

Insights into the Actual EFL Teachers' Practices, Criteria and Methodology Adopted in Assessing the Undergraduate Learners' Spoken Output: The Case of the Oral Skills Teachers at the Department of English, Frères Mentouri University, Constantine 1

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ABSTRACT: *Oral assessment, being a multifaceted and demanding task, poses major challenges to oral skills university teachers. Within the context of English as a foreign language pedagogy at the university level, considerable attention has been devoted to the teaching and learning of oral skills. However, there has been a notable lack of investigation into the teachers' actual assessment practices, criteria and methodology. The current paper aims to gain insights into the actual practices, criteria and methodology adopted by a sample of oral skills teachers at the Department of English, Constantine 1 Frères Mentouri University, in assessing the undergraduate students' spoken output. A descriptive quantitative method was adopted using a teacher questionnaire as a tool for collecting data. Twenty-nine oral skills teachers at the aforementioned department participated in the present investigation. The results have demonstrated that the teachers' actual oral assessment practices are inconsistent. They have revealed that there is a gap between the teachers' actual oral assessment practices and the theoretical frameworks as well as procedural constructs of oral assessment. In addition, it has been found that the participants lack competence in developing systematic oral assessment criteria and methodology. Such lack runs the risk of undertaking inaccurate assessment, which ultimately hinders the entire pedagogical process. On the basis of such results, teacher training and collaboration are recommended in order to remedy the teachers' inconsistent oral assessment practices. Furthermore, fostering the teachers' competence in developing systematic oral assessment criteria and methodology can help ensure a more effective and homogeneous oral assessment system at the university level.*

KEYWORDS: Assessment Criteria, Oral Assessment Methodology, Oral Assessment Literacy, Students' Spoken Output, Teachers' Practices, University Level

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Introduction

What oral assessment entails in terms of components is not yet definitive; however, there is a general consensus that it is a key construct in language pedagogy. Research has strongly emphasized the importance of assessing students' language in order to ensure better teaching and learning outcomes (Stiggins, 1995; Stiggins, 1999; Webb, 2002; Popham, 2004; Taylor, 2009; Fulcher, 2012; Herrera & Macias, 2015; Harding & Kremmel, 2016; Kremmel & Harding, 2020). Owing to the difficulty in defining the complex nature of the speaking process and the difficulty in selecting the appropriate criteria and methodology of assessing students' spoken output, oral assessment has created major challenges for oral skills teachers. The latter often struggle with issues concerning what to assess in students' spoken language (criteria), and how to assess it (methodology).

Teachers may realize the significance of oral language assessment in developing students' spoken proficiency, but this does not make such assessment process less challenging. Teachers need to be acquainted with the theoretical frameworks and procedural constructs of oral assessment in order to be able to carry out more accurate assessment in their teaching. This can help create a more homogeneous assessment system at their educational institution (Hazen, 2020).

In spite of the significance of the oral assessment task, research about teachers' oral assessment practices is rather limited (Alharbi & Surur, 2019; Smit, 2020; Hussain et al, 2021). Within the context of teaching English as a foreign language at university level, considerable attention has been dedicated to the teaching and learning of oral skills, but there is lack of investigation into the teachers' practices, criteria and methodology adopted in oral assessment. Therefore, the current study attempts to contribute to bridging the gap by investigating the actual oral assessment practices, criteria and methodology employed by the teachers at the Department of English, Constantine 1 Frères Mentouri University.

The major research questions raised in the current study are as follows:

- Are the teachers' **actual** oral assessment **practices** consistent?
- What **criteria** do the teachers adopt in their assessment of the students' spoken output?
- How do the participants undertake oral assessment in terms of **methodology**?

The significance of the current study lies in its potential to contribute to revealing the teachers' actual practices, criteria and methodology adopted in oral assessment at the Department of English, Constantine 1 Frères Mentouri University. By unveiling such practices and shedding light on issues pertinent to the criteria and methodology employed by the oral skills teachers in assessing the undergraduate students' spoken output, the present research might help inform policymakers, curriculum designers and educators about the areas to be improved and problems to be addressed with regard to oral assessment at the aforementioned department.

As background to the present study, a few key concepts are discussed in respect of language assessment literacy and oral assessment. A number of fundamental considerations in oral assessment are also presented, with a special focus on the criteria and methodology adopted for assessing EFL students' spoken output.

1. Literature review

1.1. Defining language assessment literacy

Language assessment literacy is a term that was coined for the first time by Stiggins (1991: 53). He defines assessment literacy as an “understanding of educational assessment to make use of this knowledge in measuring learner achievement”. Stiggins (1995) claims that teachers who are assessment literate know well ‘what’ to assess, ‘why’ to assess and ‘how’ to assess, can predict the assessment obstacles and problems which may face them, and can equally find adequate solutions to such problems. Language assessment literacy is considered as a repertoire of competences which involves knowing how to employ assessment methods and adequate tools at a certain point of time, in a way that enables teachers to understand, construct assessment tasks and analyze the obtained data (Stiggins, 1999; Inbar-Lourie, 2013; Pill & Harding, 2013).

Webb (2002) views language assessment literacy from a different perspective, shifting focus from the evaluation process and teachers to the learning process. In this line, he reports that language assessment literacy is the knowledge needed about how to assess students in what they know, and how they can put it into practice. Davies (2008) puts forward an approach to assessment literacy highlighting two paramount aspects: skills and knowledge. According to him, ‘skills’ refer to the practical know-how in assessment and construction. ‘Knowledge’, on the other hand, refers to the “relevant background in measurement and language description” (p. 328).

Fulcher’s definition of language assessment literacy is one of the most comprehensive. He defines it as “the knowledge, skills and abilities required to design, develop, maintain or evaluate large-scale standardized and / or classroom-based tests, familiarity with test processes, and awareness of principles and concepts” (2012: 125). Fulcher’s definition is broad enough to move from knowledge and skills of assessment to include other aspects (historical, socio-cultural, political and philosophical), and to highlight the effect which language assessment literacy has on individuals and societies. Thus, language assessment literacy is “the ability to place knowledge, skills, processes, principles and concepts within wider historical, social, political and philosophical frameworks [...] to evaluate the role and impact of testing on society, institutions, and individuals” (Fulcher, 2012: 125). He suggests “practical knowledge, theoretical and procedural knowledge, and socio-historical understanding” as language assessment literacy (Fulcher, 2012: 126).

Taylor (2013: 46) proposes eight levels of knowledge required by language assessment literacy: “knowledge of theory, technical skills, principles and concepts, language pedagogy, sociocultural values, local practices, personal beliefs / attitudes, and lastly, scores and decision-making”. Such model is useful as a framework for various research works. It has also opened the door to further research on conceptualization of language assessment literacy.

Up to the present, there has been little agreement among assessment professionals on the components, criteria, skills and knowledge required from teachers so that they could be described as assessment literate. Assessment researchers, however, agree on the fact that language assessment literacy is an integral part of teaching which is highly necessary for teachers (Stiggins, 1995; Stiggins, 1999; Webb, 2002; Davies, 2008; Taylor, 2009; Fulcher, 2012; Harding & Kremmel, 2016; Kremmel & Harding, 2020). Various works, such as those of Stiggins (1999), Volante & Fazio (2007), Herrera & Macias (2015), DeLuca, LaPointe-McEwan & Luhanga (2016), cast a great deal of light on language teachers’ lack of awareness and skills in assessing students’ oral language. The aforementioned studies stress the need for providing language teachers with

adequate training in order to raise their awareness and build up their competence in assessing students' spoken output.

1.2. Fundamental considerations in oral assessment

Oral language is a complex phenomenon in itself, and assessing EFL students' oral English has invariably been a tricky issue in the field of language assessment. Teachers vary in their assessment of EFL students' spoken output depending on a number of factors, on top of which are the criteria and methodology they use in their assessment task. To date, much research has been carried out in order to establish criteria for assessing EFL students' oral language. Harris (1969) introduces a sample oral English rating sheet presenting a set of criteria for evaluating learners' oral English: vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, fluency and comprehension. Underhill (1987: 26) puts forward a rating scale for assessing spoken language, which comprises five basic elements: "very limited personal conversation, personal and limited social conversation, basic competence for social and travel use, elementary professional competence, and general proficiency of common topics".

One of the paramount aspects to be considered in rating scales is scoring. Farhady, Jafarpur & Birjandi (2001) point out that scoring could be holistic or discrete depending on the assessment objectives. If scoring is conducted holistically, the student is more likely to receive either 'excellent', 'good', 'fair' or 'pass / fail' scores based on the teacher's overall impression. On the other hand, if scoring is done discretely, the learner's oral output is rated on specific scales with particular aspects; for instance, structure, word choice, pronunciation and fluency. In the same mainstream, Hughes (2003) suggests a checklist rating learners on a scale of five points: accent, grammar, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension.

So far, the focus has been on the assessment procedure as being developed and rated by the teacher with no regard to student self-assessment. However, more recent research sheds a great deal of light on the interactional aspect of language and students' awareness of the assessment procedure. In task-based language assessment, language use is approached in more complex and realistic settings than in mere discrete language aspects assessment. This calls for the incorporation of social, topical and pragmatic knowledge with the knowledge of the aforementioned language aspects (Mislevy, Steinberg & Allmond, 2002). Lambert's (2003) approach to oral assessment is interactional, either. He asserts that recordings of the learners' interviews can provide a justification for the assigned scores.

Various researchers claim that test scores are considerably affected by the approach or method employed for measuring students' output (Bachman & Palmer, 1981; Henning, 1983; Bachman, 1990). Information gathered from various methods is required in order to arrive at a more dynamic and richer picture of the assessment construct (Chalhoub-Deville, 1996). Although careful consideration should be assigned to the selection of assessment tasks, scoring procedures are equally critical and need to be implemented carefully. Test scoring is one of the major sources of potential irrelevant variance which may influence score interpretation. Oral assessment tasks are human-scored, so the influence of the teacher on such scores is a potential source of error which can affect students' scores (Chalhoub-Deville, 1996).

2. The study: participants, research method and data collection instrument

Twenty-nine teachers of oral skills at the Department of English, Faculty of Languages, Constantine 1 Frères Mentouri University, participated in the current study. These teachers taught oral skills during the academic year 2021-2022 or at some point in their career. Most of the participants' teaching experience (23 teachers) ranged between six and ten years in general. Besides, almost all of them (26 teachers) taught more than one undergraduate level (first, second and / third year).

In order to get insights into the participants' actual oral assessment practices, a descriptive quantitative method was employed. For collecting data, a teacher questionnaire was administered to twenty-nine teachers of oral skills at the aforementioned department. The questionnaire consists of seventeen questions organized around five major sections:

- Section 1: Difficulties of oral assessment;
- Section 2: Teachers' criteria for oral assessment;
- Section 3: Teachers' methodology in oral assessment;
- Section 4: Teachers' collaboration in oral assessment; and
- Section 5: Teachers' views on their oral assessment competence and significance of teacher training.

3. Results and discussion

The findings of the present study are discussed in relevance to the aforementioned five sections.

SECTION 1: Difficulties of oral assessment

- Question: How do you find the oral assessment task?

	N	%
Very easy	/	/
Easy	/	/
Neutral	/	/
Difficult	23	79.31
Very difficult	06	20.69
Total	29	100

Table 1. Difficulty of the oral assessment task

Table 1 shows that most of the teachers, comprising 79.31%, acknowledged the difficulty of the oral assessment task. 20.69% considered the latter as 'very difficult'. This confirms that the process of assessing students' spoken output creates a challenge to teachers, and thus requires more careful planning, implementation and reviewing, as it is advocated in research (Hughes, 2002; Hazen, 2020).

- Question: If you choose 'Difficult' or 'Very difficult,' is it due to:

	N (out of 29)	%
The difficulty in selecting criteria for assessing the speaking skill?	26	89.66
The difficulty in selecting appropriate methodology for oral language assessment?	21	72.40
Large class size	18	62.07
The difficulty in defining the complex nature of the speaking skill?	15	51.72
The involvement of such other factors as listening abilities, tone interpretation and reasoning abilities?	09	31.03
Time management / constraints	07	24.13

Table 2. Reasons for difficulty of oral assessment

As evidenced by most of the participants' feedback presented in Table 2, oral assessment was considered a 'difficult' task due to a number of reasons, most notably the difficulty in selecting appropriate criteria for assessing the speaking skill (89.66%), the difficulty in selecting appropriate methodology (72.40%), large class size (62.07%) and the difficulty in defining the complex nature of the speaking skill (51.72%). The involvement of other factors or skills, such as listening, tone interpretation and reasoning abilities as well as the time management / constraints factor, seem to be the least troublesome, with 31.03% and 24.13% respectively.

SECTION 2: Teachers' criteria for oral assessment

- Question: What criteria do you adopt in your oral assessment?

	N (out of 29)	%
Accuracy (of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation)	29	100
Comprehension of other speakers' oral language	28	96.55
Fluency	24	82.76
Quality and organization of ideas	21	72.04
Use of certain speaking strategies such as filler words, rephrasing or substituting the lost / unknown words for other simpler equivalents	19	65.52
Non-verbal skills or factors such as readiness to speak out, confidence and turn-taking	15	51.72
Argumentative, reasoning and critical thinking skills	08	27.58
Other	03	10.34

Table 3. Teachers' criteria for oral assessment

This question sought to cast light on the criteria adopted by the participants in their assessment of EFL students' oral output. According to Table 3, the top four criteria highlighted by the majority of the participants were accuracy of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation (100%), comprehension of other speakers' oral language (96.55%), fluency (82.76%), and quality and organization of ideas (72.04%). Slightly more than half the teachers opted for the use of certain speaking strategies such as filler words, rephrasing or substituting the lost / unknown words for other simpler equivalents (65.52%), and non-verbal skills or factors such as readiness to speak out, confidence and turn-taking (51.72%). Argumentative, reasoning and critical thinking skills were adopted by a minority of 27.58% despite their high significance which is highlighted in research (Mislevy, Steinberg & Allmond, 2002; Lambert, 2003; Herrera & Macias, 2015).

- Question: What are the sources of your criteria?

	N (out of 29)	%
You (your experience or personal point of view)	23	79.31
Your colleagues or the staff of oral skills teachers	12	41.38
Books and educational sources	11	37.93
Your former teachers of oral skills	02	06.90

Table 4. Sources of teachers' criteria for oral assessment

When asked about the major sources of their oral assessment criteria, the largest part of the teachers, making up 79.31%, cited themselves (their experience or personal points of view), as revealed in Table 4. 41.38% claimed to have adopted their criteria from their colleagues or the staff of oral skills teachers they worked with. Books and educational sources were employed by a limited proportion: 37.93%. The teachers' sources of oral assessment criteria should be more inclusive of more reliable pedagogical materials or references if the aim is to attain more accurate assessment (Alharbi & Surur, 2019; Hazen, 2020).

SECTION 3: Teachers' methodology in oral assessment

- Question: Is your oral assessment:

	N	%
Formative (continuous, throughout the semester / year)?	/	/
Summative (occasional tests and examinations at the end of teaching)?	/	/
Both	29	100
Total	29	100

Table 5. Types of oral assessment carried out by teachers

According to Table 5, all the teachers involved in the study reported that they undertook both types of assessment: formative and summative. It is highly crucial for students to be assessed continuously throughout the academic semester, and not merely have occasional tests or examinations at the end of the course. Summative assessment on its own does not enable teachers to figure out the extent to which they have achieved progress so that they can make the necessary adjustments (Chand & Pillay, 2024).

- Question: Why do you carry out oral assessment? (Please, rank the following reasons according to importance: 1 being the most important, and 5 being the least important.)

	N (out of 29)	%
To figure out the extent to which you have attained the outlined teaching goals	26	89.66
To assign scores	23	79.31
To see whether the content and methodology being employed are effective and interesting for students	19	65.52
To diagnose students' oral language weaknesses	14	48.28
To help students see the progress they have achieved	07	24.13

Table 6. Teachers' reasons for undertaking oral assessment

The current question was intended to uncover the teachers' reasons for carrying out oral assessment. Table 6 exhibits that the majority stressed two reasons: figuring out the extent to which they attained the outlined teaching goals (89.66%), and assigning scores (79.31%). Although all the teachers claimed to carry out formative assessment, as indicated in their answers to the previous question, priority was given to assigning scores as it was ranked by a considerable proportion of the participants (79.31%) as the second most significant reason why teachers undertook the oral assessment task. Furthermore, other reasons highlighted by smaller percentages of the teachers included checking whether the content and methodology

being employed were effective and interesting for students (65.52%), diagnosing students' oral language weaknesses (48.28%), and helping students see the progress they achieved (24.13%).

- Question: How often do you assign scores in your assessment of students' oral language?

	N	%
Often	15	51.72
Sometimes	12	41.38
Rarely	02	06.90
Never	/	/
Total	29	100

Table 7. Frequency of assigning scores in oral assessment

Slightly more than half the participants (51.72%) mentioned that they 'often' provided scores in their assessment of students' oral language, as demonstrated in Table 7. 41.38% declared that they did 'sometimes'. Keeping scores of students' spoken output is imperative and useful in the teaching process, but it should not always be prioritized in order not to create a stressful learning environment for students. The latter need to appreciate learning for the sake of it, not only for gaining good grades. Moreover, teachers' focus should include other equally important aspects such as ensuring a relaxing atmosphere for learning and trying out new ways and materials that appeal to their students' interests. Teachers should also encourage students to practise their oral language more often and enjoy exchanging information without having to constantly worry about the scores they may eventually get (Hughes, 2002; 2003).

- Question: Do you follow a particular approach to oral assessment?

	N	%
Yes	18	62.07
No	11	37.93
Total	29	100

Table 8. Teachers' approach to oral assessment

Results in Table 8 exhibit that more than half the informants, making up 62.07%, said that they followed an approach in their assessment of students' oral language, whereas only a limited percentage (37.93%) said they did not. Selection of the right approach to oral assessment determines the extent to which this task can be accurate and successful (Bachman & Palmer, 1981; Henning, 1983; Bachman, 1990).

- Question: If 'Yes', please, mention it.

The present question was meant to tap into the teachers' awareness of the approach they claimed to follow in their response to the previous question. Strikingly, out of the 18 teachers who claimed to adopt a particular approach in their oral assessment, only 07 listed the approach:

- The Communicative Approach / CLT (05 teachers);
- The contemporary natural approach (01 teacher); and
- The Direct Approach (01 teacher).

The rest of the participants who said they followed a specific approach (11) did not provide any answer. This is rather questionable!

- Question: In your oral assessment, do you:

	N	%
Use new types of tasks which students have not dealt with during the teaching / learning sessions?	16	55.17
Use the same types of tasks carried out during the teaching / learning sessions?	13	44.83
Total	29	100

Table 9. Types of tasks employed by teachers in oral assessment

In their assessment of students' spoken output, more than half the teachers (55.17%) pointed out that they employed new types of tasks which learners had not been introduced to during learning sessions. There seems to be a mismatch between what students do in the speaking class, as part of their learning activities, and what they actually face in oral assessment. Pedagogically speaking, students should not be introduced to new types of tasks in their assessment, but rather need to get involved in tasks which they have been familiar with in advance, in their usual learning sessions (Hughes, 2002; Alharbi & Surur, 2019).

SECTION 4: Teachers' collaboration in oral assessment

- Question: How often do you have meetings with the staff of oral skills teachers to discuss issues related to students' oral assessment?

	N	%
Regularly	/	/
Occasionally	08	27.57
Once before examinations	20	68.98
Never	01	03.45
Total	29	100

Table 10. Frequency of teachers' meetings

With regard to teacher collaboration, more than half the informants, forming 68.98%, declared that they had meetings with the staff of oral skills teachers once before examinations, while only 27.57% said they held meetings 'occasionally'. Having regular meetings to discuss various issues related to oral assessment (such as criteria, methodology and content) is worthwhile in helping teachers to have a framework for their assessment and create more homogeneity in their educational setting (Alharbi & Surur, 2019; Hazen, 2020; Hussain et al, 2021).

- Question: Do these meetings usually result in general conclusions and decisions on oral assessment in terms of criteria, methodology and other relevant practices?

	N	%
Yes	12	41.38
No	17	58.62
Total	29	100

Table 11. Teachers' meeting outcomes

Table 11 reveals that out of the teachers who claimed, in their responses to the previous question, to hold meetings in order to discuss oral assessment issues, the bigger part, making up 58.62%, mentioned that their meetings did not result in general conclusions and decisions on oral assessment in terms of criteria, methodology and other relevant practices. Teachers' meetings should have an agenda, specific aims and expected outcomes to attain at the end (Alharbi & Surur, 2019; Hussain et al, 2021).

- Question: If 'Yes', do you follow such decisions later on in your oral assessment?

	N	%
Often	04	33.34
Sometimes	07	58.33
Rarely	01	08.33
Never	/	/
Total	29	100

Table 12. Teachers' commitment to meeting decisions

In relation to whether the teachers followed the meeting final decisions later on in their oral assessment, Table 12 shows that more than half the participants of those who said 'yes' in the previous question (58.33%) did only 'sometimes'. Very few teachers (33.34%) said they committed to such group decisions which resulted from meetings. Teacher collaborative work can ensure more homogeneity in oral assessment. The language assessment process in itself is far from being easy. Therefore, it is necessary that teachers coordinate their work and efforts as a team and come out with uniform criteria and methodology of oral assessment. This can contribute to a more homogeneous assessment system (Hughes, 2002; Hazen, 2020).

SECTION 5: Teachers' views on their oral assessment competence and significance of teacher training

- Question: How would you rate your competence in assessing students' spoken output?

	N	%
Very incompetent	05	17.25
Incompetent	10	34.48
Undecided	06	20.69
Competent	08	27.58
Very competent	/	/
Total	29	100

Table 13. Teachers' self-rating of their oral assessment competence

According to Table 13, the biggest proportion of the respondents ranked themselves as 'incompetent' (34.48%) and 'very incompetent' (17.25%) in oral assessment. A percentage of 20.69% were undecided, while only a minority of 27.58% depicted themselves as 'competent'. This confirms, again, the major challenge which the oral assessment task creates to oral skills teachers.

- Question: Have you ever received any form of training in how to assess students' spoken language?

	N	%
Yes	04	13.79
No	25	86.21
Total	29	100

Table 14. Teachers' training in oral assessment

The overwhelming majority of the teachers, 86.21%, acknowledged the fact that they did not have any form of training in oral assessment. Enrolling English language teachers in training programs is an inevitable measure that has to be taken at educational institutions, especially universities (Alharbi & Surur, 2019; Smit, 2020; Hazen, 2020; Hussain et al, 2021).

- Question: Do you need to have professional training in order to develop your oral assessment literacy?

	N	%
Yes	23	79.31
No	06	20.69
Total	29	100

Table 15. Teachers' views on their need for training in oral assessment

Most of the informants (79.31%) stressed their need for professional training in knowledge and skills of oral assessment, as demonstrated in Table 15. Indeed, the teachers should be provided with adequate training in developing systematic oral assessment criteria and methodology in order to attain more accurate and insightful assessment of students' spoken language, as it is recommended in various research works such as those of Alharbi & Surur (2019), Smit (2020), Hazen (2020), and Hussain et al. (2021).

- Question: Would you like to add any further comments or suggestions related to your actual practices, criteria or methodology adopted in oral assessment?

Sixteen teachers responded to this question. Their answers could be grouped into two categories. The first one stressed the earnest need for teacher training programs, in addition to the organization of regular professional workshops, which may pave the way for teachers to expand conceptions and practices in oral assessment and keep up-to-date with its most recent criteria, methods and techniques. The other category of teachers emphasized the high necessity for having a uniform assessment criteria at their department. These teachers expressed their dissatisfaction with the inhomogeneity in students' grades due to the fact that every teacher worked in isolation with their own criteria of assessing students' spoken output.

The analysis of the results obtained from the present study has revealed that the participants exhibited inconsistent oral assessment practices. The latter did not consider the fundamental theoretical frameworks and procedural constructs of oral assessment. Most of these teachers were found incompetent in developing

systematic oral assessment criteria and methodology, as reflected through their unsystematic and random practices in undertaking oral assessment. Such a situation could only result in inaccurate forms of assessment in the classroom, hence the failure of attaining the pedagogical objectives outlined at the outset of the teaching / learning process, as indicated in various research works (Farhady, Jafarpur & Birjandi, 2001; Hughes, 2002; Herrera & Macias, 2015; Hazen, 2020). On the other hand, the present problematic situation considerably contributes to more inhomogeneity in the entire assessment system at the Department of English, Constantine 1 Frères Mentouri University.

Furthermore, the teachers were found unaware of the true purposes of oral assessment, in that they gave much more priority to scoring students' oral performance instead of focusing on other equally significant purposes. It is vital to recognize that besides scoring learners' performance, oral assessment is basically carried out to see the extent to which the teaching objectives have been attained, to check whether the content and methodology being employed are effective and interesting for students, to diagnose learners' oral language weaknesses and strengths, and to help students see the progress they have achieved so far. A combination of these purposes is required; no purpose should be sacrificed for another. This way, teachers could attain richer and more dynamic forms of oral assessment. The latter is a challenging and demanding task, and thus requires from oral skills teachers more careful planning, implementation and reviewing (Hughes, 2002; Chand & Pillay, 2024).

4. Implications of the research

A number of implications drawn from the current study are put forward. Reference is made to some previous studies in order to back up the highlighted implications of the present study:

- Oral assessment is a multifaceted task which creates challenges for teachers due to various reasons, mainly the difficulty in selecting appropriate criteria and methodology for assessing students' spoken output. Therefore, it requires more careful planning, implementation and reviewing (Hughes, 2002; Hazen, 2020).
- Teachers' sources of oral assessment criteria should be more inclusive of more reliable pedagogical materials or references, and not be restricted to their personal experience, if the aim is to attain more accurate and insightful assessment (Alharbi & Surur, 2019; Hazen, 2020).
- It is highly crucial for students to be assessed continuously throughout the academic semester, and not merely have occasional tests or examinations at the end of the course. Summative assessment on its own does not enable teachers to figure out the extent to which they have achieved progress so that they can make the necessary adjustments (Chand & Pillay, 2024).
- Keeping scores of students' spoken output is imperative and very useful in the teaching process; however, it should not always be prioritized in order not to create a stressful learning environment for students. The latter need to appreciate learning for the sake of it, not only for gaining good scores (Hughes, 2002; 2003; Smit, 2020; Hazen, 2020).
- Oral assessment is not conducted only to assign scores, but also to figure out the extent to which the teacher has attained the outlined teaching goals; to see whether the content and methodology being employed are effective and interesting for students; to diagnose students' oral language weaknesses and strengths; and to help students see the progress they have achieved (Hughes, 2002; Herrera & Macias, 2015; Smit, 2020).

- Selection of the right approach to oral assessment determines the extent to which this task can be accurate and successful (Bachman & Palmer, 1981; Henning, 1983; Bachman, 1990).
- In oral assessment, students should not be introduced to thoroughly new types of tasks, but rather need to get involved in tasks which they have been familiar with in advance, in their usual learning sessions. There should not be a mismatch between what students do in the speaking class, as part of their learning activities, and what they actually face in oral assessment (Hughes, 2002; Alharbi & Surur, 2019).
- Organizing regular meetings, with a specific agenda and aims, to discuss various issues pertinent to oral assessment is viable in helping teachers to have a framework for their assessment and to devise uniform criteria and methodology (Alharbi & Surur, 2019; Hazen, 2020; Hussain et al, 2021).
- Providing teachers with professional training in developing systematic oral assessment criteria and methodology can help attain more accurate and insightful assessment of students' spoken output, and thus contribute to creating more homogeneity in the educational setting (Alharbi & Surur, 2019; Hazen, 2020; Hussain et al, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Oral assessment, being a multidimensional task, has often created challenges for educators and remains a subject of contention among researchers. Such challenges underscore the need for investigating the teachers' actual practices, criteria and methodology employed in their oral assessment. The present research work sought to investigate the actual practices, criteria and methodology adopted by the oral skills teachers at the Department of English, Constantine 1 Frères Mentouri University, in assessing the undergraduate students' spoken output.

The results of the current investigation have demonstrated that the participants' actual practices were inconsistent. The teachers' assessment of the undergraduate students' spoken output was not based on research insights, but was rather impressionistic and inhomogeneous. Most of the teachers were found unaware of how to develop systematic criteria and methodology. The latter are highly imperative to make accurate inferences and equally achieve more comprehensive judgment of EFL students' spoken output, as highlighted in a number of previous studies (Hughes, 2002; Harding & Kremmel, 2016; Alharbi & Surur, 2019; Hazen, 2020; Hussain et al., 2021). It has also been found that the teachers dealt with oral assessment as a process of assigning scores instead of an integral part of teaching which should be carried out continuously and systematically throughout the year, as advocated in research (Hughes, 2002; 2003; Smit, 2020; Chand & Pillay, 2024).

In order to address the current problematic situation, teacher training as well as collaboration are highly recommended in the present study as they are in various other research works, such as those of Alharbi & Surur (2019), Hazen (2020), and Hussain et al. (2021). Teacher training can be an effective remedy for the teachers' poor competence in devising systematic oral assessment criteria and methodology. It helps the teachers to be more insightful, analytical, flexible, and more importantly systematic in the way they carry out the oral assessment task. Moreover, teacher collaboration is earnestly called for in order to coordinate the work of the staff of the oral skills teachers at the Department of English, Constantine 1 Frères Mentouri University, in an attempt to create a uniform assessment system, mainly in terms of criteria and methodology. Professional teacher training accompanied by adequate teacher collaboration can result in more conformity and homogeneity in the oral assessment system at the Algerian university.

The findings of the present study may serve as a foundation for fostering teacher training programs, curriculum development and educational policies related to EFL assessment. The study aspires to pave the way for positive changes in oral assessment practices, ensuring that they align with the outlined educational goals and contribute to the holistic development of the undergraduate students' language proficiency. Ultimately, it is worth mentioning that this is a small-scale study on the Algerian university EFL teachers' oral assessment practices, criteria and methodology, involving only a sample of twenty-nine teachers at one department. The present findings can gain higher scientific reliability with the support of more results taken from further studies which can be conducted in the future by other researchers in the field. Such future studies may involve a variety of participants (oral skills teachers) on a larger scale from various universities across Algeria.

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