

**DEVELOPMENT OF ESL SPEAKING
PROFICIENCY ASSESSMENT FOR
UNDERGRADUATES**

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**DEVELOPMENT OF ESL SPEAKING
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UNDERGRADUATES**

by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ESL	English as a Second Language
TESOL	Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
MUET	Malaysian University English Test
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
PSPT	Prototype Speaking Proficiency Test
ACTFL	The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages
CEF	Common European Framework
SOLLAT	School of Languages, Literacies, and Translation
TOEIC	Test of English for International Communication
SPT	Speaking Proficiency Test
DCEST	Diagnostic College English Speaking Test

**PEMBANGUNAN PENILAIAN KEMAHIRAN BERTUTUR PELAJAR
IJAZAH SARJANA MUDA DALAM BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI
BAHASA KEDUA**

ABSTRAK

Bahasa Inggeris dianggap sebagai aset yang boleh menghasilkan kejayaan dalam pasaran kerja abad ke-21. Oleh itu, menguasai seni bertutur dalam kalangan pelajar bahasa dilihat sebagai aspek bahasa yang paling penting ketika mempelajari bahasa Inggeris. Penilaian bertutur telah menjadi satu perkara yang penting dalam bidang pengajaran dan pedagogi bahasa dalam usaha melaksanakan penambahbaikan. Perkara ini penting kepada para pengajar dalam menilai kemahiran bertutur dalam kalangan pelajar mereka secara berterusan, dan oleh sebab itu, keputusan ujian mesti dapat membantu para pengajar menentukan kemahiran bertutur seseorang pelajar. Sungguhpun begitu, penilaian semasa yang berdasarkan sesuatu gred tidak memberi maklumat khusus mengenai kemahiran khusus bertutur pelajar. Gred yang disediakan, tidak menunjukkan maklumat berhubung cara membantu pelajar meningkatkan kemahiran bertutur mereka. Oleh itu, instrumen ujian yang tidak hanya menyediakan skor ujian tetapi juga membantu para pengajar bahasa untuk mengenal pasti kekuatan dan kelemahan pelajar mereka amat penting. Hal ini menjelaskan bahawa objektif pertama kajian semasa adalah untuk membangunkan satu ujian kemahiran bertutur bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua bagi pelajar ijazah sarjana muda. Kajian ini memberi makna kepada penilaian kemahiran bertutur melalui satu instrumen ujian dan komponen deskriptor kemahiran bertutur untuk menerangkan kemahiran bertutur seseorang pelajar. Dengan berbuat demikian, ujian prototaip kemahiran bertutur

pertama kali telah dibuat, kemudian disaring berdasarkan cadangan dua ahli TESOL. Ujian itu kemudiannya diuji ke atas 96 orang pelajar ijazah sarjana muda di sebuah universiti awam di Malaysia. Penyelidik seterusnya membangunkan tahap skor untuk menetapkan band mengikut prestasi; Band 1, Band 2, Band 3, dan Band 4. Berdasarkan kemahiran bertutur responden, deskriptor kemahiran bercakap dibina untuk mendiagnosis kemahiran bertutur pelajar ijazah sarjana muda. Instrumen yang diuji ini dijalankan ke atas 140 pelajar tahun pertama di dua buah universiti awam di utara Semenanjung Malaysia dan data yang diperolehi dianalisis untuk menanda aras pelajar. Akhirnya, profil penutur dalam kategori prestasi berbeza telah ditakrif dan dirangkaikan. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa daripada 140 responden tersebut, 56.43% dikategorikan sebagai "penutur pertengahan", 36.43% dikategorikan sebagai "penutur maju", dan hanya 7.14% dikategorikan sebagai "penutur unggul". Seperti yang dijangkakan, tiada pelajar dikategorikan sebagai "penutur baharu". Pensyarah bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua boleh menggunakan ujian yang dibina untuk mengenal pasti masalah bertutur dalam kalangan pelajar kemudiannya memaklumkan keputusan dalam usaha meningkatkan bahan pengajaran yang disesuaikan dengan keperluan pelajar. Kajian semasa ini hanya melibatkan pelajar ijazah sarjana muda dari dua universiti. Walau bagaimanapun, penglibatan pelajar ijazah sarjana muda universiti lain dari seluruh negara perlu dipertimbangkan bagi penyelidikan masa depan agar keputusan umum kajian akan dapat dijamin.

DEVELOPMENT OF ESL SPEAKING PROFICIENCY ASSESSMENT FOR UNDERGRADUATES

ABSTRACT

English is regarded as an asset that can result in success in the twenty-first-century job market. Hence, mastering the art of speaking to many language learners is seen as the most important language aspect when learning the English language. Speaking assessment has made significant inroads into the field of language teaching and pedagogy in pursuit of improvement. It is vital that instructors assess their students' speaking proficiency continuously and therefore, test results must assist instructors to determine students' speaking proficiency. However, the current assessment based on grades does not provide specific information regarding students' specific speaking proficiency. The grade provided does not indicate information on how to help students enhance their speaking proficiency. Therefore, a test instrument that not merely provides test scores but also aids language instructors to recognize their students' strengths and weaknesses is crucially vital. The first objective of the current study is to develop an ESL speaking proficiency test for undergraduates. The present study gives meaning to speaking proficiency assessment through a test instrument and speaking proficiency descriptor components to describe students' speaking proficiency. In doing so, a prototype speaking proficiency test was first devised and then refined based on recommendations of two TESOL experts. The test was then piloted over 96 undergraduates at a public university in Malaysia. The researcher then developed the cut scores to establish the performance bands namely; Band One, Band Two, Band Three and Band Four. Based on the respondents' speaking proficiency performance,

the speaking proficiency descriptors were established to identify the undergraduates' speaking proficiency. The tested instrument was administered over 140 first-year undergraduates at two public universities in northern region Peninsular of Malaysia and the data gathered were analyzed to identify the students' performance. Finally, the profiles of the speakers in the different performance categories were defined and described. The findings showed that out of the 140 students who served as participants of the study, 56.43% of the respondents were categorized as 'intermediate performers', 36.43% of the respondents were categorized as "advanced performers" and only 7.14% of the respondents were categorized as "superior performers". As expected, no students were categorized as "novice performers". The ESL language lecturers can use the developed test to identify undergraduates' speaking problems and inform decision making in pursuit of improving the teaching materials tailored towards students' needs. The current study has only included undergraduates from two universities. However, including undergraduates of other universities or nationwide involvement should be considered for future research so the generalization of the results would be guaranteed.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Nowadays, learning a second or foreign language is considered as an essential aspect in the curricula at different levels in education across the world, in particular, teaching and learning English. Since the beginning of the new era, English has grown internationally and achieved the status of “great international language” (House, 2002). Hereafter, it has been recognized as the worldwide language for exchanging information and knowledge and communication purposes (Cenoz & Jessner, 2000). As a result, over the past few decades, the English language has obtained its magnificence as a lingua franca (Risager, 2007).

For the past three decades, a number of models of communicative competence have been developed in the field of language teaching and testing which included (Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Bachman & Palmer, 2010). Generally speaking, these communicative models of language teaching and testing argue that language should be taught based on communicative activities in the classroom. In addition, these models of communicative language approach provide useful frameworks for designing language tests.

Communicating in the English language is of paramount importance across the world. The English language is widely spoken in Malaysia. As such, Malaysian students should be well prepared to remain competitive, in particular, communicating in English efficiently (Abdullah & Rahman, 2010). They added that the English language is extensively used in different fields of life such as legal and business. Therefore, it is crucially significant for Malaysian students to be well prepared to speak the language fluently. As a result, speaking proficiency has been a significant portion of the curriculum in language teaching and learning and this makes speaking proficiency an important object of assessment as well.

Moreover, language assessment plays a vital role in language teaching and learning; it is a matter of concern to those who are engaged in the education sector whether they are teachers or researchers (Dahan, 2012). Furthermore, Bachman and Palmer (1996) argue that language tests can be an important tool for providing information in terms of language teaching and monitoring the process of learning. Therefore, in order for lecturers and teachers to develop speaking proficiency of their students, they must include speaking tests in their on-going evaluation, even with large classes, communicative tests can still be applied (Cross, 1991).

Students are assessed after a course of study which shows only what they have learned at the end of the course they have taken (Oosterhof, 2001). Consequently, the assessments are just judgments of a student's performance and they do not display what the students can do and what they cannot do. They only present that some students are better than others using grades or percentages. The problem with grades or percentage

is that they do not provide any information or clue on how to help the students. Instead, they only indicate the overall result or achievement of the student (Oosterhof, 2001). For this reason, this study attempts to fill this gap by administering an ESL speaking proficiency test whereby language lecturers would be able to monitor their students' speaking proficiency improvement based on *assessment for learning*.

According to Brown (2004), assessment is perhaps the most significant aspect language lecturers and teachers can do to assist students to learn. Therefore, assessment for learning (formative assessment) is vital in teaching and learning languages in which we can expand the extent to which our assessment practices are more developmental, rather only judgmental. Furthermore, Brown (2004) argues that if we intend to change the nature of assessment and integrate assessment into learning, assessment should be at the heart of the process of learning. Hence, language lecturers should provide not only where their students have gone wrong, but what they need in improving their language learning.

In such a case, according to Masters (2015), the most practical and crucial type of assessment is formative assessment in which lecturers can provide information where their students are in their learning which it can be used to make decisions for future planning. Hence, data about where the students are, elucidates their current situation and helps in recognizing starting points for action to take. Moreover, Masters (2015) states that when assessment is intended to help and guide future planning, the crucial goal is to boost learning.

Therefore, an ESL speaking proficiency test would be crucially useful because language instructors would be able to identify and profile their students. Accordingly, this study is designed to develop an ESL speaking proficiency test, develop possible speaking proficiency descriptors, identify the ESL learners' speaking proficiency as well as profiling the students' speaking proficiency based on formative assessment.

1.2 Background of the Study

Assessment has become increasingly significant in higher education over the past two decades, and higher education institutions have provided student assessment for a variety of purposes (Ewell, 2002). Assessment is the process of collecting and explaining data and information from different sources to develop a comprehensive understanding pertaining to what students are able to do, know and understand with their current knowledge as a result of their learning process in order to enhance and ensure continuous learning (Huba & Freed, 2000). They added that assessment is also utilized for progressive improvement in institutional quality for the purpose of promoting the process of learning and program review.

Powerful and effective assessment practices are those that are meant for the purpose of improvement and sustainment of educational programs and services (Banta, 2002). According to a study by Peterson, Einarson, Augustine, and Vaughan (1999), it was discovered that assessment data that was reported by institutions influenced the educational decision-making concerning academic services, academic programs, educational curricula and developing materials according to the students' needs.

Taking into consideration the importance of speaking proficiency for non-native speakers of English language and their speaking proficiency improvement, speaking proficiency assessment has become the most paramount aspect of language teaching and testing because speaking has been recognized as more central and crucially important in language learning, in particular after the spreading of communicative language teaching approach (Nakamura, 1993).

Information about where the students are in their learning is crucially significant to identify the starting points to take action (Masters, 2013). Summative assessment is unable to determine the strengths and weaknesses of students to assist enhance their betterment in the future because it is usually taken at the end of a course of study or semester with the purpose of grading (Sadler, 1989, cited in Costel, Simona, Ana, & Stefan, 2015). If summative assessment results are reported, it is a passive measure because it does not have any direct influence on learning. In contrast with summative assessment, there is formative assessment which is an opportunity to improve the process of learning because it shows language learners' difficulties and provides information to improve the tasks of learning (Costel et al., 2015). Unfortunately, the current practices of speaking assessment based on grading or percentage scores will not be able to pin down the strengths and weaknesses of the undergraduates in their learning. For instance, if a student gets a 'B' in a summative test, it only resembles that the student has learned some skills included in the syllabus and, tells the English command of the student as a whole. It does not indicate the speaking proficiency of the student. Therefore, lecturers might not be able to help their students much in improving their English-speaking proficiency. Thus, graduates will not be able to master their

speaking proficiency well which will negatively affect their employment in their future career after graduation.

It is clear that tests of spoken language proficiency are the most difficult compared to testing the other language skills (Underhill, 1987). This is further supported by O'Sullivan (2008) who argues that it is generally true that it is challenging to conduct speaking tests. However, great improvements in the area of speaking assessment have been achieved over the past few years. Additionally, it has to be noted that assessment of speaking proficiency, besides being difficult to carry out, made many researchers and scholars conduct different research, including developing different speaking assessments and criteria (Luoma, 2004).

According to a study by Alberola Colomar (2014), it was found that there is a close and important interrelation between assessment and teaching in terms of developing students' speaking proficiency outcomes. The study revealed that the assessment procedure helped in redesigning and improving the course syllabus and class materials for the betterment of speaking proficiency of the learners. Based on the students' speaking proficiency, the teachers were able to ascertain which parts of the program should be modified for the purpose of betterment of speaking proficiency of the language learners, focusing on the needs of the students based on their weaknesses.

As Burke (1992) mentions, one of the benefits of assessment is that the universities, language lecturers, and students obtain enough information about what the students can do and what they cannot do. Therefore, speaking assessment must be used

as a tool for improvement of speaking proficiency of language learners. She also states that it is also vital for language lecturers and teachers to take into their consideration what a score means in terms of what the students are able to do and not able to do in order for them to take necessary action to help improve students' ability in speaking the language meaningfully.

A review of published works and research shows that performance indicators, identifying, setting standards and continuous assessment have brought about development and achievement in the students' performance in different sorts of areas in education, specifically in language learning. Similarly, ongoing formative assessment and standards are significant because they provide lecturers and teachers with analytical information of what the learners can and cannot do. As such, lecturers will be able to know where their students are so they will be able to help boost their students' language learning. Therefore, it is believed that identifying and profiling students' performance is of paramount importance for the betterment of quality of learning and achievement in different areas of education.

Based on the above discussion, we can conclude that little research has been done to identify and profile Malaysian undergraduates' speaking proficiency. Hence, more research should be done on how identifying and profiling the undergraduates' speaking proficiency will help language lecturers to monitor their students' speaking proficiency improvement. Therefore, the prime focus throughout this study is to develop an ESL valid and reliable speaking proficiency test and possible speaking proficiency descriptors to identify the ESL language learners' current level of speaking proficiency.

In addition, to identifying and profile the undergraduates' speaking proficiency so that language lectures will be able to help and guide their students in improving their speaking proficiency based on their current speaking proficiency.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Although English language proficiency has been a requirement for both academic life and workplace, Malaysian graduates still lack the language proficiency, especially speaking (Azman & Razak, 2007; Lan, Khaun, & Singh, 2011). The biggest challenge faced by the ESL language learners is expressing themselves in English clearly and fluently (Liu & Jackson, 2008).

Speaking proficiency plays a central role in securing job employment for Malaysian graduates (Lan et al., 2011). Notwithstanding that students learn English for years at the secondary and tertiary levels, university leavers have yet to speak the English language fluently at the workplace (Hiew, 2012). The former Minister of Education of Malaysia, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, commented in a local newspaper that university graduates have a poor command of English speaking proficiency (Wong, 2014) and stated: "I am baffled about why our children, after completing pre-school, primary school, secondary school and tertiary education, still cannot converse in English" (Subramaniam, 2014).

This has raised the issue of the assessment of speaking proficiency before graduation. To improve speaking proficiency of students, language lecturers and instructors should include speaking assessment in a way that it can lead to improvement

(Cross, 1991). However, there is no specific test for assessing speaking proficiency of university students in Malaysia. Therefore, the development of an ESL speaking proficiency test for undergraduates is necessary.

Although the public English language tests, namely the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the most relevant one to this study, the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), are valid and reliable tests internationally and locally, they provide no specific speaking proficiency descriptors of the ESL language learners. IELTS only offers the overall band of the test taker; it does not mention any description or information about the specific speaking proficiency of the test taker. For instance, Band Six of IELTS means the learner has generally good command of the English language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriateness, and misunderstandings. Likewise, TOEFL iBT only offers scores of the test taker in the description of the scores. TOEFL iBT is based on the scale of 0-120 points and each section of language (listening, reading, writing and speaking) is based on the scale of 0-30. In speaking, if a test taker obtains between 0-9, he/she is considered weak, 10-17 is limited, 18-25 is fair and 26-30 is considered good. Accordingly, the test fails to gauge what the test taker can or cannot do in carrying out conversations. Instead, it only indicates the weak, limited, fair or good level of speaking proficiency. Hence, this has raised the concern for the development of descriptors for speaking proficiency.

To assess Malaysian undergraduates' levels of language proficiency, the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) has been conducted by the Malaysian

Examinations Council since 2003. MUET is aimed at helping stakeholders to assess the overall language level of candidates required (i.e., entrance requirement to public universities) to attain a particular band score among six bands (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2015). However, MUET only provides general and vague descriptions of bands. For example, Band 4 description of MUET indicates that candidates “lack the ability to convey the message accurately” but are at the same time “satisfactorily expressive and fluent . . . with occasional inaccuracies” (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2015, p.10). Other bands also have similar vague or contradictory descriptions. Therefore, the MUET band descriptors are of little help for differentiating between proficiency levels, provides no specific and clear descriptors for speaking proficiency of the language learners. The language lecturers thereby remain insufficient in tailoring their instructional materials to the needs of the language learners.

This drawback is not only peculiar to MUET/the local context, but also to band descriptors in international contexts. An outstanding example is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which is also used in non-European countries (Little, 2007). Band descriptors of CEFR have been criticized for ambiguities and inconsistencies about differentiating between proficiency levels (Alderson, 2007; Galaczi, 2013) and suitability for young learners (Hulstijn, 2010; Little, 2007). Similar critique is applicable to traditional assessments that are based on grades or percentages (i.e., only revealing who among students are better than others), which provides no insight or clue on how to improve language proficiency (Burke, 1992).

An obtained overall score or grade is not an indication of a combination of skills that a student has; therefore, “general” test scores are of little help for learners to enhance their speaking proficiency (Oosterhof, 2001). Relying on an overall score, language lecturers are also less likely to recognize students’ strengths and weaknesses in speaking proficiency. Like the other tests, MUET provides language instructors with no specific assessment of what the student can and cannot do in speaking proficiency. Therefore, language instructors remain unclear what the student is lacking with respect to speaking proficiency in order for them to help enhance their students’ speaking proficiency based on their current speaking proficiency. This implies that leading to speaking proficiency improvement based on the current practice of assessment and speaking descriptors have not been relatively comprehensive. To assess students’ speaking proficiency accurately or comprehensively, difficulty levels of test questions, from elementary to advanced need to be addressed.

As to identifying the current speaking proficiency levels of students, identifying speaking proficiency has been conducted by several researchers and language centers. However, there is a dearth of research on identifying ESL undergraduates’ speaking proficiency in Malaysia. Due to the lack of precise identifying, the ESL lecturers imprecisely monitor or determine the speaking proficiency of their students, thereby being unable to carry out necessary actions towards improving their students’ English-speaking proficiency. This calls for identifying the current level of students’ speaking proficiency.

Students at different levels of speaking proficiency have distinct profiles. To profile students with respect to their proficiency levels would facilitate lecturers provide students with instructional guidance and activities they need. Students' profile is crucial to take the necessary action such that lecturers are able to provide further assistance to help their students (Castejón, Gilar, Minano, & González, 2016), especially by profiling the undergraduates' speaking proficiency (Nopiah et al., 2011). However, profiling undergraduates of different speaking proficiency remains unaddressed in Malaysia. This suggests the need for research on profiling students according to their speaking proficiency.

To sum up, based on the above discussion and to the best knowledge of the researcher, determining the specific ESL speaking proficiency of undergraduates in the Malaysian context has remained unaddressed. To fill this gap, it is the prime focus of this study to develop a valid and reliable ESL speaking proficiency test and identify the ESL students' speaking proficiency. A set of descriptors has been developed to identify the undergraduates' specific speaking proficiency performance. The study has also identified the undergraduates' speaking proficiency. According to their proficiency level, the study has profiled them. Student profile would help lecturers determine instructional guidance and activities students need. The study hereby is intended to contribute to the body of literature on speaking proficiency assessment.

1.4 Rationale for the Study

First, identifying the undergraduates' speaking proficiency will help ESL language instructors to monitor the students' progress as well as to adapt their teaching

materials in the classroom based on the students' needs. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that language instructors should administer speaking tests in the classroom in order for them to suit their teaching materials according to the students' needs.

Another reason behind this study is that even though the language learners have studied English for several years, it seems that language learners are still not capable of conducting appropriate communications and daily conversations in English and still remains a problem, yet to be solved (Radzi, Hanadi, Azmin, Zolhani, & Abdul Latif 2007). Therefore, it is hoped that based on *assessment for learning* of the ESL learners by informing what the learners can do and what they cannot do, this study will help language instructors to assess their students' speaking proficiency regularly and develop their speaking proficiency teaching materials in order for them to help improve their students' speaking proficiency.

Last, identifying and profiling the undergraduates' speaking proficiency will provide the ESL lecturers with enough information to identify those students who are performing well and those who are failing in their speaking proficiency. As such, both the success and the failure will be reported. Therefore, language lecturers will be able to make practical decisions and help those language learners who are weak in speaking proficiency.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

Based on the problem statement regarding providing the ESL lecturers with more information about the speaking proficiency, the lecturers will be able to assist their

students to improve their speaking. Therefore, the specific objectives of this study are:

1. Developing an ESL speaking proficiency test for undergraduates by establishing the following:
 - a. Selection of relevant sources for the construction of the ESL prototype speaking proficiency test (PSPT)
 - b. Determining the best combination of questions for the ESL speaking proficiency test.
 - c. Conducting pilot study to test the validity and reliability of ESL PSPT
 - d. Determining time allocated for the ESL speaking proficiency test
2. Developing a set of descriptors to identify the undergraduates' speaking proficiency performance by establishing:
 - a. Determining the cut scores for the bands
 - b. Identifying speaking skills undergraduates have acquired
3. Identifying the undergraduates' ESL speaking proficiency according to their performance in terms of:
 - a. Respondents' general ESL speaking proficiency
 - b. Gender
 - c. Ethnicity
 - d. University
 - e. School
4. Profiling the undergraduates' ESL speaking proficiency particularly in terms of:
 - a. Superior Performers
 - b. Advanced Performers
 - c. Intermediate Performers
 - d. Novice Performers

1.6 Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. How is an ESL speaking proficiency test for undergraduates developed?
 - a. What are the relevant sources for the construction of the ESL prototype speaking proficiency test (PSPT)?
 - b. What would be the best possible combination of ESL speaking proficiency questions selected for the ESL speaking proficiency test?
 - c. What is the validity and reliability of the ESL prototype speaking proficiency test?
 - d. What is the time allocated for the ESL speaking proficiency test?
2. How are the speaking proficiency descriptors developed to identify the undergraduates' speaking proficiency performance?
 - a. What are the most suitable cut scores for the performance bands?
 - b. What are the speaking skills undergraduates have acquired?
3. How do the undergraduates perform on the ESL speaking proficiency test?
 - a. What is the respondents' general ESL speaking proficiency?
 - b. What is the overall speaking proficiency according to gender, ethnicity, university, and school?
4. What are the profiles of the undergraduates' ESL speaking proficiency?
 - a. Who are the superior performers?
 - b. Who are the advanced performers?
 - c. Who are the intermediate performers?
 - d. Who are the novice performers?

1.7 Significance of the Study

The primary goal of this current study is to contribute importantly to the existing body of literature on pedagogical assessment of speaking proficiency of undergraduates. The implications of the study will highly contribute in the area of teaching speaking proficiency as the performance of the undergraduates will provide English language lecturers with necessary data and information about the undergraduates' speaking proficiency. Additionally, its results and findings will further our understanding of a better way of assessing speaking proficiency of the undergraduates.

The findings will assist language lecturers to realize the vital role of 'assessment for learning' on enhancing the undergraduates' speaking proficiency as well as their strengths and weaknesses. This research study will help language instructors to recognize the undergraduates' current level of speaking proficiency. As a result, through the identification of the language learners' current level of speaking proficiency, the language instructors will be capable of adapting their instructional materials in the classroom that meet the undergraduates' needs to a great extent.

Likewise, identifying the undergraduates' speaking proficiency will present whether or not the undergraduates are performing well. Unfortunately, the current grades or scores only measure that some students are better than the others, they do not suggest what the students can do and what they cannot do. Thus, identifying provides a complete and comprehensive assessment of the undergraduates at the early stages of instruction to recognize those undergraduates who might not be making sufficient

progress. As a result, this will help the related institution to conduct measures and determine the needs of the undergraduates who are in need of improvement.

Finally, the information collected by the ESL language lecturers could be used by universities and the Ministry of Higher Education to plan what needs to be done to enhance the speaking proficiency of undergraduate students in Malaysia. Further, language lecturers can investigate the effects of any innovative method in the teaching and learning of speaking proficiency at the tertiary level that language lecturers can make. Such that, lecturers will be able to tailor their teaching materials to meet the undergraduate's current needs in pursuit of speaking proficiency improvement.

To conclude, all these will provide precious insights for language planners, curriculum developers, material designers, language instructors in order for them to make informed, instructive and comprehensive decisions with regard to identifying and profiling their students in order to help enhance language learners' level of speaking proficiency. Finally, the data will be gathered by the ESL instructors and teachers will help speaking courses to cater to the different levels of speaking proficiency.

1.8 Definition of Terms

The following definitions are included to illuminate the terminology used in this study and how they are operationalized in this context.

Assessment

Assessment involves the use of practical data on student learning to improve programs and enhance student learning (Allen, 2004). In other words, assessment is the process of gathering and discussing data from diverse sources to advance a deep understanding of what students know with their knowledge as a result of their learning experiences (Huba & Freed, 2000). In this study, however, assessment refers to formative assessment where students are assessed for the purpose of taking initial action based on students' performance. This is conducted to adapt teaching materials to meet the students' needs to promote and maximize learning. Besides, the focus of this study is on assessment for learning which refers to finding out the undergraduates' speaking proficiency.

Prototype Speaking Proficiency Test

Prototype (Prototype, n.d.), as defined by the Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, means "an original model on which something is patterned or an original or first model of something from which other forms are copied or developed." Likewise, a prototype test is a test where revisions can be made to make certain about the test tasks and task type before it is used as a final version of a new test (Cumming, Grant, Mulcahy-Ernt, & Powers, 2004). In this study, however, a prototype speaking proficiency test refers to a test which is developed and tested for its reliability, validity and time allocated for

the test before the test is used as an ESL speaking proficiency test.

Speaking Descriptors

Descriptor (Descriptor, n.d.), as defined by the Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, means "A word or phrase that serves to describe or identify an item in an information retrieval system." In addition, Davies *et al.* (1999) and Luoma (2004) define descriptors as an instrument consisting of a series of constructed levels along with written descriptions about test-takers' performance. In the context of this study, speaking descriptors consist of characteristics of student performance at each specific band. Besides, speaking descriptors are the detailed description of the specific speaking proficiency of undergraduates at each performance band. The speaking descriptors will be developed based on the respondents' speaking in the ESL speaking proficiency tests.

Speaking Proficiency

Speaking proficiency refers to the ability of an individual to speak an acquired language and its form and meaning depend on the context in which it takes place (Burns & Joyce, 1997). Likewise, speaking proficiency can be referred to the speaking ability of an interlocutor measured by a particular test using rating scales (Davies *et al.*, 1999). In this study, however, speaking proficiency is defined operationally as the undergraduates' speaking ability in speaking the English language in terms of communicative ability, fluency, and accuracy. It is also the undergraduates' speaking ability to answer fully-controlled, semi-controlled and free controlled communicative activities.

1.9 Summary

This chapter highlights the crucially important impact of conducting a better way of speaking assessment which could probably be enhanced to provide comprehensive and complete information about the ESL undergraduates' speaking proficiency. The chapter presents the background of the study, the statement of the problem, the rationale for the study, objectives of the study, research questions, significance of the study, and finally the operational definition of terms. The next chapter will review the relevant studies conducted on speaking proficiency assessment of ESL students. Related theories and conceptual framework will also be presented.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the previously conducted studies and reporting systems on speaking proficiency assessment, concerns of speaking proficiency descriptors of language learners, identifying and profiling the speakers. It begins with a concise elaboration on speaking and speaking proficiency, the importance of speaking proficiency in language teaching and learning as well as the assessment of speaking proficiency and its importance in the process of language learning. Because the main aim of this study is identifying and profiling undergraduates' speaking proficiency, the primary focus will be given to the development of an ESL speaking proficiency test and speaking proficiency descriptors of the undergraduates. Moreover, the chapter provides the background literature on summative assessment and formative assessment. In addition, the chapter presents the related theories and conceptual framework which serve to set the research objectives and research questions of the study within the broader context of existing knowledge. The chapter is concluded with a summary. What follows is the detailed explanation of the above-mentioned concerns.

2.2 Speaking

Speaking is perhaps the most challenging language skill to teach, learn and assess. According to Luoma (2004), speaking in a second or foreign language is a

difficult task and competence in speaking a new language might take a longer time to improve and develop. Speaking requires involving several capacities and it needs much effort on the part of language learners as it engages preparing to be capable of speaking the language in different real-life situations. Speaking in a new language is always problematic as it requires having linguistic knowledge along with the skills that necessitate speakers to know when and how to use it (Bachman, 1990).

During the last two decades, several scholars and experts in the field of language learning and teaching have attempted to define speaking. The speaking definitions have been presented so far look at speaking from different perspectives and viewpoints. In its simplest form, speaking is an interactive process of constructing communication and meaning which involves producing and receiving information (Burns & Joyce, 1997). Moreover, Florez (1999) and Howarth (2001) defined speaking as a two-way manner involving a true communication of ideas, information, and feelings among individuals. Further,

According to Nunan (2003), speaking is referred as one of the productive skills in language teaching and learning. It is defined as a process of constructing and sharing meaning via the use of language verbally or in oral form. In fact, speaking is basically an oral communication that offers information engaging two interlocutors and they can be referred as speakers who offer the message and listeners who receive the message.

Therefore, it is clear that the communication that takes place between two individuals involves the productive skill of speaking and the receptive skill of listening.

In a same vein, Nunan (1991) mentioned that speaking is a verbal interaction of presenting information, expressing our ideas and thoughts we possess in our mind. Hence, speaking is not only expressing our thoughts but also conveying new information to others.

To elaborate more on the nature of speaking, Burns and Joyce (1997) and Luoma (2004) defined speaking as an interactive manner creating meaning that includes producing, receiving and processing information; and its meaning depends on the context in which it takes place involving speakers, the physical environment and the purpose of speaking. Speaking is also defined as the language learner's capacity to express his/her ideas coherently, fluently and appropriately in given meaningful contexts.

Meanwhile, language scholars and language teaching experts frequently mentioned speaking as a technical term to refer to one of the four skills of language that language learners should learn and improve (Luoma, 2004). In addition, she claims that speaking is seen as a social activity since individuals speak and this constructs a part of the social activity of conversation. In a typical social interaction, two or more people speak to each other about topics of their common and mutual interest in the social interaction activity. They conduct the event together and this makes everyone in the activity a speaker and a listener at the same time (Luoma, 2004).

According to Nunan (2003), speaking consists of constructing systematic oral utterances to deliver meaning. He also mentioned that speaking is immediate and it

happens simultaneously. Most important, it requires that learners not solely need to know how to use language linguistically such as grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary, they also need to understand when and in what way to use language in context.

Apart from the definitions provided for speaking, numerous definitions have also been presented for speaking proficiency. According to Iwashita, Brown, McNamara, and O'Hagan (2008), proficiency in a second language is one of the most fundamental concepts in language learning and accordingly its character is the subject of continuing and strong debate. Often times, this debate is about competing theories or models of second language proficiency and its development, as seen in the influential discussions by Canale and Swain (1980), and Bachman (1990).

One popular notion of speaking proficiency in a second or foreign language context is the ability to communicate the language and grow communicative competence (Breiner-Sanders, Lowe, Miles & Swender, 2000). Likewise, Burns and Joyce (1997) refer to speaking proficiency as the language learners' capacity to anticipate and produce the expected forms of specific language features. Proficiency is also their ability to manage features of conducting conversations such as turn-taking, providing feedback and closing conversations.

Additionally, as defined by the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages, speaking proficiency is the ability of a language learner or individual to conduct conversations and communicate in appropriate ways (ACTFL, 2006). The