

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on an introductory explanation of the study presenting the background of the study, the research questions, the aims of the study, the significance of the study, and the definition of key terms.

1.1 Background of the Study

This study is concerned with investigating the way English speaking tests are prepared, administered and scored at tertiary education levels.

Since the focus of the EFL/ESL curriculum has changed to the communicative approach and the language testing has also emphasized the improvement of the speaking skill like the one in the Indonesian context, the assessment of the speaking skill has become increasingly important. The English speaking tests can be one of the procedures to assess the students' speaking skill. Moreover, speaking tests can give beneficial backwash effect or feedback (Kitao & Kitao, 1996:2; Ur, 1996:134). Hence, there is a clear need for speaking skill tests that really assess the students' speaking skill accurately. The fact, speaking tests are considered difficult and complex to construct.

In the preliminary observation in Universitas Majalengka (UNMA), speaking was offered as an independent course. One of the teaching objectives of the Speaking Course at English Education Study Program in UNMA is improving students' communicative skill so they can express their thoughts and feeling using English appropriately and confidently based on its contexts.

In order to serve the teaching speaking objective, the speaking lecturers in UNMA applied the teaching speaking techniques as well as speaking tests to assess students' speaking performance. The test results in the scoring sheets showed remarkable scores. Most of the students got high scores in the speaking course. However, the contradictory fact was found. The students' speaking skill was not as good as their scores. Their speaking skill was still low though they had joined the speaking class and tests. It means that, the speaking lecturers paid less attention to the validity of the tests and scores.

Based on the preliminary interviews with the speaking lecturers, it was found that they faced some problems in testing the speaking skill. Some problems that speaking lecturers commonly faced are: First, the varieties of speaking basic performances, namely: imitative, intensive, responsive, interactive and extensive speaking (Brown, 2004:141-142). Those varieties of speaking basic performances give difficulties for speaking lecturers to design the speaking tests. Second, several criteria of speaking, such as: pronunciation, grammar, fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, appropriateness, etc. make the speaking skill is difficult to be prepared, administered and scored (Suwandi & Taufiqulloh, 2009:186).

Third, designing a good test should meet the principles of language assessment: validity, reliability, practicality and authenticity (Brown, 2004:19-28). Those principles of the language assessment make speaking tests are more difficult to be prepared. Fourth, the practical problem of finding the time, the facilities and the personnel for testing speaking skill; the problem of designing productive and relevant speaking tasks; and the problem of being consistent (Knight, 1992:294) are the next problems in testing the speaking skill.

Three other challenges in testing speaking are: determining the time allotment, selecting assessment activities and determining evaluation criteria (O'Malley & Pierce, 1996:58). Hingle and Linington in Richards and Renandya (2002:354) add besides listening, speaking is regarded as an essential component of a diagnostic test which measures overall linguistic proficiency. Another supporting statement is from Luoma (2004:1) which confirms assessing speaking is challenging as many factors influence one's impression of how well someone can speak a language. Madsen (1983:147) also states a supporting statement: "Speaking is considered the most challenging of all language exams in its phases: preparing, administering and scoring".

All the problems mentioned above influence the administration of the speaking tests. So many aspects of the speaking skill that should be assessed influence the assessment. As the result, the students' speaking skill is less assessed accurately and the teaching objective of the speaking course cannot be reached appropriately.

Due to the difficulties, speaking lecturers are challenged to administer speaking tests that are carefully prepared. Well-prepared tests can be as better assessing instruments than the unwell-prepared tests. Test writers must carefully plan the content of the test; specify the purpose, the information and the procedures that should be given (Norris, 2000:18). Preparing the test is like making a blueprint of a building. The architects design the buildings and select the materials to be used in the construction to meet the specific needs of the buildings because they normally know what a building is going to be used for (Fulcher & Davidson, 2009:123).

The test writers, in this case, the speaking lecturers must know their focus while testing the students. To complete the assessment process, speaking lecturers have to score the students' performance in order to make decision about the acceptability of each student's level of learning. Mastering the speaking test preparation, administration and scoring help the speaking lecturers as the test writers more confident and more rigorous in administering the speaking tests.

Since it is important to test the speaking skill, this study focuses on the speaking tests at tertiary education levels in terms of the preparation, administration and scoring. The researcher thinks that the three terms are challenging and should be taken into account by the speaking lecturers. Many speaking lecturers feel uncomfortable with the variety of speaking skills which makes them difficult in preparing the speaking tests. So many levels of speaking skill also make lecturers hard to focus on assessing the speaking skill during the test. Those levels of the speaking skill affect the way of scoring. Related to those problems, the researcher wants to find out how the speaking lecturers deal with the problems in terms of the preparation, administration and scoring of the speaking test.

The previous research on this topic are: the research in South Korea which focussed on the current practice in classroom speaking assessment in secondary schools (Lee, 2010), the types of speaking assessment tasks used by Korean Junior secondary school (Sook, 2003), and the assessment of oral skill in upper secondary schools in Finland (Riihimaki, 2009). The previous research only focused on the secondary schools, none of them were conducted in tertiary levels. Nevertheless, Laborda and Alvarez in 2011 conducted the research in tertiary level but they only focused on the teachers' opinions

towards the integration of oral tasks in the Spanish University Examination, not in terms of speaking test administration. Sak (2008) also conducted the research in tertiary level in terms of speaking exam, but he only investigated the validity and reliability of the exams. The researcher decided to focus her research at tertiary education level because in this education level, speaking is one of the independent subjects which require independent assessment.

Therefore, the study attempts to describe what and how speaking lecturers do in preparing, administering and scoring the speaking test results at tertiary education levels. Hopefully, the results of this research can improve the speaking lecturers' preparation, administration and scoring of the speaking tests.

1.2 Research Questions

Based on the above explanation, the study will be focused on:

1. How do the speaking lecturers prepare and administer the speaking tests?
2. What do speaking lecturers focus on while testing the students' speaking skill?
3. In what ways do the speaking lecturers score the tests?

1.3 Aims of the Study

The aims of the study are:

1. to describe what and how the speaking lecturers do in preparing and administering the speaking tests.
2. to identify the aspects that are focused on by the speaking lecturers during the implementation of the tests.
3. to find out the ways of scoring that are done by the speaking lecturers.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The results of the study are expected to provide its significance at least in three points of view, referring to Creswell (2003:149).

Theoretically, this study clarifies how well the speaking tests assess the students' speaking skill at the tertiary levels where the study conducted. This study, hopefully, can

provide the information and give the empirical evidence to support the fact that the speaking tests are doing their job in assessing the students' speaking skill. In addition, this study attempts to give benefits for other lecturers and teachers in other institutions who would like to administer speaking tests. They may use the results of this study as a model or description when they try to do the tests or develop the speaking tests.

This study, hopefully, can provide the information to enhance speaking lecturers' reflection toward their methods or strategies in preparing and administering the valid and reliable speaking tests based on the learning goals cited in the syllabus.

Practically, the results of this study may help to clarify the benefits of applying the ways to prepare, administer and score the English Speaking Test so that more speaking teachers and lecturers can apply the best ways of preparing, administering and scoring the Speaking Tests in their daily teaching to improve their speaking tests.

Professionally, this study hopefully can give contributions to the speaking lecturers regarding the main foci in the administration of speaking tests which must be linked to the learning goals in the syllabus. Moreover, this study is expected to give benefit to the speaking lecturers regarding the speaking test scoring of their students so their speaking skill can be assessed effectively, especially at the small tertiary level of education in small regions.

Finally, it is expected that the revision and the development towards the syllabus, especially in the speaking course, can be taken by the institutions, so the students can use English in daily conversation not only as a compliance of the assessment.

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

- a. **English Speaking Tests.** The English Speaking Tests in this study are speaking tests which are prepared, administered and scored by the speaking lecturers. The *test* is one of the procedures in measuring students' ability, knowledge and performance in speaking.
- b. **Test Preparation.** In this study, the test preparation includes the designing and constructing of the speaking tests done by the speaking lecturers.

- c. **Test Administration.** After the tests are designed and prepared, they will be administered in each tertiary level of the speaking lecturers. The tests will be given to the second grade of the tertiary level students. In this study, during the administration, the focus of the observation is on the speaking skill criteria of the students.
- d. **Test Scoring.** In this study, the lecturers will give the score to each student based on their performance.
- e. **Tertiary Education Levels.** The tertiary education levels in this study are two tertiary levels in West Java; Universitas Majalengka and STBA Sebelas April Sumedang.

