Testing Accuracy and Fluency in Speaking Through Communicative Activities

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For many years, all those interested in the teaching of English as a foreign language have analysed, investigated and discussed the role and importance of speaking skills and the way they could be tested in the teaching-learning process. It has been noted that the way oral production is being tested is definitely important in order to obtain better results in the effective and appropriate use of spoken language. This essay deals with some topic-linked ideas for teachers to test oral accuracy and fluency in a well organised and systematic way by using meaningful, interesting and motivating activities.
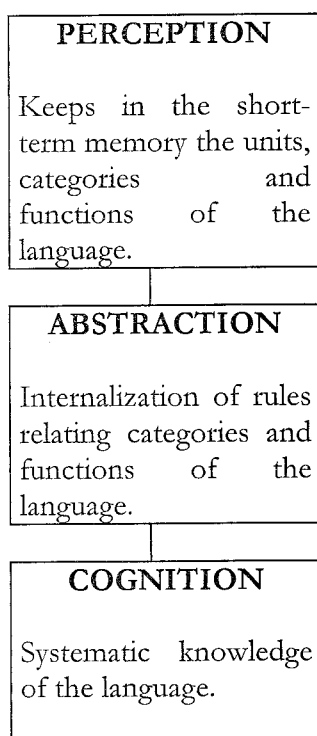
1. FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES IN TEACHING AND TESTING SPEAKING

The development of the speaking skills is carried out through some processes that teachers must take into account during the teaching-learning process. The communication carried out by using speech involves mainly the knowledge both of the **linguistic competence** (the ability to manage the rules or grammatical structures of the language) and of the **communicative competence** (the ability to use the language) to establish an effective, appropriate and acceptable communication in an oral way.
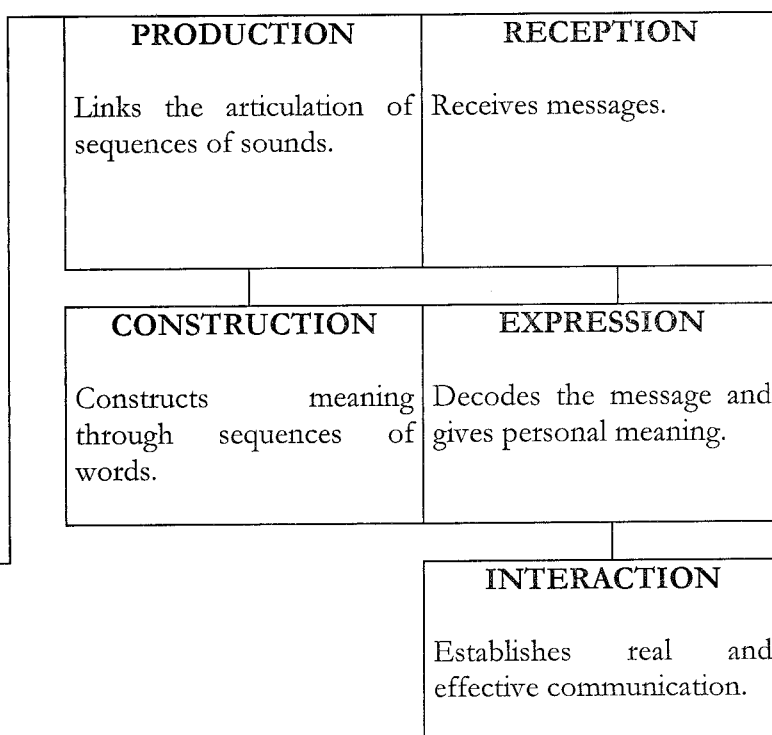
In the former, it would be said that there are two processes called "**perception**" and "**abstraction**" which together constitute the "**cognition**" or systematic knowledge that the learner has of the language. Through the perception the learner keeps in the short-term memory those units, categories and functions which characterise the language while through the abstraction the speaker internalises the rules relating the categories and the functions perceived. In the communicative competence appears, on one side, the "**production**" which links the articulation of sequences of sounds and the "**construction**" of meaning through sequences of words as a starting point to communicate orally; on the other side, appears the "**interaction**" in which the real communication takes places through the "**reception**" of the message and the "**expression**" of personal meaning to establish an effective communication, Rivers and Temperley (1978). The following diagram illustrates the processes through which speaking is developed:

LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

PERCEPTION
Keeps in the short-term memory the units, categories and functions of the language.

ABSTRACTION
Internalization of rules relating categories and functions of the language.

COGNITION
Systematic knowledge of the language.

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

PRODUCTION	RECEPTION
Links the articulation of sequences of sounds.	Receives messages.

CONSTRUCTION	EXPRESSION
Constructs meaning through sequences of words.	Decodes the message and gives personal meaning.

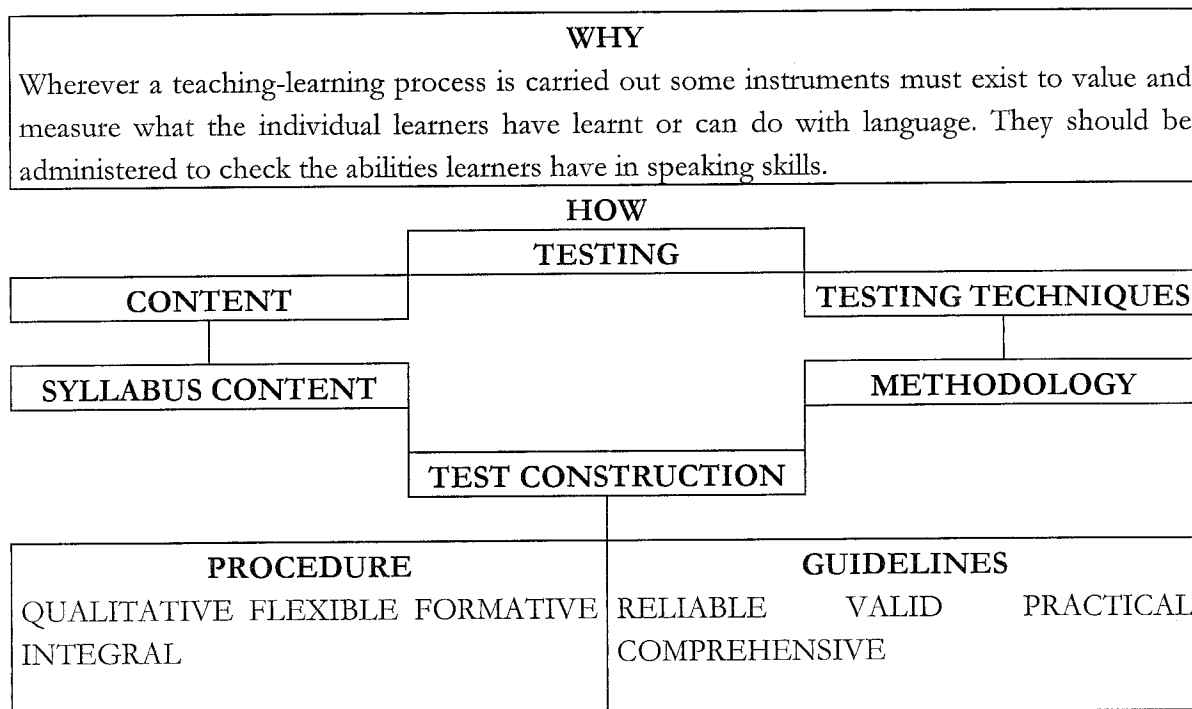| INTERACTION |
| --- |
| Establishes real and effective communication. |

Having presented the processes involved in developing speaking skills, it should be discussed **why** and **how** we should test the students´ abilities to communicate orally. It should be said that wherever a teaching-learning process is carried out, some instruments must exist that are able to value and measure what the individual learner has learnt or is able to do with language. Any form of formal assessment to check the abilities learners have in speaking skills should be administered, but its content and testing techniques must be planned keeping in mind the **syllabus content** or **what they have been taught** according to the study of needs, the specification of teaching-learning objectives, the achievement indicators and the topics and themes developed; and the **methodology of how they have been taught** according to the procedure /approach used to teach and learn the language.

It is true that "testing and teaching are closely interrelated, that it is practically impossible to work in one field without having constant concern with the other" Rea-Dickins (1992), but it does not mean that the syllabus content and the methodology should reflect strictly the test content and the testing techniques and viceversa. Therefore, test construction must be a flexible, formative and integral procedure in which the most reliable, valid, practical, comprehensive and confidential guidelines are set to test the different language components involved in speaking. (See the following diagram).

WHY AND HOW TO TEST SPEAKING

WHY
Wherever a teaching-learning process is carried out some instruments must exist to value and measure what the individual learners have learnt or can do with language. They should be administered to check the abilities learners have in speaking skills.

HOW

	TESTING	
CONTENT		TESTING TECHNIQUES
SYLLABUS CONTENT		METHODOLOGY
	TEST CONSTRUCTION	

PROCEDURE	GUIDELINES
QUALITATIVE FLEXIBLE FORMATIVE INTEGRAL	RELIABLE VALID PRACTICAL COMPREHENSIVE

When teaching and testing speaking, it is important to keep in mind the two main features of language: accuracy (precision and linguistic acceptability of the language) and fluency (ability to develop ideas and the way for expressing them). To do that, students should be aided to understand and produce correct language. As a hearer or speaker the pupil should be made aware of the appropriateness and acceptability of the language he/she uses.

Through the diagram below the author of this research shows the language components proposed to test accuracy and fluency in speaking. There are some components in which we can test accuracy such as: pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar; through these three main components the teacher can test the ability learners have to master the language as a system (linguistic competence). There are three more components in which a teacher can test pupils' ability to use the language to communicate effectively and fluently (communicative competence): mechanical skills, language use and judgement skills. The mastery of all these language components presented in terms of accurate and fluent features of the language leads learners to the last and most important language component which is the comprehension or the ability learners have to decode, transmit, share and negotiate information accurately and fluently.

ACCURACY LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE LANGUAGE FORM Ability to master a language as a system	FLUENCY COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE LANGUAGE FUNCTION Ability to use language to communicate
PRONUNCIATION Pupils' ability to pronounce sounds and follow intonation and stress patterns in an acceptable and comprehensible manner.	**MECHANICAL SKILLS** The ability to use pauses, punctuation, speed, rhythm and sentence length.
VOCABULARY Pupils' ability to produce words in response to an appropriate stimulus, determine whether the learner has certain words available to him to use in speaking situations.	**LANGUAGE USE** The ability to talk in coherent, reasoned and "semantically dense" sentences, showing a mastery of the semantic and grammatical resources of the language.
GRAMMAR Pupils' ability to produce appropriate morphological and syntactical patterns in a given speech situation.	**JUDGEMENT SKILLS** The ability to have appropriate things to say in a wide range of contexts and for a particular audience. Ability to select, organise, order, create and develop thoughts.

COMPREHENSION The ability to transmit, negotiate and share information accurately and fluently.

In order to facilitate the testing of all these language components, a checklist is proposed. It can be used by the teacher while learners are developing a communicative activity. **(See sample 1)**. It is divided into two main language features: accuracy and fluency, each one of these features contains its corresponding language components. Each language component presents five levels of language ability of the learners E: Excellent, G: Good, A: Acceptable, P: Poor, and NR: No Response, all of them describe the ability pupils have. In the same checklist there are some squares numbered from 1 to 30 which correspond to the students. So, while the teacher observes her/his students´ language ability she-he can stick or mark the corresponding square that reflects the language ability each learner has. It could also be possible that at the end of the activity the teacher takes time to record the ability the students have, but it is is more difficult for the teacher to

remember all those aspects observed on each of his-her students. It is suggested to test learners individually but with all of them in the same checklist to facilitate the administration of the test but if the teachers feel more comfortable applying one checklist for each pupil, an individual form can also be prepared.

It is also relevant to say that to obtain reliable and valid results in the testing of these language features, teachers must check one language component at a time. It is too difficult to pretend to check the whole components at the same time.

For effective testing of speaking skills, the teacher as a guide, facilitator, organiser and supervisor may look for the best way of controlling the achievement of the aims established for the course. It is the teacher who must participate actively in the design of the test by forming a test which looks as if it measures the students´ oral production.

It is expected to measure the skills according to the syllabus of the school and the appropriate proportion of content to be tested. It also may allow the comparison between the results obtained in one test and those obtained on a different test with a different format but which test the same language component in speaking; Finocchiaro and Sako (1983).

Finally, once these aspects have been stated, the test maker may proceed to determine some other facts that count when test construction takes place such as choosing a test whose cost allows partial acquisition by the institution, the marking not to be too difficult and the administration to be relatively easy to carry out.

3. SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES TO TEST SPEAKING

To facilitate the testing of accuracy and fluency in speaking it is suggested to focus pupils' attention on interesting, meaningful and motivating activities which promote and encourage the use of spoken language in real-authentic situations. It is so because for many people the test situation itself creates considerable anxiety which can badly affect their performance. So, it is necessary to expose the learners to communicative activities that make them feel more relaxed and confident. Most of the proposed communicative activities to test accuracy and fluency in speaking are based on pair work or group work. It is important to point out that students feel more comfortable when speaking with a partner because the learners feel they are talking to someone about their own lives, whose interests are identical to theirs, which makes the communication as comprehensible as possible. It usually makes them more willing to speak, to say

more when they do speak, to co-operate among themselves and to take the initiative much more because the students feel more relaxed.

ACTIVITY Nº 1 - "HALF MINUTE TOPICS" (See sample 3) GROUP WORK (FOUR PEOPLE)

The teacher gives each group a handout and four counters. Pupils place these in the starting point. They throw the dice by turns and move the corresponding number of squares, each time one of them lands on a square he/she has a half minute to talk about the topic of the square.

ACTIVITY Nº 2 - "ANSWERING AND ADVERTISING" (See sample 4) PAIRWORK

The teacher gives pupils a worksheet. In each pair there is student A and student B. Student A wants another person to share a house and has put an advertisement in the newspaper. Student B phones up about it. Both pupils have to ask and answer questions in order to find the corresponding information on the worksheet.

4. PROPOSED FEEDBACK INSTRUMENT

When testing speaking it is important to give students a feedback of their weaknesses and strengths in the language component(s) tested. To do that a form is also provided, a form which contains the name of the student, the language components and a space to write teacher's recommendations in order that students improve or maintain their language abilities. To encourage pupils' participation in their own testing process a space is provided for the students' own self-

evaluation and a proposal given by themselves to improve their oral production. **(See sample 5)**

This last part is rather important because when we are talking to other people we are constantly assessing how successful our communication is. We do this by listening to ourselves as we speak, by watching what effect it has on other people's appearance and behaviour because in natural communication we do not have time to control ourselves consciously. In this sense, the learner is in the best position to say how good he/she is at speaking and how he/she can improve his/her spoken language abilities. It is possible that they do it by giving them some easily understood guidelines that will enable them to express in an explicit form his/her impressions about his/her own level of oral production and the way they would improve or maintain it. It is another way to enable learners to take more responsibility for helping themselves to progress.

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SAMPLE 1

F/C	LEVELS OF LANGUAGE ABILITY	STUDENTS																								
	ACCURACY																									
	PRONUNCIATION																									
E	Accurate pronunciation, intonation and stress patterns throughout the speaking situation.																									
G	Occasional Pronunciation, intonation and stress errors but generally comprehensible.																									
A	Many pronunciation, intonation and stress errors. Hard to understand.																									
P	Pronunciation, intonation and stress problems make speech virtually unintelligible.																									
NR	No response																									
	VOCABULARY																									
E	Recognise, define and produce words appropriately throughout the oral production.																									
G	Minor words recognition, definition and production problems. Vocabulary generally appropriate.																									
A	Words recognition, definition and production usually inaccurate. Occasional correct words.																									
P	Recognition, definition and production errors make conversation virtually impossible.																									
NR	No response																									
	GRAMMAR																									
E	Accuracy on internal structure and combination of words.																									
G	Generally accurate internal structure of words and word-order. Occasional errors.																									
A	Frequent errors on internal structure of words and word-order which occasionally obscure meaning.																									
P	Virtually incorrect internal structure and combination of words.																									
NR	No response.																									
	FLUENCY																									
	MECHANICAL SKILLS																									
E	Speech speed, pauses, rhythm and sentence length are excellent. Speech is natural and continuous.																									
G	Speech speed, pauses, rhythm and sentence length are affected by slight errors.																									
A	Strong errors affect speech speed, pauses, rhythm and sentence length.																									
P	Long pauses, unfinished utterances and fragmentary speech make communication almost impossible.																									
NR	No response.																									
	LANGUAGE USE																									
E	Coherent, reasoned and meaningful performance of spoken language. Accurate mastery of language system.																									
G	Minor errors in performing coherent, reasoned, meaningful and accurate spoken language.																									
A	Frequently uses incoherent, unreasoning, meaningless and inaccurate spoken language.																									
P	Severe problems on using coherent, reasoned, meaningful and accurate speaking.																									
NR	No response.																									
	JUDGEMENT SKILLS																									
E	Speaks appropriately for a particular purpose and audience. Select, organise, order and create relevant language.																									
G	Rarely has trouble speaking with appropriate language for a particular purpose and audience.																									

	Minor errors in selecting, organising, ordering and creating relevant language.																										
A	Has strong problems both speaking appropriately in a specific context and audience and selecting, organising, ordering and creating relevant language.																										
P	Use inappropriate spoken language for a specific context and audience. Cannot select, organise, order and create relevant information.																										
NR	No response.																										

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SAMPLE 3

HOW

SAMPLE 4

31 ANSWERING AN
ADVERTISEMENT

Student A

> THIRD PERSON
> required to share large
> house.
> Central. Phone
> 846592.

You have been sharing a large house with two other people for nearly two years. One of them has now decided to leave so you have to find someone to take his/her place. You have put the above advertisement in the local newspaper. Someone (your partner) phones you up about it.

* Before you start, think about the following:

* where the house is situated

* when the person can move in

* how much the rent is

* how much of the house is shared

* who does the cleaning, etc.

* anything else you can think of (e.g. near the shops, station, modern, central heating, etc.)

If the person is interested, arrange a day and time when he/she can come and see the house.

Student B

> THIRD PERSON
> required to share large
> house.
> Central Phone
> 846592.

You have just moved to this town and are looking for a house or flat to rent. You see the above advertisement and decided to phone up about it. Your partner answers the phone.

Before you start, think of some questions to ask. For example, you might want to know:

* where it is

* when you can move in

* how much the rent is

* what the other people are like

* how much of the house is shared

* if everyone helps with the cleaning, cooking, etc.

* what 'your room' is like

* if it is near a supermarket, etc.

If you are interested, try to arrange a day and time to go and see it. You can start by saying:

Good (morning). I'm phoning about your advertisement in the paper.

SAMPLE 5

NAME: _____

GRADE: _____

TEACHER RECOMMENDATIONS	STUDENT SELF-EVALUATION
PRONUNCIATION	
	PROPOSAL:
VOCABULARY	
	PROPOSAL:
GRAMMAR	
	PROPOSAL:
MECHANICAL SKILLS	
	PROPOSAL:
LANGUAGE USE	
	PROPOSAL:
JUDGEMENT SKILLS	
	PROPOSAL:
FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS:	

HOW