

Enhancing English Speaking Skills through Self-Assessment-Based Action Research

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Abstract

This paper presents an action research study conducted in an English communicative course at a Chilean university. This investigation aimed to improve university students' speaking skills through the self-assessment methodology. The intervention was held during four weeks, in which participants were exposed to English through task-based lessons that required their systematic self-assessment to develop their speaking skills. With the use of an analytic rubric to measure whether or not there was improvement in pre and post oral interviews, a learning journal and a focus group interview, findings showed that there was a positive change in their speaking performances, and learners appreciated this methodology as a way to improve their academic results.

Key words: self-assessment, awareness, speaking, English language, action research.

Mejoramiento de las habilidades de expresión oral en inglés mediante la investigación-acción sustentada en la autoevaluación

Resumen

Este artículo presenta una investigación-acción realizada en un curso de inglés comunicativo en una universidad chilena. El objetivo del estudio fue mejorar las habilidades de expresión oral de los estudiantes mediante la metodología de la auto-evaluación. La intervención tuvo una duración de cuatro semanas en las cuales los participantes estuvieron expuestos al inglés mediante clases basadas en tareas que requirieron una constante autoevaluación para el desarrollo de su habilidad de expresión oral. Se utilizó una rúbrica analítica para medir si es que hubo mejoras en las entrevistas pre y post, una bitácora de aprendizaje y un grupo focal. Los resultados mostraron que hubo un cambio positivo en sus desempeños orales y que los estudiantes apreciaron esta metodología como una forma de mejorar sus resultados académicos.

Palabras clave: auto-evaluación, conciencia, expresión oral, lengua inglesa, investigación-acción.

Introduction

As English has become a worldwide language, learning how to speak it is a must now for most people around the globe, especially for students who are not born in English speaking countries, in which the foreign language is seen as a very important professional skill, and educational systems work hard to implement foreign language curriculums that are not always successful in allowing learners to really master the language. Aware of this situation, a private university in Concepción, Chile, developed an online multimedia platform, in which students from most majors in their first or second year, have access to practice all four English language skills: speaking, reading, writing and listening, as part of their curriculum. This English online course is not yet compulsory to all majors in the university, because it is currently financially impossible.

Speaking is the skill that the English Online Programme focuses on in more detail. The main aim of the course is to provide students with the necessary tools to help them communicate in English as fluently as possible, managing appropriate vocabulary, intonation, and grammar. Students should be able to comprehend and produce the language in a natural, contextualised way. Oral interviews are part of this English course and are conducted at three different stages: initial, midterm and final. The last two oral interviews are graded, 25% and 35% of their final course load, respectively. 20% is awarded to written online quizzes and the remaining 20% is assigned to oral recordings students submit through the platform, which can be rehearsed and recorded as many times as they want before the submission of the final draft to be graded. The course modules are divided into four levels, following *The Common European Framework* scale starting from the A1 level and finishing in B2.

However, many of these university students have failed to accomplish the minimum requirements to pass from one module to another; therefore, they cannot move from A1 to the higher levels. Students have stated that this is because they do not know how they are assessed; they claim they have not received feedback about their performance, and/or simply because they have never understood the requirements needed in order to achieve satisfactory results to be promoted from one level to another. Unaware of how the speaking assessment process works, students keep failing the course. In some cases, students have had to take the course even three times. In some other worse scenarios, some students have had to drop their majors, since the university policy allows them to fail any subject only a maximum of three times.

The university in which this action research was conducted has twenty-five thousand students and it offers classes to diverse majors. Most of these students come from different parts of the country. Their English proficiency level is measured when they have to take the English course, since the Chilean reality is extremely different, depending on their secondary studies. Few students come to the university with a reasonably good English level, and most of them do not recognise the very basic language commands.

Chilean education distinguishes three types of educational establishments at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels: public, semi-public and private. Several official reports have claimed that these three levels are unfortunately associated with education quality. Private education is almost always the one that achieves the best academic results in terms of national exams, and the number of students who successfully enter higher education.

Universities receive students who come from all three public, semi-public and private sectors, which translates into having students who have different language levels. Once again those learners who come from semi-public and private education tend to be the ones who have better entrance English levels and, therefore, seem to achieve better results in their university studies. That is why all learners have to initially go through a diagnostic process to place them in the right level, and specifically support those students whose entrance oral performance in English is weak.

Not all the students of the university have this course as a compulsory requirement of their majors. Yet, all of the university majors will eventually include it as mandatory. That is why we chose one of the classes in which there is mixture of majors; most of them belong to Engineering. These students show great enthusiasm towards learning English, and all of them have a basic language level, that is why they are so eager to learn. They all recognise how valuable to master a second language will be once they graduate. They all agreed that, despite the fact that this could be hard for them, learning English would be beneficial for their future professional careers. On this line, the self-assessment methodology seemed appealing for them. Since they showed great willingness to learn, being aware of their learning and assessment process became something urgent to them as well.

Self-assessment can be offered as an opportunity to understand the quality requirements involved in a specific speaking task, especially for students who claim to be confused about the assessment criteria used when giving their oral interviews. In this action research, learners will be required to assess themselves in order to raise awareness of their own learning process and thus improve their academic results by the end of the course. To conduct this self-assessment intervention, students were offered mock interview sessions after mid-terms. They were asked to record themselves, and self-assess based on a self-assessment rubric. Teacher guidance and feedback were offered throughout this study. This paper is in the context of the research grant FONDECYT 1191021 entitled *Estudio correlacional y propuesta de intervención en evaluación del aprendizaje del inglés: las dimensiones cognitiva, afectiva y social del proceso evaluativo del idioma extranjero*.

Theoretical Framework

Language Assessment

Many teachers confuse the term grading with the term assessment. This usually happens because sometimes assessing leads to a grade. According to Martínez del Campo (2013), assessment goes beyond grading, and it presents itself as a procedural phenomenon of the students' development. To assess, teachers do not necessarily need to grade their students. The main goal of assessing students is to gather information to check if in the process of learning, they have acquired all the knowledge, skills and attitudes they are supposed to.

Martínez del Campo (2013) states that there are three different phases in the process of assessing a student. The first stage involves a systematic gathering of information about the student's performance. The second stage is where the teacher gets all the information possible that would help him or her determine the student's progress and flaws, which would allow teachers to take action in order to improve and facilitate the student's learning. Dur-