

Strategic Impromptu Speaking to Combat Anxiety and Develop a Public Speaking Personality

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Abstract: Developing a public speaking personality of impromptu style is a battle that a second language learner is confronted with, where fear and anxiety act as enemies. This research is devoted to investigate how some preparation strategies could amour the learner to fight it. One hundred second-year undergraduates of the Faculty of Technology, Wayamba University of Sri Lanka received instruction on brainstorming ideas, preparing brief outlines, filling the outlines with examples, and speaking based on them. Ten sessions were created consecutively in which the learners practiced strategic impromptu speaking. The topics were drawn from university life, and the initial five minutes of each session were used for whole class discussions to assist the learners with ideas and vocabulary through a map on board allowing them to identify a unique focus for the individual speech. An initial questionnaire was administered after the second session to measure how the participants felt about the experience, and a post-questionnaire after the tenth session to measure whether, in their view, the speaking personality had grown. Six questions out of each were analysed, and the findings were encouraging. Further, Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was applied on a question which required participants to rate their ability to speak in English, knowledge over speaking strategies, level of confidence and enjoyment of the exercise prior to and after the intervention. The p value of 0.00 ($P < 0.05$) revealed that there is a statistically significant improvement in public speaking personality. Feedback from the reflective journals was

coded, and it proved the approach to be productive.

Keywords: Strategic impromptu speaking, Brainstorming, Speech outline, Public speaking skills

Introduction

Sound public speaking skills determine the success at presentations, speech tests, and multiple other forums at university and afterwards at job setting and everyday life. Yet, most undergraduates who start English medium courses only at tertiary level not only lack such skills, but they are also not motivated enough even to try. Unlike the traditional definition that limits impromptu speaking only to 'delivering a speech without preparing in advance' (Beebe & Beebe, 2009), Puteh's (2006) definition of it as 'a mini speech delivered with little or no immediate preparation time' provides the creative language teacher with some insights as to how to exploit the situation to build up the speaking confidence of the uncertain second language speaking community. Most importantly, Nawi, Yasin & Champion (2015) state that impromptu speaking can involve planning, preparation and practice if the teachers want the leaners 'to be ready at all times to speak impromptu'.

The little preparation time allowed within impromptu speech can fruitfully be used to activate the learner schemata over the speech topic since lack of ideas and vocabulary often hinder the flow of the speech. The leaners can also be trained to have a narrow focus over

the broad topic making each speech unique and attractive. Thirdly, each speaker can prepare a brief outline, and if time permits can fill the outline with interesting examples mostly in short hand style. Even international exams like TOEFL and IELTS provide quick preparation time and encourage using notes prior to speech. So, strategic impromptu speaking is realistic and meaningful and holds the power to remove the unnecessary fear or inhibitions of the novice speaker facilitating the speech.

A major reason why impromptu speeches are not accommodated in ELT courses is because teachers perceive it to be a misfit with the majority of learners. Interviews reveal that most learners have not delivered many public speeches even in mother tongue let alone in the second language of English. So, it looks reasonable by teachers to resort to prepared speech. Yet, the vital fact that they have overlooked is that even impromptu speeches can mean preparation and practice in certain ways, and moreover; teachers too have a role in making grounds for its success. Further, the prepared speeches alone cannot make the undergraduates ready for the demands of the wider world outside the university in which spontaneous speech is required as a major skill. Therefore, the need arises to find out some appropriate strategies through which impromptu speeches could work out in Sri Lankan ELT context. Further, the very challenging nature of it may arouse the interest of the adult learner to fully engage into it.

The strategic impromptu speaking sessions which were designed for this study initially attempted to equip the learners with effective impromptu speaking strategies. Then, they also focused on creating opportunities for learners to practice speech while applying the planning strategies. A further intention of the sessions was to obtain data on anxiety associated with public speaking to see whether it declines over time with

consecutive exposure into the experience. Moreover, it targeted at obtaining the learner views over the intervention to measure whether strategic impromptu speaking had positively transformed the public speaking personalities of the undergraduates. Since public speaking in English was an alien experience to majority of the learners, a few skills such as spontaneity, flow of speech, content, structure, clarity of presentation and quality of speech were specifically focused during the intervention while giving feedback at the end of speech sessions.

Research Problem

Poor speaking skills negatively affect the confidence of the undergraduates and developing those is vital at tertiary level. Though method of impromptu speaking has an un-surpassing capacity to develop the spontaneous speech, the very challenging nature of the activity casts doubt on whether either teachers or learners would welcome it as a right tool to uplift their public speaking skills.

Research Objective

To identify the perceptions of the learners over the effectiveness of strategic impromptu speaking in removing the speech related anxiety and developing public speaking skills

Review of Literature

Second language anxiety can have a debilitating effect on performance (Woodrow, 2006). Fear of speaking in a second language termed as 'social anxiety', as per Leary (1982), is made up of several constructs: speech anxiety, shyness, stage fright, embarrassment, social evaluation anxiety (feeling that you are being judged by the audience) and communication apprehension (fear associated with interacting with others). Public speaking is an event a speaker has to combat all these psychological factors in an effort to perform successfully. Tobias (1985)

introduces two models to explain the causes of anxiety during public speaking: retrieval interference and skills deficit. Retrieval interference occurs when anxiety inhibits recall of previously learnt material at the output stage while skills deficit occurs when poor language proficiency and poor study habits impair performance at input, processing as well as output stage. Hurwitz, 1986, who studied in-class speech anxiety, identified three negative emotions confronting public speaking: fear, worry and emotionality, and produced anxiety scales which is currently practised widely at research contexts as reliable tools to measure speech related anxiety. Ajeng (2006) who used the same scale in English as a foreign language context in Indonesia found discomfort, worry, fear and shyness to be the four major causes of anxiety.

Speaking confidence over a second language(L2) emerges out of the two affective and cognitive constructs of 'language use anxiety' which occur at the speech context and the 'perceived L2 confidence' which is a self-evaluation over one's L2 proficiency (Clemant, 1986). So, it is vital for a learner to believe in his language skills to speak confidently. As per Bandura (1986) a person's innate cognitive capacity, which directly affected on public speaking personality, is enhanced through environmental factors, and this is where the language teachers can positively intervene.

Methodology and Experimental Design

This research was based on two structural designs: survey questionnaire and quasi experimental design. Hundred second year undergraduates of the Faculty of Technology, Wayamba University of Sri Lanka participated in this. The introductory session was conducted with a view to expose the learners into planning strategies that could facilitate impromptu speaking. Individuals received feedback on preparing brief outlines to be

used as the structure of the speech. The themes for the sessions were related to university life such as leisure time activities, part time jobs, sports, job skills and community service. Ten impromptu sessions were arranged within two months, and the first five minutes of each session produced a whole class discussion on the theme during which the teacher mapped the vocabulary and ideas on the board out of which the individuals selected their focus or narrower topics for the speech. Then, the class was divided into three groups and the speeches were delivered in 3-4 minutes, and the sessions were concluded with a common feedback. When the participants have finished two speech sessions under the targeted procedure, a questionnaire adapted from Horwitz (1986) was administered to identify whether they felt confident or nervous at the initial speaking contexts. Next, a second questionnaire was administered to identify whether the learners experienced a development in their public speaking personalities. Finally, the learners also recorded their spontaneous thoughts over the experience in reflective diaries.

The rationale for using this methodology was that the attitudinal questionnaires and open feedback by adult learners were perceived as appropriate tools to measure the success of a novel approach into a speaking course. Further, any comments if were positive, would provide as evidence to see whether the learners had perceived a transformation in their public speaking personalities and those of their peers. In addition to that, administering the first questionnaire after two speech sessions instead of administering it prior to the sessions was so planned because for most learners impromptu speaking in English was a novel experience, and it was thought that without such exposure, they would not be able to accurately comment on it.

Table 01: Learner perceptions on the issues faced while delivering the initial impromptu speeches

Statement	strongly disagree	disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am making impromptu speeches.	2%	8%	51%	30%	19%
2. I worry about making mistakes while speaking.	3%	8%	41%	34%	14%
3. I fear about failing in my speaking sessions.	6%	8%	42%	32%	12%
4. Even if I have prepared a brief outline, I feel anxious about speaking.	3%	15%	41%	29%	12%
5. I can't speak long as I forget the things I know due to nervousness.	1%	8%	34%	38%	19%
6. I keep thinking that other students are better at English than I am.	4%	7%	35%	33%	21%

Table 02: Learners perceptions on how strategic impromptu speaking helped develop the public speaking personalities

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1. Speaking sessions gave me confidence to speak in public.	-	-	4%	44%	52%
2. I learnt to speak without worrying about mistakes.	-	-	7%	61%	32%
3. I enjoyed making impromptu speeches.	-	3%	10%	55%	32%
4. Speaking sessions helped me to talk well on a given topic with a brief preparation.	-	-	7%	60%	33%
5. Speaking sessions helped me to speak continuously on a given topic.	-	-	6%	53%	41%
6. I enjoyed listening to other speeches and learnt from them.	-	1%	6%	49%	44%

Results

Six questions from both questionnaires (Table 1 & 2) were analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively to see whether the intervention

had achieved its expected outcomes. Initial questionnaire (Table 1) focused on identifying whether anxiety had an impact on speaking whereas the post questionnaire (Table 2) focused on identifying whether the

impromptu speech sessions were effective. The selected questions in each table were arranged in such a way that for a specific issue related to anxiety focused by a question in table 1 could be compared with the response given to the corresponding counterpart in table 2 to gain some general insights over the process. For instance, the first question on both tables addressed 'lack of confidence/confidence' and the data received on table 2 could be used to generally observe whether the intervention had helped the students to remedy the situation by gaining confidence over it.

Moreover, four statements from the post questionnaire which asked the participants to denote values from 1-4 (1 means very little, 2 means little, 3 means much and 4 means very much) considering the situations prior to and after the intervention such as 'the ability to speak in English, knowledge about speaking, confidence about speaking and enjoyment in speaking in English' were analysed by using Wilcoxon Signed Rank test (Table 3).

H_0 : Public speaking skills of the students has not been improved

H_1 : Public Speaking skills of the students has been improved

Table 3: Results of the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test: Difference

Test for	N for test	Wilcoxon statistics	P value
Difference	101	5151.0	0.000

As per the statistics, the p value recorded is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected, and in the perception of the learners their public speaking skills have been uplifted at 5% significance level.

The feedback received from reflective diaries too was quite encouraging and could be coded under nine themes: built confidence, provided practice, developed speaking skills, learnt speech techniques, improved vocabulary, enjoyed public speaking, used speech outlines, achieved fluency and helped other academic activities.

Table 04: Sample thoughts over strategic impromptu speaking extracted from reflective diaries

Code	Thoughts
A: Built confidence	A1: "Impromptu speeches make our confidence specially to talk to an audience" A2: "It make me strong and now I don't have any fear for speaking" A3: " now I can speak without shiver"
B: Provided practice	B1: "Impromptu speaking is a challenging task, but is interesting when practicing it continuously." B2: "It was fun to speak because of repetitive sessions" B3: "Giving ten impromptu sessions was very useful."
C: Developed speaking skills	C1: "This lesson helped to improve my speaking skills" C2: "One of the most valuable sessions. My friends who did not speak even a word at the first day spoke more than the best students the last day" C3: " It improves speaking skill as we prepare and deliver the speech in a short time"

D: Learnt speech techniques	D1: "I didn't know about techniques before this session" D2: "I identified different techniques while doing speeches" D3: "Listened to other speeches and learnt techniques"
E: Improved vocabulary	E1: "I learnt to speak using good vocabulary" E2: "I developed my vocabulary" E3: "Discussion sessions helped a lot to learn vocabulary"
F: Enjoyed public speaking	F1: "I enjoyed speaking sessions" F2: "I tried to do best because this is a challenge for me" F3: "I enjoyed others speeches"
G: Used speech outline	G1: "We learnt to build speech according to a plan." G2: "When speaking according to a structure, it increased quality as well as enjoyment of the speech."
H: Achieved fluency	H1: "I learnt to speak very fluently." H2: "although I had English knowledge I was unable to speak long, Now I have the ability."
I: Helped other academic activities	I1: "We did subject presentations nicely. All said it's because of English sessions" I2: "It is important for the future works."

Discussion

The first questionnaire (Table 1) focused on obtaining learner views over the issues they confronted while delivering impromptu speeches in a second language, and it was administered after two strategic impromptu speaking sessions in order to obtain the genuine feelings of the fresh experience. The data revealed that even after receiving help through speech strategies like brainstorming ideas and outlining the speech, there was still anxiety (social anxiety) towards public speaking (Leary, 1982). 49% were not sure of themselves while speaking either due to language deficit (Tobias, 1985) or due to other psychological phenomena connected to social anxiety (Ajeng, 2016), and 48% worried over the mistakes they would make. A reality with regard to public speaking in a second

language is that the speakers forget the content due to language barrier or retrieval interference (Tobias, 1985). Accordingly, 57% either agreed or strongly agreed that they forgot due to nervousness. Further, there was evidence to show that performing before an audience affected the self-conscious adult second language learners. 44% feared the idea of failing in performance while 54% were conscious of the level of performance compared to the more competent peers (social evaluation anxiety: Leary, 1982).

Another interesting finding was that though the questionnaire was administered at a very early stage of the intervention, many participants were neutral in their position rather than being negative; thereby, indicating a growing confidence towards impromptu speaking. For instance, according to the data received for statement 3, only 15%

disagreed that they felt anxious about speaking after being prepared with an outline while 41% neither agreed nor disagreed. This can be attributed to the help provided through effective speaking strategies.

The analysis of the second questionnaire (Table 2) which was administered at the end of the ten impromptu speech sessions revealed that there was clear evidence that the learners had developed their public speaking skills. 96% either agreed or strongly agreed that the sessions built up their confidence while another 94% believed that it improved their fluency. While observing one's progress over the sessions, reflecting over it & recording in the diaries, the learners had been able to reduce their 'language use anxiety' and confidently deliver the speeches towards the end with the existing language skills (Clemant, 1986). Further, 87% enjoyed the sessions rather than dreading them and 93% also enjoyed others' speeches and learnt from each other. The environmental factors such as conducive classroom atmosphere and the attitudinal changes created through right feedback had helped learners to enjoy the activity, enjoy the performance of peers and to benefit through it (Bandura, 1986). Moreover, 93% felt that the practice helped them to talk with a brief preparation and further to talk without worrying about mistakes, thereby; rewarding the strategies employed during the intervention.

The six questions from each questionnaire were purposely organized so that the situation during early stages of intervention and after it could clearly be observed. The findings proved that all issues such as lack of confidence, fear of making errors, anxiety, poor self-esteem and nervousness which were identified initially had disappeared significantly towards the end. Interestingly, the statistics depicting negative attitudes as well as un-deciding responses which had been marked as '3' in the Likert five-point scale as responses to questionnaire 1 had turned into

positive and deciding figures in questionnaire 2. Quite importantly, this change could be observed with regard to all six statements.

The analysis conducted on the four statements (table 3) explaining their speaking personalities prior to and after the intervention further confirmed that the learners benefitted from the strategic impromptu speaking sessions. The participants claimed that they developed various aspects of a public speaking personality such as ability to speak in English, knowledge about public speaking including the strategies, confidence to speak and the ability to be relaxed and enjoy the speech.

The learners recorded their feelings and thoughts over speaking sessions regularly and also included a final overall comment considering the whole experience. The sample comments on table 4 were selected from the final comments. Compared to the responses presented in table 1, which showed that lack of confidence, worry, fear, nervousness and speech anxiety impaired the performance, the final open feedback was quite positive. Many participants believed that the sessions built up their confidence (A1, A2, A3) and the ability to speak spontaneously, (C2) fluently (H1, H2) and effectively (C1, C3, G2). The introductory session had exposed the learners into strategic impromptu speaking styles (D1, D2, D3, G1, G2) while brainstorming sessions had enriched their vocabulary power (E1, E2, E3) creating a path for making impromptu speeches a pleasurable experience (F1, F2, F3, B1, B2). The principal of continuous practise too accounted for the success of the programme (B1, B2, B3) enabling the participants to apply the public speaking skills earned into other academic contexts (I1, I2). Overall, the intervention has been effective and the learners have found it to be a quite positive experience.

Conclusion

The data received for post questionnaire (Table 1) and the statistical analysis conducted on statements (Table 3) revealed that in the learners' perception their public speaking skills had developed proving the methodology applied and the theories underpinning it to be effective. Further, the data from questionnaires 1 provided evidence that anxiety impacted on the performance considerably at the beginning, however; those of table 2 proved that the anxiety which affected the performance of the speaker initially had gradually disappeared through correct strategies and continuous practice. In other words, strategic impromptu speaking which in-cooperated planning, preparation and practice paved way to eliminate the inhibitions that would otherwise be present during impromptu speaking context. Finally, though challenging a task it initially seemed to be by both the parties of teacher and the students, it has proven to be favourable approach to develop the public speaking skills of the learner majority.

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