

Active Learning Using Student Recorded Monologues

by

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Abstract

This paper will detail the planning, execution and feedback of an initiative to promote active learning and improve student speaking and writing using student recorded monologues. After determining the goals of the project, a rubric was created to clarify these goals and assessment criteria for both students and instructors. A 15-lesson unit was then developed based on four personal narratives. For each narrative, students completed a series of preparation activities before producing both written and spoken versions of their narratives and uploading these in the form of online assignments. Students were encouraged to review the rubric before, during, and after work on their texts. Feedback from students and instructors on completion of the program indicated that the goals were clear and relevant, there was a high level of student engagement with the unit, and that the rubric was an effective tool for guiding the learning process.

Key Words: active learning, formative assessment, rubrics, curriculum development

1. Introduction

The project was conducted in the Sojo International Learning Center (SILC) at Sojo University, a private, technical university in southern Japan. The university has no English majors, but first and second year students are required to take two 90-minute English classes per week, which are divided by department and taught in English.

Since its inception, the SILC has emphasized continuous curriculum renewal, always striving to

improve the student experience and the outcomes of the courses.

This collaborative project involved three instructors teaching a unit of the English Communication curriculum to second year students of different levels and departments. The aim of this unit was to support students in creating and delivering short sustained monologues about personal experiences. The unit had been in existence for several years and although it was well integrated into the wider curriculum, it was felt that it lacked focus and many instructors reported difficulties in implementation. Consequently, the purpose of the project was to provide greater structure and cohesion by making both learning

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outcomes and assessment procedures transparent to instructors and students. In addition, the project team aimed to make the content more learner-centered by significantly increasing the quantity of both spoken and written language output, by generating more and better feedback on that output, and by providing extensive opportunities for students to recycle and build on their learning.

2. Active Learning

The SILC, and the university as a whole, are committed to providing opportunities for active learning. In active learning, learners are expected not just to take in information through listening and reading, but to engage in activities that require them to synthesize and analyze class content and to reflect on the learning process. Simply put, active learning is: “anything that involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing” (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p. 2).

When planning the course, the program designers attempted to facilitate active learning in a number of ways including personalizing the topics, providing opportunities for self-correction, and focusing on formative rather than summative assessment. Formative assessment is conducted while learning rather than after learning, with the aim of providing immediate feedback that the learner can synthesize into the learning process, thereby narrowing the gap between actual and desired performance (Volkwein, 2010). When utilized in this way formative assessment is often characterized as assessment ‘for’ learning, rather than assessment ‘of’ learning (Black and William, 1998). One way of achieving this is by developing an assessment rubric which can be shared with the learner and which indicates as specifically as possible what the desired performance looks like.

A rubric is a scoring tool, which lists the criteria for a piece of work and articulates gradations of quality for each criterion (Goodrich, 1997). Rubrics can help to clarify expectations and to

focus instruction (Andrade, 2000), thereby helping build consensus among instructors and learners about learning goals and classroom practices. This is particularly important when several instructors are working on the same program as it promotes fairness, consistency and accountability across different classes. Finally, rubrics can support active learning by enabling instructors to “provide individualized, constructive critique in a manageable time frame.” (Andrade, 2005, p.29)

3. Developing the Rubric

Instead of creating an entirely new rubric, an existing speaking rubric, which has been in use for several years, was modified to evaluate students’ recordings of monologues. It was created using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001). The rubric is used by instructors to rate students in a paired speaking test that serves as a final exam for the first and fourth semester of English Communication courses at Sojo. Both instructors and students have had some experience using the speaking test rubric, so it was hoped that the newly modified rubric would be familiar.

The rubric was developed to promote active learning by giving students a clear understanding of the expectations of the course, as well as providing specific and individualized feedback related directly to the task. Students were given this rubric at the start of the unit, and were asked to review it before each of the four assessed language production (‘Write and Record’) tasks, which took place in the final class of each three-lesson cycle, as shown in Figure 1. In a Write and Record task, students spend between 15 and 20 minutes writing a text on the given topic, and then record an audio file of the text.

Topic	Lesson 1	Lesson 2	Lesson 3
My Life/ Timeline	Presentation of topic	Practice activities	Write and Record
A Trip	Presentation of topic	Practice activities	Write and Record
An Achievement	Presentation of topic	Practice activities	Write and Record
Golden Week	Final assessment		

Figure 1. Unit outline

As seen in Figure 2, the modified rubric contains three main areas: 'Fluency', 'Accuracy', and 'Story'. Each main area is then divided into two sub-areas. Each sub-area includes a short explanation in simple English and in Japanese of a strong performance. Fluency is divided into 'Speed' and 'Pronunciation'; Accuracy into 'Vocabulary' and 'Grammar'; and Story contains 'Detail' and 'Structure'.

Score	Fluency 流暢さ		Accuracy 正確さ		Story 話	
	Speed 速さ	Pronunciation 発音	Vocabulary 語彙	Grammar 文法	Detail 詳しさ	Structure 構成
	Speaking is at a comfortable speed with natural pausing. 自然な息継ぎを入れながら、適度な速さで話ができる。	Easy to understand, clear intonation, very little Katakana-like pronunciation. カタカナのような発音が少なく、明瞭なイントネーションで理解しやすい。	Uses many different words. Can make longer sentences. 様々な語彙を用い、長めの文が作成できる。	Few mistakes. 文法の間違いは少ない。	Can talk about experiences in detail, including feelings. 感情表現を含めて経験を詳細に話すことができる。	Can create a story that is easy to follow. 話しは理解しやすい構成で作成されている。
0 Not done	未提出	未提出	未提出	未提出	未提出	未提出
1 Poor	あまり良くない	あまり良くない	あまり良くない	あまり良くない	あまり良くない	あまり良くない
2 OK	まあまあ	まあまあ	まあまあ	まあまあ	まあまあ	まあまあ
3 Good	良い	良い	良い	良い	良い	良い
4 Excellent	素晴らしい	素晴らしい	素晴らしい	素晴らしい	素晴らしい	素晴らしい

Figure 2. The Rubric

The Fluency and Accuracy sections were adapted from the speaking test rubric, however Story was created using the 'Sustained Monologue: Describing Experience' area of the CEFR, under 'Overall Spoken Production'.

While the original rubric was used by instructors and had long explanations of each band in complicated teacher language, the modified version was updated for use by both instructors and students to a scale of 0-4 as follows: 0 - Not Done;

1 - Poor; 2 - OK; 3 - Good; 4 - Excellent. Instructors made it clear to students that a score of 4, or Excellent, was not representative of the level of a highly proficient English user, but rather the range of B1 on the CEFR. Students could perform higher than B1, but for most, reaching B1 proficiency was an attainable and realistic goal.

4. Methodology

This unit took place over fifteen lessons in the first semester of the second year. The first two lessons were dedicated to orientation, including explanation of the unit, expectations, the rubric, and homework. After the orientation period, there were four personal narrative topics: 'My Life/Timeline', 'A Trip', 'An Achievement', and 'Last Weekend'. As shown in Figure 1, three 90-minute lessons were devoted to each topic, culminating in an assessed Write and Record task. The last of the 15 lessons was dedicated to the fifth and final Write and Record, which served as the terminal assessment. Having gone through the process of preparing, writing and recording four different narratives with teacher support during the 12 preceding lessons, and having become thoroughly familiar with the assessment rubric, it was hoped that the students would be able to perform the final assessment independently in the final lesson. Linking the terminal assessment so closely to the course content in this way ensured that the learning outcomes and the assessment procedures were as closely aligned as possible.

4.1 Main Classroom Activities

Each topic had three elements which were consistent throughout the unit: an example text, a timed writing, and a Write and Record task. In each topic, the example text took a different form. For example, in My Life/Timeline, each instructor created their own timeline and presented it to their students in unique ways. For A Trip, the

instructors' stories were given in paragraphs and students used a recording to sequence the events in the story. My Weekend used sentence by sentence recordings, each time increasing the details in the story, which students transcribed.

Another constant was a timed writing. Sometimes done in class, sometimes as homework, students wrote about each topic for about 20 minutes, often before doing any in-class work on the topic. The purpose was to get their ideas on paper, which could then be elaborated on and corrected in later lessons.

Finally, each topic included a Write and Record task. First, students participated in speed dating, sharing their stories in conversation with multiple partners. In a speed dating activity students speak with a partner for a fixed amount of time, before moving on to speak for the same length of time with a new partner. Students speak to multiple partners, repeating the same topic each time. This allowed them to practice telling their stories repeatedly in preparation for writing. Then, students were able to review the rubric to focus their efforts. Next, students elaborated on their timed writing based on the peer feedback, teacher feedback, and language foci covered in the lessons leading up to the Write and Record task. After completing the writing, they practiced reading their story individually several times. Finally, using the online PoodLL Recording plugin for Moodle, students recorded their own voices. They could play back the recording and rerecord if necessary before submitting their stories in both spoken and written form via the SILC's institutional Moodle, as shown in Figure 3.

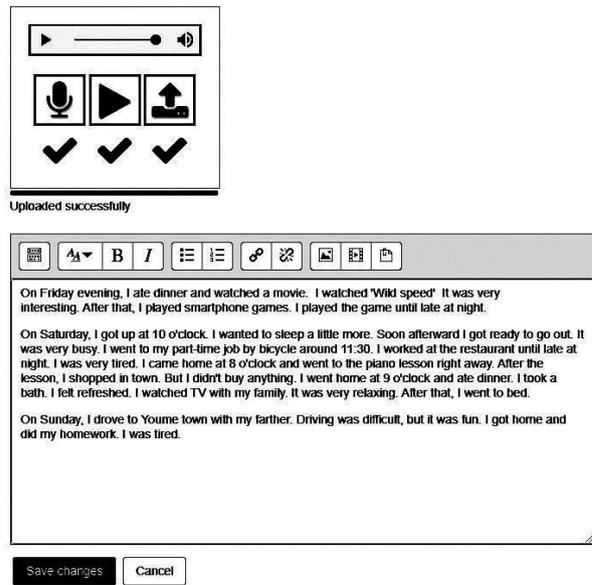


Figure 3. Submitting the assignment

In the first topic, a full class was needed to train students how to record and submit their narratives in Moodle. However, by the second or third topic, this section required only about 45-minutes of class time.

4.2 Supporting Classroom Activities

There were four language foci that were regularly addressed in the classroom. They were: past tense, linking words, feeling, and adding detail. These four points related directly to the rubric and emerged throughout the unit as weak points for many students. Before each Write and Record session, these points were reviewed. There were many classroom activities which provided students with opportunities to engage with each point.

Most lessons included a speaking element, encouraging students to interact with one another. These activities varied by class, as each instructor chose appropriate activities for each group. For example, running dictations, which include reading, writing, speaking and listening, were used to present example texts or conversation questions. In a running dictation, a text is displayed in the classroom and one student in a pair finds the text,

and memorizes a small excerpt. They then go back to their partner and dictate the excerpt. Students continue to do this until they have transcribed the entire text.

Peer collaboration was another important element throughout the course. Many activities required students to work together, not only in speaking activities, but also in areas such as brainstorming, story creation, sequencing, and adding detail. Students at this level can struggle to offer useful feedback about grammar or structure, but the process of negotiating meaning with their peers as they share their stories can help them to identify and repair problematic sections of their narrative.

A final element employed by all instructors was the use of shadowing to develop listening skills and oral fluency. Shadowing is a technique in which the learner repeats or ‘shadows’ what the speaker says as they are saying it, with no pausing. The technique has become common in Japanese classrooms and is claimed to be effective for developing oral fluency (Zakeri, 2014), as well as phoneme perception and overall listening comprehension (Hamada, 2015). The students had multiple opportunities to shadow model texts created by the instructors, as well as texts that they had themselves submitted and which the instructors had recorded using the Feedback PoodLL feature of Moodle. Shadowing instructors’ reading of the texts that the students had themselves created proved to be highly motivational and enabled learners to significantly improve on their pronunciation and prosody before resubmitting their narratives, this time in the oral form.

5. Using the Rubric

The rubric was used throughout the unit. As previously mentioned, the rubric was introduced in detail during the orientation lessons. Each area of the rubric was explained to students, and examples were given of a strong performance compared to a

weak one. Before each Write and Record task, students had access to the rubric to remind them of the specific goals of the activity. After submitting their writing and recording, the instructor listened to each student’s work, rating their performance using the rubric. Feedback was provided in up to three different ways. Firstly, the instructors graded both the written and spoken versions of the narrative using the rubric as shown in Figure 4.

Secondly, instructors were also able to provide written comments, and, thirdly, instructors could provide oral feedback, recorded via the Feedback PoodLL. After grading, students were encouraged to view the feedback provided by the instructor and listen to their own recording again.

Grade:

速さ - 自然な息継ぎを入れながら、適度な速さで話ができる。	未提出 0 points	あまり良くない 1 points	まあまあ 2 points	良い 3 points	素晴らしい 4 points
発音 - カタカナのような発音が少なく、明瞭なイントネーションで理解しやすい。	未提出 0 points	あまり良くない 1 points	まあまあ 2 points	良い 3 points	素晴らしい 4 points
語彙 - 様々な語彙を用い、長めの文が作成できる。	未提出 0 points	あまり良くない 1 points	まあまあ 2 points	良い 3 points	素晴らしい 4 points
文法 - 文法の間違いは少ない。	未提出 0 points	あまり良くない 1 points	まあまあ 2 points	良い 3 points	素晴らしい 4 points
詳しさ - 感情表現を含めて経験を詳細に話すことができる。	未提出 0 points	あまり良くない 1 points	まあまあ 2 points	良い 3 points	素晴らしい 4 points
構成 - 話しは理解しやすい構成で作成されている。	未提出 0 points	あまり良くない 1 points	まあまあ 2 points	良い 3 points	素晴らしい 4 points

Current grade in gradebook

19.00

Figure 4. Grading with the rubric

The rubric was used not only for the Write and Record task in each topic, but also for the final assessment at the end of the unit. At the start of the final 90-minute lesson, students were given the final topic, ‘Golden Week’, a holiday period which had occurred a few weeks earlier. After five minutes of thinking/planning time, students talked to a partner for ten minutes about their Golden

Week holiday, asking questions and adding details to their story. Then, students had 60 minutes to prepare, write, record and submit their narratives.

6. Feedback

6.1. Student

At the end of the unit, a survey was conducted, collecting answers from 148 students. Their response was largely positive. The overwhelming majority of students (93%) agreed that the goals of the course were important for them, with one student commenting: "Until now, I haven't written many longer sentences in English, so it was good practice." Over 87% of students agreed that the unit was good overall.

The most useful feedback was related to the rubric. 92% of students agreed that the rubric was easy to understand. A strong majority, 85%, agreed that the rubric helped them to know their strengths and weaknesses, and 88% agreed that the rubric showed them what to improve next time. There was also strong agreement (88%) that rubrics should be used in other English courses. However, only 79% of students claimed to check the rubric score after the assignments, which is something to consider in the future, perhaps devoting more class time to this.

Students (83%) also felt that the Write and Record task was useful for them, and 80% agreed that it is important to record yourself in English class. One student commented, "Speaking is very important." However, many students had trouble with the recording process, citing problems with hearing clearly or the equipment not working properly.

6.2. Instructor

Three instructors compiled self-reflections and participated in group discussions. Overall, it appeared that instructors also had positive experiences with this unit. The use of the rubric clarified both the goals and assessment criteria for students and instructors. Creating the rubric in

advance helped to shape and inform lesson planning, giving the overall unit more meaningful focus.

Again the most useful feedback was related to the rubric. The repetition of the rubric helped to familiarize instructors and students with the format, which meant as time went on, feedback improved. Also, it was possible to know very quickly the students strengths and weaknesses in terms of vocabulary, grammar, structure, pronunciation, and fluency, and to target those points in subsequent classes. Also, the repetition of the Write and Record format, albeit with different topics, gave students a chance to use the feedback almost immediately, so students knew what to focus on the next time, which made them more independent. As an instructor, using the rubric was not personally perceived as onerous, despite the quantity of student work produced. It was easy to score, change scores and to save the scores with just a few clicks while listening to student recordings.

Students were engaged throughout the unit and were actively producing English throughout the class, either individually or in groups. Although students were quite busy, the quality of the work produced, and the improvement shown over the course, was notable. Although the material was not easy, the students were focused and engaged. The clear structure made for more efficient planning, students knew what to expect, and, for the most part, were able to prepare better as a result. The pace was fast, but the main points were repeated throughout so there was a good balance of novelty compared to repetition, which instructors believed contributed to the improvement shown in the quality of work produced.

7. Conclusion

The real strengths of this unit were the clear goals and assessment criteria for both instructors and students. As stated, most students appeared to find the goals relevant. Clear goals helped with the

planning of the lessons, and also helped to keep students engaged, as they were more aware that the end of unit assessment would be mirrored on work done in class.

The rubric was a useful tool in many ways: it was easy to use, gave instructors a clear picture of students' strengths and weaknesses quickly, and gave students specific and useful feedback which could be implemented immediately. Students responded that they want to use rubrics in other English courses, which implies that many students perceived the value in the use of the rubric. However, as some students did not check their rubric score after assignments, instructors will need to develop methods for encouraging this in the future.

Aligning the classroom activities to the rubric kept students engaged throughout. Lessons were student-focused and each student produced a significant amount of both oral and written output. It was difficult for students to remain passive during the classes. It also gave them multiple opportunities to repeat material in different contexts to maximize opportunities to understand the main skills.

Overall, this project fulfilled its aims of improving the provision of speaking and writing practice for students in an active learning format. It is hoped that the success of this project will influence future curriculum development within the SILC.

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