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Learner Evaluations of English Speaking Class Activities: Striking a Balance Between Enjoyment and Challenge

学生による英語のスピーキング・クラス活動評価
— 楽しみと難易度のバランス —

HOFMEYR, Michael Frederick

Abstract

The significant impact of learner attitudes and perceptions on language learning outcomes has been increasingly recognised in the applied linguistics literature. This paper briefly outlines four types of activities used in two English oral communication classes taken by first and second-year learners studying towards a degree in English at Osaka University. At the end of their first semester, learners in both groups were asked to complete a short survey in order to evaluate the individual class activities and the course as a whole in terms of helpfulness for language development, enjoyability, and difficulty. The results of the survey suggest a complex relationship between a given activity's efficacy for language learning, learners' enjoyment of the activity, and the level of challenge it poses. Easier and more enjoyable group discussion tasks appear to have been effective both for developing learners' speaking proficiency and for providing the scaffolding necessary to successfully complete the more difficult presentation tasks that followed. While many learners found the latter tasks to be less enjoyable, there was widespread agreement that the more difficult tasks were helpful for their English speaking skill development.

keywords: English as a foreign language (EFL), learner evaluation, oral communication, presentation skills, second language acquisition (SLA), speaking skills

1. Introduction

The effects of language learners' attitudes and perceptions towards their L2 acquisition has become an important focus of applied linguistics research over recent decades. Following the widespread adoption of communicative and task-based language teaching practices that prioritise the active and practical use of the L2 by learners in the classroom (Ellis 2003, Nunan 2012), researchers have drawn attention to the relationship between a learner's affective state during class activities and their success in language acquisition. Various factors have been identified that may influence a learner's emotions during class. Anxiety stemming from the learner's lack of self-

confidence in their L2 ability, for example, may adversely impact their performance and enjoyment during a communication task (Horwitz & Young 1991). Additionally, class activities that learners perceive as being too demanding may dampen their motivation to learn the L2 (Dörnyei 2003) and more concretely it may lessen their willingness to communicate in the L2 (MacIntyre 2007). In light of such findings, it is reasonable to expect the attitudes and perceptions that learners hold towards classroom pedagogical activities to also have a significant impact on language learning outcomes.

This paper will report and reflect on the results of a short survey conducted with several groups of learners who have partially completed two similarly structured English oral communication courses at Osaka University, a large national university in Japan. The aim is not only to evaluate the effectiveness of the course in order to make improvements in future years, but also to provide some insight into the relationships that exist between the learner-perceived helpfulness of class activities for developing English speaking skills, how enjoyable learners find the activities and the perceived level of difficulty. The first two sections of the paper will provide an overview of the content of the two courses and a description of the survey used for this research. The results of the survey will then be described and discussed.

2. Two Oral Communication Courses

The learners surveyed for this study were all enrolled in a 4-year degree programme with a focus on English literature and linguistics and were either in the first or the second-year cohort at the time that the data were collected. Each cohort consisted of three groups of between twenty and twenty-four learners in size who attended class sessions together. The primary aims of the first and second-year courses were similar: to improve learners' ability to communicate effectively in spoken English on a wide range of topics, to increase their competence and confidence in persuasive public speaking, and to develop their ability to conduct basic academic research. Accordingly, the same pedagogical approach and class speaking activities were employed for both courses. The overall structure of each course was also similar, with an emphasis on cooperative group discussion and presentation skills during the first semester and then a shift towards the more confrontational communication style of formal debate during the second semester. Since the survey data for both year groups discussed in this paper were gathered at the end of the first semester, only the activities relevant to the first semester of the course will be discussed, that is the activities related to the development of general speaking and presentation skills.

While the overall structure and class activities used in the two courses were similar, the first-year course had been designed to provide more scaffolding activities and to place lower cognitive demands on learners in order to prepare them for more challenging speaking and research activities

in future semesters. Before each regular class session, learners were expected to read through a short passage on a specific topic and to look up unfamiliar vocabulary items. In the first-year course, these texts had been taken from selected commercial EFL textbooks. The reading passages for the second-year course, on the other hand, had been collected from various news media sources published in English and written for a general English-speaking audience. The latter readings may therefore be considered authentic texts, which language learners are likely to find more challenging to understand, but at the higher proficiency levels also more interesting and motivating (Loewen and Reinders 2011). In addition to carefully reading these articles, learners were asked to prepare two comprehension questions and two discussion questions about each weekly article in preparation for in-class speaking activities.

Apart from the final few classes of the semester, which were reserved for higher-stakes individual presentations, class meetings generally followed a similar sequence of activities week by week. Each session of the first-year course started with a presentation skill-building activity in which a certain presentation strategy, such as making regular eye contact or using effective hand gestures, was taught. Initially, learners watched a short commercially-produced video of a university student giving a presentation in which the strategy in question is poorly executed. Then, after considering and discussing ways to improve the presentation, they watched a second video showing the same presenter employing the strategy effectively. After this skill-building activity, learners were randomly divided up into small discussion groups of three or four learners per group. They began the discussion activity by taking turns asking each other comprehension questions about the reading passage. This lasted for a few minutes, at which point the instructor stopped the activity to confirm that each learner was familiar with the key vocabulary items found in the reading and understood the main ideas. In the next phase of the small-group discussion, each learner received a turn to initiate and lead a five-minute group discussion session based on one of the questions that they had prepared for homework.

Once all learners had had the opportunity to lead a short discussion, the instructor elicited a discussion question from each small group and wrote it on the whiteboard, typically with some editing to ensure accuracy and clarity. Learners were then asked to select one question and given five minutes to prepare a short “impromptu” speech on the topic, stating their opinion clearly and providing three reasons for the stance taken. Learners were encouraged to keep their speech between one and two minutes long, to avoid writing out a script, and to experiment with the specific presentation strategy introduced earlier in the session. When the planning time was over, the instructor called individual learners to the front of the class to present in random order. In a typical class session, there would be enough time left for five to ten learners to deliver their presentation,

with the instructor providing a few points of feedback to the whole class at the end. The planning, discussion, and presentation activities described here all served as practice to prepare learners for a more substantial five-minute individual presentation at the end of the semester for which they were given several weeks to prepare and to conduct more independent research. The final presentation counted towards a substantial part of their overall course grade and was assessed in terms of content, presentation skills, and language. Learners were expected to display a reasonable degree of mastery of the presentation skills practised over the semester and received detailed individual feedback on strong and weak aspects of their presentation during the final meeting of the semester.

The sequence of activities for regular classes described above may be summarised as follows:

1. skill-building activity to develop presentation strategies
2. small-group discussion activities (comprehension and discussion questions)
3. front-of-class “impromptu” speeches

Regular classes in the second-year course followed the same general structure and included the same activity types as outlined above. However, presentation skill-building activities took place less frequently, allowing more time for small-group discussions and “impromptu” speeches.

3. Survey

Standardised course evaluation surveys are generally conducted at Osaka University through an online learning management system at the end of each semester. However, learners are not obliged to complete these surveys, which often results in completion rates of 25% or lower. Apart from constituting only a very small sample, learners who choose to complete the official surveys are likely to be exceptionally pleased or displeased with the course and therefore unlikely to accurately represent the entire group enrolled in a given course. Furthermore, these centrally-administered surveys were designed for use across a wide range of subject disciplines, resulting in a large number of total question items, many of which are relevant for some courses but not for others. In order to gain a clearer and more reliable picture of how learners view and feel about the course activities described in the previous section, the author created a much shorter survey specifically to evaluate the two courses in question. This survey aimed to gauge learners’ perceptions and attitudes towards the individual activities designed for the courses and was administered in class during the final session of the semester. As a result, almost all of the learners enrolled in the first and second-year courses completed the survey. Learners were also asked to complete the survey anonymously

in order to encourage greater honesty in their responses.

The survey was written in English and was intentionally worded to be as clear and comprehensible to learners as possible. The first question asked learners to evaluate the degree to which the four main class activity types described in the previous section, namely presentation skill-building sessions, small-group discussions, short “impromptu” speeches, and the longer end-of-semester presentation, helped to develop their English speaking skills. Learners rated each activity on a four-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 for “not helpful at all” to 3 for “very helpful”. The second question asked learners to rate how much they enjoyed the course activities on a similar four-point Likert scale and also to specify which activities they enjoyed very much or very little. The third question asked them to rate the difficulty of the course activities and to specify which activities were particularly easy or difficult. For the first part of this question, a five-point Likert scale was used, with the centre value indicating a difficulty value that the learner judged to be appropriate for the course. Finally, question number four encouraged learners to write down any further suggestions for how the course may be improved. The full survey is appended at the end of this paper.

4. Results

Out of the 64 learners enrolled in the first-year course, 61 answered the survey and out of the 68 learners enrolled in the second-year course, 65 answered it, adding up to a total of 126 respondents with a 97% completion rate. The two tables below indicate the total number of answers at each point on the Likert scale for each question as well as the mean score for each question for the first and second-year groups respectively. Due to a few cases of incomplete surveys or incorrectly completed survey items, not all answers add up to the total number of learners who answered the survey in each year group.

Table 1: Summary of first-year learners’ survey results

	<i>n</i>	0	1	2	3	4	Mean score
Q1.a) Helpfulness of presentation skill-building activities (scale: 0-3)	61	0	9	24	28	-	2.31
Q1.b) Helpfulness of small-group discussions (scale: 0-3)	61	0	4	27	30	-	2.43
Q1.c) Helpfulness of short “impromptu” speeches (scale: 0-3)	61	0	10	22	29	-	2.31
Q1.d) Helpfulness of longer final presentation (scale: 0-3)	61	0	5	16	40	-	2.57
Q2.1) Enjoyment of class activities (scale: 0-3)	59	0	3	39	17	-	2.24
Q3.1) Difficulty of course (scale: 0-4)	60	0	0	25	29	6	2.68

Table 2: Summary of second-year learners' survey results

	<i>n</i>	0	1	2	3	4	Mean score
Q1.a) Helpfulness of presentation skill-building activities (scale: 0-3)	65	1	15	34	15	-	1.97
Q1.b) Helpfulness of small-group discussions (scale: 0-3)	65	0	5	23	37	-	2.49
Q1.c) Helpfulness of short "impromptu" speeches (scale: 0-3)	65	0	6	27	32	-	2.4
Q1.d) Helpfulness of longer final presentation (scale: 0-3)	65	0	2	22	41	-	2.6
Q2.1) Enjoyment of class activities (scale: 0-3)	64	1	5	43	15	-	2.13
Q3.1) Difficulty of course (scale: 0-4)	65	0	0	32	31	2	2.54

A large majority of learners in the first and second-year courses rated the helpfulness of all four course activities for developing their English speaking skills towards the “helpful” end of the spectrum. On the 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0, for “not helpful at all”, to 3, for “very helpful”, the mean score for presentation skill-building activities comes to 2.31 for the first-year group and 1.97 for the second-year group. While most learners considered the skill-building activities to be helpful, it is worth noting that a significant minority of learners, nine first-years and fifteen second-years, gave these activities a score of 1, indicating that they did not consider them to be very helpful. The mean score that learners gave the small-group discussion activities for helpfulness was 2.43 for the first-years and 2.49 for the second-years. While a small minority of learners did not consider these activities to be very helpful, half of the first-year learners and the majority of second-year learners considered them to be “very helpful”. The short “impromptu” speech activities received a mean score of 2.31 for helpfulness from the first-years and 2.4 from the second-years. About half of the learners in each group considered these activities “very helpful”, while ten from the first-year group and six from the second-year group gave the activity a low helpfulness rating of 1. Finally, the longer final presentation was rated the most helpful of all the class activities for developing oral English proficiency, with a mean score of 2.57 from the first-years and 2.6 from the second-years. Just under two-thirds of the learners in each course considered this activity to have been “very helpful”.

The vast majority of learners reported enjoying the class activities in general, with about two-thirds of respondents in each group answering 2 and most of the remaining learners answering 3, indicating that they “enjoyed it very much”. The mean score for enjoyment of the first-year course is 2.24, with the second-year learners reporting slightly lower levels of enjoyment at 2.13. For the final question on the survey, learners were asked to rate how challenging they found the course on a five-point scale, with 0 indicating “very easy”, 4 indicating “very hard” and the middle position

of 2 labelled as “just right”. The mean score for the first-year group was 2.68 and the score for the second-year group was 2.54. The vast majority of learners in both levels evaluated the difficulty level of the course as “just right” or one point above this in difficulty, with a small number reporting the course activities to be “very hard” and no learners at all reporting it to be easy.

5. Discussion

In general, learners’ responses in this survey indicate a high level of confidence in the helpfulness of the class activities in both of the oral communication courses. On the four-point Likert scale from 0 to 3, the mean scores for all but one of the four class activity types were well above 2 for both year groups. Learners rated the five-minute-long final presentation as the most helpful activity in the course for developing their English speaking skills, with a mean score of 2.57 from the first-years and 2.6 from the second-years. In response to the open-ended questions regarding enjoyment and difficulty of class activities, eight learners specifically mentioned that they enjoyed preparing for and giving the longer presentation. Their reasons included experiencing a sense of improvement and enjoying the challenge of thinking of questions to ask other presenters as audience members during their questions and answers sessions. In spite of the high level of enjoyment reported by many learners for this activity, ten first-years and three second-years also commented that they found the final presentation too difficult. Their reasons included the difficulty of the topic options prepared by the instructor, the challenge of conducting independent research in preparation for the presentation, and the difficulty of thinking of good questions to ask during the questions and answers sessions.

The activity type that learners judged to be the second-most helpful was the small-group discussion sessions based on the questions that they had prepared for homework, with a mean score of 2.43 from the first-years and 2.49 from the second-years. Responses to the open-ended question on enjoyment indicate that this was by far the most enjoyable activity for learners of both year groups, with 48% of first-years and 42% of second-years specifically mentioning this activity type as the most enjoyable. Many different reasons for this were provided. Ten first-year learners explained that they enjoyed this activity as it was interesting to hear their classmates’ opinions about the discussion topics as well as their personal stories related to the weekly theme. Other learners noted that the small-group discussions put less pressure on them than front-of-the-class speaking activities, which made them feel less anxious in general and also less afraid of making mistakes. A number of learners also commented that even though they were enrolled in an English language degree programme, they did not have much opportunity to speak English elsewhere and that they enjoyed doing so during the small-group discussion sessions. A small number of learners

reported not enjoying the small-group discussions, however, noting that it was sometimes difficult to understand classmates who were more fluent in English and also that quieter learners in the group could demotivate their peers. Others pointed out that this problem was largely mitigated by the random assignment of groups at the start of every class session. Despite the high level of enjoyment of this activity type reported by many learners, it is also worth noting that eight first-years and two second-years said that they found the small-group discussion activities to be difficult. It is interesting to note that in spite of the fact that the homework readings in the second-year course were unmodified authentic texts from English media sources and therefore significantly more challenging to read than the simplified texts given to learners in the first-year course, very few second-year learners mentioned that the discussion sessions based on these readings were difficult. This result suggests that learners' competence and confidence had increased over the course of the first year as they practised sharing their opinions and ideas in English. By the time they reach the second year, discussion activities seem to be easier and learners find them more enjoyable in spite of the greater complexity of the content.

While most learners in both year groups evaluated the presentation skill-building activity type as helpful, the 1.97 mean score of the second-years is significantly lower than the 2.31 mean score given by the first-years. This lower score might suggest that the amount of explicit strategy teaching aimed at improving presentation skills is more helpful for speaking and presentation skill development at the lower levels and that the pedagogical emphasis should shift to practical communication activities once learners have gained the foundational knowledge offered by the first-year course. This interpretation is supported by learners' own responses to the open-ended questions, with six first-years mentioning specifically that they enjoyed the video comparison and analysis activities, while a second-year complained that the video-based skill-building activities were not challenging enough and that they were too similar to those of the previous year.

The final activity type that learners evaluated for helpfulness is the "impromptu" speech, which involves making an unscripted short presentation in front of the class with minimal preparation time on a topic closely related to the theme of the homework reading and small-group discussion. 48% of learners perceived this activity type to be "very helpful" for developing their English speaking ability and most of the others also rated it as helpful, while ten first-years and six second-years gave it a lower rating for helpfulness. The mean scores for the helpfulness of the "impromptu" speech activity added up to 2.31 and 2.4 respectively for these groups. A likely reason for the relatively low ratings given by some of the first-year learners is the high degree of challenge posed by this activity. Learners' answers to the open-ended survey question on difficulty level support this interpretation, as a total of 23 first-years and 26 second-years singled it out as being "too hard". Almost three

quarters of these learners felt that they did not have adequate time to prepare before being called on to make their presentation, while others claimed that the set topics were often too difficult or that the activity made them feel anxious. This response was not unexpected as the activity was designed to be challenging, with the rationale being that the exercise it provides would rapidly improve learners' confidence and competence in public speaking. It was also hoped that the gradual mastery of this activity would help them to overcome their inhibitions about publicly expressing their opinions on complex and controversial topics.

It is interesting to note the apparent self-contradiction expressed in the learners' answers here, with a clear consensus that the activity was too difficult, yet with the vast majority of learners considering it to have also been very helpful for their language skill development, which they must realise to be the ultimate aim of the course. The fact that second-year learners in general considered the activity to be slightly more helpful than the first-year learners may indicate that they have begun to appreciate the benefits that such challenging speaking activities may hold for their language learning. This view is supported by the comments from several learners who noted that even though preparing for and delivering the "impromptu" speeches were the most difficult activities in the courses, they gradually noticed an improvement in their English speaking and presentation skills. Being in the privileged position to witness the linguistic development of the same cohorts of learners in the English programme over the two-year period of the two courses, the instructor himself can also attest to the noticeable difference in skill with which these short presentations are delivered by the first and the second-year learners. Presumably the speaking activities described here play a significant role in the progress demonstrated by the more senior learners.

6. Conclusion

In general, learners evaluated the two English oral communication courses very positively. Most of the class activities were considered to be very helpful for improving English speaking skills, with the exception of the presentation skill-building activities, which the second-year learners considered slightly less helpful. To the extent that learners can accurately judge the effectiveness of pedagogical practice for their own language learning, the results can thus be said to indicate that the class activities described here effectively facilitate the development of English oral communication skills. The vast majority of learners also reported enjoying the courses, with over a quarter of the total number reporting that they enjoyed it very much. Finally, most of the first and second-year learners perceived the course activities to have been either at the right level of difficulty or a little too difficult, with a small number claiming that it was much too difficult. It is worth noting again here that despite the more challenging topics and more demanding assignments of the second-year

course, the mean score for perceived difficulty was lower for the second-year group, pointing to improvements in language and presentation skills over time.

One aspect of the survey results that provides cause for further reflection is the complex relationship that emerges from the data between the three variables of helpfulness for speaking skill development, learner enjoyment, and perceived difficulty level. Even though more than half of the learners stated that the course was too difficult, the vast majority perceived the class activities as helpful for developing their English language skills. This perception aligns with the well-established notion that in foreign language pedagogy, learners benefit most from tasks that require them to produce linguistic output slightly above the level at which they currently feel comfortable (Krashen 1982). Clearly the class activities also require learners to develop general academic skills beyond English language proficiency, adding to the level of difficulty but also adding a sense of achievement as these skills are gradually mastered. Finally, it must be pointed out that the data indicate no clear and consistent correlation between the difficulty of a given activity and its perceived helpfulness for language learning. For example, learners reported the “impromptu” speech activities to have been very difficult and helpful, the final presentation assignment to have been difficult and very helpful, and small-group discussion activities to have been rather easy, yet more helpful than the “impromptu” speeches. Likewise, no obvious correlation is apparent between how enjoyable and how helpful learners find any given class activity. Learners consider, for example, small-group discussion activities to be very enjoyable and also very helpful for language skill development, while the survey suggests that most learners find the “impromptu” speech activities much less enjoyable, but still very helpful for developing their English speaking skills. These findings indicate complex relationships between the three variables of perceived helpfulness, enjoyability, and perceived difficulty of oral communication tasks in an EFL context. More sophisticated and methodologically more robust research will clearly be necessary in order to gain a clearer understanding of these relationships. The initial survey results nevertheless suggest that the two speaking courses have successfully facilitated the development of English communication skills in the learners concerned, with the easier small-group discussion activities serving as scaffolding to strengthen their motivation and confidence, leaving them better prepared for the more challenging presentation activities that followed.

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Appendix

English Discussion and Debate

Semester 1 Student Feedback Survey

Please answer the questions below about the first semester of the *Discussion and Debate* course. The results will help me to improve the course in future semesters. (This survey is anonymous, so please answer all questions honestly!)

1. How helpful was each of the course aspects below for the improvement of your English speaking skills? (0 = not helpful at all ... 3 = very helpful)

a) presentation skills videos and worksheets	0	1	2	3
b) small group discussions	0	1	2	3
c) front-of-class speeches (1-2 minutes)	0	1	2	3
d) final presentation (5 minutes + Q&A)	0	1	2	3

2.1 How much did you enjoy the course so far? 0 1 2 3
(0 = did not enjoy it at all ... 3 = enjoyed it very much)

2.2 Are there any particular parts of the course that you enjoyed very much or did not enjoy at all? Please provide details where possible.

3.1 How difficult did you find the course so far? 0 1 2 3 4
(0 = very easy, 1 = quite easy, 2 = just right, 3 = quite hard, 4 very hard)

3.2 Are there any particular parts of the course that were too easy or too hard?

4. Do you have any further comments on how the course could be improved?

Thank you for your feedback!