

ORIGINAL

The importance of different typologies of exercises and indicators for assessing speaking in the English language students' linguistic formation in Cuba.

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Abstract

The current conditions of the Cuban Education demand the formation of professionals able to master their future career in order to give a solution to the most frequent problems they face when beginning working. This presumes a permanent searching of updated information, either in their mother tongue or in foreign languages, especially in English; as well as a constant training and professional experience exchange at the national and international levels. It is an ambition their dynamic, independent and creative participation in the socio-economic development of the country. Therefore, once they finish university studies they should demonstrate a certain level of proficiency in the English language. This is part of a new policy carried out in Cuba. For this reason, it is necessary to assess the four aspects of verbal activity, particularly speaking, and change what it had been doing up to this moment. In this article, the authors discuss the current state of assessing the process of speaking in the Cuban schools and make a proposal of different typologies of exercises and indicators for objectively assessing English language students' oral communication in the Cuban context.

Keywords: assessing; speaking; skills; indicators; typology.

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La importancia de diferentes tipologías de ejercicios e indicadores para evaluar la habilidad expresión oral en la formación lingüística de los estudiantes del idioma inglés en Cuba.**Resumen**

Las condiciones actuales del Sistema de Educación en Cuba demandan la formación de profesionales capaces de dominar su futura profesión para solucionar los problemas más frecuentes que enfrentan cuando comienzan a trabajar. Esta situación presupone la búsqueda de información actualizada tanto en la lengua materna como en la extranjera, especialmente en

inglés; así como su preparación constante y el intercambio de experiencia profesional a nivel nacional e internacional. Su dinámica, independencia y participación creativa en el desarrollo económico social del país constituye una aspiración. Por lo tanto, una vez terminados los estudios universitarios, los estudiantes deben demostrar un adecuado nivel de desarrollo en las habilidades para interactuar en idioma inglés. Esto constituye una política llevada a cabo por el gobierno de Cuba. Por esta razón, es necesario evaluar los cuatro aspectos de la actividad verbal, particularmente la expresión oral y cambiar lo que se había estado haciendo hasta este momento. En el presente artículo, los autores analizan la situación actual del proceso de evaluación de la habilidad expresión oral en las escuelas cubanas y proponen diferentes tipologías de ejercicios e indicadores para evaluar objetivamente la comunicación oral de los estudiantes de esta lengua extranjera en el contexto cubano.

Palabras claves: evaluación; habla; habilidades; indicadores; tipología.

Introduction

Learning the English language in Cuba has become a priority at every level of Education. Economic globalization and technological advances are giving the possibility to exchange with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Thus, the Cuban Educational System has adopted a new policy regarding the learning of the English language; it is a necessity for every university student to demonstrate English language proficiency once graduated.

This situation demands the analysis of what English teachers have been doing up to this moment, particularly the way they assess students' skills. All students pass all English tests at every level and when they have to be in a situation where they need the skills to communicate in the English language, it is impossible for them to express themselves freely. They show very hesitant and express brief utterances, sometimes difficult to understand.

In Cuba, English is taught from third grade on and special emphasis lays on the formation and development of listening, speaking, reading and writing in all levels. Therefore, the authors of this article have searched that it is important to take into consideration the functions assessment plays within the teaching and learning process, as well as the use of a great variety of exercises and the correct indicators to measure the students' academic progress in every English skill.

The following article centers its attention on reflecting about the importance of considering different typologies of exercises and indicators to assess the four aspects of verbal activity, especially speaking. This will guarantee the improvement of speaking and the fixation of the rest

of the skills, that is, the students' linguistics formation, taking into account that assessment guides classroom instruction and enhance student learning on a day-to-day basis.

In the teaching learning process of English at all educational levels in Cuba, the four aspects of verbal activity are taught, but the authors of this research consider that there must be an emphasis in the speaking skill to achieve the development of listening, reading and writing.

Previous research works that deal with the development of the English language skills have been developed. Though they provide some general theoretical and practical viewpoints on the topic, they do not deepen into a possible application of a variety of exercises and indicators to assess the different contents of the units suggested in each syllabus at each level.

Population and sample

To diagnose the current state of assessing the speaking skill, a *population* of twenty-five teachers was taken at random, from which thirteen constituted the *sample*. They were interviewed to know about the typology of exercises and indicators they use to assess the four English basic skills, particularly speaking on teaching the language. Three (23, 1%) of them teach English in a primary school, two (15, 4%) in a Junior High School, four (30, 8%) in a High School, and the other four (30, 8%) at university. All of the teachers have more than 15 years of experience teaching English as a foreign language and five of them (38,4 %) have taught English abroad.

Fifty-five students from different levels were also interviewed. They were chosen at random. The authors also utilized the bibliographical analysis method to study the contents related to assessment in the teaching and learning process of the English language. They also applied the observation to corroborate the students' skills when communicating in the foreign language.

Analysis of the results

Jabbarifar, T. (2009) considers that it is important to clarify the distinction between evaluation and assessment. These terms are often used interchangeably, but they are technically different. Assessment of an individual student's progress or achievement is an important component of evaluation: it is that part of evaluation that includes the measurement and analysis of information about student learning.

The primary focus of assessment in Teaching English Language has been language assessment and the role of tests in assessing students' language skills. Evaluation goes beyond student achievement and language assessment to consider all aspects of teaching and learning and to look at how educational decisions can be made by the results of alternative forms of assessment.

In this article, the authors assume the difference stated by this author between the two terms because evaluation is the whole and assessment is a part of that whole that permits to corroborate if what teachers are doing has a positive or negative influence on students' progress and some teachers sometimes recognize the two terms as only one.

Genesee (cited in Carter and Nunan, 2001) believes that another purpose of evaluation is to guide classroom instruction and enhance student learning on a day-to-day basis. Classroom assessment and evaluation concerns:

- Suitability of general instructional goals and objectives associated with an individual lesson or unit plans;
- Effectiveness of instructional methods, materials and activities used to attain instructional objectives;
- Adequacy of professional resources required to deliver instruction.

Classroom assessment and evaluation under the active management of teachers can also serve important professional development purposes since the information resulting from such evaluations provides teachers with valuable feedback about their instructional effectiveness that they can use to develop and improve their professional skills. As part of reflective teaching movement, teachers are encouraged to conduct research in their own classrooms (Nunan, 1989; Allwright and Baily, 1991; Richaids and Lockhart, 1994); classroom assessment and evaluation is an important part of such research.

Acosta Padrón, R. (2007) states that the concept of evaluation is much broader for it means not only to measure the growth of the learners towards the goals set for them in the curriculum but the curriculum itself. That is to say, evaluation is an appraisal of how much the students have learned, how effective the content has been taught and how deep the objectives have been fulfilled.

In fact, evaluation is always present in a class. The teacher is constantly engaged in an informal evaluation of students' performances and the students themselves are constantly evaluating their own learning and the teacher's procedures. In fact, there is a very fine line to be drawn between teaching and testing. They often overlap. Testing can be a very effective means of teaching, and teachers and students alike know that tests often provide a very strong motivation for learning. Testing is a form of evaluation that helps teachers obtain a profile of his learners' achievements in terms of knowledge, habits and skills.

In this article, we agree with Acosta Padron, R. (2007) when expressing that the importance of evaluation is due to the functions it plays within the learning process. Three main functions may be underlined:

Instructive. A test helps the students master the language when they study for exams and again when exams are returned and discussed. Learning is also enhanced by students' growing awareness of the objectives and areas of emphasis in the course.

Educative. Tests can help create positive attitudes toward the lessons. Tests give the learners a sense of accomplishment and reward them when they have studied. The learner creates a sense of responsibility, develops his will, learning strategies and habits of working individually and in small groups.

Control. Tests confirm what each student has mastered, and they find out those language items needing further attention. The teacher also makes feedbacks and controls his teaching effectiveness. The teacher uses tests to diagnose his efforts as well as those of the students. As the teacher records the test scores, he knows if his lessons are on the right level, what skills he is teaching effectively, what areas need more work on, which points need reviewing, and if time distribution has been right. Tests can benefit both students and teachers by confirming the progress that has been made and showing how teachers can best redirect their future efforts. In addition, good tests can sustain or enhance morale and learning.

It is also assumed that evaluation nowadays is a communicative stage, a time when evaluation of language use is emphasized rather than language form. The structural approach focused on evaluating facts about the language and handling of lexical and grammatical items. Tests in assessing English skills today are mainly concerned with evaluating real communication in the foreign language.

Communicative tests combine various subskills as it is done when exchanging ideas orally or in writing. Tests should indicate how well a person could function in his foreign language. Grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary should be tested but in context and associated to meaning and function. Besides, these aspects of the language should not weigh more than the communicative skills. The teacher should not forget that the language system is just a means for an objective: communication. Therefore, teachers should evaluate, mainly, that the learners can do with the language, and how they use it in context.

During teaching English as a foreign language, it is often required to assess the speaking proficiency of students. In many occasions, teacher's evaluation is too subjectively with insufficient measurable data to back up their findings. In objectively evaluating students'

speaking proficiency, teachers must first be aware of the components of speaking proficiency. Next, they must be knowledgeable of the various vehicles to use in conducting the speaking evaluation. Finally, they should know how to use these components for effectively evaluating speaking proficiency. In this article, the authors assume that the speaking proficiency of students can be measured by looking at the following components or linguistic skills of speaking: pronunciation; usage of vocabulary; grammatical usage. Here they are explained as they apply to English.

Acosta Padron, R. (2007) expresses that the aim of the teacher is to develop the linguistic and communicative skills integratively and progressively until free and spontaneous speech is attained.

Here are some of the linguistic skills:

- Pronunciation
 - articulate sounds accurately;
 - blend sounds and words together in speech;
 - stress syllables and words properly;
 - make stress shifts;
 - use contracted and reduced forms;
 - make all necessary pauses;
 - express various communicative purposes, emotions and attitudes through intonational means.
 - read phonological transcriptions;
 - make phonological transcriptions;
 - establish sound-grapheme correspondences.
- Vocabulary
 - employ a general (everyday) or specific vocabulary;
 - group words according to meaning;
 - choose the appropriate word in a given context;
 - employ the processes of derivation and compounding;
 - make use of varied vocabulary and phrases;
 - make use of true and false cognates;
 - paraphrase the meaning of words;
 - use the bilingual and/or monolingual dictionary.

- Grammar

- choose the appropriate grammatical categories within the sentence;
- construct different types of sentences: affirmative, negative, interrogative;
- relate grammatical categories within the sentence and the sentences within the text;
- organize the elements within the phrase;
- employ simple and compound verb forms;
- combine different verb forms

Once analyzed all these linguistic skills, teachers can establish indicators for assessing speaking. For example:

High achievers: students who articulate all sounds correctly, make all the blending, linking and necessary pauses without hesitating; express correctly using falling and rising intonations, stress all syllables and words properly, and make themselves understood. They also use a great variety of vocabulary in the correct context, employ the processes of derivation and compounding, and put a subject before a predicate in sentences, adjectives before nouns and use verb tenses accurately.

Middle achievers: students who articulate all sounds correctly, but do not make all the blending, linking and necessary pauses; express using correctly just falling intonation, stress just some syllables and words properly and make themselves understood with a little hesitation. They also use a great variety of vocabulary in the correct context; but put some subjects before a predicate in sentences and nouns before adjectives and have problems with the use of simple present tense in third person singular.

Low achievers: students who articulate all sounds incorrectly, do not make any blending and linking; express using incorrectly rising and falling intonation; use a poor vocabulary; put subjects before a predicate in sentences and nouns before adjectives. They also have serious problems with verb tenses; and cannot communicate appropriately; they hesitate a lot and make unnecessary and long pauses.

Activities to enhance and assess the Speaking Skill.

In foreign language learning, teachers are aware of the problems students face for expressing their ideas, opinions and points of view. Some students are structurally competent but cannot communicate appropriately. In order to overcome the problem they must be involved in fluent conversational interaction. Here there are some typology of activities that can be used to be developed written in class to enhance speaking:

- Say How and What for

- Reconstructing, Organizing and Completing Conversations
- Games
- Gestures and Mime Activities
- Open Dialogues
- Simulation and role-playing
- Guessing Activities
- Problem-solving Activities
- Questionnaires
- Finding out Information
- Giving Directions and Instructions
- Making Stories
- Completing Texts
- Completing songs

The variety of examples bellow taken from different *Placement Tests* and adapted to the Cuban context is included in this article for teachers who want to utilize this form of assessment in oral tests during the teaching learning process of English as a foreign language in all levels of education. It consists of an interview based on conversational prompts to be presented by teachers. They can use it to assess speaking after finishing a giving content or at the end of a semester or course. The objective is to improve the way they have been assessing speaking in order to develop students' proficiency in the target language.

Personal information

- What's your name? How do you spell it? Where do you live? What's your address? What's your home/mobile number? What's your email address? Are you married or single?

Family

- How many people are there in your family? Tell me about your parents / brothers or sisters / children. What are their names, ages, jobs? / What does your mother/father/ brother/sister look like/ What is your father/mother like?

Home

- Where are you from? What is your home town or city? Do (or did) you like living there? Is it:
– big? – beautiful? – noisy? – clean? Can you describe your home?

Studies

- What do (or did) you study? Is (or was) it: – interesting? – difficult? What will you do (or did you do) after finishing your studies? Do you like what you are studying? Why? (not)

Work

- What job do you do (or want to do)? When did (or will) you start working? Why did (or do) you want to do this job? How long have you done this job? Is there someone in your family that does this same job?

Weather

- What's the weather like today? Which is your favorite season? Why? What is the weather like then? What weather makes you feel happy/sad? Have you ever seen snow? Would you like to see it? Why?

Shopping

- Do you enjoy shopping? How often do you go shopping? Do you go shopping alone or with friends? What sort of things do you usually buy? Are stuffs cheap or expensive in your country?

Sports & exercise

- How much exercise do you do? Is exercise important? Why (not)? Do you like playing/watching sports? What sports do you like playing/watching? Did you play on any team? What's your national sport? Why do you think people like football all around the world?

Food

- Do you usually eat healthy meals? What are some of your favorite foods? Do you like eating out (e.g. restaurants)? Why (not)? Do you like cooking? What's your favorite fruit and vegetable? Are fruits and vegetables important for our health? Why?

Animals

- Do you like animals? What are some of your favorite animals? What pet(s) do you have (or would you like to have)? How do animals help people? Are there laws that protect animals in your country? Why do we have to take care and protect animals?

Computers & gadgets

- Do you often use computers, mp3 players, games consoles? What do you mainly use the internet for? What problems can computers cause? What's your opinion about internet? Is it dangerous for children be exposed to video games all the time? Why? (not).

Languages

- What languages do you speak? Is it important to speak several languages? Why (not)? Is it a good or bad thing that most people in the world learn English? Is English difficult or easy to learn? Why? (not) Do you agree with the idea to demonstrate proficiency in English language to get graduated from university? Why? (not).

Travel

- Do you like to travel? Why (not)? What place would you most like to visit? Why? What's your (least) favorite way to travel? Does travel really 'broaden the mind'? Can you describe the place you traveled some years ago?

Crime

- Is crime a problem in this (or your) country? What can people do to reduce crime? Are the laws in this (or your) country generally too strict, or not strict enough?

Careers

- What sort of career do you want? What do you want most from it (e.g. money, creativity, etc.)? Should a career be the most important thing in someone's life?

Art, books, music.

- How often do you listen to music, read a book, visit an exhibition? Do you play an instrument/paint/write? Are art/music important to society? Why (not)? What is your opinion about rock music and reggeaton?

News & the media

- How closely do you follow the news? Which media (e.g. TV, newspapers, online) cover the news best? Give examples. What will news media be like in the future? What's your opinion about news programs in your country? Are you used to watching them? Why? (not).

Cities

- Do you live in a city or a country? Why do people choose to live in cities? What are the (dis)advantages of city life, compared to living in the countryside? Which do/would you prefer?

Man & nature

- How do we affect nature (e.g. rainforests)? How does nature affect us (e.g. floods)? Will problems such as pollution or endangered species ever be solved? What would you do to live in a safer world? What environmental problems are affecting your community? What do you do to solve them?

Society & culture

- Do you often mix with people from a different culture to yours? Do you like or dislike this? What are the benefits and/or problems of a multicultural society? Do many tourists visit your country? Are you able to communicate with them in English? Can you refer to a story where you spoke English with a tourist?

After analysing the authors' views about the topic, a diagnosis to the current state of assessment was applied. It was possible to know that from the overall population of teachers most of them have master qualification (69, 2%) and the (38, 4 %) has taught English abroad. The 100 % of the teachers interviewed agree with the structure presented to assess students' skills at schools nowadays, that is, a question to assess comprehension, two questions to assess vocabulary and grammar and another question to assess writing. In the case of assessing speaking, they all do the same: they give two or three topics to students to get ready for presenting a monologue or dialogue. Just the (30, 8%) exchange with students whose presentation has been poor.

All the teachers are aware about the fact that this form of assessing students' skills does not permit them to communicate in their objective reality, but they continue doing the same. When discussing the students' results, they all promote the English subject from third grade to twelve; when they are at university, it seems they have never studied English in their lives. It is undeniable the quantity of teaching resources and materials at teachers' and students' disposal, however, they do not always use them in class.

Besides, most teachers have agreed that assessing not only speaking, but also the rest of the abilities taking into account the indicators established, would definitely provide many opportunities for an effective teaching and learning. This situation shows that teachers admit the use of them in the teaching and learning process as something positive. For this reason, the use of them in teaching enables students to be more active and engaging in the lessons.

The 100 % of the sample students agreed with the idea that the use of activities of these kinds promotes active and engaging lessons for best learning experiences, it provides them to be active and take more parts or roles for their best learning experience. It also helps to broaden their knowledge. All students considered that these activities help to improve their ability in language learning skills such as reading, writing, listening and speaking.

By means of the observation it was possible to corroborate that when teachers used some activities suggested by the authors of this article, they developed the students' speaking skills. There was spontaneous communication. Pronunciation and grammatical problems were

corrected, the students were not afraid of speaking; creativeness and independence prevailed during the development of the lessons with the predominant role of students.

Conclusions

After the analysis of all the contents studied and the application of different scientific methods, the authors state the following conclusions:

It is important to clarify the distinction between evaluation and assessment.

Evaluation plays different functions within the teaching and learning process.

There are some typology of activities that can be used in class to enhance speaking in the linguistic formation of English language students, taking into consideration the indicators established to do so.

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