

## Can an Oral Test Change Teachers' and Students' Strategies and Materials?

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### Abstract

This paper aims to provide EFL teachers in the Algerian secondary schools practical insights to overcome the array of anomalies present in their teaching and assessment practices that resulted in negative effects on their outcomes. In order to achieve this objective, an oral test was incorporated in the developed achievement tests. The oral test was put into practice on a selected sample that consisted of eight EFL teachers and classes in the Biskra region. In the investigation, a qualitative study was carried out, employing observation as a data collection method. The number of sessions observed was estimated to 55 during one school year. In order to minimize the differences in observation and make teaching comparable, only four observed classes were used in this study. To collect and analyse data, the researcher opted for the Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching (COLT). Procedures for data analysis consisted in global viewing of the lessons, general coding of all the observed lessons, sorting and putting the interaction patterns into the observation schedule, and providing detailed description of the organization structures. In terms of the analysis of findings, this study had revealed that the incorporated, oral test had had interesting effects on teachers' teaching strategies and materials.

**Key words:** EFL classes, language assessment, oral Test, teaching materials, teaching strategies

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## 1. Study Background

In this study, an analysis of the Algerian teachers' and students' practices in EFL classes generated a number of interesting findings in relation to classroom assessment, and its effects on relevant learning strategies and materials. Specifically, teachers' claims are in agreement with the negative views expressed by students. That is, the testing instruments used to assess their attainment and progress in English language have a constraining and distorting influence on the content and methodology of teaching this foreign language, as well as on its learning.

The majority of the Algerian teachers believe that the current used assessment tools influenced the content of their teaching and classroom assessment. This means that those adopting these testing tools paid more attention to grammar and vocabulary. And, they also focused only on some written sub-skills, neglecting totally to teach and assess the oral skill throughout the school year. This practice would have encouraged teachers to use non-communicative methodology in ordinary classes, which markedly contrasts with the underlying principles of the adopted teaching methodology that prelude communicative teaching.

According to the atmosphere that reigned in almost all the secondary schools in EFL classes in Algeria, whole class activities dominate in all the classes. This suggests a fairly traditional method where the teacher is in charge of the events in the classroom. Whole class activities mainly consist of the teachers' interaction with one or several students, very rarely students get to lead the activity. This is a common feature for all the classes in the study. Similarly, individual work is not common in those class activities and a total dominance of the teacher talk, instead of the interaction between teacher and student, and student with student.

Equally so, this reality regarding the teacher teaching and the students learning strategies significantly indicated that these strategies suggested that there is a negative influence of the used assessment instruments on the oral skills expected to be developed by the students. This fact is evident in the claims made by teachers themselves that the scarcity of work in speaking is due to that they do not emphasise on that skill in class. In addition, evidence on teachers' practice shows that teaching materials used have an impact on the methods teachers use. That is, one of the reasons that they do not employ communicative methodology in their classes is because of the nature of the pedagogical materials employed.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The Nature of Speaking

To display the nature of speaking skill, Luoma (2004) discusses the speaking ability from two perspectives: providing a linguistic description and considering the interactive and social features.

From a linguistic perspective, the special nature of spoken grammar and vocabulary are emphasised on. Spoken grammar implies that speech is organised into short idea units, which are linked together by thematic connectors and repetitions, as well as syntactic connectors. Spoken vocabulary includes fully comprehensive words in speaking situations since the correspondent words talk about people, things, or activities that can be seen or because they are familiar to the speaker. On the same idea, Roger (2005) identifies the major characteristics of spoken language. For him, the spoken language contains simpler utterances with more context related features.

This kind of language is also referred as frequent use of the vernacular, interrogative, tails, adjacency pairs and question tags which Cameron (2001) and Carter et al. (2000) interpret as dialogue facilitators. McCarthy and O'Keeffe (2004) and Humston (2002) talk rather about utterances that are prefabricated formulaic sequences. For Schmitt (2002) and McCarthy (1998), these utterances can be retrieved and used immediately during spontaneous instances of dialogues.

In the same vein, Brown and Yule (1983) provide an interesting interpretation on the nature of the speaking skill. They distinguish between spoken and written language (cited in Nunan, 1989: 26-27). All written language is characterised by well-formed sentences; whereas, spoken language consists of sentences, often fragmentary utterances, in a range of pronunciation.

## 2.2 Assessing the Speaking Skill

When assessing the speaking skill, literature indicates that important criteria have to be taken into consideration. First, there is a need to begin with the identification of the purpose, or purposes, the test should realise. Bygate (2001) acknowledges truth that generally the purpose of testing speaking is to yield an accurate judgment of how test takers carry out successful conversation, involving both of comprehension and speech production.

The second criterion is to grasp well the sub-skills that make-up the speaking skill. These mainly concern the ability to use fluency sub-skills, such as coping strategies, interactive management, negotiation of meaning, and discourse management. The third criterion is to define as clearly as possible the instruction. Underhill (1992) sees that, "clear instructions are crucial; otherwise test takers will test familiarity with the test procedures and not the test takers' performance in that skill" (p. 40).

The last criterion to consider while assessing speaking is to perform the test in a suitable environment. According to Zhao (1998), there are two factors that can affect test takers' oral performance, one being of their failure to find suitable words to express themselves and the other being their fear of making mistakes. Underhill (1992) corroborates this assumption and advocates that truly successful speaking test should present a human approach. That is, a test developer has to make testing a challenge, instructive, and even an enjoyable experience.

## 2.3 Designing Speaking Tasks

In designing speaking tasks, test developers claim one of the key decisions is to ask the question, "what will the speakers do with language". In other words, this means to elicit exact nature of the speaking task. Literature indicates that ways of arrangements are essential to provide well-designed speaking tasks. A general consideration sees the design of these tasks in this way. First, individual, or one-to-one interviews are those types of testing techniques that enable to assess students individually. Its advantage is that it is flexible since its correspondent questions can be adapted to each student's performance. In addition, this technique can allow the test developer a good control over what happens in the test.

Second, the speaking skill can be performed through pair tasks. Swain (2001) mentions that there are three arguments in favour of this technique. The first is to include more types of talk and therefore broaden the evidence gathered about the student's skills. The second argument

has to do with the relationship between testing and teaching, either in the sense to influence teaching, or as to encourage more pair work in class. The third argument is economical since testing in pairs enables teachers to reduce the amount of time for the test.

Third, it is to arrange tasks through group interaction. Fulcher (1996) claims that interactional tasks are frequently welcomed and generally well received by students since such a type of testing usually makes students able to say more about the matter they are tested in, and thus enables them to appear willing to communicate efficiently. The final way to assess speaking can be realised through pedagogic tasks, or real-life situation. Such tasks are those which simulate language outside the classroom. Their main advantage is that they can generate some fairly genuine social interaction. This often leads to avoid artificiality.

### **3. A Rationale for the Incorporated Oral Test**

Given the conclusion discussed and reached before, the researcher has found it essential to set some guidelines to remedy the number of anomalies pinpointed in the assessment practices of EFL teachers in the Algerian secondary school. These mainly concern the following adjustments:

- the incorporation of an oral test in the achievement test,
- the revision and enrichment of the test methods,
- a creation of a balance in the distribution of test-items and test tasks in the test,
- a review of the instructions, and
- the development of a more consistent scoring scale.

In what follows, some crucial components about what a test developer has to consider when designing a useful oral test is going to be displayed. In brief, these major components include the following:

#### **3.1. Objectives**

The categorisation of the objectives to assess speaking relies on three fundamental types:

- a. Informational purposes
- b. Interactional purposes
- c. Purposes in managing interaction

#### **3.2. Types of Materials**

The types of materials to testing this skill should correspond with tasks, such as:

- a. Presentation
- b. Discussion
- c. Conversation
- d. Interview

#### **3.3. Possible Methods**

Potential test methods to testing this skill include examples as follows:

- a. Verbal essay
- b. Oral presentation
- c. Information transfer
- d. Interaction tasks

#### 4. The Study

This study discusses whether the incorporation of an oral test had any effects on teachers' and students' uses of learning strategies and materials. The methodology used in this research aimed to capture the reality, variation, and complexity of changes in classroom practice of the participants.

##### 4.1. Research Aims and Questions

This research had the potential aims of gathering evidence in order to:

- Identify the aspect of teachers' behaviours in the classroom as a reaction to the incorporation of an oral test. These included:
  - Teachers' reactions towards, and perceptions of, the new test;
  - Teachers' materials; and
  - Teachers' attitudes towards aspects of learning.
  
- Display students' reactions towards, perceptions of, the oral test. These included:
  - Students' learning context;
  - Students' attitudes towards aspects of learning; and
  - Students' perceptions of the achievement tests that incorporated the oral test

Based on the problematic and these research aims, the research questions in this investigation were formulated as follows:

**RQ1.** What is the scope of influence of the oral test on teaching strategies?

**RS2.** What is the scope of influence of the oral test on teaching materials?

##### 4.2. Methodology

###### 4.2.1. Research Approach

A qualitative approach was employed in this study. In specific terms, such a type of approach seeks to ascertain to probe the perceptions of, attitudes towards, and opinions regarding the subject under investigation.

###### 4.2.2. Research Strategies

A research strategy is a plan of actions to achieve a specific goal (Denscombe, 2010). In the current study, two research strategies were employed: A case study and ethnography.

First, a case study is a specific instance that is frequently designed to illustrate a more general principle (Nisbet - & Watt, 1984). In other words, it is the study of an instance in action (Adelman et al., 1980). In our study, the choice of this research strategy is justified by the idea that the latter allows the provision of an in-depth, complex, and thick description of all the participants.

Second, an ethnography strategy is an inquiry in which the researcher studies a group in a natural setting by collecting observational data with the aim of getting an in-depth understanding of how individuals make sense of their lived reality (Creswell, 2009; Hesse-Biber - & Leavy, 2006).

###### 4.2.3. Population and Research Sample

The population in this study included six secondary schools from fifteen in the Biskra region (Algeria). These six secondary schools comprised 35% of the whole population, eight EFL classes were selected to take part in the investigation. All these classes were from the

second year level. The rationale for this choice was to avoid examination classes where in exam pressure is usually present.

In precise terms, eight teachers and classes were observed. The number of sessions observed was estimated to 55 during one school year. In order to minimize the difference in observation to make teaching more comparable, only four classes were used for the final study.

#### 4.2.4. Data Collection Method

An observation research is indispensable to collect systematically information about what the researcher observed in the classrooms. In this study, the researcher opted for the Communication Orientation of Language Teaching, (COLT), as a data collection method. In terms of structure, The COLT scheme is divided into two parts, labelled A and B (Spada - & Frohlic, 1995). Part A describes classroom events. In part B, there is focus on verbal exchange between the teacher and students

For analysis, each activity is timed so that a calculation of the percentage of time spent on the COLT features can be determined. The use of check marks of those features describing the activity makes it possible to get an overall picture of each event in the classroom.

In our study, Part A of the COLT was employed since a classroom analysis at the level of our study sought to describe whether there is communication between teacher and students, with students. Part B was not adopted because the nature of the investigation is not on the language issue (see **Table 1**).

**Table 1: Classroom Observation Scheme in this Study**

Time	Participant organization		Activity type	Activity content	Material used					
	Whole group	individual			Type			Purpose		
	T to S/C	S to S/C			W W	A	V	P	S	N

**T to S/C:** Teacher to students or class as a whole

**S to S/C:** Students to students or class as a whole

**W:** Written

**A:** Audio

**V:** Visual

**P:** Pedagogical

**S:** Semi-Pedagogical

**N:** Non-Pedagogical

In practical terms, the observation scheme consisted in five categories: Time, Participant Organization, Activity Content, Activity Type, and Material Used. To put this scheme into practice, the researcher proceeded to code the categories. The researcher had to tick under Participant Organization and Materials Used during the observation.

To pilot and validate this observation instrument, the researcher scheduled arranged sessions in advance with EFL teachers. It is worth mentioning that these teachers were not part of the final sample in this research. They volunteered to co-attend the observation sessions with the researcher during the pilot stage. Their presence was to compare the field notes they took with those taken by the principal researcher. At the end, the observation scheme for this study was kept as it was without any modifications.

#### 4.2.5. Data Collection Procedure

Before attending the observation sessions, the researcher informed the observed teachers that his presence was to sit in the back and observe what is happening in the classroom and take notes. He had not to intervene or make comments. In this way, he was a non-participant observer.

### 5. Results and Discussion

The following Section in this paper reports the findings of four from eight teachers observed in this study.

#### 4.3. Participant Organization

**Table 2 Participant Organization on Lesson**

Number of Teacher	Percentage of lesson time				Total
	Whole class T. to S/C	Whole class	Group	Individual	
<b>T1</b>	65%	00%	25%	10%	100%
<b>T2</b>	65%	00%	25%	10%	100%
<b>T3</b>	25%	05%	50%	20%	100%
<b>T4</b>	50%	05%	35%	10%	100%

The findings from the observed classes in this study indicate crucial comments. Three from the four teachers (**T1, T2 and T4**) spent the majority of class time teaching to the whole class since the calculated time from these teachers is estimated to be equal or more than the total time of class work. Individual work is still low although there is a slight increase devoted to that category of work in comparison to what was prevailing before the incorporation of the oral test. The rationale behind spending a considerable amount of class time talking to the whole class is that it is difficult for the teachers to get rid of their practices where they dominated class discussion. In the mean time, the same group of teachers showed a great resistance towards change and innovation from a total dominance to activities where most of the work is carried out in groups or individuals

However, it is worth mentioning that among these teachers **T3** seems to be an exception since this observed teacher succeeded to reduce the time spent for the whole class discussion to

devote much of the work to group activities. Unlike the three teachers, she spent **25%** of her class time only to whole discussion. **50%** of the time is spent to group work, and **20%** to individual tasks. It seems that the purpose of this change towards group and individual works was to provide students with practice opportunities. For her, it is believed that group work helped students learn from each other and gave them more practice opportunities, especially the oral.

#### 4.4. Activity Types and Content as Percentage of Class

The analysis of the observed lessons with four teachers in **Table 3** showed (a) what types of activities were carried out in the lesson and (b) who was holding the floor and in what ways.

**Table 3 Classroom Activities for all the Four Observed Teachers as a Percentage of Class Time**

Activity type	T1	T2	T3	T4
<b>Teacher activities:</b>				
<b>Lecturing</b>	20%	20%	05%	20%
<b>Explaining</b>	25%	15%	10%	20%
<b>Directing</b>	20%	15%	00%	10%
<b>Student activities</b>				
<b>Listening</b>	00%	05%	05%	05%
<b>Reading</b>	05%	05%	00%	05%
<b>Speaking</b>	05%	05%	05%	05%
<b>Writing</b>	00%	05%	00%	05%
<b>Grammar</b>	15%	15%	05%	05%
<b>Vocabulary</b>	05%	05%	05%	05%
<b>Group work</b>	05%	00%	50%	10%
<b>Pair work</b>	00%	05%	10%	05%
<b>Oral work</b>	05%	05%	05%	05%
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%	100%	100%

It could be seen that **T1** was still the predominant focus of the class. **65%** of the lesson time was spent in teaching activities. The remaining **35%** was spent on reading texts, explaining grammar and some oral tasks. For **T2** and **T4**, **50%** of the lesson time was dominated by the teacher activities: lecturing, explaining and directing. The findings in **T2's** and **T4's** showed that there is a slight interest in students' activities. With **T2** even though grammar activities took **15%** of lesson time, pair work, and oral practice shared another **15%**. For **T4**, the same activities were estimated to be **20%**, keeping in mind that this increase in these activities was estimated to the results observed before the incorporation of the oral test.

Contrary to **T1**, **T2** and **T4**, **T3** significantly focused on the student activities. In precise terms, only **15%** of the lesson time was devoted to teacher activities. This directly implies that the teacher reduced the time that the other teachers made in total or partial control of teaching. Instead, **T3** spent **85%** of lesson time to the students' activities. The big amount of this time on this particular student activity is estimated to be **50%**. Obviously, this result indicates that the teacher's strategy has turned from teacher-centred to learner-centred approach. In itself, this is a good indication of communicative teaching. Similar to this finding, **T3** spent **10%** of her time to oral work, this means that through this activity, this teacher encouraged her students to

participate and interact using English language. The remaining time is shared by the other activities, such as listening, speaking, and pair work.

To summarize the findings from **Table 3**, a cross-comparison of the percentage of the time on students' activities in the lessons observed after the implementation of the oral test showed that there was an increase in the time devoted to student activities. Certainly, the results differed from one teacher to another; nonetheless, it seems that the majority of the teachers involved in this study worked to make their lessons more interactive and more learner-centred. For these teachers, this new strategy seeks to provide more opportunities to practise English language inside and outside the classroom.

#### **4.5. Teaching Materials**

This Section summarizes the findings related to the use for teaching materials in classroom teaching. It was found that the most used material by the four observed teachers was the official textbook. However, it is worth mentioning, in addition to this general finding, other materials were also observed to have been employed by the teachers. For instance, **T3** used PowerPoint and slides while she carried out group work tasks. The students were usually urged to watch an extract from a documentary, often chosen with a great care from multimedia sources like internet, and were asked to fulfill some relevant activities. In the case of these situations, the teacher did the job of a guide, and did not interfere or intervene so much, giving the students freedom to perform what they were asked to do. Thus, it was noticed that the students, reducing the amount of the lesson time given to the teacher, did most of the work. Moreover, the use of multimedia was also part of the listening and speaking activities. Being currently exposed to authentic audio-visual materials aided the students to train their ears to native language; and this itself yielded these students and opportunity to try to speak fluently; other teachers were observed to have used some teaching materials that were mainly adopted in lessons teaching reading and writing.

In short, these findings suggest that the observed teachers most of the time relied on the official textbook, but with a progress in the application of the new, oral test, the teachers began incorporating some other new teaching materials that pertain to the kind of teaching materials that correspond to where less teacher talk, and more oral students practices were involved. This simply means that the new oral test had, to some extent, impacted the teacher's use of relevant materials.

#### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This paper has discussed and summarized the findings which comprised the investigation conducted after the incorporation of a new oral test. A review of these findings revealed that a positive influence of the new test occurred regarding some teaching and learning aspects, whereas, at the level of some other aspects, the influence was not as significant as it was expected. It is essential to point out that the short period of time of the new model had been in operation, and other external factors hindering the interaction could explain the obtained results. What did result, however, the results of this study have led to a better understanding of what participants think of the oral test, and its effects on teaching strategies, and teaching materials.

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