Using Speaking Tests as a Motivational Tool for the First Cycle Learners at CEG 1 Natitingou

Abstract

This research study is focused on investigating the motivational effects that speaking-skill testing can produce on first-cycle students at CEG1 Natitingou. To gather data, a mixed-method approach was implemented, using questionnaires filled out by the 173 EFL learners, 10 EFL teachers, and a group discussion with the teachers during the school year of 2023-2024. The results show that most of the interviewed teachers (70 %) report a deficit of motivation among their learners during speaking exercises. They further recognise that speaking tests can help in motivating learners to take a positive attitude towards oral practice and participate actively during classroom speaking sessions. The fact that 85.54% of learners said they are not interested in speaking activities because of assessment formats that fail to test oral competencies confirms this perception. Moreover, 86 % of students reported making more effort to speak English when their speech was graded. Such findings indicate that the inclusion of speaking tests in formative and summative assessments may positively affect the motivation and engagement of learners. To enhance communicative competence, practical recommendations have been offered to revise the format and procedures of English language assessment in Beninese secondary schools.

Keywords: Testing, speaking, motivational tool, perceptions, CEG1 Natitingou

Résumé

Cette étude a pour but d'évaluer les effets motivationnels qu'une épreuve d'expression orale pourrait avoir sur les apprenants du premier cycle du CEG1 de Natitingou en s'intéressant aux perceptions des enseignants et des élèves concernant les activités orales en classe. Les données ont été recueillies auprès de 10 enseignants d'anglais langue étrangère et de 173 apprenants via une méthodologie mixte incluant des questionnaires et des discussions de groupe durant l'année scolaire 2023/2024. Les résultats indiquent que 70 % des enseignants remarquent un déficit de motivation chez leurs élèves lors des activités d'expression orale. Cependant, ils pensent qu'évaluer cette compétence pourrait encourager les apprenants à adopter une attitude plus positive et à participer davantage activement. Cette perception est confirmée par les réponses des élèves puisque 85,54 % déclarent un faible intérêt pour ces activités, car les formats d'évaluation actuels ignorent la production orale, tandis que 86 % affirment qu'ils fourniraient davantage d'efforts si leurs compétences orales étaient notées. Ces observations indiquent que l'inclusion de l'expression orale dans les évaluations, qu'elles soient formatives ou sommatives, pourrait considérablement augmenter la motivation. Des propositions concrètes sont suggérées pour revoir les méthodes d'évaluation de l'anglais dans les écoles secondaires du Bénin, dans le but de renforcer davantage les compétences en communication.

Mots-clés: Test, expression orale, outil de motivation, perceptions, CEG1 Natitingou

Introduction

According to McCarthy and Carter (2001), communicative competence is defined as "what a speaker needs to know about how a language is used in particular situations for effective and appropriate communication" (p. 55). This is the primary purpose of language teaching and learning. For teaching and learning to take place, language learners must develop four key skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. These skills recognise the interdependence of language and communication (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 155). All of the foregoing support the idea that communication, in general, and oral communication, in particular, are the ultimate goals of language learning.

Unfortunately, the majority of EFL learners in Beninese secondary schools neglect speaking, showing less interest in this skill. Consequently, very few students are intrinsically motivated to speak English in the classroom, and most are unable to engage in basic conversations by the time they complete secondary school.

Several factors explain the lack of interest in speaking activities among EFL learners in Benin in general and at CEG1 Natitingou in particular. These include learners' ignorance of the importance of English for oral communication and the absence of formative and summative

evaluation of speaking skills. This situation could be improved by implementing speaking tests to motivate first-cycle learners.

This study aims to assess EFL teachers' and learners' perceptions of the impact of testing speaking skills in formative and summative evaluations in secondary schools on learners' motivation to participate in classroom speaking activities and their ability to speak English efficiently in real-life situations. These papers do not assess speaking and listening, but rather seek to determine the extent to which testing speaking skills during formative and summative evaluations can motivate learners to engage more effectively in classroom speaking activities.

Specifically, it explores how motivating first-cycle learners in speaking activities can enhance their oral production in English. It then evaluates the potential effects of these motivational factors on learners' inclusive speaking performance and development in the English language.

In fact, the study examines the reasons why learners show a lack of interest during speaking activities in the classroom, in contrast to vocabulary, grammar, reading and writing activities. In addition, reference is made to the possible influences of implementing speaking tests on first-cycle learners' motivation for speaking activities and on their overall oral communication skills.

To carry out the present investigation, a mixed-methods approach has been adopted, involving questionnaires completed by 173 EFL learners and 10 EFL teachers, on the one hand, and a group discussion with 4 EFL teachers sampled from a total school population of 1595 learners in the first cycle and 10 EFL teachers during the school year 2023-2024, on the other.

1. Literature Review andTheoretical Framework of the Study

Some scholars have investigated the relationships between different language skills, the importance of speaking skills, the correlation between motivation and speaking ability, and the factors that affect the speaking ability of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners.

Initially, linguistsidentified four basic language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) that are important in language learning. Listening and reading are passive or receptive, whereas speaking and writing are active.

Listening and reading are described as passive or receptive skills because learners cannot demonstrate their ability to use them; they simply absorb language without producing anything themselves. By contrast, speaking and writing are considered active or productive skills because developing them requires learners to produce sentences independently, practise extensively, and learn about grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and usage.

Of the four key language skills, speaking is widely regarded as the most important when learning a foreign or second language. Brown and Yule (1983) state that "students will be judged most on their speaking skills in real-life situations". Unfortunately, EFL teaching curricula in Benin have failed to develop learners' oral proficiency. In today's world, learners need solid communicative English skills, and EFL teachers must equip them with the necessary skills to improve their speaking abilities and perform well in real-life situations.

In the current Beninese EFL context, oral skills are neglected in classes, even though employability clearly depends more on communication. So far, more emphasis has been placed on reading and writing skills. Recognising the importance of oral communication skills is crucial for developing learners' speaking skills and empowering them to successfully complete their studies and communicate effectively in English. Moreover, English is the language of opportunity for employment and the achievement of desired goals in life.

According to Bueno, Madrid and McLaren (2006: 321), "Speaking is one of the most difficult skills that language learners have to master." To develop their speaking skills, English language learners must recognise their importance and strive to acquire them to compete in today's competitive world. Of the four skills, speaking is the most difficult, simply because it requires speakers to produce sentences spontaneously and automatically during communicative events. It is challenging for foreign or second-language learners to produce sentences without first learning grammatical structures and adequate vocabulary. Therefore, EFL/ESL learners often struggle to produce grammatically and semantically correct English statements when they are aware of oral examinations ahead. This points to the issue of motivation.

As Schunk (2008: 236) recognises two distinct types of motivation, viz. extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. According to Santrock (2004), "Extrinsic motivation is defined as the pursuit of an outcome for the sake of that outcome itself" (p. 418). This can be seen as a means of achieving a specific objective. Thus, motivation is attributed to external factors, including but not limited to the influence of teachers, parents, friends, and the environment, namely incentives such as rewards and punishments. OemarHamalik (1995) explains that extrinsic motivation is "motivation that is caused by outside factors or situations" (p. 113), while Marsh (2010) emphasises that extrinsic motivation is "Experienced by students when they receive a reward, or avoid punishment, or in some other way unconnected with the task earn approval for particular behaviour" (p. 58).

Harmer (2003) states that "Intrinsic motivation plays a pivotal role in the outcome of students' language learning" (p. 148). Thus, if a considerable proportion of students lack extrinsic motivation in the classroom, it is conceivable that they may not show any enthusiasm for language learning. Consequently, the duty falls on the educator to cultivate intrinsic motivation in the classroom, thereby ensuring the continuity of students' learning. In her research, Emily (2011) speculates that "intrinsic motivation derived from students' personalities, encompassing factors such as their level of comfort, contentment, and the subjects in which they express interest" (p. 4).

Researchers frequently contrast intrinsic motivation with extrinsic motivation, which is motivation governed by reinforcement contingencies. Conventionally, educators have regarded intrinsic motivation as more conducive to superior learning outcomes than extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation has been shown to be more beneficial for students, as it fosters a sense of ease and enthusiasm for learning.

In terms of the relationship between motivation and language learning, it can be said that learners can be productive if they have the right motivation. This claim is supported by some scholars. According to Gardner (1985), motivation is the combination of effort and the desire to achieve the objective of learning English, including beneficial perspectives on learning. Crookes and Schmidt (1991) recognised motivation as learners' positioning in relation to the aim of learning English, highlighting that it is crucial for learning in the classroom. Teachers can facilitate this by providing a well-structured classroom environment that makes it easier for learners to follow and encourages them to keep up with each class.

The present study postulates that certain factors related to language learning and motivation appear to affect EFL learners' speaking skills and need to be improved. In the Beninese context of English as a Foreign Language, learners' speaking performance is influenced by factors such

as performance conditions, psycho-affective inclinations, listening-comprehension skills, and feedback during speaking tasks (Tuan & Mai, 2015).

In fact, learning conditions affect speaking performance, and these include time pressure, planning, the quality of performance, and the amount of support (Nation & Newton, 2009). Psycho-affective inclinations should not be neglected. Oxford (1990) said that one of the important factors in learning a language is the affective side of students. According to Krashen (1982), many affective variables have been connected to second language acquisition, and motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety were the three main types that have been investigated by many researchers.

The fear of speaking English is pertinent to certain personality constructs, such as anxiety, inhibition, and risk-taking. Speaking a language sometimes results in anxiety or extreme anxiety, with regrettable consequences, including despondency and a sense of failure among learners (Bashir, Azeem, & Dogar 2011). Woodrow (2006) finds that anxiety can negatively affect the oral performance of English speakers. Here again, it can be observed that speaking anxiety might be linked to classroom learning conditions, with language learners divided into two groups: strong and weak. The strong learners often dominate the weak and slow ones. The weak learners do not usually want to speak in front of the strong ones, which leads to their silence throughout the whole class activity.

Additionally, listening comprehension ability is important for learners. Doff (1998) argues that learners cannot improve their speaking unless they develop their listening. Learners should understand what they hear in order to have an effective communicative exchange. Shumin (1997) suggests that when some students talk, others answer through the listening-comprehension process. Speakers therefore play the role of both listeners and speakers. One can then conclude that students cannot reply if they cannot comprehend what is said, since speaking is very closely related to listening.

Bachman and Palmer (1996) have also identified an additional factor that fosters communication among learners, which they term "topical knowledge." This refers to the speaker's knowledge of related topical information when they employ their comprehension skills. This skill enables students to apply language in relation to their world. These scholars definitively assert that topical knowledge has a significant impact on learners' speaking performance.

The final key factor in the study concerns feedback during speaking activities. Many learners expect their teachers to provide feedback on their speaking performance. Harmer's (1991) research definitively shows that instructors' decisions about learners' performance depend on the stage of the lesson, the tasks, and the types of mistakes made. Harmer (1991) also confirms that if instructors directly correct their students' problems, the flow of the dialogue and the aim of the speaking task will be spoiled. Baker and Westrup (2003) agreed, stating that constant correction can demotivate learners and instil a fear of speaking. Instructors must always correct their learners' mistakes positively and provide more support and persuasion while speaking.

It is clear from these preceding studies that no researcher has yet investigated the effects of testing speaking on EFL learners' motivation in speaking activities in the classroom. This is what the present study aims to establish.

2. Methodology of the Study

The study employs a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative data from questionnaires with qualitative insights from group discussions. This approach enables triangulation of perceptions among EFL teachers and learners regarding speaking test motivation.

As previously mentioned, the current research is conducted in CEG1 Natitingou, a secondary school in Benin, using first-cycle learners. It targets EFL classrooms where speaking activities occur within Beninese curricula that emphasise reading and writing over oral skills.

As far as the research design is concerned, a mixed-methods approach has been used, including questionnaires distributed to 173 first-cycle EFL learners and 10 EFL teachers, alongside a group discussion with 4 of those teachers. Data collection occurred during the 2023-2024 school year, with a total population of 1595 learners, of whom 173 EFL learners and 10 teachers at CEG1 Natitingou were sampled, focusing on perceptions of speaking tests as motivational tools. The research instruments, i.e. questionnaires for EFL learners and EFL teachers, and interview guides, are fully appended to the study.

3. Analysis and Interpretation of the Findings

Ten (10) EFL teachers have been involved in the present investigation. The data have been collected through eight (08) questions, and each question explores a specific point within the general topic.

At the outset, only 04 out of the 10 EFL teachers from CEG 1 Natitingou hold professional teaching certificates (CAPES/BAPES), representing 40%. In contrast, 06 teachers hold academic certificates (Maîtrise/Licence), that is 60% of the respondents. It can then be concluded that the majority of teachers in service at CEG 1 Natitingou do not possess the required qualification for teaching. Furthermore, it has been revealed that 100% of the selected EFL teachers practise speaking activities with their first-cycle learners, but at varying frequencies. While 90% of the teachers implement such activities very often, only 10% rarely implement speaking activities with their first-cycle learners. Regarding their perception of the importance of conducting such activities, 90% of the teachers think that it is important to conduct speaking activities with their learners, whereas 10% think it is not so important to conduct speaking activities with their learners.

From the preceding, it can be noted that the majority of EFL teachers at CEG 1 Natitingou involve their learners in speaking activities, attach importance to them, and implement them with their students very often. However, 1 teacher out of 10 holds a negative attitude towards speaking activities and rarely gives his learners in the first-cycle the opportunity to practise speaking.

The realities outlined above point to the need to question the types of speaking activities these EFL teachers implement in their EFL classes. On this point, it can be noted that the majority, i.e. 100% of the EFL teachers at CEG 1 Natitingou, conduct "oral description of pictures", "roleplay activities", and "listening and repetition" as speaking activities. Unfortunately, none of these teachers conduct "interviews", "storytelling», and "oral presentations" as speaking activities. It is thus clear that the majority of the EFL teachers at CEG 1 Natitingou expose their students to a variety of speaking activities, although they still need to involve other types of speaking activities, such as storytelling, oral presentations, and interviews, to better engage their learners.

Regarding learners' engagement in speaking activities, the majority of teachers (70%) acknowledged that very few of their first-cycle learners are interested and engaged in speaking activities, irrespective of the variety of speaking activities conducted. From the foregoing, other factors may account for such students' negative attitudes towards speaking activities. Possible reasons for these attitudes include learners' lack of motivation and teachers' need to test and grade learners' speaking skills.

In fact, 70% of teachers think that very few students engage in speaking activities because speaking is not tested as part of formative and summative evaluations, while 10% of them think they lack engaging activities to motivate their learners. Most of these teachers think that testing speaking can motivate learners to become active during speaking sessions in the classroom. On the other hand, 20% of these teachers think that students can be punished when they refuse to speak English, and that removing such punishments can motivate them. As for the 10% of these teachers, they admit that they lack engaging strategies to motivate their learners during speaking activities. Surprisingly, 100% of them recognise that learners need motivation and engagement in speaking activities to improve positively in oral production.

One can then conclude that the EFL teachers in service at CEG 1 Natitingou mostly link the lack of motivation among their first-cycle learners in speaking activities to the fact that speaking is not tested during formative and summative evaluations. For them, testing speaking can therefore be a motivational tool for their learners. Overall, the EFL teachers do not lack engaging strategies to motivate their first-cycle learners. However, they strongly believe that overcoming the issue of learners' lack of motivation will enable them to improve their learners' oral production in English.

Among the 173 EFL learners involved in the study, 92, i.e., 53%, like it when their EFL teacher mostly speaks English during English class, while 49, i.e., 28%, don't like it much when their teacher mostly speaks English, and 19% don't like it at all. Happily, 89% of the learners declare that they like speaking English during English class, whereas 11% do not like speaking English. Speaking English is very challenging for 10% of the respondents, a little challenging for 77%, and not challenging at all for 13% of the surveyed learners. On the other hand, 90% of the learners think that it is very important to speak English, as opposed to 9% who think that speaking English is of little importance and 1% who view speaking English as not important at all.

Taking into account the above perceptions of the selected EFL learners, it can be asserted that the first cycle students of CEG 1 Natitingou hold a positive attitude regarding the English language and its importance in oral communication. This is therefore supposed to fuel their motivation during speaking activities in the classroom. But paradoxically, the teachers revealed that few learners are engaged in speaking activities. This means that there are other factors which account for this lack of interest and engagement of the learners towards speaking.

Besides, the majority of these learners report that they are allowed to speak English and French most of the time. This code-switching during English classes suggests that the EFL first-cycle learners of CEG 1 Natitingou are not exposed enough to the English language during English classes. English teachers are expected to create the right linguistic environment to give their learners the opportunity to develop their speaking ability. In the current context of language mixture, 32 % of the respondents always participate in speaking activities in the classroom, while 54 % of them rarely participate and 14 % of the learners never participate in speaking

activities. It can then be concluded that the EFL first-cycle learners of CEG 1 Natitingou react passively to speaking activities in the English language classroom, despite their awareness of the importance of speaking English in the world today.

As far as the possible reasons for these EFL learners' lack of motivation and commitment to speaking are concerned, the majority, despite acknowledging the importance of speaking English, are reluctant to engage in speaking activities in the classroom, as they believe that their ability to speak English will not affect their final score at the end of the school year. This raises the question of whether speaking should be tested during summative evaluations to enquire into learners' perceptions.

As for this question, 86 % of the respondents indicated that they will try to make an effort to speak English and participate in speaking activities in the classroom if speaking were tested as part of their semester grades. Meanwhile, 6% of the respondents think testing speaking will not make them try to speak English and participate in speaking activities, while 8 % of the learners are unsure of what the impact of testing speaking will be on their motivation. It appears obvious that testing speaking will be a motivational tool for the EFL first-cycle learners of CEG 1 Natitingou, as far as their enthusiasm and engagement in speaking activities in the classroom are concerned.

The group discussion with the selected four EFL teachers has clearly shown that these teachers are not satisfied with the engagement of their EFL first-cycle students. Teachers are convinced that the lack of motivation during speaking activities is not due to the activities or their content, as they are culturally relevant enough to engage learners.

Furthermore, the speaking activities are designed to cater to learners' interests, ensuring their engagement. Teachers are right to think that the format of the formative and summative evaluations is not favourable to speaking. It is clear that first-cycle learners lack intrinsic motivation, and that testing speaking is the only way to stimulate their extrinsic motivation during speaking activities. Instrumental motivation must be prompted through testing speaking. The conclusion is clear: the speaking test should start earlier in the first grade. This will ensure learners are successful in the oral part of the BEPC exam, which is often seen as a formality by learners and educational authorities alike.

The findings clearly show that EFL first-cycle learners at CEG 1 Natitingou take the learning of a language skill seriously. They engage in speaking activities in the classroom only if speaking is tested as part of the formative and summative examinations. The majority of first-cycle students are confident that they will become active participants in classroom speaking activities if speaking is tested. The respondents' perception aligns with that of their learners. They view testing speaking as a motivational tool. This suggests that curriculum designers must reconsider the format of English formative and summative evaluation papers. They must include speaking tests. This is certain to change their attitude towards speaking activities in the classroom and make them more engaged. Testing speaking will be a motivational tool for most learners, who rarely participate during such activities in the classroom, as the survey shows. Listening to the respondents' EFL teachers, speaking seems to be one of the most difficult skills to assess. For this test to have an impact on learners' attitude and motivation towards speaking activities, it should be conducted based on clearly defined criteria. There are various types of speaking tests, and among these, the present study suggests Criterion-Referenced Testing (CRT) because it is

appropriate for measuring learners' achievements and for giving them grades that will count towards their semester passing grade.

CRT functions as a test. It measures a student's performance against a standard or criterion agreed upon before classroom instruction begins (Richards, Platt, and Weber 1985; Cohen 1994; Djiwandono 2008). This is the objective of instruction. CRT is then used to measure specific instructional objectives (J.D. Brown, 2005). These objectives are always well-defined and often specific to a particular course, programme, school district or state.

Douglass Brown (2004) definitively states that Criterion-Referenced Tests can be designed to provide test takers with feedback on specific course or lesson objectives, typically in the form of grades. Classroom tests involve students in one class and are linked to a curriculum. The results of these tests are therefore useful for improving teaching effectiveness in the class and for revising the curriculum.

The interpretation of test scores is absolute when following the CRT model. Each student's score is meaningful in isolation, without reference to the scores of other students, as in Norm-Referenced Testing. A student's score on a particular objective is a clear indicator of the percentage of the knowledge or skill in that objective they have learned. The test topics are directly related to those covered in the various learning situations. In the third form (4e), learners are presented with topics on health, communication and education. These topics have already been covered with their teacher in the classroom during each of the Learning Situations.

'Recount' and 'question and answer' are two tasks that should be assigned to first-cycle learners. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines 'recount' as 'to relate in detail, to narrate'. Recount is a key task in the speaking test. It involves telling and sharing stories, experiences, opinions and knowledge, which are the main instructional activities during the learning process. In the recount section of the speaking test, students present their chosen topic, including their story, knowledge, experience, opinion and examples. Students must complete the recount task individually and face-to-face with the tester.

Use the question-and-answer task in combination with the recount. The question-and-answer task is effective for measuring spontaneous speaking ability. The tester must have questions on hand for each of the four topics to ask the students. The questions developed are WH-questions, which require elaborate explanations for students to answer.

When the speaking construct is broken down into discrete components of content relevance, content completeness, grammar and pronunciation, these components become the criteria for assessing students' speaking performance in the speaking test. The test developer then provides descriptions or indications for each criterion. The following table shows the component criteria and the descriptors or indicators for each criterion.

Table. Speaking Assessment Criteria and Descriptors

Component	Criteria	Description / Indication
Relevance of Content	Topic relevance and coherence	The content of the speech is directly related to the assigned topic or question. Ideas are logically connected and appropriate to the communicative purpose of the task.
Completeness of Content	dea development and supporting detail	The response demonstrates sufficient development of ideas, including relevant examples, explanations, or arguments that enhance the clarity and depth of the message.

Grammatical Accuracy	Range and control of structures	The speaker uses grammatical forms accurately and effectively to express intended meanings. Errors, if present, do not obscure comprehension.
Pronunciation and Fluency	Intelligibility and flow of speech	Speech is generally clear and intelligible. Pronunciation features (stress, rhythm, intonation) support understanding, and fluency reflects natural pacing with minimal hesitation.

Source:This table is adapted from the **TOEFL iBT Independent Speaking Rubric** (Educational Testing Service, 2020), the **TELPAS Speaking Scoring Guide** (Texas Education Agency, 2023), and the **Cambridge English B2 First Speaking Assessment Scales** (Cambridge Assessment English, 2018).

Each component is graded on a scale of "very good", "good", "adequate", "fair", "inadequate" and "poor". The "very good" category is given a score of 5, "good" is given a score of 4, "adequate" is given a score of 3, "bad" is given a score of 2, and "poor" is given a score of 1. The student will be assigned the highest mark (5) for each component if they demonstrate the highest level of performance in tasks that refer to the three components of content, grammar and pronunciation. If students perform poorly in the speaking test and are referred to the three components, they will receive the lowest possible score for each component: 1.

The tester rates students' speaking performance using an analytical approach and referring to the score sheet they should have prepared. The score sheet clearly shows the cells for each of the components that were scored: content, grammar and pronunciation. Each component is divided into five criteria. Each component is described with defined indicators/descriptors. The tester ticks the relevant cell under each descriptor to measure student performance in each component. From what has been said, it is clear that EFL teachers should be aware of the importance of speaking in integrative activities. This will better prepare learners for the speaking test, as suggested above.

Discussion

This study clearly demonstrates the relationship between assessment methods and students' motivation in English as a Foreign Language classes at CEG1 Natitingou. Most teachers report that students are not very involved in speaking activities, and both teachers and students believe this is because there is no oral assessment in either formative or summative evaluations. This aligns with the view that motivation hinges on perceived importance and goals; learners tend to focus on tasks that affect success measures such as grades (Gardner 1985; Crookes & Schmidt 1991). This reinforces the idea that testing plays a crucial role in shaping students' learning processes, as assessment systems often guide classroom priorities and affect learner behaviour (Brown 2004; Bachman & Palmer 1996). The clear support for speaking tests from both groups highlights the significant role of extrinsic motivation. Most teachers believe that testing speaking skills encourages more active participation, and 86 percent of learners reported that they would try harder if speaking were graded. This reliance on external motivators contrasts with the literature that emphasises intrinsic motivation for deeper learning. Harmer argues that intrinsic motivation is crucial for sustained progress, whereas extrinsic incentives are often short-lived unless paired with meaningful classroom experiences (Harmer 2003; Harmer 1991). By contrast, educational psychology recognises that well-designed external contingencies can foster engagement, particularly when aligned with clear objectives and constructive classroom climates (Schunk 2008; Santrock 2004). The current finding thus adds to the literature showing that in

settings where speaking has been historically neglected in evaluation, carefully implemented external assessment can serve as a useful entry point to foster participation, which may later support intrinsic interest when classroom tasks are purposeful, and confidence grows (Marsh 2010; Emily 2011).

Teachers report using picture description, role play, and listen-and-repeat. They rarely use interviews, storytelling, or oral presentations. This aligns somewhat with the guidelines for teaching spoken language communicatively, but it does not include more interactive, longer tasks that help develop discourse competence and spontaneous meaning negotiation (Brown & Yule, 1983; Nation & Newton, 2009). Current practices seem to focus on controlled or semi-controlled activities. Interviews and presentations differ because they require planning, developing a topic, and managing responses in real time—all key to genuinely improving speaking skills in class (Bueno, Madrid & McLaren 2006; Baker & Westrup 2003). When there is a gap between what is considered important and the limited variety of tasks, it indicates a need for focused professional development on task design and sequencing.

Learner passivity during speaking sessions, despite recognising the importance of English, also aligns with research on performance conditions and affective variables. Limited preparation time, pressure to perform, and insufficient support can depress the quality and quantity of speech production, especially for lower-proficiency learners (Nation & Newton 2009; Tuan & Mai 2015). Anxiety and low self-confidence further suppress participation, and several studies document negative associations between anxiety and speaking performance in second-language contexts (Krashen 1982; Woodrow 2006). Teachers notice that more capable students often dominate, while less confident ones remain silent. This pattern reflects an affective and interactional tendency in which fear of making mistakes and losing face causes students to withdraw rather than take risks (Bashir Azeem & Dogar 2011; Oxford 1990). Learners prefer speaking tests because they offer clearer expectations and structured opportunities to show their effort, reducing uncertainty. Additionally, outcomes related to language use in class are significant. Most students say they use English and French when speaking. While careful first-language use may help understanding, the literature notes that improvement in speaking is closely linked to listening development and exposure to comprehensible input in the target language (Doff 1998; Shumin 1997). More English input, supported by visuals, along with clear tasks would probably improve both listening comprehension and the quality of oral output. Topical knowledge interacts with listening and speaking performance, further enhancing fluency and coherence, supporting this study's proposal to draw assessment topics from classroom content to maximise accessibility, as validated by Bachman & Palmer (1996) and McCarthy & Carter (2001). Adopting Criterion-Referenced Testing would align well with local goals for measuring achievement against course-specific objectives. The literature describes CRT as focusing on predefined criteria rather than comparisons among students, which enhances transparency and instructional alignment (Richards, Platt, & Weber 1985; Cohen 1994). This approach is opposite to Norm-Referenced frameworks, where scores depend on cohort distribution and may provide less actionable feedback for improvement in the classroom (Brown 2004; Djiwandono 2008). The analytic rubric suggested in the study, based on established scales, provides concrete descriptors for content relevance, completeness, grammar, and pronunciation. Validated descriptors like these can improve reliability and fairness in rating and help students understand targets and next steps (Educational Testing Service 2020; Cambridge Assessment English 2018; Texas Education Agency 2023). This aligns with communicative

language teaching principles by assessing performance with explicit criteria that reflect real-world communication demands through meaningful tasks (Richards & Rodgers 2001; McCarthy & Carter 2001).

Feedback practices should be considered alongside the assessment format. Harmer says that immediate, heavy correction can disrupt fluency and undermine the communicative purpose of tasks, whereas selective, positively framed feedback keeps it flowing and supports confidence (Harmer 1991; Harmer 2003). Baker and Westrup also warn that constant correction could demotivate learners, increasing fear of speaking, which implies that feedback timing and tone are crucial to any attempt to use assessment for motivation (Baker & Westrup 2003; Nation & Newton 2009). By comparison, a CRT rubric used formatively can guide criterion-linked, growth-oriented feedback, likely reducing anxiety and encouraging risk-taking.

The alignment of teacher and learner perceptions strengthens the practical implication that integrating speaking tests into both formative and summative evaluations would increase participation. At the same time, the literature indicates that assessment reform is most effective when combined with rich task design, adequate input, and supportive affective conditions. This means policy changes should be coupled with classroom supports such as varied speaking tasks, structured preparation time, and explicit strategies for managing anxiety and building confidence. The recommendation is therefore twofold: first, revise assessment instruments to include CRT-based speaking components directly tied to the curriculum, using clear, research-informed descriptors; second, provide teacher development focused on expanding task repertoires, calibrating ratings with exemplars, and implementing balanced feedback practices. This study is limited by a single site and the temporal scope of data collection. Results would be more generalisable if the study were replicated across various schools and regions, and if motivation and proficiency were tracked over time after introducing speaking tests. Future work could compare the motivational impact of speaking tests with other interventions, such as increased target-language input, peer interaction structures, or recognition systems that reward consistent oral participation. These comparative analyses might shed light on how assessment reform integrates into the broader framework of teaching and learning supports (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Brown, 2004).

Conclusion

The present study investigates the role of speaking tests as a motivational instrument for first-cycle learners at CEG 1 Natitingou. Through a mixed-method approach to data collection, analysis, and interpretation, the findings reveal that the integration of speaking assessments can function as a powerful extrinsic motivator, potentially reshaping students' attitudes toward oral performance in the English classroom (Brown, 2004; Gardner, 1985). The analyses demonstrate that learners' lack of motivationfor speaking activities largely stems from the absence of oral evaluation in both formative and summative assessments. Such a situation suggests that students tend to prioritise the acquisition of skills that are subject to examination, while exhibiting limited intrinsic motivation to develop oral proficiency (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Krashen, 1982). Consequently, the existing evaluation system indirectly discourages speaking practice, as the majority of the EFL students perceive it as irrelevant to their academic success.

473 Overall, the findings suggest that introducing speaking tests could enhance learners' extrinsic
474 motivation through the incentive of grades, which, in turn, may foster greater participation and
475 investment in oral communicative tasks (Shumin, 1997; Tuan & Mai, 2015). This aligns with
476 previous research emphasising the positive influence of assessment on learner engagement and
477 achievement in language education (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Nation & Newton, 2009). Thus,
478 the study underscores the need for educational policymakers—particularly those within the
479 Ministry of Secondary Education in Benin—to reorient the English curriculum towards
480 communicative competence rather than maintaining a predominant emphasis on written
481 language skills (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Harmer, 2003). Emphasising spoken English would
482 create opportunities for the systematic inclusion of speaking tests in summative and
483 certificativeexaminations, thereby fostering a more balanced and communicatively orientated
484 language curriculum.

485 In this regard, curriculum designers and pedagogical inspectors are encouraged to adopt
486 Criterion-Referenced Testing frameworks that allow teachers to assess oral proficiency with
487 greater validity and reliability (Cohen, 1994). Such reform would ensure that speaking is not
488 only taught, but also evaluated in alignment with authentic communicative practices, consistent
489 with current trends in communicative language testing (McCarthy & Carter, 2001; Woodrow,
490 2006).

491 In sum, the study suggests that the effective and professional implementation of speaking
492 assessments could significantly improve the overall quality of English language evaluation in
493 Beninese secondary schools. Such a transformation would contribute to a more holistic and
494 learner-centred approach to language education, equipping students with the competencies
495 required for both written and spoken communication in English. The practical implications of
496 these findings call for sustained collaboration among teachers, curriculum designers, and
497 policymakers to ensure that testing practices align with the communicative objectives of English
498 language teaching in Benin.

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551

552 **Appendices 1:Questionnaire for EFL learners'**
553 Dear EFL learners, please respond to thequestions below about speaking activities with first-
554 cycle learners. Please circle the number that best matches your opinion for each statement. For
555 some questions, check all that apply or select one option. Your answers are anonymous and help
556 improve English classes.
557 **Section 1: Attitudes towards speaking English**

Item	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
1	I like speaking English during English class.					

2	Speaking English is very important for my future (e.g., jobs, communication).					
3	Speaking English is challenging for me.					
4	I feel anxious or afraid when asked to speak English in class.					

558 **Section 2: Classroom Participation and Environment**

Item	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
5	I often participate in speaking activities (e.g., picture description, role-play).					
6	I like when my teacher speaks mostly English in class.					
7	I am allowed to use French during speaking activities most of the time.					

559

560 **Q8: How often do you participate in speaking activities?**
561 • Always ( ) - Often ( ) - Rarely ( ) - Never ( )

562 **Section 3: Impact of Testing and Motivation**

Item	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
9	I show less interest in speaking because it is not tested in exams.					
10	If speaking was tested for grades, I would participate more.					
11	Testing speaking would make me practice more outside class.					
12	I am motivated to speak if my mistakes are corrected positively.					

563

564 **Q13: What would motivate you more in speaking?**
565 • Fun activities like role-play ( )
566 • Speaking tests with grades ( )
567 • Less French use in class ( )
568 • Rewards/praise from teacher ( )
569 • Practice with friends ( )
570 • Other:

571 _____

572 **Appendices 2:EFL teachers' questionnaire**
573 Dear EFL Teacher, please respond to these questions about speaking activities with first-cycle
574 learners. Your input is anonymous and helps improve English evaluation in Benin. Circle or
575 mark your choice.
576 **Scale:** 1=Strongly Disagree | 2=Disagree | 3=Neutral | 4=Agree | 5=Strongly Agree
577 **Section 1: Teacher background and practices**

Item	Statement/Question	1	2	3	4	5
1	CAPES/BAPES☐Licence/Maitrise ☐	-	-	-	-	-
2	I conduct speaking activities very often with first-cycle learners.					
3	Speaking activities are important for first-cycle EFL learners.					

578 **Q4: Which speaking activities do you use?**
579 ☐ Oral description of pictures
580 ☐ Role-play activities
581 ☐ Listening and repetition
582 ☐ Interviews
583 ☐ Storytelling
584 ☐ Oral presentations
585 ☐ Other:
586 _____
587 **Section 2: Learners' personal engagement and challenges**

Item	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
5	Very few first-cycle learners engage in speaking activities ( ).					
6	Learners lack motivation because speaking is not tested in formative/summative evaluations ( ).					

Q7: Main reason for low engagement?

☐ No speaking tests/grades ()

☐ Lack of engaging activities ()

☐ Need for punishment/refusal ()

☐ Other strategies needed ()

Section 3: Perceptions of testing speaking

Item	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
8	Testing speaking would motivate learners to participate more.					
9	Learners need extrinsic motivation via speaking tests to improve oral production					
10	Criterion-Referenced Testing (e.g., recount/Q&A on content/grammar/fluency) is suitable for Benin EFL.					

Appendices 3: Interview guide

Question 1: Are you really satisfied with the engagement of your learners during speaking activities in your classroom?

Question 2: Don't you think your activities may not be interesting enough to engage your learners?

Question 3: What do you think about the format of the formative and summative evaluations? Does it have any link with the learners' lack of motivation and engagement during speaking activities?

Question 4: What do you think about the oral test which is submitted to the fourth graders when they pass their BEPC exam?