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INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON SCIENCE, ENGINEERING AND TECHNOLOGY: a collection scientific works of the International scientific conference – Gamburg, Germany, 2025 Issue 5

Languages of publication: Uzbek**,** English, Russian, German, Italian, Spanish,

The collection consists of scientific research of scientists, graduate students and students who took part in the International Scientific online conference **« INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON SCIENCE, ENGINEERING AND TECHNOLOGY »**. Which took place in Gamburg, 2025.

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ASSESSING SPEAKING SKILLS.

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ANNOTATION: The article explores the principles, methods, and challenges involved in assessing speaking skills in the English language classroom. Speaking is a crucial component of communicative competence, yet it is one of the most complex skills to assess objectively. The paper discusses different approaches to speaking assessment, including formative and summative evaluation, holistic and analytic scoring, and task-based assessment. It also highlights the key features of effective speaking evaluation such as fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, vocabulary, and interaction. Moreover, the article addresses problems teachers face, such as subjectivity, cultural bias, and testing anxiety. Finally, it emphasizes the importance of valid, reliable, and practical assessment methods that reflect real communicative performance. The paper concludes that balanced assessment, combining standardized rubrics with authentic speaking tasks, provides the most accurate reflection of learners' speaking abilities.
KEYWORDS: Speaking skills, oral assessment, language testing, communicative competence, fluency, accuracy, evaluation methods, performance-based testing.

Introduction

Speaking is considered one of the most essential skills in language learning. It enables learners to express ideas, share information, and participate in real communication. However, assessing speaking remains a challenging task for teachers and examiners. Unlike reading or grammar tests, speaking involves spontaneous performance that depends on multiple factors such as pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and interaction. Therefore, teachers need a clear understanding of what to assess and how to ensure fairness and reliability in their evaluations [Brown, 2004]. This paper aims to analyze various aspects of speaking assessment and to provide recommendations for improving its effectiveness in English language teaching.

1. The Nature of Speaking Assessment

Speaking is a productive and interactive skill that involves both linguistic and social components [Bygate, 1987]. Assessing it means evaluating how well learners can use language for communication in real-life contexts. Since oral performance changes depending on situation, topic, and partner, it is difficult to apply fixed criteria. As Fulcher [2003] explains, speaking tests must measure not only language knowledge but also the ability to use it in context. This makes

speaking assessment complex and multidimensional, requiring teachers to balance between linguistic accuracy and communicative effectiveness.

2. Components of Speaking Skills

To assess speaking effectively, it is necessary to identify its major components. Scholars such as Hughes [2003] and Luoma [2004] suggest that speaking ability consists of several key elements:

Fluency: the ability to speak smoothly and naturally without long pauses.

Accuracy: correct use of grammar and vocabulary.

Pronunciation: clear and understandable speech with correct stress and intonation.

Vocabulary range: ability to select appropriate words and expressions.

Interaction: capacity to maintain conversation, respond, and cooperate with others.

Each of these aspects contributes to overall communicative competence. A balanced speaking test should therefore include all of them to provide a full picture of a learner's ability.

3. Types of Speaking Assessment

Speaking can be assessed through various formats, depending on the purpose and context of evaluation. Brown [2004] and Underhill [1992] classify speaking tests into several main types:

1. Interview-based assessment – a face-to-face interaction between examiner and student to evaluate conversation skills.
2. Picture description or storytelling – tests learners' ability to describe, narrate, and organize ideas logically.
3. Role-play – measures ability to use language in simulated real-life situations.
4. Group discussion or debate – assesses interaction, cooperation, and fluency in spontaneous speech.
5. Presentation or speech – tests organized delivery, pronunciation, and control of formal English.

Each method serves different testing goals. For instance, interviews and role-plays are useful for communicative evaluation, while presentations highlight individual performance and fluency.

4. Assessment Approaches

a. Holistic vs. Analytic Scoring. Holistic scoring provides a single overall score based on general impression, while analytic scoring separates performance into categories like fluency, grammar, and pronunciation [Hughes, 2003]. Analytic scales are considered more reliable because they make evaluation more transparent. However, they take more time and require training to apply consistently.

b. Formative vs. Summative Assessment. Formative assessment happens during learning to give feedback and guide improvement, whereas summative assessment occurs at the end of a course or test to measure achievement

[Harmer, 2015]. Continuous formative assessment—through classroom observation, peer feedback, or self-assessment—helps learners develop awareness of their strengths and weaknesses.

c. Criterion-referenced vs. Norm-referenced Assessment. Criterion-referenced assessment compares learners against defined performance standards (e.g., CEFR descriptors), while norm-referenced assessment compares them with other students [Fulcher, 2003]. Modern speaking assessment favors criterion-referenced evaluation because it focuses on actual communicative ability rather than competition.

5. Validity and Reliability in Speaking Assessment

An effective speaking test must be valid, reliable, and practical. Validity means the test measures what it is intended to measure—real speaking ability [Bachman, 1990]. Reliability refers to consistency across different raters or test occasions. Practicality involves efficiency in time, scoring, and administration. Ensuring reliability is especially challenging because human judgment is subjective. Using detailed rubrics, training raters, and recording performances can reduce bias and increase consistency [Luoma, 2004].

6. Common Challenges in Assessing Speaking

Despite progress in testing design, several challenges remain in evaluating speaking accurately:

1. Subjectivity of scoring – Teachers may differ in their perception of fluency or pronunciation [Brown, 2004].

2. Anxiety and nervousness – Students often perform worse under pressure, reducing reliability.

3. Cultural bias – Communication styles vary across cultures, affecting fairness [McNamara, 1996].

4. Time and resources – Oral tests require more preparation, recording, and assessment time than written exams.

5. Test authenticity – Artificial tasks may not reflect real-world speaking situations.

Teachers must consider these limitations when interpreting results and providing feedback.

7. Techniques for Improving Speaking Assessment

To overcome challenges, teachers and institutions can adopt several strategies:

Use standardized rubrics: Clear criteria such as the CEFR or IELTS descriptors improve reliability [Council of Europe, 2001].

Integrate peer and self-assessment: Encourages learner autonomy and reflection [Boud, 1995].

Incorporate authentic tasks: Role-plays, discussions, and projects simulate real communication [Luoma, 2004].

Provide constructive feedback: Helps learners understand how to improve specific aspects like pronunciation or fluency.

Combine quantitative and qualitative data: Scores should be supported by descriptive comments for deeper insight.

By applying these strategies, teachers can make speaking assessment more valid, reliable, and learner-centered.

8. The Role of Technology in Speaking Assessment

Recent advances in technology have introduced new tools for oral testing. Computer-assisted language testing (CALT) allows automated recording and scoring of speaking tasks [Chapelle & Douglas, 2006]. Online platforms like Duolingo English Test and Versant use speech recognition and AI-based analytics to assess pronunciation and fluency. Although such systems increase efficiency, they still cannot fully capture interactional competence—the ability to negotiate meaning with another human. Therefore, human assessment remains essential for measuring authentic communication.

9. Classroom-Based Speaking Assessment

In classroom contexts, speaking assessment should be continuous and integrated into regular teaching. Informal evaluation through pair work, role-plays, or project presentations gives a more natural measure of ability. Teachers can use checklists or rating scales adapted to learners' levels [Hughes, 2003]. Feedback should be immediate, supportive, and focused on progress rather than punishment. This encourages confidence and continuous improvement.

In conclusion, assessing speaking skills is one of the most demanding tasks in language education because it involves multiple dimensions—linguistic, psychological, and social. The process must balance accuracy and communication, reliability and authenticity. Teachers play a key role in designing fair, valid, and motivating assessment systems that reflect real-world use of English. Combining analytic scoring, authentic tasks, and continuous feedback provides the most accurate and educationally valuable results. Ultimately, effective speaking assessment is not just about measuring performance but about promoting communicative competence and confidence in learners.

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