

The Evolution Of Constructs For Assessing Students' Oral Speech Skills

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Abstract: In the modern education system, the primary goal is not only to impart knowledge to students but also to comprehensively develop their life skills. This article examines the historical evolution of constructs for assessing students' oral speech skills, from the 19th century to the present day. It highlights the initial focus on external aspects of speech (fluency, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, and intonation) in Prussian and English education systems, transitioning to content-oriented criteria in the early 20th century, and later incorporating communicative approaches with linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competencies. Particular attention is paid to holistic and analytic assessment methods, their advantages, and limitations, supported by research findings. The article also references international language proficiency assessment systems and high-performing countries in PISA assessments that emphasize creative oral tasks.

Keywords: Oral speech assessment, constructs, holistic assessment, analytic assessment, communicative approach, speaking skills, language proficiency, PISA, creative writing.

Introduction: In the modern education system, the primary goal is not only to impart knowledge to students but also to comprehensively develop their life skills. Accordingly, in this era of advanced technology, society needs a generation that is entrepreneurial, creative, and adaptable to any innovation more than merely knowledgeable individuals. For this reason, educating individuals who can apply school-acquired knowledge in real life is considered a priority task today.

In particular, students' creativity and creative abilities are most developed in native language classes. It is worth noting that language is a person's primary creative tool. Any new idea, imagination, story, poem, or drama is expressed only through language. In native language classes, students develop skills in independent use of language, expressing their thoughts in written and oral forms.

Indeed, countries that recorded high results in the 2022 PISA international assessment include Singapore, Japan, Korea, and others, with strong emphasis on creative thinking and oral tasks in language education. In addition, systematic assessment is well-established, where students are evaluated not to find errors but to

enhance their creativity.

Worldwide, specialized research centers operate to study language learning and assess proficiency levels. In Germany, the ECL (European Consortium for the Certificate of Attainment in Modern Languages), in France, DELF (Diplôme d'Études en Langue Française), and in the United Kingdom, IELTS (International English Language Testing System) assess proficiency in German, French, and English as second languages. For instance, China's ZNC (written) and Putonghua (oral) proficiency tests determine the level of oral and written speech in Chinese.

Globally, the first official requirement for assessing oral speech in native language classes dates back to 1834 in Prussia (present-day Germany), when Education Minister von Altenstein mandated separate grades for oral speech in all schools and gymnasiums, officially recorded in journals.

At that time, oral speech assessment focused on fluency and grammatical correctness. Additionally, age-appropriate texts were read aloud, and intonation was evaluated.

Later, in the 1870s, education reforms in England introduced special oral speech examinations in

secondary schools. In English schools, speech culture and ethics were primary requirements for oral examinations. Similar to Prussia, texts were read aloud, and pronunciation and intonation were graded.

Thus, in the 19th century, more attention was paid to the external aspects of oral speech, while logic, substantiation, coherence, and clarity were secondary. Additionally, examinees were required to speak loudly, believing that high-volume speech is more understandable to listeners.

1918 marks an important period of change in the English education system. Specifically, the School Certificate was established in secondary schools as the first standardized qualification document. Its purpose was to assess students' general knowledge and provide a unified standard for university admission. The examination included an Oral English section, testing speaking skills in everyday situations.

In the oral speech part of the School Certificate, grades were given for fluency, pronunciation, intelligibility, expression, and comprehension. There were four levels:

1st level – Distinction: expressive, fluent, and error-free speech, achieving 80% or higher;

2nd level – Credit: fluent, logical, accurate answers to all questions, 60-79%;

3rd level – Pass: skipping complex questions, giving short simple answers with some errors, 40-59%;

4th level – Fail: failure to meet minimum requirements, below 40%, unable to answer oral questions.

As evident, speaking skill assessment in English education improved significantly within 50 years, shifting focus from form to content constructs. With the introduction of the communicative approach in education, language was viewed as a means of communication, leading to changes in oral speech assessment constructs.

Oral speech constructs later included linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competencies, with special emphasis on real-life situations. By the late 20th century, holistic and analytic methods were used to assess oral speech.

Holistic and analytic assessment are approaches used in evaluating oral speech, differing in overall versus separate grading. In holistic assessment, an overall grade is given to all constructs of oral speech. This approach views all aspects (fluency, expressiveness, accuracy) as a whole, without separate criteria. Research shows that holistic assessment stands out for its simplicity and speed but may involve high

subjectivity.

At Tunis University, Maha Ounis examined 20 speech samples using holistic assessment and found significant differences in raters' results due to varying focus on speech aspects, reducing the reliability of conclusions.

Additionally, Yuji Nakamura (2004) tested written speech using holistic assessment and concluded: "Holistic assessment has high communicative effect but does not fully meet validity principles." Indeed, while easier and faster than other approaches, achieving fair results is challenging. In native language classes, if teachers use holistic assessment for students' oral speech, time is saved, but real abilities may not be accurately evaluated.

In analytic assessment, each construct is graded separately by criteria, such as fluency, vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, and coherence of sentences, with separate total scores.

Numerous studies have been conducted on analytic assessment, proving its high reliability and validity through experiments. Researchers like Greg Smith, Khanh Vo, and others explained differences between analytic and holistic assessment, showing that analytic rubrics yield 15-25% higher results.

Maha Ounis also highlights analytic criteria as one of the most effective methods for assessing speaking skills, as it clearly reveals strengths and weaknesses, supported by evidence. The main advantage of analytic assessment is that even the smallest details are considered, results are 90% reliable and objective, though it is more complex and time-consuming.

In summary, these assessment methods have been applied in education systems since the late 20th century, achieving numerous effective outcomes. Starting from English education, they served as a foundation for European and Asian systems. For the first time, analytic criterion rubrics were created for oral speech assessment, later serving as models for written speech.

In international examinations assessing second-language oral speech, such as IELTS, TOEFL, and CEFR speaking sections, constructs like intelligibility and clarity are prioritized over pronunciation.

The evolution of constructs for assessing students' oral speech skills reflects a shift from formal, external criteria in the 19th century to communicative, content-focused, and multifaceted approaches in the modern era. The transition to analytic methods has enhanced objectivity and diagnostic value, enabling targeted development of speaking competencies. These advancements, observed in leading education systems, underscore the importance of systematic, creativity-

oriented assessment in native language education to prepare adaptable and proficient communicators for contemporary society.

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