Testing English Speaking Skills in a University level Affect EFL Learners' Oral Performance: A Case Study of Arab Open University

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to explore students' English speaking skills within Arab Open University students –Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh campus. The sample of this study was first year in English Language Department (Intensive Courses Program). The total number of students was 22 males. This study used within-group experimental design that is one group pre-test and post-test design. The data were analyzed by using paired sample test. The result showed that there was a significant relationship between pre-test and post-test and students oral performance. So, students' speaking skill in the pre-test and post-test sign 0.000 were less than P -value <0.05. The findings of the study indicate that all schools, colleges and universities must evaluate their speaking effectively to see how far they can communicate, and to draw their attention toward this important language skill. In addition, the study points out that students must continue speaking English after leaving the classroom.

Key words: Language proficiency, speaking skills, oral performance, autonomous learning, open university.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is not always easy to speak spontaneously in a foreign language. This may be because the students feel nervous or anxious about speaking or they don't have the ability to speak English. Therefore

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they must be given a certain environment to see how far they can communicate, and that should be through evaluating the students speaking skills continuously during the class to draw the attention of students toward the importance of speaking skills as one of the important language skill. (Elliis, 2000).

Ross and Kasper (2013) state that although the testing of L2 oral proficiency is closely interrelated with its assessment, the latter aspect is treated peripherally. Here tests are viewed as a subject of assessment, which is inline, for example, Brown and Abeywickrama (2010). There are different types of oral tests such as IELTS and TOEFL in which speaking is one of their language proficiency.

L2oral proficiency can be defined as learners ability to converse with one or several interlocutor (international competence in an L2, Kasper and Ross 2013: 9). With regard to testing, they highlight, among other things that L2 speakers must be given the chance to participate in meaningful communicative interaction.

Tests of speaking and writing are examples of performance tests, because the students has to produce language, and is then rated on that production. That's why we call them performance test (Ryans and Fredericksen: 1951).

According to Richards and Rerandya (2008), speaking is one of the central elements of communication. In EFL teaching, it is an aspect that needs special attention and instruction. In order to provide effective instruction, it is necessary for EFL teachers to examine the factors, conditions, and components that underlie oral communication effectiveness. Effective instruction derived from the careful analysis of this area together with sufficient language input and speech – promotion activities, will gradually help learners speak English fluently and appropriately.

Three major pillars, student – student interaction, student – instructor interaction and student – content interaction**;** and recently some expertise added t**o** elements which are student - interface interaction and vicarious interaction Moore & Kearsley (1996). Therefore, online interaction components have been categorized into two levels in the present study as follows:

Student-student interaction occurs when the mode of learning of the student is on regular basis or through asynchronous learning via various media of instructions, such as threaded discussion, blogs,

emails and phone calls. Moore (1989)**,** pointed out that learner-instructor interaction is a form of communication between the instructor and the learner in a course, assignment, forum and in these circumstances, a student gives comment related to the course**,** or clarifies undistinguished points. It sometimes may occur through offline communication**,** for instance**,** through email or SMS**,** and personal communication**,** or face to face interactions**.** Student – instructor interaction is a communication process that occurs between a student and his/her lecturer. The interactive process can be within an online course, or during communication shared with an offline contact (personal dialogue). In the study Moore & Kearsley (1996), it revealed that this type of interaction occurs between student and his/her instructor, and it is crucial for learners to feel that they are in a real learning environment or it can happen face to face between two people in the library.
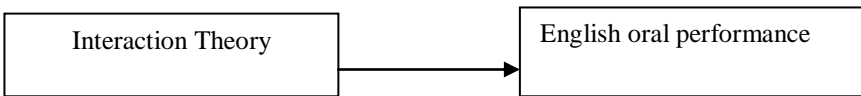

Figure 1: Theoretical framework adapted from Elnour et al. (2015)

According to the researcher, the process of learning a foreign language in Saudi Arabia, especially English, has been a constant headache to the concerned governmental bodies, teachers, parents and those who are in charge of education. In spite of the great efforts, energy, and money for changing the syllabus and teachers' training that have been spent, but still some learners fail to speak the language because of several reasons. One of these reasons is discarding of speaking tests in schools and colleges. The target of learning English language now a day is for oral communication. It is the most widely spoken language in the world. A great number of non-English speakers as well as native speakers use English as an important medium of international communication. English is no longer the language used in English speaking countries. No developing country can ignore the role of spoken English in improving its international profile and prominence. Subsequently, the ability to listen critically and to express oneself clearly and effectively contributes to a student's success in school and college and later in life.

Brown and Yule (1999:102) state that the assessment of the spoken language has traditionally been a headache for the English teacher. Many well-established tests do not even have an oral component, since grammatical accuracy and vocabulary can be assessed quite adequately, it seems, in the written mode. When an oral component is found in proficiency tests, it is often based on a discrimination between words which have very similar pronunciation.

Brown and Yule (ibid: 103) also state that naturally, there will continue to be a requirement that the students be assessed on their command of the grammar and vocabulary which they have been taught. Teachers may also wish to make informed judgments on the pronunciation and fluency of their students' speech. Brown and Yule also suggest that the teacher should continue to assess these features, not in isolation, but as part of his assessment of the student's ability to communicate effectively in the spoken mode. They also suggest that one of the main aims of most English teachers is to make their students able to communicate information effectively in spoken English.

Brown and Yule (ibid:25) state that learning to talk in the foreign language, is considered to be one of the difficult aspects of language learning for the teacher to help the student. Each speaker needs to speak. He needs someone to listen to him and to respond to him.

Walter and Bartz (1979), say that test construction begins with a series of questions that the rest developer asks himself or herself the answers to those questions will determine the kind of the test that is produced. The first decision is why we need the test in the first place. What are we trying to find out. More than any other factor, the answer to this question will determine the kind of testing instrument we need. The first thing to decide is why and what to test. There are several common reasons for testing. These can be divided into testing needs that are internal to the language program, and external needs, which serve the student and the student's future employer.

Walter and Bartz (ibid) also state that one common internal reason for testing is for placement test. A second internal reason for testing is to assign grades. A third reason for testing is that testing provides motivation and that affect affects positively toward their oral

performance. A fourth reason for testing is to provide diagnostic feedback. When we give a test, we can discover students' areas of strength and weakness, and that will also affect positively in improving the students' speaking skills.

According to the researcher, students speak inside the classroom. So, why don't we evaluate their speaking effectively to see how far they can communicate, and to draw their attention to this important language skill.

Therefore, students must be given a certain environment, to see how far they can communicate in situations where all the choices of language used are made by the people speaking English. Finally, there should be an effective ways of evaluation to see how our students have the ability to speak English.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

In the Arab communities learners are not quite enthusiastic in practicing English language as a second language, whereby national and global booming of business movement invigorated students of tertiary level to study English language in order to develop their career. So, speaking a foreign language formal and informal has been a constant problem to the learners as well as teachers. The researcher noticed that most of the students cannot speak English fluently. So, this study is going to investigate why the teachers neglect evaluating students' oral performance since it affects directly toward the students' oral performance, and that is why most of the intensive English courses learners at Arab Open University in Saudi Arabia find difficulties to make real conversations, whether inside or outside classrooms.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

1. Examine the impact of testing speaking skill on the students' oral performance. .
2. Identify the benefits obtained from the speaking test evaluation.
3- Draw the tutors, educationists and students attention towards the importance of speaking skills.

1.3 Questions of the study

The present paper addresses the following study questions:

1. To what extent do speaking tests help to improve the students' oral performance?

2. To what extent do neglecting students speaking tests affect the students' oral performance?

1.4 Hypotheses of the study

1. Establishing speaking tests continuously motivate students to improve their oral performance.

2. Neglecting speaking tests affect negatively toward the students oral performance.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The present study is crucial to be conducted for these purposes:

1. The present study would meet certain expectations in EFL discipline.

2. Finding would be benefited to Oral test and speaking skills at large.

3. The study will help to explore factors for enhancing and developing oral test.

So, the researcher hopes that this study will contribute in solving this problem that results in low achievement in learning speaking as one of the important language skills.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Although testing oral skills is a field of interest to many researchers, I have not been able to find similar studies carried out before, but there are some studies that in some way or another link to this paper. A study conducted by Linsken and Judith (1983), Defense Language Institute, Foreign Language Center, entitled "Teaching and Testing Oral Skills". It stated that a discussion of teaching and testing oral skills in a second language looks at issues in the testing of speaking ability in of communicative activities that can be built into a foreign language program with oral proficiency goal. The study also stated that the key to success is to bring our experience and knowledge freshly each day to the task of helping students acquire functional language ability.

Another study conducted by Sissel Agasoster (2015), Department of Foreign Language, University of Bergen in Norway, entitled "Assessment of Oral English – A Study of Assessment Practice of Oral English at Lower Secondary Schools in Norway". The tool for collecting data was interviews administered to both teachers and students, as well as a student questionnaire. The main finding is that the assessment of oral English is mostly based, on the teacher's impression throughout the school year, and there must be clear criteria to assess the students through the grammar, fluency and accuracy, pronunciation, content and vocabulary.

There is a similarity between this study and the previous studies reported above. That all researches shed a light on the importance of speaking test assessment and how it motivates and improves students' oral performance.

On the other hand, this study differs from the previous studies considered above that some schools and colleges such as Arab Open University in Saudi Arabia does not conduct a speaking test assessment, and that is why most of the students find difficulties to speak English.

3. METODOLOGY AND INSTRUMENT OF THE STUDY

The present study used an experimental method and applied one of pre-experimental design a pre-test and post-test experimental design. The technique used to choose the sample was convenience sampling. One group of pre-test and post-test design was a research design that administering a post-test to a single group of participants. It means that in this study there is no control group. Therefore, the researcher just focused on the experimental group. The sample of the study was drawn from intensive English courses, (EL-097-Beginners) from Arab Open University, Saudi Arabia branch, Riyadh campus. So, the measuring instrument that was used for collecting data for the present study is a student pre-test and post-test (22 subjects). Pre-test and post-test was taken about three hours to examine (22) students. Each student attended the speaking test individually for 10 to 15 minutes including the warm up questions, general questions, and students' opinions as well. Four categories: fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation .Then, the collected data was

statistically analyzed by Statistic Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

3.1 Participants of the study

Participants in this study were 22 undergraduate students from Arab Open University (*AOU)* in the main campus at Riyadh - Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the academic session 2019-2020. Whereby, the study targeted specifically beginner students who studied English language as an intensive language program for two months. During these months there were different types of evaluations such as presentations during the class, speaking conversations and a speaking test in isolation and within the group. In terms of respondents distribution there were 22 males representative 100 %. To collect the data, the experimental group was given a speaking test in the form of pre-test and post-test. The test was constructed based on content validity and the test content was also consulted with two experts and had shown reliability coefficient of the pre-test and post-test which were 0.77 and 0.88. Finally, each participant took less than six hours to complete oral examine and the post-test was completed within 7 weeks.

3.2 Pre and post speaking Test

The test is conducted before, after and during lectures to check if there is a progress within the students' performance. Through the students' performance of this test, the researchers attempt to find answers to the following questions:

1. To what extent do speaking tests help to improve the students' oral performance?

2.   To what extent do neglecting student speaking tests affect the students' oral performance?

**Table 1: Descriptive analysis for pre-test and post speaking test**

Part	Pre-test			Post-test		
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Result	Mean	Std. Deviation	Result
Content	1.590	0.734		2.955	0.950	
Vocabulary	1.410	0.590		2.227	0.752	
Grammar	0.950	0.375		1.773	0.813	
Pronunciation& fluency	0.910	0.294		2.091	0.811	

Source: The researcher from applied study, 2018

Table 2: Comparing Mean Results of the pre-test and post speaking test

Part	Pre-test	Post-test
Content	1.59	2.95
Vocabulary	1.41	2.27
Grammar	0.95	1.77
Pronunciation and fluency	0.91	2.09
Total	4.86	9.09

Figure 2: Comparing Mean Results of the pre and post speaking test
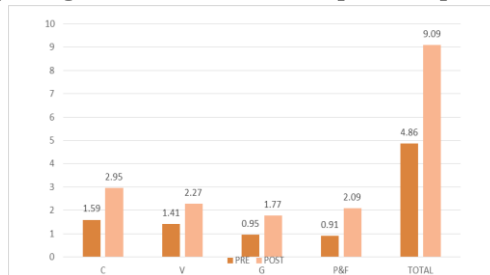
The above tables and figures show that there is a remarkable difference in all test components. In the content, the mean was 1.59 while it jumps to 2.95 in the post test. In vocabulary, the mean was 1.41 in the pre-test while it increases to 2.27 in the post test. In grammar, the mean was 0.95 in the pre-test but it goes up to 1.77 in the post test. In Pronunciation and fluency, the mean was 0.91 while in the post-test it rises to 2.09. Generally, there is a difference between the performance of the students in the pre-test and the post-test, and that can be seen through the total results. In the pre-test the mean was 4.86, while it jumps to 9.09 in the post-test which means the students benefit from the continuous speaking test during the class and in isolation as well. The researcher documented the performance of the participants to compare it with their performance in the pre-test and post-test to see if there is a significant progress or not, and that can be seen through the below table.

Table 3: Frequency distribution of the students' pre and post-speaking test

Skills	Pre-test				Post-test			
	Excellent	V. good	good	poor	Excellent	V. good	good	Poor
Content	3	7	0	12	8	6	7	1
Vocabulary	1	0	7	14	1	6	12	3
Grammar	0	0	1	21	0	5	7	10
Pronunciation & fluency	0	0	0	22	0	8	8	6

Source: The researcher from applied study, 2018

3.3 Result of the study

The above table shows the performance of the pre-test and post speaking test. There is a considerable difference between the score of the students in the pre-test and post-test as shown in the above figure. The speaking skills of participants score increase to some extent as a result of the students' presentations and conversations inside the classroom. These activities increase the students' scores in the post test. In addition to that the activities motivate the students toward the important of speaking skills. Therefore, there is a progress and that fulfilled the first hypothesis "*Establishing speaking tests continuously motivate students to improve their oral performance*" which indicated that conducting speaking tests continuously motivate students to improve their speaking skills. Also, the second hypothesis "*Neglecting speaking tests affect negatively toward the students' oral performance*" had been achieved according to the low results of the students in their pre-test which indicate that neglecting speaking tests affect negatively toward the students oral performance.

4. LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The present study was conducted among beginner learners at Arab Open University in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Riyadh campus between September 2019 to November 2019, within the academic session 2019-2020. The respondents who were   responded to paired test: pre-test and post-test. Therefore, the findings might not be generalized for learners in English department at Arab Open

University, over all of the respondents who participated on the pre and post-test were 22 males.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings of the present study and the statistical analysis, we can say that oral speaking tests were effective in improving speaking English of tertiary level specifically students at Arab Open University, Department of English language (Intensive English Program). There were positive relationships between paired pre-test and post-test and students performance in the present study. It is clear that conducting continuous speaking tests motivate students to improve their oral performance. In addition, it also draws the attention of the learners toward speaking as one of the important language skills. Also, the study shed a light on the intensive English Program at Arab Open University to conduct speaking tests and listening tests as well. As we know that listening and speaking are interrelated to each other since speaking feeds on listening. Thus, *AOU* needs to manage both speaking and listening tests. Also, English tutors should conduct English presentations and conversations inside and outside the classroom and make a continuous evaluation. In addition, English tutors should encourage autonomous learning inside the classroom to improve students' oral performance.

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