

SIGNIFICANCE OF VERBAL COMMUNICATION ABILITIES FOR EVERYDAY INTERACTION AND EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS IN TANZANIA

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Abstract

This study explored how English language teachers assess oral language skills in Tanzanian secondary schools. Employing a phenomenological research design, this study used observations, interviews with teachers, and document reviews to investigate classroom practices. The findings indicate that oral language assessment in secondary schools is not comprehensive, and primary assessments are dominated by debates, group discussions, presentations, dialogues, dictation, interviews, questions and answers, and computer-assisted testing. Oral language assessment seemed more beneficial to smaller classes compared to larger classes due to time limitations. The study suggests that students' oral language proficiency could be improved by strengthening both classroom and national assessments. The article also calls for the integration of formative assessment measures to ensure that language proficiency improves among learners. This study establishes that the assessment of oral language skills in Tanzanian secondary schools requires improvement, as end-of-course summative assessments mainly occur without classroom assessments to ensure students' learning progression. Thus, more emphasis needs to be placed on oral language assessment as it is essential for effective communication and job skills.

Introduction

The desired outcome of second or foreign language instruction is to enable language learners to possess skills that allow them to communicate in the target language (Ahmed & Elton, 2020; Martin, 2020). Currently, many education systems consider the once neglected oral language skills as an important element in language assessment. Of recent, oral language assessment is conducted both in foreign language contexts and in countries whose language of instruction is their mother tongue (In'nami, Koizumi, Sawaki & Watanabe, 2017; Wurth, Tigelaar, Hulshof, deJong & Admiraal, 2019). The aim of oral language assessment is to develop interactional competence, which is important in communication (Lam, 2019). The advantages of oral assessment are described by Hazen (2020) as to assess deeper levels of students' understanding, provide instant feedback to students and

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develop oral communication skills. This trend makes assessment of oral language skills in foreign language contexts such as Tanzania even more important to develop students' communicative competence. Scholars argue that language learners do not only need to hear language being presented clearly and logically by an expert, but they also need to possess the learned content by trying it out (Vuzo, 2010; Vandergrift & Goh, 2009). Therefore, students who are in contexts where English is used as a medium of instruction while they are non-native speakers need to be orally proficient in the language for them to fully participate in the learning process. Despite oral language skills' importance, Frisch (2016) argues that the skills remain the least understood by teachers and the least developed among students.

In Tanzania, the Education and Training Policy of 2014 requires that assessment of learning be conducted in line with the world's current education trends (URT, 2014). Concerning the English language subject in secondary education, the syllabus requires assessment of oral language skills to be conducted at both the classroom level and at the end of the education cycle (MoEVT, 2010). However, some studies (Qorro, 2012; Vuzo, 2010; 2012; Uwezo, 2010) have discovered oral and written deficiencies in English language proficiency among students at secondary and primary school education levels. Likewise, Chiwanga (2014) found that tour guides who had gone through secondary school education could not communicate well with English speakers from other parts of the world. These findings show that the oral language skills developed at secondary school education are insufficient to make someone proficient enough to communicate with other English speakers.

Language assessment models have been changing to reflect the type of language proficiency needed at a particular point in time and the evolution like theories of language as well as theories of language learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Hidri, 2018). In the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), oral proficiency in a foreign language was not mandatory since learners were required to translate written language from the native language into the target language (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Richards and Rodgers (2001) further state that linguists realised later that speech, rather than written words emphasised during GTM, was the primary form of language. Therefore, language assessment had to be adjusted from being dominantly written to include both written and oral skills as a result of the need to communicate in the foreign language one learns (Bachman & Savignon, 1986). Practices Since 80% of language communication in schools is oral (listening and speaking) and only 20% written (reading and writing), it is imperative to teach and properly assess oral language skills (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). Assessment of oral language skills can be used to improve students' language proficiency and their participation in the learning process. It is also argued that oral language assessment should be viewed as a way of obtaining evidence of where students are in terms of achievement of their learning goals and what they need in order to progress towards these goals (Cheng & Fox, 2017). Furthermore, Lado (1970) sees that the ability to use language orally facilitates learning how to write it and, therefore, teaching and assessing oral language skills subsequently improves written language skills. Given the necessity to be able to communicate in a foreign language one learns, the ability to communicate orally in the target language is given more emphasis than mastery of language items such as grammar and vocabulary. It is further argued that in practice, while language teaching and learning has changed to reflect the changes in view about language, language assessment in many parts retains the grammatical view (Järnström, 2019; Shohamy, 2013). Indeed, oral language skills have had trivial space in curriculum and assessment such that learners are expected to develop the skills as they hear the language being used by competent language users (Ahmed & Elton, 2020; Vuzo, 2010; Vandergrift & Goh, 2009). This expectation is unrealistic because oral language skills need to be developed for real-life communication. Assessment of oral skills should be carried out in the same way as other skills. It is, therefore, important to conduct oral language assessment as learning takes place in the classroom. This is because the focus of the field of language assessment has shifted its emphasis to a broader consideration of assessment practices in language classrooms (Cheng & Fox, 2017). Classroom assessment guarantees monitoring of learning progress and allows for adjustments in the teaching to

cover the problematic areas. When oral language ability is assessed at classroom level, its development among students may be assured (Martin, 2020).

It is believed that oral language skills acquired in one's education are a way to build on-job skills which employers need (Hazen, 2020; Chiwanga, 2014; Huxham, Campbell & Westwood, 2012; Oliver, Haig & Rochecouste, 2005). To attain oral language proficiency among students, the education system needs to emphasise formative assessment more than summative assessment (Mdima, 2015; Solomonidou, 2014). Sinwongsuwat (2012) also stresses that, in classroom contexts, the traditional face-to-face direct tests where learners are required to interact with each other or with the teacher is more feasible and necessary than the end of term or year examination. Furthermore, it is classroom assessment that benefits students in their learning than an assessment that is conducted once or twice in a while and coupled with a judgemental pass/fail comment (Butler & Stevens, 1997). It is the classroom teacher's responsibility to develop oral language skills among students in a foreign language, a task that can best be done through formative assessment (Calfee & Sutter, 1982).

Given its importance as the medium of instruction and its influential role in determining the selection of students for higher education in Tanzania, the mastery of English language skills is vital. The most dominant way to determine proficiency in language is through assessment. Written language skills are assessed at both school and national levels. Evidence indicates that oral language skills are indirectly assessed at national level (MoEVT, 2010; Mdima, 2015; NECTA, 2015; 2016; 2019a). In recognition of the importance of classroom assessment, Cheng and Fox (2017) reiterate that quality classroom assessments do not only measure learning but also genuine episodes of learning in and of themselves. Again, information generated through classroom assessment can help teachers to evaluate the efficiency of their teaching strategies (Ndalichako, 2018). Therefore, assessment of oral language skills at classroom level to ascertain students' proficiency in oral language skills is imperative. Given the value of oral language skills, it is important for students to master it in order to facilitate learning of both the English language subject and other subjects taught through its medium. While Ndalichako (2018) portrays a general picture of assessment in secondary schools, it is uncertain whether and how oral language assessment of the English subject is conducted in the Tanzanian secondary school classroom. This dearth in literature made the researchers interested to put to light teachers' classroom practices in the assessment of English oral language skills in Tanzanian secondary schools. The paper aims to answer the question "Which ways do English language teachers use to assess oral language skills in secondary schools?"

Literature Review

Assessment refers to activities undertaken by the teacher to obtain information about the learner's skills, knowledge, and attitudes (Marsh, 2005). Brown (2004) describes assessment as an act of interpreting information about students' performance, collected through any of a multitude of means or practices. However, Cheng and Fox (2017:1) view "assessment of student learning as one of the most important, complex, and demanding exercises." Assessment has been in place since formal education came into being and it has recently transformed from being used for evaluation purposes to being used to aid learning and hence practices called assessment for learning as opposed to assessment of learning (East, 2016; Solomonidou, 2016).

Classroom assessment in language involves approaches by teachers to design and carry out collection of multiple forms of information concerning students' language use, to analyse and interpret it, to provide feedback, and to use this information to help make decisions to enhance teaching and learning (Turner, 2012). Turner (2012) further explains that, in this process, observable evidence of learning is collected through a range of techniques such as observation, portfolios, conferencing, journals, questionnaires, interviews, projects, task sheets, and quizzes/tests. These activities are conducted alongside regular instructional activities. Furthermore, Kitta (2014:52) states that "brief assessment that provides frequent feedback about learning progress is more effective than long, infrequent ones, like once-a-term tests."

Oral examination is the oldest form of assessment where a candidate responds to questions from one or more examiners (Hazen, 2020; Huxham, Campbell & Westwood, 2012). The assessment may involve the candidate

and the assessor when interacting on a one-to-one basis (Hazen, 2020) or among students themselves (Crosthwaite & Raquel, 2019; Lam, 2019). Oral communication is more dominant outside of school; therefore, students need to have these skills because their oral communication is critical to both their social and academic success (Butler & Stevens, 1997). Hazen (2020) further reiterates that there is a need for classroom performance assessment approaches that allow students to demonstrate in a direct way how well they can communicate orally particularly in their workplaces. In that way, Timpe-Laughlin and Park (2019:22) argue that “when designing and implementing interlocutor-mediated oral performance assessments, test developers must carefully consider the types of questions that are to be employed as a means of prompting test takers.” Oral language assessment, therefore, works as a rehearsal of what the students will be doing in the real life situation.

Proficiency in oral language skills is essential and it actually contributes to proficiency in other language skills. For instance, Miller, Heilmann, Nockerts, Iglesias, Fabiano, and Francis (2006) believe that proficiency in oral language enhances other oral language skills such as reading. In his classic book on language testing, Lado (1970) claims that proficiency in oral language skills leads to improvement of written language skills as well. This association between oral language and written language skills suggests that the teaching and assessment of oral language skills are imperative to develop the overall language proficiency of learners.

When it comes to specific oral language assessment strategies, interviews are considered suitable in determining students’ oral language skills (Lam, 2019; In’nami, Koizumi, Sawaki & Watanabe, 2019). Its benefits compared to other strategies lie in the fact that the student benefits from the guidance by the teacher who is an expert in the area in delivering the responses. Students have the opportunity to be drawn back to the topic by the teacher should they be going astray. Furthermore, Timpe-Laughlin and Park (2019:21) observed the following regarding open-ended and close-ended questions in an interview assessment:

While open-ended questions are regarded as providing test takers with more opportunities to produce second and foreign language (L2) output and showcase their L2 speaking proficiency, closed questions are considered to be leading, allowing only a limited, predetermined range of answers. Several guidelines for test developers and L2 educators strongly favour open-ended questions.

In that respect, open-ended questions become relevant to secondary school students particularly the class with which this study is conducted, Form Three. Since they have used English as a language of instruction from Form One, their language sophistication is expected to be higher at their level.

The review of literature revealed that some studies have been conducted to assess secondary school students’ oral language skills at the end of the course or programme (Frisch, 2016; Järnström, 2019; Solomonidou, 2014). It is clear from literature that assessment at the end of the course/programme is suitable because it determines what students have learnt and is sometimes referred to as assessment of learning (East, 2016; Luoma, 2004). Despite its several advantages, assessment of learning does not aid learners and teachers to improve learning process (Marsh, 2005; Mdimba, 2015). In order to make students benefit from learning, assessment for learning, otherwise referred to as formative assessment is recommended (Hazen, 2020; Järnström, 2019; Kahembe & Jackson, 2020). In language assessment, oral language is advocated because it serves to enable students’ participation in learning and enhances their oral language proficiency. In order to make students proficient in oral language skills and warrant classroom participation, assessment of practical oral language skills is inevitable (Abdala, 2020; Ahmadi & Sadeghi, 2016; Buberwa, 2018; Emmanuel, 2019; Frisch, 2016; Mdimba, 2015). In Tanzania, studies that have been conducted regarding assessment of English subject such as Mdimba (2015) focused on the extent to which teachers adhered to CBCA principles. This study therefore is set to investigate secondary school teachers’ classroom assessment practices of oral language skills in English subject.

Methodology

The study adopted a phenomenological research design. As a research methodology, phenomenology is inductive and descriptive (Husserl, 1970; Dahlberg, Drew & Nyström, 2001); however, as part of philosophy, it is a study of human experience from the first-order perspective (Wilson & Washington, 2007). The phenomenological

approach regards behaviour as a phenomenon determined by experience rather than by any other external described reality (Van der Mescht, 2004). The primary objective in phenomenological studies is to attempt to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon from the point of view of those who have concrete lived experience of the phenomenon in question (Reiter, Stewart & Bruce, 2011). Indeed, the main aspect of phenomenology is to understand the essence of the experiences that participants share within a common ground (Gadamer, 1976). The design was selected because it is suitable for the study of lived experiences of research participants, in this case, English language teachers and students. Furthermore, the design makes it easier to investigate and obtain a rich and detailed description of teachers' assessment practices in conducting oral language assessment in secondary schools. To achieve a fuller picture of oral language assessment practices in Tanzanian public secondary schools, two districts were used to obtain secondary schools to be involved in the study. The two districts were selected based on the smallest classroom-student ratio and the largest classroom-student ratio. Based on those criteria, Iringa Municipality and Bukombe District in Iringa and Geita regions respectively were selected (BEST, 2020). In Iringa, three schools with the smallest classroom-student ratio were selected while in Bukombe, three schools with the largest classroom-student ratio were selected. Furthermore, Iringa and Bukombe are urban and rural areas respectively and therefore a balance of the practices between urban and rural areas was obtained.

This study used purposive sampling to obtain both schools and teachers. This sampling technique was preferred because the study aimed at obtaining English language teachers and their students; where other techniques such as random sampling would not be suitable (Mackey & Gass, 2005; Patton, 1990). Categorically, three types of purposive sampling were used: stratified, typical and cluster. Stratified purposive sampling was employed to obtain schools. The selection of schools involved two strata where three included schools with classrooms that had 45 students or less, and three schools included those with classrooms with more than 45 students. To obtain those schools, the researcher used Basic Education Statistics (BEST, 2020). Information of districts with the largest student-classroom ratio and those with smallest student-classroom ratio were found where Bukombe and Iringa respectively fitted the criteria. Typical purposive sampling as suggested by Patton (1990) was used to get teachers. Cluster sampling that involves the selection of group such as intact language class rather than an individual as research participants (Mackey & Gass, 2005) was used to select Form Three students.

The data were collected through three main ways: documentary review, classroom observation, and interviews. The English language syllabus for secondary schools, schemes of work, lesson plans, and school examinations of the English language subject were reviewed. A classroom observation schedule that contained a comprehensive list of oral language classroom activities was used to conduct a classroom observation. Lastly, an in-depth interview was conducted with English language teachers whose classrooms were observed. The data were thematically analysed using the six steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2013; 2006).

Findings and Discussion

Interviews with English language teachers, classroom observations, and documentary review have shown that teachers used several strategies to assess secondary school students' oral language skills in the classroom. Such strategies included debates, discussion and presentation, dialogue, interviews, dictation, speech, computer-assisted assessment, and written tests. The varying strategies were determined, in many aspects, by the teacher's perception of what is a good assessment strategy, what works better with the class, the teacher's perception of their students' ability to use English and the stake oral language assessment held in the final assessment of students. These results are presented in more details below.

Debates

The findings show that debates were preferred by many teachers as a strategy for oral language assessment. Many teachers believed that a debate was a convenient way through which oral language may be exhibited by students. Through prepared schemes of work that were reviewed, teachers indicated debate as a teaching strategy for oral language skills. In that way, debates were used to assess oral language skills. Of the eight interviews conducted, only two teachers did not mention debate as an assessment strategy. One of the teachers reported that debates had

two specially allocated sessions in a week. Stating the importance of debate as assessment strategy, another teacher said:

Debate is the most effective way to assess oral language skills because students get time to argue, give recommendations, or give some opinions upon the subject matter. This can develop their oral language skills. It is good for topics that need them to express themselves, be it feelings or opinion and from that topic the teacher evaluates oral language skills. It is through debate that the teacher can teach topics that are related to speaking skills.

Another teacher considered debate as a good strategy to assess oral language skills because it is easy for students to use the target language more naturally. The teacher also added that because of the function of opposers and proposers of the presented motion, oral language assessment among students is made easy. In that sense, students' use of oral language comes closer to authentic environment. Using the teacher's verbatim "When they converse, they criticise, they argue and from that they become perfect in speaking the target language". Another teacher said that debate is preferred in assessing oral language skills because due to the nature of interaction among them, students do not easily get tired or bored. Moreover, another teacher considered debate useful because of the competition inherent in it, and students' desire to demonstrate their mastery of the language makes it a good strategy:

Debates are very useful way because they are competitive in nature. And some students want to show their ability of speaking English especially in front of other students. So it is very good, very important. But there is an element that I see; it is selective. You cannot involve all students. It involves just some students. The shy and the timid are excluded.

The teacher went on to suggest debate competitions between schools in order to motivate more students to develop oral language skills. It was believed that competition among schools would enable comparison of performance among students and improve oral language skills.

Debate appears to be preferred by teachers as an assessment strategy because of its convenience in its conduct. Teachers have lesser roles to play as they just lead students to select a motion and organise them in two groups to debate. Another major role becomes that of determining oral language proficiency. The English language syllabus requires that debate be conducted in a way that a class is divided into two groups. One group argues for and another against the motion (MoEVT, 2010).

The syllabus further states that each group selects the main speakers. After the main speakers have spoken, other students take turns to discuss for or against the motion in their respective groups.

Group Discussions and Presentations

All interviewed teachers admitted to use group discussions and presentations as a means to assess oral language skills. Teachers believed in the usefulness of discussion and presentations. What varied their practice was the number of students, teachers' belief in discussion and presentation, and the frequency with which the strategy was conducted. This strategy is conducted in a way that students are divided into groups. A question is given and every group discusses. After a discussion is complete, each group is allowed to present what they have discussed. One of the teachers commented:

I always use group discussion. Group discussions give students enough time to speak the target language. When they present their assignments in front of their fellow students, they use English. When you assign them something to discuss, you really want them to perform in front of others. Therefore, when they perform in front of others, other students have enough time to judge and to critique. So, when critiquing and asking questions they speak English. Therefore, students practice speaking the target language and the teacher ascertains the level of oral language mastery among students.

Another teacher considered discussion as the most effective strategy to assess oral language skills. The teacher believed that, during discussion, the students understood more than when questions and answers were used to assess oral language skills. The teacher said "of all the strategies, discussion is the best as it gives students more

opportunities to interact than what questions and answers would do. Students discuss and understand better in these discussions”

Findings also showed that presentations were preferred because they allow practicing real time communication and its assessment made possible. In one of the classes, classroom observation conducted found that during presentations, students had an opportunity to hear reactions from their fellow students regarding their ability to present the subject matter. They also received reactions from teachers who stimulated the students’ oral language skills. It was also observed that some teachers gave ample time to present as a necessary step towards developing oral language ability. During interview session, one of the teachers said: “The best way is to give them ample time to express themselves in presenting their ideas and experiences in front of the class and giving them chances to practice oral presentation in front of their friends”. It was also observed that teachers considered discussion and presentation as the most involving means of assessing oral language skills.

Other teachers viewed presentations as a superior strategy in the assessment of oral language skills. To do so, they compared it with other strategies. One of the teachers explained:

Presentations are the most effective of all the ways because they may be conducted more often compared to other strategies such as debates and interviews. Presentations also give the students more opportunity to use oral language when they present topics to their fellow students. From these presentations, the teacher can determine whether the students are good in oral language skills or not. Other ways are not as good as presentations because you cannot determine many aspects of oral language skills. In my opinion, presentations are the best for assessing oral language skills of students.

Another form of presentation was mentioned by one teacher “sometimes we can involve the so called oral speaking competition”. The teacher defined oral speaking competition as “...which you pick some students so that they can compete with others individually or in a group” According to him, the competition can be within the school or between schools.

However, it was discovered that discussions were effective in small classes where discussions and presentations allowed most students to participate. The groups had manageable numbers of participants, between five and seven. It was seen in one of classroom observations where the class had 28 students: only five groups were formed. Three groups had six students each and two groups had five students. Given this number of participants, group discussion and presentation were effective. The teacher moved from one group to another to provide assistance in case the students needed it. The teacher also appeared to easily monitor oral language production among learners.

On the other hand, it was observed that large classes were disadvantaged to use discussion and presentation. The number of students in the class hindered the teachers from successfully applying discussion and presentation. In one of the large classes, the teacher attempted to use discussion; classroom observation revealed that forming groups was almost impossible as the classroom was full of desks and chairs such that there was no space for the teacher to move around the class to monitor what students discuss. It was also difficult to separate one group from another since the desks and chairs left no space for that arrangement.

Therefore, teachers considered group discussions and presentations as a useful strategy in assessment of oral language skills. Their belief is probably based on the fact that students negotiate meaning in discussion, an aspect that makes them understand better than if they just answer questions. Its participatory level was termed useful as it enabled teachers to hear from each student. Despite its mass support by teachers, large classes did not benefit from this strategy. And where attempts were made to implement it in large classes, classroom management was difficult.

These findings are in agreement with what Crosthwaite and Raquel (2019) report that oral language assessment in form of pair or group discussion dominates secondary English language assessment in Hong Kong where English is their second language. Again, Tzou (2020) found that students were more willing to participate in group work than when other strategies that involved the teacher in the conversation were used. Crosthwaite and Raquel (2019) also found that assessment of academic production, unlike the assessment of English for general

purposes, focused on the presentation, support, and defence of the language user's position on the topic under discussion. In the same vein, Lam (2019) found that in group oral language assessment, development of interactional competence, a competence responsible for turn taking and turn giving, could be achieved. Since Ahmad and Eltom (2020) found that students had little skills for oral language interaction, group discussion would be an important strategy in oral language assessment.

Interviews

It was found that some teachers used interviews to assess oral language skills although it was conducted sparingly by teachers whose classes were small. Three out of six teachers reported that interviews were used to assess oral language skills. During an interview, one teacher said that:

Interview is suitable for small classes because it involves one-to-one interaction between the teacher and a student. With my class, I just need around five hours to interview all students. Every student is interviewed for about ten minutes. The exercise can be completed in one day and I usually do it on Saturdays to avoid interference with routine timetable. Interviewing guarantees that every student's oral language is assessed.

With regards to frequency with which interviews are conducted, one of the teachers said that "three or four times a year". Another teacher who assessed his students using interviews considered interviews as inclusive. The teacher said:

...with interviews you can interact with all of the students. When you practice interviews, you attend to all the students because it is made mandatory. Other strategies such as presentations or debates are selective as they involve students who volunteer. With interviews, every student is individually assessed"

The findings further showed that, on the contrary, large classes did not benefit from interviews. One of the observed classes had 135 students. Interview with every student in such a class was reported by the teacher to be difficult. The teacher complained during the interview that the class was too large and that interview with every student would take too long time which both teachers and students may not be willing to spend. Teachers who taught large classes also claimed that interviews were difficult to conduct in their classes due to the large number of students. During the interview, the teacher whose class contained 135 students had this to say: "How do you expect someone to conduct interviews with a class which is as large as three classes? That cannot work. Those interviews can easily be carried out in smaller classes"

It was found that, although interviews were used by few teachers in the sample, the teachers considered it to be a strong strategy in the assessment of oral language skills. Its strengths were attributed to its effectiveness in the one-to-one interaction between the expert (teacher) and the student. The student learns from the teacher the way language is used. This is different from when students are assessed through dialogue that involves one-to-one interaction between students. The student also receives immediate feedback during the process, an aspect that gives an opportunity for better learning.

These results are in concurrent with those of Hazen (2020) who found that interviews stood at an advantageous position because students study harder to avoid embarrassment in front of the teacher than if it were a written test. In the process to prepare themselves for interviews, students were said to discuss with their fellows and practise their answers out loud instead of just rereading their notes. In that regard, oral language assessment through interviews makes students study more actively and exert more efforts in understanding the subject matter. Since competence and performance may vary, Gu and Hsie (2019:191) caution examiners and raters of oral language assessment that "compared to writing, spontaneous speech tends to consist of shorter and simpler sentences rather than long and complicated ones." It is, therefore, expected that students will produce simpler sentences in interviews than those they can write. That should not be taken as lack of proficiency, rather the discrepancy between competence and performance and raters are expected to have that in their minds while grading students. Gu and Hsie (2019), therefore, argue that raters are not expected to penalise students' spontaneous speech due to simplicity in grammatical structures. To conduct interviews, teachers also need to be uniformly trained in order to rate the students fairly because Park (2020) found that familiarity with students'

mother tongue, coupled with training, have influence in lenience or severity in rating students' oral language. Furthermore, Tzou (2020) found that college students in English as a foreign language class were less willing to speak in teacher-fronted oral language interaction such as class discussion and interviews but were more willing to speak up in pair or group work discussing topics of their interest.

Dialogue

The findings indicated that dialogue was rarely used by teachers to assess oral language skills. Despite being indicated in the syllabus, teachers did not seem to prefer it. All schemes of work and lesson plans reviewed did not point to it as an assessment strategy. Of the eight interviewed teachers, only one mentioned it as strategy used to assess oral language skills. The teacher said that:

Dialogue gives students the opportunity to exchange words while the teacher checks the oral language use. Skills in turntaking and turn-giving are also assessed. The way they make their arguments and defend their point of view forms the assessment procedures. Even those who think that they are not able to speak are involved in a dialogue. They may use their partner's ideas of style to keep the dialogue going.

Since dialogue involves student and student conversation, it possesses the flexibility and has a reduced level of anxiety as the teacher is just there to oversee and assess while students exchange ideas. In that regard, dialogue would be a suitable way to determine students' oral language skills. Its non-use, unfortunately, deprives the students the potential it has in developing oral language skills.

These findings echo those of Lam (2019) who found that the interactions among students were characterised by collaborative unplanned dialogues, in which students engaged with each other's ideas and incorporated their partners' ideas into their own utterances to keep the conversation going. Galczi and Tylor, (2018:1) add that:

Spoken interaction is a fundamental but also complex endeavour. It is dynamic and co-constructed, it evolves and emerges, and is shared between interlocutors. It is reciprocal and those involved are both pro-active and re-active at the same time, simultaneously deconstructing messages as listeners and constructing their own message as speakers.

Dialogues among students were also found to be more effective in determining oral language skills of students in Tzou's (2020) findings because students were more willing to speak up when interacting with their fellow students than with a teacher.

Computer-assisted Assessment

It was observed that computer assisted assessment occurred in one of the classes. The class had 32 students and the teacher used a computer programme to teach parts of speech. The teacher used a computer programme that produced audio along with visual words displayed on the wall by a projector. The lesson was on word class and word order where explanations were made by the computer programme. The teacher paused the programme here and there to add more explanations that he considered relevant. The teacher insisted the students to listen to correct pronunciation of English sounds from the computer. So in that way students' oral language was assessed more practically. During the interview the teacher narrated the usefulness of using a computer or any other audio-visual materials:

...the most or the good way of assessing these oral language skills or the effective ways I can say is audio-visual because a student with the help of instruments like a projector can view the teacher or the instructor and at the same time hear what is being spoken.

This strategy also enables oral language skills to be assessed along with other language skills such as reading because words displayed through a power point projector could be read. By listening and reading, students improved both listening and reading skills at the same time. This proves the point that integrative language assessment where assessment of one language skill cannot be completely separated from assessment of all other skills.

Dictation

The findings showed that some teachers considered dictation as a viable means to assess oral language skills, particularly listening. The students would listen to the teacher reading out the text and they would write what they have heard. The extent to which they get the words correct implies their mastery of listening skills. The teacher would determine their listening skills based on the number or percentage of correct and wrong responses. Although only two teachers mentioned dictation as an assessment strategy for oral language skills, six teachers included the strategy in their schemes of work. The syllabus also mentions dictation as one of the strategies to be used in language teaching. During the interview, one of the teachers stated that:

Dictation is useful in assessing listening skills of our students. With large classes like mine, dictation becomes convenient strategy because all students are assessed at the same time. Since the students supply responses through writing, the teacher gets ample time in grading. Another teacher added that: “Of course in our syllabus we do always have dictation. We teach the students listening skills; as you read, they write. Through this, they can also be corrected on how to write correct spelling.”

Dictation is an appropriate way to assess listening skills among students. Given the role listening skill has in oral language, its assessment needs to be strengthened. Dictation would, combined with other strategies, be effective way of determining students’ proficiency in listening skills. If students can write what they have listened, writing skills are also assessed. This strengthens the point that oral language skills can be used to develop other language skills such as writing (Miller, Heilmann, Nockerts, Iglesias, Fabiano, & Francis (2006); Lado, 1970).

Speeches

Interviews with teachers revealed that speech was one of the strategies teachers used to assess oral language skills. Students were instructed to prepare and deliver speeches in front of their fellow students. Teachers said that speeches were conducted at classroom or school level. Three types of speeches were mentioned to be used to assess oral language skills, namely; ordinary speeches, impromptu speeches, and morning speeches.

Ordinary Speeches

Ordinary speeches involved teachers organising students to prepare and deliver speech in the class. The teacher selected the speech topic and gave the students an imaginary occasion such as graduation ceremony, welcome Form One, or any other event. Issues to address may be given as a guideline for the speech. The selected students prepare speeches and deliver in front of the class. During an interview, one of the teachers noted that:

We can talk about the speeches. So, speech again is another way whereby oral language skills can be assessed. It involves speaking skills. You cannot speak without following the procedures in addressing your audience. So, it is very important. Speech again enables students to improve their confidence as well as their capability in attempting or in speaking a language. So, that is another activity that can be included in oral language assessment.

Impromptu Speeches

The findings from schemes of work and lesson plans reviewed revealed that only three teachers had indicated that they would use impromptu speeches. In one of the classrooms observed, the teacher selected students in turns and assigned them to talk about a certain topic without prior preparation. Students presented what were assigned to them. Their presentations varied from three to six minutes. Most of the students presented relevant information to the topic although they were too brief. This practice made the assessment of oral language skill to be effective because students did not prepare themselves before. Students utilised what they had in their minds to talk about the given topic. In that regard, real time oral language assessment was conducted and the ability of students was genuinely determined. Although impromptu speeches have been listed in the syllabus as a teaching and learning strategy in English subject, teachers used it sparingly.

Morning Speeches

Interview with teachers revealed that morning speeches are also used to assess oral language skills. It was reported that although students volunteered for morning speeches, those who did so were in a better position to display their abilities to use language orally. One of the teachers said although morning speech was one of the strategies

to assess oral language, it had a weakness of lack of immediate feedback since a student cannot be corrected in front of all students. Correcting them would discourage the already daring students who volunteered to deliver morning speeches as many avoided it. Regarding how morning speeches were conducted, one of the teachers said:

They [students] explain themselves in morning sessions; we have this morning talk at the assembly ground for the sake of developing English speaking. They deliver their morning talks in the morning before they start the lessons. This is the measure that helps us to determine their oral language skills.

Speeches involve public speaking skills which many people do not have. Public speaking is even avoided by competent language users. To these students who learn English as a foreign language, speech delivery is even more complex activity. Students' avoidance of public speaking is, therefore, not surprising. This finding is in line with the study that found that students' fear of public speaking, fear of embarrassment, lack of confidence, and shyness among students acted as barrier for their participation in public speaking events (Tzou, 2020).

Questions and Answers

Of all the interviewed teachers, two of them mentioned question and answers as a strategy to assess oral language skills in classroom. The strategy appeared in every scheme of work and lesson plans as a way used to teach English language. It was particularly dominant in the beginning of the lessons where teachers used it to probe what the learners know about a new topic. It was also used to probe if students remembered what they had learnt in the previous lesson. Although this strategy appears in the syllabus, scheme of works and lesson plans; only two teachers mentioned it in the interviews. The reason for not including it would be a narrow perspective of what oral language assessment entails. One of the teachers who included it in the interview had this to say "So, we sometimes use questions and answers which of course don't give a big chance for them to express themselves". The teacher admitted that this strategy does not provide ample time for students to have lengthy speeches and, therefore, it is not elaborate. Oral language skills become difficult to assess in question and answers because students provide brief responses such that their speaking skills cannot be fully demonstrated. Responses in one correct word, phrase, or short sentence only guarantee that the student understood the question but cannot be provide concrete evidence of mastery of speaking skill. The second teacher said:

I also assess oral language skills through questions and answers. I ask them questions on certain topics and they reply and I ascertain their oral language proficiency. That [question and answers] enables me to know the areas in which students are strong and weak in their oral language skills. When I ask them and they correctly respond, I interpret that oral language skills are mastered.

Questions and answers is a good strategy when the teacher can allow students to give elaborate responses. The teacher also needs to give students opportunities to express themselves rather than requiring them to provide brief and factual responses. For this strategy to work better, it needs carefully planned procedures where the teacher asks follow up questions to elicit lengthy conversation. This would avoid findings such as those by Khamkhien (2010) who found that interaction in the language classroom in Thailand was mostly teacher-dominated, and learners were called upon primarily to provide factual responses, which were not genuine and authentic.

Written Tests

Written assessment of oral language skills was mentioned by one teacher during the interview. The teacher said that since practical oral language assessment was hard to conduct in his class, he found that conducting it through writing was a convenient way to him.

We conduct these examinations. We conduct according to our level. Though they are not as they should be; they are not certified in some areas but we try to perform them. We assess their oral language particularly how to speak but they do present their thought in written way. For example, you can write a debate question and the students argue for or against the motion. Students will write individually upon the issue raised in the question. So, we transform it from spoken to written.

This assessment of oral language through writing is what is referred by Mdima (2015) and the NECTA (2015; 2016) as indirect assessment. It is usually conducted when direct assessment appears to be not feasible due to shortage of resources such as time, fiscal, and human resources.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings have revealed that the teachers struggled to assess oral language skills of secondary school students in English language. The varying assessment strategies are evidence of the efforts they make towards making secondary students orally proficient. However, some factors hold them back in their endeavours. The factors included large number of students in the classroom and lack of resources such as books. Furthermore, many of the assessment strategies were selective in that not all students were involved in assessment. Teachers relied their decision on student oral language ability based on a section of students who either volunteered or were selected to perform oral language tasks. Majority of students were not assessed regularly.

Although oral language assessment appears to be avoided by teachers, its potential advantages outweigh the disadvantages. Therefore, teachers need to be trained in the use of assessment strategies based on the availability of resources and the size of their classes. Teachers with large classes could also begin to assess oral language skills, particularly speaking, through writing. To assess oral language skills through writing is possible through installing a public address system in the classroom. Students can be made to listen to a recorded text and answer the questions through writing. This would be a more comprehensive oral language assessment compared to other strategies such as dictation.

Since oral communication is a necessary requirement in most jobs, oral language assessment could be used to develop these skills in students. However, Timpe-Laughlin and Park (2019) argue that “when designing and implementing interlocutor-mediated oral performance assessments, test developers must carefully consider the types of questions that are to be employed as a means of prompting test takers”. This will elicit language production that is expected of students and hence assessment results will yield the expected outcome.

Given its importance in schools and in job markets as seen in this paper, it is high time national assessments included oral language in English language. While other countries learning English as a foreign language such as Korea send their students to English speaking countries such as the United States to learn the language in immersive settings (Park, 2020), it is recommended that other countries can at least develop oral language through assessment.

Since oral language assessment appears to take place haphazardly, and that teachers conduct it at their convenience, there is a need to systematise it in order to strengthen oral language skills among secondary school students. Several measures can be taken to systematise it, including making it a mandatory task for classroom teachers, making it a compulsory testable element in English internal school examinations, and making it an examinable subject in national assessments such as the Certificate of Secondary Education Examination (CSEE).

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