Self-Assessment of Oral Proficiency among ESL Learners

Dr. Smriti Singh

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Patna, Patna, India.

Corresponding email address
smritichotu@gmail.com, Ph: 09199202209

Article reference:

Abstract: In India English is an important language occupying a high position for a few reasons as mentioned here: meeting new people and communicating with others, career and travel opportunities and improving one’s academic performance in other subjects. Teaching of any language requires an assessment to check its successful delivery. Generally assessments and exams are written in nature conducted by external bodies and test only a few language skills like writing and reading. Oral skills get neglected and good grades in writing or reading skills do not necessarily mean excellence in oral proficiency. This is where the role of self-assessment comes in. Self-assessment means judging the quality of your own performance based on specific criteria. This paper will discuss the benefits of self-assessment and try to answer the following: What oral proficiency is and how it relates to one’s language learning goals? What guidelines can be used to rate one’s speaking ability?

Index Terms: English in India, ELT, Self-assessment.

1. Introduction

Nowadays English is one of the most spoken languages in the world (Rönnerdahl & Johansson, 2005:11). Its importance is inevitable. According to Rönnerdahl and Johansson (p. 11) “it has been suggested that as much as 99% of all communication is spoken” and by this quote we can understand the importance of spoken language. As a teacher of languages, one feels that spoken language is very important as it is the students’ most effective way of being able to communicate. There is no point learning a language using solely textbooks or other typical classroom materials that do not develop students’ oral skills, which, realistically would be the most important language skill that students would need in real-life situations.

According to Palmér (2010) oral language is students’ main way of communicating and it is a very important part of their learning process. It is something that can be applied to all foreign language teaching, where the aim is for the students to develop their communication skills. Through communication they can send and receive information, process knowledge and interpret and critically evaluate their own knowledge. Using their communication skills the students enhance their ability to develop other linguistic skills. Palmér (2010:38) says that “the students’ language development is the first reason for why a teacher shall focus on oral communication in the class” (n.h).

Although people speak for many different reasons, these can be broadly categorized in two ways:

1. transaction - using language to get things done. e.g. requesting and giving factual information and service encounters.

2. interaction - using language for social intercourse. e.g. conversing, discussing, making friends and storytelling.
As far as the English language is concerned in a country like India, there are numerous benefits of studying English. Some of them are as follows:

- meeting new people and communicating with others
- career and travel opportunities
- connecting with roots you have to that language and culture
- improving your academic performance in other subjects
- great employment opportunities in growing, cutting-edge fields, such as:
  - politics/international affairs
  - international education
  - intelligence
  - international business
  - philanthropy and the nonprofit sector

This paper tries to answer the following questions:

- What oral proficiency is and how it relates to one’s language learning goals
- Is there any difference between proficiency and fluency
- What is self-assessment and what are its benefits
- A set of guidelines that can be used to rate one’s speaking ability

Language proficiency encompasses social contexts associated with language acquisition and academic contexts tied to schooling, in general, and standards, curriculum, and instruction, in particular. Standards-based instruction that integrates language and content represents a refinement of the seminal work by Cummins (1980, 1981), in which he first posits the constructs of basic interpersonal communication skills and cognitive academic language proficiency (Gottlieb, 2003).

English language proficiency standards need to capture the full range and complexities of methodologies that blend language and content learning. To this end, we must expand the coverage of current English language proficiency (or development) standards to bring them into alignment with practice. In addition, we must ensure that English language proficiency standards dovetail academic content standards to create a continuous pathway to academic success for our English language learners.

Language proficiency assessment, in large part, has not remained apace with changing teaching practices for our English language learners. We need to retool existing language proficiency assessment measures to match the pedagogical shift to content-based instruction. English language proficiency standards guide the development of test blueprints, task specifications, and English language proficiency measures. Thus, language proficiency standards are the first step in the construction of reliable and valid assessment tools. We must create rigorous language proficiency standards as the anchor of a sound assessment system for English language learners.

There are very few studies that specifically focus on self-assessment of oral proficiency by ESL learners.

In a longitudinal case study by Yuh-Mei Chen (2008) conducted at a university in southern Taiwan twenty-eight ESL students learnt to self-assess oral performance in English by comparing student assessment with teacher assessment. This study showed that through feedback and practice, participating students make significant progress in learning to assess their
own oral performance and this helped students to achieve desired learning outcomes. Not only the teacher but most of the students agreed that it was a beneficial learning practice. It should be kept in mind that results of several self-assessment studies can be contradictory because the outcome is influenced by the use of the monitor (Blanche, 1988). This does not mean that self-assessment practices do not benefit the learners. In fact, self-assessment accuracy helps learners to become autonomous and they would not have to depend entirely on the teacher’s opinion to appraise their progress. Also it would enable them to make teachers aware of their individual learning needs.

Oral proficiency is a student’s ability to speak a language in real-life settings, outside of the classroom. At this juncture one needs to make a distinction between proficiency and fluency. Oral proficiency describes how well you can speak a language in the real world, regardless of your textbook, grades, or class goals. While other language skills such as writing are also important, if you want to study or work in a place where English is spoken, you will need to be able to communicate effectively. On the other hand, language fluency refers to the ability to be fluent or fluid in language use and is not sufficient for language proficiency.

Figuring out one’s level of oral proficiency will help one understand how well one can communicate in English right now. One can then use what one has learned to measure one’s progress and set one’s learning goals based on how one hope to use English in the future.

A student’s ability to engage in conversation, understand written or spoken text, and present information orally or in writing is developed over a number of years of learning a language. Each person is unique, and even in immersion programs, not all students attain the same level of proficiency in the same period of time. However, all students should be able to increase their proficiency each year if they are in a high-quality language program taught by a fluent and capable teacher. So, assessing language proficiency is a critical component of program evaluation. An even more important reason to assess language proficiency is to provide students with accurate feedback on their developing abilities in the language. While grades may be based on many non-linguistic factors, such as attendance, mastery of specific grammar points, or completion of homework, language proficiency focuses only on what a student is actually able to do with the language. (http://www.k12.wa.us/worldlanguages/assessment/default.aspx)

Generally a number of instruments are available for assessing proficiency. Centre for Advanced Linguistics, Washington D.C. uses an interview protocol to assess oral fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and listening comprehension of students. There are many computer based tests and external organizations like Cambridge University which conducts assessment tests. The point is that all these examinations are conducted by external agencies. Students are tested for their skills and awarded grades. Apart from this, these examinations are expensive. Some also require gadgets and instruments to record student response for later evaluation. In such cases students cannot assess their learning outcomes on their own. So what is self-assessment? And why is it important?

Self-assessment means judging the quality of one’s own performance based on specific criteria and taking charge of one’s learning. It has dual benefits in form of motivational and academic benefits.

**Motivational benefits of self-assessment**

The process of self-assessment helps one reflect on how much one has learned. Research shows that monitoring one’s progress can change how one feels about language learning by increasing one’s -

- involvement in setting learning goals
- sense of achievement from successes
motivation to learn
overall confidence in learning

Academic benefits of self-assessment

Self-assessment can change not only one’s motivation to learn, but also how one learns. Research shows that conducting self-assessment in the classroom can improve one’s language learning by improving one’s

- awareness of goals and expectations
- attention to strengths and weaknesses
- independent and self-regulated learning
- communication with teachers (http://www.cal.org/aop/why.php)

Guidelines to measure oral proficiency levels

American Council on Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) mentions different proficiency levels at which people’s ability to perform vary and if the learner is given this framework, s/he can get an idea of his strengths and weaknesses. ACTFL gives the following levels: Novice-Low, Novice-Mid, Novice-high, Intermediate-Low, Intermediate-Mid, Intermediate-High, Advanced, Advanced-Plus, Superior. Below is mentioned the basic criterion for each level as given by ACTFL.

Tasks performed at each level:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Novice</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Greet</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Tell</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Ask</td>
<td>Describe</td>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>Make plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>Advise</td>
<td>Compare</td>
<td>Explain</td>
<td>Narrate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Defend</td>
<td>Discuss</td>
<td>Hypothesize</td>
<td>Persuade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Topics to talk about:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Novice</th>
<th>Basic objects</th>
<th>Expressions of politeness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Survival phrases</td>
<td>Information about yourself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>Daily life situations</td>
<td>Topics of public interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Abstract topics</td>
<td>Unfamiliar topics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How much Language is produced at each level?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Language Produced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Novice</td>
<td>Words/phrases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermedi ate</td>
<td>Sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>Connected sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Extended conversation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Kind of language produced at each level:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Language Produced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Novice</td>
<td>Memorized words and phrases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermedi ate</td>
<td>Combination of familiar language in reaction to questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>Factual talk in conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Structured argument in organized talk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Stanford FLOSEM Foreign language Oral Skill Evaluation Matrix measures fluency on a scale of 1-6:

Learner can participate only in interactions which involve producing formulaic question-answer patterns and/or offering very short responses to simple questions. [1]

When participating in a simple conversation on familiar, everyday topics, the learner must frequently pause to formulate short, simple non-formulaic statements and questions. [2]

While participating in a conversation or discussion, learner can express themselves using simple language, but consistently falters and hesitates as they try to express more complex ideas and/or searches for less common words and expressions. These efforts noticeably impede flow of communication. [3]

Learner can effortlessly express herself, but may occasionally falter and hesitate as they try to express more complex ideas and/or searches for less common words and expressions. Although distracting, these speech rhythms do not noticeably impede the flow of communication. [4]

Learner is generally fluent, with occasional minor lapses while they search for the correct manner of expression. [5]


The Linguistic Proficiency self-assessment guide measures proficiency on a scale of 0-5 and the broad outline they have given is similar to the guidelines given by ACTFL.
0 No Proficiency

1 Can understand a limited number of high frequency words in isolation and short, common everyday conversational expressions (e.g., “How are you?”; “My name is …”). Can offer very short responses to simple questions, however, has difficulty in accurately reproducing the target language sounds and sound patterns.

2 Can understand a limited number of high frequency words in isolation and short, common everyday conversational expressions (e.g., “How are you?”; “My name is …”). Can offer very short responses to simple questions, however, has difficulty in accurately reproducing the target language sounds and sound patterns.

3 Can comprehend the main point(s) of a short conversation at less than normal speed, though it is likely that details will be lost. Some repetition may be necessary. Can convey expression using simple language, but consistently falters and hesitates in expressing more complex ideas and/or searches for less-common words and expressions. These efforts noticeably impede flow of communication. Adequate vocabulary, but at beginning stage of showing knowledge of synonyms and a limited number of alternative ways of expressing simple ideas. Some repetition may be necessary to make meaning clear. Limited ability to utilize a few complex constructions, though not always successfully. Grammatical errors persist which may make meaning unclear.

4 Understands most of what is said (all main points and most details) in both short and longer dialogues and passages which contain abstract information heard at almost normal speed. Some repetition may be necessary. Can effortlessly express self, but may occasionally falter and hesitate at more complex ideas and/or searches for less-common words and expressions. Clearly demonstrates knowledge of synonyms and alternative ways of expressing simple ideas. Speech is always intelligible, though a definite accent and/or occasional inappropriate intonation pattern is apparent. Consistent command over a limited range of more complex patterns and grammatical rules. Occasional errors in grammar are present, but do not obscure meaning.

5 Understands everything at normal fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, intonation and command of complex patterns and grammatical rules like a native speaker.

(http://www.nlada100years.org/sites/default/files/Effectively%20Representing%20Limited%20English%20Proficient%20Clients(5).pdf)

2. Study

A set of 15 Undergraduate Learners learning English as a Second Language were asked to assess their speaking proficiency. When given the ACTFL guidelines, 8 of them marked themselves at the Intermediate or Advanced Levels in all areas. 4 of them marked themselves at the Superior level as far as topics to talk and language produced parameters were concerned. 3 of them marked themselves at the Superior Level in all areas.

When given the FLOSEM Matrix, 10 of the learners put themselves at Level 3 while 4 placed themselves at Level 2 and 1 placed himself at Level 5. Similar markings were done as far as the NLADA Proficiency guidelines are concerned.
3. Findings

When the teacher assessed the students on the same lines, the teacher found certain discrepancies in the ranking of the students as far as their ability to make conversations or arguments was concerned. When discussed with the students, they accepted that due to fear of peer acceptance they had ranked themselves at a higher level.

The students were also of the view that the other guidelines were clearer than the ACTFL guidelines regarding the nature of language competence and performance required at each level. Secondly, they were of the opinion that if such guidelines are given to them at the beginning of the semester/course, then it becomes easy for them to understand the areas they need to work upon.

4. Conclusion

Normally the proficiency exams test a student’s writing and reading skill and in some cases listening skills and may not give an accurate picture of his proficiency level. It would be a good idea to give Second Language Learners one comprehensive set of guidelines to evaluate their learning. The teacher too can record their spoken work and use the same guidelines to evaluate them and then check how far their evaluations match. Initially this may seem time-taking but it will help students find the gaps and work at their own pace. Self-assessment will help the learner know where he stands in terms of oral proficiency. Use of guidelines such as the one laid down by ACTFL will help learners monitor their own progress, engage in self-reflection, evaluate language programmes, set personal learning objectives and standardize assessment.

References


Author Bio

Dr. Smriti Singh is an Assistant Professor in School of Humanities and Social sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Patna. Her areas of interest are ELT, Indian Writings in English, Diasporic literature. She has published 2 books and various research articles. She was also the Fulbright FLTA at the University of Texas at Austin.