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ASSESSING ORACY SKILLS IN ONLINE COURSES

ОЦІНЮВАННЯ МОВЛЕННЄВИХ НАВИЧОК В ОНЛАЙН НАВЧАННІ

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ABSTRACT

This academic article explores the intricacies of assessing oracy skills online within the context of online courses. While online learning has been growing in popularity, with many educational institutions transitioning to this mode of delivery, there remains a lack of empirical insight into designing online courses that account for the right assessment. The study seeks to address this gap by investigating the challenges and strategies involved in assessing oracy skills online.

The article highlights the multifaceted nature of oracy assessment, which involves assessing oral language and communicative competence. Additionally, assessing oracy skills requires flexibility, as students mature and move from one age period to another. The challenges of online assessment are also discussed, including academic dishonesty, which can hinder fair assessment. Plagiarism, identity verification, and cheating are all identified as key challenges in online assessment. Moreover, students may experience a lack of motivation, insufficient and unrealistic information, and inadequate communication with their instructors as additional barriers in online learning.

In response to these challenges, the article outlines various strategies and technologies that can be employed to assess oracy skills online. These include using formative online tests, which provide quick feedback and help build confidence and maintain practice, as well as summative tests that stem from taking formative tests. Additionally, the article suggests that educators should focus on positive student perceptions and outcomes in online learning to develop better practices.

Overall, this article highlights the importance of understanding the intricacies of assessing oracy skills in online courses and provides insights into the challenges and strategies involved in this process. By taking into account the various factors that can impact online assessment, educators can develop more effective and engaging online courses that promote student success.

Key words: *oracy skills, assessing oracy, assessing online, distance learning, communication.*

Introduction. Despite the growing global usage of online learning, which in many areas is substituting face-to-face and blended learning due to a large number of benefits for students in the educational process [16; 11; 5; 15], and the recent increase in ways and technologies of assessing online assignments and student activity [35; 4; 28; 17; 2; 9], key researchers such as Dridi et al., Hughes et al. continue to argue that assessing online learning prevails in positive results. «...students ...not demonstrating fitness for practice» [22]. One such gap is in the relative lack of empirical insight into a steady system of designing online courses which can directly account for the right assessment. In theoretical terms, the training course is increasingly recognised as efficient and engaging, as it counts a various number of developing core skills activities and results in transparent and student-centered assessment, which should be considered at the stage of a course design. More research is needed to define possible concerns and fears of the students to take them into account to minimize possible lacks in the assessment of online student activities. In addition, a growing recognition of the importance and 'reality' of both growing efficient methods for online assessment and, at the same time, malpractices in assessment [25], drive educators to focus more on the positive students' perceptions and outcomes in online learning to develop them for better practice. Still, the literature doesn't capture enough the intricacies of assessing oracy online as these practices may vary and have different realizations depending on many factors, and more than that, online course assessment oracy is complicated by the additional specific context. That is, the assessment process of assessing skills in online courses may differ from the standard process of assessment. This study seeks to investigate the intricacies of assessing skills online, particularly, peculiarities in assessing oracy online framed by the online courses.

Analysis of relevant research. The emphasis on assessing oracy skills has been introduced as oral competence through listening and speaking [45]. Oracy involves a multifaceted system of assessment due to complexity of oral language and communicative competence [33]. More than that, the assessment approach demands flexibility in assessing students as they mature and move from one age period to another [33].

Since the beginning of the pandemic time in 2020, many educational institutions have faced challenges in the transition to online teaching and learning. Many researchers defined academic dishonesty as a key problem in online learning, particularly plagiarism which hinds online assessment [6; 34; 40; 42; 1] investigated the challenges related to teachers, learners, and online instructions and stated them as teachers' unpreparedness, increasing teaching workload, students' demotivation and emotional well-being problems, poor autonomous learning skills, difficulties in communicating with families, technical and technological obstacles, problematic learner behaviours and distraction in online environments, reduced classroom interaction, difficulties in assessing learner language performance. These hinders evoke the consequent actions in developing specific online strategies and techniques varied from conventional to alternative, depending on the targeted outcomes in the learning process.

Aim of the Study. Considering the above discussion, this work aims to contribute to the process of more accurately documenting what problems and challenges in assessing online oracy in online courses. Broadly, the research questions in this literature review will be organised to investigate three main areas as the guide for exploration: 1) To outline the definition of oracy in current literature. 2) To analyse the basic principles of assessing online learning and determine principle challenges in assessing online. 3) To identify key strategies and technologies for assessing oracy.

Methods. A complex of modern general scientific research methods and approaches was used to achieve the goal and fulfill the tasks of the research, namely the theoretical ones: analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, systematization, comparison, and generalization, which made it possible to process scientific sources, determine the essence and features of the assessing principles both on site and online, reveal the principal instruments and approaches of assessing oracy.

The use of the Publish or Perish research bibliographic search tool [18] enabled to select the most cited current sources for 2017-2022 from the search database. The Scopus database served as a key provider of theoretical sources, mainly journal articles. To search the Scopus database, the following key phrases and words were entered: 'online assessment', 'challenges in online learning', 'oracy skills', 'orality skills', 'assessing speaking online', 'assessing listening online'. Words and phrases were entered both in the title line of the studies and for keywords. Working in the Mendeley bibliographic manager made it possible to automatically organize sources according to the proper citation style and search through the library.

Literature review.

Oracy and its definition in the literature.

Oracy has been defined as describing skills parallel to literacy. Thus, while literacy involves writing and reading as part of the creature's perception, orality involves speaking and listening [45]. This foundation reflects the model of communication that is the subject of the basic science of conversation or discussion. Oracy is an intercept in communication that promotes reciprocity and makes communication accessible.

Oracy is defined as speaking ability and is used as an academic term to assess speaking and listening skills in oral exams [23]; one of the most important communication skills, the ability to «speak well», create and influence public discourse [21].

Oracy is an integral part of building decision-making capacity and engaging students in arguments and counterarguments in a two-way communication process that provides a holistic understanding of all aspects of communication [21].

Oracy is inseparable from the conversational interaction that takes place during storytelling [8]. The strategies of speaking up, collaborating, and asking for clarification are the key complexities that make speaking real in communication. Speaking proficiency or interaction is a key feature of oracy.

It has been argued that talking to young L1 learners involves various skills developed in a modeled and supported communication process [31]. As a difficult skill to assess, speaking is complicated for L2 students and other challenges such as special education.

Since oracy is considered more complex than literacy, with greater involvement and interaction between teachers and students, it requires a more active role in the teaching and learning process [12]. Therefore, the assessment of oral skills should be multi-faceted and integrative.

Oracy is also an important element of literacy development. The condition for shaping oral communication skills is a better understanding and enrichment of the vocabulary of reading and writing skills [38; 3]. Also, the additional role of oracy is important for acquiring literacy and providing instruction.

As part of the balance of persuasion, the ideal model of oracy is *logos* (i.e. thematic content), *ethos* (ability to show character), and *pathos* (ability to emotionally influence listeners) [23].

Some researchers argue that while the L1 balance shifts more toward the *logo*, the L2 unit tends to include more *pathos* and *ethos* [23]. It seems that the more complex the content and vocabulary, the more complex is the process of learning public speaking and the more complex is the assessment of this skill.

Along with the term «oracy» in modern literature, there is another definition of oral proficiency as «orality». Spoken language is mainly oral and exploratory oral presentations, developing speaking and listening skills with L1 students [39]. As a consequence of literacy, orality plays an important role in the oral transmission of knowledge [13]. This may involve the transfer of content or *logos* within the Oral Proficiency Scheme.

Orality is closely related to communication science, which deals with the relationship between technology, society, and communication. This representation is enriched by inclusion in personal reflections [43]. Seeing reflection as an integral part of critical thinking, which is one of the most sought-after essential professional skills, this idea of oral competence finds constant support in the professional or authentic component of oral competence.

Important elements of oral competence during a presentation are verbal and non-verbal resources that result in mutual communication with the audience. In speech transmission, positioning related to paralinguistic devices can be crucial in interaction. Rank can also vary by gender, social status and role, and level.

Basic principles of assessing online learning and determine principle challenges in assessing online

Having shifted to the 21st-century learning [24], which is outlined as a framework consisting of foundational knowledge (to know), meta knowledge (to act) and humanistic knowledge (to value) (Fig. 1), the reality of the current realm of learning focuses on mostly online ways. Boitshwarelo et al. investigated online tests as the common way of online assessment and defined that formative online tests are best suited for students' needs in providing quick feedback and designed with a multiple attempts option play an important role in building confidence and maintaining practice before

exams and summative tests. The researcher stated that student motivation is often linked to effort, therefore leading to summative performance which stems from taking the formative tests [7].

Academic dishonesty, like cheating [7], plagiarism [6; 40], identity verification [6], is deterred as a key challenge in online assessment and often hinders fair assessment.

Vanslambrouck et al. state that students experience a lack of motivation as the principal barrier in online learning, because of insufficient and unrealistic information about the courses or training online or in a blended mode. Despite the flexibility in doing online courses, the online learning process makes completing group work tasks challenging as it requires additional time and depends on the other students' fulfillment. Along with this obstacle, motivation problems can arise in postponing tasks. At the same time, any face-to-face or contact moments like feedback and role plays seem extremely valuable and important, which makes the design of the courses balanced and harmonious with individual and group tasks.

Another argument for highlighting challenges in online and blended learning is a level of students stress [26]. Despite the number of studies stating that students in distance learning have no significant stress level [20; 27], Lazarevic statistically proves the increased level of stress from the number of subjects the students take online and names the reasons, such as finding time to study, accessing learning materials, social stress, expectation from your family and friends.

The challenges in the online assessment are stated to be in organizing group work, particularly in creating groups, organizing their work, and completing the tasks within it [46]. To find the most efficient and reliable tool for a precise and valid assessment, the current research suggests a number of solutions, such as personalised assessment in contrast to one-size-fits-all standardised formative one, with engaging AI and providing computerised-adaptive assessment. Another type of efficient assessment is authentic assessment, which more effectively assesses higher-order skills and problem-solving abilities than multiple-choice testing can. The peer assessment has a leading role in assessing online courses. Due to its applicability in the majority of scenarios and for a variety of goals, is the most flexible strategy in the toolkit for evaluation in open online education. It is useful for both formative and summative assessments and is scaleable. A number of characteristics can be added to peer assessment to maximize its advantages. One such aspect is the use of the previously stated small-group peer evaluation design. Another element is a rater training process built within the course [46].

The researcher Long argues in her research that the quality of assessment of online interaction correlates with the design and delivery of a module on oracy skills, which enhances interaction in the classroom, therefore, increasing the level of students' engagement in learning. Along with the scaffolding of the online course, the ways of assessment play a significant role in creating positive learning atmosphere [29].

On the other hand, an overwhelming number of technologies makes assessment online challenging and confusing, due to the constrained amount of time available for reflection and input [36]. Despite the prevailing number of the technically developed households and the Internet, the majority of students' criticisms were related to technical issues, which included audio problems like broken microphones or bad sound, sporadic admissions challenges brought on by security measures the university imposed, Internet connection problems, and security concerns. Nevertheless, the interaction between students stays crucial and technical means in assessing and teaching online should be pinpointed at the development of possibilities for communication: group work, feedback, communication in the chat box, and others. The leading challenges in online assessment, such as academicians under pressure to uphold or modify norms, and online evaluation poses difficulties because cheating is more difficult to detect [36].

Key strategies and technologies for assessing oracy

In higher education, there is a huge potential to creatively apply diverse assessment methodologies to assist and evaluate student learning due to various digital technologies and the pervasive availability of information everywhere, at any time. Implementing the opportunities provided by technology to promote and evaluate deep learning that equips graduates for a changing and unpredictable future is a problem in the digital age. Online tests are a common type of online assessment used in higher education, such as online assessment, online tests, online quizzes, multiple choice questions, and other related aspects, particularly in a higher education context [7]. Depending on the cognitive level of engagement, particularly grounding in Bloom's taxonomy, multiple-choice questions can focus on different demands to the learning outcomes.

The research on online learning assessment by Moussa reveals the most popular strategies applied in universities, including but not limited to quizzes, written assignments, exams, group projects and presentations, case studies, article reviews, and any appropriate assessment. Depending on the assignment, different types of questions were asked, such as those requiring selected responses, essays, short essays, and critical thinking and problem-solving questions [32].

Since oracy skills are intricately linked to metacognitive skills such as critical thinking [14], the result of critical thinking as a part of communicative skill unfolds a purpose and leads to problem-solving or decision-making, creating the oracy model in communication. As Goodsett investigates in the study on the best practices for assessing critical thinking online, the efficient way of the right assessment is to create precise rubrics for teaching and assessing with the elements of online learning design. The forms of assessment which can be included in the rubric, refer to providing feedback, multiple-choice question construction, and the use of open-ended questions.

With the developing more cognitive level of IT, assessing oracy has become more sophisticated, launching new modes of audio-visual communication [30; 41]. A boosting variety of digital online tools and means enables facilitating oral negotiation and mastering oral skills as a

complementary way in the design of language tests providing support for the development of oral negotiation skills through the use of interactive tools [30].

Along with the wide range of online resources and tools to use to develop online assessments, educators can have access to basic HTML tools and management systems for assessing students' outcomes in the online environment, such as selected response assessments, constructed response assessments, virtual discussions, concept mapping, e-portfolio assessment, writing, field experiences, individual and group projects, informal student feedback, peer assessment, and self-assessment. Communicating in the online learning process takes place via technology, engaging the participants in group asynchronous and synchronous discussion, group project grade, the drafting process, and a peer preview of a draft [6]. The assessment technique of such high-order thinking activities demands detailed rubrics regarding the expected students' outcomes.

An integrative assessment technique is applied in assessing oracy within the professional context vlog (PCV) [19]. Students are expected to create professional digital communication for a unique work setting. The instructor gathers anonymous, qualitative student feedback and evaluates and compares contributions from three independent cohorts that had been exposed to two different PCV designs. The improvement in oracy confidence, critical thinking, authentic voice, authority, and argument flow was consistently reported by students. Beyond a «sweet spot» of text or media content, the PCV's assessment value, however, declines. The level of authentic voice and personal communication confidence is diminished if a student spends excessive time communicating through text or media.

Video assignments are getting more popular in online assessment and teaching and aim to improve digital literacy and English proficiency. For course topic assignments and to make up for missed lectures, students create brief video flips. The results of student assessments show that our key objectives – improved oral proficiency, increased digital competence for language acquisition, and increased student-teacher contact time-have been met. The video assignments serve as an essential complement to other student work from the teacher's perspective and serve as a foundation for evaluating oral English proficiency and better comprehending what students know. Even though the structure necessitates a high level of preparation from the students, it also saves teachers' time [37].

Discussion and conclusions. The main study aimed to investigate the literature sources in assessing oracy online. The results of learning the theoretical background indicated the presence of challenges in online teaching, learning, and assessment. The research efforts of this study was designed to answer the tasks in describing the oracy assessment online, particularly to outline the definition of oracy in current literature, to analyse the basic principles of assessing online learning and determine principle challenges in assessing online, to identify key strategies and technologies for assessing oracy. With pairing our notion with the current studies' analysis, we define oracy as an interception in communication engaging speaking and listening ability, interaction with the speakers grounded in

the content, ability to express themselves and influence and collaborate with the counter speakers. Due to its complicated nature, oracy should be assessed with the integrative scale of criteria providing multidimensional rubrics in assessing various facets of communication interaction.

In finding a response to the second task posed in this literature review, the study demonstrates that the key hinders in assessing and teaching online mainly relate to communication problems between students. Online learning participants find challenging a lack of face-to-face conversation and group interaction in the classrooms on site. In contrast, any collaborating tasks in online courses look efficient and helpful in increasing the level of motivation, which can drop in the online tasks fulfillment. Along with the factors stated in the literature, like finding time to study, accessing learning materials, social stress, expectation from your family and friends, lack of motivation and collaboration may lead to increased stress levels in taking online learning.

In addressing the last research question about strategies and technologies for assessing oracy, this study has revealed that the high-quality assessment of oracy online benefits from a various range of test types mainly focused on the development of higher-order thinking skills, reflection, collaboration, and engagement in learning. The growing number of IT means support the technological solution in providing fair and precise assessing, blurring the edge between distance and face-to-face learning. However, educators and assessors should keep in mind the students' needs and design the courses and tests in a student-centered way.

Additionally, implications toward the planning the speaking task in online assessment and the factors the instructors should consider, still remain unclear and require further deeper theoretical and practical analysis. These factors may include the purpose of the assessment, the output is needed from the assessment, the consequences of the assessment, the context for the task, the test takers and what are their expectations of the task, knowledge, and skills do all test takers share which can be drawn on in the task, language proficiency level(s) should the task accommodate, resources are readily available to deliver the assessment and others.

In conclusion, based on the data collected in this literature research, it is challenging to assess what if anything instructors, at this point, should be mindful of when teaching in either learning environment. Without a more comprehensive understanding of oracy assessment online, it is difficult to answer the question about the specific condition and additional factors influencing the outcomes in learning. However, further research is necessary to obtain a clearer understanding of the specific and academic factors in oracy assessment in online learning.

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АНОТАЦІЯ

Ця наукова стаття досліджує складності оцінки навичок усного мовлення онлайн в контексті онлайн-курсів. Незважаючи на те, що онлайн-навчання стає все більш популярним, і багато закладів освіти переходить на цей режим, все ще існує недостатньо емпіричного уявлення про створення онлайн-курсів, які враховують правильну оцінку. Дослідження має на меті заповнити цю прогалину, зокрема щодо викликів та стратегій, пов'язаних з оцінкою навичок усного мовлення онлайн.

Стаття підкреслює багатогранність оцінки усного мовлення та комунікативної компетенції. Оцінка навичок усного мовлення потребує гнучкості,

оскільки студенти зростають і переходять з одного вікового періоду в інший. Також обговорюються виклики онлайн-оцінки, включаючи наукову нечесність, яка може заважати справедливій оцінці. Плагіат, перевірка ідентичності та обман визначаються як ключові виклики при онлайн-оцінці. Крім того, додатковими бар'єрами в онлайн-навчанні студенти є відсутність мотивації, нереалістична інформація та недостатнє спілкуванням з викладачами.

У відповідь на ці виклики стаття визначає різноманітні стратегії та технології, які можуть бути використані для оцінювання навичок усного мовлення в онлайн-курсах. Серед них формативні онлайн-тести, які забезпечують швидкий зворотній відгук та допомагають розвивати впевненість і підтримувати практику, а також сумативні тести, які впливають з формативних тестів. Стаття пропонує педагогам зосередитися на позитивних сприйняттях та результативності студентів в онлайн-навчанні, щоб розробляти кращі практики.

Загалом, підкреслюється важливість розуміння особливостей оцінювання навичок усного мовлення в онлайн-курсах та надає інсайти щодо викликів та стратегій, пов'язаних з цим процесом. Ураховуючи різноманітні фактори, які можуть впливати на онлайн-оцінювання, педагоги можуть розробляти більш ефективні та залучаючі онлайн-курси, що сприяють успіху студентів.

Ключові слова: усна комунікація, оцінювання розмовних навичок, оцінювання онлайн, дистанційне навчання, комунікаційна взаємодія.