



ASSESSING THE PUBLIC SPEAKING SKILLS OF VIRTUAL ESL LEARNERS USING ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES

K.A.D. Sandamali*

*Department of Secondary and Tertiary Education, The Open University of Sri Lanka,
Sri Lanka*

INTRODUCTION

Public speaking skills are crucial to be developed among learners at school level, and it enables learners to express their ideas to the public (Do and Dang, 2012). Public speaking is a process, an act in delivering speeches before an audience (Nikitina, 2011). There are various benefits of improving the public speaking skills of students. It trains the students to think critically, fine-tune verbal and non-verbal skills, and overcome the fear of public speaking (Paradewari, 2017). Prior to the Covid 19 pandemic, teachers organized various events in the school such as English Literary Association events, English Day competitions, Morning Assembly, Classroom Speaking Contests, and Speaking Clubs with the purpose of improving the public speaking skills of learners. Their public speaking skills were assessed based on how they performed at such events. However, such conventional methods of assessing public speaking skills were disrupted with school closures due to the sudden outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic. As a result, teachers were expected to find alternative methods to practice and assess public speaking skills in a virtual classroom. The alternative assessment strategies that are integrated with digital online tools can be implemented to fill the gap created by the Covid 19 pandemic.

According to Reeves (2000), there are three main strategies to integrate alternative assessments into online settings: cognitive assessment, performance assessment, and portfolio assessment. In this study, a performance assessment is used consisting of two major concepts. These two major concepts are performance (the product is used to assess the student's active generation of a response that is observable either directly or indirectly) and authentic (where the task is related to the real world) (Elliott, 1995). Brown and Hudson (1998) state that alternative assessments are mostly accepted in English Language Teaching for language testing practices as they are different from the testing practices predominant in other fields.

The focus of this study is to plan and implement an alternative assessment to assess the public speaking skills of ESL learners as well as to assess the alternative assessment's suitability for improving the public speaking skills. The objectives of this study were to identify the need for using alternative assessment strategies to assess the public speaking skills in a virtual classroom, plan an alternative assessment, implement the planned alternative assessment, and assess the suitability of the implemented alternative assessment.

The researcher observed that the ESL learners have less opportunities to engage in public speaking in most online ESL classrooms. Even though some ESL teachers assess public speaking skills of learners in the virtual ESL classroom, most learners showed fewer performances as they had not participated in public speaking events physically due to the school closures. Therefore, it was needed to find alternative assessment strategies to assess the public speaking skills of online ESL learners.

METHODOLOGY

This study is an action research. Action research differs from other forms of research in that it is more obstinate about changing particular teachers' or practitioners' practices to solve



everyday problems in the school and classroom, while aiming at improving both student learning and teacher effectiveness (Hoover, 2013). First, structured interviews were conducted to understand about the learner perceptions on public speaking and the assessment methods of public speaking skills. The background information collected through these observations and structured interviews stressed the importance of planning an alternative assessment to assess the public speaking skills of the learners.

The sample of the research is 15 students in grade 7 who were purposively selected from a school in the Dehiowita Division. Different techniques such as observations, structured interviews, reflective journal entries, and the assessment itself were used as data collection tools.

First, the ESL learners were assigned speeches on familiar topics with which they were familiar, and marks were allocated for the speeches (product). At the beginning of the intervention, three workshops were conducted on improving the public speaking skills of the ESL learners, as well as a planned an assignment task aligned with what has been taught. In this study, the Assessment for Learning (AFL) approach was implemented. Gipps et al. (2000) state that this is an approach to teaching and learning where feedback is used in the teaching process, allowing students or groups to redefine the task, further practice it, and move to the next stage by improving their performance.

A checklist was created for the purpose of marking and the scoring criteria was shared with the learners before engaging them in the assignment. The assigned tasks in the alternative assessment can be stated as follows.

- Task 1: Write a description on a familiar topic in Padlet.
- Task 2: Paste the pictures and videos related to the topic in Padlet.
- Task 3: Peer evaluations. (Comment and rate others' descriptions in Padlet).
- Task 4: Moderate the description based on the comments and feedback from peers.
- Task 5: Deliver the speech in the virtual classroom (Product).
- Task 6: Self-reflection on their speech and the process while practicing the speech.

Marks were allocated for students for each task. Padlet was integrated as a digital tool to provide a collaborative approach toward the alternative assessment. Learners were given the opportunity to develop their public speaking skills through peer evaluations/feedbacks and self-reflections. Feedback is seen to contribute to language learning (Sahyoni, 2018), and it is important to the learning process as it indicates to the teacher students' progress, while motivating students to learn, guiding them to achieve progress, and showing them their progress (Do & Dang, 2012). The data gathered through the observations, structured interviews, and self-reflections were analyzed qualitatively while the test marks were analyzed quantitatively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The necessity of conducting alternative assessments was identified through the observations and structured interviews of this study. The observations revealed that public speaking is given less attention in virtual classrooms and students were less motivated to speak. The analysis of the data gathered through the structured interviews, conducted with 15 students, can be summarized as follows.

1. Less attention is paid towards improving the public speaking skills of ESL learners in the virtual classroom.
2. When the learners deliver a speech, marks are allocated to them. but they are not given criteria that was used to allocate marks.



3. No collaborative approach is used when engaging in public speaking.
4. ESL learners do not get an opportunity to reflect on their speeches, and to understand their strengths and weaknesses.
5. Speech anxiety is high in the virtual classroom because the learners feel that their speeches are heard by not only their classmates, but also outsiders as they join the class from their homes.
6. Connection loss and network issues become a hinderance to the public speaking in a virtual classroom.

Based on the data revealed through the observations and structured interviews, it is obvious that the alternative assessment strategies can be implemented to assess the public speaking skills of ESL learners in virtual classrooms as an alternative method.

The marks of the first speaking test and the alternative assessment are presented in Figure 1.

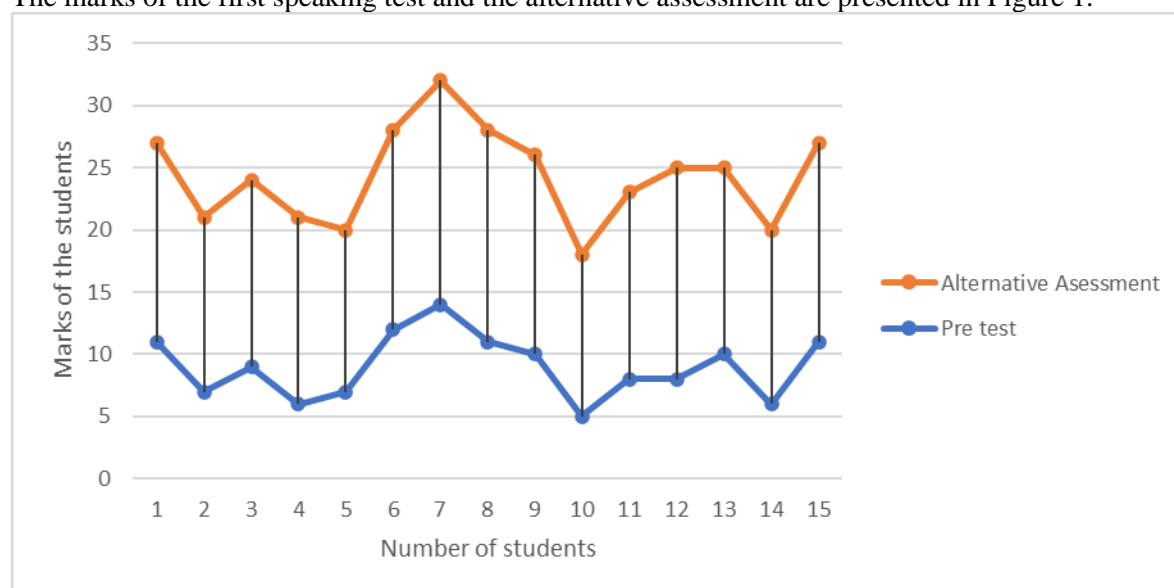


Figure 1: Marks received for the pretest and the alternative assessment.

Figure 1 shows that most of the ESL learners have obtained fewer marks for their performance at the pretest. However, they have showed a considerable improvement in their public speaking skills after engaging in the alternative assessment as they obtained marks not only for the end product (speech), but also for the process of practicing their speech.

The reflective journal entries reveal that the students were able to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their speeches through this process. For eg. one student had said

“It was a great experience for me to deliver a speech after going through a process. In the process, I was able to correct my grammatical errors with the feedback given by my peers. Therefore, I delivered my speech without any fear.”

Most of the learners appreciated the collaborative approach that integrated Padlet with their learning. It was a new experience for them to work with Padlet, which involved commenting, rating peer writings, and correcting them. The attractive interface, videos, and pictures motivated them to read and comment on the writings. For eg. a learner said



“I did not have any speech anxiety as I was sure about my speech after moderating it with the comments of the peers and practicing it well”.

This shows that alternative assessments can be implemented to assess the public speaking skills of ESL learners while decreasing their speech anxiety which negatively affects their personality. These statements reveal that the alternative assessment contributed to making the learners reflective practitioners.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

This study reveals that alternative assessment strategies can be successfully implemented to assess the public speaking skills of ESL learners in a virtual classroom. When the learners' capabilities are assessed through a process, they are able to understand their weaknesses, and strengths as well as their values and beliefs related to public speaking. Speech anxiety is generally a hindrance for public speakers. Alternative assessments are useful to decrease the speech anxiety in ESL learners as they get an opportunity to develop their speeches step by step until the final speech (product). Peer evaluations also play a major role in the success of alternative assessments for public speaking as there is a collaborative, learner-friendly environment for the learner to engage in the assessment. Learners are motivated to work towards their target by integrating digital tools such as Padlet,. Finally, they understand that every action they take within the process affects the quality of the product (final speech).

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