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Student assessment of oral presentations in German as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

Students are usually afraid of making oral presentations in a foreign language, mainly when they are beginners, as it is the case in this work. The main idea was to study how language skills were evolving and if students were able to recognize that progress. This work presents the methodology that has been followed in order to integrate the students' assessment in the evaluation of their oral presentations in German as a Foreign Language, at the Universitat Politècnica de València. The testing process was carried out in two ways: peer and self-assessment. Data was collected according to the various presentations. The paper describes the quantitative results of peer evaluation throughout the term and the qualitative feedback they provided. Data analysis permitted to observe how peer and self-assessment positively evolved throughout the term. What can be considered more important is that students have improved their formal communication skills, while they have also developed their knowledge on German language.

1. Introduction

Higher Education in the 21st century has integrated new technological resources and new (or not so new) methodological approaches. In the last years, the active role of the learner has been emphasized by the "active

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methodologies". The student takes an active part, not only in the learning process (through different techniques applied in the classroom) but also in the assessment of this learning.

In their works, Boud and Falchikov (2006); Montero-Fleta (2006), Pascual-Gómez et al. (2015) demonstrate how important it is for the student to participate in the assessment stage in order to complete his active role in the whole process. This joint assessment can be carried out through peer assessment (PA) and/or self-assessment (SA).

The motives for including the student in the evaluation process is not only for educational reasons, but also professional. Future job of students nowadays requires attitudes, skills and competences that can be developed through this joint assessment: it encourages the capacity of reflection, increases self-criticism, boosts cooperative working and, of course, helps to increase learning autonomy, essential for life-long learning.

However, it is also true that sometimes this kind of assessment has been used due to work overloads, as Valero-García and Díaz de Cerio (2005) point out, when the teacher has to deal with large groups. But we agree with Price et al. (2007) in their support for the great potential PA and SA have to influence learning: "Peer and self-assessment has the potential to offer assessment efficiencies, but its real value is in terms of its potential to impact on learning" (Plymouth University, para. 4).

The goal of this work is to verify if peer assessment and self-assessment help to improve the results in oral presentations in German. This is one of the subjects of the Bachelor's Degree in Informatics Engineering at the Universitat Politécnica de València (UPV). Another goal is to know what students reflect carrying out the evaluation. That is, the purpose is to analyze and value the efficacy of learning-oriented assessment, understood as an evaluation, which helps to improve at the same time the product and the learning process (Black and Wiliam, 1998).

The starting point is the concept of Carless et al. (2006) about higher education assessment, which is characterized by three ideas. Firstly, the evaluation tasks have to encourage this kind of learning needed in the 21st century. Then, the evaluation process has to seek life-long learning (through self-assessment and peer assessment). And finally, feedback has to be feedforward, that is, it has to have an effect on current and future tasks.

2. Methodology

The study is contextualized in the subject *Alemán A1* (Basic User Level of the CEFR). Its main goal is to achieve basic linguistic knowledges and skills in order to "understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type" as the CEFR indicates.

The experience has shown that beginner learners have problems to express themselves in German in the classroom. Therefore, it was decided to tackle this difficulty by giving them the opportunity to prepare their interventions in the target language. In addition to the simulations and role-playing, oral presentations are very useful for getting over this initial barrier.

2.1. Aims

In this investigation it has been determined to put assessment for learning into practice and check if, in effect, positive results in the evaluated subject learning (German language) and in the students' monitoring about their self-learning process could be obtained. That is, have the students improved their oral presentations technics and their speech by doing and evaluating the oral presentations themselves?

2.2. Procedure

In order to answer these questions the following tasks were prepared for the practical sessions in the multimedia laboratories. Working with the computer makes it possible to prepare and present cooperatively an oral presentation by the students. Moreover, thanks to the institutional platform, documents can be shared between the teacher and the students.

The content of three oral presentations about cultural aspects were defined: in the first one, the goal is to make a first approach to the physic and political geography of the different German federal states (*Bundesländer*), giving information about population, political party and sights of the land; the second one deals with the planning of a trip

to a German city or federal state, indicating means of transportation, accommodation and cost; and in the third one, students have to buy online giving details about measurements, packaging and prices in order to prepare a typical German recipe. These three topics provide insight into the German culture and the reality of a country, which still demands engineers, mostly informatics, and which is now being place of residence and of job place for many of our graduates.

The oral presentations were carried out in groups of two or three students. The first one was completely produced in the informatics laboratory without previous preparation. But for the two other following presentations, however, they could meet together and work on it previously so that the sessions became not too long. So, if they were able to have the presentation already prepared, they should only practice it before their contribution.

2.3. Participants

The available data correspond to presentations and evaluations of 25 students. All of them were absolute beginners, they had no previous knowledge of German. Excepting two, who were false beginners, that is, they started to study German again, although they already had a slight knowledge of it (for academic or personal reasons). In relation to their degree, 20 learners were studying Informatics Engineering, 2 learners Industrial Engineering, one Biotechnology, one Telecommunications Engineering and one Architecture.

2.4. Instruments and Tools

For the study two assessment instruments, which permitted to collect all the needed data, were introduced: the rubric to determine the different aspects of the oral presentations to be assessed, and the questionnaire for the SA.

In order to collect the answers corresponding to both PA and SA the institutional platform PoliformaT (based on Sakai) was used. This platform was chosen as repository for storing the recorded presentations' videos. Hence, peer assessment is not public, self-assessment neither and the videos are only available for the members of the working groups.

To assess each oral presentation, both students and the instructor used the same rubric as assessment instrument. To define the rubric dimensions those suggested by the ICE (Instituto de Ciencias de la Educación) of the UPV (AALHE, 2012) were considered, but slightly adapted starting from the former experience of the authors.

This rubric is defined with detailed criteria, which determine the quality of the oral work, giving value as much to the presentations accuracy, content, planning of the information and visual supports, as to linguistic written and oral correctness (Table 1). Both teacher and students followed the same criteria.

Table 1. Assessment Rubric

| Criteria | **Levels of achievement** | | | |
	D (0,2 p)	C (0,25 p)	B (0,35 p)	A (0,5 p)
Content	Less than half of the required information	Half of the required information	Sufficient information as required	Additional information provided
Design	Very few images, it is difficult to read the information	Some images, some information can be read	Almost everything enhanced with images, almost all the information can be read	Everything enhanced with images, all the information can be read
Written language (spelling, grammar, vocabulary)	Many errors in the slides	Some errors in the slides	Only a few errors in the slides	Almost no errors in the slides
Oral language (pronunciation, fluency)	Language impossible to understand	Language difficult to understand	Language easy to understand	Language easy to understand and fluent

Four dimensions were assessed by peers: a) the contents, how they were selected and structured; b) the design of the electronic presentation (multimedia elements, colours, fonts, layout and so on); c) the written language and d) the oral language. For the last dimension and taking into consideration that presentations are usually given in pairs, each student is assessed individually.

Four levels of achievement were given: A, B, C, and D, corresponding to the numeric values: 0.2 – 0.25 – 0.35 – 0.5, being necessary a minimum of 0.2 to pass the practical session. Therefore, all of them had passed the practical sessions in advance; this can eliminate tension and strengthen the sense of these laboratory sessions, that is, to practice; but by evaluating the effort and the work done. In addition, it is useful for focusing the attention on specific aspects to be improved and consolidate.

Each group is assessed by its classmates individually, according to the group work and the oral expression of each member group for the last criterion.

The oral presentations were recorded with a mobile device and were stored in the institutional platform. Both teacher and students can thus view the recording in order to analyse those aspects they consider and draw their conclusions. This is really effective for the self-assessment and helps to evaluate the learning process of the students from the point of view of the teacher.

In order to assess the oral performance learning process, students themselves were asked by using five open-ended questions (Westall Pixton and Gil Salom, 2004):

- Q1. Do you think you maintained the audience's interest? How?
- Q2. Were you able to manage your time during the preparation?
- Q3. What do you think were the strengths of your presentation?
- Q4. What do you think were the weaknesses of your presentation?
- Q5. How do you think you could improve it?

And for the self-reflection of the third presentation, only three questions were asked, which completed the self-assessment process by comparing the presentations carried out and evaluating their performance:

- Q6. Compared with the last two presentations, do you think you have improved? In which aspects?
- Q7. What do you think has helped to improve your ability to make an oral presentation in German?
- Q8. What do you think you could still improve and how?

All the questions had been commented in the classroom, so that students could be sure about what was being evaluated, why and with which purpose. It was considered necessary that students were informed and conscious of the sense and goal of each activity made in the classroom.

3. Results

Having looked at the methodology in the former section, obtained assessment results are shown now. Firstly, peer assessment results for each of the three oral presentations (labs) are described and then, self-assessment results.

Concerning peer assessment, each of the following Figures (1 to 3) collects the scores assigned to the corresponding oral presentation. On the one hand, the instructor scores for each group and, on the other hand, the average of the students' scores for the same groups.

In the first oral presentation (Figure 1) instructor scores are, in general, more extreme than that of the students. In particular, concerning groups 1, 3 and 4 scores are divergent. For instance, while instructor score for group 1 is the highest possible score, the corresponding students' score is among the lowest. For groups 3 and 4, the opposite is the case.

However, in the second presentation (Figure 2) a substantial overlap in scores can be appreciated.

Finally, Figure 3 shows that both assessments are much more similar in the third presentation. Moreover, in virtually all cases, scores go simultaneously up and down for the different groups. In other words, the opinion of the instructor and that of the students seem to agree. To better understand the numerical differences between instructor and students' scores, we have to remember that the second actually corresponds to an average, as stated above.
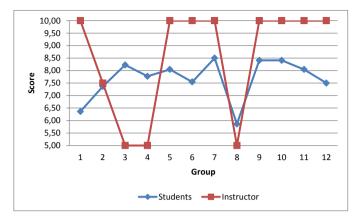
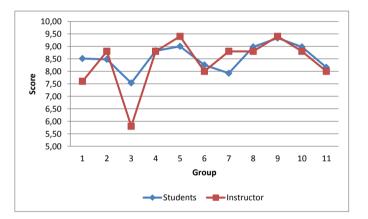Figure 1. Lab 1: The German federal states (*Bundesländer*)
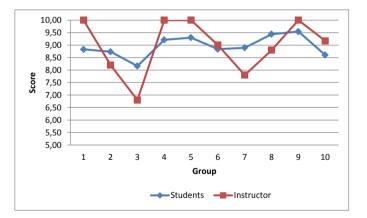

Figure 2. Lab 2: Planning a trip online

Figure 3. Lab 3: Buying online

Qualitative analysis indicates that the most difficult aspects for students concerning oral presentations have been overcome through repeated practice. Moreover, it seems clear that the improvements in the usage of the target

language (pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary), and those about emotional factors such as nerves and self-confidence, are clearly related.

4. Conclusions

The data analysis of both peer and self-assessment indicated how these two processes have positively evolved throughout the term. What is more important is to consider that students have improved their formal communication skills, while they have also developed their knowledge on German language. Supported by these assessment processes, students were able to detect those aspects to be improved and took the necessary actions for making it possible. To sum up, it could be stated that they are becoming "expert" evaluators as well as "experts" in the German language that they are learning.

Acknowledgements

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