

Assessing Spoken Language in EFL: Beliefs and Practices

Ana Patricia Muñoz Restrepo
Luz Dary Aristizábal
Fernando Crespo Orozco
Sandra Gaviria Monsalve
Luz Adriana Lopera Orozco
Marcela Palacio Urán

ANA PATRICIA MUÑOZ RESTREPO

(Colombiana) Magister en enseñanza del Inglés. Actualmente trabaja en el Centro de Idiomas de la Universidad EAFIT como Coordinadora de Investigación y Desarrollo. apmunoz@eafit.edu.co

LUZ DARY ARISTIZÁBAL

(Colombiana) Licenciada de educación-Idiomas.

FERNANDO CRESPO OROZCO

(Colombiano) Magister en enseñanza del Francés. Se desempeña como Profesor en el Centro de Idiomas de la Universidad EAFIT. fcrespo@eafit.edu.co

SANDRA GAVIRIA MONSALVE

(Colombiana) Magister en enseñanza del Inglés. Actualmente Coordinadora Académica en el Centro de Idiomas de la Universidad EAFIT. sgaviria@eafit.edu.co

LUZ ADRIANA LOPERA OROZCO

(Colombiana) Licenciada en Idiomas. Trabaja como Coordinadora Académica en el Centro de Idiomas de la Universidad EAFIT. alopera@eafit.edu.co

MARCELA PALACIO URÁN

(Colombiana) Licenciada en Idiomas. Actualmente se desempeña como Profesora e Investigadora en el Centro de Idiomas de la Universidad EAFIT. opalacio@eafit.edu.co

ABSTRACT

The assessment of spoken language has gone from the testing of grammar and pronunciation to a more comprehensive assessment of oral language. Thus, oral assessment should reflect not only instructional objectives and practices but also the real-life situations in which the student will have to perform. With this in mind, this research study aimed at investigating teachers' understanding of oral assessment in order to establish similar oral evaluation criteria for teachers, students, and the institution. To obtain information for answering the research questions set forth in this study, 30 teachers were interviewed on their beliefs and practices on oral assessment. The analysis of the data followed a grounded approach. The results of the project revealed that most teachers have a weak knowledge of assessment; that assessment is done for summative purposes rather than formative; that assessment is done unsystematically and without much planning; and that teachers use multiple activities to assess different aspects of oral language with some attention to students' level of language proficiency. The implications of these results indicate the need for educational programs in the area of assessment and the creation of an oral assessment system

RESUMEN

El artículo presenta los resultados de un estudio sobre las creencias y prácticas en la evaluación oral del idioma Inglés. El estudio se realizó en el Centro de Idiomas de la Universidad EAFIT. La información se recogió entre 30 profesores de diferentes niveles quienes fueron entrevistados a través de grupos focales. Los resultados mostraron que los profesores realizan la evaluación con fines cuantitativos. En general se desconocen los propósitos formativos de la evaluación. Igualmente, no existen procedimientos sistemáticos para evaluar los estudiantes, más sí, una gran variedad de actividades apropiadas para la evaluación. Las implicaciones del estudio indican la necesidad de ofrecer programas de capacitación así como desarrollar un instrumento válido y confiable para medir el desempeño oral de los estudiantes.

PALABRAS CLAVES

Summative Assessment, formative assessment, oral assessment techniques, authentic assessment

KEY WORDS

Evaluación sumativa, evaluación formativa, técnicas para la evaluación oral, evaluación auténtica

INTRODUCTION

A 1999 study on oral language in the classroom conducted at EAFIT Language Center, Medellín, Colombia focused on three areas: the effectiveness of the required materials in reaching the Language Center' oral goals, the students and teachers' beliefs about the role of oral language in the classroom, and oral assessment. The examination of the required classroom texts in relation to the goals of the Language Center revealed that although the material as designed did not always meet teachers' needs, the textbooks lent themselves to the types of adaptations that needed to be made in order to reach the Language Center's oral goals. As the types of changes being made typically need to be done with any required textbook in order to meet the needs of a specific population, the researchers concluded that it was not necessary to replace the series being used.

In the area of beliefs, the researchers discovered that there are a number of mismatches between teachers' beliefs, students' beliefs, and what is actually happening in the classroom. The most marked differences were between what teachers and students believe, and between what teachers believe and what they do in the classroom.

When looking at the results obtained from the oral assessment area, the research team concluded that from the data obtained on oral assessment, only a few generalizations could be made as to how teachers as a group assessed students orally (in many cases the sample size was limited because of the difficulty of getting questionnaires back from teachers). However, the researchers concluded, in general, that assessment is an area in which teachers lack expertise. For example, the characteristics considered when evaluating a student's oral performance do not match those that are deemed the most important in a communicative approach to language teaching. Current research in the field favors a communicative approach to teaching English. A communicative approach stresses real-life communication. In this approach, the style of instruction places the emphasis on interaction, conversation and language use, rather

than on learning about the language (Lightbown and Spada, 1993).

Moreover, many of the characteristics considered by teachers are actually contrary to the communicative approach. From a variety of tasks provided, some teachers based their selection on the ones that they considered more appropriate for a given level rather than on an understanding of assessment. In addition, there were no patterns as to the manner or frequency of feedback, meaning that each teacher is doing something different. Furthermore, the data collected on the frequency and manner of feedback was not consistent between the questionnaires and interviews. When asked to rank criteria to assess students' oral performance, teachers agreed basically on one issue which was accuracy-based and did not reflect a communicative approach to teaching.

The 1999 research project on the area of assessment showed that the lack of understanding in the area of assessment and the lack of similar criteria or patterns in assessing students' oral performance caused discrepancies between methodology and instructional practices at the Language Center. It was also concluded that more investigation needed to be done into what was actually happening in the classroom and to gather more information on specific materials and methods being used in order to know in which areas changes needed to be made, and if a system of assessment would really meet the assessment needs of teachers, students, and the Language Center.

Furthermore, the analysis of the oral assessment procedures at the Language Center suggested that it did not provide teachers with a comprehensive picture of students' growth and achievement. Also, it did not offer informative feedback about the process of teaching and learning. Teachers assigned scores based on an impressionistic idea of their students' oral performance but not on clear criteria to base their judgements.

Assessing students orally is indeed a challenging endeavor especially for two reasons. First, all teachers have different teaching practices and to pretend that all teachers understand and teach the same is

impossible. However, it is possible to think about a consensus on similar assessment and feedback practices. Second, teachers may be somewhat reluctant to assess oral language in the classroom. A possible explanation for this involves issues related to time, logistics, and lack of adequate training on how to assess oral language performance. This justifies the need for professional development programs on assessment and evaluation.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In recent years a variety of assessment practices have become popular in opposition to more traditional forms in assessment. For instance, many educators have found that traditional testing does not always accurately reflect their perception of a student's abilities. O'Malley and Valdez (1996:2) point out that, "...current assessment procedures do not assess the full range of essential student outcomes, and teachers have difficulty using the information gained for instructional planning." Heaton (1997) encourages continuous assessment because it enables teachers to assess over a period of weeks or months, language performance that cannot be assessed by means of tests. Continuous assessment, he claims, enables teachers to take into account certain qualities which cannot be assessed in any other way: namely, effort, persistence, and attitude.

One type of assessment that fosters student autonomy and the regulation of teaching and learning through ongoing processes is authentic assessment. As defined by O'Malley and Valdez (1996), authentic assessment is a type of assessment that reflects student learning, achievement, motivation, and attitudes on classroom activities. Authentic assessment is important mainly because it is based on activities that represent classroom and real-life settings and is consistent with classroom and instructional objectives. Some examples of authentic assessment are portfolio assessments, performance assessments, and student self-assessment. Portfolio assessment is a systematic collection of student work, which demonstrates the progress of language acquisition over time.

Performance assessment requires students to accomplish meaningful and complex tasks based on prior knowledge and previous learning. By developing and using self-assessments, students become autonomous learners being able to plan their own learning. They can also assess their progress and accomplishments and thus be responsible for setting and meeting their own goals.

Another characteristic of authentic assessment is that it provides students with feedback at different stages in the development of their language performance. Through feedback, students get information about their areas of strength and areas to be improved which fosters further learning or review. The teacher also benefits from feedback on what is being learned and on the effectiveness of his/her own teaching. Furthermore, feedback gives teachers information on whether the students are making progress or not, if they are responding to instructional approaches and materials, and if they are accomplishing the achievement standards established by the institution. In addition, authentic assessment promotes the involvement of students in the assessment process through both peer and self-assessment. Indeed, teachers must understand that self-assessment and peer-assessment techniques can be used regularly to encourage students to monitor and take control of their own learning. Teachers can also self-assess their teaching practices to determine what changes or adaptations they need to make to their methodology. This is what has been called self-regulated teaching and learning, according to which students "make choices, select learning activities, and plan how to use their time and resources. They have the freedom to choose challenging activities, take risks, advance their own learning, and accomplish desired goals" (O'Malley and Valdez, 1996:5). Through self-regulation both teachers and students participate actively in the teaching and learning, giving opinions and making value judgements about their own knowledge with the purpose of improving themselves.

It is worth mentioning some features that make non-traditional assessments special and different from other forms of assessment. Brown (1998:654) discusses the

difference between alternative assessments and traditional assessments and presents a list of characteristics stating that alternative assessments:

1. Require students to perform, create, produce, or do something
2. Use real world contexts or simulations
3. Are non-intrusive in that they extend the day-to-day classroom activities
4. Allow students to be assessed on what they normally do in class every day
5. Use tasks that represent meaningful instructional activities
6. Focus on process as well on products
7. Provide information about both the strengths and weaknesses of students
8. Ensure that people, not machines, do the scoring, using human judgement

The ideas proposed here support a formative type of assessment through which the teacher observes the student doing something real, provides him/her with feedback, and adjusts his/her teaching. Formative assessment is continuous and is meant to inform the student, parent/guardian, and the teacher of the student's progress toward the curriculum objectives. The main purpose of this assessment is then to identify the difficulties in learning rather than consider the final results. According to Jorba and Sanmartí (1994), formative assessment seeks information on the student's mental representations and strategies that he/she uses to achieve a goal.

Formative assessment can be contrasted with summative assessment through which students' progress and achievement are reported at the end of a course or year. It is usually reported in the form of grades, generally determined by test scores. The main purpose of this type of assessment is to determine knowledge, skills, abilities that have developed over a period of time, in other words to summarize student progress. Both formative and summative

assessments have different intentions according to the moment they are applied at: *during instruction or at the end of instruction* and both imply a decision-making process in the classroom. These decisions as pointed by Genesee and Upshur (1996) involve judgements about who should pass or fail a course, whether to proceed with a unit or not, whether to change a particular approach to teaching or not. At any rate, the choices that teachers make aim at improving language teaching and learning. For this reason, it is important for teachers to consider the purposes of assessment. These purposes are basically two:

1. Social or administrative: It aims at informing students (and parents) of their progress and determining which students have the competencies required by the school system so they can be promoted or certified to a higher level.
2. Pedagogical or formative: It aims at providing the teacher with useful information to suit the teaching-learning activities to the students needs and thus improve the quality of teaching in general. It also recognizes the changes that need to be made so that the students learn in a more meaningful way, that is, it regulates teaching and learning processes.

Identifying the purposes of assessment helps teachers plan their assessment procedures. In this sense, teachers should clearly identify what students should know and be able to do at different levels of oral language proficiency, that is, to identify the achievement standards for each level and for each language skill (reading, writing, listening and speaking). In the case of oral assessment, teachers should identify what students should be able to comprehend and produce by the end of a course.

It is clear that the ideas proposed by the new trends in assessment aim at the regulation of teaching and learning. Thus assessment becomes an essential component for change and improvement. Through assessment, the teacher gets information in order to adapt his/her teaching practices so that the student can learn better. The students themselves are involved in

this decision-making process by participating in their own evaluation thus taking more responsibility for their own learning. Beyond the final product of learning, non-traditional forms of assessment also look at the learning process and environment, the students' social and emotional contexts, and the good match between instructional objectives and classroom content.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The objectives of this study are to investigate teachers' understanding of assessment in order to establish similar oral assessment criteria for teachers at the EAFIT Language Center. The research questions formulated are:

1. To what extent do teachers at the Language Center make of assessment an ongoing process?
2. What are the existing tools teachers use to assess students' oral production?
3. What do teachers assess?
4. What aspects of oral language do teachers assess?
5. How is the Language Center's goal reflected on evaluation tools?
6. How does the Language Center syllabus by level influence teachers' tailoring of assessment tasks

METHOD

This study started in the first semester of 2000. During that first semester, the researchers looked a series of formats used to record oral assessment grades and follow-up activities. The purpose was to identify areas of oral assessment to be explored. Based on this analysis, a questionnaire called Task Description Form was created. Teachers were asked to describe the tasks used for oral assessment, the aspects of oral language assessed, the frequency and duration of assessment, the classroom arrangement, the topics and the nature of the assessment tasks. From the questionnaires distributed to 110 teachers 34 were returned. Since less than 50% of the forms were

received, the data analysis was somewhat difficult; besides, the results were fairly impressionistic and superficial. From the results it could not be explained teachers' reasons and purposes for doing assessment. By consequence, the researchers decided to supplement the information and further investigate into teachers' understanding of assessment.

The data was gathered through a Focus Group technique. Originally, the research team planned to include a stratified sample of 48 teachers both from the Adult and Adolescent English programs at EAFIT Language Center. Teachers were scheduled into eight different focus groups. Unfortunately, many teachers did not arrive on the scheduled day leaving a total sample population of 30 teachers. The focus group sessions were rigorously carried out making sure all the participants answered the same questions. The questions were related to their understanding of assessment, aspects of oral language assessed, assessment techniques, reasons for doing assessment, and frequency of assessment. In each focus group session, which lasted between 1-2 hours, two researchers participated, one recording and asking the questions and the other taking notes.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis process started by transcribing the focus group sessions. The transcripts were repeatedly read, analyzed, and compared with researchers' notes. During this process, recurrent themes and salient comments were identified and noted. That is, the analysis of the data followed a grounded approach where the information obtained emerged from an examination of the data rather than being determined beforehand and imposed on the data. The naming and grouping was done on index cards. Coding categories were then assigned to groups of cards. The emerging categories were described by each of the researchers in terms of propositions and then compared among the researchers in order to ensure reliability. When looking at the described data, the researchers concluded that it responded some basic assessment questions: What, how, why, when. Therefore, these questions were used as the guidelines to interpret the

data. The data was then classified under different questions:

1) What is the understanding of assessment? 2) Why is assessment done? 3) What is assessed? 4) How is assessment done and 5) When is assessment done?

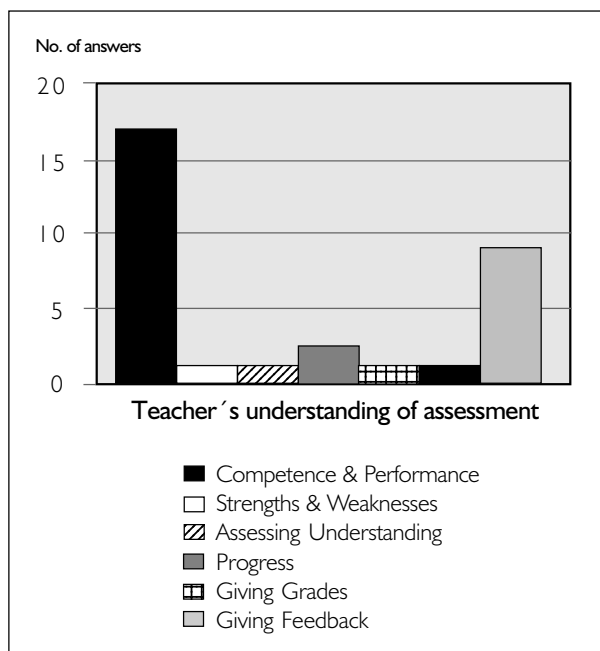
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results reported here are a descriptive discussion based on the information obtained from the Focus Groups. In the process of interpretation, the numerical data are not disregarded (the number of responses will appear in parenthesis). However, the ultimate validity of the results is not supported by the size of the sample population. Beyond that, they are valid to the extent that they contribute to the global understanding and clarity of the phenomenon.

The analysis of the data in relation to teachers' **understanding of assessment** reveals that teachers have a weak understanding of what oral assessment is. Mainly, assessment is defined as the evaluation of students' oral competence and performance (17 responses). Assessment is also understood as one way to detect students' strengths and weaknesses when they communicate in the foreign language (1).

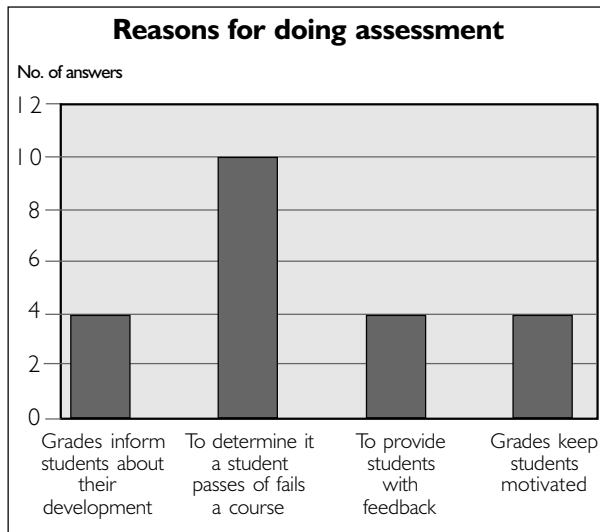
Furthermore, teachers look at assessment from different perspectives, associating it with assessing understanding (1), progress (2), giving grades (1) and feedback (1). It could be said that there is a generalized idea of assessment and that very few give reasons of a formative type of assessment. One teacher views assessment as a subjective appraisal of the degree of students' achievement in mastering the target language. He states that it is subjective since the Language Center 'does not have specific criteria to judge students' oral performance.' Setting criteria is indeed a crucial and difficult issue in assessment since, no matter how clear and refined the criteria are, they will always be determined by some degree of subjectivity. The teachers impressions are nonetheless extremely important because they are the best-informed people in the classroom to judge what their own students should know.

GRAPHIC I
What is understood by assessment?



Regarding the category **why assessment is done**, the data do not provide ideas from which generalizations can be made. The answers provided by teachers only give account of assessment as a procedure through which grades are assigned to students. When asked about the reasons why teachers assign grades, teachers seem to agree that it is an administrative or social requirement in order to determine whether a student should pass or fail a course (10). Other teachers say that assigning grades "keeps students motivated and encourages them to speak in class" (4). Assigning grades, teachers also say, gives them "the opportunity to know where students are at" (4). It is clearer that the reasons for doing assessment reflect a summative purpose. Teachers are not aware of formative purposes in their assessment practices. This information reveals an important issue: teachers usually give grades because they feel committed to do so, giving more importance to the administrative side of assessment with little consideration of the pedagogical or even the research side of assessment.

GRAPHIC 2
Why is assessment done?



The analysis of the category **what is assessed**, suggests that teachers assess different aspects of oral language being pronunciation the most salient feature (20) as well as other aspects of speech such as intonation (11), rhythm (4) and blending (1). More specifically, teachers pay close attention to the pronunciation of certain phonemes difficult to produce for Spanish speakers such as inter-dental /θ/, plosives /t/ and /k/, alveolar /d/, inflectional -s, and /s/ beginning of word (e.g. *study*).

A first feature to which teachers pay close attention when assessing oral production is the students' **ability to deal with grammar** (24). Many teachers consider that it is important for students to be aware of the correct use of grammar as a means to "learn to think in the second language, and to improve communication." Other teachers look at the students' **ability to convey meaning** when speaking (19), that is, the students' capacity to transmit a message in a coherent and fluent way and be understood by their peers or teacher. Other teachers consider that grammar is not a priority when assessing oral performance and that grammar can even be learned by imitating the teachers' grammar model. This implies, perhaps, an implicit type of learning on the part of the students where teachers' explanations may

be minimal. Moreover, some teachers also consider that the role of grammar when assessing oral performance depends upon the level of proficiency and the purpose of the activities for each class (7). Many teachers (13) say that their assessment activities are based upon the level and objective of the course.

Although there is a slight preference in giving more importance to the assessment of grammar, it appears that grammar is seen by teachers as a tool to facilitate learning and effective communication, but not as an end in itself. This is in tune with the Language Center's methodology which aims at preparing students for all forms of interaction with English speakers through the four language skills: Listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Grammar, as pointed out by Flaitz, (2000:18), is "an important and consistent thread which is woven into the practice of the four skills." It seems that the role of grammar, when assessing oral production, is taken from the skill of being able to produce rules to the skill of being able to communicate in the foreign language.

Fluency is a second feature of language mentioned by teachers when assessing oral performance (10). Fluency, as defined by teachers, has to do with the natural flow of language which supposes lack of hesitation and mumbling (9). The data reflect a concern for personality factors: some teachers think that the production of spontaneous and natural use of language may be affected by how confident students feel in class. For instance, when reading aloud, teachers comment, students' lack of confidence may cause breakdowns in the natural flow of speech, making pauses where inappropriate and signaling punctuation where not required. It is true that performance on an assessment task may be affected by factors such as nervousness or anxiety but it is important to consider that performance on a reading task depends largely on the student's ability or skill to read. As Underhill, 1987, specifies, reading aloud can be improved by training and it does not have anything to do with oral proficiency.

In addition, fluency was connected to the students' ability to produce comprehensible messages

(comprehensibility) and their ability to join sentences and produce ideas in a coherent, meaningful and complex way (9). Moreover, fluency was associated with the students' capability to stay in the second language when speaking, or the students' ability to speak in English without recurring to or translating from Spanish (4). Another definition of fluency found in the data refers to the speed (3) at which the students communicate and to the possession of vocabulary and idiomatic expressions (1) so that ideas can be expressed continuously and naturally. Indeed, it is not easy to assess fluency, even impressionistically. For example, as pointed out by Cohen (1994), there are problems connected to criteria such as speed or ease of speech. Speaking "easily," he says, does not necessarily mean speaking appropriately. In fact, according to Cohen (1994), the very hesitation phenomena that make a students' speech seem broken may really be a sign that the student is searching for the appropriate vocabulary item or grammatical structure. Fluency is rather the ability to know how to hesitate (minimum of pauses or hesitation before beginning or during speech), stay

silent or self-correct thus producing an acceptable and relaxed quality of speech.

A third feature of oral language considered by teachers when assessing oral production is **vocabulary**. Teachers look at students' ability to use vocabulary in context (9) and if vocabulary usage affects comprehensibility of messages. Here, teachers are not looking at words in isolation, but at how they relate to the context to convey a message that is understandable for the listener. A final aspect which teachers take into account when doing oral assessment, is the **overall comprehension and competence** the students have.

We could say that although the aspects considered by teachers may follow a traditional view of oral language assessment that reflects accuracy of language in some aspects, there is a tendency to assess language in its communicative perspective. Thus assessing accuracy is not a goal in itself, but one component which is closely connected with form, meaning, and use. This tendency, different from results found in the past, may be due to teaching training in the area of communicative language teaching and learning offered at the Language Center.

CHART I - WHAT IS ASSESSED?
Aspects of oral language assessed and defined by teachers

A S P E C T S	No. of Responses	M E A N I N G
Pronunciation	20	Intonation, rhythm, blending, stress, vocalization
Grammar	24	Ability to deal with grammar, correct use of grammar
Conveying meaning	19	Get message across, comprehensibility
Fluency	10	Natural flow of language, lack of hesitation and mumbling, speed, ability to produce comprehensible messages, ability to stay in L2
Vocabulary	9	Ability to use vocabulary in context
Comprehension & Competence	1	Degree of understanding and knowledge

In relation to **how assessment is done**, teachers report on using *multiple tasks* to assess oral performance being presentations (11), role-plays (11), the most favored by teachers followed by conversation (8), recording on tapes (9), picture description (5), question and answer (4), and others (see graphic 3). These tasks are in few cases chosen depending on the students' needs and interests, level of proficiency, and size of the group.

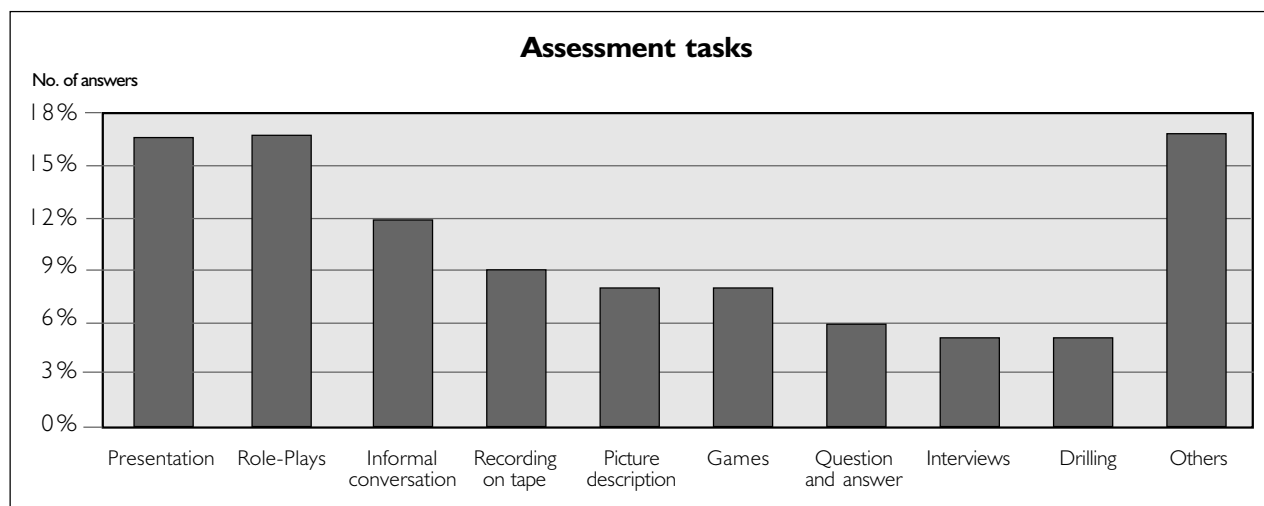
Regarding the reasons why teachers select a specific activity to assess oral performance, few generalizations can be made. It could be said, however, that there is lack of similar criteria for selecting activities since answers vary from teacher to teacher. Nonetheless, the answers lead us to believe that teachers encourage role-plays in lower levels because students may be more willing to take risks. Role-plays become a very spontaneous activity that fosters a relaxing classroom atmosphere. Furthermore, role-plays seem to be a good tool to promote naturalness of language. "Conversation, some teachers say, serves as a means to check different aspects of the language, such as fluency, vocabulary, content, and coherence." Recording on tapes, according to teachers, gives them the opportunity to provide students with feedback and questions and answers train students to succeed in

oral interactions. There is no evidence in the data whether teachers tailor activities to students level of language development

In addition, the data show that some teachers use error correction as a way to have the students assess their oral production (3). This is done by eliciting either self-correction in intermediate or advanced levels or teacher correction in basic levels. Peer correction was also mentioned but the level was not specified. Indeed, errors are indicators of learning. Students may benefit from error correction by analyzing their progress and success in language learning. Errors also provide feedback, they tell the teachers about the effectiveness of their teaching.

When asking teachers about the grouping technique to do assessment, the answers indicate a preference for pair assessment (9) and small group assessment (9), followed by individual (8) and whole group assessment (2). Decisions on when to assess individually, in pairs, or in groups depend on the purposes and content of the assessment task. For instance, the teacher may want to see if see how well students negotiate meaning. In this case, a pair or small group assessment activity would be appropriate.

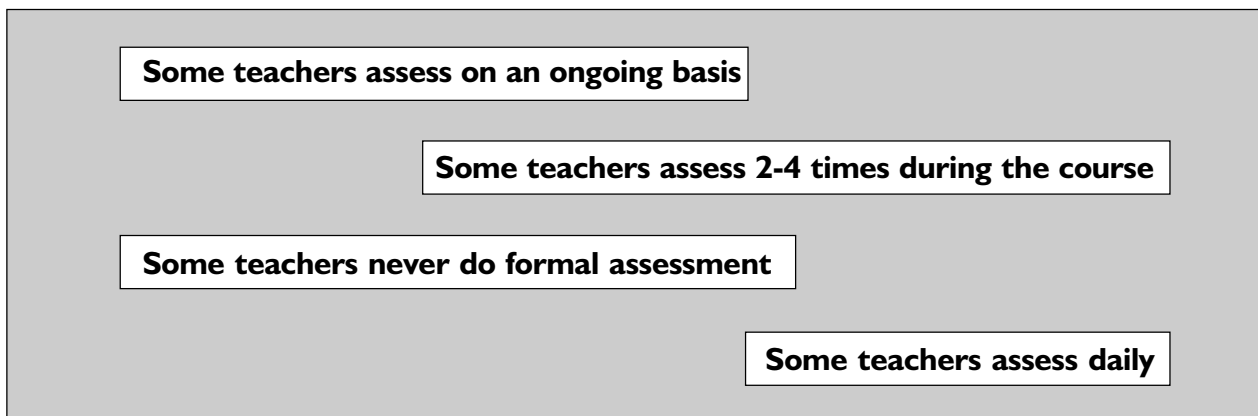
GRAPHIC 3 - HOW IS ASSESSMENT DONE?
Percentages corresponding to frequencies on 67 answers given



Regarding the category **when assessment is done**, the data did not reveal consistent answers among teachers. Teachers seem to have their own frequency when assessing. However, many of them assess their students' oral performance between 2 to 4 times during the course (10). A variety of factors such as level, objectives, and tasks are kept in mind when assessing oral performance. Some teachers report on doing assessment on an ongoing basis, sometimes every class (6). Other teachers say they never do formal assessment or that they only assess when there is an opportunity. It seems then that the number of times to do assessment varies from teacher to teacher with no consistent pattern of frequency and somehow determined by a subjective decision and lack of planning on how often to assess students.

Doing assessment on an every day basis may be a threatening experience for students whose level of anxiety may increase due to constant evaluation. On the other hand, lack of formal assessment does not allow students to know at what point in their development they are. Teachers must balance assessment activities according to different factors such as duration of the course, students' needs, administrative requirements, and others. At any rate, it is essential to consider that assessment should be done on an ongoing basis. This, according to O'Malley and Valdez (1996), provides baseline data as well as information on improvement of language proficiency on a continuous basis. Doing assessment on a continuous basis implies that oral assessment should be spread out throughout the course and not be left as a final activity.

CHART 2
When is assessment done?



CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study show that teachers have some weaknesses regarding assessment. Teachers are well aware of what and how to assess. However, very few teachers give reasons of assessment as a process through which teaching methodology and learning can be improved. Teachers need to understand that assessment not only implies assigning grades to students, that the value of formative assessment is a fundamental key to regulate the process of teaching and learning. It is through formative assessment that teachers adapt their teaching practices to the difficulties and progresses of their students thus making instruction suitable to the learners' way of learning. Combined with summative assessment, teachers, students, and the institution can benefit from formative assessment as a quality improvement process. Thus, teachers need to be more conscious of the benefits of assessment. It is through assessment that teachers get information on how their teaching is affecting students and if their teaching strategies are working. They also get information on which students need help with a specific topic.

The lack of systematic and ongoing procedures is an indication that teachers are not aware of the goals of assessment and that there is little planning when doing assessment. Identifying the goals of assessment can allow teachers to focus their assessment tasks on more pedagogical procedures rather than administrative. Besides, reflecting upon the goals of assessment allows teachers to recognize that assessment cannot be left as a final activity but that it should be done on an ongoing basis and throughout the entire course.

Teachers also need to be given clear oral performance criteria in order to assess their students better. As stated before, setting criteria is not an easy task because every teacher has his/her own way of teaching and his/her own way of perceiving students' performance. However, similar criteria for assessment can be established that help teachers assessing their students more systematically and objectively.

One important implication of this study is the need of in-service training courses in the area of assessment. The more teachers know about assessment the more informed they will be in making sound choices and wise decisions in their classrooms. In so doing, they will be able to recognize that assessment is a powerful tool for improving language teaching and learning.

The next step for the Language Center Research Team will be to develop an oral assessment system in order to help teachers assess their students more systematically, objectively and in accordance with communicative principles of teaching, learning, and assessment.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen, E. D., and Valette, R. A. (1997) *Classroom Techniques: Foreign Language and English as a Second Language*. In. Andrew Cohen. *Assessing Language Ability in the Classroom*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle Publishers.
- Bailey, Kathleen. (1998) *Learning about Language Assessment*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle Publishers
- Brown, D. James. (1998) *The Alternatives in Language Assessment*. TESOL Quarterly, Vol. 32, No. 4, p. 654
- Cohen, D. Andrew. (1994). *Assessing Language Ability in the Classroom*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle Publishers.
- Flaitz, Jeffra. (2000). *Communicative Language Teaching*. (Unpublished manuscript). EAFIT Language Center, Medellín, Colombia. p. 18.
- Genesee, Fred and John Upshur. (1996). *Classroom-based Evaluation in Second Language Education*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Heaton, J. B. (1997) *Classroom Testing*. New York: Longman Group Limited
- Hughes, Arthur. (1989) *Testing for Language Teachers*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Jorba, Jaume and Neus Sanmartí. (1994) *Enseñar, Aprender y Evaluar: Un Proceso de Regulación Continua*. Madrid: Ministerio de Educación y Cultura.
- Lightbown, P and Nina Spada. (1993) *How Languages are Learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- O'Malley, Michael and Lorraine Valdez. (1996). *Authentic Assessment for English language Learners*. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company. pp. 2, 5
- Underhill, Nic. (1987). *Testing the Spoken Language*. New York: Cambridge University Press.