



Effectiveness of Using Prepared and Impromptu Speeches to Evaluate Undergraduates' Oral Proficiency in English as a Second Language Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Proficiency in English language can be considered as crucial because it has been commonly used as a lingua-franca in communication. This study was conducted to investigate the effectiveness of using prepared and impromptu speeches to evaluate undergraduates' oral proficiency in English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. The undergraduates' perception on the importance of testing oral proficiency and the effectiveness of prepared and impromptu speeches to evaluate oral proficiency of the undergraduates were investigated. A sample of 74 first year undergraduates who are reading up for Bachelor of Science (Honors) in Software Engineering were selected for this study as a convenience sampling. The data were gathered under three stages by following a mixed methodology. As the first stage a questionnaire was distributed and as the second stage a prepared speech was done. As the third stage, a prepared-impromptu speech and an impromptu speech were evaluated. The data collected from the questionnaire and the marks of the three speeches were analyzed to answer the research questions. The analyzed data emphasized that the participants have identified the importance of oral proficiency in English language for their future career and prepared and impromptu speeches can be used as a testing technique to

evaluate undergraduates' oral proficiency. Thus, oral proficiency in English language is crucial for the undergraduates, as English language has been used for communication purposes. Hence, prepared and impromptu speeches can be considered as an effective testing tool to evaluate students' oral proficiency in English Language in the Sri Lankan ESL classroom.

1. INTRODUCTION

English language plays a crucial role, as it is considered as a global language. Hence, English language plays a significant role as a lingua-franca, a bridging language. According to the constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka (2015), "English shall be the link language" (p.11). Sri Lanka, being a colony of the British empire, Kachru (1992) identifies Sri Lanka to the outer circle where English is learned as a second language. In the Sri Lankan education system, English as a second language (ESL) is a compulsory subject in the school curriculum.

Oral proficiency in English Language is an essential skill as English is a language and it is used to communicate with one another. According to Harahap & Rozimela (2012), "Speaking is one of the important skills in English that should be mastered by students... In order to have English communication skills, students have to master high level proficiency in speaking." (p.01). Thus, according to Abeywickrama (2008) "Today, fluency in English in Sri Lanka is an inevitable social requirement. English language is considered as a highly prestigious language that provides access to all kinds of privileges" (p.20). It can be justified that in the Sri Lankan context oral proficiency in English language is vital, as it has been used in the society.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of using prepared and impromptu speeches to evaluate undergraduates' oral proficiency in English as a Second Language (ESL)

classroom. In order to achieve this purpose, the following objectives were focused.

1. To identify the undergraduates' perception on the importance of testing oral proficiency
2. To examine the effectiveness of prepared and impromptu speeches to evaluate oral proficiency of the undergraduates.

Following research questions were initiated to conduct the study.

1. What is undergraduates' perception on the importance of testing oral proficiency?
2. To what extent is undergraduates' oral proficiency developed through prepared and impromptu speeches?

Hence, first the undergraduates will be given the opportunity to enhance their speaking skills through prepared speeches and step by step their oral proficiency will be evaluated through impromptu speeches.

2. METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of prepared and impromptu speeches to evaluate undergraduates' oral proficiency in the ESL context. Hence, in order to collect data to investigate undergraduates' perceptions on the importance of testing oral proficiency, a questionnaire was initiated. To answer the second research question, pre and post tests were conducted where students' proficiency levels were evaluated.

As the sample for this study, seventy-four first year undergraduates of Bachelor of Science (Honors) in Software Engineering in a non-state university in Sri Lanka, was selected as a convenience sample. Thus, according to Dörnyei (2007) cited in Etikan, Musa & Alkassim (2016) he explains,

“Convenience sampling is a type of nonprobability or nonrandom sampling where members of the target population that meet certain practical criteria, such as easy accessibility, availability at a given time, or the willingness to participate” (p.02).

All these undergraduates follow two English courses in their first year. In the first semester they follow the course “General English” in which they are taught on grammar points and language skills. In the second semester, they follow the course “Business English”, which focuses on developing their oral proficiency with a special focus on business English.

As the initial stage, the questionnaire was given to collect basic information of their age, education level, their opinion about English language and importance of oral proficiency. As the second stage, all the participants were asked to make a prepared speech on any topic they like for 2-3 minutes. As they have already learnt about the structure of speeches in their first semester, they were asked to use the techniques they learnt into their speech. The marking criteria was given to the participants prior to the evaluation. The participants were given a week to prepare for their speech. Individual feedback was given at the end on all the speeches. The third stage was conducted in two phases and the participants were given two weeks to develop their speaking skills with the feedback given in the second stage. As the first phase, all the participants were given five topics and asked to be prepared to do a speech on a given topic. They were given a week to prepare themselves for the speeches. On the evaluation day, participants had to select a topic randomly from the chits in which the given topics were written. They were given 60 seconds to prepare themselves and they were asked to do the speech for 2- 3 minutes. Participants’ speeches were evaluated according

to the marking rubric. As the second phase, a week after the first phase participants were given a topic randomly and asked to give an impromptu speech for 2-3 minutes. These speeches were evaluated according to the marking rubric. The marks of the third stage were used to analyze the effectiveness of prepared and impromptu speeches to evaluate students’ oral proficiency. The collected data was analyzed using IBM SPSS software and thematic analysis.

All the participants were informed about the study priorly by giving an information sheet and their consent was taken to collect the data. It was guaranteed that their identity would be secured.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of preliminary data can be explained as follows. The data collected from the questionnaires can be mainly categorized under gender, stream followed for Advance Level (A/L) and the grade for Advanced Level General English. Hence, the sample contained 48 male and 26 female participants. Among them, 24 of them have followed the Science stream, either Combined mathematics or Biology as one of the main subjects along with Chemistry and Physics. The remaining 50 students have followed either Commerce or Arts or a combination of streams. Furthermore, their grades for General English subject in Advanced Level examination were explored to get an understanding of the level of the English language of the participants. Figure 1 shows a summary of the grade they have obtained for the subject in Advanced Level examination.

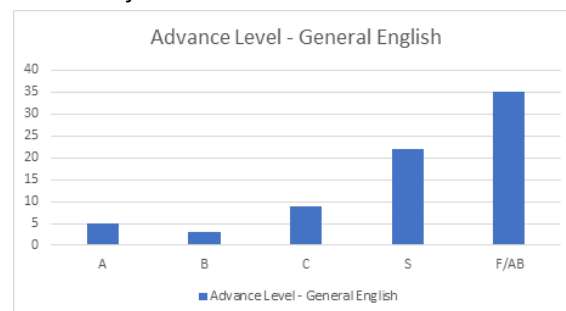


Figure 1- Grades for the subject, General English in Advanced Level Examination

3.1 Undergraduates' perception on the importance of testing oral proficiency

According to the collected data, participants have elaborated that oral proficiency in English is important to them, especially with the degree program they are following. They have highlighted that English is the language that is being commonly used to communicate in the working environment as they always communicate with foreign companies. Further, it can be manifested that none of them have gone through any kind of oral tests in English during their period in schools. It was remarkable to elaborate that they have done only one group presentation during their first year and that was the only speech they have done in English language in their university. Majority of the participants have suggested that there should be more opportunities and programs for them to practice English language in order to become proficient as they need it to communicate with others.

3.2 The effectiveness of prepared and impromptu speeches to evaluate oral proficiency of the undergraduates.

In the second stage, participants were given individual feedback about their speeches as it will be helpful to enhance their oral proficiency. In order to investigate the effectiveness of prepared and impromptu speeches to evaluate participants' oral proficiency, the marks they got for the first prepared speech, second prepared-impromptu speech and third impromptu speech were analyzed. Thus, it was significant to note that there is a significant increase in the marks of the participants, especially when we compare the marks of the two prepared speeches with the impromptu speech. Moreover, the marking criteria was not only focusing on the content and language, but also it was focusing on non-verbal gestures (posture, eye contact, hand gestures), style and time management as these aspects are crucial in the communication process. Each of

these speeches were evaluated out of 20 marks. The following figure summarizes the median of the three speeches.

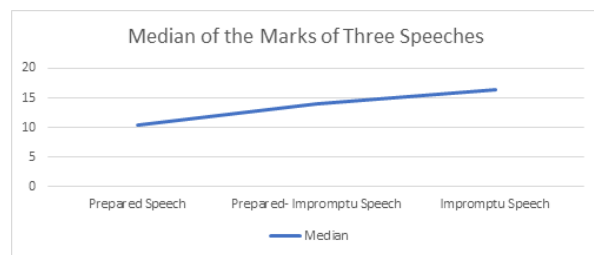


Figure 2 – Median of the marks of three speeches

The collected data elaborated that oral proficiency is crucial for the participants and prepared and impromptu speeches can be used as a testing tool to evaluate undergraduates' oral proficiency in English Language.

4. CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of prepared and impromptu speeches to evaluate the oral proficiency of undergraduates in English language in the ESL classroom. As English language is being commonly used as a lingua franca, oral proficiency is vital to conduct the communication process successfully. According to the analyzed data it can be manifested that majority of the undergraduates has identified the importance of English language and why oral proficiency in this language is essential for their future career path. As this study was conducted with a group of undergraduates who are reading up for Bachelor of Science (Honors) in Software Engineering, proficiency in English language is crucial for the communication process. Thus, it can be manifested that prepared and impromptu speeches can be used as an effective testing tool to evaluate undergraduates' oral proficiency in English in ESL classroom. However, the major findings cannot be applicable to all the ESL learners as this study was conducted with a group of undergraduates who are reading up for a Bachelor of Science (Honors) in Software Engineering in a non-state university of Sri Lanka. Furthermore,

as oral proficiency in English is crucial for the ESL learners investigating on different types of testing tools to evaluate oral proficiency would be a promising area for future studies.

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