

Teaching Public Speaking in a Blended Learning Environment

Ainol Haryati Ibrahim and Zailin Shah Yusoff

Abstract—Information and communication technologies (ICTs) provide new environment for learning and teaching. Today, apart from a fully face-to-face or online environment, blended learning promises opportunities for teaching and learning to be done in both environments. This paper reports results from an analysis of data collected from students at a Malaysian university. An end-of-semester survey was completed by 40 students taking a Public Speaking course. The survey was conducted to understand students' reactions towards the use of wiki in a blended learning environment. The survey data are being used to inform decisions on the course delivery structure and about adoption of new digital technologies for learning and teaching. Findings from the study indicate that the students found that using wiki facilitated their speech preparation process specifically in receiving feedback and improving speech delivery. Although some had reservation about publishing their speeches publicly on wiki, they understood that it was to their benefit. Therefore using wiki in a blended learning environment was found to be advantageous to the Public Speaking course.

Index Terms—Blended learning, ICT, public speaking, wiki.

I. INTRODUCTION

In most English language classrooms, especially in English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL), the instructors are often faced with the daunting task of getting the learners to overcome their anxiety to speak in the target language. Three major factors that could contribute to this are cultural factors, linguistic factors, and psychological or affective factors [1]. Anxiety, often linked to feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension or worry, affects the ESL/EFL learners significantly [2]. For an ESL learner in a public speaking class, performing a task in front of the class increases communicative stress, and is predicted to lead to a reduction in fluency and complexity. Reference [1] suggested that ESL/EFL learners' problems in production may be eased if they are given time to plan before they begin to speak. Thus, for long turns such as giving speeches or presentations, reference [3] recommended that students be provided with opportunities to practice. However, due to time constraints, such practice is almost impossible to carry out extensively in the classroom.

One method to overcome this is through using web-based tools such as wiki, podcast and *you tube* to facilitate practice.

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Through the use of these tools in a blended-learning environment, students can be given instructions, practice their speech delivery; receive feedback from peers and instructors on their speech outline and speech delivery. Blended learning, which is "a learning program where more than one delivery mode is being used with the objective of optimizing the learning outcome and cost of program delivery" [4] will also minimize the need for face-to-face interaction and overcome problems of time-constraints. Thus, this study seeks to look into the effects of using web-based tools to facilitate practice for students in a public speaking course.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study was guided by the following research objectives:

- To examine students' use of wiki for the Public Speaking course;
- To investigate students' perception of the use of a blended learning environment in teaching public speaking skills.

III. PRACTICE IN PUBLIC SPEAKING

Communication is a dynamic process, defined as the process of sending and receiving verbal and nonverbal messages to create shared meaning [5]. There are various contexts of communication, for instance, intrapersonal, impersonal, interpersonal, small group and public [6]. Public speaking is one context where communication occurs, specifically, in the public domain. Public speaking is defined as "a sustained formal presentation made by a speaker to an audience" p. 10 [6]. According to [7], it is an activity involving mental and physical presentations which are different from social conversational skills. An effective speaker requires physical coordination, mental concentration, content organization and skills practice, and a great deal of experience.

A number of studies have been done to investigate the impact of different approaches in method of instruction in developing public speaking skills and reducing speech anxiety [8] [9]. Nevertheless, regardless of the approach, public speaking scholars agree that practice is essential in reducing speech anxiety and developing public speaking skills [7], [10], [11]. Practice enables individuals to identify and address speech-related problems or concerns prior to delivery [10]. Greater self-control and increased effectiveness in speech performance are also facilitated because practice enhances familiarity with speech

performance and the public speaking environment. In fact, it is “one of the most important factors in confident speaking for speakers at all levels of experience” p.25 [7].

One way a language instructor could assist learners in managing anxiety in second language speaking is by providing opportunities for practice through task repetitions or rehearsals [12] [2] [3]. There are two distinct but related ways repetition affect performance [12]. First, experience of a particular communication task on one occasion helps learners carry out the same task on subsequent occasion. Secondly, work on a particular type of communication task helps learners deal with the new versions of that task type. This is in line with Vygotsky’s “zone of proximal development” (ZPD), which explains the difference between an individual’s actual and potential levels of development where skills already mastered constitute actual level; and skills that can be performed when assisted constitute the potential level. Therefore, learnt skills provide a basis for the performance of new skills. Reference [13] suggest that because formal speaking, such as giving a speech in class, involves long turns, learners need to be aware of ways to plan the time they are given to speak. Reference [3] further suggests that when teaching students to make oral presentations or to give speeches, it is important for the instructor to provide opportunities for the students to practice giving prepared, extended presentations or speeches in class.

In public speaking skills training, audio recordings could be utilized as a tool for effective practice or rehearsal, especially for vocal-related sub-skills, for example, pronunciation, intonation, or rate of speech. This parallels the suggestion by [7], who states that for novice speakers, at the initial stage, practice sessions could be audio-recorded, to check for naturalness, and vocal variety. Besides being able to play back their speeches for review, students will also have the opportunity to receive feedback from peers, instructor, and even members of the public who are interested in the contents of the speech. Audio recordings posted on course websites also provide opportunities for the students to communicate with a global audience through the Web [14]. And because these recordings are accessible to the public, the students are empowered to be legally responsible for the contents of their speeches [15]. Thus the speech preparation process becomes real and authentic, as opposed to when they are preparing speeches to be delivered in the classroom with only their peers and the instructor as the audience.

Recently, researchers have started to compare different approaches in the method of instruction for a public speaking course [8] [9]. Nevertheless, little has been done to study the impact of technological tools in the instructional process. Rapid technological advancements, particularly the proliferation of information and communication technology (ICT), makes it imperative to examine how a web-based tool, specifically, wiki, affects teaching and learning in a public speaking classroom. In the public speaking classroom, wikis which are editable, web-based free authoring tool, and can create socially rich environment that encourages the construction of knowledge in an authentic environment [16]. Wikis can be utilized as a website that serves as a hub for student activities related to developing public speaking skills. These activities include drafting speech outlines, posting audio recordings of speech practices, and getting feedback on speech practices from instructor and peers. This study

explores students’ use of wiki in speech practice activities, and their perception of the use of a blended learning environment in teaching public speaking skills.

TABLE I: THE APPLICATION OF WIKIS IN THE PUBLIC SPEAKING CLASS

WEEK	TOPIC(S)	MODE	
		F2F	WIKIS
1	Introduction to the course/ Introduction to Wikispaces and Audacity, the digital recording tool used to record students’ audio practice	✓	
2-8	Speechmaking Process : Informative Speeches Input : lectures, videos of sample speech presentations	✓	
	• Students planned and drafted their speech outlines on their Wikis during and outside of class meetings, and received feedback from the instructor and group members via Wiki	✓	✓
	• Students practiced certain aspects of delivery by recording their recitations of poems. These audio files were uploaded to their Wikis for feedback	✓	✓
	• Students recorded their practice of speech delivery (to be uploaded on Wiki) for feedback on pronunciation, intonation, and vocal variety	✓	✓
9-14	Speechmaking Process : Persuasive Speeches Input : lectures, videos of sample speech presentations	✓	
	• Students planned and drafted their speech outlines on their Wikis during and outside of class meetings, and received feedback from the instructor and group members via Wiki	✓	✓
	• Students practiced certain aspects of delivery by recording their recitations of poems. These audio files were uploaded to their Wikis for feedback	✓	✓
	• Students recorded their practice of speech delivery (to be uploaded on Wiki) for feedback on pronunciation, intonation, and vocal variety	✓	✓

IV. METHODOLOGY

The research was carried out in a public engineering and technology-focused university in the east coast of Malaysia. This project involved an instructor, who was also a member of the research team, and 40 second-year undergraduate students taking the Public Speaking course, from the Bachelor of Applied Sciences in Industrial Biotechnology program.

The aim of the Public Speaking course was to introduce students to the speechmaking process. Students were exposed to two varieties of public speaking, namely, informative speaking and persuasive speaking. Besides instructional lectures, sample speeches and videos were shown to enhance students' understanding of the course. Class meetings were held twice a week, with each session lasting for two hours, at the multimedia language laboratories. In order to investigate the extent of the benefits that learners may gain from the use of Wikispaces in a public speaking class, the study made use of a one-semester application of this tool in the speechmaking process. Table I summarizes the application of Wikis in the Public Speaking class.

At the end of the 14-week semester, the learners were given a questionnaire to complete. Data gathered from the questionnaires were coded for analysis

TABLE I: STUDENT ACTIVITIES ON WIKI

Activities	n	%
Using Audacity for speech practice	39	97.5
Using Audacity for recording	38	95
Using wiki to draft speeches	38	95
Upload speech practice	38	95
Visit lecturer's wiki	37	92.5
Visit course mates' wiki	34	85
Give feedback to course mates	33	82.5

V. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

All of the students said that computers were easy to use and 72.5% said that they have high computer literacy. That is perhaps the reason why they did not face any problems using wiki (77.5%) even though this was the first time they have used wiki (97.5%). They also did not face any difficulty in using Audacity for the first time (90%) to audio record their practice.

Most of the students accessed their wiki at the university's one-stop centre (97.5%), which is a facility equipped with wifi for the students' convenience. Half of the students spent between one to three hours each day on their wiki while another 25% spent four to six hours each day.

The activities frequently done by students online revolved around speech practice (Table II). The students used Audacity to record their speeches (95%) and to practice the speeches assigned to them (97.5%). Wiki was used to draft the speeches (95%) and upload their speech practice (95%) for peer feedback. Instead of providing feedback face-to-face, students were able to use wiki to mediate feedback. The students also visited the lecturer's wiki (92.5%) and each other's wiki (85%). Table 2 illustrates the activities the

students were engaged on wiki throughout the course:

One of the activities that they had to do in the course was to record their speeches for course mates to provide feedback. The students had mixed feelings about this activity. Eleven of the students 27.5% felt that the activity was good for feedback some said that they were excited about having an audience to their speeches (15%). Others said that it was a good experience (15%), that they enjoyed it (2.5%) and helped them improve their speech delivery (10%). However quite a number claimed that they were a little nervous and embarrassed to have an audience to their speeches other than the course instructor and course mates (20%). One student said:

- I would feel embarrassed as I'm not good in English (Student 1).
- Other comments which had similar tones include: embarrassed, shame, shy, should be private.
- Some students felt the same way but took it as a positive experience when they said:
- At first it was embarrassing. However, as the group members gives comments on the audio files, it was encouraging (Student 6).
- I felt a bit shy to uploading an audio file. However, I think that method is the best so that everyone can give their feedback to improve my performance (Student 7).
- I felt nervous at first, as I'm letting everyone to listen to my speech practice. However, I found it useful as it helped me. I learned from others' comments (Student 8).

The positive reactions from students suggests that they were taking charge of their own learning even though they may not be comfortable with having a wide audience listening to their speeches. This supports postulates from several studies [15], [17] that when students' speeches are accessible to the public, they are empowered to be responsible for the contents of their speeches.

The students also said that wiki was easy to use for the activities that they had to do in the Public Speaking course such as drafting and writing their speech outline, recording speech practices and providing feedback to course mates' speeches (87.5%). They also appreciated the function of wiki as a repository for all their drafts, outlines and speeches for the course (90%). The students specifically mentioned that wiki was a good tool for providing feedback and improving their speeches (97.5%). When asked which they preferred; using a blended learning or mainly face-to-face approach, more than half of the students (57.5%) preferred the blended learning than the face-to-face approach.

VI. CONCLUSION

The blended learning mode that was used for the Public Speaking course provided the students with more opportunities to practice speaking outside of the classroom. It also empowers students by giving them opportunities to create and publish for a real audience. The speech preparation process becomes real and authentic, as recommended by scholars, as opposed to when they were preparing speeches to be delivered in the classroom with only

their peers and the instructor as the “audience”.

Learning in this environment represented a new and attractive experience, and develops a more creative learning environment. However, some students suggested that a certain percentage be given to online activities as part of the coursework to ensure that all students take the activities seriously. This would be the recommendation from this study. Future research can further explore if there are significant differences in the speech preparation process of students in different learning environments: online, face-to-face and blended. Matters of assessment and evaluation should also be given due consideration for blended learning Public Speaking course.

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