Oral Presentations from the Eyes of EFL Freshman Students: A Qualitative Study[1]

Emrah EKMEKÇİ[2]

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Abstract

Improving oral communication skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context is regarded as a challenging issue since students have limited opportunities to practice the target language outside the classroom. The objective is to make students gain the maximum benefit from the activities in the classroom within the limited time periods. Therefore, different techniques, activities, tasks, projects, and etc. have been utilized in order to accomplish this objective in oral communication skills course offered in English Language Teacher Education (ELT) Programs in Turkey. Guiding students to make oral presentations about variety of topics can be one of the ways of fostering their oral proficiency levels in English. This study investigates into ELT Freshman students' perceptions of one-semester performances based on self-created presentations. It employs semi-structured interview which is one of the data collection tools in qualitative studies. The results of the study indicate that student-created oral presentations can contribute to students' fluency, self-confidence, cooperation, interaction, and foreign language learning motivation in the eyes of freshman students.

Key words: Oral presentations, oral communication skills, foreign language learning.

İngilizce Öğretmenliği Birinci Sınıf Öğrencilerinin Gözünden Sözlü Sunumlar: Nitel Bir Çalışma

Öz

Öğrencilerin hedef dili sınıf dışında kullanma olanaklarının sınırlı olmasından dolayı İngilizcenin yabancı bir dil olarak öğretildiği ortamlarda, sözlü iletişim becerilerinin geliştirilmesi oldukça zorlu bir süreçtir. Amaç, öğrencilere sınıf içerisindeki aktivitelerle sınırlı süre içerisinde bu becerilerini azami ölçüde geliştirebilmelerini sağlamaktır. Bu yüzden, Türkiye'de farklı üniversitelerin İngiliz Dili Eğitimi programlarında okutulan *Sözlü İletişim Becerileri* derslerinde çeşitli teknik, aktivite, görev, proje vb. yollarla öğrencilerin yabancı dilde sözlü iletişim becerileri geliştirilmeye çalışılmaktadır. Farklı konularda öğrencilere hedef dilde sözlü sunumlar yaptırmak ve bu doğrultuda öğrencilere rehberlik yapmak, söz konusu becerinin gelişimi için kullanılan tekniklerden birisidir. Bu bağlamda, mevcut çalışma İngilizce Öğretmenliği birinci sınıf öğrencilerinin bir dönem buyunca kendi hazırladıkları sunumlarla ilgili algılarını ve düşüncelerini ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmada nitel araştırma yöntemlerinden biri olan yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme tekniğiyle veriler toplanmıştır. Çalışma sonucunda öğrenciler tarafından bizzat oluşturulup sunulan sözlü sunumların;

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2 Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Ondokuz Mayıs Üniversitesi, Eğitim Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili Eğitimi ABD, emrah.ekmekci@omu.edu.tr, ORCID ID: 0000-0001-5585-8512 [Makale kayıt tarihi: 27.6.2018-kabul tarihi: 6.10.2018]

öğrencilerin akıcı konuşmasına, kendilerine güvenlerine, sınıf içi etkileşime, işbirlikçi öğrenmeye ve yabancı dil öğrenme motivasyonlarına katkı yaptığı ortaya konmuştur.

Anahtar kelimeler: Sözlü sunumlar, sözlü iletişim becerileri, yabancı dil öğrenimi.

Introduction

Speaking, one of the traditional four skills, is a process of oral language production. It is usually regarded as the most complex and difficult skill to master (Tarone, 2005). This complexity results from the characteristics of spoken language. In order to be successful speakers of a foreign language, learners must be competent enough in content, morphosyntax, lexis, discourse, the sound system, appropriate register, pragmalinguistic features, and so on (Tarone, 2005). This complex aspect of the spoken language makes it difficult to acquire and learn.

Brown (2001) explains the reasons for this difficulty by enumerating some important characteristics of spoken language as well. One of these is clustering which means that learners are expected to produce phrases because fluent speech is not word by word. They need to organize what they want to produce both cognitively and physically. The second one is redundancy in which the speakers have an opportunity to make the meaning clearer. In addition, reduced forms, performance variables such as hesitations, pauses, corrections and backtracking, colloquial language, rate of delivery, stress, rhythm, intonation and interaction are among the characteristics of spoken language which may cause difficulty in the course of spoken production and interaction. Brown (2001) states that all these features are actually similar to the ones in listening comprehension since oral communication skill is usually labelled as listening/speaking courses. These two skills are closely interrelated and students are expected to interact with each other through these skills. Moreover, microskills which are common for these two skills are also attached importance as they will help speakers maintain the communication and interaction. According to Brown (2001), some of these microskills are as follows;

Producing chunks of language of different lengths,

Producing English stress patterns,

Using an adequate number of words to accomplish purpose,

Monitoring oral production and use strategic devices to enhance the clarity of the message,

Using grammatical word classes, word order, patterns, rules, and elliptical forms,

Using cohesive devices,

Accomplishing appropriately communicative functions according to situations, participants, and goals.

Using appropriate registers and conventions in conversations,

Conveying links between events and communicate relations such as main idea, supporting details, new and given information, generalizations, and exemplification,

Using facial features and body language along with verbal language to convey meaning (p, 272).

When the above-mentioned microskills are closely examined, it is clear that successful speakers are expected to focus on both forms and functions. In other words, students need to improve their skills in terms of lexical choice, stress, intonation, cohesive devices, grammatical rules, etc. In addition, they should practice how to use language appropriately according to situations with correct communicative functions.

In a foreign language classroom, students are expected to carry out some certain classroom performance for oral production (Brown, 2001). The kinds of oral production are classified as imitative, intensive, responsive, transactional, interpersonal, and extensive. In order to accomplish certain language forms, students imitate the target speech through drills. Although drilling provides students with limited practice through repetition, they give students an opportunity to listen and orally repeat some phonological and grammatical forms which cause linguistic difficulty. As for intensive speaking performance, students are provided with certain phonological and grammatical aspects of the target language and expected to practice them. What makes it different from the first category, imitative performance, is that it is more than repetition and it raises students' awareness of certain forms of language. The responsive performance requires meaningful communication and interaction among students and between students and the teacher. The transactional performance covers exchanging specific information with the help of conversations. Similar to the transactional category, interpersonal dialogues are carried out for maintaining social relationships as well as transmission of information. As for the last category of oral performance in foreign language classrooms, Brown (2001) mentions extensive monologues which are in the forms of summaries, reports, short speeches and presentations.

All of the stated categories are of utmost importance to enhance students' oral production skills. Teachers need to include activities focusing on each category in the speaking courses. They should design activities that will enhance students' imitative, intensive, responsive, transactional, interpersonal, and extensive performances altogether.

With regard to the categories that have been mentioned above, researchers and scholars have been trying to carry out some techniques, activities, and strategies in foreign language speaking courses. For instance, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) state that speaking strategies are very important because they help foreign language learners negotiate meaning between a language learner and a speaker of the target language. Hedge (2000) thinks that a competent speaker is aware of how to utilize speaking strategies. In order to compensate for the possible breakdowns in communication, some verbal and non-verbal strategies can be used. In addition, learning speaking strategies is regarded to be essential since they provide language learners with various tools to be able to communicate in different situations with an appropriate form of the target language.

Various techniques and activities for different language levels and age groups to promote speaking skills in foreign language classrooms have been suggested by many scholars and researchers. For instance, Kayi (2006) suggests a number of activities such as discussions, role play, simulations, information gap, brainstorming, storytelling, interviews, story completion, reporting, playing cards, picture narrating, picture describing, and finding the difference. All of the activities aim to contribute to students' communicative development rather than leading them to rote memorization. The primary objective is to create a rich environment where meaningful communication takes place and students are actively involved in the learning process.

One of the ways of designing effective oral communication courses is to make students deliver oral presentations. Iftimie (2015) states that oral presentations bring a lot of benefits to the learners and learning environment. They enable students to learn new information while gathering data for their presentations. Oral presentations foster learner autonomy, team spirit, students' creativity. In addition, oral presentations have a tangible end-product such as slides, posters, handouts, and etc. They also offer a break from the usual class routine. The author having carried out a project which is based on extemporaneous type of presentation-a presentation planned carefully, but is not read or learned by heart- in the EFL context in Romania and Taiwan, concludes that there are some strengths and weaknesses of the delivery of oral presentations. The strengths perceived by Romanian and Taiwanese students consist of well-organized and clear aspects of oral presentations. Besides, the oral presentations delivered by the students have good end-products and they usually meet time requirements. As for the weaknesses, it is stated that some of the presentations were either memorized or read. Some students' voice was not appropriately adjusted and there was little and no eye contact with the audience in some cases. Some of the speakers made grammar and pronunciation mistakes and speech was not fluent enough.

Masmaliyeva (2014) emphasizes the benefits of oral presentations for students. The author dwells on the student-centeredness of these activities and states that oral presentations can have advantages for both students and teachers. Students can enhance fluency, accuracy and confidence thanks to oral presentations. As Meloni and Thopmson (1980, p. 503) put it, oral presentations contribute to students' communication skills in terms of "gaining practice in choosing and narrowing a topic, gathering information from a variety of sources, organizing and supporting ideas, expressing the main idea, formulating questions, working within time limits, preparing audio and/or visual aids, speaking formally in front of a group, leading a discussion, and answering questions" (as cited by Masmaliyeva, 2014). From the teachers' perspective, oral presentations provide them with a classroom atmosphere where the students are all active and responsible for their learning. The role of teachers changes from the source of knowledge to a facilitator, a listener, and an organizer.

In another study emphasizing the significance of oral presentations, Hill and Storey (2003) suggest online support for students to develop their oral presentation skills. The importance of delivering effective oral presentation is the focus of their study and they state that academic oral presentations cover not only content knowledge and cognitive skills but also cultural knowledge and skills for engaging others and constructing knowledge.

As the above-mentioned studies indicate, utilizing oral presentations in foreign language speaking classes in order to enhance students' communication skills is attached importance considering the benefits it has for both students and teachers. Although the aforementioned related research proves this importance, much more research is needed especially from the perspectives of the students who have some experiences about oral presentations in their classes. To this end, in order to fill in the gap in the literature about how students feel about oral presentations in the foreign language classes, the current study seeks answers to the following research question;

How do EFL Freshman Students perceive self-created oral presentations in oral communication skills courses?

Methodology

The study was conducted qualitatively. Descriptive qualitative research design was used in the study. Descriptive qualitative design aims to analyze the events experienced by humans as social subjects. This type of research design is experienced in a natural setting and is used to explain and describe what a participant experiences about a specific activity or an event (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In addition, the study seeks an answer to the question of *how* EFL freshman students perceive self-created oral presentations in oral communication skills courses.

Participants

Purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants. Thirty-five ELT freshman students participated in the study. Twenty-six of whom were female and nine were male students. They all took the compulsory course *'Oral Communication Skills-I'* offered in the first grade at ELT Departments in Turkish Universities. Their ages ranged from 18 to 29. The participants were informed that their privacy would be respected and participation was voluntary.

Data Collection

The researcher used two methods in collecting the data for the study namely, interview and dairies. As Dörnyei (2007) puts it, in semi-structural interviews there is a set of pre-prepared guiding questions and prompts, but the format is open-ended and the interviewee is encouraged to elaborate on the issues raised in an exploratory manner. The interview had factual questions (age, the languages and settings of previous presentation experience if available) and seven content (main) questions. In the first week of the semester, the students were informed about the study and asked to keep a diary for each of their presentation experience during the semester. They were also informed that the dairies they kept would be evaluated and graded at the end of the semester.

Procedure

During the fall semester of 2016-2017 academic year, students were expected to prepare and deliver presentations in the *Oral Communication Skills I* course. Prior to students' presentations, the teacher informed the students about presentation skills in general, effective presentations, type, design, and delivery of presentations for the first six weeks. The following table illustrates the 14-week syllabus of the course;

Table 1: 14-Week Syllabus of Oral Communication Skills I Course

Weeks	Content
1	General objectives of the course
2	Building Presentation Confidence
3	Delivery
4	Parts of a Presentation
5	Audio-Visual Aids: Type, Design, Delivery
6	Types of Speeches
7	Giving a Demonstration/ How to Speech
8	Group Discussion
9	Current Events Presentations
10	Group Discussion

11	Informative Presentation
12	Persuasive speech/presentation
13	TEAM Presentations
14	Interview

As it is seen in Table 1, the students were expected to deliver oral presentations both individually and cooperatively. Two group discussions were also conducted to enable students to give impromptu speeches. Errors were not corrected during presentations and each student received oral feedback about the content and delivery from the instructor and peers.

Data Analysis

In analyzing the data, the researcher followed certain steps. First, the data from the semi-structured interview were managed by coding and categorizing. Second, the data obtained from students' dairies with regard to each presentation experience were also coded and put into categories merging with the initial categories. In line with the content questions addressed to the students in the interview, there appeared nine main categories about their perceptions of oral presentations in the speaking classes.

Findings

The findings of the study consist of the main categories obtained from the semi-structured interview and students' dairies. The following table indicates the number of the students who have experienced oral presentation before individually and in groups and the language of presentation until the date when the study is conducted.

Table 2. The number of students who have experienced oral presentations in different languages

Presentation Language	Individual Presentation	Group Presentation	Frequency
English	35	35	once-three times
Turkish	10	11	twice
German	4	3	once

Table 2 shows that all of the students (n: 35) participating in the study have presented in English before, both individually and in groups. Eleven students state that they have presented in Turkish, ten individual and all in groups. In addition, four students declare that they have experienced oral presentation in German, four individually and three in groups. Data obtained from the factual questions in the interview suggest that all of the students have experienced oral presentation before once to three times. This shows that they are not experienced enough in terms of oral presentation skills. Apart from the factual data, the data obtained from the interviews and students' dairies can be put into the following categories.

Expectations from the *Oral Communication Skills I* course

In the semi-structured interview and dairies, it is mostly stated that most of the students expect to develop self-confidence from the course. Being able to speak fluently, learning how to make an interview or presentation, improving speaking skills, having less anxiety while speaking, overcoming the fear of

speaking in front of people, responding fast, having more opportunities to practice speaking, improving spoken interaction, establishing effective communication, and improving pronunciation are among the other issues appeared in the analysis of the interviews and dairies. Some of the responses are presented below;

Student A: I hoped that this course would help me become more fluent.

Student B: My pronunciation needs to be developed. I think this course will help me to correct my mistakes.

Student C: I usually feel so nervous before speaking that I forget everything. I hope at the end of this course I will be able to overcome my fears.

Contributions of the *Oral Communication Skills I* course

A great number of students stated that they have learned very much working on their presentation. For instance, they reported that they learned how to make a presentation, study with other people, present self-confidently, be a team/group member, attract the attention of the audience, overcome the fear of speaking, improve their speaking skills, convince people through effective speaking, make visually effective presentations, use body language, present without memorizing, in front of a crowd, and independent from their notes. They also stated that they learned the importance of eye-contact while presenting. Some excerpts from students' answers are presented below;

Student A: I can say that I have self-confidence now at the end of the course. I am not so nervous now.

Student B: I think I have overcome my fear of presenting in front of my classmates. I hope I can do the same in front of other people I do not know.

Student C: This course helped me find the ways of how to improve my speaking.

Difficulties the students experienced with their presentations

Majority of the students stated that they had difficulties in presenting about unfamiliar topics even though they were allowed to select from a wide range of topics within the scope of the type of the presentation of the week. They also encountered difficulties in presenting in front of the students they are not familiar to (most of the students meet each other for the first time in that course) and speaking spontaneously, so they forgot what they would say. As a result of these difficulties, they stated that they were anxious, nervous and shy, and even they shook like a leaf during their presentation due to too much excitement. Some responses are as follows;

Student A: I did not know most of the students, so presenting in front of the students I am not familiar to was very hard for me.

Student B: I normally feel nervous while presenting in Turkish. When it comes to presenting in a foreign language, I can say that it was a really difficult and terrifying experience.

Student C: Speaking spontaneously was difficult at first but this experience really helped me.

Anxieties experienced while delivering a presentation and the subsequent Q & A audience-led discussion

With regard to the issue of anxiety, most of the students affirmed that they experienced anxiety about forgetting their sentences and their friends' questions, making eye contact, and adjusting their voice. They also complained about pronunciation mistakes. Some excerpts from students' answers are presented below;

Student A: I did not have any anxieties at all during the presentation, but I felt nervous in Q & A audience-led discussion section?

Student B: I had stomachache and my hands were shaking during the presentation

Student C: I wanted my friends not to ask questions subsequent to my presentation

Student D: I was really nervous in the first two minutes, but I got relaxed later.

Observing their friends' presentations

The findings from the semi-structured interviews and dairies revealed that students benefited much from observing their friends' presentations. For instance, they stated that they learned how to control their excitement while observing other presentations. It was also reported that observing other presentations helped them notice what they should and should not do during their own presentations. In addition, they stated that observations raised their awareness about different presentation styles, some common mistakes, and effective use of body language. They also reported that they were able to evaluate other presentations with a critical eye after their observations. Some responses are as follows;

Student A: I realized that everybody was making the similar mistakes while presenting.

Student B: While observing my friends, I understood that reading from the PPTs was really boring.

Student C: Thanks to observations, my ability to criticize and interpret other students' presentation improved.

Working with their friends on a presentation

In the semi-structured interview and dairies, it is mostly stated that working with their friends on presentations helped them respect others' opinions, be patient, share experiences and opinions, interact with other students, organize effective presentations, share tasks, and establish close friendships. Some of the responses are presented below:

Student A: Collaborating with other students relaxed me.

Student B: I did not learn anything, because I do not like working with other students.

Student C: I really learned a lot from my friends. We were always sharing ideas about how to make our presentations more effective.

Contributions of the open discussions

Most of the students agreed that open discussion parts in the courses enabled them to notice the new ideas about the same issue. Learning different perspectives, getting an opportunity of practicing fluent speech and exchanging ideas, getting accustomed to asking questions and answering their friends' questions, and comparing ideas with their friends were among the issues uttered in the interviews and pointed in the dairies. Some responses are as follows;

Student A: I was shy in the first few open discussions, but later I felt more relaxed.

Student B: I do not think I participated in the open discussions because of the fear of making mistakes.

Student C: I could not speak in open discussions, because I had nothing to say.

Student D: I think open discussions were very useful and enjoyable, we were able to realize that other ideas were also worth listening.

Contributions of the group discussions

Similar to the case in open discussions, group discussions were reported as very beneficial in terms of evaluating others' ideas about the same topic. Most of the students stated that group discussions enabled them to be aware of different ideas, perspectives, and viewpoints. They also added these discussion sessions were more informative and motivating than the individual presentations. However, some students stated that they could not concentrate on the topic in the group, so individual presentations were more preferable for them. Some excerpts are presented below;

Student A: I cannot concentrate on the issue while discussing a topic in the group.

Student B: Group discussions were more informative than the individual ones. They enhanced my motivation, because I had a chance to interact with my friends during the preparation stage.

Student C: I realized that everybody formed the sentences in different ways with different vocabulary.

Possible changes in case of recurrent presentations

In the semi-structured interviews and diaries kept by the students, it was clearly stated that the students would change some points with regard to their presentation if they were to present them the second time. For instance, some students reported that they would change all of the presentation, delete full sentences and write only the main points. In addition, it was stated that they would re-design the presentation, prepare more attractive presentations with more visuals, never memorize, use their own words, write the references, rehearse before the actual presentation, feel more relaxed, deliver spontaneous speech, and add some videos. Some of the students also stated that they would try not to become so nervous if they re-presented it. Some of the responses are as follows;

Student A: If I had a chance to re-present it, I would change all the parts in my presentation, writing only the main points on the slides with some visuals.

Student B: I would definitely add some visuals and delete full sentences

Student C: I think I have managed to prepare an effective presentation, so I would not change anything.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigates into ELT Freshman students' perceptions of one-semester performances based on self-created presentations. Thirty-five ELT freshman students participated in the study. Twenty-six of whom were female and nine were male students. They all took the compulsory course *'Oral Communication Skills-I'* offered in the first grade at ELT Departments in Turkish Universities. The students who participated in the study followed the course for fourteen weeks, three class hour a week. They also followed the fourteen-week syllabus and performed at least one individual and one group presentation.

To uncover the perceptions of the students with regard to the presentations they performed, they were asked to keep dairies from the beginning of the semester. At the end of the semester, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with the students. The participation was totally voluntary-based and the students were informed that their privacy would be respected.

Data obtained from the semi-structured interviews and students' dairies were analysed. Since the current study is a type of descriptive qualitative research, each response associated with students' perceptions about the oral presentations was attached importance and the categories were generated. The analysis yielded nine different aspects with regard to students' perceptions. The categories consisted of expectations and contributions of the course; difficulties and anxieties students experienced; contributions of the open and group discussions; observation and collaboration experiences, and possible changes in case of recurrent presentations.

The in-depth analyses conducted show that the expectations of the students prior to the course were fulfilled to a great extent. For instance, most of the students expected the course to help them increase self-confidence about their speaking skills. After the course, most of them approved that the course really helped them. Therefore, it can be stated that the expectations of the students match with the contributions of the course from students' point of views. The findings also suggest that almost all of the students experience difficulties and anxieties. Based on these findings, it can be suggested that language teachers and syllabus designers need to take students' perspectives into consideration to lower the affective filter which may hinder students' success and spoken production.

With regard to observation and collaboration issues, language teachers are suggested to encourage cooperation and collaboration in speaking classes. It is clear from the findings that students learn from each other and that can be a motivational factor. The students' great interest in the open and group discussions also proves this.

To sum up, the syllabus used for the *Oral Communication Skills I* course in this study can be applicable for speaking classes for different levels with some modifications. The students' desire to change their presentations in terms of both style and content if they are given the opportunity to present for the second time supports this positive effect in favor of the use of oral presentations in speaking classes. The current study also yielded similar results to the ones obtained by Iftimie (2015), Masmaliyeva (2014), and Meloni and Thopmson (1980). However, the study differs from them in that it presents a syllabus which can be used in oral communication courses for students with different proficiency levels of English

by making necessary modifications. This study is limited to the context in which it is conducted and the findings cannot be generalized to the whole population. However, it provides a perspective as to the perceptions of students who are engaged in oral presentations in speaking courses. Further studies may focus on different dimensions of oral communication skills with some modifications in the syllabus. A quantitative study can also be conducted to determine students' success with regard to fostering oral communication skills utilizing the given syllabus.

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