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Assessment of Students' Speaking Skills using the Competent Speaker Speech Rubric

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Abstract: *The importance of English language learning for students worldwide, especially in countries where English serves as the medium of instruction, cannot be overstated. However, in educational institutions in Pakistan, appears to be an overemphasis on accuracy at the expense of fluency. As a result, students face challenges when communicating in English as their second language. The present study aims to assess the speaking proficiency of students who studied English II at the University of Swat, utilizing a sample comprising 65 students from two intact classes. A quantitative research design was employed to gather data, and students' presentations were observed using the Competent Speaker Speech Rubric. The results indicated that students' proficiency in five competencies, namely providing relevant supporting material, usage of suitable language, incorporation of vocal variety, usage of an effective pattern to present a topic and display of proper articulation, pronunciation and grammar, were below the satisfactory level. On a positive note, students surpassed satisfactory standards in three competencies, specifically selecting and refining a topic, effectively conveying a thesis or specific purpose, and employing physical and nonverbal cues to enhance verbal communication. The present study has significant implications for instructors, suggesting them using rubrics as valuable grading tools to evaluate students effectively.*

Key Words: Speaking Skills, Competent Speaker Rubric, English-II, University Students, Pakistan

Introduction

Students throughout the world now place a greater emphasis on studying English language, particularly in settings where English is the primary language of teaching. The need for efficient international communication is the driving force behind this, as English has become the language of choice for interactions worldwide (Ahmed, Pathan, & Khan, 2017). Previous research studies have emphasized the effective amalgamation of four language competencies, such as listening, reading, writing, and speaking, as a means of facilitating successful English language teaching and learning. It is crucial to design instructional approaches that align with the established standards and assist students in developing their communicative competence (Sadiku, 2015).

Speaking, as described by Rivers (1981), plays a more significant role than the combined use of reading and writing. It includes various aspects such as oral expressions, making requests, engaging in communication through speech, and delivering speeches (Nunan, 1995). Additionally, Chaney (1998) defines speaking as a dynamic and interactive process that encompasses constructing and exchanging meaning using verbal and non-verbal signs. This process takes place within diverse contexts and includes activities such as receiving, processing, and producing information in order to derive significance.

Brown (2001) outlines three key dimensions of speaking classes. The first dimension is form, which focuses on teaching grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. The second dimension is meaning, which emphasizes the production of meaningful spoken messages with authentic communicative purposes. Lastly, the third dimension is opportunities, which involve improving fluency in speaking. To engage in

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effective spoken communication, speakers require proficiency in essential components such as vocabulary, comprehension, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency. Likewise, learners should be able to communicate fluently and effortlessly in English with others.

Tam (1997) outlined several factors that impact effective speaking performance, highlighting the significance of vocabulary, pronunciation, and collocations in enhancing fluency among language learners. To enhance their speaking abilities, English language learners should participate in a variety of tasks and activities across diverse situations. Despite being recognized as a fundamental skill, numerous students face challenges in speaking English as a second language. Even after years of study, language learners frequently grapple with proficient communication or interaction in English. Therefore, it is crucial for learners to acknowledge the importance of developing speaking skills, as these abilities empower them to compete effectively in the contemporary world (Bueno, Madrid, & McLaren, 2006).

Competence in oral communication is deemed as a vital capability essential for progression in academic and professional domains. Within Pakistan, the English curriculum is meticulously crafted to furnish students with indispensable skills required for adept and fitting communication in diverse academic and social contexts. Nevertheless, there exists an inclination to emphasize accuracy at the expense of fluency. Keeping in view the demand for proficiency in English speaking across the globe, researchers should put forward and fill the gap between theory and practice (Baig, Javed, Siddiquah, & Khanam, 2021). Without these skills, effective communication and the expression of thoughts and ideas would remain elusive.

Proficiency in verbal communication helps students advance in their careers, builds self-confidence, and expands their professional networks. Despite these benefits, a significant majority of students encounter challenges in enhancing their English-speaking skills, which consequently impact their writing abilities directly or indirectly. As a result, even after years of education, numerous students find it challenging to communicate effectively in English. To tackle this issue, English II is a mandatory course at the undergraduate level for university students across all disciplines. In addition to addressing various skills, this course is specifically aimed at nurturing students' speaking proficiency and enabling them to communicate clearly, appropriately and effectively in classrooms as well as in real-life situations. It's worth mentioning that the existing research has primarily focused on evaluating writing and listening skills, with little attention given to assessing the students' speaking abilities. Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to determine if English II students met the desired learning objectives for speaking abilities at the undergraduate level.

Literature Review

Constructivism Theory of Learning

Constructivism philosophy views learning as an active process in which learners generate and assimilate new ideas, concepts, and information based on their prior experiences and current understanding (Cohen et al., 2004). This approach emphasizes a teaching methodology that is student-centred, putting the student at the centre of knowledge construction and the teacher acting as a facilitator throughout the learning process (Blyth, 1997; Huang, 2010).

In contrast to passive acquisition by repetition or memory, constructivism emphasizes the construction of knowledge, critical thinking, analysis, comprehension, and practical application (Marlowe and Page, 2005). Constructivism prioritizes meaningful learning experiences, offering rich and purposeful environments that are particularly beneficial for advanced knowledge acquisition (Cantaert et al., 2022; Gasaymeh, 2011).

A constructivist philosophy advocates for students to build their knowledge through interaction, exploration, and firsthand experience. Higher education institutions are shifting away from teacher-centred, curriculum-driven approaches towards inquiry-based, student-centric environments, where the emphasis remains on the learners (Brooks & Brooks, 1993).

Jonassen, Peck, and Wilson (1999) outlined five characteristics of meaningful learning including: a). Active: As they actively interact with an environment, learners manipulate its elements, observe the outcomes, and formulate their own interpretations. b). Constructive: learners amalgamate fresh



perspectives about the world with existing ones, constructing their own mental models. c). Intentional: Throughout the learning process, students express their decisions, actions, tactics, and solutions. d). Authentic: such learning activities use problem-based or case-based learning environments and are integrated into real-world situations. e) Cooperative: entailing highly communicative, group-oriented interactions in which students socially negotiate a shared understanding of the learning task and the strategies used to complete it.

Proponents of the constructivist learning approach highlight the importance of teachers creating diverse scenarios for non-English major students. This enables them to share their real-life perspectives using various media and the Internet, enhancing their speaking abilities, collaborative skills, and English proficiency. Simultaneously, teachers ought to make adjustments to cater to students' needs. Through this collaborative effort, both educators and students can enhance each other's global awareness. Students familiar with real-world English learning would find it simpler to adapt to new environments worldwide (Ullah, Akram, & Shams, [2020](#)).

Within a constructivist learning setting, authentic assessment methods hold significant importance. As higher education instructors shift from traditional teaching to student-centred teaching, it becomes essential to create assessment tools that objectively measure students' learning outcomes. Rubrics provide benefits to both instructors and learners, improving teaching practices by establishing transparent expectations, nurturing self-reflection, providing constructive feedback, and simplifying the grading process. For aspiring teachers, exposure to rubrics serves as an authentic learning experience, equipping them for their future student-centered classrooms (Chick, [2004](#)).

Gasaymeh ([2011](#)) outlined various considerations essential for designing and utilizing effective rubrics within a constructivist learning environment. Firstly, comprehensive rubrics are essential in a constructivist learning environment that tackles complicated problems, as opposed to task-specific ones. A wide rubric promotes flexibility and creativity in problem-solving, allowing teachers to evaluate students' progress on a range of assignments. To prevent overgeneralization, care must be taken to make sure that rubrics are properly adapted to particular assessment contexts, such as projects or presentations. Second, rather than only imparting knowledge, constructivism places more emphasis on fostering an atmosphere which allows people to learn and use knowledge to solve problems in the real world. Consequently, in order to improve student involvement, the rubric criteria should centre on the knowledge acquisition process. Third, rubrics are more than just checklists for assessment; in a constructivist learning environment, they are supposed to act as scaffolds encouraging critical thinking. The continuous integration of rubric design and application with instruction is pivotal to this approach, as technology plays a critical role in enabling continuous "dynamic assessment," thereby contributing to meaningful learning experiences that are sustained throughout the learning journey rather than ending at the end. Fourth, according to constructivists, beliefs, mental models, and personal experiences are the sources of knowledge formation. It becomes difficult to reach a consensus on the assessment process and results when the diversity of experiences, needs, and beliefs among teachers and students is taken into account. Diverse viewpoints must be acknowledged and respected during the evaluation process in a constructivist environment. The evaluation process may be improved by encouraging students to consider the work of their peers and by using reviewers with different backgrounds. Fifth, analytic rubrics are more pertinent in a constructivist learning environment compared to holistic rubrics. In this setting, learning should be assessed based on possible outcomes representing acceptable evidence of learning within specific domains. Consequently, utilizing multiple criteria sets to evaluate learning outcomes and processes becomes imperative. Lastly, rubrics should be provided to learners along with examples of previously assessed students' work showcasing various levels of assignment quality. These scored rubrics serve as models or guidance tools in a constructivist learning environment.

Utilizing constructivism theory as a basis, this study proposes that a constructive learning environment influences the speaking proficiency of English II students. In other words, the more constructive the learning environment is, the more the students will be able to excel in speaking.

Speaking Skills

The ability to speak clearly is essential for good communication. Speaking is the existence of a communication objective that has to be achieved. For example, speakers may aim to negotiate and solve a specific issue, build and maintain social relationships with others, or communicate a wish and desire to accomplish something (Dewi, Kultsum & Armadi, 2017). Speaking abilities are the capacity to comprehend language rapidly and provide appropriate messages and responses in a communication context, according to Canale and Swain (1980). Harmer (2007) goes on to say that effective speaking requires the ability to communicate concepts clearly and concisely while keeping the listener and the communication's goal in mind.

Speaking English is particularly important for foreign learners. Gard and Gautam (2015) argue that English learners must master speaking as it is one of the fundamental language skills. Communicating well in the English language opens up opportunities for knowledge and skill improvement, as well as employment prospects. Additionally, speaking English facilitates communication and interaction with people from different cultures while travelling. It is clear that developing speaking skills is essential for effective communication and various practical benefits.

Factors Affecting Speaking Skills

According to Al-Hosni (2014), learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) often struggle with oral communication despite having a good understanding of the language. The lack of emphasis on developing oral language skills in the classroom is a major contributing factor, as teachers tend to be the primary speakers. However, even when teachers do use oral language, it does not necessarily help students acquire knowledge or explore ideas. To address this issue, researchers need to understand the nature of the challenges and the specific situations in which they arise.

Rababa'h (2005) found that EFL learners had difficulties in speaking English. These difficulties may originate from the students themselves, the curriculum, the methods of instruction, or the physical setting of the classroom. For instance, a large percentage of students find it difficult to articulate their ideas and carry on coherent conversations as a result of a limited vocabulary. Furthermore, ineffective communication and strategic abilities can prevent productive cooperation. Lexical interference, public speech anxiety, language barriers, participation reluctance, English language anxiety, and insufficient exposure to the language are other issues that may impact an English language learner's speaking abilities.

- a. *Lexical Interference*: The acquisition of speaking skills can be significantly influenced by lexical interference. As explained by Brown (2000), lexical interference happens when learners' native languages interfere with their understanding and proficiency in the acquired language – often leading to inaccuracies within their spoken English. This effect can lead learners to unintentionally use similar words from their first language that may not have an accurate equivalent or usage in the English context, therefore impairing effective communication skills.
- b. *Public speech anxiety*: McCroskey and Richmond (1982) have identified public speaking anxiety as a prevalent phenomenon that affects a significant number of individuals. It is characterized by physiological symptoms such as increased heart rate, trembling, sweating, dry mouth, and difficulty in breathing. These physical manifestations can disrupt the smooth delivery of a speech and hinder the speaking proficiency of certain individuals.
- c. *Linguistic challenges*: English language learners often encounter linguistic challenges when acquiring speaking skills, including difficulties in grammar, pronunciation, and intonation, as observed by Celce-Murcia et al. (1996). These linguistic aspects can have a significant impact on learners' ability to communicate accurately and effectively, leading to frustration and impeding overall language acquisition progress.
- d. *English Language Anxiety*: According to Horwitz et al. (1986), English language anxiety affects the learners' speaking abilities. Feelings of anxiety or trepidation when speaking English, especially in academic or social contexts, are its defining characteristics. Anxious English language learners may find it difficult to communicate effectively, make mistakes in their speech, or perhaps choose to talk little or not at all.



- e. *Unwillingness to participate*: The degree to which students are unable to engage in a language class room can significantly affect their ability to speak. Many factors, including low self-esteem, a fear of making mistakes, and cultural disparities in the communication styles of learners, cause learners to avoid engaging in speaking (Nunan, 1991). Students' ability to practice speaking English and receive timely feedback on it is hampered by this resistance.
- f. *Lack of exposure*: According to Lightbown and Spada (2021), learners' speaking proficiency is negatively impacted by lack of exposure. Learners may have trouble improving their speaking skills if they do not practice often and engage with native speakers or in real-world situations. It is essential for students to interact with native speakers in authentic settings to leverage communication opportunities for enhanced confidence and improved accuracy, as well as fluency in spoken English.

Research Methodology

Participants of the Study

The current study included 65 undergraduate students from two intact classes in the Department of Botany and Zoology as participants. These students were in their second semester and were required to take English II course. The primary goal of this study is to evaluate how English II course influenced their speaking skills by the end of the second semester. Demographic information about the participants revealed that they were female students aged between 18 and 26 years.

Measurement Instrument

For the evaluation of students' speaking abilities, this research employed "The Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form," also recognized as The Competent Speaker rubric, which was developed by Morreale et al. (1993). Dunbar, Brooks, and Kubicka-Miller (2006) suggested using The Competent Speaker rubric for assessing fundamental oral communication skills in higher education across disciplines. This rubric comprises eight competencies designed to gauge proficiency in speaking: a) providing relevant supporting material, b) usage of suitable language, c) incorporation of vocal variety, d) display of proper articulation, pronunciation and grammar, e) usage of an effective pattern to present the topic, f) selecting and refining a topic, g) effectively conveying a thesis or specific purpose, h) employing physical and nonverbal cues to enhance verbal communication. Each competency received a score on a scale of 8 to 24 points based on individual performance. This assessment aimed to provide insights into anticipated course outcomes and identify areas for improvement. Students were briefed that the speaking test was non-credit and would not affect their CGPA. The students were given freedom to select a topic and deliver a speech. The speech delivery time was 4 to 6 minutes.

Inter-rater's Reliability

Speaking abilities are subjectively assessed because they involve a variety of linguistic, pragmatic, and communicative components, according to Weir (2005). It's possible that various raters will have different ideas about what makes a strong speech performance. High interrater reliability, on the other hand, lessens subjectivity and promotes an impartial and uniform evaluation across several raters. Low concordance among raters in their score suggests that the evaluation criteria need to be clarified. Finding places where the criteria are unclear or need more explanation is made easier by analyzing rater disagreements. The input provided facilitates improvement of criteria, hence augmenting the assessment's validity and reliability (Bachman & Palmer, 2022). Therefore, it is crucial to give raters precise and comprehensive evaluation criteria in order to increase interrater reliability. Training initiatives should also be put in place to improve raters' comprehension of the standards and encourage score uniformity. Enhancing interrater reliability also involves creating a fair and uniform procedure for rater disputes to be resolved. It is helpful to set aside time during the training process to examine presentations and use rubrics to analyze assessments in relation to each ability. This cooperative method makes it easier for assessors to share their knowledge, which improves score consistency among assessors.

A faculty colleague of the researcher was asked to help as an inter-rater during the speaking test for the current study. The inter-rater received training on the use of rubrics before conducting the speaking test. There was no considerable difference between the interrater's score and the researcher's, according to the results shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Mean and standard deviations score for English speaking competencies

Competency	Researcher's Score		Inter-rater's Score	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Selecting and refining a topic	2.30	0.52	2.27	0.51
Effectively conveying a thesis or specific purpose	2.73	0.46	2.73	0.43
Providing relevant supporting material	1.71	0.60	1.71	0.60
Usage of an effective pattern	1.50	0.56	1.50	0.56
Usage of suitable language	1.88	0.54	1.88	0.57
Incorporation of vocal variety, etc.	1.48	0.53	1.47	0.52
Display of proper articulation, pronunciation and grammar	1.54	0.59	1.52	0.59
Employing physical and nonverbal cues to enhance verbal communication	2.32	0.67	2.34	0.57

Data Analysis

In this study, the mean value was utilized to evaluate overall performance and make comparisons among different groups. As clarified by Fulcher (2003), this method outlines the calculation of average score in a speaking assessment achieved by a group of students. The mean value was determined by summing up the total score in each competency divided by number of respondents. Using mean value enables the establishment of performance benchmarks and effective monitoring of progress over an extended period. Furthermore, the standard deviation (S.D.) of the scores was also determined, which indicated how each observation differed from the mean.

Further, a one-sample t-test was also performed. This statistical technique is used to compare a single sample's mean to the known or anticipated population mean. The one-sample t-test, which is frequently used in research and data analysis, determines whether the sample mean substantially deviates from a value that has been hypothesized. The outcomes are described in Table 2.

Findings

The assessment of student performance on *The Competent Speaker Rubric* indicates varying levels of proficiency across different competency areas. Students demonstrated a higher aptitude in competencies such as the ability to choose and refine a topic, effectively communicate a thesis or specific purpose, and effectively employ physical and nonverbal cues to enhance their verbal message. However, they exhibited relatively lower levels of proficiency in competencies such as providing appropriate supporting material, using suitable language, incorporating vocal variety, maintaining proper pronunciation, articulation, and grammar, as well as utilizing nonverbal cues that align with their verbal message.

Table 2

Means and standard deviations for English speaking competencies

Competency	Mean	SD	One-sample t-test results
Selecting and refining a topic	2.29	0.52	t(64)=2.197481, p<0.05
Effectively conveying a thesis or specific purpose	2.73	0.45	t(64)=2.337888, p < 0.05
Providing relevant supporting material	1.711	0.60	t(64)=2.853536, p < 0.01
Usage of an effective pattern	1.50	0.56	t(64)=2.869034, p < 0.01
Usage of suitable language	1.88	0.54	t(64)=2.174464, p < 0.05
Incorporation of vocal variety, etc.	1.48	0.53	t(64)=2.714627, p < 0.01



Competency	Mean	SD	One-sample t-test results
Display of proper articulation, pronunciation and grammar	1.54	0.59	$t(64)=2.171431, p < 0.05$
Employing physical and nonverbal cues to enhance verbal communication	2.29	0.66	$t(64)=2.303492, p < 0.05$

To assess the student's performance, the researcher performed one-sample t-tests. The aim of performing the mentioned test was to check if the mean scores for each competency significantly deviated from the midpoint on the scale. According to the findings reported in Table 2, students did not show any significant differences from the moderate "satisfactory" score in competencies such as providing relevant supporting material, usage of suitable language, usage of an effective pattern, incorporation of vocal variety, and display of proper articulation, pronunciation and grammar. On the other hand, the findings revealed that students demonstrated a significant level of proficiency above the "satisfactory" threshold in competencies, including selecting and refining a topic, effectively conveying a thesis or specific purpose, and employing physical and nonverbal cues to enhance verbal communication. Conversely, in the remaining five competency areas, the students' performance fell significantly below the "satisfactory" threshold, indicating a need for improvement.

The overall competency of the respondents was ascertained by summing up the scores obtained from each competency. The mean value of 12.82 (SD=2.04) was found for this sample. Moreover, the researchers performed a one-sample t-test to check if this value deviated substantially from the midpoint of the scale (a score of 16). The results showed that the mean value for the group ($t(64)=-2.05, p < 0.05$) was substantially below the potential midpoint.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study evaluated undergraduate English II students' achievement of targeted learning outcomes in speaking abilities. According to our findings, students performed better than expected in three areas included in the Competent Speaker Rubric: selecting and clarifying a topic, conveying a thesis or defined goal, and using nonverbal cues to support spoken language. They did not, however, perform at a level that was deemed sufficient in five areas: providing suitable supporting information, utilizing suitable language, bringing vocal variation, making sure that grammar, pronunciation, and articulation are all correct, and using nonverbal cues to back up the spoken message.

The results of our study are consistent with the work of Laverde Paredes and Pazmiño Perez (2022), which examined how a learner's first language affects their ability to speak English as a foreign language in elementary school. This study revealed difficulties that arise when a learner's native language interferes with verbal expression, including poor pronunciation, fluency, and grammatical structure confusion. In their 2007 study, Evans and Green found that students face difficulties in many areas, including pronunciation, grammar, and fluency in higher education institutions. Mahbub and Hadina (2021) more recently conducted a study that looked at the linguistic barriers that prevent learners from developing their oral skills. They identified a number of issues, including insufficient vocabulary, bad pronunciation, incorrect language usage, lack of fluency, and inadequate language knowledge. The most common barrier, inadequate language knowledge, indicated a limited comprehension of sentence structure, grammatical rules, and other language-related concepts. This may be the result of inadequate exposure to the language or inefficient teaching strategies.

The outcomes concerning the impact of non-verbal behaviour on learners' speaking skills align with a prior study by Hamouda (2013). This study observed that a considerable number of students in oral English language classes opted to withhold their responses and remained silent during interactions with their teachers. Reasons for this included low English proficiency, lack of confidence, fear of public speaking, shyness, fear of making mistakes, unpreparedness, and negative evaluation.

Implication of the Study

The findings of this study have important ramifications for educators and universities. Instructors can enhance transparency and equity in assessing students' performance by incorporating rubrics into the evaluation process. This minimizes the dependence on subjective opinions that might be prejudiced or

inconsistent. Rubrics are useful tools for assigning grades because they enable teachers to provide insights and suggestions to students who are asking for more points or feedback on their work. This methodology promotes more uniform and clear grading procedures, aiding students in understanding the requirements needed to achieve targeted marks or results.

Higher education institutions will find great value in the insights gained from this study, which will give them a way to assess the accomplishment of speaking skills-specific course objectives. By means of feedback mechanisms, establishments can discern domains of expertise and those necessitating refinement and then put strategies into place to augment the entire educational experience. The study also highlights how important it is to provide teachers with assessment training. Speaking ability evaluations on an ongoing basis are becoming an increasingly important part of higher education and preparing students for successful employment.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study successfully met its objectives, it does possess certain limitations that future research endeavours could address. One significant limitation of this study is the small sample size, which considers the undergraduate students from two classes in one university. The study's conclusions might not be as broadly applicable given the small sample size. In view of this constraint, care and consideration must be taken while interpreting the research findings. It is recommended that future research increase the sample size by including students from various fields and extending the sample throughout the public and private sector universities across Pakistan.

Another limitation concerns the designated time for students to deliver their speeches, set at 4 to 6 minutes. This time constraint might impede students from fully expressing themselves during their speech delivery. An extension of the time to 15-20 minutes could prove advantageous, enabling students to comprehensively cover each aspect of speaking skills. Such an extension would also aid instructors in identifying areas that require improvement.

Finally, the sampled respondents were female students, and no representation was made of male students. This exclusion of male students restricts the generalizability of the study. For a more comprehensive assessment of the student's speaking ability, male students will be included to gain insights into the challenges they equally face while learning and speaking the English language.

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