



Assessing Speaking Skills in Online University Courses: The Case of English for Tourism

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Abstract

Summative assessment is especially useful for scoring and grading at the university level. In the case of English for Tourism—a core and ESP subject in the online Bachelor Degree in Tourism at the Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria—the assessment of speaking skills is done through a video (oral) presentation on a topic covered during the course. Since online classes require a special consideration when selecting and implementing assessment of speaking skills, the students have to be provided with models and samples to follow, alongside tools that may help them overcome performance difficulties and a rubric adapted to the level and expected results for guidance. In this paper, we explain the steps taken to assess speaking skills in students of Tourism that bring different levels of prior knowledge into the virtual classroom but need to acquire and develop, at least, a B2 oral fluency and accuracy for their professional careers.

Keywords: *Online university courses; assessment; speaking skills; oral presentations; rubric.*

1. Introduction

Generally speaking, the assessment of students has three distinctive purposes nowadays; namely, diagnostic, formative and summative [1]. While diagnostic assessment precedes instruction and is “used to gather information about students’ prior knowledge and to identify misconceptions” [2], formative assessment “gathers information in an *ongoing* manner throughout a course. That information is then used to guide teaching and to improve learning and performance” [2]. By contrast, summative assessment takes place when “information about student learning is gathered and analyzed at the conclusion of a course in order to determine whether students have achieved identified goals” [2]. Therefore, summative assessment has been traditionally used to obtain a total score at the end of the course, as it helps to “collect appropriate information about the level of achievements reached by students” [1]. Summative assessment can be variously carried out through a culminating project that incorporates (part of) the knowledge acquired in class, a final exam or test, or a performance task, for instance.

Oral presentations are a type of performance tasks by which the students engage in the process of active communication by conversing, explaining a point of view, discussing an issue or sharing ideas and materials with an interlocutor in their native or in a foreign language [3]. Rubrics are assessing tools and, as such, they can be used to test students’ performance by incorporating indicators of intended learning outcomes [4]. This way, the teacher offers students a broad description of what they are expected to do: how complete and appropriate their oral performance should be to arrive at a certain score or grade. Through the criteria or indicators specified in the rubric, both English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) students can recognize the goals regarding their speaking skills required in a language-oriented course.

In recent years, performance-based tasks have gained considerable support among educators, as a process in which thinking skills, cooperative work, interpersonal relationships and problem-solving strategies are fostered and worked on [1,4,5,6]. Online university students’ oral presentations, like the ones described below, could be more limited in range and reduce the aspects of the learning process that can be effectively assessed, yet they are a useful tool to evaluate speaking skills despite the geographical location. In fact, it promotes involvement and a more active participation in the virtual environment. Even though the students do not have much opportunity to interact with others, due to our distance and online learning modality, having to prepare an oral presentation is an activity that allows collecting evidence of their speech performance (including aspects such as pronunciation, oral discourse, ability to effectively communicate in real-life contexts orally, non-verbal language, etc.).



2. Material and methods

2.1. Data collection

We analyzed 48 videos by 24 different 2nd-year students of 'English for Tourism III', a core subject of the online Bachelor Degree in Tourism taught at the Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (Spain); ten of these were incoming Erasmus+ Programme students. As part of their formative assessment, they have to submit three assignments during the course aimed at checking their progress in B2-level Use of English, Reading, Listening, Writing and Speaking skills [7] by means of comprehension and expression exercises and/or tasks handed in either in written form or via oral presentations. In the latter case, each student has to record two videos of around 3-minute length focusing on topics of professional interest covered in the textbook. Thus, the audiovisual material used for this paper consists of 24 creative videos in which the students promote their hometown or city supported by realia, pictures and images; and other 24 more subjective videos that record their opinion about a promotional video of a high-quality international resort (available at YouTube^{ES}®).

2.2. Types of assessment and tools

It is widely accepted that online classes require a special consideration when selecting and implementing assessment for speaking skills [2]. If students are to pass the course successfully, they have to be provided with models and samples that can be imitated and adapted to their level and skills (that is, somehow personalized or customized), alongside with other strategies and resources that help them overcome any difficulty they may encounter during the summative assessment.

Firstly, the students attending 'English for Tourism III' are subject to formative assessment, as defined in the Introduction above. Since meaningful feedback is a key component of this type of assessment [2], it is regularly provided to students so that they gain knowledge and strategies to complete the exercises and tasks appropriately. To this end, they have the support of the self-study textbook plus periodic feedback on their performance through the Virtual Classroom [VC], including thematic forums, self-evaluation tests, private dialogues for tutorials and teacher-commented correction of assignments. Besides, to improve their overall performance and language skills, there is a 'Further Resources' section at the VC that is gradually enlarged and complemented depending on the needs for reinforcement detected in their writing (informally in the forums or more formally in the assignments).

Secondly the students get a copy of the applicable rubric well in advance so that they can prepare and modulate their discourse and have the expected speaking outcomes clear [4,6]. The rubric used for this concrete group of ESP students includes a series of descriptive criteria that are evaluated simultaneously while the students are observed in the process of doing something [3,6]. In this case, we are interested in a successful B2-level of oral communication in English to do a qualified job in the tourism sector. For this reason, the rubric articulates around two main criteria: a) the dimension involved, which takes into account linguistic, discursive and attitudinal facets; and b) indicators of levels of achievement plus scoring, from "below average" (1 mark) to "excellent" (4 marks), to a maximum of 16 marks. Due to space restrictions, in **Table 1** below we present the three dimensions, but just a sample of the indicators and score:

Table 1. B2-level rubric sample criteria for 2nd-year students of 'English for Tourism III'

Dimensions		E.g. Indicators of the level of achievement	E.g. Corresponding score
Linguistic	Use of English: Grammar & Vocabulary	Too many basic mistakes and errors, which are below the minimal [upper-intermediate] level required in the subject. The vocabulary used is poor, repetitive and not much related to the topic, in particular, and to Tourism, in general. Informal register for an oral presentation in academic situations. Words are not usually well collocated or appropriate for the context.	Below average; needs improvement (1 mark)
		Speaking is clear most of the time (50-75%), yet some words are mispronounced. Some mistakes and errors, but do not	



	Pronunciation & Enunciation	prevent effective communication. Basic pronunciation and/or enunciation problems are detected, but not frequently (these do not make ideas difficult to understand).	Satisfactory; acceptable – good (2 marks)
Discursive	Oral presentation: structure & delivery	The introduction is clear and concise. The presentation flows and is connected so it is relatively easy to follow the discourse. Reduced need for using a written outline or personal notes. Ability to present the topic with relative easiness, although being nervous. Seems relatively comfortable with his/her oral presentation and skills and acts naturally most of the time. Appropriate voice volume, tone and pacing, with supporting gestures.	Above average; very good (3 marks)
Attitudinal	Originality & attitude	St is consistently ready to participate. Stays and speaks with a positive attitude throughout the video. St cares about organization, background, details and academic correctness in front of the screen and is not distracted. St sustains the audience's attention throughout the presentation.	Excellent (4 marks)

3. Results

At the beginning of the course, the baseline level of English in the classroom ranged from B1 to C2 (native speakers) as per the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) descriptors [7]. Three students (= 6 videos, 12.5%) had an 'excellent' rating due to both their native language mastery and their indeed outstanding communicative competence and promotional skills. Six students (= 12 videos, 25%) presented a semi-native or high-level of spoken English. Accordingly, their linguistic and attitudinal dimensions were 'excellent', yet the discursive one was 'above average' in these cases since some structural and delivery elements could be improved, especially in relation to the relative dependency on written notes and to being unable to control non-verbal and body language (thus transmitting some degree of nervousness and insecurity). Thirteen students (= 26 videos, 54.2%) were between 'satisfactory' to 'above average', going from B1+ to B2+ levels. A detailed description of their performance would require larger space but, roughly, these students had adequate language skills to present the contents of their videos, yet with different degrees of fluency and accuracy. In these 26 videos we see an evident effort to complete the task and comply with the requirements, even if most of them showed uneasiness having to speak in front of the camera or difficulty to express themselves naturally; at times, it was difficult to figure out whether they could be conversing in English properly and without fear of being judged. Finally, two students (= 4 videos, 8.3%) needed improvement; their English language level was adequate for the purposes, yet the videos presented did not meet the minimal requisites nor were totally focused on the task.

As a result, we observed that 22 students had incorporated most of the recommendations and indications received through formative assessment, hinting at metalinguistic awareness of structures and functions [8]. The more subjective part, that of being able to communicate orally according to a set of instructions but, at the same time, showing creativity and strategies to express their personal opinion on a relevant topic, was assessed flexibly inasmuch as it depended on many extralinguistic factors that they had to bring to the classroom from the outside or work hard to develop in a short time (a course spanning 6 months).

4. Concluding remarks

Using a rubric that adopts a holistic approach, that is, one where all criteria (covering dimensions and indicators) are assessed simultaneously, may work relatively well in online university ESP courses that require testing speaking skills. At the stage of summative assessment, this kind of rubrics allows faster scoring of performance tasks such as oral presentations, but the knowledge and skills shown in them may correlate with formative, or continuous, feedback by which the students receive support and



indications of “good work” and an opportunity to rethink and reinforce their overall results in the subject as much as the basis for long-life learning.

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