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Assessment of the Speaking Skill in Algeria: Facts and Challenges

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Abstract :

With the growing need to connect with people all over the world, it is high time to focus on speaking as being the fastest and the most effective skill of communication. The current research paper's objective is to explore how speaking is assessed in Algerian universities and compare it against the standards established for achieving an insightful and effective assessment. The research work was conducted at Abu Baker Belkaid University in Tlemcen and the participants were eight teachers of the speaking and listening module. Collecting data was through a semi-structured interview with the teachers; it was generally about their experience of teaching this module, the tasks they bring to their students, the most challenges they face, and their general knowledge of the assessment issues. The results were as expected; the presence of technical problems that impede the progress of learning such as deficiency of materials and rooms; learners' difficulties like lack of motivation, silent students, and anxious students; and insufficient experience with speaking assessment among teachers. In that regard, some remedies were suggested to alleviate these challenges and reconsider speaking assessment practices.

Keywords: English Language; Speaking; Assessment; Difficulties; Teachers; Practices.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment in language education is crucial in that it shows teachers if learners are making progress or not. A teaching process cannot work properly without assessment, otherwise, the learners' level remains unknown. A speaking assessment is one of the assessments that need to be done carefully, as speaking is a spontaneous interactional act that includes various aspects. Hence, teachers must pay attention to every detail entailed with speaking. Primarily, to be able to speak is the role of the human brain where speech is produced by using different aspects. Then, the speaking act is always, with a few exceptions, addressed to one or more interlocutors, which gives it its interactive feature.

Accordingly, the assessor has to put in mind at least the two major aspects of speaking. The first aspect related to the structuring of words and sentences, which includes the use of linguistic competence such as grammar rules, vocabulary, intonation and stress, pronunciation, fluency, etc. and the second aspect, which is related to interaction with others involving the communicative competence such as gestures, social conventions, cultural knowledge, etc.

As such, the researcher enquired about the following points:

- ✓ What is going on in a classroom-speaking test?
- ✓ Are the principles of assessment taken into consideration?

And supposed the following hypotheses:

- ✓ Many problems are facing both teachers and students. The formal, direct speaking test is often the used type.
- ✓ Principles of assessment are not applied to speaking assessment.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Introducing the Concept: What does speaking entail?

Speaking, without a doubt, is the easiest and the most effective means to communicate with others, express ourselves, meet our needs and make relationships. In language education field, Sasson, (2013) mentions that learning to speak a foreign language is among the hardest skills to learn. Luoma (2004) states that being able to speak a foreign language is the corner stone of the ability to use that language. However, this skill is given less importance because of its nature as spontaneous and momentary (Bygate, 1987).

The speaking skill encompasses two sub-skills: Motor-Perceptive Skills and Interaction skills. Motor perceptive skills are those procedures occurring in the

human being's mind to produce speech including perception, recall, and formulation of sounds using grammar and vocabulary. Interaction skills include the talent of speaking effectively when sharing a conversation, that is to know when, how, and what to say to whom (Bygate, 1987). Thornbury and Harmer (2005) talk about what speakers *do* and *know*. What speakers *do* means the way speech is generated at the mind level passing through different stages including conceptualization (preparation of relevant concepts), formulation (arranging those concepts into sentences) and articulation (the final stage where organs such as lungs, teeth, and tongue interfere to transmit the message). On the other side, what speakers *know* includes linguistic (grammar, vocabulary, and phonology), extra-linguistic (cultural and context), and sociocultural (social conventions) knowledge. Relying on what have been said about the educational meaning of the word 'speaking', educators and test designers struggled a lot to implement approaches and methods that facilitate the assessment of this skill and that help revealing the most possible the level of learners and their progress.

Hence, before talking about the assessment of the speaking skill let us get an overview on language assessment in an educational context.

2. Language Assessment

. The meaning of assessment is frequently understood as testing, however, there is a difference between the two concepts. Assessment, on the one hand, is a continuous process through which teachers can gather information about their learners' progress. This process involves many methods including classroom observation, quizzes, classroom performance, testing, etc. Testing, on the other hand is one of the methods used to assess learners, and it is performed formally under special classroom conditions (Pawlak & Waniek-Klimczak, 2015). Hughes (2003) points out that testing, without doubt, is not the single method to get informed about learners' language proficiency, but is one among many ways to do that. However, Douglas (2010) declares that testing is the only method to achieve fairness.

Evaluation in language education is also a concept that arises confusion and controversy. Yet evaluation is broader than assessment and testing. Bachman (1990) states that evaluation is a progressive process of gathering information in order to make decisions about teaching and learning. Douglas (2010) states that "*Tests can help confirm our own assessments and help us make decisions about students' needs with more confidence*" (p. 1).

2.1. Principles of Language Assessment

The first and important purpose of any assessment is its usefulness; that is to achieve the goal which it is designed for. For a test to be useful, several qualities should underlie it. **Validity** is the most prominent principle that should underlie any type of assessment (Brown, 2004). It is related to the assessment content and purposes. In other words, the assessment should measure the language ability that is supposed to be measured (Fulcher and Davidson, 2007). Brown (2004) mentions that a valid test of writing for instance is a test that aims at investigating the learners' ability of writing, not anything else. A writing test that requires students to write as much words as they can in fifteen minutes is not valid because it tests their lexical package rather than writing ability.

Reliability is also another important quality for a useful assessment. It has a relationship with the scores obtained. A reliable test should have consistent results if it is performed twice to the same candidates and under the same conditions (Brown, 2004). However, a test is likely to show inconsistency in some cases such as instruction ambiguity, unexperienced or challenging test tasks, possibility of multiple correct answers, different ways of scoring between teachers (Douglas, D. 2014). Chapelle notes that "*The classic role of reliability is as but one form of evidence of the validity of a test; this is congruent with older arguments that a test must be reliable before it is valid. ... Reliability becomes an element in a validity argument*" (1994, as cited in Davidson & Lynch, 2002, p. 134).

Authenticity refers to the relevance between test tasks and real life. In order to motivate test takers and promote their performance to get better grades, test tasks should be authentic, i.e. to mimic real life situations (Brown, 2004). Authentic tasks permits to reveal the real level of a test taker either in the test context or in real life, thus we can generalize the results (Bachman & Palmer, 1996).

Washback or backwash implies the positive or negative impact that tests may put on students, teachers, parents, society, and on decisions made by policymakers. This impact is usually considered as negative (Hughes, 2003). When teachers spend much time focusing on the items included in the test more than the skills that learners need to strengthen their language, the curriculum will be influenced negatively (Gipps, 1994). To achieve a beneficial backwash, Hughes (2003) provides a set of advice to teachers saying that they will get useful results if they (1) test the area of language you intent to improve, (2) perform criterion-referenced tests, i.e. tests that the student's performance is compared with a set of criteria put by the test designer rather than with his fellows as in

Norm-referenced tests, (3) set objectives to the achievement tests to be reached rather than focusing on the details of the programme content, and (4) Ensure that the test items are clear and understood.

Practicality: An assessment is said to be practical if there are sufficient resources that help to implement it. Resources are of different types: *human resources* such as test writers, administrators, scorers; *material resources* such as rooms, tape recorders, computers, etc. and *time* needed to administer the assessment. The relationship between the available resources and the required resources can be shown as follows: $Practicality = \frac{\text{Available resources}}{\text{Required resources}}$

If the required resources were more than the available ones, then the test is considered impractical and test designers have to revise the specifications in order to make it feasible or to provide the needed resources (Bachman & Palmer, 1996).

2.2 Types of Language Assessment

2.2.1 Formal Vs. Informal

An assessment can be performed either formally or informally. We mean by **formal assessment** the tests that are accomplished under particular classroom conditions. There are four types of formal assessment or tests. **Placement tests** help classifying learners depending on their progress level; they are often performed at the beginning of the semester. **Achievement tests** are performed at the end of a unit or a semester to measure how learners have achieved. **Diagnostic tests** are used to get knowledge about the progress of learners during their learning process. **Proficiency tests** that are done at any time to see an individual's overall language proficiency without taking into consideration their learning process (Hughes, 2003).

Informal assessment, also called continuous or alternative assessment, in the other hand includes different types and methods that help getting informed about the level of learners (Brown, 2004). The purpose behind this kind of assessment is for teachers to get an overview about the learning and the teaching process, and for students to get feedback about their weaknesses and strengths. One type of this assessment is self and peer assessment, which permit to get a feedback from a learner perspective. Another type is classroom observation where the teacher provides feedback to learners to show them whether they are doing well or not. Portfolio assessment is also a kind of informal assessment which is a collection of the learner's everyday activities and which has a purpose of controlling and adjusting the learning process due to the reflection performed by the learner upon this collection (Santos, 1997).

2.2.2 Norm-Referenced Vs. Criterion-Referenced

A norm referenced assessment ranks learners basing on a kind of comparison between their capacities. A learner passes the test if he or she is classed among the first ten per cent of the whole number, for example. Norm referencing is useful in placement tests. However, in criterion-referenced tests test-takers are ranked regarding a set of criteria put by the scorer or the administration, that is to say that a learner who does not achieve those criteria could not pass the test (Hughes, 2003).

A critical difference between the two types of assessment is that in norm referenced tests, the placement of test-takers change among groups, i.e. the same individual can be classified, for instance ,n° 2 in group A, and n° 15 in group B, or even he or she can succeed in group A and fail in group B. However, in criterion-referenced tests, the results are the same in whatever group since the success is compared with standards that are the same everywhere.

2.2.3 Summative Vs. Formative

Summative assessment is, as its name shows, an assessment that measures the sum of learning; it is performed at the end of the year or the unit to get informed about what learners have learnt. Formative assessment is an assessment with a purpose of getting information about the level of learners in different learning stages so that teachers can adjust their teaching methods or focus more on weaknesses of the learners. Another difference between the two types is that the first one is graded, i.e. the results are shown in form of grades or marks, but the second one is not (Torrance & Pryor, 1998).

3. Assessment of Speaking

To assess the language level in general, many approaches were adopted since the first half of the 20th century, but the communicative language testing approach was and still is the most dominating one because of many reasons. One of these reasons and the most important one is the spread of English as a global language of communication, thus the urgent need to use it to interact with others all over the world. The second reason, which is the premise of the communicative approach, is that any language, including English, is not only an amount of linguistic knowledge (such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, etc.) but also language performance; that is to say how to use linguistic knowledge effectively in different real life situations. The use of the language refers to the language production that includes surely the speaking skill.

Due to the complexity of speaking components, as shown above, the assessment of this skill has long been a controversial topic. Bachman (1990) points out that language assessment is affected by changes in language teaching and learning. Therefore, the first challenge is whether assessment can help us understand aspects that affect students' oral performance, and the second challenge is how best to use this information to design more useful assessments. Knight (1992) wonders what criteria and tasks we should focus on when assessing oral performance without ignoring the reliability, validity, and usefulness of the assessment.

Hughes (2003) declares that the main challenges that assessment designers encounter are related first with the choice of tasks that simulate real life situations and reflect out classroom performance of the learners, and second with the reliability and validity of scoring.

Luoma (2004) states that speaking assessment is a challenging concern since *“there are so many factors that influence our impression of how well someone can speak a language, and because we expect test scores to be accurate, just and appropriate for our purpose”* (p. 1). Alderson and Bachman (2004) draw our attention to the reliability issue when testing speaking saying that speaking is a momentary event that requires taking decision about the performance of the test taker in real time. This leads to subjectivity that contrasts reliability.

Fulcher and Davidson (2007) affirm that besides the problem of relevant tasks and scores that reproduce the daily outside classroom speech, test designers have to deal with the problem of fluctuation of performance and interaction that can occur when test takers meet different interlocutors.

From a practical standpoint, Sak (2008) spots the light on the time and costs needed to perform a speaking assessment especially if the number of the examinees is large.

3.1 Types of Speaking Assessment

There are three types to assess students' speaking ability: direct, indirect and semi-direct tests.

Indirect Test: first appeared prior to the development of the communicative testing approach. In this type, there is no requirement for the test taker to speak. An example of this is Lado's pronunciation test in which the examinee is asked to identify words with distinctive pronunciations.

Direct (live) Test: In which the examinee interacts with one or more interlocutors. The Oral Proficiency Test was the first of its kind, and since then, direct tests have been widely used. (O'loughlin, 2001). Still, Luoma

(2004) points out that a live test is neither practical because it is time consuming, nor is it useful to reveal the learner's ability to use the language. To avoid these drawbacks pair interview was introduced as another kind of live test. This involves conducting a conversation between two test-takers without the interference of the teacher examiner.

Semi-Direct Test in which All test-takers receive the same instruction and take the test in front of a tape recorder or other device without an interlocutor presence. The teacher then rates their performance (O'loughlin, 2001). Although practical and fair, this type of test was criticized for being non-authentic (Jeong et al., 2011).

METHODOLOGY

1. Data Collection

To understand the state of speaking assessment in Algeria the researcher conducted an interview with eight teachers of oral production module at Abu Bakr Belkaid University of Tlemcen. A semi-structured interview that gives the researcher the flexibility to introduce additional, unplanned questions based on the interviewee's responses. The questions were as follows:

- 1- For how many years have you been teaching speaking?
- 2- What are the tasks you usually prepare for a speaking lesson and for a test?
- 3- What are the difficulties you usually encounter when teaching and testing speaking?
- 4- What are the criteria you use to assess speaking?
- 5- Which is more effective: formal or informal assessment?
- 6- How do you achieve a reliable and valid speaking test?

2. Data Analysis and Discussion

The teachers' responses served as a solid foundation for proving or disproving the current research paper's hypotheses. Concerning the teachers' experience in teaching speaking it ranged from one to eight years of experience. One of them has eight years, three have six to seven, and the remainder have up to three.

As to the teaching tasks, the majority of teachers use the common task: presentation. Other tasks, such as collective conversation, monologue, games, and language functions are used proportionally. Some teachers use less well-known tasks, such as "book report," in which students must present a summary of a book

they have read, and "the game of chair," in which students must sit on a chair in front of their classmates and respond to all of their questions. Another teacher stated that his focus is on how to speak confidently in front of an audience even if making mistakes. Another emphasized the significance of idioms in speech, stating that they are motivating and amusing, and that one cannot comprehend native speakers' speech without learning idioms. The tasks she assigned are almost directly related to the application of idioms in various contexts. Concerning tests, teachers agreed that they conduct conversations with their students or do some tasks that are suitable for a test such as speaking about a free topic or about their presentations.

The following table summarizes both types of tasks:

Teaching tasks	Testing tasks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation • Group discussion • Games (e.g. the game of chair) • Individual talk (e.g. a speech) • Book report • The questionnaire • Idioms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Face-to-face interviews • Speaking about their presentations • Speaking in front of a tape recorder

Table1: Tasks

We remark in that table that the task diversity found in the teaching section is not found in testing; this reflects the gap between teaching and testing. Another remark is that the live (face-to-face) test is the type the most and it is considered impractical as it consumes much time.

As for difficulties faced in teaching, the most confusing one for the teachers is crowded classrooms. Teachers said that this problem is annoying for both teachers and students. Teachers find it difficult to know the capacities and the weaknesses of their students and students could not find the chance to speak, especially with the few hours assigned to this module per week; just three hours including speaking and listening are allotted. Another difficulty is the lack of equipment such as laboratories. Another type of difficulty is related to the learners themselves; Teachers are unable to behave appropriately due to the students' lack of motivation and linguistic competence. Another problem that has been stated is heterogeneous classrooms; it would be puzzling for teachers to cope with different students' backgrounds and ages.

Regarding the assessment difficulties, teachers complain again about crowded classrooms. The nature of a speaking test is unlike the other subject tests; in a speaking test students pass one by one and this is exhausting and time-consuming.

Another difficulty is the shortage of ICTs that help teachers do the test properly. A third important problem is with anxious students; a speaking test, unlike other tests, is a face-to-face test that does not give learners the time to think about what to say or to correct their own mistakes and this provokes students' anxiety; accordingly, such live tests have a bad washback on anxious students.

The next table matches between the difficulties found by the teachers either in teaching or in testing speaking:

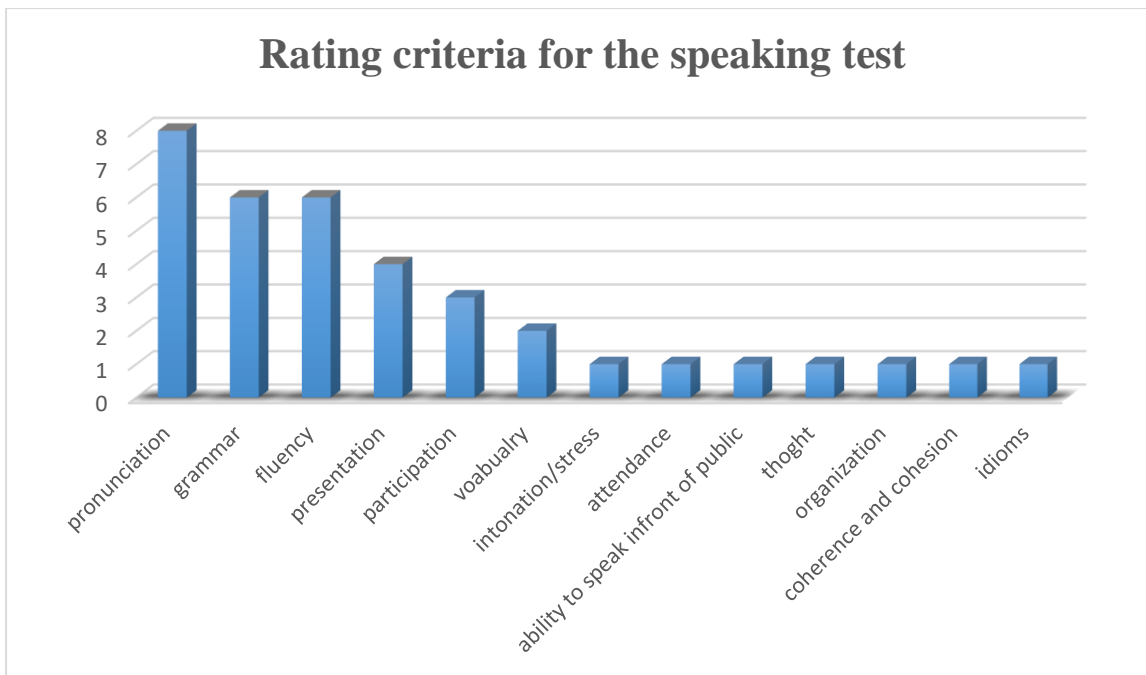
Difficulties found in teaching	Difficulties found in testing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crowded classrooms • Lack of materials • Short time allotted per week • Weak linguistic competence • Lack of motivation/ Students' silence/fear of mistakes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crowded classrooms • Lack of materials • Time-consuming • Students' anxiety

Table2: Difficulties

As it is shown in the table above, almost difficulties are similar in both instruction and test; one can realize that what affects teaching affects also testing, therefore, to perform better tests we have to guarantee better teaching conditions.

On the subject of the rating criteria used to give scores, each teacher adopts his or her own list of criteria. The lists include generally pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, intonation/stress, ability to speak in front of an audience, ideas, and the use of idioms. One teacher declared that he scores the students' performance holistically without relying on any criterion. Another teacher put the accent on the attendance of students during the course as a criterion because, to him, it would be unfair to give a higher score to a student who speaks well but does not attend.

The following bar graph shows more clearly the criteria used by teachers to assess their students' performance:



Bar graph 1: Criteria used to assess the students' speaking performance

Clearly, pronunciation is the most frequently used criterion, followed by grammar and fluency. Presentation comes in the fourth order before vocabulary and intonation. Then come the other criteria in a tiny percentage 7.69%. We remark that all these criteria fall under the measure of *'what the learners know about language'*, however speaking, as has been talked about above, is not only that, it is also a social activity that requires the speaker to interact with others taking into account cultural and social conventions. As such, the test is considered *'invalid'* since it assesses only one side of *'what it means to speak'*; *'unreliable'*, since teachers adopt different rating scales; *'unauthentic'* since it side-steps the interactional feature of speaking.

Vis-à-vis whether formal or informal assessments are more beneficial, teachers believe that informal assessments are more appropriate and more effective for the speaking skill since such a skill cannot be assessed in a few minutes or even an hour, but rather over a period of time. Some of them pointed out that both assessments are needed depending on the needs of the students. A teacher said that for anxious students a formal assessment is not relevant.

As to how to perform valid and reliable assessments, most interviewed teachers have no idea with the exception of one who suggested using ICTs to ensure less threatening test conditions and to give the opportunity to the test-takers to repeat their performance in case they are dissatisfied. Some teachers suggested having training about these issues, while others focused on unifying a test format and rating criteria list.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

The assessment of the speaking skill is in fact one of the hardest tasks that the teacher is required to perform, however, paying attention to the specificity of the skill itself can remove this hardness. Primarily, an assessment, not least a speaking assessment, has to be an extra opportunity of learning not an evil imposed on teachers and students as well. This would facilitate the teaching-learning process and achieve the planned objectives including the improvement of the students' level. To do this, taking into consideration the '*definition of the construct*', i.e. the definition of the skill to be assessed, is the very first step to start right and to plan well what to teach and therefore what to assess. Luoma (2004) stated that the interactional feature of speaking makes it different from the other skills. Second, it is important to choose carefully the type of test relevant to subject to be assessed. The speaking skill, as has been said, is, unlike the other skills, a momentary and spontaneous skill, thus a live formal test is not relevant because it creates a non-peaceful environment that makes students afraid and nervous. Consequently, it would be better to perform informal or the so called '*continuous assessment*' because it is less threatening and more comfortable for students and teachers as it is performed well. It is also practical as it is a part of the learning process. It is also an authentic assessment because students can interact freely in the classroom. Concerning validity and reliability, teachers should agree upon a rating scale that serves as a reference for all of them. This way, the speaking assessment becomes fruitful and with a positive washback.

CONCLUSION

Knowing a foreign language means knowing to speak it, and knowing whether a foreign language learner is a good speaker or not is a hard task that requires the assessor to consider many sides related to the specificity of the speaking skill.

To be able to speak well entails at least two sub-skills: linguistic competence and linguistic performance. Linguistic competence refers to knowledge about language, i.e. vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, intonation, etc. Linguistic performance refers to how to use this language in different social situations with different interlocutors. For that reason, assessors should put into consideration both sides. They have to assess the learner's competency concerning his or her language knowledge as equally as to his or her interaction with others in several contexts.

The present research paper aims at investigating to which extent university teachers assess their learners correctly. The results showed that the majority of them do assess just the learners' knowledge about the language however miss to assess its use. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to reconsider our assessment knowledge and practices to help learners improve their speaking skill and their language level in general.

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