

THE LEARNER'S PERSPECTIVE ON ASSESSING AND EVALUATING THEIR ORAL PRESENTATIONS

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Abstract

Although oral presentations are an integral part of academic life in university settings, relatively little is known about how students perceive themselves as presenters and how they perceive the task of presenting. This qualitative study analyzed student self-reflection reports written following three different oral presentations delivered in a Japanese university English class. The findings revealed English proficiency levels affected how students assessed their own presentations, not just in terms of grades, but in terms of what they specifically noticed and commented on after viewing a video of their own presentations. There were also discrepancies between the letter grades students assigned themselves and the comments describing their perceived improvements throughout the course. In addition, when assessing their presentations, many of the students tended to focus primarily on linguistic features instead of the content, delivery or structure. It is hoped that by taking into account these findings regarding student perceptions of presentations, instructors can potentially improve their own instruction, assessment and feedback.

1 Introduction

Oratory skills have long been considered an important attribute for university students to develop. While there is a substantial body of research examining how to deliver presentations, how to teach presentation courses, and how to assess oral presentations, there is relatively little research examining how learners perceive, assess and evaluate their own presentations. To address this, a short qualitative study was conducted at a Japanese university in an English presentation class.

2 Background

In order to place the findings of this study in a relevant context, a brief overview is provided of some of the important research on peer assessment and how it relates to self-assessment. Next, the concept of noticing is examined briefly, with particular emphasis on how this also pertains to self-assessment. This is followed by a short look at the importance of oral presentations and how self-assessment and noticing can help improve student presentations. After examining the qualitative findings from this study, implications for teachers and future research are then discussed.

2.1 Peer assessment

Both peer assessment and feedback are widely accepted as important parts of a learning process (Auster et al., 2006). Both are particularly effective in the ESL classroom, especially in writing classes (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009). However, teachers – who are still the predominant source of this assessment and feedback – tend to inadvertently discourage students by predominantly focusing on errors and other negative aspects (Adams, 2003). To counter this, teachers can involve students more in the assessment process by having them evaluate or provide feedback on the work of their peers (as well as their own). Once students have been trained and are familiar with it, peer assessment can be a very reliable tool (Okuda & Otsu, 2010; Patri, 2002; Topping, 2012).

Peer assessment is used in language classes and predominantly in writing classes (Campbell et al., 2001; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009). The majority of the research to date has tended to focus on the potential benefits for the student receiving the feedback, but as Lundstrom and Baker (2009) found, there are also potential benefits for the student doing the assessing. This surprising finding suggests that the assessment ‘giver’, as they were labeled, also actually learns how to better assess their own work in the process of assessing their peers.

The purpose of peer assessment of course depends on a multitude of factors. Aiding fellow classmates is an obvious one, but also providing a second assessment, which can compliment that of the teacher’s, is equally important and can serve to provide a greater range in feedback (Campbell et al., 2001). Peer assessment can also be carried out before any work has been submitted, thereby giving the student a possible indicator of how their work will be received (Campbell et al., 2001).

In terms of categorizing peer assessment, Topping (2013) illustrated two different kinds: formative and summative. Essentially, summative is similar to a traditional test, where the goal is to see how much knowledge students have learnt. Formative is a way to check on how students are doing and perhaps more importantly, how they see themselves progressing. Formative assessment does not look to measure proficiency, but rather to provide clues as to how to improve it (Baniabdelrahman, 2010). For the purposes of this paper, formative assessment is more relevant, for the self-reflection reports that will be examined later in this paper.

2.2 Self-assessment

If we accept that peer assessment can be beneficial to the learning process, then the next issue to examine is if self-assessment, or as it is sometimes known as; self-reflection, can also be beneficial. There are subtle differences between the terms; ‘self-assessment’ often refers strictly to grading and evaluations, while ‘self-reflection’ includes these aspects but refers to a wider range of self-observations and is also perhaps more aligned with ‘formative assessment’. For the purpose of this paper, the term ‘self-reflection’ was deemed more appropriate.

Dating back to Holec (1985), there is a broad body of research that suggests self-assessment has many beneficial attributes, although it has not been as widely utilized by educators as peer assessment (Cram, 1995). Little (1999) stated that developing the ability to assess one’s own

accuracy is an important step on the path towards becoming an autonomous learner, which in itself is important for SLA (Kessler, 2009). Cram (1995) also said that self-assessment gives learners more control over the learning process, especially their own learning, which in turn encourages further autonomous learning. In terms of specific findings, self-assessment has been proven to be an effective tool in a wide range of contexts (Brantmeier, 2005), including ESL reading classes in Jordan (Baniabdelrahman, 2010). Watching videos of their own performance has proven beneficial for trainee teachers as well (Eroz-Tuga, 2013). Involving students in all the stages of learning (including assessment) promotes greater responsibility and is strongly supported in the literature (Ishii & Baba, 2003). In fact, it has been argued that self-assessment and self-reflection are not only potentially beneficial, but that it is actually necessary for learners to reflect on an experience, before they can understand it properly (Kolb in Knutson, 2003). Self-reflection and self-assessment can further develop learner autonomy, and thereby strengthen the overall learning process (Kessler, 2009; Benson, 2001).

Being able to reflect on your own performance and assess it objectively is not an easy accomplishment though and for young learners, or inexperienced ones, it is crucial to have a teacher who can provide sufficient guidance in the classroom (Knutson, 2003). In fact, we can say that learning how to reflect is a skill in itself, also needing to be learned (Granville & Dison, 2005).

Critics of self-assessment have claimed that it is not reliable and indeed studies have shown that student self-assessments can vary considerably from teacher assessments (Campbell et al., 2001; Patri, 2002). Holistic scores on self-assessments have also been found to differ from itemized competency assessment (Guest, 2013). Interestingly, self-assessed ability levels have been found to positively correlate with levels of enjoyment in particular courses (Brantmeier, 2005). Campbell et al., (2001) did state though that despite possibly being unreliable, self-assessment can still be a valuable learning activity and can provide students with important insights into the learning process and their own position in it. This is known as ‘active learning’, whereby students take more of a leadership role in the learning process, and benefit accordingly (Auster & Wylie, 2006). However, despite the many supportive findings suggesting self-assessment can aid the learning process, there has been little research to date on what learners actually think of self-assessment (Cram, 1995).

2.3 Noticing

Research on self-assessment has identified many factors that can make it effective, but perhaps none are as important as ‘noticing’. According to Schmidt (1990), in order for learners to acquire a form, they need to notice it first. He went as far as saying “noticing is the necessary and sufficient condition for the conversion of input to intake for learning” (Schmidt, 1994, p. 17). He also referred to noticing as ‘noticing the gap’, meaning students become aware of a difference between what they want to say and what they can say, thereby prompting action to reduce the aforementioned gap.

Many researchers agree that by drawing learner’s attention to form, L2 learning can be better facilitated (Izumi & Bigelow, 2000). Adams (2003) showed learners benefitted greatly from noticing and that it led to an increase in the incorporation of the target forms, particularly

grammatical and vocabulary forms. Noticing is not quite as effective for oral tasks though, as Adams (2003) also noted that ongoing processing demands and time constraints often disrupt learners from noticing as successfully as when they are writing. One can imagine those same processing demands and constraints would likely have a similar, if not greater impact on the task of presenting, and quite likely impede noticing. Mackey (2006) though, claimed that interactional feedback (usually on the spot feedback given in the midst of a conversation or activity) does facilitate SLA. The same study found a relationship between noticing and interactional feedback along with a positive relationship between reports about noticing and subsequent L2 development for certain specific forms.

Miles (2009) found that noticing could be used to draw attention to particular grammatical items in oral presentations through the use of audio recordings. After participants noticed certain grammatical errors in their recordings, their output was found to be more accurate in subsequent presentations. In another study though, Izumi and Bigelow (2000) looked at whether output was actually influenced by noticing, and found mixed results. They did note importantly however, that measuring noticing is very difficult as it involves internal learner processing.

While, Schmidt (1994) was specifically referring to linguistic and grammatical items when he illustrated his views on ‘noticing the gap’, it is possible that the same logic applies for other skills, including presentation skills. An example of this could be when a student aspires to be a strong speaker but discovers they speak rather softly, after watching a video of their presentation. They have then ‘noticed the gap’, in terms of a skill they need to improve and can attempt to correct their perceived weakness.

2.4 Oral presentations

Being able to present is an important part of academic life (Adams, 2004; Grez et al., 2009; Pineda, 1999), particularly for undergraduate business department students (Campbell et al, 2001), and increasingly for ESL students looking to study in western universities (Yang, 2010; Zappa-Hollman, 2007). It is also an increasingly important skill in the professional world as well (Greenan et al, 1997; Nakamura in Otsoshi & Heffernen, 2008; Stowe et al., 2010; Webster, 2002). While being able to present well may be important, oral presentations are difficult to analyze and assess because there is little agreement as to what exactly constitutes a ‘good presentation’ (Campbell et al., 2001).

If presentations do play an important role in determining the success of university students, then it is imperative for educators to know more about how learners perceive the task of presenting. This will assist educators in better understanding the process learners go through, when delivering oral presentations and will in turn allow them to provide these learners with better feedback and clearer assessments.

Traditionally, feedback regarding presentations is usually given to students after the completion of the task – in contrast to writing tasks where feedback can be provided throughout the process – and usually originates from the teacher, or in some cases, from peers. However, with technological developments, video footage of presentations can now be utilized in many constructive ways to enhance feedback. The use of video provides presenters with a unique

opportunity to view their presentations from the teacher's perspective or from the audience's perspective and to reflect on this in a constructive manner.

In one particular study – with important connotations for this paper – Romova and Neville-Barton (2007) examined the speech production of ESL students doing a BA in a university in New Zealand and found the students were quite accurate with their self-assessments. In addition, reflecting on their performance helped the students to improve certain aspects of their oral presentations, such as the length of it, and the range of vocabulary used or attempted in the speech. Perhaps not surprisingly then, teachers have been using video footage for decades to improve the presenting skills of their students, with documented success in improving the content, student attitudes and subsequent scores (Bourhis & Allen, 1998).

3 The study

All the aforementioned studies and findings essentially provided the impetus for this research project. The basic premise was that if noticing and self-reflections/assessments were generally conducive to improving L2 proficiency and learning in general, were they also conducive to improving presentation skills? While a definitive answer to this question eventually proved beyond the scope of this paper, it is definitely a question worth addressing in future papers. However, there is still a great deal that can still be learned from simply examining student self-reflection reports about their oral presentations.

This study was conducted at a Japanese university, over the course of a full 15-week semester. The first purpose of this study was simply to discover what specific elements students noticed and commented on in a self-reflection report regarding their own oral presentation. The second purpose of this study was to try and analyze what effect the self-reflection reports were having on the student's subsequent presentations and if this was leading to improvements.

4 Methodology

It is possible to call this study a longitudinal study as it measured change over time, but it is necessary to keep in mind the relatively short period of time used to collect data. The primary measuring instrument used in this study was the self-reflection reports, collected from the students three times during the semester. These self-reflection reports (SRs) were a part of the standard course requirements, so the data collection for this study did not intrude on the regular course proceedings. The SRs were collected one week after each of the three main course presentations. They were completed individually and outside the classroom, after the participants had viewed a digital video of their own presentation. The data collected from these SRs was supplemented by classroom notes, presentation assessment grades, course evaluation forms, previous English class placement results, and from an informal discussion conducted with students at the end of one class. Primarily though, the SRs determined the findings to be discussed later. For more specific information regarding the SRs, please refer to the appendixes at the end of this paper.

After the data had been collected, it was analyzed qualitatively, and supported in a few instances by basic descriptive statistics. Thematic coding of the comments written on the SRs was the

primary form of analysis conducted and involved simple categorization of comments into groups, depending on the content of the answers. In a sense, this study could be seen as a primitive “analysis of narratives”, as described by Polkinghorne (1995), by seeing SRs as a kind of limited narrative from the participants. No triangulation of the data was carried out though, which can be considered one limitation of the study. Unfortunately, logistics prevented such an in-depth and all-encompassing collection of data, which could have included transcripts from the participant’s presentations, or interviews with the participants to further examine the learner’s perceptions.

4.1 The participants

There were 13 participants in this study and they were drawn from an *Introduction to Presentations in English* course that was taught by the author/researcher. This represented a purposeful sampling method of selection as these students were obviously interested in presenting (they had registered for this elective course), and would be delivering a series of presentations throughout the semester. Initially there were 15 participants, but two later dropped the class and did not complete the second or third SRs (their first SRs were discarded from the data pool). The recruitment process for the participants was essentially serendipitous, in that all the students in the course were offered the opportunity to take part in the study, and all of them ended up giving their consent after the details of the study had been explained to them. Nine of the subjects were female and four were male. They were all Japanese except for one Korean male. The students were mostly in their fourth (and final) year at university, although a few were in their second or third years (first-year students were not eligible to register for the course).

In terms of their educational background, only four of the participants were English majors. The rest were from various different departments, including the Business department, the Economics department, the Law department and the French department. After a brief informal discussion with the participants, further important background information was garnered. Only two of them reported never having studied English abroad and generally, the English level was relatively high, with the class average estimated at being in the high intermediate range (650-750 TOEIC score). All the participants had studied English in their freshman year at university and all had experience delivering English presentations in various English classes, although none had actually taken a class specifically about presentations. The reasons given for taking this elective course for most of the participants, was to further or maintain their English oral ability, and secondly, to improve their presenting skills, which they saw as useful for finding employment and for their future careers.

4.2 Class requirements

As part of the course requirements, all the students were required to deliver three major presentations during the semester. The first one, in week 5, was worth 15% of their final grade. The second presentation was in week 10 and accounted for 20% of their final grade. The last presentation was in the final examination week (week 16) and accounted for 30% of their final grade. The students were also required to collect a digital video (mp4) of their presentations (which had been filmed by a classmate using a hand held digital camera), and to watch them at home, while completing a short one-page SR. This process was repeated for each of the three

major presentations and the self-reflection reports were submitted at the beginning of the following class (or a week after the final presentation). All the participants completed the three presentations and submitted all the requisite SRs on time. The SRs were read and assessed (for effort) by the instructor, commented on, and then returned to the students at a later date. A photocopy was kept for research purposes.

4.3 The presentations

For each presentation, the participants were given a short list of tasks, that they could choose from; 1. Persuade the class to buy a particular product, 2. Persuade the class to agree with their particular opinion on a topical issue, or 3. Persuade the class to choose a certain country as a destination for their next holiday. The specific topics for the presentations were decided on by each participant and then approved by the teacher (to safeguard against any offensive or overly complicated topics being chosen). For the first two presentations the class had a week to prepare, but for the final presentation they had two weeks. No visuals were permitted in the first two presentations, but the use of PowerPoint, Keynote or Prezi, was mandatory for the final presentation. The first two presentations were approximately 5 minutes in length (with 30 seconds leeway on either side) and the final presentation was 7-8 minutes. All the presentations were delivered individually and all of them were filmed. For all three presentations, the audience consisted solely of the other students in the class, along with the teacher.

5 The findings

After a qualitative analysis of the data – based primarily on thematic coding of the comments written on the SRs – several interesting and surprising findings came to light. Firstly, relating to the issue of improvement, there was an interesting difference between how students assessed themselves in the open-ended comment section, versus how they assessed themselves with a specific letter grade. There also appeared to be an intriguing difference in what the more proficient students and the less proficient students noticed and commented on. Surprisingly, there was no real difference between the quantity of negative and positive comments. A further and pleasing finding was the sense of continuity between the presentations that seemed to develop as a result of the SRs. Overall, the findings suggest that using self-reflection reports and video clips of oral presentations can potentially generate many positive effects. The findings also shed some light on how students at different levels of L2 proficiency, might see the task of delivering an oral presentation and how they assess themselves.

5.1 Achievements

To more efficiently organize and categorize the comments on the SRs, Cram's (1995) 'Types of achievement' and 'Levels of achievement' were used. It should be noted here that this 'model' or categorization of achievement originally came from Brindley (1989). According to Cram, there are essentially four different types of achievement, which second and foreign language teachers assess. They are: general or linguistic gains, academic and/or vocational gains, social and/or cultural gains, and gains made in independent learning skills. Within each of these four types there are four different levels of achievement that are possible. They are; overall gains in proficiency, gains made in areas of functional language skills, gains made in understanding or

knowledge of language, and change in awareness or attitude.

Overall, it can be said that the students assessed their achievements positively, in many areas, especially with regard to linguistic gains. Seven out of thirteen students made comments directly on their perceived linguistic improvements in the final SR, such as “my English got better” or “I could speak more accurately”. In more specific terms, most of the linguistic achievements seem to have been made in the functional language skills area, which was strongly emphasized during the course. On the first SR, six out of thirteen students commented directly on certain functional language skills they had used well, such as signposting, attention-getters, or rhetorical questions. Nine out of thirteen students made positive comments regarding their use of functional language on both the second and the third SRs. Both the high number of students commenting on these achievements, and the increasing number, from the first SR to the final one, suggests students placed a high degree of importance on linguistic ability for oral presentations. This is not surprising as it was one of the primary goals of the course. However, it was pleasing to see that the students seemed to be, at the very least, aware of these goals and actively trying to meet them. It could however, be argued that a bias on my part is responsible for this finding. The course was designed to teach students about functional language skills and it is reasonable to presume that most students were able to comprehend this and conclude that by using these skills (and by commenting on them in the SRs), they were increasing their likelihood of attaining a better grade.

Another finding related to Cram’s levels of achievement model, is the change in awareness or attitude. On the first SR, six out of thirteen students were positive about their achievements, with comments such as “I have gained confidence”, or “I am no longer scared of presentations”. Ten out of thirteen commented favorably in this area on the second SR, and all the students did so on the final SR. There could be many reasons for this, including complying with what they perceived the teacher was expecting them to write. Logically though, it is not difficult to comprehend that the repeated experience of presenting and then assessing oneself, led many students to notice the gap in their presentations and to then actively bridge that gap. This idea is supported by the earlier findings, which noted an increase in specific comments about functional language gains.

In terms of Cram’s other two types of achievements, the participants did not make any comments at all regarding social and/or cultural gains. Nor were there any comments relating to independent learning skills. This suggests that while the students clearly noticed the more specific elements when self-assessing (such as specific language skills), they either did not notice, or did not believe they had made achievements in the broader more undefined areas.

5.2 Grades and comments

Another intriguing finding had to do with how the students evaluated their achievements and their overall improvement over the duration of the course and the three presentations. Certainly, as the instructor of the class, I felt intuitively that all the students had improved to varying degrees – my assessment notes bore this out – but it was pleasing to see that they all assessed themselves as having improved as well. On the final SR, eight students rated themselves as “much improved”, while the other five rated themselves as “somewhat improved”. Nobody

assessed themselves as the “same” or “worse than before”. Reasons given to support their assessments showed that primarily, they assessed themselves as having made linguistic gains and improvements in attitude, adding further support to the earlier findings.

There are a couple of things that are worth looking at more closely here. Firstly, it was a little surprising that many students rated themselves as “much improved”. Students (particularly Japanese students) are notoriously reticent about self-assessment and tend to undervalue their improvements, at least on paper. It is possible then, that the students in this class really did feel confident about their improvements and perhaps most importantly, could substantiate why they felt they had improved. Many of them provided specific examples of tangible functional language skills they felt they had mastered or improved on. Some other comments were more general in nature, such as “I could learn many important tips”, or “learning useful skills of presentation help my poor English”, and “I could know a lot of things about doing presentation well”. Some students commented on the structure; “the skills I learned made my presentation much more organized”. Others noted the skills and lamented that they couldn’t master all of them; “I can use half techniques that we learn, but not all, especially knock-down is difficult”. Many students commented on certain skills they felt had helped them become better presenters; “I’ve never heard of the skills like machine-gunning, tripling, softening and so on before. After I learned these, my presentation became more interesting than before...and I always try to use signposts as many as I can, in other class’s presentations”.

A conclusion that can be drawn from this segment of the SR analysis is that all the students assessed their presentation skills as having improved and could comment on specific skills as evidence of this improvement. This would suggest that they were very aware of the goals of the course, and even when they hadn’t mastered all of the presentation skills, they were able to clearly see tangible areas in which they had improved and could therefore more accurately assess their progress. In other words, by watching and assessing their own presentations they became more able to identify and use functional language skills, which in turn led them to more positively evaluate their specific linguistic and overall achievements in subsequent presentations.

5.3 The letter grades

A somewhat puzzling and contradictory finding comes from the actual letter grades the students assigned themselves for the first two presentations. Nine of the thirteen students gave themselves the same grade for both presentations. Three students gave themselves a slightly higher grade for the second presentation, and one gave herself a slightly lower grade. This would indicate that most of the students felt they had not improved – directly contradicting the comments they made at the end of the semester. One likely conclusion from this is that while students feel more freedom to respond to open-ended questions/prompts about improvements and weaknesses, they feel reluctant to actually assign higher letter grades to their presentations, perhaps because letter grades tend to carry more weight and have more significance for them. Therefore, they tend to assign themselves a grade they feel comfortable with and stick with it, regardless of how they really feel later on. Also, on the whole, most students were conservative with their grade self-assessments; eight gave themselves a lower grade than the teacher, and four gave themselves the same grade as the instructor gave them. Only one student overestimated their grade for the first presentation. For the second presentation the results were still fairly conservative, but a few more

students overestimated their scores (three), compared with five assessing themselves the same as the teacher did and five still giving themselves a lower assessment than the instructor. There was no data for the final presentation, as students were not asked to grade themselves on the final SR.

From these comments and self-assessments we can deduce several important things. Firstly, students tend to be conservative in their self-assessments when considering letter grades, which no doubt have special connotations for them. They are often reluctant to give themselves better grades over time even though they seem to believe they have improved. Grades are very ‘black and white’ and don’t give them the liberty to express opinions on which specific areas they have improved on and which still need work. Therefore, providing students with a chance to analyze and write their own comments is perhaps much more meaningful and can provide a more detailed picture of what they really think about their progress.

In terms of reliability, one could argue that the students were not that accurate at grading their own presentations. Less than half of the students (four out of thirteen in the first presentation and five out of thirteen in the second presentation) gave themselves the same grade as the instructor. As mentioned before though, this might have less to do with actual assessment ability and more to do with not wanting to overstate their case and lose ‘face’. Further evidence of this comes from the fact that – as was previously mentioned – nine students gave themselves the same grade in the first two presentations, despite later assessing themselves as having improved by the end of the course.

5.4 Differences based on proficiency levels

The 13 participants were divided into two groups, based on their class placement tests from their freshman year at university. The four English majors had been placed in the “advanced class” for English and were therefore considered to be ‘high-level’. Two other students were in the top stream in their respective departments so they were also assigned to the ‘more proficient’ group. The remaining students were all non-English majors and had been streamed into the lower English classes in their respective departments. They were therefore assigned to the ‘less proficient’ group. While the rationale for this grouping was simplistic and is certainly open for criticism, it served a useful purpose and allowed general comparisons to be made between the more proficient and the less proficient students.

The content of the comments made by the students on their SRs revealed distinctions between the stronger half of the class and the weaker half. While the less proficient students tended to write just as many comments on the SRs as the more proficient group, the focus of their writing was significantly different. The more proficient group tended to comment directly on specific functional language and rhetorical skills which had been learnt in class and how effectively they could use them or not, whereas the less proficient students tended not to notice these skills, or at least not to write about them as much. Instead, the majority of their comments were focused on non-verbal factors, such as eye contact, and body language. Several of the less proficient students actually commented on their own appearance, such as how much they smiled, or didn’t smile, or even about their hair style and weight. When they did focus on linguistic features, it was usually in a negative manner, and they concentrated on their overall lack of proficiency, or grammatical mistakes.

By the second presentation more of the less proficient students commented on or referred to the specific skills that were being learnt in the course, suggesting they were more on task and had a better understanding of what the course and the instructor were emphasizing. Still, it was notable that some of them tended to again comment about the previously mentioned non-verbal factors.

One reason for this difference in focus could be that the less proficient students didn't actually comprehend the skills they needed to demonstrate, or couldn't perhaps understand them well enough to comment on them appropriately. Also possible though, was that they were suffering from a lack of confidence after having compared their own presentations to that of their classmates. When they watched their own videos, the more transient factors (and usually more negative factors) such as eye contact and English grammar became more noticeable. Another possible explanation is that some of the less proficient students didn't actually use the new functional language skills in their presentations, so they simply failed to notice what was missing from their presentations and instead focused on some of the visible or apparent mistakes.

This last point is worth considering as in the second SR many more students in both groups commented on things that were missing from their presentations, and not just on what they had done. This could indicate that they had become more astute at assessing their own presentations and had a better idea of what to look for going into the viewing (even if they never actually found it), rather than simply noting what they saw.

5.5 Balance of positive and negative comments

There were a few other findings worth noting from the analysis of the data. One, which was a little surprising, was the fairly even balance between the negative and positive comments that students wrote. On the SRs there was an equal amount of space in which to write about the "good things that you noticed that you did" and the "things that you noticed that you need to improve on for next time". It was intuitively thought that students would find it easier to write about their weak points or that they would notice these more. In fact, they wrote almost exactly the same amount, in terms of word counts (40.3 words on average for what they had done well versus 38.8 words on what they needed to improve on), for both questions, on all three SRs. It is possible that they honestly felt there was an even balance between the positive and the weaker aspects of their presentations, but it is perhaps also likely that they simply felt the need to fill the space provided on the sheet, in order to complete the assigned course task.

5.6 Continuity between presentations

One more pleasing finding was that many students seemed quite keen to keep improving and referenced what they would like to improve for the next presentation. This is important as it shows a sense of continuity between presentations was developing and that students were seeing learning how to present, as a process. Personally this was perhaps the most gratifying finding in this study. I had repeatedly stressed to students that presenting skills – much like writing skills – take time to develop. They also require continuous self-reflection and self-analysis/self-assessment to generate improvement. Presentations should not be seen as an isolated task, but as a series of connected tasks, in which students need to focus on improving a range of skills, often

through trial and error. It is of course highly possible that they were writing what they thought the teacher wanted to read, but at least they were thinking of this point.

6 Implications

There are many implications that can be drawn from this small study for teachers and learners alike, although the small number of participants and the short duration of the study should caution against any grand generalizations. Overall though, it can be said that the benefits derived from using self-reflection reports in an oral presentations class made them highly worthwhile tasks. Not only did learners benefit from the self-reflection reports, but the instructor – also the researcher in this case – benefitted as well.

In particular, by utilizing SRs after each assessed presentation, an important sense of continuity was established and students came to see developing presentation skills as a continuous process. They also seemed to learn from previous presentations, as they would do from writing tasks or recorded conversations. This repeated practice of observing their own presentations and writing a SR allowed students to sharpen their noticing skills, so that they were far more specific about and aware of what they were able to do well and what they needed to continue to work on.

By continually trying to use the presentation skills they had learned in class and then looking for them in the videos, the students also seemed to become very clear about the course goals, which in turn seemed to motivate them further. They knew what they needed to achieve in order to be successful in the course and were well placed to make a strong effort to do so. When the students evaluated the course in the last class (for internal university requirements) many of them stated as much, which likely contributed to the high course evaluation score of 4.91/5.00 (based on a Likert Scale of 1-5, from 15 questions).

Also important is that students seem to be far more capable of assessing and noticing the language and functional skills they used. Achievements relating to any social or cultural knowledge they may have gained as a result of these presentations went either unnoticed or were unclear to them.

For future self-reflection tasks, it might be pertinent to abolish the self-grading task, as it proved rather unreliable and not overly useful. Some questions dealing with social or cultural achievements might also help students broaden their view while assessing their performances. It may also be worthwhile to provide more guided questions for less proficient students, so that they can focus more on the important skills and so that they can notice what is missing from their presentations, rather than just focusing on the mistakes or non-verbal actions, which caught their attention.

Educators can also take note of the distinctions that were found between the more proficient and the less proficient students. By realizing what the weaker students tend to focus on and what separates the more proficient students from them, educators can in a sense, ‘notice the gap’ and take action. This could be done with more specific questions on the SRs, or it could be done in terms of more specific and leading comments in the feedback that they provide. By being more aware of the differences between the weaker and the more proficient students when it comes to

preparing and delivering oral presentations, educators can be more effective teachers and promote greater learning opportunities for their students. Specific courses can be developed, which do not just simply focus on a broad range of generic presentation techniques that may or may not be relevant for the students.

7 Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that the self-reflection reports used in this English presentation course, served a valuable purpose in getting students to be more aware of their achievements and to better focus them on improving their skills for future presentations. The self-reflection reports also seemed to have bolstered a sense of continuity between the presentations and to have provided both the teacher and the students with a deeper insight into the learner's perspective on the process of learning about and delivering successful presentations in English. Important distinctions between what the more proficient and the less proficient participants noticed in their own presentations and in how they assessed themselves, needs to be further explored so that educators are better able to help a wide range of students develop their presenting abilities.

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Appendix A

Self-reflection #1

Name:

Answer the questions as best as you can.

1. What was your feeling while watching your presentation?
2. What were some good things you noticed that you did?
3. What were some things you noticed that you need to improve on for next time?
4. How would you evaluate yourself? (A+/A/B/C/F) Why?

Appendix B

Self-reflection #2

Name:

Answer the questions as best as you can.

1. What was your feeling while watching this presentation?
2. What were some good things you noticed that you did? What things did you improve on from last time?
3. What were some things you noticed that you need to improve on for next time?
4. How would you evaluate yourself? (A+/A/B/C/F) Why?

Appendix C

Self-reflection #3

Name:

Answer the questions as best as you can.

1. How do you feel about doing presentations now?
2. What things have you improved on since the beginning of this course?
3. What are some things you still need to work on?
4. How would you evaluate your presentation performances over this course? Circle one and explain briefly.
(much improved/somewhat improved/same/worse than before)

*The writing spaces following each question have been shortened from the original handout in all three appendixes here, to conserve space.