Objective Assessment of Oral Presentations and

EFL Leannrrs' Speaking Development

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Abstract

A longitudinal study was planned, and a scale was suggested for assessing EFL learners' oral presentations. The scale had three major evaluation components: `Preparation', `Organization', and `Presentation'. The students were informed about the rating scale against which their performances would be evaluated. Throughout the course each student had five performances on different occasions.

The results of the study indicated that: (a) significant improvement was observed in the learners' performances, (b) ANOVA results indicated that the five performances were significantly different, (c) there were high correlations between each paired performances, and (d) the rating scale was a reliable and consistent measure by means of which the instructor could assess the student's speaking ability.

Key words: Oral presentation, speaking skill, EFL learners, objective assessment, rating scale.

Introduction

Most students studying English as a foreign language share a common problem with organizing and communicating their thoughts and ideas orally. This may be due to the fact that learners do not benefit from sufficient practice and opportunities to speak in the classroom. Second, learning to speak is a complex process not readily known to the learners; learners are not familiar with the skills and strategies they can use to develop their speaking ability. Third, EFL learners have little opportunity to develop the skills for arranging their ideas cohesively and coherently while speaking. Fourth, they are not familiar with the criteria by which their oral performances are assessed.

Iranian students majoring in `English Literature' or `Teaching English as a Foreign Language' have to pass certain courses related to speaking. Among these courses is `Oral Reproduction of Short Stories'. The rationale behind this course is two-fold: (1) to make students familiar with the literary elements used in short stories as regards characters, and plot. It is assumed that through reading stories students can experience an enjoyable task, and come across universal themes, and foreign culture and values; (2) to reproduce the stories in the classroom in their own words in order to improve their speaking skills so that they become competent enough to speak appropriately and effectively. As far as course objectives are concerned the teacher is responsible to create conditions so that the students will have a chance to be exposed to the language in real situations.

Like other language skills, speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information (Burns & Joyce, 1997; Kayi, 2006; Richards & Renandya, 2002). In order to speak successfully the learners should not only know how to produce grammatically correct sentences (linguistic competence), but also to use the language properly (sociolinguistic competence). Furthermore, speech has its own skills, structures, and conventions that are different from the written language (Carter & McCarthy, 1995; Cohen, 1996; Burns & Joyce, 1997). The learners should therefore be provided with opportunities where they can learn and experience the language through communicative tasks (Stone, 1991; Lavine, 1992; Rathet, 1994; Quinn, 1994).

With respect to assessing the speaking ability of learners studying English as a foreign or second language, there is a general agreement that evaluating students' oral ability is not only a difficult task, but also time consuming. Henning (1987) states that the greatest draw-back with scales for testing oral ability is that they tend to have rather low reliability because of subjective measures. Therefore, teachers should be recommended to use rating scales which provide them with a clear and precise definition concerning each scale point so that most measurement errors would be minimized. Kitao and Kitao (1996) assert that evaluating speaking ability is a difficult task that requires simultaneous use of different abilities. The components of speaking that might be considered in the assessment scale are grammar, pronunciation, fluency, content, organization and vocabulary. Even though methods of testing speaking are not perfect, they have significant effects on teaching and classroom instruction. Spolsky (1992) maintains that diagnostic or formative assessment is typically curriculum-oriented which provides feedback to students and teachers.

To date, few research studies have been conducted with the purpose of proposing ways and methods to assess students' speaking abilities. Nambiar and Goon (1993) found out that effectiveness in oral communication is not dependent on words and sounds alone but that paralinguistic and extra-linguistic data also play a significant role. Upshur and Turner (1995) suggest a method for designing simple, reliable and valid rating scales for second language tests that can be easily created by any group of teachers. Messerklinger (1997) suggests that teachers can evaluate speaking ability by asking students to speak. Also, MacGregor (2000) asserts that in the classroom, evaluation can be seen as an ongoing process in which the teacher utilizes various instruments to measure the progress of the students. Therefore the main objective of conducting the present study in a course called `Oral Reproduction of Short Stories' was to discover a method by which EFL students' speaking ability could be measured objectively, while helping them to learn. The hypotheses pertaining to this study were as follows:

1. The learners' preparation of a story has a role in their oral performances.

2. The learners' role in organizing the elements of a story has a role in their oral performances.

3. The learners' presentation of a story as regards communication, clarity, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, has a role in their oral performances.

The research questions addressed in this study were as follows:

1. Does the learners' preparation of a story have a role in their oral performances?

2. Does the learners' role in organizing the elements of a story have a role in their oral performances?

3. Does the learners' presentation of a story as regards communication, clarity, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation have a role in their oral performances?

Methodology

The study was based on a longitudinal observational design. The subjects were fifty-nine undergraduate students who had enrolled in the two sections of the course called `Oral Reproduction of Short Stories (I)' at Yazd University. In the following section the procedure used in the classroom will be elaborated

Procedure

At the beginning of the semester the students were made familiar with the methodology and the rating scale by which their oral presentations would be assessed throughout the course. Handouts containing all the necessary instruction for home preparation were distributed to all the students on the very first day. In this way the students were not only informed about the aim of the course, but also how they were supposed to read and prepare each story at home for class presentation. The handouts contained the following instruction:

a) At each session the teacher would assign one story from the prescribed book entitled `*Short Stories for Oral Reproduction'*.

b) The students would read the story paying close attention to the structure of the story, that is, the beginning (introducing characters), the body (building of a conflict or a sequence of actions leading to a crisis or problem), and the climax (resolution of conflict or how the problem is solved). In addition, they would visualize the main events of the story and consult their dictionaries for unfamiliar idiomatic expressions, and words.

c) The students would summarize the main events of the story or write an outline concerning the main events of the story at home. The students were advised not to memorize the story word by word; instead they were recommended to keep in mind the introduction, plot, and conclusion of the story and reproduce it in their own words. Finally, they were to rehearse the story at home, in order to present the story in the classroom with less difficulty.

d) With respect to their class performances the students were instructed to bear in mind the following points:

1. Each student would begin his/her oral presentation by giving an `Introduction'. In the introduction part the students would talk about (i) the major and minor characters of the story, (ii) the central idea of the story, and (iii) the setting of the story.

2. Then, they would talk about the `Development' of the story. At this stage they would talk about the events that occurred in the story step by step without providing the details of events.

3. Finally, they would have a `Conclusion' at the end of their presentation. In this part the student would express their opinion about the story in a few sentences.

e) Besides the regular class session which was held two hours every week for each section, a fixed timetable of four hours each week was set so that if the students had problems regarding their stories, they could consult the teacher.

Class Assessment

During the course, each student was evaluated for five performances. The teacher would randomly call students to come in front of the class and reproduce their stories. Each session the teacher would assess the oral performances of ten students. There was a separate rating sheet for each student (Appendix I). At the top of the rating sheet there were spaces for such information as name, date, title, and time. The scale had three general components: Preparation, Organization, and Presentation. Organization had three sub-components: `Introduction', `Development' and `Conclusion'r Presentation had five sub-components: `Communication', `Clarity', `Grammar', `Vocabulary' and `Pronunciation'. The arrangement of each criterion helped the teacher to observe and rate the students' oral performances systematically. The Likert type scale provided for a numerical rating from 0 to 5; where 5 indicated excellent, 4 very good, 3 good, 2 fair, 1 poor, and 0 indicated the absence of the criterion. In addition, for each criterion there was a space for "observations" for writing down information that helped the teacher during the final numerical scoring. At the bottom of the scale there was a space for general comments. This space was used for recording specific information regarding mispronounced words and common grammatical errors, so that the teacher could discuss them with the student at the end of the class.

As mentioned earlier, there were fifty-nine students in the two sections. They were made familiar with the rating scale so that they would know the criteria by which they were evaluated. Furthermore, since the class period throughout the whole semester for assessing the students' oral presentations was insufficient, extra classes were also held with this purpose in mind.

Data Analysis

At the end of the semester, after the data collection was over, all the students' rating sheets were calculated and analyzed using the SPSS package. Then the students' performances on five different occasions were compared to see how the evaluation model had worked. Statistical measures were taken in order to examine the linear development and improvement of students' oral performances throughout the course. The statistical operations performed on the data were as follows:

(a) The first computation was to find out whether the five performances were of the same nature. The statistical operation utilized was ANOVA. The results as presented in Table 1 indicate that the five performances were significantly different. The students' fifth performances were not greatly different from their fourth performances. This indicates that the learners had developed some consistency of performance and had overcome some basic problems in their oral presentations.

Table 1

Summary statistics of ANOVAs performed on the results of the 5 performances

		Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
2nd performance	Between Groups	21	22.774	2.387	.010
	Within Groups	37	9.542		
	Total	58			
5th performance	Between Groups	21	9.370	1.743	.068
	Within Groups	37	5.374		
	Total	58			
3rd performance	Between Groups	21	20.411	2.451	.008
	Within Groups	37	8.328		
	Total	58			
4th performance	Between Groups	21	17.278	1.914	.041
	Within Groups	37	9.027		
	Total	58			

(b) T-tests and Paired Samples Correlations were also computed with the intention of comparing each two performances. The results revealed high correlations between each paired performances like first and second, second and third, third and fourth, as well as fourth and fifth performances (Table 2).

Table 2

Correlation coefficients computed for each paired performances

	N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair1: 1st & 2nd performances	59	.642	.000
Pair2: 2nd & 3rd performances	59	.720	.000
Pair3: 3rd & 4th performances	59	.776	.000
Pair4: 4th & 5th performances	59	.760	.000
Pair5: 1st & 5th performances	59	.465	.000

(b) In order to measure the students' improvement throughout the course, *t*-tests were also computed, the results of which indicated that each performance was different from the other performance in the pair (Table 3). Correlation coefficients between each two performances were also computed, using Pearson Product Moment correlation. The five correlation coefficients for the five pairs revealed high correlation between each two performances (p=.000).

Table 3

Comparison of each two performances from the first performance to the fifth performance

	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Lower	Upper			
1st & 2nd performances	-3.3599	-1.6909	-6.058	58	.000
2nd & 3rd performances	-4.6372	-3.2001	-10.917	58	.000
3rd & 4th performances	-2.4699	-1.2419	-6.051	58	.000
4th & 5th performances	-2.3663	-1.1930	-6.072	58	.000

(c) Correlations were computed for randomly paired performances. All the coefficients indicated statistically significant correlation between and among all performances of the subjects. The results are presented in Table 4 which is indicative of the fact that there has been consistency of the impact of the treatment on the subjects.

Table 4

Pearson Product Moment Correlation for randomly paired performances

2nd & 5th performances	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.530**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	59	59
3rd & 4th performances	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.776**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	59	59
3rd & 5th performances	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.665**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	59	59
5th & 4th performances	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.760**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	59	59
4th & 2nd performances	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.615**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	59	59

Results and Discussions

As mentioned earlier, the main aim of conducting this study was two-fold: (1) to introduce and examine a rating scale for assessing learners' oral performances; and (2) to examine the effectiveness of the rating scale on the linear development and improvement of learners' oral performances. The rating scale proved to be a reliable and consistent measure by means of which the teacher could assess the learners' oral presentations.

The findings of this study revealed that EFL learners' preparation of a story along with organizing the elements of a story had a positive role in their oral performances. At the very beginning of the semester, students were made familiar with the rating scale, that is, the criteria by which their oral presentations would be assessed. After the first performance, the students were informed about what made their performances acceptable or effective. Then, in the course of the semester, they were given different opportunities to observe their peer's performances. Each performance indicated some degree of qualitative improvement over the previous one.

The findings of this study shows that if the assessment of oral presentations is done according to some established criteria and/or rating scale the learners will adjust themselves accordingly and there will be a tangible development in their performances. Likewise, the guidance and instruction which was provided to the students from time to time as regards the way they should read, prepare, and practice reproducing the main events of the story, keeping in mind the `Introduction', `Development' and `Conclusion' of the story proved fruitful. Objective evaluation of oral performances enabled the students to become aware of their pitfalls and needs. In addition, the students' oral presentations can be improved if they are made aware of the problems they may have in their performances.

Correspondingly, the learner's presentation of a story as regards communication, clarity, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation had a positive role in their oral performances. All the students reproduced their stories first by talking about the introduction of the story, then, the development of the main events leading to the climax of the story, and finally, the conclusion of the story. The students reproduced the story in their own words using indirect speech. In addition, they organized their speech by using cohesive devices such as, pronouns, co-ordinate conjunctions, and discourse markers.

While the students were reproducing their stories in the class, the teacher used to jot down the errors, the students had committed on the rating sheet for each individual student. At the end of each class session, there was a discussion of the errors that the students had committed while reproducing their stories. The teacher wrote on the blackboard the errors that the students had committed without mentioning their names. First, the students were requested to correct their peers' errors and, then, if they were not successful, the teacher would provide the correct answer. In this manner, the students would activate their own grammatical competence and knowledge in order to take active part in class discussion and not be passive recipients of knowledge. Moreover, after the class session was over some students approached the teacher individually, and the teacher on her behalf pointed out the errors that the particular student had committed while giving his or her presentation. This technique proved fruitful because the students came to realize that committing errors while learning a foreign language is natural, and eventually, as their knowledge and experience increases about the target language they would get rid of their errors.

Most importantly, some students while reproducing their stories felt that they had committed errors in their speech related to tense, vocabulary, articles, prepositions, or word order. Without getting any hint or clue from the teacher, the students immediately corrected their own errors and provided the correct form. Additionally, improvement was seen in those students who at the beginning of the semester were feeling nervous and inhibited to speak in front of their classmates. Likewise, assessing students' oral presentations each time they spoke enabled them to pay attention to those components of speaking where they did not make a good performance for the first, second, or third time. The students had a chance to give a better presentation the following time. At the end of the semester, an overwhelming number of students had become very hopeful and realized that if they tried hard and practiced more they would finally succeed. There was a consistent improvement noticed on the five different performances that each student had.

Furthermore, some students while reproducing their stories in the class gave some explanation regarding the story by making use of the blackboard. They used to write the main events and draw sketches of the main characters on the board. This technique which some students used in the class without any instructions given by the teacher revealed that, if students are given a chance to progress, and, if the teacher creates a humanistic environment in the class to facilitate the task of language learning, students make use of strategies which help them to enhance their own learning.

Conclusion

Several conclusions can be drawn from the present study. First of all the students in this study realized that learning to speak appropriately is a complex process and by means of practicing they can overcome many of their problems and enhance their fluency. The students were instructed to prepare an outline of the main events of the story, as well as practice reproducing the story at home, so that it would be easier for them to reproduce the story naturally and confidently in the classroom. Second, students' oral presentations can be assessed objectively if a reliable rating scale is utilized. Third, if the students are informed beforehand on the basis of what criteria their performances will be assessed they will prepare accordingly. Fourth, by having some knowledge about their performances, the students are able to check their progress and improvement throughout the course. Finally, the students can be convinced that speaking like any other language skill has to be practiced and developed.

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Appendix I

STUDENT'S NAME:

DATE:

TIME: FROM_____TO _____

TITLE:

		0	1	2	3	4	5	OBSERVATIONS
PREPARATION	(1) PREPARATION & KNOWLEDGE							
ORGANIZATION	(2) INTRODUCTION							
	(3) DEVELOPMENT							
	(4) CONCLUSION							
PRESENTATION	(5) COMMUNICATION							
	(6) CLARITY							
	(7) GRAMMAR							
	(8) VOCABULARY							
	(9) PRONUNCIATION							

COMMENTS: