



Perceptions of ESL Students on Group Presentations as an Assessment Tool

I.N.J. Bogamuwa* and N.K. Abeysekera

Department of Language Studies, The Open University of Sri Lanka, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka

**Corresponding author: Email: inbog@ou.ac.lk*

1 INTRODUCTION

Group work is an essential academic aspect of tertiary education, especially at the beginner level, as it acts as a platform upon which students' interactive skills can be developed while minimizing their sense of isolation. Although in many instances team based learning and assessment are under-utilized in distance learning, when designed with a valid purpose combined with explicit rubrics and marking guidelines, it can be beneficial to students as well as academics. By utilizing group work in assessment, students' graduate attributes are developed while allowing assessment of their generic skills in addition to subject knowledge (Centre for the Study of Higher Education, 2002). Moreover, group assignments and presentations are recognized as important learning experiences for students as they are valuable transferable skills for higher level academic activities and work place demands (Madden and Keogan, 2014).

The current study examines the perceptions of students of English as a Second Language (ESL) on the effectiveness of group presentations as an assessment tool in terms of the learning experience and engagement, and their views on the fairness of the assessment. Moreover, it explores the students' suggestions for further improvement in group presentations as an assessment tool.

2 METHODOLOGY

The current study is primarily based on data collected from the students registered for the Diploma in English Language and Literature (DELL) Programme in 2016/17, which consists of six courses covering basic language and literature components in English. The course Advanced Grammar and Communication Skills aims to prepare students for higher academic study at tertiary level or work place demands by developing their written and spoken communication skills. The current study is based on feedback gathered after conducting group presentations as a method of formative assessment. The total number of students (112) were distributed into 14 groups with 8 in each. During the preparatory session prior to group presentations the students were made aware of the evaluating rubrics to ensure fairness and transparency of the assessment. The time allocated for each presentation was 15 minutes and instructions were provided to conduct the presentations using posters. Since the current study is descriptive in nature a questionnaire with a 4-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (4) was administered to them at the end of the group presentation. In addition, post presentation group discussions were held. Out of 95 questionnaires 86 were completed and returned. The responses from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics (SPSS 18 package).



The frequency distribution, percentages and Mean values were calculated in order to analyze the perceptions of the students on preparation for and assessment on group presentations. The data were analyzed using basic thematic reduction around the following themes: efficacy and contribution of peer learning, effectiveness and fairness, group member contribution, effectiveness of presentations versus written assessment, transferability of group working and presentation skills, previous experience and suggestions for improvement. The demographic details of the sample are represented in Table 1.

According to Biggs and Tang (2007, p. 219) “The common practice of simply awarding an overall grade for the outcome, which each student receives, fails on all counts”. Thus, assessment criteria for the group presentations in the current study had allotted marks for individual contribution and performance as well as overall group performance.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Question 1: To what extent do students feel that preparation for and assessment at group presentations help them in learning?

According to the Table 02 all students agreed that preparation for group presentations helped them in learning subject content. The majority (79%) either agreed or strongly agreed that preparation for group presentations was more challenging and time consuming than a written assignment whereas 21% disagreed. The majority (77.9%) felt that learning was more effective in group presentations than in written assessment (22.1%). Further, 94.2% agreed that effective contribution towards peer learning took place in group presentations while 5.8% disagreed. When considering the Mean values of all the above attributes it shows that the majority of the DELL students had a positive view on efficacy of group assessment and contribution of peers towards learning.

Question 2: To what extent do students prefer preparing for group presentations?

With regard to the preparation for the group presentations, the majority had strongly agreed or agreed that it was more enjoyable and sociable (95.3%) while 87.2% had preferred to prepare for a group presentation than an individual presentation (Table 3). At the same time the majority (93%) had strongly agreed or agreed that they were satisfied with the group member contribution revealing that the students’ motivation and commitment in collaborative work was high. The Mean values also indicate that DELL students had a very positive view regarding the preparation and group member contribution

Question 3: To what extent are students satisfied with the level of transparency and effectiveness of group presentations as an assessment tool?

The Mean values of Table 4 show that these students were very optimistic on the effectiveness and fairness of group assessments as an assessment tool since the majority had either agreed or strongly agreed that the marking rubrics used was fair and effective (98.8%) and transparent (96.5%). Thus, it is clear that these students were satisfied with the level of fairness and transparency and the objectivity of the assessment.

Question 4: To what extent do students prefer group presentations as an assessment tool?

In relation to Table 5, the majority (87.2%) preferred group presentations than individual presentations while 57% either agreed or strongly agreed that facing group presentation is less stressful than facing a written assessment. However, only 57% agreed or strongly agreed that facing group presentation is less stressful than facing a written assessment and the Mean value (2.63) also does not show a strong positive view in this regard.

Question 5: To what extent do students recognize the transferability of group working and presentation skills?

According to Table 6, the value of transferability of group work and presentation skills in meeting higher level academic activities and work place demands successfully was strongly recognized by these students as the Mean value (3.84) indicates a strong positive views on this attribute.

Information gathered through interviews revealed that 50% of students had prior experience of group presentations at various stages such as school and professional courses.

Their overall view on group presentations reflected a variety of comments such as it provided the opportunity to “share ideas and knowledge”, “get to know each other”, “built confidence to conduct a successful presentation” and “identify

one’s skills, talents and potentials”. Further, they were of the opinion that preparation for group presentations motivated and improved soft skills and team spirit. Although some commented on the challenging nature of group presentations they also acknowledged that it was interesting and effective and was “the best tool to assess communication skills”. Nevertheless, some students stated preparation for group presentations proved to be difficult for distance learners especially due to the number of members in the group.

In response to suggestions for improvement in group presentations as an assessment tool the majority commented on the time allocation for preparation and presentation. Some proposed the use of Power Point as the media of presentations, especially those with prior experience. Some claimed that more consideration on individual contribution may improve it.

Table 1: Demographic details of the participants (Frequency and amp; %)

Entry qualification		Gender		Age			First Language			
Selection Test 65 (75.6)	Ad. Certificate in English 21 (24.4)	Female 69 (80.2)	Male 17 (19.8)	18-35 63 (73.2)	36-55 20 (23.2)	56 ≤ 03 (3.5)	S 73 (84.9)	T 12 (14.0)	E 00 --	Other 01 (1.2)

Table 2: Efficacy of group assessment and contribution of peers towards learning

Description	Responses (no of observations and %)				Mean value
	1: SD	2: D	3: A	4: SA	
Preparation helped me to learn Grammar and Communication Skills	00 (--)	00 (--)	47 (54.7)	39 (45.3)	3.45
Preparation was more challenging and consumed more time than a written assignment	01 (1.2)	17 (19.8)	39 (45.3)	29 (33.7)	3.12
Assessment in group presentations is better than written assessment in terms of learning effectiveness	02 (2.3)	17 (19.8)	41 (47.7)	26 (30.2)	3.06
Effective contribution towards peer learning took place in group presentations	02 (2.3)	03 (3.5)	35 (40.7)	46 (53.5)	3.45

Table 3: Preparation and group member contribution

Description	Responses (no of obs. and %)				Mean value
	1: SD	2: D	3: A	4: SA	
Preparation was more enjoyable and sociable than a written assignment	01 (1.2)	03 (3.5)	24 (27.9)	58 (67.4)	3.62
I prefer to prepare for a group presentation than an individual presentation	03 (3.5)	08 (9.3)	38 (44.2)	37 (43.0)	3.27
I am satisfied with the contribution towards the workload by other group members	00 (--)	06 (7.0)	28 (32.6)	52 (60.4)	3.53

Table 4: Effectiveness and fairness of group assessments

Description	Responses (no of obs. and %)				Mean value
	1: SD	2: D	3: A	4: SA	
In my opinion group presentation is preferable to individual presentation as an assessment tool	02 (2.3)	09 (10.5)	47 (54.7)	28 (32.5)	3.17
Facing an assessment in group presentations is less stressful than facing a written assessment	08 (9.3)	29 (33.7)	36 (41.9)	13 (15.1)	2.63

Table 5: Preference for group presentations

Description	Responses (no of obs. and %)				Mean value
	1: SD	2: D	3: A	4: SA	
In my opinion: the marking criteria/rubrics used for assessing presentation skills – fair and effective	00 (--)	01 (1.2)	53 (61.6)	32 (37.2)	3.36
In my opinion: the marking criteria/rubrics used for assessing presentation skills - transparent	00 (--)	03 (3.5)	50 (58.1)	33 (38.4)	3.35

Table 6: Perception of the transferability of group working and presentation skills

Description	Responses (no of obs. and %)				Mean value
	1: SD	2: D	3: A	4: SA	
Developing group work and presentation skills will be useful in workplace/academic situations	00 (--)	00 (--)	14 (16.3)	72 (83.7)	3.84

1: Strongly Disagree, 2: Disagree, 3: Agree and 4: Strongly Agree

4 CONCLUSIONS

The current study reveals that the majority of the DELL students had a positive view on the efficacy of group assessment, contribution of peers towards learning as well as preparation and group member contribution. These revelations support the idea that when utilized for assessment, group work benefits students and teachers in developing graduate attributes and generic skills such as teamwork, analytical and cognitive, collaborative, organizational and time management skills (CSHE, 2002). Furthermore, they were very optimistic on the effectiveness, fairness and transparency of group assessments as an assessment tool. This is particularly important since pre-grouping, monitoring of initial preparations and discussions of assessment criteria and rubrics took place prior to the group presentations. The majority preferred group assessments than individual presentations as well as written assessments because they found that group presentations were less stressful though challenging and time consuming. This proves that group assessment ensures that learning and assessment are more public and accountTable while making assessment more efficient. Since all the students had recognized the transferability of group working and presentation skills it shows that this type of assessment is more authentic, being common practice in work and professional settings. Although this methodology is underutilized as an assessment tool in ODL sphere group assessment provides an opportunity for distance learners to work collaboratively while encouraging effective peer learning. In addition to that, group assessment output can reduce the assessment workload of examiners although it requires substantial time for planning and preparing students. In general, listening and speaking skills in a second language are neglected in assessment due to practical issues. Hence, group presentations can be recommended as an effective remedy.

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