

An Investigation into Testing EFL Learners' Oral Communicative Competence in the Sudanese Secondary Schools.

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ABSTRACT :

The present study investigated why learners' oral communicative competence was not tested systematically in the Sudanese secondary schools. Utilizing a questionnaire and an interview, it was concluded that testing learners' oral communicative competence systematically in the Sudanese secondary schools, to some extent, was neglected due to the lack of awareness of its importance to the Sudanese teachers of English. Based on the findings of the present study, a development of clear theoretical framework for teaching and testing English language in the Sudanese secondary schools was recommended. In addition, training teachers of English on oral communicative testing was recommended.

Key words: communicative competence, communicative approach, language tests.

المستخلص:

بحثت هذه الدراسة سبب تجاهل اختبار مهارة التخاطب الشفوي للطلاب الدارسين للغة الانجليزية في المرحلة الثانوية في السودان. استخدمت الدراسة استبيان لجمع البيانات من معلمى اللغة الانجليزية في خمسة ولايات. بالاضافة لذلك تم جمع البيانات من خلال اجراء مقابلة مع خبراء مناهج اللغة الانجليزية في المركز القومى للمناهج ببخت الرضا. توصلت الدراسة الى ان ادراك معلمى اللغة الانجليزية بأهمية اختبار مهارة التخاطب الشفوية لطلاب المرحلة الثانوية غير كاف مما ادى الى تجاهل اختبار هذه المهارة. اوصت الدراسة بوضع اطار نظرى واضح لتدريس واختبار اللغة الانجليزية في السودان. كذلك اوصت الدراسة بتدريب معلمى اللغة الانجليزية في المرحلة الثانوية على طرق اختبار مهارة التخاطب الشفوي.

INTODCTION :

English language has been introduced into education in Sudan by the condominium rule (1898-1956). The objectives of teaching English language

during that time were restricted to developing reading and writing skills (Bashir: 1970). Approaching the independence of the country, an

international commission was invited to provide advice on education. This international commission (referred to as the 1955-International Commission) recommended, a change in the School Certificate Examinations to test speech and the comprehension of spoken English in the secondary schools (Ministry of education: 1957). However, this recommendation did not take place. Ironically, what the report called for, to be adopted in the secondary schools, had been a practice in the intermediate schools before 1955. An oral test was used to be part of the English language examinations in the intermediate schools. However, that oral test was abandoned because candidates were not used to the different versions of the spoken English of the examiners, and the lack of coordination between those examiners (Hamza: 1963).

Following the independence of Sudan, many factors affected English language negatively. Then many steps were taken to improve students' English language standards. One of these steps was changing the syllabuses. New courses (The Nile Course and The SPINE series) were designed in the 1980s and 1990s for developing the use of English in a communicative situation and help students to use English language competently in all situations respectively. However, it is worthwhile to note here that testing learners' oral communicative competence did not find a place after this change in the syllabuses. The Secondary School English examinations continued to emphasize testing reading and writing. The same recommendation, for testing

learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese Secondary Schools, has been reiterated by the Sudanese researchers since the independence, but there has been no response (Ali: 2009 and Marghani: 2000). English language examinations in the Sudanese secondary schools have been an issue of questioning (Al-Haj: 2005 and Siddiek :2009). Recently, the objectives of teaching English language have been changed to meet the domestic needs, and in conformity with modern trends in teaching English language. However, concerning testing learners' oral communicative competence, we are still lagging behind the modern trend. This point needed investigation to find out why testing learners' oral communicative competence systematically in the Sudanese Secondary Schools has been neglected.

1.1 Questions of the study

The present study mainly addressed the question: to what extent, is testing learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese Secondary Schools not adopted due to the lack of awareness of its importance to the Sudanese teachers of English?

1.2 Hypotheses of the study

The present study hypothesized whether testing learners' oral communicative competence systematically in the Sudanese secondary schools is neglected due to the lack of awareness of its importance to the Sudanese teachers of English.

1.3 Objectives of the study

The present study attempted to realize the following objectives:

- 1- To find out the reasons behind the negligence of testing learners' oral communicative competence systematically in the Sudanese secondary schools.
- 2- To forward some recommendations that will be conducive to testing learners' oral communicative competence systematically in the Sudanese the secondary school.

2.0 Literature Review:

2.1 Teaching and communicative testing

Teaching in the past, based on the theories of language acquisition and the goal of teaching, concentrated on teaching language structure. Drills and repetition were used to reinforce the new knowledge (Stevens: 1977). Consequently, accuracy was emphasized at the expense of fluency, and error correction was a vital element of that teaching. Following that, it would be fair to say that the goal of testing in the past was to find out what the learners knew about language (Mendelsohn: 1989). In addition, tests were separate measures of the elements of language. The reason behind this breaking down of language skills into the elements and testing them separately was mainly the high level of reliability compared with subjective evaluation of performance in an integrated skill (Savignon: 1976).

Since early 1970s, the theory of communicative competence has gained influence on language teaching and language testing. This theory expanded

the scope of understanding the nature of language (McNamara: 2000). Considering communicative competence as a goal of teaching, all teaching should be orientated towards facilitating the integration of the four components of communicative competence for the learner, including teaching linguistic competence and taking into account the learner's communication needs (Canale: 1980). In addition, since most learners give priority to the speaking skill (Valette 1977), they should be given opportunities to take part in meaningful communicative interaction. In this case, communicative classroom activities will be useful (Morrow: 1981). Besides, teachers should be friendly, facilitator, accept "errors" as a natural feature of language learning, and encourage learners to take risk saying what they mean (Savignon: 1976).

One of the major implications of communicative competence is testing. First, the goal of the teaching and consequently testing should be demonstrated explicitly. To be more accurate, the testing objectives should be the teaching objectives (Mendelsohn: 1989). When communicative competence is the goal of teaching, pencil-and-paper tests will not be a good measure of all its components. They only measure the linguistic competence, which is an essential part, but much more emphasis needed on the other components of communicative competence. (Canale: 1980). Pencil-and-paper tests generally make most learners, who seek developing their oral communication, get frustrated (Valette 1977). Therefore,

direct testing of production, either written or spoken, regardless the challenges of economy and reliability cannot be avoided i.e. if you want to measure students' ability to express themselves in a foreign language, there is probably no other way for doing this than having them talk and assess their performance subjectively (Viljo: 1976). These direct tests reassure students that teaching and testing are orientated towards developing communicative competence (Savignon: 1976). In few words, it could be stated that testing should be indistinguishable from teaching, and the former should be a natural outgrowth from the latter. The following words are an excellent summary for this relation of teaching and testing (Swain: 1984):

“Communicative language testing and teaching are seen as two sides of the same coin. Having teaching and testing compatible is essential if we expect our students to learn what we teach them.”

Concerning the situation in Sudan, during the Condominium Rule were orientated language structure was emphasized, and lists of decontextualized linguistic items were tested. A move towards teaching English language for communication was taken up in the 1980s, with the advent of the Nile Course, and supported with the introduction of the SPINE series in the 1990s. However, what had been claimed, developing the

students' communicative competence, was just slogans and no deep change took place, especially on the side of testing which has influence on teaching (Al-Haj: 2005). In the 1990s, the goal of teaching English changed to help students communicate competently in adequate accuracy and fluency in all situations (Al-Faki: 1997), but still tests have been emphasizing testing skills separately using pen-paper tests. The situation has been as if pasting new slogans on old wagons or setting the labels “communicative competence” with nothing really changed (Savignon: 1976). This happened although it had been noticed that one reason for poor speaking of the students in the Sudanese secondary schools is that they simply did not have adequate opportunities or reasons to practice this skill. English has been taught as a school subject, as something to know about rather than a tool to use (Ali: 2009).

2.2 Difficulties in testing oral communicative competence

It has been a long time before arriving at the conclusion that direct testing is necessary for a valid test measuring oral communicative competence, regardless of difficulties may be encountered when testing directly (Viljo: 1976, Mendelsohn: 1989, Canale: 1980). These previous words entail that difficulties are essential part of this kind of testing. When the goal of teaching is developing communicative competence, both direct and indirect tests should necessarily be adopted, and difficulties will naturally be faced with direct and communicative tests. The

following is a summary of what might be encountered when dealing with such kinds of these tests.

2.2.1 Theoretical framework:

The main problem of testing oral communicative competence has been the definition of what is meant by communicative competence, or the way in which language is interpreted i.e. to construct tests on an explicit theoretical framework. Most foreign language teachers claim that their teaching and testing are orientated towards developing learners' communicative competence, but they test the mastery of small fragments of the language (Heaton: 1990).

2.2.2 Test (format, content, and criteria):

Deciding exactly what to be tested in this test may be problematic. In communicative competence, grammatical competence is easy to test, but strategic and sociolinguistic competences are very difficult to test (Evans: 2003). Relating to this point, the criteria for testing oral communicative competence, and the weighting given to its components should be decided (Heaton: 1990).

2.2.3 Nature of communication:

When testing oral communicative competence, it is neither possible nor desirable to separate the speaking skills from the listening skills. This very interdependence of the speaking and listening skills increases the difficulty of any serious attempt to analyse

precisely what is being tested at any one time. In addition, success in communication often depends as much on the listener as on the speaker. This listener may affect results of a test negatively or positively (Heaton: 1990). One solution for the inseparable nature of speaking and listening is to accept this nature (Harrison 1983b), and beside a direct production test, another separate listening comprehension test might be adopted (Gefen: 1983). Concerning the effect of the listener, selection and training them can be a better solution for this (Underhill: 1993).

2.2.4 Reliability:

Assessment of live exchange is the most urgent problem in communicative testing (Harrison: 1983b). It is impossible to retrieve the test, without a tape recorder, at any time after the test administration (Weir: 1990). Even when tape-recording is available, the recapture of the full context of the test will not be available (Heaton: 1990). The examiner of an oral production test is working under great pressure making subjective judgments as quickly as possible. This pressure may affect his ability to make reliable judgments. These doubts about reliability restrict such kinds of tests. In addition, the marks given to a candidate sometimes are reflection of the quality of the examiner (McNamara: 2000). In other cases, the personality of the students may colour his ability to speak. Besides, the tense of a test may affect the student's performances (Lado: 1977). Furthermore, a representative sample of behavior should be elicited

to reflect reality of the candidates' ability (Hughes: 2003, Wesche: 1983), but many factors may affect taking this representative sample.

2.2.5 Administration:

It is problematic to test large numbers of candidates because of the limited time, number of qualified examiners needed, physical resources (such as rooms, furniture), machinery needed (such as audio, video, photocopying equipment..etc (Davies:1976).

2.2.6 Human resources (examiners):

For testing oral communicative competence, people are needed to construct, moderate, administer, mark, and check the efficiency of tests. Out of all those people, test examiners may be the big problem because qualified people with oral testing and marking experience are badly needed (Underhill: 1993). Lack of qualified examiners would lead to neglecting testing oral communicative competence, or suggest using techniques that are more incommunicative.

2.2.7 Cost:

One of the enormous practical constraints on testing oral communicative competence is the test cost. Financial resources are necessary for constructing, standardizing, administering, paying a larger number of examiners, and providing equipments (Weir: 1990).

2.2.8 Time:

Time is needed to develop, administer, and mark a test (Underhill: 1993). The

biggest problem here may be with the time needed for administering and marking an oral communicative test, especially when a large number of candidates are involved in the test.

Most of the above difficulties may prevail when oral testing is discussed in the Sudanese secondary schools. It has been claimed that the teaching of English in the Sudanese secondary schools is orientated towards helping students to communicate with adequate accuracy and fluency in all situations (Al-Faki: 1997), but the still tests measure mainly knowledge about English. This may indicate a lack of explicit theoretical framework.

3.0 Methodology of the study

Descriptive and analytical methods were adopted for the present study. In addition, a mixed research method was utilized. For collecting data, a questionnaire was designed and validated by a panel of experts. In addition, the reliability of the questionnaire was calculated statistically using the *Cronbach Alpha coefficient*. The result was 0.64, which indicated that the reliability of the questionnaire was within the acceptable range (Dornyei: 2003). This questionnaire which was designed in accordance with Likert's 5-point scale (*strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree and strongly disagree*), was administered to 138 teachers of English in the Sudanese secondary schools from five states. In addition, an open interview was conducted with the syllabus designers in the National Curriculum Centre, Bakht El Ruda town. Adopting a mixed research

method, the quantitative data which drawn from the teachers' questionnaire and the qualitative data derived from the syllabus designers' interview will complement each other. Then the questionnaire data was analysed statistically in terms of frequencies, percentages, and median. Besides, the interview data was presented and discussed. Furthermore, the hypothesis of the present study was discussed critically and tested in the light of the results of both instruments.

4.0 Results:

4.1 Presentation and Analysis of the teachers' questionnaire:

A closed-ended questionnaire was designed to elicit data from teachers of English in the Sudanese secondary schools on testing learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools. Five statements were dedicated for the study hypothesis. The following is a detailed account of the analysis of those statements.

Questionnaire statements number 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 were phrased to elicit whether teachers of English in the Sudanese secondary schools were aware of the importance of testing learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools. They were phrased in a positive form in comparison with the study hypothesis, to avoid complexity during the analysis. Providing a positive

answer (strongly agree or agree) by respondents to the first four statements, would show their lack of awareness, and consequently contribute to the acceptance of the hypothesis. Concerning statements 5, it was also worded in a positive sense, but opposite to the former four statements to check the reliability of the respondents.

Statement number 1 inquired whether the respondents thought that written (pen-paper) tests were enough to assess learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools. The analysis of this statement revealed that 46.4% of the respondents strongly disagreed that written (pen-paper) tests were enough to assess learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools, and 26.8% of them disagreed to that. On the other hand, 10.1% of them strongly agreed and 9.4% of them agreed that it was enough, while 7.2 % of them were undecided (table 4.1).

Statement number 2 asked whether the respondents believed that testing English language knowledge was enough to assess learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools. Concerning this statement, the analysis showed that 36.2 % of the respondents strongly disagreed and 31.9 % of them disagreed that testing English language knowledge was enough to assess learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools. On the other side, 17.4 % and 9.4 % of them agreed and strongly agreed respectively that it was enough

for that purpose. At the same time, 5.1 % of them chose to be undecided (table 4.1).

Statement number 3 asked whether the respondents thought that difficulty of conducting an oral test could justify the absence of testing learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools. The analysis revealed that 60.1 % and 22.5 % of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed respectively that difficulty of conducting an oral test could justify the absence of testing learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools, while 3.6 % and 6.5 % of them strongly disagreed and disagreed respectively to that. Besides, 7.2 % of them preferred to be undecided (table 4.1).

Statement number 4 wondered whether the respondents thought that oral test could be avoided even if the objective of teaching was developing learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools. The analysis of this statement made clear that 10.9 % and 47.1 % of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed respectively that oral test could be avoided even if the objective of teaching was developing learners' oral communicative competence, while 6.5 % and 20.3 % of them strongly disagreed and disagreed respectively to that. Besides, 15.2 % of them remained undecided (table 4.1).

Statement number 5 intended to find out whether the respondents believed that an oral test for learners in the

Sudanese secondary schools would be necessary for developing their oral communicative competence. The analysis of this statement showed that 52.9% of the respondents agreed that an oral test for learners in the Sudanese secondary schools would be necessary for developing their oral communicative competence, and 31.2 % of them strongly agreed to that. On the contrary, only 4.3 % of them strongly disagreed and 7.2 % of them disagreed to that. In addition, only 4.3 % of them chose to express their opinion in a neutral way when they picked undecided (table 4.1)

4.2. Discussion of the questionnaire results:

Concerning statement number 1, which inquired whether written tests were enough to assess learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools, it was obvious that a considerable percentage of respondents were not in favour of that (73.2%). The former figure could be compared with a small percentage of respondents who were in favour of that (19.5%). Those figures indicated that most of the respondents were aware that another kind of tests was needed to assess learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools rather than written. This statement was tested statistically by the SPSS 15.0 using the median. The score of this test was (4.0000) on a 5-point scale (Likert-scale). This made clear that the dominant answer of this statement was "disagree" (table 4.1)

About statement number 2, which asked whether the respondents believed that testing English language knowledge was enough to assess learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools, it was clear that most of the respondents believed that testing English language knowledge was not enough to assess learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools (68.1%). This was reached though 26.8% of them were against that. Out of the previous figures, it could be stated that most of those respondents showed a considerable sign of awareness of the importance of testing learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools. Those figures demonstrated that some other aspects of language rather knowledge should be tested when assessing learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools. To test the reliability of this statement statistically by the SPSS 15.0 using the median. The score of this test turned to be (4.0000) on a 5-point Likert scale. This indicated the typical answer of this statement was "disagree" (table 4.1).

Responding to statement number 3, which asked whether the respondents thought that difficulty of conducting an oral test could justify the absence of testing learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools, it was strikingly evident that most of the respondents thought that (82.6%). However, a small number of those respondents were against that (10.1%). This result indicated that a big number of the respondents held a very

low sign of awareness concerning the importance of testing learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools. Testing the reliability of this statement statistically by the SPSS 15.0 using the median, the result of this test was (2.0000) on a 5-point Likert-scale which reflected the average answer of this statement was "agree" (table 4.1).

Analysing statement number 4, which inquired whether the respondents thought that oral test could be avoided even if the objective of teaching was developing learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools, it was disclosed that most of those respondents thought that oral test could be avoided (58.0 %). Out of those respondents, 26.8% of them were against that. The analysis of this statement showed a sign of low awareness. Based on the theoretical framework of the present study, oral test could not be avoided when the objective of teaching is developing learners' oral communicative competence. Furthermore, testing this statement statistically by the SPSS 15.0 using the median showed that the median score of this statement was (2.0000) on a 5-point Likert-scale. This demonstrated that dominant answer of this statement was "agree" (table 4.1).

Responding to statement number 5, which attempted to find out whether the respondents believed that an oral test in the Sudanese secondary schools would be necessary for developing learners' oral communicative competence, it was maintained that 84.1% of the

respondents were in favour of that. This disclosed that a big number of the respondents thought that it was necessary to test learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools since developing their oral communicative competence was the objective of teaching. However, only 11.5% of them were not in favour of that. The findings of this statement indicated a high degree of awareness. Based on the theoretical framework of the present study, oral test is vital for developing learners' oral communicative competence. To prove the findings of this statement, statistical test by the SPSS 15.0 using the median was conducted. The score of this test was (2.0000) on a 5-point Likert-scale. This made evident that an average answer of this statement was "agree" (table 4.1).

The findings of the above statements could be reported as follows. The findings of statement number 1 showed their awareness of the necessity of another kind of tests to assess learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools. In the same context, the results of statement number 2 indicated their awareness of the necessity of testing other aspects of language rather than knowledge when

assessing learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools since it was one of the objectives of teaching English language. In addition, statement number 3 showed a high degree of awareness when they reported that an oral test for developing learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools would be necessary. However, they demonstrated a low degree of awareness when most of them, thought that the difficulty of conducting an oral test could justify the absence of testing learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools. In the same respect, most of those teachers stated that oral test could be avoided even if the objective of teaching was developing learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools. The latter results also indicated a very low degree of awareness. To sum up, it could be concluded that the findings of statements number 3 and 4 casted doubts on the outcome of statements number 1, 2 and 5 which demonstrated their awareness of the importance of testing learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools.

Table (4.1): Awareness of the importance of testing learners' oral communicative competence.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Undecided		Disagree		Strongly disagree		Median
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	
1- Written (pen-paper) tests are enough to assess learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools.	14	10.1	13	9.4	10	7.2	37	26.8	64	46.4	4.00
2- Testing English language knowledge (e.g. grammar, vocabulary..etc) is enough to assess learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools.	13	9.4	24	17.4	7	5.1	44	31.9	50	36.2	4.00
3-Difficulty of conducting an oral test justifies the absence of testing learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools.	31	22.5	83	60.1	10	7.2	9	6.5	5	3.6	2.00
4- An oral test can be avoided when developing learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools.	15	10.9	65	47.1	21	15.2	28	20.3	9	6.5	2.00
5- An oral test is necessary for developing learners' oral communicative competence in	4	31.	7	52.	6	4.3	1	7.2	6	4.3	2.00

the Sudanese secondary schools.	3	2	3	9			0				00
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4.3 Analysis of the syllabus designers' interview:

An open interview was designed and conducted with two Sudanese experts on designing English syllabuses and training teachers at the department of English language in the National Curriculum Centre, Bakht El Ruda town. This interview aimed to find out the causes behind the negligence of testing learners' oral communicative competence in the Sudanese secondary schools. The qualitative data drawn by interview was planned to consolidate the quantitative data that derived from the teachers' questionnaire. In this interview, two questions were dedicated to the study hypothesis. The following is an analysis of these interview questions: Concerning Questions number 1, which asked whether the syllabus designers thought that most teachers of English were aware of the importance of testing learners' oral communicative competence systematically in the Sudanese secondary schools, the respondents provided contrasting views. The first interviewee asserted firmly that most teachers of English were aware of that. He added that even other educators and politician were aware of the importance of such kind of testing. On the other hand, the second interviewee claimed that most of those teachers of English were not aware of that. He attributed this lack of awareness to their training during university education, and the

inadequate in-service training. Regarding questions number 2, which inquired whether testing learners' oral communicative competence systematically in the Sudanese secondary schools was neglected due to the lack of awareness of its importance to most teachers of English, the same contrasting views continued. The first interviewee explained that the absence of testing learners' oral communicative competence systematically in the Sudanese secondary schools was not neglected due to that lack of awareness. Responding to the same question, the second interviewee clarified that it was neglected because most teachers of English were not aware of its importance. In addition, he explicitly demonstrated that most teachers of English were not familiar with the concept of communicative competence and communicative techniques; consequently, they were not aware of their importance in teaching and testing.

4.4 Discussion of the syllabus designers' interview:

Considering the interview questions, it was clear that the interviewees had different point of views. The first interviewee explained clearly that most teachers of English were aware of the importance of testing learners' oral communicative competence systematically in the Sudanese

secondary schools. In addition, he explained that he did not think testing learners' oral communicative competence was neglected due to the lack of awareness of its importance to most teachers of English. On the contrary, the second interviewee enthusiastically stated that most teachers of English were not aware of the importance of testing learners' oral communicative competence systematically in the Sudanese secondary schools and he thought that it was one of the major reasons for the absence of such tests in the Sudanese secondary schools. Out of the responses of both interviewees, it could be concluded that some teachers of English were aware of the importance of testing learners' oral communicative competence systematically in the Sudanese secondary schools, however some of them were not. Besides, the responses of both interviewees indicated that, to some extent, this lack of awareness played a role in neglecting testing learners' oral communicative competence systematically in the Sudanese secondary.

5.0 Conclusions

Based on the findings of the present study, it could be concluded that testing learners' oral communicative competence systematically in the Sudanese secondary schools, to some extent, was neglected due to the lack of awareness of its importance to the Sudanese teachers of English. Therefore, the study hypothesis was confirmed. Accordingly, developing a clear theoretical framework for teaching and testing English language in the

Sudanese secondary schools and making it clear to both learners and teachers was recommended. Training teachers of English to familiarize them with the concept of communicative competence, communicative tests, and testing in general was also suggested. Furthermore, initiating civil organizations to spread the awareness of the importance of testing students' oral communicative competence among teachers, educators, and people in general was recommended, too.

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