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Original Research Article

Attaining Objectivity in the Evaluation of EFL Learners' Oral Production (Case Study of 2nd Year Students – University of Dr. Moulay Tahar – Saida – Algeria)

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Abstract: Evaluating EFL students' oral production is one among the most challenging teaching practices. On the one hand, there is a controversy over what criteria are to be considered the most in the evaluation process. On the other hand, the perceptions students have of their teachers' feedback tend to influence their learning behaviour. The aim of the present paper is to shed light on what relevant methods can help attain objectivity when evaluating EFL learners' speaking. It also tries to know about the sample's (2nd year students of English – university of Saida) stances about and reactions to testing and evaluating their speaking abilities. Two questionnaires were used and addressed to both students and teachers. The results confirm that the nature and the conditions of the evaluation process make it very hard to attain objectivity. In addition, students' affective aspects in relation to evaluation have a relatively negative impact on their learning orientations of the speaking skills.
Keywords: Speaking, evaluation, testing, objectivity, affect.

INTRODUCTION

In English as a foreign language learning (EFL) context learners give more attention to the speaking skills, which they consider the gauge of their English proficiency level. A great deal of research, however, focused on the development of effective strategies and techniques in teaching speaking. Yet, studies on devising appropriate evaluation methods seem to lag far behind the interest granted to developing the learners' oral abilities.

The use of reliable assessment techniques of EFL learners' speaking skills is reported to be a challenging task for many practitioners. In fact, a growing body of evidence suggests that the target language speaking skills are the most difficult feature of students' language achievement to be evaluated. However, the difficulty in assessing speaking gets much more serious given the students' reactions to bad scores in high stake testing which may influence their affective predispositions mainly motivation, self-esteem and attitudes towards both the subject matter and the teacher assessor. In this article, which has an action research orientation, the notion of evaluation of EFL speaking skills is examined along with the exploration of students' attitudes towards the teachers' assessment practices. The paper provides both a theoretical section where the related literature is reviewed, and a practical section where a description of the methodology and analysis of the obtained data are covered.

The final part of the article allows some room for a set of suggestions and recommendations as to appropriate evaluation of EFL students' oral performance in decisive tests and exams.

1. Review of the Literature

The present part covers some theoretical material related to the evaluation of speaking. It mainly deals with the very features of learners' oral performance that testers focus on the most in the assessment process. It also sheds light on objectivity, reliability and validity of the testing practice.

1.1. Evaluating Students' Speaking Performance

Testing language learners' knowledge in a particular field is generally believed to be a difficult task. Yet, teachers often find it more and more complicated when it comes to evaluating their learners' speaking skills. Johnston (2003), echoing Bachman (2000), points out that due to the complexity of language it is quite challenging to determine appropriate ways of testing students' knowledge. According to Luoma (2009): "assessing speaking is challenging, however, because 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*"* Luoma (2009: 1). Correia (2016) agrees that the relative difficulty in assessing speaking is associated to the very nature of the skill itself being spontaneous. The latter feature renders things complicated for both the student speaker (performing in a test) and their tester:

> Speaking has unique traits that make it the most distinctive and probably the most difficult skill to assess. Unlike writing, speaking is done spontaneously greatly restricting the possibility to plan one's discourse before processing and producing it. Thus, the teacher/assessor has to judge, in real-time, production and/or interaction related to several aspects of what is being said (range, accuracy, fluency, interaction, coherence) Correia (2016: 90).

In the same line of thoughts, researchers refer to the challenging task of evaluating a learner's spoken performance and link it with those many elements [1] that the speaking skill subsumes and that should be looked at carefully by the tester. Kaye (2008) describes the following aspects as main tools necessary for the production of effective communication:

- *Phonological features of speech* (individual sounds, stressed and weak sounds in words, stressed and weak words in speech, rhythm of speech, intonation patterns and connected speech).
- *Following the rules of language* (choosing the right vocabulary, using grammar structures to put clauses and sentences together, using features of discourse to give long and short turn's cohesion and coherence).
- *Paralinguistic devices* (gestures and facial expressions, eye contact, posture, positioning and movement of the head, verbal tools such as changes in volume).
- *Understanding the communicative functions of grammar and vocabulary*.
- *Understanding and using the social meaning of speech* (formal and informal language, language connotations, conversational principals such as turn taking and exchanges; starting, maintaining, managing and closing conversations).

Kaye (2008) believes that an effective and accurate evaluation of speech production requires the tester to identify and isolate each of the mentioned aspects, and see which of them can be included in the evaluative process. Yet, the examiner also needs to go

through more challenging steps subsuming the selection of appropriate testing format, using specific tasks and considering the speaker's emotional state. Mead & Rubin (1985) mention that assessing students' oral performance can be done through the use of two different methods: observational approach and structured approach. In the former method the task of assessment is done in an unobtrusive way by the teacher who, having their students do some speaking activities, observes their performance with the aim of evaluation. As for the latter method, the teacher asks the students to perform a given task either in a one-on-one setting (tester and one student) or in a group or class setting. In this method students are to be aware of the fact that they have to engage in a meaningful communication with an actual audience.

As far as grading is concerned, test administrators can go through a holistic approach or an analytic one (Mead & Rubin, 1985). In a holistic rating students are graded on the basis of a general impression of their oral performance. On the other hand, in an analytic rating different aspect of the speaker's speech like range of language, pronunciation, accuracy, content etc… are taken into account by the tester.

Yet, as far as reliability and objectivity of the test are concerned, Bérešová (2019) states that:

> According to Weigle (2002), holistic scoring needs time-consuming training and has the first impression effect. While assessing holistically is a more natural process in real life, analytic assessment provides diagnostic information. Reliability of an analytic scale is higher than holistic due to specific criteria and different aspects of speaking ability are considered to be developing at different rates (Bérešová, 2019: 13).

One of the main reliable speaking test formats is that designed by Cambridge University (ESOL Examinations). It covers a number of speech components with different proficiency levels that the examiner can identify. More details are displayed in Appendix1.

2.2 Objectivity and Validity of Rating in the Assessment Practice:

As mentioned previously, reaching objectivity in evaluating the students' oral performance is quite complicated. Some researchers stand to reason the fact that even when following an analytic approach, the reliability and validity of the marking (scoring practice) is still tricky and subjective. Worth to quote, in this respect Knight (1992) who states that: "there is still a great deal of subjectivity in a) the selection of criteria, and b) the way each criterion is measured (e.g. how exactly do you decide the grammatical accuracy of a speaker's performance?)" (Knight, 1992: 299).

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[1] Among those elements there are suprasegmental features which include: stress, tone, intonation, duration, word juncture, etc.

Among many different important features that make of the evaluation practice of the speaking skills challenging, such as: construct definition, predictability of task response (task description), interlocutor effect, the effect of characteristics of the test-taker on performance, Barry O'Sullivan (2008) referred to the validity and reliability of rating. In this very same respect, Bérešová (2019) asserts that: "language teachers prefer testing grammar and vocabulary to testing productive skills as this assessment appears to be more subjective rather than objective" (Bérešová, 2019: 01).

Given the above discussion, a consensus over the difficulty of assessing the speaking skills due to objectivity shortcomings seems to gain solid ground. Hence, a number of studies and workshops in different EFL settings are trying to provide relevant key answers and remedial practices as how to appropriately evaluate students' oral performance. The following section of the present article presents, then, an action research that hinges upon the very issue of attaining objectivity within the assessment process.

3. Diagnosing the Evaluation of Speaking: Methodology and Analysis

The present section, which is practical, offers a diagnosis of the evaluation process of EFL oral performance in conversation classes at the department of English – Faculty of Letters, Languages and Arts. This action research attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What attitudes do 2nd year EFL students have towards the evaluation of their speaking performance in exam by their teachers.
2. Which practice (s) can help attain objectivity in the evaluation of the speaking skills.

3.1 Sample and Research Instruments:

The present action research investigation had recourse to 30 EFL students and 4 teachers of Oral Comprehension and Expression (OCE) at the department of English. The collection of data was done through the use of two different questionnaires. The first was addressed to the students, and the second to the teachers. However, an observational practice [2] done during (OCE) classes, preceded the administration of the two former tools. Therefore, 30 students and 4 oral communication teachers participated in the study as data providers.

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[2] The observational practice targeted the same sample (2nd year students of English, University of Saida) after posting the 1st semester exam results. The sample was observed for classroom learning behaviour mainly motivation and attitudes. It also focused on the impact of their exam performance results on their relationship with the teacher and their perception of the oral expression module.

3.2 Students' Questionnaire Results and Analysis:

As mentioned earlier, a questionnaire was addressed to 30 EFL students at the department of English – university of Saida. The main objective behind designing the research tool in question is to know about the students' main perspectives on the evaluation process of their oral performance. Most importantly, the questionnaire attempts to elicit the participants' stances about the objectivity and validity of the rating practice, and the effects of unexpected marks on their learning behaviour. Other relevant information is addressed, such as students' preferences with regard to exam topics.

➤ Q1: Students' Self-Evaluation

Average	33%
Good	**66%**

➤ Q2: Basis of Students' Self-Evaluation

Exam mark	13%
Peers feedback	10%
Teacher's feedback	**60%**
Personal opinion	33%

As the results of the first and second questions indicate, students; on the basis of their teacher's feedback (60%), point to a good level (66%) of their speaking skills.

➤ Q3: Students' Perceptions of the Evaluation Provided by their Teacher

Accurate	46.66%
Somehow Accurate	**53.33%**
Not Accurate	3.33%
Not Accurate at all	3.33%

As shown above through the figures related to question 3, the participants point to a somehow accurate (53.33%) evaluation practice on the part of their teacher.

As for question 4, more than half of the sample (53.33%) indicates that they feel unsatisfied of the marks they get in oral communication exams.

➤ Q4: Students' Satisfaction of their Marks

Unsatisfied	**53.33%**
Satisfied	46.66 %

However, when asked about their reactions in case they are unsatisfied of their oral exam marks, the students pointed to a more positive attitude, feeling motivated (36.66%); while others indicated that they refer to the teacher for explanation (26.66%). The former answer is not really compatible with what the researcher noticed during the post-exam observation where unsatisfied students got less motivated and quite reluctant to engage in classroom tasks.

➤ Q5: Reaction to Unsatisfaction

Talk to the teacher	26.66%
Do nothing	20%
Feel not motivated	16.66%
Feel motivated	**36.66%**

As far as the data obtained from question 6 is concerned, the participants suggest that teachers, when rating their oral performance, need to focus more on pronunciation (50%) and Grammar (40%).

➢ Q6: Items to be focused on:

Grammar	**40%**
Vocabulary	36.66%
Fluency	36.66%
Pronunciation	**50%**
Intonation	0%
Knowledge of the topic	33.33%

The last question elicited students' preferences as to the types of tasks they would like to have in their exam. The results, as shown below, point to role playing (53.33%) and free topic discussion (40%) as the activities students like the most.

➢ Q7: Students' Preferences about Exam Topics

Random draw topic discussion	10%
Role playing	**53.33%**
Direct questions	26.66%
Reading a text aloud	16.66%
Free topic discussion	**40%**

3.3 Teachers' Questionnaire Results and Analysis

As indicated in the methodology section, four (4) oral communication teachers from the department of English – University of Saida contributed as data providers in the present action research work. The use of the teacher questionnaire allowed the researcher to collect data related to the teachers' practices of and perspectives on the evaluation of EFL students' speaking performances in exams. It elicited information related to rating approaches, content of exam tasks and students' learning behaviour.

As far as the first question is concerned most teachers pointed out that they use both the holistic and analytical approaches when evaluating their students' oral performance.

➢ Q1: Evaluation Approach

Holistic	25%
Analytical	0%
Both	**75%**

Answers to the second question show that all the teachers opt for storytelling and random draw topic discussion as exam tasks.

➢ Q2: Tasks used when evaluating students' speaking skills

Describing something	50%
Telling a story	**100%**
Comparing things	50%
Giving some personal information	75%
Random draw topic discussion	**100%**

When asked about which feature(s) of students' speaking performance they focus on more in evaluation, all the respondents referred to fluency and pronunciation and three pointed to grammatical fluency.

➢ Q3: Features of Students' Oral Production Teachers Focus on the most in Evaluation

Grammatical accuracy	75%
Fluency	**100%**
Range of vocabulary	50%
Pronunciation	**100%**
Intonation	0%
Ideas organisation	50%

As for the evaluation setting, all the teachers stated that they use live performance and no recording is referred to when rating.

➢ Q4: Setting(s) of the Evaluation Process

Live performance [3] of the student in front of one or more examiners	**100%**
Recorded performance and evaluated later by one or more examiners	0%

Answers obtained from question 5 indicate that objectivity, reliability of the assessment along with students' negative attitudes after scoring are the most challenging concerns that face the teachers during the evaluation process.

➢ Q5: Issues encountered when evaluating students' speaking skills

- Making a task clear and unambiguous   0%
- Being objective   75%
- Giving reliable assessment across different students   75%
- Timing   0%
- Students' negative attitudes and feedback after scoring   50%

Another related problem was indicated in the teachers' answers to question 6 where most of the respondents stated that their students often complain to them when they get an unsatisfactory exam mark.

➢ Q6: Student(s) complaining about their speaking exam grade

Yes	**75%**
No	25%

➢ Q7: Dealing with students' complaints about scoring.

As far as the seventh question is concerned, the respondents stressed the importance of affective support and encouragement, along with showing and telling students about their weaknesses. The following answers were provided by teachers:

- *"Providing the student with his speaking weaknesses that he needs to work on; for example, (Pronunciation, vocabulary, clarity, organisation of ideas...)"*

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[3]This setting is a form of direct testing: "The classic example of a direct assessment of speaking is an interview in which participants engage in structured or semistructured interaction with an interlocutor/interviewer/ rater" (Ginther, 2013: 2).

- *"They never say a word, but I can feel their disappointment and try to give them some advice and encouragement to improve their level."*
- *"Just have some encouraging chat with them stressing the importance of learning rather grades."*

➢ Q8: Effects of students' unrealistic expectations about scoring.

More anxiety in the classroom	50%
Low self-esteem	50%
Low motivation	**100%**
Strained relationship with the teacher	**75%**

When asked about the effects of students' unrealistic expectations about rating on their learning behaviour, more respondents pointed to low motivation and strained relationship between the teacher and students.

➢ Q9: Teachers' Suggestions.
The last question elicited a number of teachers' suggestions related to objectivity in evaluating the speaking skills. The participants offered interesting recommendations most of which focus on the following points:
- Getting learners understand which criteria of their oral performance are to be taken into account by the teacher evaluator, and which kind of task they are going to deal with in their exam.
- Enhancing and supporting the students' affective dimension by encouraging them and guiding them stressing the importance of lifelong learning.
- Having more than one examiner while testing the student's speaking skills.
- Using valid scoring criteria based on standardized grid.
- Making students well aware about scoring criteria prior to speaking test.
- Familiarize students with speaking tasks in the classroom with a focus on the most important features of oral production.
- Using videos and audio techniques in the classroom that boost the students speaking skills with a stress on real life situations, so that they acquire the most important features of oral production subject of the speaking test.
- Using an analytical approach to evaluation.

3.4 DISCUSSION OF THE MAIN FINDINGS
The present action research work focused on the very notion of objectivity in evaluating EFL students' oral performance. Targeting a sample of 30 students and 4 oral communication teachers at the department of English – University of Saida, the study attempted to know about the relevant criteria that teacher examiners have to consider when designing exam topics and tasks and when translating the students' performance into grades.

The data obtained from the observational practice during post exams period points to a consistent learning behaviour marked by low involvement, disappointment and complaints on the part of students who were not satisfied of their scores.

The students' questionnaire results and analysis suggest that teachers are considered as relevant sources of feedback for most students. However, the accuracy of the teacher's rating of the examinees' oral performance constitutes a concern among some students who indicate that sometimes they think they deserve better marks when comparing theirs to those of their classmates. Such feeling of unsatisfaction, according to the respondents, would lead them to making more effort and get more motivated. Yet, as mentioned earlier, the observational practice proved the opposite where disappointed students tend to show relative reluctance to engage in classroom tasks and to explicitly ask the teacher for explanation, as far as their unexpected poor mark is concerned.

From another parameter, pronunciation and grammar are the two main features that students want their teacher to focus on most when rating their oral production, while role playing and free topic discussion are their favourite type of task they want to work on in exams.

As far as the results obtained from the teachers' questionnaire are concerned, all respondents agree that the evaluation process of students' oral performance is far from being an easy task. Given the complexity of the speaking skills, most of the teachers indicated that they follow a mixed approach involving both holistic and analytical orientations when evaluating their examinees' performance in a live setting using no recording. Worth to note, however, that teachers are somehow missing an important technological aid that may make their evaluation practice more efficient given that using recording helps them focus more appropriately on student's speech features and thus give reliable scores to the main items like grammar, range of vocabulary, pronunciation, etc.

The results also show that most teachers respondents in the present action research tend to opt for random draw topic discussion and storytelling to structure their exam tasks. Thus, given the preferences expressed by students who tend to have a penchant to role playing in exams, teachers seem to be missing another important variable which is mainly affective. Meeting exam tasks with students' needs and expectations can raise the examinees' motivation and reduce their anxiety leading, thus, to better performance and less evaluation issues.

From another parameter, a sense of awareness can be noted on the part of the participants teachers who agree that reliability of the assessment and objectivity are actual concerns in the evaluation process. The teachers confirmed that students often complain about unexpected scores, and show as a result of such negative scoring a relative reluctance, low motivation and a debilitating anxiety. This proves the fact that the teachers' evaluation of their learners' performance is a relevant variable that affects the students' learning behaviour.

Another relevant teaching practice is also reflected in the obtained data when most teachers stress the importance of affective support and encouragement of students as reliable means to enhance and improve their oral skills learning achievement.

4. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

After the afore mentioned analysis and discussion of the main findings, the present action research work offers a number of suggestions and recommendations that oral communication teachers can take into consideration so as to appropriately approach the evaluation process of EFL students' speaking performance.

As far as designing the exam task is concerned, it would be quite beneficial to take the students' expectations and preferences into account. Furthermore, teachers are invited to clearly communicate to their students some relevant information like:

- How exactly the oral exam will proceed.
- Which tasks or exercises students will be asked to do.
- Which criteria the teacher will focus on the most when evaluating students' oral performance.
- The amount of time students will be granted in their exam.
- How the points will be distributed.

Yet, the notion of objectivity remains a thorny issue in the evaluation of students' oral performance. Though the analytical approach to rating is thought to be more efficient, still there is some controversial debate over it. Thus, it is recommended to opt for a cautious evaluative practice that carefully considers some more reliable variables like fairness of rating with regard to different examinees' performances. This can be done through the elaboration of a detailed criteria list with appropriate distribution of points for each feature of the student's speech along with setting key answer list. This would guarantee an easy and practical comparison of different examinees' performances.

As it was mentioned previously in this article, the very nature of the speaking skill makes quite difficult to attain objectivity when evaluating students' performances in exams. For instance, in a live performance evaluation the teacher has really to concentrate on every single utterance produced by the examinee and then translate it into scores, whether be it within an analytical or holistic approach. Therefore, it is interesting to record the examinees' speeches and refer to the audio tracks for a careful analysis of a maximum number of features such as pronunciation, range of vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, fluency, speech acts realization, intonation, ideas organization, etc. The teacher can go back to the audio material each time they want to check before confirming the score they grant to a given performance.

5. CONCLUSION

The speaking skill has always been considered as a relevant gauge of EFL students' proficiency, which makes of the evaluation of the skill in question an endeavour that needs to be approached more cautiously. As shown in this paper, the very notion of objectivity in the rating process is thought to be a thorny issue. The present article explored the afore mentioned problem and the findings of the action research study confirmed the difficulty of evaluating learners' oral performances. The study also revealed that unexpected scores would negatively affect students' learning behaviour which would become more susceptible to low motivation, frustration and to develop a relatively strained relationship with the teacher and negative attitudes towards the subject matter (oral communication module). Though complete objectivity in assessing EFL speaking is difficult to reach, still teachers can opt for some practices that can help them proceed to evaluation with the utmost care. In this respect, it is recommended that a thoughtful selection of exam tasks that meet students' needs and expectations is prerequisite for cultivating a sense of security and optimism among students. Clearly communicating relevant information about the exam nature, procedure, time, criteria and points distribution helps prepare students to be more focused and affectively ready.

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APPENDICES
Appendix I: Teacher's Questionnaire
Teacher's Questionnaire
The present questionnaire is part of an action research study. It revolves around the issue of objectivity in evaluating EFL students' oral performance in exams. You are kindly requested, then, to fill in the present form. The data you are going to provide will greatly enrich the study.

1) - Which approach do you usually follow when evaluating your students' performance in exams?
- Holistic (based on the assessment of the learner's observable success in performing given speaking tasks)
- Analytical (based on the assessment of separate features of the learner's performance like grammar, fluency, vocabulary, etc using a particular scale or template)
- Both

2) – What kind of tasks do you usually use when evaluating your students speaking skills?
- Describing something
- Telling a story
- Comparing things
- Giving some personal information
- Random draw topic discussion

3) – What features of students' oral production do you focus on the most when scoring their performance?
- Grammatical accuracy
- Fluency
- Range of vocabulary
- Pronunciation
- Intonation
- Ideas organisation

4) - What setting(s) do you usually use in the evaluation process?
- Live performance of the student in front of one or more examiners
- Recorded performance and evaluated later by one or more examiners

5) – What issues do you encounter when evaluating your students' speaking skills?
- Making a task clear and unambiguous
- Being objective
- Giving reliable assessment across different students
- Timing
- Students' negative attitudes and feedback after scoring

6) - Have you ever had an experience with student(s) complaining about their speaking exam grade?
- Yes
- No

7) -How do you usually deal with students' complaints about scoring?
………
………
………
………
…………………………………..

8) – Do you think / have you ever noticed that students' learning behaviour in the oral classroom is influenced by the teacher's evaluation practice?
- **Yes** ☐
- **No** ☐

10) – According to you, what can students' unrealistic expectations about scoring lead to? :
☐ - more anxiety in the classroom
☐ - low self esteem
☐ - low motivation
☐ - strained relationship with the teacher

11) - What can you suggest as far as objectivity in evaluating speaking is concerned?
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………………………………………………………………………………………..

Thank you very much indeed!

Appendix II: Students' Questionnaire
Students' Questionnaire

Evaluating EFL Students' Speaking Proficiency
The present questionnaire is part of an action research study. It is one among other important data collection tools that the researcher uses to investigate the evaluation practice of students' speaking performance in conversation classes. You are kindly requested to fill in the present form. All the information you are going to provide is going to be kept extremely confidential.

Thanks to all participants.
1 – What do you think your level of speaking proficiency is?
Low ☐   Average ☐   Good ☐   Very Good ☐

2- How do you evaluate your speaking proficiency?
- Through my exam mark ☐
- Through my peers' feedback and comments ☐
- Through my oral expression teachers feedback and comments ☐
- Through my personal perception and opinion ☐

3- How do you consider your teacher's evaluation of your speaking skills in final exams?
- Accurate ☐
- Somehow accurate ☐
- Not accurate ☐
- Not accurate at all ☐

4- Have you ever felt unsatisfied of your mark in a speaking exam?
Yes ☐   No ☐

If yes, would you explain?
- My performance in the exam deserved a higher mark ☐
- When comparing my mark to those of my classmates I felt some unfairness in evaluation.

5- In case the mark you obtained was less than you expected, would you:
- Talk to the teacher about the issue? ☐
- Do nothing? ☐
- Feel not motivated to make effort anymore? ☐
- Feel motivated to make more effort in the future? ☐

6- Which item (s) do you want the teacher to focus on the most when evaluating you speaking in exams?
- Grammar   ☐
- Vocabulary   ☐
- Fluency   ☐
- Pronunciation   ☐
- Intonation   ☐
- Knowledge of the topic   ☐

7- What kind of tasks do you want to have in your exams of speaking?
- Random draw topic discussion   ☐
- Role playing   ☐
- Direct questions   ☐
- Reading a text aloud   ☐
- Free topic discussion   ☐