

‘A unique opportunity in the curriculum for students to have genuine agency over their choices and outcome’: a study of the impact on learners of an employability-focused, externally assessed speaking and listening assessment.

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1. Introduction

English Speaking Board (International) Ltd. is an Ofqual-regulated awarding organisation offering accredited qualifications in speaking and listening. Our ESB Level 1 Award in Speech (Grade 2) and Level 2 Certificate in Speech (Grade 4) each have four pathways, including Speech for Employability. We wanted to investigate the impact on learners of undertaking an ESB International qualification as one way of developing oracy, specifically in the context of post-lockdown education, focusing on these employability pathways.

ESB International assessments take place in groups of six learners, and each learner is assessed individually whilst interacting with the group, teacher and the assessor. Face-to-face assessments are held in person, with a trained, standardised and moderated assessor coming to the centre. The two qualifications used for this study comprise four sections: a talk, a mock interview, and listening, responding and exchanging views. At Level 1, learners also have to pitch an idea, and at Level 2 they participate in a formal telephone call.

2. Aims

It was recognised that the closure of schools in the lockdowns of 2020-21 would have a profound impact on learners' education, health and well-being (Unicef, 2020), and this was born out in the I CAN report, *Speaking Up for the Covid Generation* of 2021, which found that 1.5 million children in the UK are at risk of not speaking and understanding at an age-appropriate level, and teachers of both primary and secondary-age learners are concerned that children may not catch up. The causes of learners' struggles with speaking and understanding are identified in the report as a lack of 'communication-rich experiences' with fewer things to talk about, gaps in speech and language therapy during school closures, and vast lags in support for learners with special educational needs and disabilities (*Speaking Up for the Covid Generation*, p.4).

ESB International qualifications have two features that we wanted to look at more closely. Firstly, learners can choose what they want to research and talk about and preparing and completing an assessment therefore provides an opportunity for a 'communication-rich experience.' Secondly, the emphasis on personal choice provides an authentic opportunity for the exercise of learner agency, where the individual can actively direct the learning process. We follow Mayukhina and Wyse (2019) p.226 in distinguishing four types of agency:

1. contextual: including wider socio-cultural and immediate educational and physical settings
2. intrapersonal: individuals' personal beliefs, motivations, attitudes, abilities, experiences and past achievements
3. interpersonal: in relation to teachers, peers, and parents
4. temporal: based on past experiences which inform their expectations, goals, and their future agentic self-image.

3. Methods

Three centres participated in a data collection activity, with a total of 564 learners entered for ESB International assessments.

Teachers were asked to complete two internal assessments of learners, before beginning the qualification and again after it had taken place. Teachers could assess learners' competencies as 'Not Competent (NC)', 'Competent (C)', or 'Highly Competent (HC)' in statements drawn from the National Curriculum for Key Stage 3 in spoken language and reading. 382 responses were received.

Learners completed an online questionnaire both before they started preparing for their assessment, and afterwards. These questionnaires measured how learners felt about their communication skills and personal development. Learners rated the extent to which they agree/disagree, on a Likert scale, to a number of statements, and answered two open questions in each questionnaire which were analysed thematically. 226 learners responded to the pre-assessment questionnaires, and 198 to the post-assessment.

Teachers were also given the opportunity to respond to a questionnaire.

4. Analysis

4.1 Teacher Voice

Judgements made by teachers show a highly positive impact on learners' communication skills. Where an average of 35% of learners were judged 'NC' at the beginning of the preparation period, this had reduced to 5% after the assessments.

Learners were most likely to be judged 'NC' in their ability to 'Use role, intonation, tone, volume, mood, silence, stillness and action to add impact' and to 'Participate in formal debates and/or discussions, summarising and/or building on what has been said'. These areas saw a 34% and 32% reduction in 'NC' judgements, respectively.

Correspondingly, learners were much more likely to be judged 'HC' post-assessment. Where the average pre-assessment was 4% of learners being 'HC', this had improved to 29% post-assessment. Specifically, learners were judged to be 'HC' in their ability to 'Speak confidently, audibly and fluently' (32%) and to 'Give confident and developed responses when speaking 1:1 with an adult.' (34%) (Figure 1).

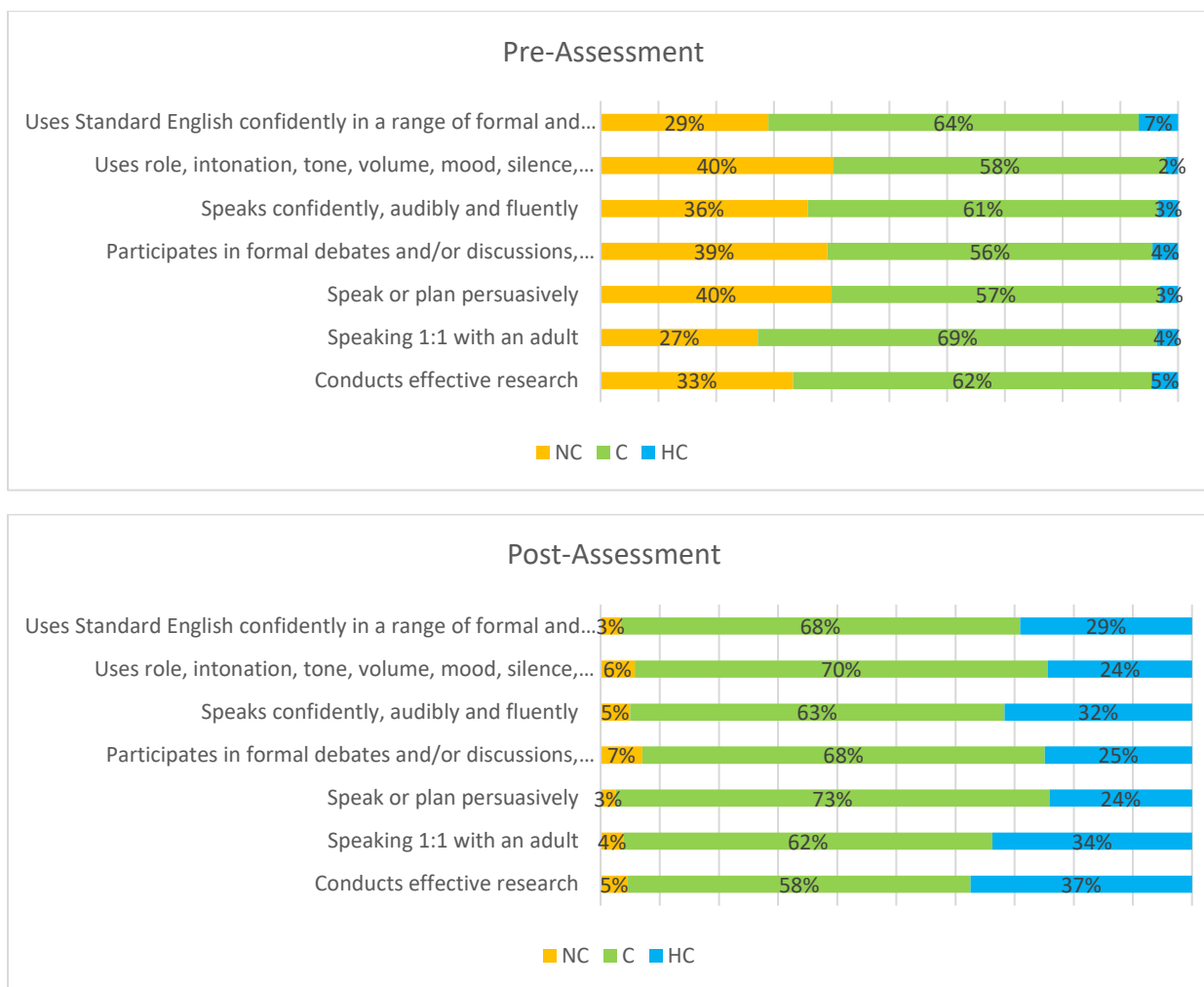


Figure 1

These data suggest that, through this opportunity to have a ‘communication-rich experience’, the gap created by the pandemic can be reduced, and learners can develop their oracy skills in vital areas. This is further corroborated by feedback given in teacher questionnaires. When asked: ‘On a scale of 0-10, how much do you think completing the ESB International qualification has helped to develop your learners’ speaking and listening skills in the wake of the pandemic?’, the average was 8.6.

Teachers also gave qualitative responses, which were thematically analysed. The most common themes were:

1. Confidence:
 - ‘Students who were previously very anxious about speaking in front of an audience came out of the assessments brimming with confidence.’
 - ‘Students who are usually quiet or reluctant to speak gained so much confidence. They all expressed confidence in completing interviews or professional conversations in the future.’
2. The value of personal choice:
 - ‘A unique opportunity in the curriculum for students to have genuine agency over their choices and outcome.... students rose to the challenge, enjoyed having choice and ownership.’

- 'By giving the students a chance to practise their speaking and listening in an assessment that was not run by school staff, students learned to step up, overcome their fears about presenting, and talk about something they chose.'
3. The impact on learner attitudes:
 - 'The benefit came from how seriously they all took this award. It drove them to speak and act confidently and strive for something.'
 - Learners were 'proud of what they achieved'.
 4. The impact on learner behaviour:
 - 'I noticed students genuinely supporting each other's spoken language.'
 - 'Many completed more work outside of school than they had done throughout the year.'

This reflects the framework established by Mayukhina and Wyse (2019). We can see that where teachers identified an improvement in self-confidence, this was expressed in terms of the learners' future agentic self-image, i.e., temporal agency. By exercising personal choice, learners were empowered to have some control over intrapersonal agency, and co-constructing spoken interaction provided an opportunity to exercise interpersonal agency.

4.2 Learner Voice

Although teachers had a highly positive view of the value and impact of the experience of preparing for the qualification, learners' responses to the Likert scales were less definite. Table 1 shows the statements with the highest percentage increase in learners choosing to 'Agree' or 'Strongly Agree'. Most improved were, 'I can give a short talk on a job or course I am interested in' with an increase of 14%, and 'I feel like my voice matters,' with an increase of 12%.

	Percentage increase in 'Agree' or 'Strongly Agree'
I can give a short talk on a job or course I am interested in	14%
I can ask questions to improve my knowledge and understanding	8%
I can join in a discussion, answering questions in detail and building on other's ideas	8%
I feel like my voice matters	12%
I can learn a lot from my peers	7%

Table 1

Statements showing the most improvement are those reflecting personal choice/intrapersonal agency. This is also exemplified in the thematic analysis of learners' qualitative responses:

1. Intrapersonal agency: elements that learners were most looking forward to were those allowing freedom of choice:
 - 'The talk on a figure who inspires, because finally someone will actually have to listen to me and what I have to say.'
 - 'Being able to deliver a talk about something I enjoy and am interested in.'

2. Temporal agency: Learners also expressed their desire to prove themselves, and to have an experience that would benefit them in the real world:
 - 'Getting the award and being able to use it in the future to help me.'
 - 'Learning how to do a really good interview in the future because I will be able to have a better job.'

These themes re-surfaced post-assessment, with learners feeling the best parts of the qualification were:

1. Talking about a topic of personal interest:
 - 'I enjoyed presenting my inspirations and sharing what I like.'
 - 'Speaking to others about what I am passionate about.'
2. Improving, learning, or becoming more confident
 - 'Feeling more confident while speaking in front of people.'
 - 'Pushing myself to speak in front of an audience.'
3. The assessment experience itself, and the opportunity for 'real life experiences'
 - 'The best part was the interviews as it gives me a view of what we would have to do in the real world.'
 - 'Having somebody interested in listening to my interests and ambitions that also has had them and wants me to succeed.'

Finally, learners were asked what they were least looking forward to, and afterwards, what could have been better. Again, learners were most concerned with aspects of interpersonal or intrapersonal agency.

1. Interpersonal agency: worry about speaking in front of an audience, of being judged, or being unsuccessful:
 - 'Probably talking in front of people as I am shy, and I don't really like my voice that much so it's a bit embarrassing.'
 - 'Presentation because that's where the most people are listening.'
 - 'Being told I am not good enough or that I did a bad job.'
2. Intrapersonal agency: many learners displayed low levels of confidence in their abilities, and concern that their nerves, recall, and past experiences would hold them back:
 - 'Making the CV because it was hard to think of experiences from a long time ago.'
 - 'Getting to the presentation and messing up.'
 - 'I don't feel confident in my creativity.'

In post-assessment responses, intrapersonal agency and contextual agency were the most prevalent themes. Worries involving interpersonal agency, specifically speaking in front of others, were diminished.

1. Contextual agency: learners now expressed that aspects that could have been better were out of their control, such as time to prepare, length of assessments, and the physical layout of the rooms.

2. Intrapersonal agency: learners were still most likely to comment on their own abilities and self-confidence, but these comments were now framed more constructively, with learners able to articulate their areas for improvement:
 - 'I should've been more confident on speaking and using facial expressions.'
 - 'I could've tried to look up more and use more body movements.'
 - 'Keeping eye contact with listeners.'
 - 'Slow my pace of talking.'
 - 'I became nervous and needed to stay calm.'

5. Limitations, conclusions, and future directions

ESB International is continuing to research the impact of external assessment on the development of learners' oracy and personal development, and this study is an early step. The relatively low return of learner data is being addressed by refining the research tools, so that we can be more confident of capturing the learner voice in more depth and detail. This small-scale study has shown that external assessment taken in peer groups can play a valuable part in developing young people's speaking and listening skills by creating communication-rich situations. In particular, preparing for and experiencing an ESB International qualification fosters learner agency and empowers young people to find their place in the world.

ESB International welcomes interest from other schools that would like their learners to participate in these qualifications and in the further study of the impact of this learning through external assessment.

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