

Improving Feedback to English as Second Language Students in Presentation Classes

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The purpose of this study was to re-examine the researcher's formative assessment process for a third year university English for Presentation class in order to help students improve their presentation skills. The researcher used a Public Speaking Self-Assessment: Making Presentations' survey, student interviews and a class self-assessment journal. The researcher discovered that the survey questions needed to be redesigned; more time was needed between the two surveys, and the importance of being a good listener needed to be addressed. Interviews revealed that videotaping presentations was useful for identifying strengths and weaknesses, providing feedback on a peer's presentation skills and for a motivational boost. Finally, the class journals revealed that the students were very critical of themselves, the student assessment rubric questions needed balancing, and new student-initiated assessment strategies needed to be developed. The outcome of this 'action research' while not statistically significant, did provide insight into areas for improvement in future research methodology, classroom feedback and evaluation strategies and in the usefulness of videotaping student presentations as an evaluative tool.

Keywords: formative assessment, action research, methodology, feedback, evaluation

Introduction

This study is part of an ongoing process of *action research* to improve evaluation feedback to English as a Second Language students enrolled in a third year English for Presentation class. Action research is succinctly defined as 'a disciplined process of inquiry conducted *by* and *for* those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the "actor" in improving and/or refining his or her actions.' (Sagor, 2000)

It came to the attention of the researcher after examining year-end surveys and data collected from interviews with students and the teacher's observations of students' performances that students were not making significant improvements in their presentation skills. This formative assessment process, in which the teacher gave the student both verbal and written feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of their presentations, had been considered to be a useful method in a presentation class as it served to provide students with relevant and timely feedback on the one hand, and the teacher with insights to improve his teaching on the other. However, the students were not making the gains expected. Therefore, the researcher decided to re-examine his formative assessment process in order to determine ways the feedback process could be improved to help students develop their presentation skills.

Previous studies related to presentations in ESL or English as a Foreign Language contexts focused either on problems associated with Asian student reluctance to speak in English, the reasons for this and the ramifications that has on making presentations or on the advantages and disadvantages of specific video software usage. (Sato, 2003; King, 2002; Tazijan et al., 2010) The researcher intends to focus on a single class in which he will introduce systematic videotaping coupled with three-pronged evaluation by self, peer and teacher. Furthermore, the students will be required to write entries into a class journal to set goals prior to every presentation. Part of the reasoning behind this assessment procedure is to provide students with advice from two other sources, the teacher and a peer. In addition, it gives the students the opportunity to develop the ability to assess their own performance as this, along with the ability to communicate clearly in the second language, is an important skill for their current academic life and their post university careers. (Dunbar, 2006)

Students in the English for Presentation class are all members of the International Welfare Development

(I.W.D.) faculty at Nihon Fukushi University (N.F.U.) where there is a strong focus on English studies, oral communication and self-regulatory skills. As part of that focus the faculty has a special program and event to reinforce this. One special program that the students are expected to take part in is the annual Fieldwork study tours to Asian countries. They are expected to be able to communicate in English independently while abroad. In addition, the faculty holds an International Collaborative Project, called the World Youth Meeting (W.Y.M.). At this two-day event students from various Asian countries are invited to make presentations with the faculty students. The preparation, initially via SKYPE and email, and presentations are all done in English. In fact the entire event is planned, organized and hosted by a student steering committee. This event was implemented as part of the faculty's commitment to an educational constructivist approach whereby the students 'actively construct their knowledge rather than passively receiving knowledge from their teachers or environments' (Kageto& Sato, 2010).

Research Design and Methods

Context

The focus of this research is on a single third year English for Presentation class consisting of nineteen students in the same faculty. The prerequisites for taking the class included first and second year Information and Communications Technology classes and English for Presentation I, II and III classes. The V/VI presentation class is the only presentation class available to students in the third year. It is an elective course so; consequently, the class attracts students with various levels of English language abilities and with a mixture of motivational reasons. All of the students had taken part in the Fieldwork study tours to Asian countries and the W.Y.M. Although participation in this event is mandatory, not all of the students chose roles that necessitated giving presentations with visiting students at the event.

The class meets once a week for ninety minutes. A variety of awareness raising activities to assist students in improving their public speaking skills is used. Students are expected to give three presentations per term. These consist of two individual and one small group presentation. Eighty percent of the students' grades for the course are based on their presentation performances. The teacher chooses the presentation themes but students have a lot of freedom in choosing the content.

Based on previous observations, the researcher decided to increase class preparation time, vary the feedback by flipping some of the class content online and to introduce systematic videotaping of the presentations. The videos were uploaded to the teacher's YouTube account. The videos are unlisted so only select students were sent the link to view them. Students were asked to preview a peer's video and their own and then fill out a presentation evaluation rubric outside of class, thereby, freeing up class time. Students were also asked to set personal goals in a self-assessment journal. The evaluation rubric and class journal focused on skills the presentation class teachers agreed were important to a successful presentation. These techniques are in line with earlier research, which stresses the importance of teachers assisting students to take charge of their own learning and to participate in some part of their own assessment. (Nicole and MacFarlene-Dick, 2006)

Design

Surveys - Students were asked to fill out a Public Speaking Self-Assessment: Making Presentations survey in the first and last week of classes as well as a year-end survey. Participation in these surveys was voluntary. The Public Speaking Self-Assessment survey consisted of six items: students' awareness of their own public speaking style, ability to read their audiences' reactions, satisfaction and ability to listen closely to other speakers. These items were considered important skills for successfully giving or self-assessing student's presentations by the presentation class teachers. Students were asked to respond to the items on a 4-point Likert scale (SA (4) = Strongly agree to SD (1) = Strongly disagree). The results of the first 6 items were analyzed using a Comparing Means (Paired two-sample t-test) analysis to assess whether there were any significant changes in students' self-assessments over the course of the first term. The final two items of the survey consisted of open ended questions asking students to identify their strongest skill as a presenter and to identify how they could improve their listening skills as an audience member. The listening skills questions were included to heighten student awareness of the importance of the audiences' reactions. In addition to these, the researcher also asked students for any additional comments about their first term presentations. The year-end survey consisted of ten items on 4-point

Likert scale: evaluation methods used in the class and self-evaluation methods used to view the videotaped presentation and the class journal. The survey also included two open-ended questions, which asked about things the students liked or disliked about the class. Eight of the students returned the year-end survey and they will be discussed for insights.

Student Interviews - Finally, three students were interviewed in a single 20-minute session, regarding their perceptions of the evaluation process, their assessment of their own progress and their opinions about the video taping of their presentations. The students' comments were assessed to determine their ability to identify weaknesses in their presentation skills and to propose ways to address those self-identified weaknesses.

Class Journal - The class journal, in which students wrote about their presentation improvement goals, how they were going to achieve that goal and an evaluation of their progress after watching their video, was also examined for any useful data. The class journal had a checklist of items that students were to think about when assessing their presentations. These included physical and vocal elements as well as awareness of their audiences' reactions as a means to assess how well their presentation was being received.

Results

Public Speaking Self-Assessment Survey Part I – Statistical Analysis

Of the nineteen students in the class, eleven submitted their completed surveys to the teacher by the deadline and one submitted after the deadline by email. The statistical analysis of the six questions on the surveys found little significant change. Question number one had the largest difference but statistically speaking the numbers show only a very small change. (pre. 3.0, post 3.3, $p = 0.19$). The reasons for the insignificant change will be examined in the discussion section.

Public Speaking Self-Assessment Survey Part II – Open Ended Questions

The seventh question on the survey asked students to identify their strongest skill as a presenter. The students' comments from the beginning and end of term have focused predominately on the physical elements related to presenting such as smiling, making eye contact and using gestures as well as vocal elements like pronunciation, volume and pace.

The eighth question was added to raise the students' awareness of the importance of being a good listener and to get students to think about the effect this has on the presenter. However, few students understood what the researcher was getting at.

Student interviews

During the course of several classes the researcher interviewed six students who had volunteered to meet with the researcher. The researcher asked the students three questions. Firstly, if watching the video of their presentation was helpful. Secondly, what they learned about their presentation style from the videos. Finally, was the video taping of presentations a good idea and why or why not. These interviews provided some of the most interesting observations.

Class Journal - Student Comments

The class journal that students write in before and after presentations provided a few insights in terms of the student's own self-awareness yet, some interesting points were revealed in the scores. The teacher made a note of student, peer and teacher scores and a summary of comments for each presentation in the journal. These gave rise to some interesting points for discussion. The journal comments were assessed according to the students' ability to identify their own weaknesses and propose concrete ways to address them in future presentations.

Four of the eleven students added more general comments that covered a wider area. These comments are worth exploring in a little more depth in the discussion section.

Year-End Survey

The year-end survey was completed by eight of the nineteen students in the class. It was decided to focus on the qualitative aspects of the students' responses in the discussion section.

Year-End Interviews

Three students agreed to talk about their experiences in the class during a single thirty-minute session. The researcher asked students for their thoughts about the class in general and about the use of videotaping of presentations.

Discussion

Public Speaking Self-Assessment Survey - Statistical Analysis

The lack of any significant change in terms of the statistical analysis of the six questions on the survey may be due to a number of factors. Firstly, the data pool was small as only eleven out of nineteen students registered for the class submitted their surveys on time for the analysis. Secondly, upon reconsidering the questions that the students answered revealed that the questions themselves maybe at fault. The questions were not significantly refined or detailed enough to reveal student progress. Another reason maybe the limited time between the two surveys. The first term consisting of four months may not be a long enough interval for students to have noticed any changes.

To address these limitations, it would be useful to expand the data pool, for example, by surveying students in other presentation classes in the first and second year, as this could reveal more interesting results. Next, it would be useful to redesign the survey, creating more specific questions with finer divisions such as gestures, eye contact, facial expressions for body language, volume, word stress, and pauses for speaking and so on. Adding data from surveys at the beginning and end of the second term could alleviate the issue of the limited time and could provide more interesting results. Finally, asking students to watch and compare their first presentation of the first term with their final presentation from the second term, could reveal some interesting data as the longer time in between these two presentations could reveal students' progress.

Public Speaking Self-Assessment Survey - Open Ended Questions

The comments with regards to the seventh open-ended question indicated to the researcher that students are acutely aware of the importance of the physical elements of giving presentations. Consequently, it would be useful in the second term to look closely at what students are doing to improve these areas utilizing brainstorming and discussion activities. This would provide students with an opportunity to get new ideas for self-improvement that doesn't rely exclusively on teacher-centered instruction, which is in keeping with the educational constructivist approach of the faculty.

One problem with the eighth question, however, was that its intent was not clearly stated and, therefore, the students gave fairly standard examples of listening practice strategies like watching movies, listening to music, speaking with native English speakers, etc. in the beginning and end of term surveys. Two students made the connection to giving presentations and said that writing notes of keywords and making eye contact with the presenter would help. The researcher concluded from this that he needed to change this question as well as introduce activities to heighten students' awareness of the importance of being a good audience member and the effect the audience has on the presenter.

Year-End Survey – Multiple choice questions

The first three questions of the year-end survey dealt with the aspects of the evaluation methods used in the class. All seven of the respondents scored either strongly agree or agree in the ten questions. The students responded positively to the use of different evaluations; self, peer and teacher, scoring four strongly agrees (4SA) to three agrees (3A). All of the students appreciated the comments from the teacher (7SA). This may reflect a bias towards teacher appraisal and might be worth exploring more in the future. Questions one through nine focused on the use of videotaping and reviewing presentations out of class. The students were fairly positive about watching their presentation video (Question 4: 5SA/3A), watching helped them improve their speaking (Question 5: 4SA/3A) and watching helped improve their body language (Question 9: 5SA/3A). In general then the students appeared satisfied with the process of videotaping their presentations and making improvements in their performance after viewing it. Students

were less satisfied with videotaping as a means to improve their pronunciation (Question 6: 3SA/4A) and use of gestures (Question 8: 2 SA/5A). Videotaping can raise awareness of certain issues but follow up training or review in class may be in order. Question seven asked if watching the video was helpful in improving the volume of speaking and the majority (1SA/6A) were unenthusiastic. The use of microphones may have made this a mute point. The final question asked the students if the assessment of the class journal was useful. The majority of the students felt it was useful. (6SA/1A) In what way the journal was useful is not clear and a more detailed survey about what or how it was useful would be worth exploring.

Year-End Survey – Open Ended Questions

Questions eleven and twelve asked students what they liked and what they disliked about the class in general. Students said they liked various social aspects of the class. They liked working with different students throughout the year, the interesting presentation themes and being able to ‘see things from various points of view’. In terms of their presentation skills, students commented about having ‘improved a little’ or ‘could learn [about] my presentation skills’. Students said they made more concrete progress in their ‘words, how to make presentations more fun and looks good’ as well as ‘pronunciation’. One student commented that their ‘classmates teach me English that I didn’t know’. This speaks to the importance of students learning from other students. Question twelve asked for things that students did not like about the class. Several students were not happy with the class schedule, Monday first period, but most students answered nothing. One student made the comment that ‘the class would be better if we give comments in every end of the presentation’. The researcher had originally thought that giving students time to review their videos would help raise students’ awareness of their presentation skills. This comment emphasizes the importance of providing immediate feedback in class.

Student Interviews – Session One

All six of the students who were interviewed said ‘yes’ when asked if they thought watching the video of their presentations helped them improve their presentations. It was indicated to the researcher that students felt that videotaping presentations gave them a perspective that they didn’t have before. They were able to identify ‘weak points’ and ‘see yourself the way other people sees us’ so ‘we can fix things’. This supports the use of videotaping presentations so that students have an equal opportunity to see both their weak points and, conversely, their strong points.

The next interview question asked the students what they had learned about their presentation style from watching their taped presentations. Students said they could identify problems, for instance, mannerisms that they were unaware of such as ‘touching my hair a lot’, ‘looked up a lot [but] not [at] the audience, and using ‘Japanese English’. Several students reported that there were, also, positive aspects of their presentations. They identified that they had ‘good pronunciation’, and could speak without a script, which made their presentation sound more ‘natural’. One student seemed almost surprised to learn that his presentation was ‘easy to understand’ and that his ‘voice is not as quiet as another persons’. This student had previously identified in the class journal that his pronunciation and volume of speech were problems. Being able to watch their presentations helps them to identify not only problem areas but also to give them a motivational boost when they notice positive aspects.

The last question asked students if watching one’s own video was a good idea and why or why not. All of the students said ‘yes’ it was a good idea as it helped them to ‘know their weak points’ so that they could ‘change it’, ‘see my good point and bad point easily’, let’s them ‘watch themselves objectively’, and ‘compare my presentation and another’s presentation. It is helpful.’ The researcher had originally intended the videos to be a tool to provide students with an opportunity to identify areas that needed work and therefore, had not anticipated that it would be a positive motivator as well. One student said it best when she said, ‘But, it’s a good way to make our presentation better, to have more confidence in yourself, [and] be more proud to [of] yourself. That its no[t] shameful; to do a presentation.’

Student Interviews – Session Two

During the second session of student interviews, the three students talked mostly about the various themes and the presentations of the other students. When asked about the evaluation methods, their responses were very general and reflected the answers from the surveys. They all agreed that the journal was useful as they could easily review previous comments by themselves and the teacher. With regards to watching

their videotaped presentations, they had more to say. One student said, 'Watching [my] own presentation that Gary ... recorded, I could see my good points and bad points really clear'. Another student added, 'I like the new learning technique about re-evaluate yourself by watching your own video. Presentation helps you improve your English speaking ability but to be a good presenter as a student we need to see how we speak, how we make an eye-contact or gesture toward the audience.'

Class Journal - Student Comments

In the journal entries students were expected to form a concrete objective in terms of something they wanted to improve upon, propose a way in which to do that and then score the success or failure of the action. In terms of coming up with objectives and ways to address them, the students had no difficulties. However, they did tend to give themselves a much lower score than either their peers or teacher. Japanese students by and large often subjectively score themselves much lower compared to that of their peers or teachers. This continued through the second term despite coaching from the teacher. It may be necessary to spend more time on reviewing the evaluation process in the next academic year.

In the second term students were asked to focus on evaluating something they did well. However, their comments tended to mention only small improvements, which did not change their self-evaluation scores significantly.

While many of the things brought up in the survey were further elaborated on here, students also mentioned the importance of watching their own and other students' presentation videos as it helped them in different ways. They stated that they became aware of mannerisms like playing nervously with their hair, staring at the roof or using long rambling sentences. Once aware of these mannerisms, they proposed making an effort to correct them. It is worth directly quoting one student who said, 'I think the video is a good chance to get to know yourself better, and see what [how] other people see you on the stage.'

Conclusion

This study is part of an ongoing process of 'action research' to improve evaluation feedback to English as a Second Language students enrolled in a third year English for Presentation class and to that end, it has been successful. Through a careful reexamination of the process, tools and findings, new approaches to the class and the steps in evaluation were revealed. Also, observations about the way in which the students use the videos have given the researcher some new ideas for classes in the second term as well as ideas for further refining the research method and tools. The positive comments from students regarding the usefulness of videotaping has convinced the researcher that it is a useful addition to his presentation class and one that he will recommend to his colleagues. Furthermore, the researcher will need to further refine his research tools to dig deeper into this question. While there may not have been any significant statistical evidence, some concrete conclusions from this cycle of 'action research' were found. Furthermore, new areas of inquiry and questions for further research have been noted. Thus, this cycle of 'action research' met the definition of said research by allowing the researcher to find areas for improvement and refinement for his actions, which any researcher / teacher knows is all part and parcel of teaching. To quote Mark van Doren, famous American poet, writer, critic and more importantly English teacher, "The art of teaching is the art of assisting discovery" for teachers and students alike.

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