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ENHANCING COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE VIA ASSESSMENT ACTIVITIES OF SPEAKING SKILLS FROM COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

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Abstract
In teaching language, assessment plays an important role in helping teachers identify students' linguistic proficiency, language skills and evaluating the problems that exist in the learning-teaching process. Thanks to assessment activities, teachers can actively adjust and improve teaching methods, support students to solve the difficulties they face. This article focuses on the assessment activities of English-speaking skills through the Communicative Approach (CA) for law-major students to enhance communication competence effectively. The study involved 60 students at the Hanoi Law University. The findings showed that communicative approach assessment measures bring about some benefits and challenges as well as express the perspectives of students towards applying CA in assessing speaking skills.

Keywords: assessment, evaluation, speaking skills, communicative approach, competence

Introduction
In the era of international integration, foreign language in general, and English, in particular, has become one of the essential criteria in jobs, communication and study. Therefore, improving foreign language skills is significantly concerned with the national education system in Viet Nam. A wide range of conferences and workshops have focused on innovating teaching methods, selecting appropriate materials and textbooks, etc to make the process of teaching and learning foreign languages more effective. However, the innovation in teaching approaches must go well with assessment activities that take a vital part in long-life learning to meet requirements in the radical renovation of education.

By 2018, Hanoi Law University had applied a two-TOEIC English-course program for non-English major students in their curriculum. However, in the content of the subject, students had been mainly taught reading and listening skills based on the 2 - skill TOEIC standard test. Speaking and writing skills were integrated into the subject as an additional knowledge with the content taken from The New Headway textbook, by Liz and John Soars. These two skills had not been tested and assessed in a specific form during English at Hanoi Law University. Speaking skills have been added to the curriculum for students in the last 2-3 years when the university had the policy of applying the Standardized Test of English Proficiency for students as a prerequisite condition for graduation stipulated by the Ministry of Education and Training. Currently,

non-English major students at Hanoi Law University are learning speaking skill based on the international TOEIC test format, including 11 questions with 6 main speaking activities described in the following table:

Table 1: Current TOEIC Test Format at Hanoi Law University

Question	**Activity**	**Evaluation criteria**
1-2	Read a short paragraph aloud	- Pronunciation - Intonation and accents
3	Description of photos	- Grammar - Vocabulary - Ideas
4-6	Answering questions	- relevant content - simultaneous reply
7-9	Answer the questions according to the content provided	Include all of the above criteria
10	Choosing solutions to the situation	Include all of the above criteria
11	Expressing opinion	Include all of the above criteria

However, teaching and learning English speaking skills still has some limitations such as classroom organization, teaching method, time, student qualifications. At present, English tests for non-English-major students mainly focus on listening and reading skills through regular tests and end-term test modules. Evaluating students' speaking and writing skills during the course is still limited, especially for speaking skills. English speaking ability of students is only reflected through the TOEIC standardized examination held by the Hanoi Law University for the last-year students before graduation time. However, the number of students who register to take the internal TOEIC exam at the university is just a humble one. In addition, the assessment of speaking skills for students in the classroom is also inadequate and challenging. The paper focused on some assessment measures of English-speaking skills to help non-English major students at Hanoi Law University have the motivation and effective English learning methods. Besides, the authors also made some recommendations on testing English speaking skills for students so that teaching and learning English at Hanoi Law University could meet the development requirements of linguistic competence.

Importance of speaking skills in learning the language

Speaking is considered as one of the four most important skills of English, helping learners to express their foreign language skills directly in daily communications. Researchers and educators have had different opinions about speaking skills. Chaney (1998) argues that speaking is a process of creating and sharing information in different contexts. He admits the importance of speaking skills in learning and teaching language; however, students should find out more appropriate methods to learn it best thanks to the development of modern society. He considers cultural factors and communicative rules as the most important components. According to Brown (1994), speaking is the process of interacting with each other to create information through the process of creating, receiving, and processing information. In short, language researchers are consistent with the idea that speaking is a skill that allows people to express information, express opinions, thoughts, emotions clearly, helping the process of communicating effectively.

Today, no one can deny the role of foreign languages in the general development and international economic integration, in which speaking skill is considered as a productive skill, helping learners to show the ability to communicate with the best results. Brown

and Yule (1983) assert that speaking skills play an important role in everyday communication. The authors mention two main functions of speaking skills: transactional function (information transmission function) and interaction function (function to maintain social relationships). Therefore, the development of speaking skills has an extremely important meaning in the curriculum of English as a foreign language (EFL) or as a second language (ESL).

Nunan (1999) argues that successful speaking skills are assessed based on the ability to carry out conversations in the target language. Obviously, through speaking skills, teachers not only assess students' English ability but also their social knowledge, communication skills, life experiences, and personalities. Some of the problems in speaking ability include: a) Students do not have enough motivation to practice in the class; b) they are too shy and afraid to take part in the conversation; c) they have nothing to say; and d) they do not like the materials (Asaei, 2011). These problems can be handled if there are appropriate and effective teaching and learning strategies.

Testing-evaluation and role of testing-evaluation in teaching and learning English

The appropriateness and quality of a curriculum can be tested through specific testing and evaluation methods. Testing and evaluation are inextricably linked to each other although the two operating processes can intrinsically focus on different aspects. Testing consists of the methods and skills used to collect information which evaluates students' ability, their level of grasping knowledge and motivation (Allan, 1999). Evaluation, meanwhile, is the collection of information necessary to determine whether a program is appropriate and meets its goals or not. The evaluation must be designed to find out which method is effective and which is not. (Kaufman, Guerra, Platt, 2006). The evaluation has been considered as reflection way and it is imperative to embed reflection in the curriculum (Harvey et al., 2010). Dean, Sykes, Agostinho, & Clements (2012) argue that assessment involved in the discussion with the reflective or probing questions. Assessment should make use of the utility of the online space (Woodley & Beattie, 2011). Besides, through analyzing reflective assessment tasks, Cord & Clements (2010); and Hughes, Mylonas, & Benckendorff (2013) discover what students are learning and what teachers need to change.

In summary, the testing and evaluation of English in general and of English-speaking skills in particular is an indispensable factor to promote learners' motivation to learn speaking skills. Cowie & Bell (1999) reveal that evaluations have a very important impact on the educational process in general, helping detect and improve the learning process. Assessing English speaking skills during classes opens up many opportunities for learners to show their English-speaking ability while still providing accurate information and reliable evidence on academic progress and learning outcomes of learners. Furthermore, it allows learners to participate in activities not only as a self-assessor but also in assessing others, using the information obtained through testing-evaluation to optimize learning performance. Therefore, the assessment activities should be specifically and appropriately designed to accurately assess learners' communication ability through specific activities which may positively impact the learner's attitude and passion for learning English speaking skill. Thus, learners can determine the level of their English proficiency and reach the output standard required for the training program they are attending. Currently, there is a wide range of assessment methods instructors can apply in the classroom, regardless online or offline such as e-portfolios (An & Wilder, 2010), online role-play (Ogilvie & Douglas, 2007), online journals (Cord & Clements, 2010) or blogs (Edgar, Francis-Coad, & Connaughton, 2012). However, the negative effects of some evaluation methods on teaching and learning are mentioned (Madaus,

West, Harmon, Lomax, & Viator, 1992). Darling-Hammond (1988) and McNeil (1988) clarify the external accountability testing results in the de-skilling and de-professionalization from instructors and show their serious influence on teaching (Whitford & Jones, 2000).

Learning-oriented assessment through the communicative approach

Communicative approach (CA) is a prevailing one of all current world-wide teaching methods in which learners make use of authentic material to make the meaningful real communication. Larsen-Freeman D. (2000, p.122) states that CA makes communicative competence as the key goal of language teaching and asserts that there is an interdependence between language and communication. Language teaching activities are involved in real-life situations tasks, real outcomes, collaborative and interactive performance. Thus, assessment principles are relevant to productive assessment activities. Carless (2007) indicates three principles for learning-oriented assessment as follows:

Principle 1: Assessment tasks should be designed to stimulate productive learning practices amongst students;

Principle 2: Assessment should involve students actively in engaging with criteria, quality, their own and/or peers' performance [sic];

Principle 3: Feedback should be timely and forward-looking to support current and future student learning.

These principles were described as figure 2 in a schematic form:

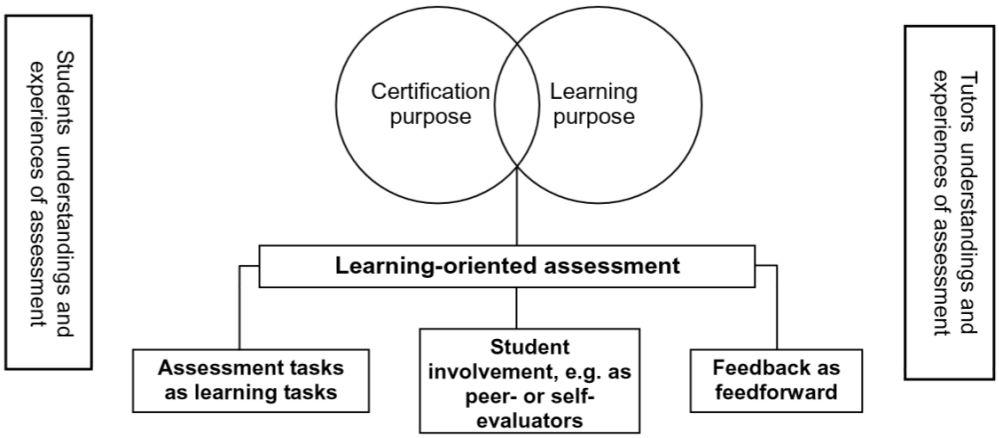


Figure 1. Learning-oriented assessment framework

As can be seen from the figure, there is an interconnection between learning and certification purposes of assessment activities. They both orient to certification and learning process with an overlapping space. To get the purposes mentioned, the instructors have to design the appropriate tasks ensuring that they are the tasks students take in the learning process. Moreover, the assessment activities have to involve all students in their awareness of assessment criteria, self-and-peer evaluation. Lastly, the assessment has to be the positive and forward reflection which affects future actions with suitable changes.

Methodology

Participants

The group selected for the study consisted of 60 undergraduate students who major in law from K4232 and K4228 of Hanoi Law University. Throughout the class, students were invited to perform tasks in teams. This approach fostered communication and collaboration among students in order to generate data for the study. Students' English proficiency mostly was at the pre-intermediate level.

Instruments

To gather the data for the analysis, the writer employed a qualitative and quantitative research method. The instruments include questionnaires and reflective journals. 60 questionnaires consist of a variety of items regarding the students' perspectives on the appropriateness towards a number of measures to test and assess speaking skills for students in the teaching process. The questionnaires were designed on a five-point Likert scale (including 5. strongly agree - 4. agree - 3. undecided - 2. disagree - 1. strongly disagree). A teaching project with the assistance of IT was also implemented in the course. After finishing the content of the course, students wrote an individual journal at the last course with the question "How do you assess the activities to test and assess speaking skills for non-English major students in the teaching process in comparison with the traditional teaching approach?". After writing their opinions, they scored the effect of two approaches based on a 10-point scale.

Procedures

In this 10-week English speaking skill course, the teacher applied both traditional approach and communicative one in two stages: the first stage for the first five weeks and the second stage for the next five weeks of the course. In the first stage, with the traditional teaching method, reading the materials to find out the ideas for the topics, presenting their speech in front of the class, getting comments and scoring from the teacher are the main activities of the subject. In the second stage, students were introduced communicative activities in the speaking learning process to suit the assessments given by the teacher. After finishing the course, the students were asked to write reflective journals about the learning experience and answer the questionnaires. In the course, the testing and assessment activities for the speaking process are involved as follows:

Assessing in pairs

The time for speaking practice and speaking skill assessment for students is not much, so the teacher guided students on how to practice, asked students to prepare and check their work by themselves. To make use of classroom time, teachers asked students to practice in pairs and self-assess each other. However, for students to be capable of assessing each other's speaking skills, teachers set up specific criteria for each performance including ideas, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, intonation, stress, presentation style, etc.

For each speaking task, students had an evaluation paper sheet with the given criteria to comment on their friend's speech by ticking the criteria in the form of passing or failing and even noting the mistakes their partner made when speaking if possible. Students then remarked on each other and re-practice if they had enough time. After students practiced and made their comments in pairs, the instructor asked students to present for the assessment from the whole class and the teacher as well. From this

evaluation, each student could realize whether their evaluation was correct or not, and they could adjust and consciously improve their speaking skills.

Evaluating in groups

The teacher guided students to practice speaking skills in a group and assessed each group's speech through the criteria for speaking tasks required by the teacher. With this method, students felt confident in their speaking tasks because many students in the survey process admitted that they often felt unconfident in front of other students in the class when lecturers commented on their talks (accounting for 10%). As a result, teachers took advantage of the time to evaluate more students during the speaking time, and more importantly, all students in the class had a chance to participate in the speaking activities that teachers required. Students would be more aware of preparing speech, presentation to minimize errors to perform speaking activities most effectively.

Recording the content of speaking practice

Teachers assigned speaking tasks to students and asked them to prepare their speech, practice speaking, and record their speech. With this assessment method, teachers requested students to submit audio recordings to evaluate and the teachers sent comments to students outside of class time. Thus, during class time, both teachers and students joined more speaking activities and students could also perform more speaking activities with different speaking contents and skill requirements. In addition, the teacher asked students to listen to the recording themselves and assessed their speaking progress by using the criteria paper sheet (the rubric) given by the teacher or by the students themselves.

Communicating with people from English-speaking countries to assess students' speaking skills

Together with the explosion of modern technology and the proliferation of social networks, finding a native English-speaking friend is no longer an obstacle. Students made friends with a native speaker through Facebook or joined an online speaking class with a native teacher to practice speaking English daily. Then, students recorded the conversation for the teacher to assess. If students are exposed and communicate with native speakers regularly, they compare, contrast and detect mistakes to self-adjust and standardize their speaking ability.

Using Social networks to self-assess students' speaking skills in group

To effectively use social networks in helping students develop their speaking ability, the teacher asked students to follow the following steps:

Step 1: Create a common account on the forum for group members to participate in the forum.

Step 2: The teacher spent a lot of time guiding students on how to comment by explaining the rules, providing students with clear criteria to evaluate their speech.

Step 3: After the teacher provided the theory, topics and lectures, students were asked to submit their speech, discussions, dramatic stories, amusing anecdotes, films, video clips, role-plays that are related to the topics to the Facebook group 2 days before the submission deadline. Other students expressed their opinion through the "like" button and made comments about their partner's work online based on the assessment criteria.

For the first time, the implementation of direct speaking skills required the participation and direct instruction of the teacher so that the participants could become familiar with

the assessment method to achieve effective speech. The teacher assessed the speaking products based on opinions from the number of "like" and comments.

Findings and Discussion

This section shows the attitude and perspectives of students and teachers towards using CA activities to assess speaking skills: (a). Benefits of using CA to assess teaching and learning speaking skills; (b). effectiveness of CA activities in enhancing communication competence; (c). challenges of applying CA in assessing speaking skills.

Benefits of using CA to assess teaching and learning speaking skills.

According to the survey results during the implementation of the paper, up to 70% of students surveyed said that the evaluation of lecturers on speaking skills for students by using CA during class time was important. The rest believed that this assessment was extremely important in the process of learning the speaking skills of students. None of the students felt that the teacher's evaluation of speaking skills was unimportant or less important.

Table 2: Benefits of CA activities to assess speaking skills.

No.	Statements	Min	Max	Mean	STDEV
1	Providing "authentic", "from-life" assessments	1	4	3.5	1.51
2	Enhancing communication skills	1	5	4	0.82
3	Developing critical thinking,	1	3	2.6	1.52
4	Modifying their skills to suit specific situations	1	3	2.4	0.84
5	Developing communicative reflection	2	5	3.5	1.08
6	Promoting students 'self-regulation in situations	3	5	4	0.81
7	Arousing students' contribution and cognitive engagement	2	4	2.9	1.32
8	More frequent connection to classmates	3	5	4.4	0.84
9	Boosting decision-making ability	1	3	1.8	1.03
10	enhancing their learning autonomy	2	4	3	0.81
11	Increasing interest	4	5	4.3	1.67
12	Improving pronunciation, phonetics, accents	1	4	2.9	1.1
13	More accurate assessment with the rubric	2	4	3.2	1.79
14	Creating an active and creative learning environment	1	4	3.5	1.51

There was a consensus among students that the assessment activities brought about "enhancing communicative skills"; "Increasing interest"; "promoting Students 'self-regulation in situations" and "more frequent connection to classmates" with the highest mean value of 4 and more than 4. Most of the respondents strongly agreed with the significance of that assessment such as "Creating an active and creative learning environment"; "developing communicative reflection" and considered it as "authentic", "from-life" assessments" with the mean value of 3.5. However, these opinions were different among the students with a stdev of more than 1.0. In terms of accuracy, the participants indicated the high approval of the activities of the assessment, when mentioning the decision-making ability students could gain from the assessment, only a small number of them agreed.

Effectiveness of CA activities in enhancing communication competence

With the activity of writing reflective journals after the course, students showed their experience by giving scores to the traditional approach and communicative one.

Table 3. The comparison of CA speaking activities affect scores of teaching in the traditional approach and IT-assisted approach

	Effectiveness of CA speaking activities			
	Number	Mean	Mode	Stdev
Traditional teaching approach	60	6.5	6	0.9
IT-assisted teaching approach	60	7	7	0.78
P-value	0.00			

After giving their reflection, students scored RP– enhancing effects of teaching in the traditional approach and IT-assisted approach. It can be clearly seen in Table 3, the mean scores of the two approaches are 6.5 and 7 (out of 10) respectively. The Independent-samples T-test shows p-value 0.00 which is lower than 0.05. These values indicate that the difference between approaches is significant. It is clear that the methods of teaching speaking skills with and without using CA are different. In other words, the CA-assisted teaching approach is more preferable thanks to its effects.

Challenges in applying the CA approach in assessing speaking skills.

When investigating the challenges of the assessment process, students had a chance to show the constraints they faced in speaking class. These things were expressed in the questionnaires and reflective journals. Most of the students had a high agreement that a large number of students, short teaching time at class and lack of technology devices in a class were the first obstacles because they had bad impacts on concentration, performance and connection among the students with the high mean value of 4.3, 4.4, and 4.4 respectively. Most of the English language classes of non-English major students at Hanoi Law University consist of around 30-35 students on average and sometimes the class size can be over 40 students each class (often for supplementary classes). With this class size, the amount of teaching time in class for transferring knowledge to students about grammar, vocabulary, or reading, listening, and writing skills for students can be relatively adequate, but for speaking skills, it is a hard job.

Table 4: Challenges in applying the CA approach in assessing speaking skill

No.	Statements	Mean	Stdev
1	Emphasis is given to linguistic competence	2.5	1.51
2	Too many students in a classroom	4.3	1.08
3	Short teaching time at class	4.4	1.03
4	Unawareness of importance of communication	3.2	1.51
5	Unsuitable curriculum	3	0.98
6	Lack of technology devices	4.4	1.21
7	Subjective assessment	3.2	1.2
8	The difference in student qualifications	3.5	0.98

Moreover, for speaking skills, teachers did not have enough time to follow each student's progress in practicing speaking skills in class. Therefore, the testing-evaluation of students' speaking ability was also limited. In fact, a short time for speaking skills limited the students' opportunity to develop their speaking skills and somewhat prevented students from carrying out speaking activities creatively. With this time duration, it is also difficult for teachers to help students practice speaking skills individually in a class of over 30 students. Therefore, assessing activity for speaking

skills of students will also be limited, affecting the effectiveness of students' speaking skills.

The unsuitable curriculum is also one of the difficulties students admitted facing with a mean score of 3.0. According to the university's internal TOEIC test structure, students' speaking skills can only be tested and assessed through short text reading activities to check students' pronunciation, intonation and stress (Questions 1-2), the skill of presenting views through a speaking topic (Question 11) and answering questions related to the content of the topic (Questions 4-6). Therefore, in the process of teaching and learning English speaking skills, speaking activities under questions 1-2, 4-6, and 11 are focused more. Therefore, the speaking skills of students do not meet the requirements of the TOEIC international speaking test. In fact, the assessment of taking Toeic English courses for modules 1 and 2 in the new 4-year program is being conducted for Listening-Reading skills with the regular tests and one end-term exam in the form of multiple-choice. Clearly, assessing students' English-speaking skills is still being a big problem in teaching English for non-English-major students, which leaves students with subjective attitudes towards the subject and fails to recognize the importance of speaking skills, resulting in ineffective learning.

The learners indicated that "difference in student qualifications" had a bad effect on the effectiveness of speaking activities. Thus, assessing the speaking performance of students in groups becomes more difficult. Most of the English language classes have different levels of proficiency among students because they come from the different majors of the law of the university, as well as from different provinces in the country. According to a survey conducted with 80 students studying Toeic English at university, up to 60% of students studied English for more than 10 years, 28% of them learned 7-8 years, but when asked about the ability of English, about 50% students said that they were at a poor level, 30% chose the level of a normal level of speaking competence, and only 20% of students thought that they were at a high level of speaking skill. The differences in student qualifications sometimes also affect the student's progress and mood as well as the teacher's choice of the teaching method. If the teacher teaches easy knowledge, it will not help the good students to be motivated and interested in the lessons and the situation will be similar to the poor students when the teachers teach knowledge requiring high levels of speaking skills.

Strategies for assessing speaking skill to enhance communication competence for students

In the reflective journal, students proposed the corresponding assessment activities depending on the teaching approaches such as "asking students to take part in social activities using English as the main language and call for the participation from the other group or via social networks". By using this assessment method, the teacher can base on how the speaking tasks are done through other students' support to assess student's speaking skills. Or "Having students engage in problems" is also a strategy helping students improve their communication competence. Through these situations, students give their ideas to solve the problems and teachers can evaluate through this. Another assessment method is creating competition on stage for students to show their ability through activities such as role-play, games, quizzes, etc.

Conclusions

English speaking skill was added to the foreign language course of non-English major students at Hanoi Law University as a compulsory skill. English speaking skill is inevitable for students if they desire to obtain a degree before graduation. This

encourages students to have positive attitudes and motivations to practice speaking skills as frequently as possible. Whether students can speak English well or not depends much on their starting points, English knowledge, and especially their social skills. A number of test-measures really help improve speaking skills for non-foreign language students from the approach of communication

Through the paper, the authors made some recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of assessing activities for students' speaking skills, and provide the prompt supplementary measures to speaking skills tests: Firstly, before each new course, the university should organize an English test to check input quality for students with the purpose of not only classifying them according to their capacity and conditions but also facilitating the teaching and learning process of both lecturers and students. Secondly, supplying the form of speaking skills tests for students through regular tests and end-of-unit tests are necessary. The speaking test will take time, but speaking is a skill that requires students to meet the foreign language learning outcomes and is designed in accordance with the standard content in the general curriculum. Therefore, organizing tests is a mandatory stage to assess speaking skills for students. At the same time, the periodic assessment set out for students also creates pressure and motivation for students to improve their own speaking ability. Thirdly, it is necessary to develop a specific rubric to evaluate students' speaking skills based on the TOEIC standard test that is being applied by the university. This helps teachers easily assess and detect students' strengths and weaknesses, and through specific criteria, students can assess their speaking ability before getting feedback from teachers. As a result, the teaching process of speaking for a big class still achieves the targeted objectives. Through this paper, the authors wish to help students find ways to improve their speaking skills. Besides, students can complete the subjects required in the learning program and meet the international English language proficiency standards.

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