

Testing and Assessing English Non-Major Students' Speaking Skills at a Northern University of Vietnam: An Empirical Study

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ABSTRACT: For a long time, the method for testing the speaking abilities of non-English major students at a northern university has narrowly focused on their capacity to convey information. This approach has failed to consider two other critical skills: their ability to interact with others and to manage the flow of a conversation. Consequently, this empirical research, which relies entirely on evidence from observation, was conducted to foster and thoroughly assess all three of these competencies. The study's results will highlight students' specific strengths and areas for improvement, and this information will be used to enhance subsequent classes.

KEYWORDS: Non-major students, speaking ability, interaction skills, testing and assessment, university.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the current trend of international integration, being able to communicate in English at a fairly good level is essential for all non-major students. During the training of English modules for non-major students at a northern university, testing and assessment are continuous and regular activities at the end of each module. This has a positive impact on the teaching and learning process for both lecturers and students. Specifically, lecturers can grasp the progress of students during the training process. Through student feedback, lecturers can change and improve their teaching and assessment methods. Furthermore, by analyzing students' tests, lecturers can identify which knowledge areas students are struggling with or lack, in order to implement timely measures to correct and supplement new knowledge when necessary. As for students, they can measure their own progress in their studies. Through feedback from lecturers, they can identify which areas of their knowledge need improvement and which errors need correction, which also motivates them to strive for higher academic results. Therefore, testing and assessing the speaking skills of non-major students at the university is an urgent requirement to enhance their skills and meet the higher demands of subsequent advanced modules.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. The Concept of Testing and Assessment

Testing and assessment are important issues; therefore, many educators and management levels have recently paid attention to this matter. Through conferences and training workshops, the spirit of innovating testing and assessment methods has begun to be put into practice. The majority of teachers have become aware of the great significance of testing and assessment and have made some improvements in content, form, and teaching methods. Some schools have actively participated and achieved good results in innovating assessment methods in sync with efforts to innovate teaching methods, but this has not been widespread and has not been encouraged or replicated by educational management levels.

Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW dated November 4, 2013, of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam emphasizes: "To fundamentally and comprehensively innovate Vietnam's education system towards standardization, modernization, socialization, democratization, and international integration." In the trend of comprehensive renewal of the education system, innovating methods of testing and assessing student learning outcomes plays a very important role in the process of innovating quality assurance and evaluating the teaching quality objectives of educational institutions. Testing and assessment aim to determine the purpose of the teaching process and the learning outcomes of learners compared to the initial objectives. Through this, lecturers will have a basis to adjust their teaching methods to achieve the set initial objectives. This is one of the bases for innovating and improving the quality of higher education.

According to Professor Dr. Le Duc Ngoc, testing and assessment are the decisive stages for the quality of the teaching and learning process. For lecturers, testing and assessment help them know the effectiveness and quality of their teaching. For learners, testing and

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assessment help them know the quality of their learning. For managers, testing and assessment help them adjust training programs, organize teaching and learning, as well as make accurate and reliable decisions about evaluating learners' academic results.

2.2. Assessment - The Most Important Interaction Between Teaching and Learning

In the field of education, teaching is always associated with and supportive of learning. The most important interaction between teaching and learning is assessment. Thus, the assessment method is one of the top issues that the education system must pay attention to, alongside learning methods, teaching methods, and curriculum content. Assessment allows us to determine: whether the educational objectives set are appropriate and whether they have been achieved. Whether the teaching has been successful and whether the learners have made progress. The assessment to conclude whether the learner has made progress is related to the assessment of learning outcomes. Student assessment is the student's confirmation of the level of achievement according to the value standards of the school's training objectives or of each lesson and subject. These value standards can be converted into scores for grading, which is called quantitative assessment; if not converted into scores but only commented on based on standard criteria, it is called qualitative assessment.

2.3. The Concept of Speaking Skills

Linguist Khamkhien believes that speaking is one of the most important skills when learning a foreign language, including English. According to Bygate, speaking is a reflective skill that helps learners use a foreign language to express opinions, thoughts, and feelings to the interlocutor or listener. Thus, it can be affirmed that it is the speaking skill that helps the English language perform its own communication function. Furthermore, speaking skills also contribute to strengthening the learner's listening skills, helping to enhance vocabulary and practice related skills. Therefore, many Vietnamese students, when learning English, want to study and practice a lot to improve their speaking skills, which is useful for their future studies and work.

2.4. Testing, Assessing Oral Activities and Skills for Assessing Oral Skills

Testing and assessing speaking skills for students is a difficult task for universities because it requires managers to provide very specific and authentic criteria, as well as technical support facilities. For non-major students today, the assessment of speaking skills is mainly the assessment of information skills. In speaking tests, examiners often ask students to present a given topic; students often prepare and memorize it, so they mainly just read it out. In addition, the examiner will ask a few more questions related to the topic just spoken about. In fact, with this assessment method, teachers have omitted other student interactions such as interaction skills and management skills. To get an accurate view of these two skills, teachers need to provide content for assessing these skills as well as complete criteria and scoring scales.

Author Arthur Hughes in his book "Testing for Language Teachers" states that there are 6 types of speech acts as follows: - Expressing: likes, dislikes, preferences, agreement/disagreement, requests, opinions, comments, attitudes, assertions, complaints, reasons, evaluations, comparisons; - Directing: guiding, persuading, advising, prioritizing; - Describing: actions, events, objects, people, processes. - Eliciting information: information, instructions, explanations, help; - Narration: sequence of events; - Reporting: describing, commenting, deciding, choosing. Also according to the author and this book, oral skills are divided into 3 types as follows: Information skills; Interaction skills and Skills in managing interactions.

3. EXPERIMENTAL METHOD AND PROCEDURE

3.1. Research Subjects

This experiment was conducted with 40 non-major students in the second semester of their first year. In this period, students already have a foundational knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and communication skills from the English 1 module of the previous semester.

3.2. Research Method

This experimental research method will produce results based on the use of verifiable evidence.

3.3. Research Context

The research was conducted at a time when close communication between lecturers and students had been reduced. Lecturers need to gather more information about students to innovate teaching methods, while students need to clearly understand their strengths, weaknesses, and their current level of knowledge.

3.4. Research Tools

- **Participants in the experiment:** Includes 40 students divided into 20 interacting pairs.
- **Examiners:** 02 people.
- **Technical staff:** 01 videographer.

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- **Equipment:** 01 video camera (a phone can be used) with a large capacity memory card.
- **Location:** A specialized speaking test room, unaffected by noise and strangers, to ensure a smooth testing and assessment process.
- **Materials used:** The lecturer needs to prepare all necessary materials for the test, such as: communication situation cards for each pair, scoring criteria, and scales to evaluate all three conversational skills (information provision skills, interaction skills, and interaction management skills). The lecturer should have 20-25 communication situation cards for 20 pairs of students - 03 criteria and evaluation sheets for each skill. Each situation card will include the following 3 parts: Part one: A general speaking topic divided into 2 sub-topics for each student to talk about; Part two: A communication situation related to the topic of part one, including prompts from the lecturer for students to interact with each other; Part three: Each student will have to think of a communication situation related to the speaking topic to communicate with the other student.

3.5. Data Collection

With 63 teaching hours for the English 2 module, the lecturer will divide 40 students into 20 interacting pairs to learn information skills, interaction skills, and interaction management skills. Throughout the learning process, the interacting pairs will constantly change participants. The in-class steps are as follows: - The lecturer prepares 20-25 communication situations to practice information provision skills, interaction skills, and interaction management skills; - Each general conversation situation provided to the pairs lasts for 20 minutes. Students will have 5 minutes for individual preparation, 10 minutes to practice in pairs at their seats, and 5 minutes to practice in pairs in front of the class for the lecturer and other students to comment and provide feedback on all three aspects of interaction: information provision skills, interaction skills, and interaction management skills.

Each part of the situation card will be used to assess and score different speaking skills of the students. Part 1 is to assess and score the skill of providing information on a given topic: The examiner will listen to the student speak on the chosen topic and ask further questions if necessary, with a maximum total score of 10. The specific assessment criteria and scoring scale are detailed (see Table 1). Part 2 assesses and scores interaction skills. This is a communication skill that can be non-verbal (through eye contact, facial expressions, hand gestures) and verbal (using speech to perform the required interaction task) with a maximum total score of 10. The assessment criteria are shown as follows (see Table 2). Part 3 assesses and scores interaction management skills, demonstrated through flexibility and the ability to handle situations created by the other student. This skill can be expressed through gestures and words in specific situations, with a maximum score of 10. The events that occur in each interaction situation cannot be predicted, so handling them depends on the flexible response ability of each student in the pair. The criteria are assessed as follows (see Table 3).

Table 1: Criteria and Scoring for Information Provision Skills by Topic

Category	Language Use			Information Provided		
Criteria	Grammar	Pronunciation	Fluency	Complete	Incomplete	None
Maximum Score	2	2	2	6	3	0

Table 2: Criteria and Scoring Scale for Paired Interaction Skills

Category	General Communication Behavior			Assigned Interaction Task		
Criteria	Eye Contact	Facial Expression	Hand Gestures	Well Completed	Not Fully Completed	Not Performed
Maximum Score	2	2	2	4	2	0

Table 3: Criteria and Scoring Scale for Interaction Management Skills

Assessment of Task Completion in Assigned Interaction Management			
Excellent	Good	Average	Incomplete
9 – 10 points	7 – 8 points	5 – 6 points	– 4 points

3.6. Conducting the Test and Assessment

Students gather fully in the examination room, which is equipped with all necessary devices, furniture, and is free from surrounding noise. For each turn, the lecturer will call 03 pairs of students to prepare, then each pair will take turns practicing speaking in front of 02 lecturers.

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- **Step 1:** Each student in the pair will draw a situation card with three parts and return to their seat for 10 minutes of individual preparation for all three parts of the test. Then, each student will speak on the topic of Part 1 for 5 minutes. The two examiners will monitor, listen, and mark the scoring sheet.
- **Step 2:** The student pair will conduct a conversation based on the prompts in Part 2 for 5 minutes. After that, each student will present a situation related to the topic in Part 1 to interact with the other student for 5 minutes. This part of the test will be recorded for the examiners to review later to assess and score interaction skills and interaction management skills.
- **Step 3:** The examiners watch the recording to assess the students' interaction skills and interaction management skills.

3.7. Final Score After completing the entire testing process, the teacher will give a final score by taking the average of the scores for all three skills.

4. EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS AND SCORING SHEET

A survey questionnaire was fully distributed to students to get their feedback, and the following is the analysis of the questionnaire (see Table 4).

Table 4: Analysis of Survey Results

No.	Question	Response Options		
1	How necessary do you believe it is to assess speaking skills through the evaluation of information skills, interaction skills, and interaction management skills?	Necessary	Not Necessary	No Opinion
		Students who chose: 32 (80%)	Students who chose: 4 (10%)	Students who chose: 4 (10%)
2	In your opinion, was this speaking skill assessment experiment effective?	Yes	No	No idea
		Students who chose: 34 (85%)	Students who chose: 0 (0%)	Students who chose: 6 (15%)
3	In your opinion, is it feasible to apply this speaking assessment on a wider scale?	Yes	No	No idea
		Students who chose: 34 (85%)	Students who chose: 0 (0%)	Students who chose: 6 (15%)

According to the results of the survey, the majority of students (80%) stated that assessing information provision skills, interaction skills, and interaction management skills is necessary, 10% considered it unnecessary, and 10% had no opinion. 85% of students found the speaking test experiment to be effective, 15% had no opinion, and the disagreement rate was 0%. Regarding the wider application of this speaking assessment model, the agreement rate was relatively high at 85%.

The scoring sheet was made according to 3 assessment contents with criteria and a scoring scale of 10. The final result of the student is the average of the three scores. The scoring results for each skill are as follows (see Table 5).

Table 5: Scoring Results for Each Skill

No.	Assessment Content	9-10 points	7-8 points	5-6 points	3-4 points	0-2 points
1	Information Provision Skill	8 (20%)	24 (60%)	4 (10%)	4 (10%)	0 (0%)
2	Paired Interaction Skill	4 (10%)	27 (70%)	4 (10%)	4 (10%)	0 (0%)
3	Interaction Management Skill	4 (10%)	27 (70%)	4 (10%)	4 (10%)	0 (0%)

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According to the results obtained, we see that the number of students who met the requirements (from 5-10 points) reached 90%, of which scores of 5-6 accounted for 10% and 9-10 also accounted for 10%, besides the number of good and excellent scores of 7-8 being quite high at 70%, and the failure rate was only 10% for each skill. After that is the average score of all 3 skills of the students calculated by the examiners (see Table 6).

Table 6: Final Score for Speaking Skill Assessment

Assessment Content	9-10 points	7-8 points	5-6 points	3-4 points	0-2 points
Final Score	12 (30%)	16 (40%)	8 (20%)	4 (10%)	0 (0%)

The failure rate was only 10%, and the passing rate for students (5-10 points) was 90%, of which scores of 5-6 accounted for 20%, scores of 7-8 were 40%, and scores of 9-10 accounted for 30%.

5. CONCLUSION

Through the entire experimental process, the full and effective assessment of all three skills requires key elements such as: full cooperation from students and guaranteed facilities. The assessment process needs careful and detailed preparation; lecturers need to build strict and balanced scoring criteria for all three skills to correctly assess the students' abilities. The students' results in this experiment also show that there needs to be more experimentation in different skills besides speaking so that students become familiar with this experimental method. The research also encountered certain difficulties, namely: the facilities for testing and assessment were not really guaranteed, student cooperation was not yet close, and the scoring by lecturers was sometimes subjective and inconsistent. With these initial results, the research team hopes that this method of testing and assessing speaking skills will be widely applied to non-major students to meet future output standards.

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