



Self-Assessment to Improve Speaking Skills

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One of the biggest challenges EFL teachers might face in their profession is get their learners to talk in English using an acceptable level of accuracy for grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and fluency. It is definitely not a straightforward task. It takes a lot effort from both teachers and apprentices. At the end of the third term, A1 and A2 level recruits from the third term from the Ecuadorian Navy should be able to maintain simple oral exchanges in English by using the tenses they have been studying. In addition, they have to use the vocabulary and the collocations studied in the course as well as possess an intelligible pronunciation and fluency when they speak. However, they are having some difficulties with the use of these tenses and vocabulary when they talk in English. They struggle a lot when they try to maintain a dialogue transferred from the unit contents to real life scenarios. They cannot use the proper words or grammatical phrases to fully express their ideas.

After observing all the deficiencies these pupils were having when they tried to have oral production, the teacher implemented the self-assessment technique to help them overcome those difficulties to communicate among themselves or with the teacher. The implementation of this innovation lasted two weeks. It took place during face to face classes with 34 young male adult learners from the Navy in Guayaquil, Ecuador.

Literature Review

This action research focuses on the implementation of the self-assessment technique and how it strengthens the oral performance in an EFL classroom. The following section shows related theories about it.

Speaking

When a person is able to produce oral meaningful utterances in a language, they say that person speaks that language. This is the speaking skill or ability the person possesses. Nevertheless, speaking is not only talking in any language. It involves more aspects such as

the correct use of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, transaction, interaction, pragmatics, social and cultural rules (Kürüm, 2016). According to Kuśnierek (2015), speaking is the most important competence that a person should dominate when learning a new language. Another expert mentioned that:

Of all the four skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing), speaking seems intuitively the most important: people who know a language are referred to as ‘speakers’ of that language, as if speaking included all other kinds of knowing. And many, if not most, language learners are mainly interested in learning to communicate orally (Ur, 2012, p. 117).

Considering these authors, the researcher proposed a way to develop the speaking ability in students when learning or acquiring a new language. In order to achieve a correct performance of this skill, teachers must find a suitable strategy that stimulates learners to talk in English while they are in class. Responding to this necessity, some researchers agree that by applying self-assessment in the classroom, learners could enhance their oral communication.

Self-assessment

Self-assessment in education means the learners evaluating or reflecting about their own learning based on stated goals or criteria. They have to be able to recognize weaknesses and strengths for the purpose of improving their performance at the next level of learning (Rolheiser & Ross, 2001; Andrade & Du, 2007).

Why to apply self-assessment?

According to Alek et al. (2020), self-assessment is one of the different approaches to assess students’ speaking skills in English language. They concluded in their study that self-assessment helps increase future oral production as well as motivation. They also stated that it boosts oral communication between learners and teachers.

More benefits of applying self-assessment in a classroom are mentioned by other authors: students receive good feedback from the teacher related to their learning, it increases their autonomy, and they develop critical abilities to evaluate themselves. Additionally, students have the feeling that they can domain their own learning, it develops the value of responsibility in them, it helps them to eliminate the fear about the teacher being the only one who can judge their work, and finally it helps to improve their cognitive level (Jamrus & Razali, 2019, p.70). Another study revealed that self-assessment increased the level of proficiency in learners during the semester regarding to vocabulary, fluency, and confidence (De Saint Léger, 2009, p. 169).

Ways to use self-assessment effectively.

Rolheiser and Ross (2001) stated four stages to use self- assessment with students. First, teachers need to involve students in the elaboration of the criteria from the rubric for self-assessment. This will give both teachers and learners the opportunity to negotiate the criteria of their performance to have a balance between the school objectives and the student's preferences. Second, teachers need to show students how to apply the criteria they created to assess their own work. When students have been involved in the creation of the criteria, the results will be a combination of personal and school goals. If not, they need to be modelled by the teacher on how to use the criteria. Third, teachers have to give feedback about how learners applied the criteria. This feedback should come from the teacher to discuss and obtain better results in their self-assessments. Finally, teachers have to help students to create new goals for their learning and new levels of effort with the data of their current self-assessment.

Tran (2019) mentioned that to apply self-assessment effectively leaners need time to develop experience with this technique. He also stated that apprentices need to practice a variety of strategies to obtain feedback, training and guide for further learning. Finally, he

revealed that in one relevant study with 60 Iranian EFL learners, the self-assessment technique did improve the learners' speaking abilities.

Disadvantages of self-assessment.

According to Basak (2019), some factors should be considered by researchers for the application of the self-assessment technique. These are the students' age, gender, social or cultural background, motivation and their willingness to learn English. This means that if learners are influenced by any of these elements in a negative way, the results might not be positive.

Another researcher claimed that "self-assessment is not popular among educational institutions because: 1-students feel that assessment is the responsibility of teachers, 2-teachers are not yet ready to trust student's judgment and, 3- students lack the sufficient assessment skills" (Lee, 2016, as cited in Thawabieh, 2017, p.15).

Another study concluded that "good students tended to underrate themselves and that weaker students tended to overrate themselves" (Boud & Falchikov, 1989, as cited in Dochy et al., 1999, p. 334). This means that learners might grade themselves with higher or lower scores than they deserve. To avoid this situation, teachers have to guide them on how to evaluate themselves to be fair with their grades and make sure they can properly achieve the next level of learning.

Innovation

This innovation was applied to 34 young male adult learners of the third term from the Ecuadorian Navy. Their English level is between A1 and A2. It lasted two weeks. The classes were taught in a face to face modality.

The lesson plan consisted on a backward design. In the backward design, the final task is planned first to identify the desired results in the learning process. Then, the teacher determined the acceptable evidence for those results which was the checklist for the self-

assessment. Finally, the activities to be performed by learners to help them reach the objectives of the unit were planned. These activities were classified into acquisition, transfer or meaningful making and they were developed to acquire the vocabulary and grammar required for the unit. To support these activities the teacher used slides, banners, games, videos, audios, E-book, and the student's textbook. Additionally, the teacher applied the Gradual Release of Responsibilities (GRR) when working with the students to help them acquire autonomy in class which consisted first on demonstration of the task, then the guided instruction on the formative activities, after that; the collaborative work among the learners, and finally, the transfer where they had to work on their own.

The unit had four lessons and the summative evaluation which was the final task. Each lesson contained useful vocabulary to practice in everyday situations such as food, adjectives to describe food or activities, leisure, military courses, and colloquial phrases to greet and end conversations. In addition, the students practiced the structures required for the final task: Simple Present, Present Continuous, and Future Going to.

Before the unit, the recruits were instructed on how to self-assess. Then, they had a pretest that consisted on presenting a conversation in pairs related to future plans and the teacher recorded it. They self-assessed using a checklist and were given oral feedback by the teacher.

During the unit, the learners were given a new mentor chat about future plans everyday as a model to create a new one in pairs with the vocabulary and grammar studied through the activities in each lesson. Immediately after that, they presented their own dialogue, they self-assessed and received oral feedback from the teacher. At the end of the unit, the learners were given some minutes to organize the final oral task and present it. They self-assessed and the teacher recorded them and gave them oral feedback.

Research Methodology

The present study is an action research. An action research is defined as:

A process of steps used to collect and analyze information to increase our understanding or a topic or issue. At a general level, research consists of three steps:

1. Pose a question,
2. Collect data to answer the question
3. Present and answer to the question (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p.3).

This action research was conducted using quantitative and qualitative instruments to analyze how self-assessment of the students' dialogues (independent variable) improved their speaking skills (dependent variable).

Participants

This research was carried out with 34 Ecuadorian male students in the third term from the Ecuadorian Navy. The students' ages rank between 18 to 23 years old. It was conducted in face to face classes. Their English level goes from A1 (3 students) to A2 (31 students) according to the CEFR. The level of the students was determined by applying them an online English test at the Cambridge English Language Assessment page.

Instruments

Two experts in EFL validated the checklists and another expert in assessment validated the rubric for this action research. After that, the researcher used a pre and a posttest as instruments during the innovation. These two instruments answered the following research question: *to what extent will recruits improve their speaking skills with the implementation of the self-assessment technique?*

To have an overall concept about the impact of the implementation of the self-assessment technique in students, the teacher applied the direct observation of the learners' attitude toward the innovation. The observation was done class by class. The researcher

focused on the reaction of the students toward the innovation, if they looked comfortable or not by doing all the activities performed during the innovation and if they looked less afraid than before of speaking among themselves or in front of others. It helped to answer the following research question: *will the implementation of self-assessment technique increase the students' self-confidence when they speak English?*

The pretest took place before the unit. The students were asked to create a conversation in pairs related to their immediate future plans based on a model chat provided by the teacher. They presented it to the class and the teacher recorded them. Then, the recruits self-assessed using a checklist. The teacher used a rubric to evaluate aspects in their first oral intervention such as content, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and interaction.

For the posttest, a final task was given the last day of the unit and the students had a few minutes to organize themselves to present it. It consisted on presenting a dialogue between two marines who ran into each other in the street during the upcoming holidays which was Christmas. They had to greet each other showing surprise by using the colloquial phrases they had practiced. They also had to ask about their families and their immediate future plans for the next holidays by using the vocabulary related to food, adjectives and leisure activities. They had to use the appropriate structure for each question. At the end, they had to close the conversation by using more colloquial phrases learned during the unit. After that, they self-assessed their final oral intervention for that unit and were given oral feedback from the teacher as well. The teacher also evaluated their final oral presentation with the rubric and recorded them.

According to Ulker (2017), "A rubric works on each criterion separately, provides scales for a list of components and a description for each rating. This type of rubric is used to assess important tasks where each component needs to be evaluated separately" (p. 135).

The rubric used by the teacher for this action research had four descriptors: Content, Grammar & Vocabulary, Pronunciation, and Interaction.

A checklist is “a simple list of items designed for both assessor and student to check if every item is presented” (Ulker, 2017, p. 135). The checklist used in this action research had four items for the students to self-assess their oral performance: Understands the videos, the worksheets of the unit because the audio content is appropriate, uses some new vocabulary, grammar to express his future plans related to some topic, uses intelligible pronunciation, interacts by asking, and answering questions. Each item of the checklist corresponds to one descriptor from the rubric.

Data Analysis

The data from this action research was analyzed by using Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. To report the first action research question *to what extent will recruits improve their speaking skills with the implementation of the self-assessment technique?* the researcher obtained the maximum, minimum, mean, standard deviation, and the *p-value* from the students’ grades in the pretest and posttest.

To report the second action research question *will the implementation of self-assessment technique increase the students’ self-confidence when they speak English?* the researcher took some notes about the students’ reactions.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher obtained the written authorization from the principal of the Marine School from the Navy in Guayaquil to carry out this action research. The participants, who are adults, were also asked to voluntarily participate in this study and they agreed. Both authorities and participants were informed that the objective of this investigation was for academic purposes.

Results

To answer the research question: *to what extent will recruits improve their speaking skills with the implementation of the self-assessment technique?* these are the results:

Table 1

	N	Min	Max	M	SD	Sig (p)
Pretest	34	7.00	10.00	7.93	0.85	0.00
Posttest	34	8.50	10.00	9.40	0.53	

Note: N=Sample, Min=Minimum, Max= Maximum, M=Mean, SD= Standard Deviation, Sig (P)=Significance

Table 1 shows an improvement comparing the results from the pretest and the posttest for the Minimum, and the Mean values. The *p-value* is less than 0.05 which means the students increased their grades comparing the pretest and the posttest. The standard deviation in the posttest is closer to the mean value than in the pretest.

To answer the second research question *will the implementation of self-assessment technique increase the students' self-confidence when they speak English?* the researcher took into consideration the observation of the students' reactions during the implementation of the innovation. The following notes are some of those reactions.

At the beginning of the implementation of the self-assessment technique, the recruits were not sure of how to self-assess. They kept asking the teacher how to do it even though she had taught them how. She monitored the students and realized that some of them overestimated their scores and others underestimated them. Consequently, the teacher proceeded to give the learners formative feedback about their self-assessment to help them be fairer with their performance.

Another observation made by the researcher was that at the beginning of the implementation, the students were afraid of talking in front of the whole class, they felt judged not only by the teacher, but also by their peers and by the fact that they were being recorded. As the lessons passed by, they felt less afraid of speaking in front of others and at some point, they managed to know how to self-assess their speaking skills fairly.

In general, the pupils had a more positive attitude as the unit continued compared to the beginning of the innovation. In the recordings, the researcher had the opportunity to watch and listen again the students' performance in the pretest and posttests. In the pretest they looked doubtful while in the posttest they spoke with more self-confidence.

Discussion

Regarding the first research question, to what extent will recruits improve their speaking skills with the implementation of the self-assessment technique? this study found out that the application of self-assessment improved speaking skills. This is consistent with other studies that showed similar results. One of them stated that, "self-assessment helps improve future performance, increase motivation and stimulates them during their speaking performance, and increase communication between student and teacher" (Alek et al, 2020, p. 211). Other researchers that encountered positive results when applying self-assessment were Ariaifar and Fatemipour (2013), they claimed that in a sample of 60 Iranian participants, the implementation of self-assessment technique did help the participants to upgrade their speaking skills.

For the second research question, will the implementation of self-assessment technique increase the students' self-confidence when they speak English? this study revealed that students showed more self-confidence with the implementation of self-assessment technique when speaking English because the teacher could observe that they were less afraid of talking in front of an audience. In the same way, De Saint Léger (2009), concluded in her research that self-assessment enhanced the proficiency of the learners regarding to vocabulary, fluency, and confidence.

Another finding in this research was the development of autonomy in the recruits. In this study, the teacher observed that they managed to self-assess more fairly after practicing for many days and receiving formative feedback from the teacher. This is consistent with

Jamrus and Razali (2019), who found out in their study that self-assessment increased the students' autonomy and developed critical abilities to evaluate themselves.

Finally, another similarity with other study was the observation of some students overestimating or underestimating their scores when they self-assessed their oral abilities. The researchers stated that “good students tended to underrate themselves and that weaker students tended to overrate themselves” (Boud & Falchikov, 1989, as cited in Dochy et al., 1999, p. 334). The only difference with this study was that good students overestimated their grades and weak students underestimated them when the self-assessed.

Conclusions

Learning a new language is quite difficult for any EFL learner especially if they do not have the time and opportunities for extra practice outside the classroom as in the case of the recruits from the Ecuadorian Navy since they have a tough routine from the dawn until late at night. They also lack the motivation to practice their English lessons due to the tiredness they feel every day for the extreme physical exercises. Nevertheless, they have to at least be able to communicate at the A2 level when they graduate as marines.

After observing this enormous difficulty, the teacher tried to overcome this problem with other techniques but without too many positive results. The students felt no motivation to learn English since it is a basic subject for their profession. However, they have the necessity to approve it in order to graduate. Consequently, this study was carried out to help them feel the motivation to learn English and improve their oral abilities and not only to pass a subject.

The implementation of the self-assessment technique with the recruits to improve their oral performance had quite positive results towards the English language. They went from “I cannot do that” to “I am doing it” when they were taught to self-assess with critical thinking and honesty. Indeed, no one knows better than one how they are progressing in their

work or tasks. Besides, the significant improvement shown in the results of the evaluation made by the teacher with the rubric in the posttest proved that they really increased their speaking skills at least for that unit.

As a conclusion, after observing the students' pretest and posttest during the implementation of the self-assessment technique, they did improve their self-confidence when speaking English because they were able to self-assess with a higher score during the posttest and they were less afraid of speaking in public. Additionally, they were more willing to work on the activities and the dialogues as the unit continued which means they were more motivated to learn and speak English.

Limitations

Initially, the estimated number of participants were forty recruits, but six of them could not participate due to a variety of factors. One of them had a car accident right just before the innovation and the other five were on their mandatory shifts when the teacher applied the pretest. As a result, they were taken out of the research for that first part and this situation made them feel out of place. However, they participated in the rest of the innovation and the posttest. The ideal situation would have been having all of them within the study, but the teacher could not wait too much time to implement the innovation because there were due dates for this research.

Another problem was the fact that the students did not have enough time in their autonomous learning at nights to practice their lessons because of the strict routines they have that do not allow them to practice as they desired. Therefore, the teacher had to make them practice in their face to face classes during the day which extended the length of the unit more than it should. In conclusion, the time was a limitation for this study.

Finally, some resources were limited inside the classroom such as the internet to make students do extra online activities that could have helped them better to acquire the

vocabulary and structures needed for the unit. In addition, some technological devices such as the projector and the speakers were not always available to play the audios or videos, thereby; the teacher had to use her cellphone to make them listen to the mentor chats that serve as models for them to create a new one.

Recommendations

For future researchers, it is advisable to apply the study to all the students from the group to have more precise results about the whole class to obtain the Maximum, Minimum, Media, Standard Deviation, and *p-values* when collecting and analyzing the data. Another suggestion is planning all the activities with enough time in advance to avoid any delay in the unit. If the learners do not have enough time to practice their lessons, if it is possible, try to give them virtual tutorial sessions with the consent of the school authorities at a different time than their regular classes to give them extra formative feedback that improves their next level of learning.

As final recommendation, when the technological resources are not available to develop all the planned activities, it is suggested to self-manage in advance what it is needed to carry out all the tasks successfully.

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Appendix 1

Lesson Plan

Available upon request.

Appendix 2

Rubric

Available upon request.

Appendix 3

Checklist used by the students to self-assess

Available upon request.

Appendix 4

Consent letter

Available upon request.

Appendix 4

Students' Grades

Available upon request.

Appendix 5

E-portfolio

Available upon request.