
Oral Assessment at the Secondary Schools in India: To Discontinue or Resurrect?

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Abstract

The educational system in India heavily relies on summative examinations to determine learners' overall success in an academic year. These are conducted on two occasions – half yearly and year-end examination. The test administration is done through paper and pencil mode which has no scope for speaking skills. To address this issue, the government of Maharashtra (India) introduced the internal assessment of speaking skills as a part of year-end exam. However, the decision was revoked after 10 years of the implementation. Therefore, in this paper we present a critical appraisal of the L2 oral assessment practices in the regional medium schools.

Key words: Assessment of Oral Skills, Five Principles of Assessment, Maharashtra (India).

Introduction

In oral testing, we test the learners' ability to use spoken form of language in an interactive communication or individual production. For ESL learners, it is important to use oral/spoken language in academic as well as in social communicative settings for various purposes depending on their needs. Hence, (i) to know how well the learners perform in fulfilling their communicative needs and further (ii) to help them improve oral performances leads to an inclusion of oral tests in ESL classrooms. However, the oral tests seem to be less successful when it comes to design, administer, and score the learner performances. A failure in these may not only harm language learning, but also leaves language teachers unskilled in making oral tests a success. A similar kind of situation was experienced in Maharashtra after the implementation of oral test for a period of 10 years, and the decision was revoked to forgo the oral tests. It was stated that the schools considered such internal assessment as an opportunity only to mark the learner performance leniently and help them score better in their year-end examinations. Therefore, we actually conducted a systematic study by considering the theoretical aspects of the oral tests.

In assessment, there is a set of five principles as assessment guidelines. These principles of assessment have the potential to improve quality of tests. This helps teachers to design learner-friendly tests and increases the success rate of teaching-learning process. Moreover, this encourages teachers to analyze the test independently which is likely lead to improvement of test-tool itself. This issue of knowing the effectiveness of oral assessment and studying its quality in a more systematic manner is a need to be taken up in the form of research.

This paper reports the pros and cons of oral test procedures in high school context. It presents an observation of oral tests in five different schools in the state of Maharashtra (India).

As a general trend, though the teachers respond positively to oral tests, they do not practice the tests in a discrete manner. The major function of such tests was perceived and practiced as to award the marks. Many a times, these tests are not followed by any feedback session so the learners do not even get a chance to know if any improvement in their oral abilities. This apparent observation of the present oral test procedure raises the question that whether the test really can be seen implemented aptly in the given situation. There is a need for the test to be tested. So, the study emphasizes on judging the quality of an oral test procedure by using five principles of assessment. These above mentioned issues are examined in a more detailed way in this paper. First, we look at the general nature of an oral test and the five major principles of assessment.

Assessment of Oral Skills

An oral test refers to a procedure in which a learner is encouraged to speak in order to be assessed on the basis of what he says (Underhill, 1987, p. 7). Oral test can be easily distinguished from the test of other skills even if used alone or combined with other skills. Assessing oral skills is unique with its features which we discuss below.

Oral production is different from another productive skill, i.e., writing. In speaking, a speaker has to actually produce meaningful sounds which forms a string of words (phonological feature) as in contrast with writing of words using pen or pencil (orthographical feature). In speaking, the production can be at the level of idea units or utterances as the focus is entirely to convey the

meaning under short time. In writing, the production is in more formal way with use of complete sentences. It is mainly because a writer gets enough time to form complete sentences and to edit or re-edit the written production.

Speaking is a meaning making process in which a speaker can be a sole participant who passes on the information (monologic task) or there can be more than single participants who are actively involved (dialogic task) in the transaction of oral information. In both the situations, oral ability is not static and one dimensional as only to produce phonological sounds but it comprises of a number of sub features such as:

- *fluency* (ability to speak at ease with minimum efforts),
- *accuracy* (ability to speak with minimum grammar errors),
- *complexity* (willingness and ability to use more advanced structures to speak),
- *content* (production of a number of ideas/use of language functions), and
- *interactional features* (ability to participate and carry out a meaningful communication with the interlocutor).

These features contribute to the construct of oral production and help assessors make a comprehensive assessment of the learner's oral language use abilities (Fulcher, 2003, Luoma, 2004).

In oral tests, we need instances of actual language use under strict time limit. This can be done by using open ended tasks of possible solutions and extended responses. Such tasks need to be designed according to learner's level of proficiency, themes and topic they encounter in daily life, and language use situation and needs. Therefore, designing a task to help learners display their oral language use abilities is a vital stage to be considered in the process of oral assessment. This is also a way to address the issue of comprehensive construct in assessing oral abilities.

Furthermore, any personal bias in the assessment of extended responses can be reduced to certain extent by incorporating assessment criteria. A use of analytical assessment criteria helps assessors to (i) attend the learners' speaking abilities comprehensively, (ii) link tasks to the focus of assessment, and (iii) assess speaking performances without any bias.

By attending to all these issues of assessing speaking we can successfully aim at assessment validity – the five principles of assessment are the standard parameters to know the assessment quality.

Oral Test and Five Principles of Assessment

There are five cardinal principles of assessment which help assessors to know the effectiveness of the tests.

Practicality is rooted in the way the test is implemented. It considers the amount time required to perform oral tasks, suitable infrastructure for performances to be clearly audible, and requirement of logistics and human resources.

Any test can be called *valid* only if it fulfills its purpose. In assessing speaking, we keep certain objectives in mind and design our assessment. This means, for example, if we wish to know whether the learners can ask and answer questions. This objective may be tested through assessment format which will actually make them involve in a conversation and ask and answer questions to other participants.

A test is *reliable* when the same test is administered to the same group of learners and the results are similar across its administrations on the different occasions. Speaking performances which are generally open ended and without a single correct response, the reliability of tests may be increased by using consistent criteria for correct responses. This adds to minimum of human errors or subjectivity in the scoring of performances.

A test becomes *authentic* when there is a reflection of learners' real world situations in the test task. Such reflections make learners feel familiar with the test situation and aid to their level of performance. Therefore, it is required to consider learners' culture, region, habits, and provide meaningful, relevant, and interesting topics.

Washback is the impact of a test on the teaching and learning context which can be both positive and negative. A positive impact, for example, motivation to perform an oral task independently may be achieved through constant feedback, self-assessment, and ample opportunities to practice

their oral abilities. Any such positive impact increases chances to improve the teaching, learning and assessment processes.

Thus, these five principles of language assessment can potentially judge the quality of the tests and serve as a set of guidelines to design, administer and assess the test and the test procedures.

The present study diagnoses loop-holes of the oral test procedure as possible reason that might have made the government of Maharashtra to revoke their decision of implementing oral tests. Such attempt to find out the causes will also shed a light on improving the test procedures.

Methodology

Research questions

This is an assessment study of the oral test implementation procedure in Maharashtra (India). The following two questions were set in this study:

1. How the oral tests are being implemented in the ESL classrooms in India?
2. To what extend the oral tests are successful in the secondary school context in India?

Participants

In the study, as one of the aims is to see how the oral assessment has been practiced in the schools, we choose the 5 different schools as to observe the assessment procedures and one teacher from each school. We approached the teachers who teach English to class 9. These teachers were from regional medium school of non-remote rural locality in the state of Maharashtra.

Data collection

The research was carried out by observing the summative oral tests in the five different schools during academic year 2011-2012. We used the observation protocol as a tool to observe the classroom assessment to explore how the oral tests are being implemented. The observation protocol was developed in sync with the five principles of assessment as to address the issues of

oral test design, administration, and scoring. Also, additional information was collected from the teachers in form of the samples of (i) oral assessment questions papers prepared by the teachers themselves, (ii) learner response sheets, and (iii) marks awarded by the teachers.

The data collected through observation protocol was analyzed qualitatively. For this, we organized our findings as per the five principles of assessment. We discuss these findings in the section below.

Findings and Discussion

First, let us look at the kind of test format was prescribed to the teachers by government body of education. Based on the prescribed assessment document, the teachers were expected to design, administer, and score the oral assessment. However, the information provided in the document is limited only to the test objectives and score distribution.

Oral assessment as a part of year-end assessment carries 20 marks out of total of 100 marks. This is further distributed in the four categories: listening (6), reading aloud (4), speaking (5), and conversation (5). The policy document also mentions the test objectives as follows:

1. Learners listen to words, proverbs, and sentences and comprehend them.
2. Learners write down the words, proverbs and sentences without any errors while listening to them.
3. Learners tell the words, proverbs and sentences with appropriate stress and intonation.
4. Learners read aloud the given passage with proper speed and comprehend it.
5. Learners narrate any incident/ topic in appropriate way and with confidence.
6. Learners participate in the discussion actively.

This was the only document teachers had received in relation to administration of oral tests. So, teachers who actually did not have any training followed their own ways to design assessment task, administer them and score the performances. For the first test component – listening – the teachers read out some random words and the learners were required to listen to the words and say it. For second component of the test i.e., reading aloud, teachers asked learners to read any

paragraph from the English textbook. For the last test component – speaking and conversation – teachers assigned random topic to learners and expected them to talk about the topic.

Having discussed the nature of the prescribed oral test in the policy document, we observed the oral assessments procedures in the classrooms. We below discuss our findings categorically as in relation to the five principles of assessment.

The oral tests which had been prepared and administered for the class IX learners were found quite *practical*. The instructions were clear for administering the test since the test-creators (teachers) themselves administered the test. As the three parts of the tests (reading, speaking and conversation) did not have clear rubrics so the scoring processes were sketchy, only one part of the test (listening) could be scored easily. No extra material resources were needed to administer the test. We can call these as low cost material tests since only paper pencil and some photocopy (prints of unseen passages) material was used by the teachers.

The tests were less *reliable* as there is scope for human errors, subjectivity, and bias in the scoring process. Most of the teachers used their own impressions to award the marks since there were no clear scoring criteria/rubrics for reading, speaking and conversation sections. Thus, these tests did not achieve reliability. Tasks were ambiguous and less challenging for class IX learners. For example, simple topics like my family or my mother were without any proper prompt. In most of the schools there were no suitable testing conditions the reasons could be noisy and crowded classes, fear among the learners and most of the times angry mood of the teachers to avoid copying.

Some of the teachers were in a hurry to complete their tasks of administering the test so there was no flexibility of time for the learners. Compared to total marks of the tests, actual test time was less. Test input was not clear to the learners. The tape recorders should have been used for listening test in order to avoid the pronunciation errors made by teachers. It would have reduced the ambiguity.

Tests are *valid* to some extent as they measure what they supposed to measure. The main objective of the oral tests is to test learners' overall proficiency of the language. According to

one of the objectives, learners have to listen to the words and write them down correctly. In these tests, learners listen to the words, understand them but cannot spell them correctly. If they do not write (spell) the word correctly, the teacher reduces the marks. Thus, the listening test measures writing skills rather than listening skills. The same thing happens in the conversation section. Teachers asked General Knowledge and science questions which could be answered in a word, so, it was totally unfit for a language test. For example, a question, *Who invented the computers?* – was asked and if they failed to give a correct answer, then, it would lead to no/less mark. It resulted in the lack of construct validity because many of the topics are not of relevance to learner's real life language use.

The *coverage* of the oral tests was also not comprehensive since the sub-areas of each section have not been covered appropriately. Most of the times the teachers used their own impressions to give mark as they did not know what to test and failed to cover the sub-areas of oral skills.

The oral tests reflected smaller degree of *washback* mostly due to absence of descriptive feedback. With the inclusion of a scoring criterion for each section, the teachers could have helped learners to know their areas of strengths and weakness. But, in these oral tests, there was no criteria used and moreover the scores were supposed to be confidential and neither formal nor informal post-test feedback sessions were conducted. To note, it was pointed out that had there been enough time for the teachers and the training to provide feedback, it would have been beneficial for the learners to do well in the tests. For example, one of the learners did well in listening, reading, and speaking but her performance was average in conversation skills. So, in such cases, positive feedback to the learners might make them feel enthusiastic and help perform better.

The tests are less *authentic*. Mostly all the items were isolated rather than contextualized. The test lacks to cover interesting, input rich, and different themes and ideas of the topics. There were quite a few selected topics and repetitions of these are noticed. Teachers only mentions the topics from the list hence no elaborative input was provided.

In the last section of the test (conversation skills) teachers asked a couple of questions. Most of these questions were not appropriate to learners' level and repeated many a times. Moreover, the

questions are neither logically linked nor liked by the learners. An example of a set of questions asked by teacher and answered by a learner is given in Figure 1:

Teacher: Tell me the names of any four scientists.
Learner: (he keeps mum and frightened).
Teacher: Where is Taj Mahal? Who built it?
Learner: In Agra. Shahjahan built it in the memory of his wife.
Teacher: What is the capital of Maharashtra?
Learner: Mumbai... no...no... Bombay.
Teacher: What is your hobby?
Learner: Reading.
Teacher: Which newspaper do you read?
Learner: SAKAL
Teacher: Tell me today's headline.
Learner: (No answer).
Teacher: Ok. You may go now.
Note: The teacher gives 5 marks (out of 5)

Figure 1: A sample of learner's oral performance with the interlocutor involved

From the given example we can see that the test is not appropriately challenging to the learner's level (class IX) and also it does not reflect any real life situations. This is mainly for the following reasons:

1. Yes/no type or one-word answer questions do not really elicit the learner's abilities to use oral language in meaning making process.
2. The questions are general knowledge based and do not direct learner's attention to generate a variety of ideas or content.
3. There is no incorporation of well-designed assessment task but randomly asked questions which in turn affects the learner and adds to the test anxiety.

All the above conclusions have been drawn by real classroom observation of the oral tests, question papers and answer sheets of listening test. *The observation revealed that to the large extent the oral tests do not fulfill the five major principles of assessment. As the main objective of the oral tests is to assess the learners' listening and speaking abilities, the oral test procedure has failed to achieve it.*

Implications for Pedagogical and Assessment Purposes

It has been found that the teachers are aware of the importance of oral skills. Teachers feel that, teaching and assessing of oral skills create learning awareness among the learners. Keeping the importance of oral test in mind, some efforts may be extended to incorporate to alter the oral tests. There is a need to bring positive changes into the oral test procedure that can be done by applying the five principles of assessment as a primary step.

As one of the ways, an inclusion of alternative assessment can be a good move from the teachers to administer the oral assessment. It offers a wide variety of formats – checklists, journals, portfolios, peer assessment – and actually provide information about what the learners can do rather than what they might have memorized and wanted to say it out in an oral test.

Alternative assessment ascertains if the learning specific objectives stated in the curriculum have been addressed in the classroom teaching and learning. With due importance of communicative language teaching in ESL classrooms, we do have language to use objectives in relation to oral language. So, failing to assessing learners' oral abilities in an appropriate way lead to mismatch between curriculum goals and its fulfillments.

As the learners get minimum opportunities to use L2 (English) outside the classroom context and in the classroom, English is language of instruction in only one class. Therefore, considering the lack of exposure to L2, it is desirable to incorporate formative assessment with a variety of assessment activities to provide learners enough L2 exposure and ample oral language use opportunities.

Conclusion

The results of the study have portrayed a clear and real picture of the ways oral tests are being implemented. It was necessary to study the actual oral test practices rather than claiming the success of the procedure depending on exam results. We generally tend to think if the exam results are high; this is the success of the whole procedure. Therefore, this study particularly focused on different aspects of oral test procedure – the real execution and the critical appraisal

through the five major principles of assessment. The study does not only look at the implementation of oral procedures, but also brings out the fact that there is a need of revivifying the oral tests through assessment literacy among the teachers, inclusions of alternative assessment approach, and involving students in the assessment procedure as to make them feel a sense of ownership for their own learning and assessment.

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