



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Testing Speaking Skills in an Undergraduate ESL Classroom in Pakistan**

**<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Hassan Abbasi \*, <sup>2</sup>Asmara Shafqat and <sup>3</sup>Muhammad Farshad**

1. Lecturer, Department of Basic Sciences & Humanities-English, Dawood University of Engineering and Technology Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan
2. Lecturer, Department of English Linguistics and Allied Studies. NED University of Engineering and Technology Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan
3. Assistant Professor, Department of Basic Sciences & Humanities-English, Dawood University of Engineering and Technology Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan

**\*Corresponding Author:** hassan.abbasi@duet.edu.pk

**ABSTRACT**

Speaking skills is one of the most essential skills required for English language learning. Therefore, this study explores how English-speaking tests are designed, administrated, and conducted within a Pakistani English language classroom. English language teachers typically plan assessment of English-speaking skills using a set of speaking rubrics and criteria. For this purpose, the researchers have collected data by over-viewing empirical studies on testing speaking skills and reflections from teaching practices of ELT in Pakistan for in-depth thematic analysis. The findings show that different language frameworks have been adopted to assess speaking skills. Similarly, internationally recognized speaking tests with a standard set of rubrics are administrated around the world in English language classrooms. Furthermore, analysis of the assessment and speaking tests used by the Pakistani English language teachers within a Pakistani English language classroom. The study recommends that teachers should adopt different approaches, interactive material, rubrics, and testing criteria for assessing learner's speaking skills

**KEYWORDS** Assessment, ELT, ESL, Speaking, Territory Level, Testing

**Introduction**

Speaking skills is one of the foremost skills which is focused on ESL courses at tertiary level (Rao, 2019; Shabani, 2013 & Shagufta et al., 2023). As it enables the learners to improve their language performance (Poehner & Inbar-Lourie, 2020). As, communication is mainly the performance indicator of undergraduate students in professional life. However, to teach and assess the English communication skills in English classes, they must be integrated with the other skills for effective learning of the skill (Apriyana, 2021). Therefore, integration requires that learners are engaged in different speaking activities which enables them to use their oratory power and share their opinion (Majeed, A, 2019 & Wesley, 2013). These interactive activities include speaking prompts, picture cues, debate, topics for discussion, presentation, pair-conversation, interviews, problem solving activities and role-play which the learner often finds difficult (Shagufta et al., 2023 & Zhang, 2009). Consequently, teaching learners the skills of persuading, negotiating, arguing, debating, and convincing through their speaking skills. This allows the teacher to assess the learner for formative and summative functions of speaking skills within the classroom easily (Koizumi, 2022). Hence, this study aims to explore how English language teachers assess speaking skills of learners using different frameworks and rubrics by comparing international and local practices.

**Literature review**

Speaking skills are tested and assessed as a key performance indicator for undergraduate studies at territory level (Shabani, 2013). Teachers develop different speaking tests to assess the performance of learners. However, the major obstacle within

the language classrooms for these speaking tests is validity and reliability of the formative and summative speaking test which is often assumed but not practiced in ESL classroom. (Lewkowicz & Leung, 2021). Besides, the reliability and validity there are other significant issues while implementing speaking tests in English classroom. One of the key issues is the test taker's ability, language proficiency, context, rubrics, and test purpose (Akiyama, 2004, 2019; Hirai & Koizumi, 2013 & Honda, 2007). Besides this, a successful speaking test implementation requires physical space, time, technology and efforts from administration and teacher. Lastly, the role of teacher itself is challenging in implementation of the test, as the teacher must play a double role by acting as a facilitator and assessor of the test (Teasdale & Leung, 2000). Subsequently, the teacher has a leading role in speaking tests as they are the main creators, administrators, and raters. Beside the teacher's motivation the environment, cultural values, policies, and students' characteristics also play an equally challenging role in implementing language speaking tests in ESL classroom along by maintaining its reliability and validity (Lee, 2010)

Pandemic revolutionized the teaching practices (Quraishi, Asif, Sheeraz & Amer, 2020). English language teachers also had to adopt innovative approaches to teach, test and assess learner's performance. Hence, assessing the four skills of English language was not easy; because of infrastructural, technological, and economic challenges (Abbasi & Aftab, 2021). As a result, teachers face problems in testing the speaking skills of the learners because of physical space, technology, online platforms, and individual assessment of each learner. However, it also provided an equal opportunity to teachers to assess the speaking skills by using digital platform with built-in lessons which can be adopted according to learner's needs. Teachers evaluated learners on impromptu speaking and interviews using a rubric (Abbasi, Khan, Chandio & Javed, 2022)

Overall, English speaking skills testing must be employed for effective English language learning. Without adequate testing, the students might not have functional speaking skills required for professional life. As of now, speaking skills is not tested and graded using any criteria, framework, or rubric in most of the institutes in Pakistan. This paper explores the existing ESL practices of assessing speaking skills using adopted tests from foreign experts or designing a rubric for testing speaking skills within the Pakistani English language classroom.

## **Material and Methods**

The study considers empirical studies, frameworks, internationally recognized scales, and rubrics for assessing speaking skills. It also overviews the teaching practices and research within the ESL context of Pakistan. The articles were overviewed after searching the available literature from different sources like journals website and online libraries. The focus of the search for the literature was on teaching practices, speaking skills and testing speaking skills internally and locally. After the search, the articles were divided into two specific themes testing speaking frameworks and scales and testing speaking practices within Pakistan English language classroom.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Testing Speaking Skills Frameworks**

Testing speaking skills is a complex and multidimensional process. As a result, there are different approaches, rubrics and criteria being employed to assess speaking skills worldwide (Galaczi, French, Hubbard & Green, 2011). The foremost testing scale that is used commonly is the Cambridge English general and business speaking tests which is often referred as Business English Certificates (BEC). They are level-based certificate courses and test the proficiency levels of the learner by focusing on the levels as assigned in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, 2001). Through the rubrics, speaking is

evaluated through a face-to-face method where the learner is engaged in a series of tasks. Through the participation in different tasks, the examiners can elicit large samples of the speaking skills which have been analyzed in greater detail than the traditional speaking prompts and interviews. (Brooks 2009; Galaczi 2008; O'Sullivan, Weir & Saville 2002 & Taylor, 1999). Two examiners evaluate the performance of the learner during the speaking test, interlocutor interacts and conducts the test with learner/test taker and provide a holistic understanding based on scales while the second examiner acts as an observer having no part in the test and focused making assessment of each learner on a set of scale (Galazzi et al, 2011). The construct within the rubrics is lexical, grammatical along with the communicative, discourse competence, pronunciation, and interactive communication. This sort of testing is based on the expert judgment more than the construct or scale. The limitations of the scales have promoted the development of further scales that include assessing the test taker on quantitative and qualitative approaches of testing scales. These include G-theory (e.g., Lynch and McNamara 1998; Sawaki 2007), multi-dimensional scaling (Chalhoub-Deville, 1995) and multi-facet Rasch measurement MFRM (Sawaki, 2007). While the evaluators have resorted to scale descriptors and stakeholder perceptions too (Brown 2007; Knoch 2009; Lazaraton 2002).

In the same way, few countries adopt IELTS style speaking test in their language classroom for assessing the proficiency and speaking skills of learners (Islam & Bt Stapa, 2021). More than 11,000 organizations worldwide accept IELTS speaking test as the most standard speaking test (IELTS, 2021). IELTS is a standard speaking test because of the context and format of the test. For instance, Private Sector University in Bangladesh administrated IELTS speaking test in its undergraduate program. IELTS speaking test categorizes learners into different bands "such as expert user (band score 9), very good user (band score 8), good user (band score 7), competent user (bandscore 6), modest user (band score 5), and limited user (band score 4) were used" (Islam & Bt Stapa, 2021, p.13). The results enable the teacher to know about the current proficiency of the learners, almost 38% got IELTS band score 4.5., while 33.3% got five band score and only one student scored 6.5. The result shows that in Bangladesh, most of the learners are not proficient in speaking skills. Yet the criteria adopted provide an opportunity for them for self-reflection and improvement. Hence, countries adopt IELTS speaking test because of its authenticity and credibility of the text,

However, in the scenario of Pakistan, the approach to testing speaking skills is different within ESL classrooms as the tests are designed, conducted, and scored solely by teacher.

### **Testing Speaking Skills in ESL Classroom in Pakistan**

In Pakistani ESL classrooms, teacher often do not pay attention to the testing criteria (Coleman, 2010 & Jafri et al, 2013). Despite all the undergraduate programs have English as one of the compulsory courses; where speaking is one of the major skills to be taught and evaluated using different speaking-tests. Yet, research informs us that teachers pay less attention to this skill (Shagufta et al, 2023). As a result, students do not have proficiency in the language (Pervaiz et al 2022). As teachers rely on simple testing scores and often do not apply any rubric or criteria to assess the learner's capabilities (Riaz, Haider and Hassan; 2019). Another major reason for teachers utilizing simple criteria for marking speaking skills is that mostly undergraduate students undertake this course just for passing the examination with good grades (Memon, 2000). As, English speaking skills can be improved and evaluated by several strategies, approach, and methodology of teaching. Majeed (2019) and Sambath and Sethruman (2017) used task-based criteria to assess students speaking skills as an alternative to use rubrics and scales which are valid and dependable. As English-speaking skills are in high demand in professional life therefore, it must be assessed using authentic criteria for speaking tests.

In English language classes, teachers focus on assessing speaking through presentations only (Pervaiz *et al* 2022). Hence, while evaluating the speaking skills, they specifically rely on scales and rubrics adopted from foreign context or used by English language centers like Berlitz, Eureka, and other which places the learners in different level of speaking (Majeed, 2019). Previously, Brooks and Wilson (2014) have already explored how oral presentations can be evaluated to improve the speaking skills of students. In the same way, Pervaiz *et al* (2022) marked students speaking skills based on oral communication among 20 BS English students. Dornyei and Scott (1995) model was used for testing the student's performance. The rubric focused on pronunciation, content, vocabulary, accuracy, communication, accent, fluency, switching and fillers.

Riaz *et al* (2019) utilized Kim's (2010) testing scale to overview the performance of first year's students over two semesters. The rubric included "five scales of meaningfulness, grammatical competence, discourse competence, task completion, and intelligibility" (Riaz *et al*, 2019 p.133). The learners' performance was graded on these scales. The speaking performance of all the learners was recorded via individual dialogue prompt or pair scenario. These recordings provided the assessor with the opportunity to evaluate the speaking ability of the learners. Hence, this analytical scoring rubric provided the learners a chance to self-improve and self-monitor their speaking capability and distinguish between major and minor errors. Similarly, Abbasi *et al* (2022) narrated that for testing the speaking skills of learners' teacher's knowledge, proficiency, self-designed rubric, and impromptu situation were taken as constructs for testing the speaking skills of learners in an undergraduate degree program. While Shagufta *et al* (2023) reported that teachers assess the speaking skills of learners based on presentations, discussion, debates, interviews and reading aloud to mark students speaking capabilities.

## **Conclusion**

In the global world, there are different rubrics and scales with accurate reliability and validity to assess the speaking skills of learners like Cambridge English general and business testing and IELTS speaking tests with band scores. (CEFR, 2001 & Islam & Bt Stapa, 2021). In different countries, IELTS speaking test are administered to know the level of proficiency the learner acquired (Islam & Bt Stapa, 2021). This testing is helpful as it provides an insight to the teachers and gives an opportunity to learners for self-improvement and grants them learner's autonomy.

However, in Pakistan the scenario is quite opposite where teacher rely on their personal language expertise, experience, and technological equipment in some cases to assess learner's speaking skills. Such a practice only provides the learners with some scores and marks in the subject, however professional skill is not acquired. As Coleman (2010) and Jafri *et al* (2013) have reported that undergraduate students in Pakistani classroom lack speaking fluency because they do not know how to self-monitor and improve their speaking skills. Also, the major focus is on presentations and content while delivering (Pervaiz *et al*, 2022). As the teacher cannot specifically focus on every student in a large classroom (Riaz *et al*, 2019). While some ESL teachers focus on role play, interviews, role play and problem-solving speaking prompts for testing English speaking skills (Shagufta *et al* 2023). Therefore, if the learners are introduced to a proper language testing criteria and techniques where they can self-evaluate and self-monitor their own skills than their speaking proficiency would be much more effective in the ESL classroom and professional life.

## **Recommendations**

Speaking skills are one of the essential qualities among all the four skills of language. It is required in every field. Considering its importance, ELT teachers should adopt different approaches to teach and evaluate the learner's capabilities. It is essential that learners be introduced to different models, scales, and testing criteria so that they can improve their

speaking skills. Hence, teachers should use different scales in their ESL classroom for effective learning and try to adopt the scales that are discussed in this paper according to the context and introduce learners to the testing criteria before it is introduced to test the learner. This awareness would enhance the speaking skills of the learner.

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