

Alternatif Bir Değerlendirme Sınavı Olarak Branşla İlgili Sözlü Sunum

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Özet

Makale üniversite düzeyinde İngilizce eğitimi veren bir okulda öğretim elemanlarının ortaklaşa çalışmaları sonucu okulda yapılan sözlü sınavlara alternatif olarak geliştirdikleri alan odaklı sözlü sunum üzerinedir. Öğrenciler İngilizce öğretmenliği dışındaki branşlarda eğitim gören ve İngilizce eğitimini bölüm zorunluluğu olarak almaktadırlar. Alan odaklı sözlü sunum projesi başlangıçta öğrencilerden gelen şikayetler üzerine geliştirilmiş olmasına rağmen, uygulama gerek öğretim elemanları ve gerekse öğrenciler açısından umut verici sonuçlar doğurmuştur. Uygulamaya katılan gönüllü yirmi öğrencinin katılımıyla yapılan yapılandırılmış görüşmeler sonucunda alan odaklı sözlü sunumların alternatif sözlü sınav anlamında etkin bir araç olduğu görülmüştür. Makale alan odaklı sözlü sunumların benzer eğitim kurumlarında uygulanabilmesine imkan sağlayacak şekilde aşamalardan oluşan süreç hakkında okuyucuları bilgilendirmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: İngilizce Eğitimi, Sözlü Değerlendirme, Sözlü Sunum, Türk Öğrenciler

Discipline-related Oral Presentation as an Alternative Oral Assessment

Abstract

This article reports on collaborative efforts of teachers in integrating discipline-related oral presentation as an alternative assessment into the curriculum of a tertiary level English language teaching school in Turkey. The students enrolled in the program are those who major in a variety of disciplines other than ELT and receive English instruction as a departmental requirement. Although discipline-related oral presentation project was first initiated in response to the complaints raised by students about the prompt-based speaking assessment employed in the school, it was found that the project yielded a number of promising results on the part of both students and teachers as well. The findings of the structured interviews with volunteer students revealed that the oral assessment through discipline-related oral presentations is an efficient tool. The article provides the readers with a step-by-step procedure employed in the project which can be replicated in similar teaching contexts.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, Oral Assessment, Oral Presentation, Turkish Students

1. Introduction

Of the four language skills speaking is considered to be the most important by language learners. According to Richards and Renandya (2002), a large number of language learners around the world study English only to become proficient in speaking skills. Although communicating orally is a final-point-to arrive, the teaching and assessment of oral language in some parts of the world continues to be a challenging endeavor.

The difficulty stems from the very complicated nature of speaking. When we are speaking, interaction and communication take place through the existence of at least one other speaker. Since it is an interactive, spontaneous and collaborative process involving a second and/or third parties, learners need to overcome a variety of challenges to construct meaning while producing, receiving and processing information (Brown 1994; Burns & Joyce 1997).

Speaking is context-sensitive; that is, the environment in which speaking occurs and the people participating all play a crucial role in constructing and maintaining communication. Furthermore, in order to communicate orally one needs to have skills such as body language, style, adapting to the audience and active listening along with grammatical and lexical knowledge (Rahman, 2010).

With the advent of communicative approaches to language teaching, now more than ever teachers are conditioned to enrich their repertoire of communicative activities. In order to motivate students to speak, a myriad of techniques are tried out by teachers especially in EFL teaching contexts, like Turkey, where rote learning is emphasized over meaningful learning. In these contexts, the EFL students do not necessarily speak very much in English, nor do they have much opportunity to practice using the language outside of the classroom. The curriculum in these contexts favours the written language, and the focus is on grammar rather than on oral communication.

Assessment of students' oral performance is a major professional endeavor for many teachers in EFL teaching contexts. To begin with, regardless of the types of tasks -whether it is a role play or picture description - learners experience some kind of anxiety before an oral exam. The anxiety stems partly from the task, in many cases unknown to the testee, and of the impromptu nature. Another factor causing anxiety is the criteria for scoring oral proficiency and the weighting given to the components of an oral test. The students usually take the oral exams knowing little about the evaluation rubric or without knowing it at all. However, an oral presentation allowing ample preparation time with a negotiated rubric can ease the difficulties inherent in oral assessments.

This article focuses on how Turkish teachers of English working in an intensive English language school at a state university capitalized on the

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potential benefits of discipline-related oral presentation as an alternative assessment tool. It is assumed that the accumulated experience through this project will transform into new and fruitful practices in similar teaching contexts.

2.1. Points to consider while designing oral assessments

Speaking is probably the most difficult skill to test. In the teaching contexts where speaking skills are not promoted adequately and underdeveloped, the teachers' exposure to oral assessment is likely to be limited.

Underhill (2004) asserts that when designing an oral test our concern should be placed 'on the people who will take the exam not the instrument' (p.4). Before embarking on a project to design an oral exam he states, decision makers should answer a couple of crucial questions as to what resources such as people, time, space and equipment (p. 11) are available.

In recent years, Turkey evidenced the existence of accredited external exams like TOEFL, TOEIC, and IELTS delivered by major testing agencies. However, only those students who are enrolled in private universities are required to take these exams. The types of the language exams delivered at state universities generally comply with the school management's decision. In Turkey, at state universities, the curricula of intensive English programs, , which is commonly called 'preparatory education', generally include two major courses; the main course and grammar. The learners are not usually exposed to language skills in separate courses. Rather, they follow a single coursebook published by an international company and receive instruction on language skills as presented in these books. The exams delivered by the schools of foreign languages are generally of multiple choice type.

If not otherwise scheduled, speaking assessments in these programs are generally based on prompts at best. That is, students individually pick a teacher-prepared prompt on a very general topic such as friendship or color and start to talk about it. There are, of course, exceptions. However, the number of the state universities utilizing alternative oral assessments is very limited and , as previously mentioned , the accredited external exams are widely required by private universities.

Prompt-based speaking assessment has been around in our school at Süleyman Demirel University for a long time. However, change was called for as the quantity of the complaints voiced by students was abundant and needed to be addressed.

2.2. Institutional context

In Turkey, the majority of state and private universities require freshmen students to receive 30-week long intensive English language instruction. Preparatory English education is usually offered by the schools of foreign languages at state and private universities. The students who are placed at a

university take a proficiency exam delivered by schools and, depending on their scores, are accepted in English preparatory programs. The students who receive a satisfactory score in the proficiency exam are allowed to start their education in their departments.

The school of foreign languages at Süleyman Demirel University offers English preparatory education to undergraduate students majoring in business administration, tourism and hotel management, and a number of engineering fields (mechanical, civil, textile, food, environmental, agricultural engineering). The school went through a restructuring process starting in the 2005-2006 academic year. Within the process, a skills-based approach was adopted and the coursebooks were selected in a way that they provide both general English and academic language skills. The courses offered by the school are reading/writing, listening/speaking, main course and grammar. The students are assigned to classes based on their proficiency levels not on their professional domains of study. The students' proficiency level in the school ranges from lower intermediate to intermediate.

With its innovative language teaching practices the school has recently received 'European Language Label Award' granted by the European Commission in 2009 and 2011, respectively.

3. The Impetus For Discipline-Related Oral Presentation Project

Within the restructuring process, syllabi of the courses were revised and the course requirements were modified. The results of the program evaluation questionnaires revealed that the students were not satisfied with the prompt-based speaking assessment delivered by the school. The major problem was related to the topics included in the prompts. The topics were considered by the students to be either not appealing or difficult to talk about. Another concern relating to the execution of the prompt-based assessment was that prompt-initiated impromptu speeches were demanding for students as they were not allowed adequate time for preparation. Another point raised by students was the lack of domain-related activities in the curriculum.

Discontented with the prompt-based assessment, the listening/speaking course teachers opted to implement an alternative assessment tool in the school addressing the afore-mentioned problems. A series of brainstorming sessions was organized with the participation of the course teachers to decide on an alternative assessment tool. During one of the the sessions, the author's proposal on replacing prompt-based assessment with discipline-related oral presentation was welcomed by teachers. Although a few raised their concerns about some issues, the majority agreed on the inclusion of discipline-related oral presentation as a partial requirement of listening/speaking course. As such, the project had a cautious start with some concern.

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Oral presentations could work pretty well in our school context providing students with adequate preparation time. Furthermore, presentations could be organized in a way to allow students to choose topics which could be tailored toward their disciplines. In doing so, we could both eliminate the discomfort with the prescribed topics in prompts and encourage students to become involved in a discipline-related activity.

3.1. Oral presentations

Oral presentations are a great way for students to practice language skills. In the first place, they provide a meaningful learning experience encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning. Second, being a process-oriented activity, oral presentations allow students time to work at their own pace by breaking the task into parts (Harmer, 2007).

King (2002) argues that properly organized oral presentations can help learners gain learning experiences and life long language skills which can be useful in academic life and throughout their career. Properly organized oral presentations, King argues, also help students develop higher thinking skills such as inquiring, collecting, organizing and constructing information. In a very recent article, Al-Issa and Al-Qubtan (2010), enumerating a number of advantages of oral presentations in EFL contexts state that presentations encourage students to speak which is ‘the least practiced and most neglected skill’ in (p.25). To them, oral presentations provide a rich learning atmosphere in which the other language skills might be evenly improved. Gershon (2008), on the other hand, argues that the effectiveness of any kind of presentation in front of people might have a significant impact on our achievements in globalizing world. He further adds that we will have to deliver an oral presentation or ‘speech at some time in our life time-whether we want to or not ‘ (p.9).

4. Objectives

At the end of the brainstorming sessions and evaluation meetings the teachers initiated the discipline-related oral presentation project with the aim to provide students with an alternative oral assessment through which they could have adequate time for preparation and also choose their topics in their particular domain.

Admittedly, when the final decision was taken on the oral presentation component, some teachers were anxious. It was understandable, though, as changing long-established practices is not that easy and resistance to change is usual. However, the teachers could gain much more through this endeavor than they otherwise would. By raising consciousness among teachers it could be possible to pass through the period of transition from the known to the unknown as smoothly as possible. Thus, preliminary work towards the project started with teachers.

4.1. Preparing teachers for the project

In order to familiarize the teachers with oral assessments in general and equip them with necessary baseline information, a teacher trainer who has an expertise in oral assessments was invited to the school to give an inservice seminar. The certificate-bearing seminar lasted eight hours in two sessions and it was videotaped for further analysis. During the seminar the teacher trainer demonstrated for the participating teachers oral assessment samples, the general stages of designing, organizing and marking procedures followed in these assessments. Following the in-service seminar, several meetings were held with the teachers in which the knowledge received was analyzed, detailed and strengthened. At the end of the evaluation meetings, an action plan for the project was outlined. The teachers were all in agreement on the point of a 'negotiated rubric' which was thought to reduce students' anxiety. Generally speaking, in Turkey, students have little say in the evaluation criteria of a course. However, it is clear that involving students in the processes contributing to their own learning would increase the degree of comfort with any kind of performance in a foreign language.

The stages of the project were conducted parallel to the syllabus of the listening/speaking course. Throughout the project, the participating teachers regularly got together to exchange ideas and to form baseline information to execute the stages concurrently in separate classes.

Topic selection

Adequate guidance and careful organization are crucial to the realization of effective oral presentations. Since the establishment of the school in 2002, neither students nor teachers were exposed to such a requirement. The students were informed about a ten-minute discipline-related oral presentation component as a partial requirement of the listening/speaking course. According to Underhill (2004), choosing the topic is very important in presentation type tests. Topics, he states, should contain 'new information or put over a new point of view', and, ideally, the topic choice should be made by the learner in 'consultation with his teacher (p. 47). With this in mind, the students were guided regarding possible sources of topics. They could find a suitable topic by focusing first on their personal interests, (what they want to learn about in their domain) and second by consulting the teaching staff in their departments, and visiting departmental libraries. Even at this early stage, students' reactions to the oral presentation requirement as an alternative oral assessment were positive and encouraged the teachers to believe they were proceeding along the right path. Some of the students stated that such a requirement made them feel like 'real college students'. An agriculture engineering female student expressed the feeling that throughout her former education she was always given the assignments by teachers, and was never asked to choose a topic. (informal conversation). These

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comments somehow underline the traditional teacher-centred and memorisation-based education system which is a prevailing mode of teaching in Turkey.

At this stage, teachers refrained from giving sample titles to students to avoid further expectations and promote learner autonomy. Once the students turned in their topics, teachers negotiated the topics with the students in terms of suitability. Although students were preinformed about the type of the topics, that is, neither too general nor too specific, some students provided broad titles which could not be handled in a ten-minute presentation such as ‘Tourism attractions in Turkey’. As examples of topics, , a food engineering student chose chocolate and its benefits for human health, and another student majoring in agriculture engineering decided to do his presentation on how to grow organic tomatoes. It is worth noting here that the students were so motivated that teachers’ office hours were in great demand by students. Once the presentation topics were specified the second stage was devoted to shaping and crafting the presentations.

Outlining the presentation

As students were taking the reading/writing skills course they were familiar with outlining skills. Transferability of the knowledge obtained either from one course to another or from courses to actual life, regardless of the discipline, is a point of interest for researchers (James, 2006). While students were involved in outlining, they automatically had to transfer and revise the skills they learned in the reading/writing course and make use of them in a meaningful context. The outlines were discussed with the students individually in detail with an emphasis on the introduction, body and conclusion parts. They were encouraged to use signposting as it helps direct and guide the audience from one part to another. At this stage, the students were also provided with a list of transition expressions they might want to use during presentation. Their attention was drawn to the preparation of the visual aids they might want to use such as overhead projector, flip charts, PowerPoint data projection. They were encouraged to prepare handouts and cue cards accordingly. They were told to use their imagination to enrich their presentation with anything they found useful such as realia, pictures, video clips and the like. The students were reminded that during presentation they would be asked questions by the teachers. At the end of this stage they were asked to submit a list of technical equipment they planned to use.

Videotaped demos

In order for students to visualize what is expected of them, two speaking course teachers volunteered to prepare demos of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ presentations. The demos familiarized students with important points such as timing, eye contact, effective use of visual aids and the introduction, development and conclusion parts. Copies of the demos were distributed to teachers for classroom

analysis. During the analysis of the demos, students had the opportunity to discuss and share their ideas with both classmates and their teacher. In order to avoid anxiety, they were told they should prepare their presentation thoroughly well in advance and practice in front of their friends and receive feedback. At this stage, the issue of plagiarism was underlined and students were familiarized with the forms of plagiarism. They were taught how to refer to the published or downloaded documents and how to cite them. They were strictly advised to avoid any form of plagiarism and stick to their own ideas. As plagiarism was an unknown topic to many of the students, an adequate amount of time was assigned to explain the different forms in detail.

Negotiating the evaluation rubric with students

The next step was constructing the ‘negotiated’ evaluation rubric. Conventionally, any type of grading is deemed to be the teacher’s right in Turkey and accordingly students are not accustomed to negotiating grading with their teachers. The prevailing thought among teachers was that including students in the evaluation process would help students understand what they are expected to do. Sharing decisions about evaluation criteria with students and accommodating their ideas regarding the evaluation could also relax them. With this in mind, each teacher in the class asked students to brainstorm on possible categories of a rubric evaluating an oral presentation. The brainstorming sessions and the mind-mapping activity yielded in each classroom similar categories. The categories compiled in the classes were later discussed among the teachers and the final version was shared with the students (see Appendix 1). Negotiating the evaluation rubric was appreciated and considered to be ‘fair play’ by the students. In relation to the rubric construction stage, a male student majoring in computer engineering expressed his feeling that for the first time in his academic life a teacher was involving him in the grading process and for the first time he felt that he was important as a student and his ideas worth respecting (informal conversation). The final version of rubric which was created through negotiation with the students was displayed on the bulletin board of the school two weeks before the assessment. The underlying reason for displaying the rubric was to further familiarize the students with the scoring and encourage them to prepare their presentations accordingly. The students were informed about the presence of a second teacher along with their course teacher to ensure reliability during the oral presentation. According to Underhill (2004), ‘the single most effective way of getting round the central problem of lack of reliability is to use more than one assessor’ (p.89). The teachers who would accompany the course teachers were also familiarized with the rubric. The teachers exchanged ideas on the warm up and wind up phases of the assessment. To this end, in order to create a relaxing atmosphere, teachers planned to offer

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candies and eau de cologne to students, which is a traditional welcome for guests in Turkish culture.

5. Oral Assessment Through Discipline-Related Oral Presentations

After a long preparation process completed with the guidance of the course teachers, the students were ready for their performance. Each presentation was graded by two teachers during the assessment. The final score was given based on the average of the total mark. Taken as a whole, the presentations were successfully delivered and the students seemed to enjoy the experience.

Following the presentations, it was obvious that the teachers as a ‘team’ had a feeling of fulfilment having tried out something which had not been tried out in the school before. Inspired by the overall success and the students’ satisfaction with the project, the reading/writing course teachers expressed their intention to integrate ‘essay contest’ into the curriculum.

In line with Underhill’s (2004) claim that ‘a good oral test allows learners to be treated, and to behave, like ordinary human beings, it seemed right that we should do a market survey of what they think, expect and want’ (p.12), and so structured interviews were conducted.

6. Structured Interviews

Structured interviews were conducted on twenty volunteer students majoring in different fields. Each student was interviewed once and was recorded on computer for transcription. The interviews lasted thirty to forty minutes. Interviews were conducted in Turkish and scheduled after the actual presentations according to students’ availability (Glesne and Peshkin 1992). The emerging opinions were categorized under two broad titles presented with selected quotations. The students were asked the following questions:

1 What do you think about the overall experience?

2 What would you recommend us to do to improve the discipline-related oral presentation as an assessment tool?

6.1. Findings

Opinions regarding the overall experience

Taken as a whole, the participating students found the experience beneficial. A male student majoring in food engineering summed up his experience;

...It was memorable...I learned how to use power point and developed other computer skills and also developed my self-confidence...(informant: C.P)

The concept of plagiarism was found to be very effective for students. Almost half of the interviewees expressed their ideas about plagiarism. One of the students stated;

... I understood that when I was in high school I conducted different forms of plagiarism. This project taught me to produce something original ... (Informant: Y.A)

Almost all of the participating students stated their content with the right to choose topic and the negotiate the rubric with them. One of the students stated her feelings as follows;

...It was really good that teachers took our ideas into consideration. We are not used to it... we chose the topics which we wanted... it was a tiring process but teachers were helpful... (Informant: S.P)

Recommendations of students for the improvement of the assessment

Of the twenty students participating in the interviews eight raised their concerns about the poor quality of the technical equipment. A male student stated;

...the computer was so slow that I got stressed out. If we were allowed time to download our file before the presentation it would be more relaxing...(Informant: A.G)

Another interesting finding was about the lack of authenticity in teacher-prepared videotaped demos;

... If I were I would use students' demos. They would feel more authentic... (Informant: A.S)

Another finding was related to the number and the content of the questions asked by the teachers during the presentation. A male student majoring in mechanical engineering commented ;

...I was asked three questions related to my topic while my friend had to answer only one general question...

Taken as whole, students' reactions to the oral assessment were positive. Involving the students in the process throughout the assessment yielded promising results. The fact that the students had a say in scoring procedure was a totally new experience for the students. The negotiated rubric helped students overcome the difficulties associated with the oral assessments, that is, they were assessed based on the criteria they selected.

7. Conclusion

This paper documented a project which came to life through speaking course teachers' collaborative efforts to integrate discipline-related oral presentations into the curriculum of an intensive English teaching program in Turkey. The program evaluation questionnaires revealed that the students had concerns about the school's prompt-based oral assessment in terms of insufficient time for preparation of the topics. A series of meetings and brainstorming sessions among teachers yielded the discipline-related oral presentation component as a partial requirement of the listening/speaking course. In teaching contexts like ours where the teachers and students are both used to traditional teaching methods and traditional multiple choice pen and paper tests, changing the long-established assessment method was a demanding endeavor. However, it was evident that starting the change with the teachers, raising their consciousness and preparing their mindset gradually was an important step which should not be ignored.

In order to investigate students' opinions regarding their experience and to learn about their recommendations structured interviews were conducted on volunteer twenty students. The findings of the interviews revealed that the students found the experience beneficial in terms of developing research skills, computer skills, self-confidence. It was also found that a sense of consciousness was raised among students with respect to the issue of plagiarism.

As for students' recommendations regarding the improvement of the project, students emphasized the necessity of quality technical equipment. Regarding this issue, the quality of the equipment can be checked the day before the actual presentations and students can be allowed to download their files before.

Another recommendation was about the teacher-prepared demos. The participating students stated that these demos were not authentic in the sense that they were by their teachers. It is a good idea to record some of the presentations for future use and analysis.

In our context, we started our journey holding our breath. However, the resultant success was impressive and worth sharing with our colleagues across the country who hesitate to initiate courageous projects in their teaching settings.

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