



The Alternative Assessment of EFL Students' Oral Competence: Practices and Constraints

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Abstract

This study investigates the current practices and challenges of alternative assessment for the teachers. While oral competence remains a productive skill in learning language process, the concept of alternative assessment or teacher-made assessment (classroom assessment) is another more authentic method of assessments which is different from the traditional ones. This study involved two EFL teachers who had more than five years teaching experience and used to give alternative assessment practice in the same Islamic Boarding School (IBS). An in-depth semi-structured interview and class observation was conducted with these two key aims: (1) to describe how English teachers are currently using alternative assessment practices on EFL students' oral competence; and (2) to describe the difficulties faced by English teachers in implementing alternative assessment on EFL students' oral competence. The results revealed that English Teacher in IBS has widely employed several methods such as peer assessment in collaborative work, and class students' observation. In applying alternative assessment strategies, the teachers focused on oral skills which used many group activities and gave authentic materials as topic. The teachers increased the students' involvement by giving activities such as role-play, assigning them to memorize short dialogue, drama, conversation, and presentation. The teachers also collected students' notebooks as additional scores, raised students' cases or problems to solve, and shared the components that would be assessed. The teachers gave some recommendations in order to use oral presentation to stimulate students' oral competencies in their class and evaluate or control students to practice English outside of the classrooms as well. English teachers also faced several difficulties in implementing alternative assessment on EFL students' oral competence, such as students' lack of vocabulary, students' weak of pronunciation and grammar which makes the students less confidence and motivation, and some slow-learners. In addition, teachers also had limited time to assess all student competencies.

Keywords: alternative assessment, classroom assessment, oral competence

Introduction

Assessment is a significant factor in the process of education. It helps to evaluate whether the students have studied the specific content of a course or, in the case of students from a foreign language, whether they have obtained linguistic elements from the teachers that will enable them to communicate according to different levels of proficiency (Coombe et al, 2007). In other words, the assessment needed by the teacher to know the extent of students' abilities. It is also needed to evaluate teaching and learning process based on students' proficiency level.

McNamara (as cited in Mendoza, 2009) stated that alternative assessment is a kind of assessment which is different from traditional paper and pencil tests and requires students to demonstrate skills and knowledge that cannot be assessed using multiple choice tests. In addition, it uses methods that can assess both the process and the results of language learning without any test. This kind of assessment can be more easily integrated into the class than traditional assessment. In addition to the easy information to understand, this assessment is also more responsive to each student. It prompts learning and increase the access and equality in education (Yildirim 2013).

Lizasoain (2014) stated that traditional testing usually assesses performance rather than competence. However, people's performance in language does not necessarily reflect the underlying knowledge. That view now reveals that better competencies are assessed through alternative assessment than traditional one.

Speaking is one of the skills that must be assessed to determine the level of foreign language proficiency (Pratolo, 2017; 2019). It is a production skill of a language that serves as a mean to assess whether the learners are able to understand and produce the foreign language they learned. Nunan (2009) stated that beside writing, speaking is also productive skill in language learning. The assessment of language proficiency becomes difficult as it involves many aspects such as: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and understanding, which are translated into communicative competence (Ur, 2010).

Islamic Boarding School (IBS) Yogyakarta was established in 2014. Based on pre-interview with the English teachers in that school, IBS has two kinds of language assessment; the first assessment focuses on conversation and had already been implemented since IBS had daily program in its dormitory such as checking English vocabulary which aims to encourage students to enhance their vocabulary understanding in their conversation. Meanwhile, the second language assessment is implemented during the teaching-learning activity in the classroom.

Before further discussion about the topic, it is necessary to clarify what the researcher means by alternative assessment in this article. According to Hughes

(2003) alternative assessments or teacher-made assessments are also known as classroom assessments. They refer to other methods that are different from the traditional "pencil-and-paper tests", including some activities such as project, portfolio, poster, presentation, role play, self-assessment, self-record-keeping, peer feedback and assessment, performance assessment, observations, conference/interview, learning log, and journal (Brown, 2004; Greenstein, 2010). Moreover, Mendoza (2009) argued that classroom assessments tried to explain students' critical thinking and evaluate the skills using open-ended tasks that often take long time such as portfolio, demonstration, interview, oral presentation, experiment, and project.

The study by Ercilia (2016) revealed that teachers can choose appropriate alternative assessment to be applied in their classrooms by considering the steps to apply, the way to use, and the different benefits and results that they can achieve as part of everyday classroom learning. Yildirim and Orsedemir (2013) have investigated performance tasks as alternative assessment for young learners. Beside pen and paper tests, alternative assessment methods which include the performance tasks such as project, portfolio, self-evaluation, and peer evaluation in collaboration with teacher observation in classroom activities are suggested to be given to young language learners.

Having reviewed on some relevant literatures, there is a necessity to formulate a definition of the important terms as the subject of this research, namely alternative assessment and oral competence. In this study, alternative assessment refers to the assessment which is thought to be more authentic. Alternative assessment is an effective way to address all curriculum objectives, to make the connection between teaching and learning, and to enable students to be responsible and aware of their own learning processes through the use of self-assessment.

Meanwhile, Hymes (as cited in Jiménez, 2013) oral competence is defined as a combination of linguistic knowledge and certain skills that allow the speaker to use the target language. Speaking competence does not only involve the ability to understand grammar, but also the capacity to use linguistic knowledge in various communicative situations. More importantly, regarding the speaking assessment, Hughes (2003) stated that "measuring accurate oral abilities is not easy. It is time and effort consuming, including training to get valid and reliable results" (p.134). By assessing speaking skill as complex activity, teachers must remember that they have to take some considerations before testing to get more objective results such as by giving speaking assignments, and rubric for students' performance evaluation.

Therefore, by knowing how to use alternative assessment to evaluate the competency of students' speaking ability in a class, the teachers need to investigate the appropriate and good way for their students to minimize the

difficulties that may hinder the teaching-learning process. This is an interesting discussion that will be elaborated comprehensively in this study.

The research problem of this study is “how English teachers currently use alternative assessment on EFL students’ oral competence, and the difficulties faced by them in implementing the assessment?” The purpose of this study is to describe how English teachers currently use alternative assessment on EFL students’ oral competence and to identify the difficulties faced by the English teachers in implementing the assessment. This study is expected to create awareness among the language teachers about the importance of how alternative assessment is used and interpreted, and how they can use it to enhance teaching and learning process especially on oral competence. It is indicated as the production process of systematic verbal or oral form of utterance to convey meaning.

Theoretically, the result of this study can be used as a reference for English teachers to update their professional alternative assessment practice in order to increase the students’ motivation in learning. In addition, it can also increase the quality of language education, and help other researchers to find sources about alternative assessment on oral competence. Practically, this study can give more knowledge to the teachers about how the current use of alternative assessment practices especially for EFL students’ oral competence is. The researcher hopes that this research will motivate students to learn more to achieve the instructional goals which will help them in attaining higher achievement on oral competence. Moreover, for the teachers, they will become more reflective ones. For the writer, this research can increase the writer’s knowledge about alternative assessment on oral competence and give experience in conducting research.

Method

This study is a case study involving two EFL teachers of IBS. The selection of the participants in this study followed the criteria that the teachers should have five to ten years of teaching experience as suggested by Kyriacou (2001).

Teacher 1 (T1) is an eligible EFL teacher who matches the selection criteria. She has eleven-year teaching experience started in 2007 at an Elementary School before moving to the Islamic Boarding School in 2017. Meanwhile, Teacher 2 (T2) has seven years teaching experience started in 2011 and has five years teaching experience in Islamic Boarding School.

The data collection in this study was done through teachers’ class observation as supported data and a semi-structured interview as primary data. The advantage of semi-structured interview is that the interviewer has structured guidance although it is possible to go from this guidance if there are interesting issues come up during the conversation. Datko (2015) added that a semi-structured interview makes the researcher has more control over the

content, and the participants have more freedom to express their views.

In order to achieve the objectives of the research, researcher modified the interview guidance employed by Mussawy (2009) with a similar study in Australia. Total 30 questions were posed to the participants. It comprised four main sections. The first section covers alternative assessment practice by the teachers, while the second part concerns about the form of alternative assessment. The third part deals with the use of alternative assessment, and the fourth section focuses on students' involvement. For the last section, the participants are asked several questions regarding general opinion of alternative assessment as additional information before ending the conversation.

Class observation was taken by note taking and interview was recorded for the purpose of data analysis. Before starting the interview, participants were notified that any data generated from the interview would be stored safely in the folder, and would be deleted as soon as the research ends. Researcher also informed that their real name would not be used throughout the report to ensure the privacy. Finally, as an effort to make participants feel comfortable, the interview was conducted using Indonesian language.

Because primary data is in the form of audio, it must be transcribed for further analysis transcript into written. The data first went through the transcription process, and then the results of transcription were verified by the participants. After that, writer brought the data to the coding process suggested by Creswell (2012). The next process was to read the transcription repeatedly. Then the data were grouped based on the categories to facilitate the identification process and mark interesting information related to the topic. The next step was to classify similar codes so that they formed several categories called themes.

Results

Based on the analysis of the result of the observation and interview conducted to the English teachers on their alternative assessment practices, it was found that English teachers had implemented various alternative assessment, carried out activities to increase students' involvement in teaching and learning process, suggested some recommendations for other teachers, and identified difficulties in assessing EFL students' oral competence. In this section, the main finding of this study which deals with the use of alternative assessment by English teachers, and the difficulties in assessing EFL students' oral competence are discussed briefly.

Observation Result

From the result of the observation, the researcher found that English teachers used direct instructions in which students become the center of learning. With that instructions, teachers encouraged the students to speak English using

authentic materials or real example as the topic. In implementing alternative assessment in assessing students' oral competence, teacher 1 (T1) assigned the students to perform an act in front of the class as learning activity. First, the teacher told the students that they would have project of making a conversation. Then the students were divided into groups of four or five. In their groups they discussed the idea of the story and the teacher asked them to make a dialog for conversation. Having completed the dialog conversation, the students submitted it to the teacher. Then, the teacher told them to act and speak in front of the class based on what conversation they had written. After that, the teacher gave the feedback and returned their scripts and made a short conversation with the students.

Meanwhile, Teacher 2 (T2) made the class more communicative using English with joyful learning to enhance their academic performance, task-based language teaching, and oral approach/ situational language teaching. In implementing alternative assessment in assessing students' oral competence, T2 invited students to complete missions of game activity. First, the teacher gave instructions to the students about how to play and learn based on the topic. Next, the teacher divided the students into several groups for role play. Then, the students following the game played on a special board with pictures of snakes and ladders on it. Each player moved his or her pieces up the ladders to go forward and down the snakes to go back and made oral report about what the picture showed in English. In the whole class activity, the teacher always observed the class to monitor how far the students had done with learning activity and corrected students' pronunciation as corrective feedback. Besides that, T2 often invited students to sing songs that have been memorized together to elicit students' enthusiasm as ice breaking activity.

Based on the result of observation the types of alternative assessment activities used are varied. The teachers used observation to assess students' oral competence when students spoke in the class. In the whole class activity, the teacher applied two activities, short questions and answers, and oral report/presentation. The alternative strategy used by the English teachers were group work, self-assessment, peer-assessment, game, and singing. Those methods made the students have more practice with their friends giving comment and feedback. The methods also made the learning process becomes more interesting through innovative games.

Interview Result

From the interview with T1 and T2, there were three key aspects used by the English teachers on their alternative assessment practices to answer first research question. Those aspects are alternative assessment implementation, students' involvement in teaching learning activities, and also teachers' inspiration of alternative assessment to the other teachers.

In the first aspect, it is found out that before carrying out the test or giving oral assignments, the teacher told the material to be studied and the competencies to be achieved to the students. In applying alternative assessment strategies, the teacher used a lot of group activities to motivate the students to speak English while the teacher assessed the students' activity based on the class observations method and also collected students' notebooks as additional score. The teacher provided the material from the real life, so that students can use it in their daily lives and make it easier to be memorized.

The second aspect explained the students' involvement in teaching learning activities. The teacher often asked the students to practice conversation and memorize the vocabulary by speaking activities such as drama, role play, conversation, and presentation. The type of alternative assessments that truly measures students' oral competency is having students' cases or problems to solve to practice their English so the teacher can see the frequency of the students in speaking. Peer-assessment in collaborative work method was also implemented as additional score at the end of the class.

The suggested recommendation for teachers describes that presentation can truly measure students' oral competencies because it shows the students' understanding. Teachers should make an alternative evaluation outside the classroom so they can assess the extent of students' memory and interest in English speaking.

As the answers to the second research question, the writer found several difficulties faced by T1 and T2 when conducting the assessment on students' speaking abilities. Those difficulties included students' lack of vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar which made the students less confident and less motivated especially among slow learners. The teacher also had limited time to assess all competencies of the whole students in the class.

Discussion

Alternative Assessment Practice on EFL Students' Oral Competence

Teachers' Alternative Assessment Implementation

From the interview with T1, it is found out that before carrying out the test or giving oral assignments, the teacher told the students about the material to be studied and the competencies to be achieved. The assessment was carried out after the students understood the material, to check their understanding and competencies. The assessment was conducted in front of the class to build students' confidence. The teacher used some methods of alternative assessments such as evaluation between friends, self-assessment, presentation, and role play. The role play activity is in line with class observation finding which is more authentic. This is similar with Ur (2010) who stated that there is another

kind of assessment known as alternative assessment which is considered to be more authentic used in the classroom than pen-and-paper tests are usually considered traditional.

Those kinds of methods are very necessary so that the students do not get bored during the evaluation process. In addition, the methods indirectly increase the students' vocabulary. This finding confirmed by Lizasoain (2014) stated that self-assessment, portfolio, student designed test, student-centered assessment; project, oral presentation, play, and diary are considered as other kinds of alternative assessments.

From the interview with T2, the writer found that there are two types of assessments of English language proficiency that are applied in IBS, namely oral assessment and written assessment. For oral examination, the results focus on the school report card, while the written assessment is for the official report cards. Both types of assessments affect the students' achievement every semester. The activity of the students in the class also become additional score for the students. T2 argued that in students' oral competencies there are several important items that are assessed, such as vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and fluency. Before assessing the students' oral competencies, he had delivered to the students the material and the vocabulary that must be learned and memorized along with the components that would be assessed, so that when the students are tested randomly, they can could answers correctly. Usually, oral test is directly done with the teacher (face to face), or in the form of dialogue with friends in front of the class. The assessment is adjusted with the duration of the written examinations.

The teacher also provided opportunities and facilities for the students by giving the information about English-language competitions, selecting them, and guiding them to join the competition. In applying alternative assessment strategies, the teacher focuses on oral assessment, using a lot of group activities that encourage the students to speak English with other friends. Besides that, the teacher also assessed the students' activity based on the class observations. Alternative assessment or classroom assessment provides more opportunities for the teachers to directly observe linguistic performance through classroom observation or direct testing (Brown, 2001). It is similar with observation finding that the teacher divided the students into group for collaborative work and used observation to assess students' oral competence when students speak in the classroom.

Another alternative assessment is the collection of student notebooks as additional score. T2 delivered the material through LCD projector, simple songs, and games in order to avoid the monotonous teaching learning process as well as to make the students become more active in the class. It had positive impacts because students felt happy and could accept the material easily. Classroom

assessment can function as a strong motivational factor, and it may be useful for reducing student nervousness in taking the test (Lee, 2010).

T2 argued that the type of alternative assessments which truly measures the students' oral competency is repeating the sentence or new material by linking the previous material, so that students do not easily forget the materials. T1 provided the material from the real life, so that students can use it in their daily lives and make it easier to be memorized. The teacher argued that learning English should be fun, then a new assessment is made after the students understand. As mentioned earlier by Lee (2010), one of the advantages of class assessment is to assess oral skill as a reference for the performance assessments and communicative language tests. The grade of the assessment can promote the testing authenticity. In addition, the students can carry out academic exercises that simulate experience or real-life problems. It is similar with observation finding that the students speak English using authentic materials or real example as the topic of the discussion.

Students' Involvement in Teaching Learning Activities

T1 often asked the students to practice conversation and memorize the vocabulary to understand the meaning and master the given material. Other speaking activities such as drama performance in the end of the class is used to review the material that has been delivered. The teacher emphasized not only grammar, but also other skills such as how the students can think about how to use the materials that have been learned and practiced. Lizasoain (2014) pointed out that the competency is measured from some important skills such as critical thinking, collaborative work, and self-learning. It does not only focus on linguistic competence.

T1 stated that the type of alternative assessments that truly measures students' oral competency is providing cases or problems to be solved by the students. By having direct dialogue in practicing, teacher can see the frequency of the students in speaking. The activity can be used to determine how active the students are in the class. If the environment supports the practice of English every day, students will get used to speak English. Drama can be used as an alternative type of assessment that is expected to make the students enhance their vocabulary and improve their grammar that becomes the obstacle for students to practice speaking. Drama also developed the creativity and self-confidence of the students; it is an effort to motivate the students to speak English.

Alternative form of assessment such as evaluation between friends is also good as additional assessment at the end of the class, and this kind of assessment does not require long time, however the official curriculum requires the teachers to collect tasks according to the agreed time. McNamara (2000) stated that the use of alternative assessment is an effective way to address all

curriculum objectives, to make the connection between teaching and learning, and make the students become responsible and aware of their own learning processes through the use of self-assessment. In conclusion, alternative assessment has a positive impact on teaching and learning process which allows students to use language in different situations, feel motivated towards learning, be responsible for their own judgment, and aware of their achievements. It is in line with observation finding, which is used an elective method, a combination of communicative language teaching to enhance their academic performance and feel joy in learning.

Recommendations for Other Teachers

T1 recommended presentation as an alternative assessment that truly measures students' oral competencies. Beside presentation can show the students' understanding of English language material as a whole, the students can also learn how to use the technology such as LCD projector and other facilities provided in the class.

T2 recommended the necessity to make an alternative evaluation outside the classroom, out of what has been scheduled by the school. The most important thing is how the teacher can assess the extent of students' memory and interest in English speaking since usually students only learn when they will face an exam. After the exam, students will then forget the material. Alternative assessment should be an assessment that can build the culture of students in the classroom; how the material has been taught can be practiced in Daily life such as having dialogue with students outside the class. For example, when they have something to do with the teachers, or if they forget the vocabulary, they are allowed to ask questions with friends, and that is permissible in teaching learning.

What makes IBS different from other schools is that it emphasizes the assessment of students' verbal abilities and does not only assess writing skills like other public schools. In IBS, teachers have the responsibility to make the students active to speak English both in the class and outside the school hours such as in the dormitory. If the students can practice vocabulary or conversations that have been learned, they will get additional score. What is expected as the results of alternative assessment is that what has been conveyed by the teacher can be remembered by the students. It will make the students familiar with the vocabulary or expression that has been taught, even though every student has his/her own aspirations or interests on each subject.

Difficulties in Implementing Alternative Assessment on Students' Oral Competence

Lack of Vocabulary

The lack of vocabulary is one reason that makes the students difficult to speak English.

“For English language, their main problem is vocabulary understanding, so sometimes I have to target the students to memorize 20 vocabularies per day, and submit the vocabulary to me, so that their vocabulary will increase.” (T1)

This statement indicates that T1 has difficulty in assessing the oral ability of students who are lack of vocabulary, and to overcome the difficulty, the teacher gives them target of vocabulary to memorize. This is a challenge for English teachers since vocabulary is the basic knowledge for students to speak English.

Pronunciation and Grammar

Speaking is a productive skill of a language that serves as a mean to assess whether the learners are able to understand and speak in the target language. Ur (2010) stated that “What makes the assessment of language difficult is because it involves many skills such as pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and understanding, which are translated into communicative competence” (p. 120) .

“In speaking English, students are constrained by vocabulary and the fear of making errors in word structure. Drama is a method to encourage the students to speak English since most of them are still afraid of making mistake in pronunciation and structure.” (T1)

The statement of T1 indicates that most students afraid to speak English because they are afraid to make mistake in grammar. Vocabulary is another reason that makes the students difficult to speak English.

“Basically, they are capable to speak, it is only a matter of how they build their self-confidence. Sometimes they are still afraid of grammar and vocabulary. Actually, if they are confident, they can alleviate the problem.” (T2)

The teachers argued that basically students are able to speak English, but they lack confidence for their grammar and vocabulary. The direct pointing and questioning technique can make the students pay more attention, prepare their understanding and confidence, and build communication and interaction with other students. With this method, the teacher can recognize the details of the students' progress. The result of the interview indicates that the students worry about grammar and pronunciation which makes them lack confidence and motivation to speak English.

Slow Learners

Slow learners will have difficulties in learning. In this case, the teacher continued to give questions until the students able to answer. The point of this case is not only about the score, but also how students can practice speak English.

“Yes, the students' memory, because every student has his/her capacity. Especially those with low level of understanding, they usually have poor memory when they get burden. Therefore, direct test will be difficult. The questions given in the test

should be adjusted to the students' ability." (T2)

The statement from T2 indicates that he has difficulties in assessing the oral ability of the slow learners. Teachers should look for other ways so that students can answer the questions or assignments given. Grierson, as cited in Lee (2010) stated that the difficulty of the teachers is to prepare the assessment for slow learners.

Limited Time

Insufficient time in conducting speaking assessments in the class also influence the students' motivation to speak and enjoy learning English. Besides being constrained by insufficient time to measure all students' abilities in oral, students also have lack of motivation in learning.

"In my opinion, the difficult thing is that beside the limited time, which is more than two hours, and if it takes longer time the student will forget the material. Another problem is that students do not enjoy the homework that I give to motivate them. I want to make them understand that English is important." (T1)

Nevertheless, Hughes (2003) also pointed out that measuring accurate oral abilities is not easy. It takes a lot of time and effort, including training to get valid and reliable results. By assessing speaking skills as complex activities, teachers must remember that they must prepare some considerations before testing such as making speaking assignments and evaluating the students' performance following the rubric to get more objective results.

This study also revealed that the teachers have difficulty in assessing students' oral competence in the class because of the limited time to measure overall students' competences. In addition, students also get difficulties to enjoy and motivate themselves in speaking class.

Conclusion

Based on this study has shown that English teachers in IBS currently use alternative assessment practices on oral competencies of EFL students by applying several methods and strategies. The alternative assessment methods are peer assessment in collaborative work, and students' observation in the class. In applying alternative assessment strategies, teachers focus on oral skills and use a lot of group activities that encourage the students to speak English with other friends. Teacher gave authentic materials or real example as the topic of learning. The Activities include collecting students' notebooks, having students' cases or problems to solve, and telling the components that will be assessed. The teachers used various activities to increase the students' involvement in teaching learning process by giving activities such as role play, memorizing the short dialogue from in the textbook and demonstrate it to other students, drama, conversation, and presentation. The teachers gave some recommendations to

other teachers in order to use presentation to stimulate student involvement in the implementation of alternative assessment to know the students' oral competencies in their class. The teachers also recommended the need to evaluate students' oral competencies outside the class, because, in IBS, the teachers are able to control students to practice English inside and outside of the class.

Based on the analyzed data, the teachers have several difficulties of alternative assessment practice on EFL students' competence because of students' lack of vocabulary, students' weak of pronunciation and grammar which makes the students less confidence and motivation and some slow learners. The teacher also has limited time to assess all competencies of the whole students' in the class. This study indicates that English teachers need alternative assessment tools for assessing students' oral competencies and good method to make alternative assessment instruments can enhance the learning process, especially on oral competence.

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