A Research Report on Engineering Students' Performance in English Language Speaking Test

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A RESEARCH REPORT ON ENGINEERING STUDENTS' PERFROMANCE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE SPEAKING TEST

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Abstract

This paper focuses on a research study made with 408 students of various engineering colleges in and around Chennai of India. It identified that female students have performed better than male students in speaking ability test in English language.

Introduction

> 'Language is a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, while all the time we long to move the stars to pity.' - Gustave Flaubert

Speech enables students to make connections between what they know and what they are learning, and listening helps them to acquire knowledge and explore idea. A successful speaker has some characteristics like highly motivated, a great degree of aptitude, flexible and adapt his/her style and beliefs to meet the demands of the task or the learning situation and also aware of importance of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Moreover, he/she has complementary receptive skills (reading and listening) as models for what he/she wants to say, and she/he uses writing as a means of preparing for speaking encounters. Hence, a number of things are to be needed for fostering speaking skill.

A Vital Problem Underlying Speaking Tests

On the other hand, one of the vital problems underlying speaking test is that "speaking" is difficult to define. For example, speech can be broken down into three areas:

1. Pronunciation and intonation, accuracy and fluency.
2. It can be categorized in terms of strategies.
3. It can be regarded as a form of interaction and analyzed using the methods of pragmatics or discourse analysis.

The problem is that in the course of a normal conversation, all these aspects are important. If testers try to separate out the strands, they may well find that the ecology of speaking is different in different successful speakers. This means that the accurate speaker may communicate effectively, but slowly, whereas the fluent speaker may sacrifice accuracy for the sake of rapid communication (Skehan, 1998).

Our Data Collection

Following the guidelines offered by Foster et al. (2000) and Skehan (1996 &1998) for the selection of a unit for measuring speaking ability test, we recorded 408 students' voices in cassettes. Sony cassette-corder TCM-150 recorder was used for recording purpose.

Oral proficiency measured:
- Accuracy
- Fluency
- Physical performance (body language, eye contact, etc.)
- Pronunciation and intonation
- Grammatical accuracy

These students were provided with the following topics:

1. You and your family
2. Your best friend
3. Your weekend activities
4. Your hobbies
5. Your last summer holidays
6. Your plans for the future
7. A T V programme you love/hate
8. Your favourite subject
9. Your dream holiday
10. A film you'd like to see again
11. Your hometown
12. A game you like playing
13. A person you admire
14. Your favourite season
15. Your childhood
16. A person you respect
17. An embarrassing experience
18. A book that influenced you for life
19. A place that you'd like to visit again
20. A lovely dream

Students were asked to select any one of the topics and speak on the topic for 5 minutes and 25 marks would be awarded as the maximum for the task. Besides, a separate evaluation sheet was used for speaking test.

Sl. No	Measuring accuracy	%
1.	Percentage of error-free clauses	15%
2.	Errors per 100 words	52%

3.	Percentage of target-like verbal morphology	32%
4.	Percentage of target-like use of plurals	21%
5.	Target-like use of vocabulary	27%

Table- 1: Percentage of measuring accuracy in speaking test

Table-1 shows that measuring accuracy in speaking test conducted among 408 students. And found only 15% of error-free clauses in the overall samples, nearly 52% errors per 100 words were found in their speaking test. Besides,32% of target-like verbal morphology used in their speaking test. 21% of target –like use of plurals used by informants and 27% target-like use of vocabulary were used in the speaking test. Besides, the results are given in figure -1.
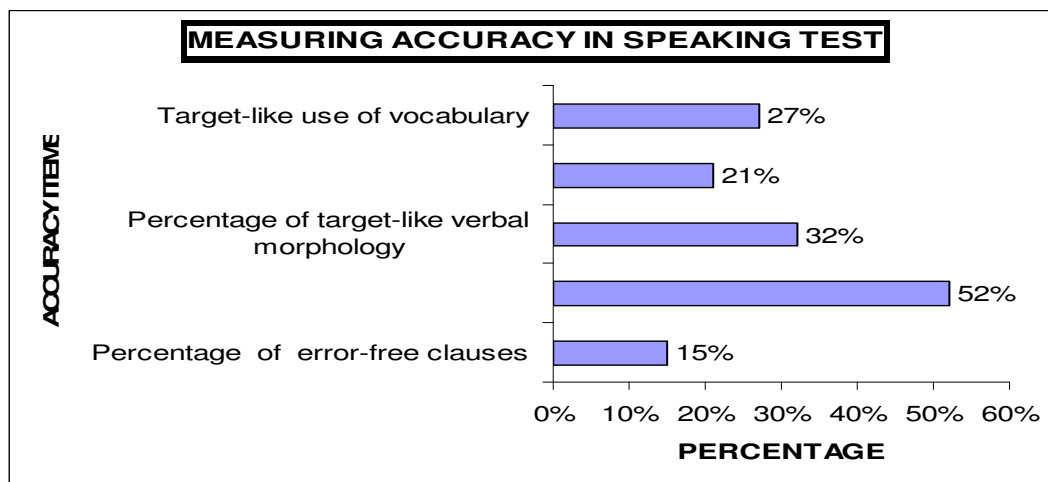

Figure -1: Percentage of measuring accuracy in speaking test

Sl. No.	Measuring fluency	% (N= 408)		
1.	Speed of delivery	Slow	Medium	Fast
		42%	37%	21%
2.	Number of pauses	2772		
3.	Pauses length	Long		Short
		1094 (39%)		1678 (61%)
4.	False starts	57%		
5.	Repetitions	39%		

Table- 2: Percentage of measuring fluency speaking test

Table-2 shows that students' fluency measured in the five areas such as, speed of delivery, number of pauses, length of pauses, false starts, and repetitions. Nearly 47% students were slow

in delivering their speech, 37% students were medium in delivering and only 21% students were fast in delivering their speech. Besides, among 408 samples the researcher found nearly 2772 pauses in the informants' speeches. These pauses are not regular pauses like coming between words and sentences. These are all irregular pauses, putting else in the sentences and words and bringing poor articulation of the language.

Moreover, the researchers identified 1094 (39%) long pauses and 1678 (61%) short pauses among 408 sample speeches. And the researcher found 57% informants started falsely with their topics and also the researcher identified 39% speech samples were repetition of words and phrases.

The relationship between language anxiety and second language proficiency has been investigated in earlier studies (See MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991). These and other studies found high correlation between the anxiety and the proficiency. Reviewing articles, Macintyre & Gardner (ibid) mentioned 'anxiety is one of the best predictors of success in the second language'.

Errors Found in the Performance of the Speaking Test

The following are the sample errors in the speaking test:

(a) Grammatical errors

    (i)Using wrong subject-verb agreement
1. I am **belongs** to middle class family, …
2. He **don't** have any bad habits.
3. I **am tell** about my family,
4. **My hobby is** singing and dancing and etc.,
5. My father is a business man, now **he work** in a factory.

    (ii) Using wrong articles
1. He is **a** Engineer, …

    (iii) Using wrong verb phrase
1. I have only one sister and my father is <u>doing businessman</u>.
2. I am <u>doing ECE department</u> A-Section…

(**b) Pauses length** (/ is used for short pause and // is used for long pause)

1. I am laxmi / doing / BE / and my mam // works/ , she is house wife// ……..//
2. Hi, // I am jai pratha from xyz engineering college//. // I wish to speak about I and my family, at first I wish to start with a proverb east or west home is the best//……
3. //my name is sathish//, I am doing // first year //CSE in XYZ Engineering college//.
4. And // I have// only one sister// and/ my father is doing business//. My sister// is doing MA first year /and my mother is also working.//

(c) Repetition of words and phrases

1. My name is Vijay laxmi , name is vijay laxmi ….
2. I like playing cricket, I like cricket very much …
3. My father is working revenue inspector, revenue department, in revenue department (repetitions with reformulations of words (self corrections)) ….

(d) Pronunciation

It is possible for people to produce practically all the correct sounds but still be unable to communicate their ideas appropriately and effectively. On the other hand, people can make numerous errors in both phonology and syntax and yet succeed in expressing themselves clearly.

Obviously, pronunciation plays very important role in effective communication among their peers. Moreover, in multilingual classroom settings the researcher observed the students can make numerous errors in pronunciation due to the gravitational pull of their first languages/ mother tongues or pronunciation according to spellings.

The following present examples of errors in pronunciation.

Word	Incorrect pronunciation
1. Not	naaTu
2. Always	aaLwe:ysu
3. School	iskuuLu
4. Often	a:fTen
5. Hospital	ha:spatri
6. Post Graduation	poost gra:vitesan

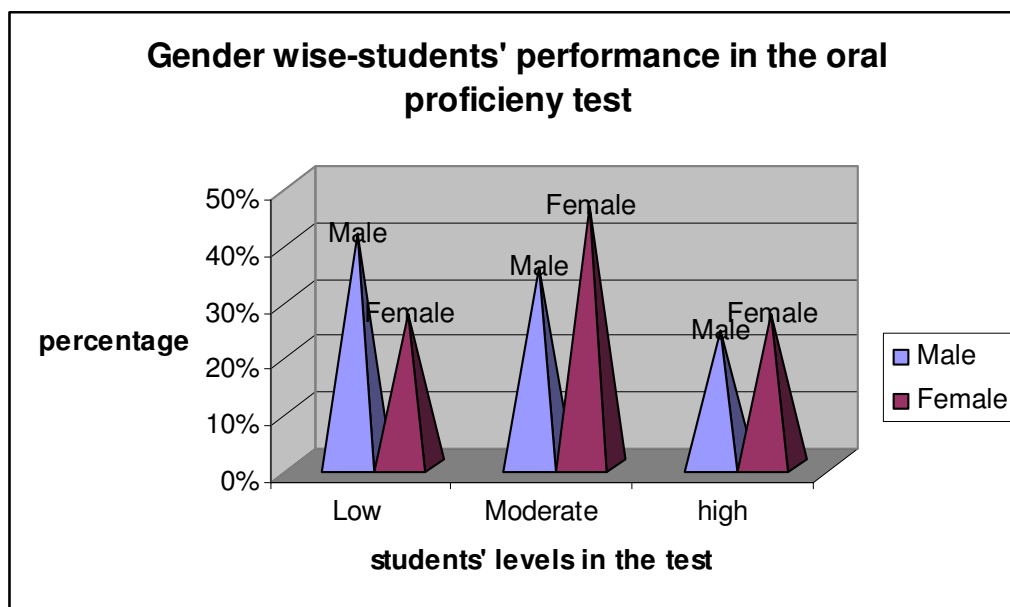Gender wise-students' performance in the oral proficieny test

Figure- 2: Percentage of students' performance in oral proficiency test - Genderwise

Figure-2 shows that only 27% female students secured low marks than (41%) male students and 46% female students have scored moderate marks than (35%) male students. However, 27% female students have scored high marks than (24%) male students. Hence, the results of oral proficiency test shows that female students have performed better than male students.

Conclusion

The results of English speaking proficiency test shows that female students performed better than male students. Moreover, the test also identified that the students' with high language anxiety have not performed well.

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