

Oral Placement Test as The Indicator of Bilingual Students' Speaking Skills

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Abstract

This study investigates whether there is a significant relationship between the speaking ability of students in bilingual classes and their daily conversation performance, as reported in the oral placement test. The researchers analysed the relationship between the placement test scores and the speaking performance of 146 first-year bilingual students attending an Islamic Junior High School. An oral interview was applied to determine their speaking ability on the placement test and was conducted again to test their speaking ability at the end of the semester. Pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, comprehension, and fluency were the scoring criteria for assessing the oral interview to indicate the learners' English performance in speaking and their oral abilities. Each student is tested individually in more or less than ten minutes. A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was applied to determine the strength of the correlation between the oral placement test and those from the oral interview at the end of the semester. The data indicated that the results of the oral placement test when the students are still considered first-year students are still the same with their speaking at the end of the term; therefore, there is no significance and changes. These results turned out to be affected by the students' learning style at the previous school, background knowledge, and the teacher's teaching methods.

Keywords: *bilingual class, language test oral interview, placement test, speaking test*

Introduction

For decades, public institutions have used placement exams to determine whether incoming students were prepared or not. When students have finished their studies, they need to continue to the next level of an academic institution. To have a place and being accepted into a particular level or school, one needs to take a placement test. However, emerging information reveals that the test has little correlation to students' future success in society, casting doubt on their use and achievement. One of the prominent disadvantages of the use of placement tests was shown on Shimizu's (2002) study, which showed that placement tests can affect the psychological impact on lower-level students. The results of the placement test can express the sense of inferiority and diminish their motivation to learn, as the respondents know their level (Shimizu, 2002). The idea of the test could explicitly prevent the students' real progress, and knowledge is giving them to think twice (Burdman, 2012). Some of them are rethinking whether the tests are fair to students and wondering if their traditional use produces an actual barrier to complete institution application.

Some studies argued that test scores from placement tests are interpreted based on the purpose and context, in this case, whether the students ready for developmental education rather than producing a predictive relationship between their previous scores and grades. The potential to develop students' outcomes has intrigued many writers in recent research studies.

Several studies (e.g., Belfied & Crosta, 2012; Scott-Clayton, 2012) have also found some dissatisfaction with the students after taking the placement test. Some students complained on the time allocation as well as the facilities, the ambiguity in the questions of the test, the influence of teachers/examiners certification, work experience and gender, and teacher's participation in the test interactions. Moreover, students' previous learning orientation, as well as comprehensive knowledge of the subject, is also one of the subjects affecting their outcomes in placement tests (Fulcher, 1997; Gunduz, 2010; Hussain, 2017; Sundqvist et al., 2018).

To station a student into a specific level or place of a language curriculum or school, usually, a placement test must be done. It is also the primary goal of the placement test itself. The items in the test usually include a sampling of the material to be covered in the courses in the school's curriculum. A student's performance on the test should be determined at which the student will find material neither too easy nor too difficult. Placement tests come in many varieties: assessing comprehension and production, responding through written and oral performance, multiple-choice, and gap-filling formats. One of the examples of placement tests that are done in Indonesia now is the PPDB (*Pendaftaran Peserta Didik Baru*) or Freshmen Student Registration.

As the placement test goal is to predict the achievements of students and to assign them to remedial or standard classes, the school that the researcher went to divide the students into two classes; regular class and bilingual class. Some studies on the study of bilingual and language transfer pointed out that first-language skills play in supporting the development of second language competence. The outcome of the bilingualism also has been shown on word reading, vocabulary, oral language, reading, and writing in the languages (Genesee, F., & Jared, 2008; Hipfner-Boucher et al., 2014; Swain & Lapkin, 1982; Turnbull, M., Hart, D., & Lapkin, 2003; Uchikoshi & Maniates, 2010).

Because one of the highlighted outcomes in bilingualism is on the oral language, and the placement test in this study is applied to divide the freshman students into a regular class or bilingual class, one of the outcomes in the placement test is to find out their ability in speaking. Naturally, speaking ability is the result of language learning itself. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing also occur naturally together in learning events in school at all significant levels, even though traditionally they were taught separately (Peregoy & Boyle, 2001). Moreover, one skill cannot be done without another, just like it is impossible to speak in a conversation if the person does not listen well, and people seldom write without reading (Harmer, 2015). Therefore, learning a language remains incomplete if one does not achieve competence in speaking.

Speaking skills play a critical role in second-language learning and teaching, as they have even assisted in oral language testing research (Knight, 1992). The curriculum in language teaching has also pointed out that speaking skill makes a crucial object of assessment. It will help to strengthen and develop other language competencies. Speaking is an effective medium of communication within a general English curriculum. As a result, oral proficiency testing is becoming one of the exceptionally main issues in language testing and significantly makes speaking crucial (Nakamura, 2007).

Moreover, a person's fluency in speaking will indicate his or her competence in that language (Matin, 2013). A person may write without proper knowledge of grammar and sentence structure; he or she can read without proper pronunciation, listen without proper listening skills; whereas, speaking skill depends on the total knowledge of a language

(vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, listening). L2 oral proficiency can also be understood as learners' ability to converse with one or several interlocutors (Kasper & Ross, 2013). Speaking is a way for people to generate utterances which include informative purpose such as expressing ideas and opinion (McDonough & Shaw, 2003). Furthermore, in deciding a student's academic program, past performance of the previous school courses is usually the most reliable predictor of future performance (Hudron et al., 1993). The quality of freshman academic before being accepted are in consideration and explicitly chosen from their past school experience.

Therefore, to sum up, in order to ensure the present study was an attempt to found out whether the oral interview test can be utilized to evaluate the students' speaking in the freshman year and at the end of the year. In other words, this study aimed to evaluate whether students in the bilingual class have the requisite competence to speak in English and everyday communicative contact. This study will also examine the unexamined relationships of placement test results and students' speaking skills. The implicit research hypothesis was that the relationships presumed to exist between placement test results and speaking performance. Moreover, the researcher also curious to know how significant the relationship between placement test results and students' speaking ability can be elaborate. Based on the background knowledge and issues above, the researcher thought that it was essential to prove and examine the relationship between the two variables empirically and is expected to be beneficial for educators, English teachers, students, and other test developers.

Method

Participants

The population of the study was 230 freshmen of 7th graders of an Islamic Junior High School that joined the bilingual class. The samples were taken using Slovin's measurement; therefore, the samples taken were only 146 students of the Academic Year 2019 and 2020. The subjects of this study were the students from the bilingual classes to ensure that all participants have a similar purpose in the beginning. Moreover, to ensure the same level, the participants were all 11 and 12 years of age. Most of these learners had the same goal and perspective that joining the bilingual class can improve their English and allow them to use English to practice their communication. Thus, the researcher will be focused only on oral English as it plays a vital role in communicative interaction.

Research Design

The present study employed a quantitative method, in a correlational design to describe the relationship between students' oral placement test results and their speaking ability. The writer used an ex-post facto research design, as there was no treatment done in this research and uses the data already collected. The ex-post facto design may show the possible effects or relation of an experience that occurred or a condition that was present before the investigation (Balnaves & Caputi, 2001). The data that the researcher took were the data of English oral placement tests when they enrolled in the school, and at the end of the term, they took a final exam in an oral test. In the placement test, students were given questions regarding on daily-life topics. The test consists of an interview based on conversational prompts to be presented by the interviewer. At the end of the term, students took an oral speaking exam, based on conversation dialogues from different topics.

The data collection instruments employed in the present study is an oral interview test. The placement test includes 20 speaking prompts related to general and personal questions regarding the daily topics in a conversation, such as about their homes, families, jobs, studies, interests, and a range of similar topic areas. The test in which the interviewees were asked to answer in less or more than 10 minutes. It was administered to the participants to decide their position of English speaking skill and know their English speaking level for the bilingual classes. The grading was adapted from a known source to assess students' speaking skills. The grading criteria for assessing the interview were accent, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. After administering the placement test and conducting the speaking test, the coefficient of correlation between two sets of scores was calculated.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed the product-moment Pearson test to calculate the correlation between the two variables. In this analysis, it is conducted by Product Moment Pearson Correlation. If the correlation value (r) ranges from 1 to -1, the value is getting closer to 1 or -1 means the relationship between the two variables is getting stronger. In contrast, the value close to 0 means the relationship between the two variables is getting weaker. A positive value indicates a directional relationship (X rises then Y rises), and a negative value indicates an inverse relationship (X rises then Y drops). Sugiyono (2017) gives guidelines for providing interpretations of correlation coefficients as follows:

Table 1. *Interpretations of Correlation Coefficient*

0,00 – 0,20	Very low / considered as no correlation
0.20 - 0.40	Low correlation
0.40 - 0.70	Medium correlation
0.70 - 0.90	Strong correlation
0.90 – 1.00	Very strong/perfect correlation

Results

The data collection tools are the oral interview test administered to the participants in the placement test, and the results were inputted to some statistical procedures to arrive at an answer to the research question. The research question is as follows: *Is there a significant correlation between bilingual students' oral placement test and speaking ability?* After collecting the data of the oral placement test, the writer took the 146 students' scores and analysed them to find out whether there is a significant correlation between the oral speaking test result and the students' speaking ability.

Table 2. Results of Coefficient Correlation

Correlations

		Oral Placement	Speaking Test
Oral Placement	Pearson Correlation	1	.515**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	81	81
Speaking Test	Pearson Correlation	.515**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	81	81

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

After the data being counted with the formula, the next step is to interpret the r score / r_{xy} . From the correlation above, the results between the variables are not negative, and there is a positive correlation. By identifying from the result of the formula of r (0.515), it could be decided that the result is in the interval of 0.40 – 0.70, which means that between x variable and y variable, there is a medium correlation. To finalise, the researcher needs to found out the table of the degree of freedom (df) by doing the df formulation as in: $df = n - nr$. Therefore, the df equals 144.

After that, by consulting with the product-moment table, it can notice that 'r' table in the significance 1% is obtained 0.286 and in 5% is obtained 0.220. Next, the writer compared 'rxy' to the 'r' table. 'rxy' results is 0.515, whereas 'r' table are 0.220 and 0.286. Having that results, the writer assumed that 'rxy' is bigger than 'r' table in the calculation of $0.220 < 0.515 > 0.286$. Therefore, the researchers concluded a medium correlation between students' oral placement test and students' speaking ability. Considering these results, it could be suggested that the oral interview test does not indicate the EFL students' daily speaking ability. Thus, it is not possible to correlate the two sets of tests of EFL students' speaking ability when they are enrolled with their real speaking ability.

Discussion

From the results of the finding above, it is intended that the research can reveal any correlation between students' oral placement test and students' speaking ability. As the 'rxy' is more prominent than the 'r' table in the calculation of $0.220 < 0.515 > 0.286$, it is concluded that it has a medium correlation. This result can be interpreted that the oral placement test of the bilingual class students' does not relate to students' speaking ability achievement. This finding was relevant to the study by Gunduz (2010) which pointed out that the students' average score in last year academic year is an indicator of their continuation performance at school. The students' current background knowledge and the students' ranks when they were in their dwelling units predicted their consistency in the next academic level.

Nevertheless, the students' oral proficiency when they took the placement test can be interpreted as a similar level of ability when they have finished their academic level. There are

several reasons for this. The results from Belfied and Crosta (2012) showed that the conditions when taking the placement test may affect the students' real-time ability on the test was conducted. Those conditions are the rooms, the time allocation, the number of students per group, and the teachers or test-makers competence in rating the test-takers skill. The test-takers age and background of the population are also in consideration of the performance in the language test (Manna & Yoo, 2015). The reliability of any test of spoken language hinges on oral examiners or raters (Fulcher, 2014). The raters' background regarding the test scores has always been a concern in the language testing field. Therefore, the raters' reliability could also be an additional factor in the learners' speaking ability (Kim, 2016).

Moreover, the test format for assessing second language speaking proficiency could become the other factor of the results between the oral placement test. The test at the end of the year does not have significant changes. According to Qian (2009), by adopting a semi-direct testing that includes prompts that can be audio, video, and/or textual, the test taker must perform tasks-based, and there will unlikely be variation in the output. Therefore, a possible scenario that relies on conversation activities based on a set of selected themes which are previously negotiated with learners should also be in consideration (Sim & Mirabela, 2016). In line with that, an authentic assessment that can increase the students' ability in speaking could be implemented in order to allow them expressed their deep understanding of what they know, understand, and can do (Zaim et al., 2017).

However, as placement tests considered serving for diagnostic purposes, it should be useful to provide feedback about some language points and discover learners' strengths and weaknesses (Zhao, 2013). In this case, doing the oral placement test at the beginning of the term is crucially important to provide institutions with valuable information on the learners. Meanwhile, the speaking test at the end of the year measures the benefits on a long-term base outcomes. Placement test may support students' academic success and educational process with the correct placement (Hilgers, 2019; James & Templeman, 2009).

Further, the findings dealing with students' speaking ability might propose a considerable possibility that teachers indeed had a vital role in the classroom setting. In line with Ur (2012), communicating orally and fluently in informal interaction is the primary goal for many language learners. For that purpose, designing classroom activities to improve students' ability to promote oral fluency is important. Ur (2012) states that getting students to talk is much more difficult than making them read, write, or listen during language courses. In that case, teachers essentially needed to explain the essence and the purpose of doing particular English speaking activities. The consideration of the teacher to help the students understand what and why they need to do in the speaking activities is essential, as it helps them to realize that mainly they are a bilingual class student. Once the students indeed understood the essence of doing a particular English speaking activity, teachers might expect them to do the activity well.

Moreover, if the oral placement test is an accurate indicator of someone's speaking ability, the school may need to have a massive room to assess the learners on this language skill. If the school wanted to encourage the oral ability, test the oral ability (Matin, 2013). The institution might employ the results of the speaking assessment as a placement test to position the learners in the appropriate and suitable level. This indication may be helpful to the school or institution in redesigning the current syllabus to emphasize and point more on the speaking skill more than before. The teacher might also conclude the findings of the research to develop activities for speaking ability enrichment. That way, the necessities of the students would be on the same line of the framework of the bilingual program. English teachers can be

benefitted from the findings of the present research to design their lesson plan the way that they could cover the actual capabilities and essence of the learners.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the possibility of a relationship between students' placement test and students speaking ability. Based on the calculation of the data described previously between students' placement test and students speaking ability test that investigated by product-moment Pearson, the result is obtained 0.515. The correlation coefficient between scores on both variables is positive and has medium significance. Therefore, considering this result, it could be suggested that the oral placement test does have a relation to the students speaking ability. Thus, the results of the oral placement test when the students are still considered first-year students are still the same; there is no significance and changes.

From the conclusion above, the writer suggested that the placement test in English should be considered in the four skills of language and not only on writing or reading. As it can be used by the teacher in classifying students to a regular class or bilingual class and following the previous study that claimed the product of bilingualism are not only in reading and writing but also an oral skill. Thus, the speaking placement test can be used to make valid predictions of the EFL students' general English if considered with the other skills. This is following the results reported in several previous studies, and it could be claimed with confidence that these two measures reveal a similar pattern of interrelationships.

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