

# Impromptu speech as an instructional strategy in developing undergraduate engineers' English oral proficiency

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**ABSTRACT** – The ability to speak English proficiently is an asset that needs to be acquired by every engineer. This study investigates on the performance of the undergraduate engineers in the impromptu speech assessment in terms of task fulfilment, accuracy, fluency and pronunciation and their average English proficiency levels after the seven-week speaking instruction. The participants of the study include 206 third year undergraduate students who are takers of the course on English for Professional Interaction. A Descriptive Impromptu Speech Assessment Rubric which was used to evaluate the students indicates that their scores were lowest in accuracy and fluency, and their average standard of score fell under the 'Good' category. The findings provide insights into future Impromptu Speech task and assessment design.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The complex and competitive trends in today's trade and industry has created demands for engineers to be able to collaborate on cross-functional teams and thus deficiency in oral proficiency would retard them from communicating effectively across the international community of engineers. As for countries where English is spoken as a second language, students have limited access to the language outside the classroom context and hence face various difficulties in terms of oral proficiency. Although a plenitude of research has been carried out in the field of oral proficiency and impromptu speech, studies that focus on the effect of using impromptu speeches on oral proficiency development are still scarce [1]. This study aims to investigate on the performance of the undergraduate engineers in the Descriptive Impromptu Speech Assessment in terms of task fulfilment, accuracy, fluency and pronunciation. Besides, the study also aims to determine the average English proficiency level acquired by the undergraduates upon the completion of the instructional period.

### 1.1 Oral Proficiency

The definition of oral proficiency includes a mastery of vocabulary and grammar [2]. Oral proficiency does not merely involve the ability to construct grammatically correct sentences, but also to keep oneself equipped with skills related to the workplace like presentation skills, negotiation skills and interpersonal skills [3]. Several studies have identified vocabulary and grammar as important factors that affect oral proficiency and pronunciation has been considered as a dramatic factor that influences speakers at all levels [4]. Several

speaking tasks could be deployed to assess oral proficiency and to improve fluency and accuracy but many studies have used monologues to assess learners' oral performance [5]. In the context of this study, activities based on descriptive impromptu speech have been designed by the instructor to evaluate the oral proficiency of the students. There are at least five components of speaking skills that a learner needs to master to increase the oral proficiency and these components are significant in analyzing a speech process. The five components include grammar, vocabulary, fluency, pronunciation and comprehension [6]. The oral proficiency score for each component is 5 marks, adding up to a total of 25 marks. The learner's score is calculated using the following formula [6].

$$\text{Learner's score} = \text{Objective score}/25 \times 100$$

There are scoring standards and range in speaking assessment as formulated by [6].

Table 1 Scoring standards and range in speaking assessments

Standards of scoring	Range of scores
Excellent	80 - 100
Very Good	73 - 79
Good	65 - 72
Average	60 - 64
Poor	56 - 59
Very Poor	< 56

### 1.2 Impromptu Speech

Impromptu speech refers to speech that is delivered spontaneously without any time for rehearsal or preparation [7] and [8] describes impromptu speech as speech delivered with little or without any immediate preparation. In a study by [9] it was found that students who were involved in impromptu speeches were found to be much better than those who were taught using the traditional method of teaching oral proficiency. In this study, the students were found to be able to produce coherent speeches which were featured by correct pronunciation, suitable vocabulary and well-phrased sentences. Hence, this study advocates the efficacy of impromptu speeches for developing students' oral proficiency. [9] also suggests that impromptu speeches

are implemented in courses other than English for at least 10 minutes as it involves cognitive processing and higher order thinking skills.

**2. METHODOLOGY**

This study was conducted in a technical university in Malaysia. Purposive sampling was used in the selection of 206 participants of the study who comprise of third-year undergraduates taking a course on English for Professional Interaction. These participants were from 4 different faculties which are Faculty of Electrical Engineering (FKE), Faculty of Information and Communication Technology (FTMK), Faculty of Electronic and Computer Engineering (FKEKK) and Faculty of Electrical and Electronic Engineering Technology (FTKEE). Participants were taught by the same lecturer but with different background knowledge. One of the learning outcomes of this course is to enable students to present clear detailed descriptions and viewpoints on a wide range of issues. As such, one of their assessments include a two-minute impromptu descriptive speech which carries a total of 20 marks. Prior to the descriptive impromptu speech topic, the students were exposed to the course content which include impromptu group discussions.

Seven weeks of the course instructions included an introduction to speaking skills, followed by a variety of activities on language forms and functions, discourse functions, ways of initiating, maintaining and concluding discussions, making suggestions and recommendations as well as stating and justifying points of view. This was followed by an introduction to the different genres of public speaking, that include informative speech, descriptive speech, argumentative speech and persuasive speech. Then, the instructor narrowed down to the topic on impromptu descriptive speech. The students were immersed in activities related to preparing, organizing and presenting the speech. After some mock impromptu speech sessions, they were geared towards the individual descriptive impromptu speech assessment.

The instrument that was used for the assessment is an adapted version of the B2 Speaking Rubric Progress Test 2 by the British Council [10]. This rubric is selected by the teaching team to be used to assess speaking assessment. The marking criteria of the rubric options include Task Achievement, Language Accuracy/Range, Fluency and Pronunciation. Each criterion carried a total of 5 marks, thus adding up to a score of 20 marks. This rubric varies slightly in comparison to the rubric by [6] which includes Vocabulary as an added criterion. Anyway, in [10] vocabulary is included as part of the ‘Fluency’ criteria. In this descriptive impromptu speech assessment, students were required to give a detailed account of an experience on topics related to education, workplace, health and fitness, technology, environment and social issues. Descriptive statistics (SPSS version 22) was used to identify the mean score values and standard deviation of the four criteria that include task achievement, pronunciation, language accuracy and fluency as well as the mean score obtained by the participants in the assessment.

**3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

A descriptive analysis of the mean score value for the impromptu descriptive speech is between a score of 3.05 to 3.90. Hence, the findings indicate the highest score for Task Achievement (M = 3.90, SD = 0.34) followed by Pronunciation (M = 3.69, SD = 0.47). As for Language Accuracy (M = 3.21, SD = 0.47). Meanwhile, the lowest was fluency (M = 3.05, SD = 0.33).

Table 2 Descriptive analysis of mean distribution and standard deviation for impromptu descriptive speech assessment

Assessment	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Task Achievement	206	3.90	0.34
Pronunciation	206	3.69	0.47
Language Accuracy (Grammar)	206	3.21	0.47
Fluency (Vocabulary)	206	3.05	0.33

Accordingly, it is evident in the table that the students are weakest at ‘Fluency’ (vocabulary) followed by ‘Language Accuracy’ (grammar). This finding is in agreement with the literature and other research findings [4] and [5]. This study has confirmed the view that second language learners’ common problems include linguistic factors such as Language Accuracy (Grammar) and Fluency (Vocabulary). This finding also concurs with [11] who has revealed that linguistic difficulties are the main issues encountered by second language learners. [11] adds that the teaching of vocabulary is most often neglected and when learners have poor vocabulary, they are likely to lose their confidence and get inhibited. Therefore, it has been suggested by [11] that language educators need to focus on the teaching of language forms such as grammar rules and vocabulary items.

On the other hand, [5] asserts that instructors need to focus on speaking strategies so that learners enjoy the speaking activities, hence enabling them to improve themselves in other aspects. The findings of the study by [12] has also confirmed that students need to be exposed to communication strategies and in this context, speaking strategies. [12] also adds that students’ target language proficiency need to be developed by exposing them to semantics as well as communication situations which would provide them the opportunity and practice in initiating, contributing and repairing conversations.

In preparing undergraduate engineers for impromptu descriptive speech, the language instructors could focus on grammatical features used in the simple present tense, the use of descriptive adjectives and detailed noun phrases which would be useful to provide information about a particular subject [13]. Besides, [13] adds that adverbial and figurative language could be taught so that the undergraduate could provide additional information about behaviors. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that instructors pay attention to

the undergraduates' grammatical mastery as well as vocabulary/fluency empowerment.

Since the participants of this study have attained a mean score denoting a 'Good' proficiency level, instructors could tap on other alternative approaches to heighten their proficiency levels to 'Very Good' and 'Excellent' as a way forward in producing global professionals.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study have resulted in several pedagogical implications. It is found that the teaching of descriptive speech should be focused more on how to develop the ideas and the enrichment of the vocabulary. It has provided insights into how the descriptive impromptu speech course and task design as well as instructional methods and materials such as modules could be further improved to fulfil the needs of the undergraduate engineers. Pointing out on the importance of impromptu speech, the findings too pave a way for the implementation of a ten-minute impromptu speech practice in every other course and in the context of this study, it is applicable to all the engineering courses in the technical university. The findings of this study have indeed provided a promising futuristic alternative in developing the oral proficiency of the engineering undergraduates in a growing technical university.

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