, indicates a specific area for targeted improvement. The prioritization of accuracy over appropriateness in speaking suggests a tendency among students to focus more on grammatical correctness rather than adapting their language to different situations. This preference may stem from a desire to avoid errors, as observed in previous findings related to confidence and fear of making mistakes. To address this challenge, educators can implement situational speaking exercises, role-playing activities, and interactive scenarios that encourage students to apply language in context. Additionally, raising awareness about the importance of appropriateness in communication may shift students' perspectives toward a more balanced approach to speaking proficiency.

Use of Body language in Speaking

The assessment of students' spoken proficiency in terms of using body language revealed that none of the students were observed as excellent or very good. The majority of students performed at a satisfactory level in non-linguistic activities such as eye movement, gestures, smiles, fear, and worry. Overall, the spoken proficiency of students concerning body language was deemed satisfactory. However, 50% of students exhibited poor proficiency and may benefit from encouragement. Additionally, 5% and 45% of students were rated as good and satisfactory, respectively, in their use of body language.

The absence of students rated as excellent or very good in using body language suggests a potential area for improvement in non-linguistic communication skills. The satisfactory performance of the majority in various non-linguistic activities indicates a baseline competence in incorporating body language into spoken communication. The significant proportion of students categorized as poor in using body language signals a need for targeted encouragement and guidance. Educators can implement activities that focus on enhancing non-verbal communication skills, fostering a more confident and expressive demeanor among students.

The distribution of students across different proficiency levels highlights the diversity in their ability to utilize body language effectively. While some demonstrate satisfactory skills, others may require additional support to improve their non-linguistic communication.

Conclusion

This research explores the complex dimensions of speaking proficiency among B.Ed first-year students, covering the following aspects: overall proficiency, accuracy, fluency, pronunciation, comprehension, vocabulary use, confidence, appropriateness, and body language. The findings demonstrate a low average overall proficiency of 15.85%, with more than half of the students (55%) performing below the average, suggesting a dismal state of proficiency. Pronunciation poses a major difficulty, with none of the students attaining excellence and 90% being rated as poor. The study highlights the interrelationship between accuracy and fluency, recommending specific interventions to improve both aspects. Moreover, comprehension proficiency is characterized by an absence of excellence and a reliance on aural habits. Confidence levels are affected by a fear of errors, necessitating the adoption of confidence-enhancing measures. The research stresses the importance of multifarious strategies, such as vocabulary enrichment, cultural sensitivity training, and situational speaking exercises, to facilitate a more comprehensive and effective enhancement of language skills among the bachelor level students.

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