7 Raising awareness on assessment criteria through peer-assessment and self-reflection in the Spanish oral class

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Abstract

In language courses, oral skills are frequently a source of anxiety for students. Moreover, in some occasions, students are unfamiliar with the evaluation criteria used to assess their performances, increasing their level of stress when facing the oral exam. This article describes a series of activities based on the introduction of several formative and summative self- and peer-assessment activities in a Year 2 Spanish module, aimed at students in the Modern Languages Programme at the University of Nottingham. Students have varied profiles and learning styles, as their programmes include Modern Languages and some variations of Joint Honours programmes with languages. The activities aimed to give students some extra tools to allow them to better monitor their oral performance, potentially easing their concern on the linguistic elements which would be assessed and letting them autonomously identify their own strengths and the areas where they might need improvement.

Keywords: oral skills, peer-assessment, self-assessment, B2, spanish language learning, assessment literacy.

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1. Introduction

The context of our practice is the Spanish 2 module which offers three contact hours a week: a lecture taught by the Module Convenor with 150 students, and two one-hour seminars in small groups: one focused on writing skills and the second one focused on oral practice. All classes are taught using Spanish, although English might be used exceptionally to clarify some points, for example giving assessment instructions or in one-to-one meetings with students. According to the module outline, these are the learning outcomes that students are expected to achieve after completing the module:

- Spanish 2 will bring students up to level B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR);
- it will provide them with the necessary linguistic skills for their year abroad; and
- students will respond to situations, both formal and informal, constructing a reasoned argument on a current topic or issue, either orally or in writing, demonstrating effective oral and written communication in Spanish.

2. Issues identified

Assessment is a key area that needs to be considered at all stages of any teaching and learning activity. From a student perspective, it can be one of the main sources of stress and a potential anxiety trigger. This situation worsens when we refer to the specifics of language learning, where oral skills are one of the main learning outcomes of the module and thus a fundamental part of assessment. The assessment of oral skills can be challenging for students due to its short timespan – usually oral exams do not take longer than 15 minutes – along with their inability to control the speech in the same way as in written assessments.

In our case, during Semester 1, students informally expressed their concerns about the oral assessment to me and other language tutors. They felt it was one of their main anxiety triggers when facing their final exams, but also during oral language classes and formative activities. In particular, oral assessment was a potential source of worries and stress for two main reasons: (1) students feeling they were not in control of their oral speech and relying too heavily on memorisation, leading to a surface learning approach; and (2) students often feeling unfamiliar with the applied evaluation criteria, or the level of language they were supposed to achieve (in our case, in the context of this paper, B2+). With regards to this, students were not able to fully understand the marking criteria for oral activities, nor the assessment rubric used to give them oral feedback. Students had been introduced to the marking criteria before, but it is worth highlighting that marking criteria wording is generally addressed to tutors, not to students. In fact, we discovered that students were not aware of what a B2 level was. Many of them were not familiar with the CEFR. An additional issue was that students focused on avoiding grammar mistakes but were unaware of other elements being assessed (e.g. fluency, vocabulary, cohesion and content).

3. Implementation of the practice

Allowing students to 'feel ownership' of their learning (Biggs & Tang, 2011, p. 40) is one of the essential elements to encourage students' motivation and further learning success. The amount of studies surrounding the need to encourage students to take control of their learning has grown substantially in the last decades. Nevertheless, despite the range of proposals available, there is a common element to most studies in this field: feedback plays a central role in improving "the student's capacity to self-regulate their own performance" (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p. 205, see also Biggs & Tang, 2011, pp. 64-65).

My departing point of reflection was precisely what students understood about the level corresponding to a CEFR B2 and after identifying the issues mentioned

above, I linked them to current theories on self- and peer-assessment. I further considered different strategies that could be followed to change this situation by encouraging student self-awareness of the learning process and the skills they are meant to acquire.

3.1. Contextualisation

Given the practical nature of the course, formative feedback and continuous summative assessment are key to the students' learning. However, final examinations carry the most weight of the mark awarded – an oral exam is 20%, while the final written exam weighs 40%, and continuous assessments a further 40%. I decided to focus on formative and continuous summative assessment, aiming to provide feedforward during the course. I prepared several activities specifically linked to the oral classes, and the formative and continuous oral assessment in class. These activities, completed in preparation for the final exam, aimed to give student's useful, constructive feedback to help them identify their strengths and the areas where their oral performance might need improvement. In other words, I designed these activities using the 'assessment for learning' approach (Carless, Joughin, & Liu, 2006; Sambell, McDowell, & Montgomery, 2013, pp. 8-9), which emphasises the idea that assessment should be pragmatic and useful for learners, with a good balance between summative and formative opportunities, and with formal feedback aimed to improve learning.

3.2. From peer-assessment to self-awareness

Among the different strategies that have been developed, formative peer-assessment seems a relevant option to consider when critically reflecting upon feedback and assessment, as it might be useful to tackle the issues mentioned.

Peer-assessment is now common practice in Higher Education and a well-established field of research. However, the goal of peer-reviewed activities, as stated by Sambell et al. (2013), falls below the framework of assessment for learning, and aims at "developing the student's capacity as a lifelong learner"

(p. 120). Peer-assessment therefore requires the student to act as an assessor and to produce feedback. This is a much more complex process that requires, as noted by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006, p. 200) and Black et al. (2003), among others, the students to connect with the knowledge they already have and to explicitly use the marking criteria. In other words, they are required to adopt the point of view of the assessor.

In the field of language learning, Cheng and Warren (2005, p. 95) comment on the comparatively low number of studies on peer-assessment on oral practice, as most of them are focused mainly on written practice. Rodríguez-González and Castañeda (2018, p. 2) highlight the same issue in their study on trained peer-feedback in second language learning and reveal how a well-planned and implemented activity can improve students' confidence, encourage active learning, and enhance audience awareness.

Considering the above-mentioned studies, I developed a peer-assessment activity on oral skills aimed at enhancing students' awareness on their learning by allowing them to consider which elements were part of a good oral performance at a B2 level. To achieve these goals, I developed a series of activities over six weeks during Semester 2, aimed at training students to become assessors and provide feedback.

3.3. Sequence of activities

The timeline of these stages was tailored to give students several opportunities to become assessors. First in groups, later individually, and finally on students as practise in identifying strengths and areas for development in their peers' presentation.

- Week 5, piloting oral presentations and peer-assessment: In small groups, students are asked to listen to each other practising the oral presentations; they ask questions and give informal feedback to their peers. At the end of the class, a few minutes are allocated for collective reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of students' performances.

- Week 6, out of class preparation for a first oral presentation: During self-directed study week, students prepared autonomously for the oral continuous assessment.

- Week 7, first oral presentation: Over two weeks, each student presented in class for three minutes, followed by a short three-minute Q&A. Students who did not present filled in an observation form commenting on their fellow students' performances and noting elements which could be improved in their presentations.

- Week 8, teacher's summary for the first oral presentation: The teacher collected all the feedback forms and processed the completed forms in a single, collective list of elements divided in two columns: those needing improvement and positive aspects.

- Week 9, feedback and analysis session on first oral presentation: Students were provided with that document and were asked to classify the items into the four descriptors included into the oral examiners' marking sheet (communication and understanding, including accent and pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and register, and intellectual performance). In this session, the teacher gave students the mark of the first oral presentation alongside the actual rubric against which they have been assessed. The oral seminar on Week 9 was essential – it was used both as a feedback session, so students received their marks, but also as a training session, with a previous activity with the feedback and data gathered by the students.

- Week 10/11, second oral presentation (mock oral exam): Over two weeks, students assessed each other's presentations, this time using the actual assessment rubric. Students were asked to identify the indicative band but not a mark. At the same time, each student filled in a self-assessment form at the end of their presentation. Finally, during the last two weeks, students were expected to reflexively practise their oral

exams and, at the same time, to be capable of identifying their own and their peers' strengths and areas of improvement.

4. Analysis of results

This was the first time that students were asked to observe and evaluate (but not grade) their fellow students' work. Therefore, the initial suggestion was received with certain reluctance. However, working in small groups, students were able to compile a first sample of reflections that included a wide array of items.

Then, students were formally asked to fill in the observation forms. Participants compiled a long list of elements covering grammar (uses of the subjunctive, prepositions, or past tenses), fluency (amount or lack of pauses, pronunciation), vocabulary (use of specific words), and content and coherence (precise answers, appropriate use of linkers, or deep knowledge about a topic). This first stage was thus reasonably successful, although not all the students completed the form. This could have been improved by emphasising that completing the form was not voluntary, but part of the activity.

I also noted that there was a disproportionate focus on grammar mistakes and fluency (specially the number of pauses made by the speakers) in the students' feedback. This was addressed in Week 9, which proved to be the most relevant session for the students. It gave them the opportunity to reflect upon such unbalances when I showed them a very long list of fluency and grammar issues and shorter one of issues related to vocabulary and content and coherence. The fact that it was their own feedback and they were asked to think about how to improve all the areas meant that they could reflect actively and critically about oral language as a complex whole. Furthermore, this session also helped them to fully understand their mark and their tutor's feedback.

On Week 9, students were expecting their marks from their oral presentations. The language tutor is expected to give them a marking sheet back with a grade

and some notes pointing out mistakes. I opted to alternatively follow the plan below.

- Students worked in groups classifying the items they had written down in four categories, corresponding to the columns of the oral assessment rubric: (1) communication and understanding, including accent and pronunciation; (2) grammar; (3) vocabulary and register; and (4) intellectual performance.

- For 15 minutes: each group shared their views and results, and certain aspects that might not have been clear were commented upon.

- For 10 minutes: in small groups, students identified one area where to improve as well as specific actions to improve in that area.

- For 10 minutes: students received their rubrics with the grades. They read their feedback and asked to comment on it individually with the language tutor. Office hours and the possibility of going through the feedback on a one-to-one basis was offered as well.

As mentioned, two major modifications were introduced in this session. First, I opted for the collective feedback reflection, before giving them their marks at the end of the session. This proved positive, as students were able to relate the collective feedback reflection with their own individual feedback reports and mark afterwards. Secondly, their feedback sheet was divided in two parts: the rubric and my own notes. These notes followed the same pattern of the student feedback identifying positive aspects and areas to improve, moving away from the previous model of focusing only on the mistakes.

On subsequent sessions, students clearly improved their performance on the mock oral exams, compared to their performance on the continuous assessment. They showed more confidence, and when asked how they thought their performance had been, they were better able to identify the areas where they might need

improvement, but also their strengths. Their focus widened from grammar and fluency to vocabulary and cohesion.

5. Conclusion

The main goal of this activity was to offer the students a more complex approach to a successful oral performance, moving from the obvious grammar mistakes to a more holistic view of oral language. Students' performance on their mock exams suggested that the activity had been successful. Most students were perfectly capable to peer- and self-assess an oral performance with an acceptable degree of accuracy, which demonstrates a better knowledge of criteria, therefore, they knew better what was expected of them. Furthermore, the activity kept the students engaged and I received positive informal oral feedback by conducting interviews during the class. The general feel was that students felt better prepared after doing this activity to successfully take their final oral exams. They also mentioned that they were more aware of the different elements considered by examiners and had a better understanding of the rubric. Therefore, I am confident that the activity proved to be successful, and useful to improve students' self-perception on their own learning by allowing them to view learning from the assessor's perspective.

In future iterations of the course, I would like to use the recordings of oral presentation exams – gathered mainly for moderation purposes, to enhance students' learning. I aim to anonymise a selection of recordings and develop next year an additional activity where students might discuss and assess them.

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