

Examining Changes in ESL Students' Speaking Performance Across Two Workplace-Based Assessments

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ABSTRACT

Speaking proficiency is an important component of English language learning, particularly for students preparing to enrol into professional environments where effective oral communication is required. However, a single speaking assessment provides only a snapshot of learners' performance and offers limited evidence of change over time. This study examined changes in the speaking performance of 45 English as a Second Language (ESL) students across two workplace-based speaking assessments conducted during a 14-week semester. The first assessment was conducted in Week 6 and the second in Week 13. Both assessments involved group speaking tasks related to workplace situations, while students were assessed individually using the same marking rubric. Students' scores were analysed using descriptive statistics and a paired-samples t-test. The findings indicated an increase in mean speaking performance from 27.13 out of 40 (67.8%) in the first assessment to 29.22 out of 40 (73.1%) in the second assessment, representing a mean gain of 2.09 marks. The difference was statistically significant, $t(44) = 10.04$, $p < .001$, with a large effect size ($d = 1.50$). The findings suggest that repeated opportunities to engage in workplace-oriented speaking activities and assessment were associated with improved assessed speaking performance over the semester. The study highlights the value of repeated classroom assessment for monitoring changes in ESL learners' oral performance.

Keywords: ESL speaking, speaking assessment, oral performance, repeated assessment, workplace English, tertiary education

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is a fundamental component of second and foreign language learning because it enables learners to use their linguistic knowledge for meaningful communication. Unlike receptive language skills, speaking requires learners to retrieve vocabulary, construct grammatical utterances and communicate meaning in real time. Consequently, developing effective oral communication can be challenging for ESL learners. In tertiary education, the development of speaking ability is particularly relevant because students are increasingly expected to communicate effectively in academic, social and professional contexts.

Hence, the importance of oral communication becomes particularly evident when English is required in workplace situations. University and college students may need to participate in meetings, respond to workplace problems, make suggestions, negotiate with colleagues and communicate professionally with clients or customers. Consequently, classroom speaking activities that incorporate workplace-related situations can provide opportunities for learners to practise language in contexts that are relevant to their future professional lives.

Speaking skills development, however, does not occur at a single point in time. Learners generally require repeated opportunities to produce language, practise communicative functions and receive feedback. Research on task repetition has suggested that repeated opportunities to perform speaking tasks can influence aspects of oral performance, including complexity, accuracy and fluency. For example, research involving university

ESL learners has found that task repetition combined with post-task activities can contribute to improved oral accuracy. More recent meta-analytic evidence has also reported positive effects of task repetition on several dimensions of L2 oral production, although the magnitude of improvement varies according to the linguistic dimension, task type and learning context.

Classroom assessment provides an opportunity to examine whether such changes are reflected in learners' actual performance. A single speaking assessment, however, represents performance at only one point in time. Comparing students' performance across multiple assessment points can provide a more informative picture of changes occurring during a course. This is particularly relevant in classroom-based research because naturally occurring assessment data can provide evidence of learner performance without requiring an additional experimental intervention.

Despite the value of longitudinal perspectives, classroom research may often focus primarily on students' performance at an individual assessment point or their final achievement. Examining changes between two naturally occurring speaking assessments can therefore provide useful evidence for teachers and programme coordinators regarding students' oral performance over the course of a semester.

The present study addresses this issue by examining the speaking performance of 45 ESL students across two workplace-based speaking assessments conducted during a 14-week semester. Both assessments involved group speaking activities related to workplace situations, but students were individually graded using the same assessment rubric. The first assessment was conducted in Week 6 and the second in Week 13. Immediate feedback was provided following each assessment, focusing on their language proficiency and content relevance.

Hence, this study seeks to answer the following research question:

RQ1: Is there a significant difference in ESL students' speaking performance between the first and second workplace-based speaking assessments?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Development of EFL Speaking Performance

Speaking development is a multidimensional process involving learners' ability to produce language with appropriate levels of complexity, accuracy and fluency. Research on second language oral production has frequently employed the complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF) framework to investigate changes in learners' spoken language. Suzuki and Kormos (2020), for example, demonstrated that linguistic dimensions including grammatical accuracy, pronunciation and different aspects of fluency were associated with listeners' perceptions of L2 speech comprehensibility and fluency.

Importantly, longitudinal research suggests that oral development does not necessarily occur uniformly across linguistic dimensions. Kanda (2024), in a longitudinal study of low-proficiency English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, found that repeated oral tasks contributed to improvements in syntactic complexity, lexical complexity, accuracy and fluency within repeated-task conditions.

However, not all dimensions demonstrated sustained improvement across the longer period examined. Similarly, Li and Sui (2025) demonstrated considerable individual variation in the relationship between complexity, accuracy and fluency across a 15-week period, highlighting the dynamic nature of L2 speech development.

These findings suggest that repeated measurements of speaking performance can provide useful evidence of change that may not be visible through a single assessment. This study therefore adopts a relatively simple longitudinal perspective by comparing students' performance at two assessment points within one semester.

Repeated Speaking Practice and Task Repetition

Repeated opportunities to perform speaking tasks may facilitate oral development by increasing learners' familiarity with task demands and allowing greater attention to language production. Qiu (2020), for example, investigated the effects of topic familiarity and task repetition among 60 EFL learners and found that both factors influenced aspects of complexity, accuracy and fluency in oral production.

Similarly, Hsu (2019) examined university EFL learners participating in repeated speaking tasks and found that combining task repetition with post-task transcription was particularly beneficial for oral accuracy. More recently, a 2025 meta-analysis synthesising research on task repetition in L2 oral production reported positive effects across complexity, accuracy, lexical complexity and fluency, although the magnitude of the effects varied according to task and contextual factors.

Longitudinal interaction may also contribute to oral development in language learning. Saito et al. (2021) investigated Japanese EFL learners who participated in weekly conversation exchanges over a 12-week semester and examined changes in their oral proficiency. Their work demonstrates the value of examining speaking development over an academic period rather than relying exclusively on single-point assessment.

Speaking Assessment in the Classroom

Speaking assessment provides an important source of evidence regarding learners' oral performance. However, speaking scores can be influenced by task characteristics, topic familiarity, interactional conditions and rating processes. Qiu (2020), for example, demonstrated that topic familiarity and task repetition can influence oral performance, while research on speaking assessment has also highlighted the importance of task characteristics and rating considerations.

The present study addresses some of these concerns by comparing two assessments that used the same marking rubric, the same maximum score and similar workplace-related speaking contexts. Although the tasks were conducted at different points in the semester, these similarities provide a reasonable basis for examining changes in students' assessed speaking performance.

Although previous research has provided evidence that repeated speaking tasks and sustained interaction can contribute to L2 speaking skills development, much of the existing research has employed experimental tasks, controlled interventions or detailed linguistic measures such as complexity, accuracy and fluency. There is comparatively less emphasis on using naturally occurring classroom assessment scores to examine changes in students' overall speaking performance across a regular academic semester.

Hence this study addresses this practical gap by comparing students' performance across two workplace-based speaking assessments conducted as part of a 14-week ESL course. The two assessments used the same marking rubric and the same maximum score of 40. Both assessments also involved similar workplace-related speaking situations. Although the assessments were conducted at different points in the semester, these similarities provide a reasonable basis for comparing students' scores across the two assessment points.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative repeated-measures design to examine changes in students' speaking performance between two assessment points within a 14-week English language course. The same students completed both assessments, allowing their individual scores to be compared directly.

The study is best described as a classroom-based longitudinal comparison rather than an experimental pre-test/post-test study because the first assessment occurred during the semester rather than before instruction commenced, and no control group was included.

Participants

The participants were 45 ESL students enrolled in an English language course at a Malaysian tertiary institution. This English language course was part of their undergraduate study plan. All 45 students completed both speaking assessments and were therefore included in the analysis.

Speaking Assessments

Two formal speaking assessments were conducted during the semester. The first assessment took place in Week 6, while the second assessment took place in Week 13.

Both assessments required students to participate in group speaking tasks based on workplace-related situations. Although students worked collaboratively during the task, each student received an individual mark. The speaking situations used in the two assessments were similar in their workplace orientation, providing a relatively consistent communicative context across the two assessment points.

Both assessments were graded using the same marking rubric and had a maximum score of 40 marks. Immediate feedback was provided to students following each assessment.

Table 1 summarises the assessment characteristics.

Table 1 Characteristics of the Two Speaking Assessments

Characteristics	Assessment 1	Assessment 2
Assessment week	Week 6	Week 13
Task format	Group of 4-6 students	Group of 5-6 students
Scoring	Individual	
Context	Workplace-related (casual)	Workplace-related (serious)
Maximum score	40 for each assessment	
Feedback	Immediate	

Data Analysis

The assessment scores were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Means and standard deviations were calculated for both assessment points. The difference between the two assessment scores was examined using a paired-samples t-test, as the same students provided scores at both assessment points. Cohen's d was calculated to determine the magnitude of the observed difference. The significance level was set at $p < .05$.

RESULTS

Overall Speaking Performance

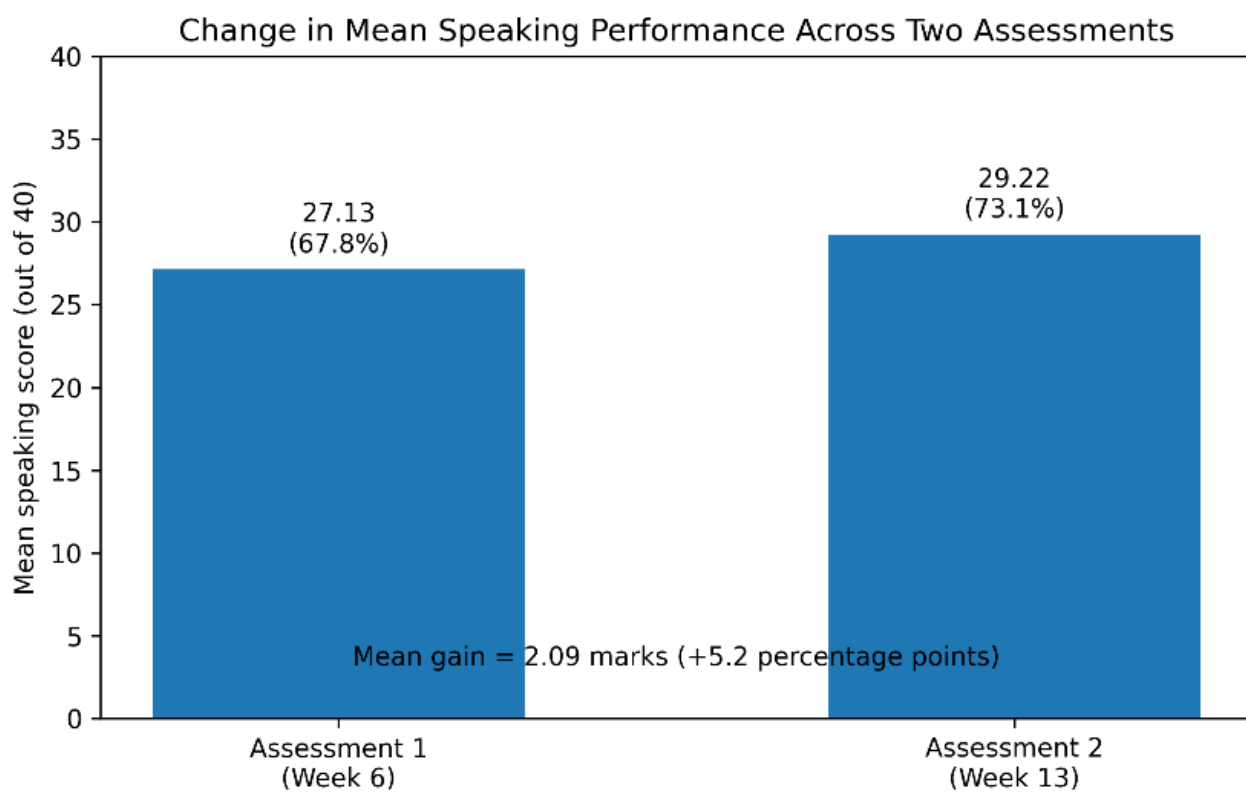
The descriptive statistics indicated an increase in students' speaking performance between the two assessment points. As shown in Table 2, the mean score increased from 27.13 out of 40 (67.8%) in Assessment 1 to 29.22 out of 40 (73.1%) in Assessment 2. This represents a mean gain of 2.09 marks, equivalent to an increase of approximately 5.2 percentage points.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for Speaking Performance

Assessment	N	Mean	SD	Percentage
Assessment 1	45	27.13	1.95	67.8%
Assessment 2	45	29.22	1.66	73.1%
Mean gain		2.09		5.2 percentage points

A paired-samples t-test was conducted because the same 45 students completed both assessments. The analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between Assessment 1 and Assessment 2, $t(44) = 10.04$, $p < .001$. The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference was approximately 1.67 to 2.51 marks. The effect size was large, with Cohen's $d = 1.50$.

These findings indicate that students' assessed speaking performance was significantly higher in Week 13 than in Week 6

Figure 1 Change in Mean Speaking Performance Across Two Assessments


DISCUSSION

The improvement observed in the present study suggests that students demonstrated stronger speaking performance after several additional weeks of English learning sessions and speaking practice. The increase from 27.13 to 29.22 marks is relatively modest in absolute numerical terms but represents a meaningful improvement when considered against the 40-mark assessment scale. Furthermore, the large effect size indicates that the difference between the two assessment points was substantial relative to the variability of students' scores.

One possible explanation for the observed improvement is students' continued exposure to speaking activities throughout the semester. Between Week 6 and Week 13, students had additional opportunities to use English

orally, interact with peers and become more familiar with workplace-oriented communication. Repeated opportunities to perform or practise communicative tasks may help learners become increasingly familiar with task demands and allocate their attention more effectively during oral production. This interpretation is consistent with research showing that task repetition and familiarity can influence L2 oral performance positively (Qiu, 2020; Hsu, 2019). More recent meta-analytic evidence similarly indicates positive effects of task repetition on multiple dimensions of L2 oral production, although effects vary according to task and contextual factors.

Another possible contributing factor is the feedback provided after the first assessment. Students received immediate feedback following Assessment 1 and subsequently had additional time to apply or respond to the feedback before Assessment 2. Feedback may have helped students become more aware of weaknesses in their oral performance and the expectations associated with the assessment rubric. However, because all students received feedback and there was no comparison group without feedback, the present study cannot determine whether feedback itself caused the observed improvement. It is more appropriate to interpret feedback as one component of the instructional context within which the improvement occurred.

The similarity between the two assessment contexts may also have supported comparability. Both assessments involved workplace-related speaking situations, were conducted as group tasks and were individually graded using the same rubric. Consequently, the increase in scores is less likely to be explained solely by a change in the assessment criteria. Nevertheless, the two tasks were not identical, and differences in specific topics, group interactions or task demands may have contributed to differences in performance.

The findings also have practical implications for classroom assessment. Rather than viewing a speaking assessment solely as a means of assigning a grade, teachers can use repeated assessments to obtain evidence of changes in learners' oral performance. The present findings demonstrate how two naturally occurring assessment points can be compared to provide a simple measure of change over a semester. This approach is particularly practical for classroom-based research because it does not require the introduction of a separate intervention or additional assessment instrument.

At the same time, the findings should not be interpreted as definitive evidence that the 14-week course caused the improvement. Several factors may have contributed to the higher second-assessment scores, including additional classroom exposure, speaking practice, feedback, increased familiarity with the assessment format and general development in English proficiency. The study demonstrates an association between assessment point and performance rather than a causal effect of any single instructional factor.

CONCLUSION

This study examined changes in the speaking performance of 45 ESL students across two workplace-based speaking assessments conducted during a 14-week semester. The first assessment was conducted in Week 6 and the second in Week 13. Both assessments involved group speaking tasks, individual grading and the same assessment rubric. The findings demonstrated a clear improvement in students' assessed speaking performance.

In addition, the findings suggest that repeated opportunities for workplace-oriented speaking practice and assessment may be associated with improved oral performance over the course of a semester. From a pedagogical perspective, the findings support the use of repeated speaking assessment as a means of monitoring learners' progress and providing opportunities for feedback and continued development.

Nevertheless, the study has several limitations. First, only two assessment points were used, which limits the extent to which a detailed developmental trajectory can be established. Second, the study did not include a control group. Therefore, causal conclusions regarding instruction, feedback or repeated assessment cannot be made. Third, although the assessments used the same rubric and similar workplace contexts, the tasks were not necessarily identical. Finally, the group-based nature of the assessments means that students' performances may have been influenced by group interaction and group dynamics despite the use of individual scoring.

Future research could address these limitations by incorporating three or more assessment points, collecting data from multiple classes and examining specific dimensions of speaking performance such as fluency, accuracy, pronunciation and vocabulary. Nevertheless, the present study demonstrates that relatively simple classroom assessment data can provide useful evidence of changes in ESL students' speaking performance across a semester.

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