

Providing Interactive Feedback through Voicethread for Improving Presentation Skills: A Case Study at BITS Pilani Hyderabad Campus



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Introduction

Presentation skills form an important part of English in all professional courses. While it is acceptable that ESL teachers spend time on teaching presentation skills to their undergraduate/post-graduate students, providing individual feedback to each student is certainly not a common practice in India. Considering the large size of English for Specific / Academic/ Occupational/ Science and Technology classes in the country, it can be a daunting task. There has been some effort to address feedback-related problems in large classrooms. However, very few studies have reported the effectiveness of suggested strategies. Therefore, the current study is justified. It tries to trace the effectiveness of interactive feedback provided through Voicethread, a simple web 2.0 tool, and its impact on presentation skills of students.

The Research Context

The study was carried out at Birla institute of Technology and Science (BITS) Pilani, Hyderabad Campus. The researcher, who is a faculty member there, experimented with Voicethread while teaching an optional

course titled “Advanced Communicative English” to a class of 70 B. Tech. and M. Sc. students. Since it was a course comprising all four major language skills, only two classes could be devoted towards teaching presentation skills. The researcher also faced a few challenges while trying to assess students’ performance in making presentations. First, it was not possible on the part of the researcher to let every student make a complete presentation in the class. Second, it was almost impossible to offer feedback to each student on their presentation skills. Moreover, the challenge of monitoring how students utilize the given feedback to improve their presentation skills was overwhelming. To address all the above mentioned problems, the researcher decided to use Voicethread.

Review of Literature

According to Vygotsky (1978), effective learning happens through interaction and participation. Feedback, which is one of the most important facilitating tools in learning, also needs to be interactive in nature (Gass&Varonis, 1994). Then, since any interactional feedback is offered in reaction to students’ errors and involves some amount

of interaction, it can be considered “a kind of communicative corrective feedback” (Nassaji, 2015, p. 2). However, feedback should go beyond errors and incorporate comments on the student’s overall performance. In higher education, especially in places where students are proactive and capable of offering constructive feedback to their peers, it is important to develop students’ ability to self-regulate (Nicol, 2013, p. 41), which can be initiated through learner training in using feedback (Mahapatra, 2015). It has been also pointed out by Cho and MacArthur (2010) that students benefit more when they get feedback from multiple peers than only a single peer or a teacher.

Though the above mentioned review establishes the effectiveness of interactional feedback, there is a need to address the difficulties an ESL teacher usually faces in a large classroom (Ramadevi, 2002), which are common across institutes of professional learning in India. One of the strategies to deal with a large classroom is to use technology, which, in general, is an excellent aid to learning (Beatty, Gerace, Leonard & Dufresne, 2006). Among the popular learning technology available to most teachers, web 2.0 tools have been found quite productive in promoting collaborative and interactive language learning (Stevenson and Liu, 2010). Such collaboration and interaction are much more necessary when it comes to learning speaking and listening skills. Further, oral feedback is necessary for enhancing oral skills, and according to Hsu, Wang and Comac (2008), audio feedback can be an

effective tool to promote listening and speaking skills. Thus, using web 2.0 tools, which facilitate providing audio feedback along with feedback through other modes, can be used for teaching presentation skills in large classes. However, there is very little evidence to support the claim regarding the effectiveness of these feedback strategies in large classes (Shamim&Kuchah, 2016).

Methodology

A case study approach was adopted for the study as the researcher wanted to carry out the study in a natural setting. It also helped in understanding the entire process of how feedback is offered, received, evaluated and used. The effectiveness of Voicethread as a feedback tool was assessed using an adapted version of “individualized posttest studies” (Nassaji, 2015, p.119). A record of the interactions vis-a-vis improvements in individual skills involved in a presentation was maintained for each student.

The study tried to address the following questions:

- How effective is the use of Voicethread as a feedback tool for improving students’ presentation skills?
- How does Voicethread facilitate feedback-based interaction among the teacher and learners?

Sample

The entire class of an English language skills course formed the case for the study. Purposeful sampling procedure was adopted to select the case, which was also convenient

in nature, as the researcher was the only teacher handling the course. The class comprised around 70 students from various branches of B. Tech. and M. Sc.

Methods of Data Collection

The following methods were used for collecting data for the study:

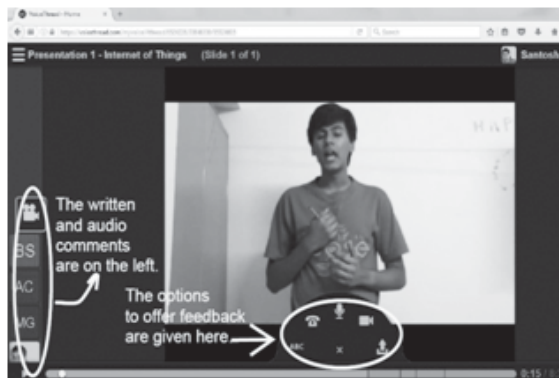
- **Voicethread:** On this web 2.0 tool, audio/video/images can be shared with people and audio/video/written comments can be posted on any shared item. This was the only tool used for discussing the students' presentations and sharing feedback on them.
- **Observations:** The students' presentations were observed and a descriptive record of progress was

maintained for each student.

- **Interview:** Only ten students were informally interviewed. The interview was semi-structured. The aim was to elicit the students' experiences with the use of Voicethread.

Data Collection

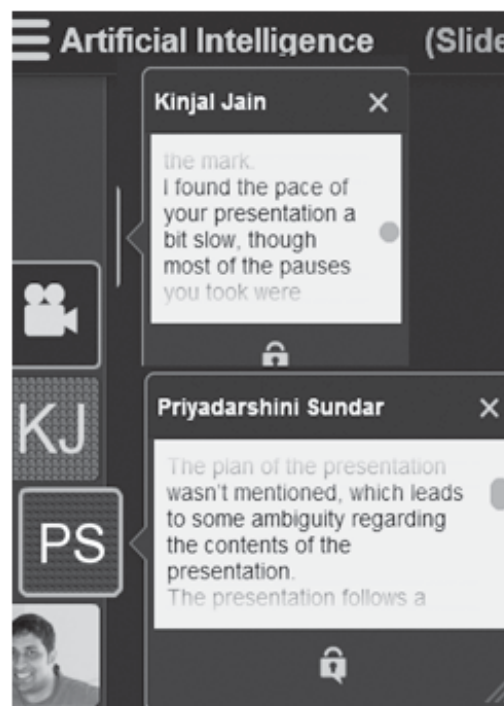
The collection of data for the study was started with training the learners to use Voicethread. As they had been already taught in the classroom how to make a good presentation, they were asked to make a presentation on a topic related to their core area of study, upload the same to Voicethread and share with three classmates. The following figures are screenshots of students' presentations on Voicethread.



(Figure 1)



(Figure 2)



(Figure 3)

The students were asked to comment on three aspects of their peers' presentation: organization, i. e., the introduction-body-conclusion structure, focus, i. e., to what extent they adhere to the topic in hand, language use and presentation decorum, which includes factors such as body language and visual aids. The teacher's comments, which followed peers' comments, concentrated on making the student think about and evaluate his/her peers' comments and getting everyone to reflect on his/her own presentation. After going through the feedback provided by the peers and the teacher, the student is expected to write a short response in which one has to specify what changes he/she plans to incorporate to improve the next presentation. Then, the student had to make the second presentation, upload on Voicethread and explain through a comment how he/she has made use of the feedback given on his first presentation. The researcher observed both the presentations and maintained a record of all the comments too. After the students made their second presentation, their progress was assessed individually after evaluating the comments and explanations. Information about students' experience of using Voicethread was collected through interviews with ten students who voluntarily

came forward to share their thoughts with the researcher.

Findings

How effective is the use of Voicethread as a feedback tool for improving students' presentation skills??

The use of Voicethread helped the students become more self-aware and self-critical. Most of them pointed out areas of improvement that were not found in the feedback comments. In the case of around 30 students, improvements were observed in all the specified areas, i. e., organization, focus, language use and presentation decorum. In other cases, students utilised feedback on aspects, which they thought they lacked, and defended themselves against a few comments. The researcher instructed the students to analyse all the comments and reflect on them while making their second presentation. Further, the explanation, which each student had to present after the second presentation, was quite helpful because most of the students went through the given comments thoroughly and looked into their own presentations carefully before preparing their explanation. A sample interaction is presented below:

Comments by Classmates after First Presentation	Teacher's Feedback (transcription of the audio script)	Student's Response	Explanation of the Student after the S e c o n d Presentation
<p>S1: <i>I thought you began well. But you did not talk about the plan of your presentation, which made me clueless about what to expect. The topic "Internet of Things" was quite interesting and I had a whole of new information. Your pronunciation and general use of language was more or less error-free. However, you pumped more energy than required into the presentation. Well, that should be toned down and you need to work a little on your pace of delivery. I found it a little too fast.</i></p> <p>S2: <i>I liked that anecdote-beginning. But add the plan next to it and follow the plan. The conclusion was hurriedly drawn. Take care of that. The topic is ok. I have issues with how you moved from one sub-topic to the next. The connection was missing. You have no problems with pronunciation and sentence formation. What you need to do is to go a little slow and make it a little more interesting with your delivery and style of presentation. The PPT looked great. All the best!</i></p>	<p>I went through your presentation carefully and felt that it was a good attempt. There are areas you need to work on and in others, you have done fairly well. It won't be difficult for you to point them out. What do you think about your classmates' comments? How do you plan to address them? Make a list of the aspects, which need improvement and after you make your next presentation, use that list as a checklist. All the best!</p>	<p><i>Sir, I found a lot of common observations between the comments of S1 and S2. I totally agree that I missed the plan. Regarding maintaining coherence, I am thinking about how to bridge the gaps. I was a little ashamed that I was going overboard with my pumped gesture. Seriously, I need to relax a little and maintain a better gesture.</i></p> <p><i>My list:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>1. Plan</i> <i>2. Maintaining coherence</i> <i>3. Composure and gesture</i> <i>4. Conclusion</i> 	<p>I'm sure my second presentation looks better than the first one. I have added a plan and followed it closely. It also worked in overcoming the gaps between sub-sections. I look more relaxed and pleasant. Though I tried to improve my conclusion, it still looks a little clichéd. I need to keep practicing to make more interesting presentations because I watched some made by my classmates. They are much better than mine. They look much more natural.</p>

How does Voicethread facilitate feedback-based interaction among the teacher and learners?

If the interaction that is described in the above mentioned table is compared with a hypothetical classroom situation in which the teacher along with other students comment on a student's presentation, the advantages Voicethread offers become very prominent. Firstly, in a typical college classroom situation, it is almost impossible to find time to discuss presentations made by every student. Secondly, the teacher and students may find it difficult to remember what each student did in his/her previous presentation and compare it with his/her second or ongoing presentation. In contrast, interaction on Voicethread is focused and productive. In addition, the presenter has access to all the comments, and there is scope of making more than one attempt to come up with a better presentation, which most students did in the current study. It offered them not only practice but also scope to self-regulate. Thirdly, the teacher did not have to comment specifically on anything for every student. He/she can be a facilitator and monitor the interaction, which can save his/her time. Lastly, the students found the platform innovative and interesting. They thought that feedback offered by the peers and the points raised by the teacher had enabled them to reflect on their presentations.

Discussion

The findings of the study indicate that using Voicethread can be an effective strategy for

teaching and offering feedback on presentation skills, especially for large classes. The use of Voicethread, a web. 2.0 tool, made the process of learning student-driven, and thus, more effective, which supports the claims made by Beatty, Gerace, Leonar and Dufresne(2007) and Stevenson and Liu(2010). On the one hand, the researcher did not spend much time offering feedback, on the other hand, the students had direct access to the feedback virtually anywhere they wanted. In addition, they had time to go through the comments and their own presentation at their convenience. Moreover, the interaction with multiple peers and the teacher gave rise to a fruitful discussion. Of course, some learner-training was necessary, but most of the learners became more 'self-regulatory' (Boud& Molloy, 2013) through the duration of the study.

Another important factor is that on Voicethread, feedback was offered in the form of audio, video and written texts. This attempt goes beyond the assertion made by Hsu, Wang and Comac (2008) regarding the effectiveness of audio comments. More empirical enquiries are required to look into the impact of different modes.

Conclusion and Future Research

The study, which experimented with Voicethread as an interactive feedback tool for improving students' presentation skills, was only a case study. Even though the findings suggest that Voicethread can be used as an effective strategic tool for offering individual feedback to large classes, they

can be generalized for a larger population only with a few clauses. First, using Voicethread entails having access to personal computer and internet, which is still not very common across all college students in India. Then, the teacher has to familiarize him/herself with the use of the tool. The last of the clauses has to do with the motivation of the teacher and the students, which was very high in case of the current study. However, the current trend in the use of technology looks favourable and more teachers and students are expected to have access to personal computers and internet in the near future. Large scale studies are necessary to examine the impact of the modes of feedback on learning outcomes. Another important area that needs attention is how feedback shapes self-regulation among students.

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