Training Public Speaking and Presentation Skills for Rural Students on Online Platform: An Experimental Study

Ayesha M.I.

1 PhD Research Scholar, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore, India

Abstract

Purpose: This training programme aimed to improve the public speaking and presentation skills of the rural students. This experimental study sought to enhance the speaking skills and learning outcome of the students by bringing training modules, students and technology together. This paper highlights the challenges and findings of training rural students on “Public Speaking and Presentation Skills” and suggests some better ways for effective language teaching on online platform.

Methodology/Approach/Design: The study is of an experimental design. The sample for the experimental study was chosen based on the requirements and interests of the learners. Entry level proficiency test and exit test were conducted for the participants of the training programme. The performances of the target students were video recorded and analysed. Comparison was made to assess the level of improvement found in the target group.

Results: When students were taught the twenty strategies for public speaking, each learner came forward to present their speech but few students faced network issue which made their presentation not to sound good. During the exit test it is seen that there is a slight increase in the performance of the learners. In order to assure quality in E-learning platform there is a need for flexibility on the side of both learner and teacher.

Practical Implications: The study presents practical implications for teachers. The results of the study might be of use for handling speaking lessons for students of rural areas.

Originality/Value: From the trainers’ perspective, remote learning or virtual learning has become the current educational ultimatum. Teachers should be flexible to adapt virtual classroom than clinging on to the outdated methods used in a physical or traditional classroom.

1. Introduction

Public Speaking is a learnable skill that requires excellent communication skills. A good public speaker should be a good communicator; he must know how to keep his audience engaged. A good public speaker should know the art of presentation by doing so his speech becomes a remarkable one. Public Speaking and Presentation skills is the need of the hour, training students on this area is very essential as it will catalyse their career opportunities.

Effective public speaking skills helps the students with career advancement, as they indicate creativity, critical thinking skills, leadership abilities, poise and professionalism, qualities which are valuable for job market (Carnes, 2016). While students in urban colleges are getting the best of training on Public speaking and Presentation skills, there are still students from rural colleges who do not get the benefit of quality training on Public speaking and
Presentation Skills. This training programme strives to improve the skills of the rural students through digital classroom. The idea is to enhance the learning outcome of the students by bringing training modules, students and technology together. It also looks at the impact of this sudden change on teachers and learners and it also views how the learners respond in different context.

Training rural students on this topic was indeed a challenging one. Though the learners were final year students, few learners of the same batch were not able to properly even construct a sentence. Based on the speaking level, the module for the training was designed. The students had a strong conviction that only when grammar is learned properly can the language be spoken fluently. This strong conviction was broken by making them to speak wrong English confidently. In the process, their mistakes were corrected, by doing so their confidence level increased gradually. Students were taught grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary and public speaking and presentation skills strategy. All the students were readily available on Google Meet. Their interest to learn new things made the trainers to train them more on this topic. By the end of every session five students were asked to speak for five minutes on their area of interest. Training students in traditional classroom and virtual classroom did have some differences. In traditional classroom, the students are always under the supervision of the teacher whereas in virtual classroom especially in Google Meet, when the video is turned on, there are chances for bandwidth issues, so the students were instructed to turn off their audio and video and post their responses in the chat box.

2. Literature Review

Public speaking and Presentation skills play an integral role in establishing a successful and rewarding professional career. Effective public speaking skills helps the students with career advancement, as they indicate creativity, critical thinking skills, leadership abilities, poise and professionalism, qualities which are valuable for job market. Over the years, it is seen that learners from rural colleges struggle while communicating in English language. While students in urban colleges are getting the best of training on Public speaking and Presentation skills, there are still students from rural colleges who do not get the benefit of quality training on Public speaking and Presentation Skills.

Change is the essence of life. Teachers who adapt to the current teaching methods stand the test of time. In the current teaching arena, ICT enabled collaborative teaching and learning environment is very predominant. Covid-19 has brought about drastic changes in all fields of life. Teachers are experiencing tremendous change in their vocation and are under stress to find new ways to upkeep and reach their students. Almost 75% of school children are not attending school in buildings due to closure of many universities and schools across the globe. Remote learning or virtual classroom has come as a panacea to alter traditional classroom. Traditionally, India has remained a source of ELT experiments based on various methods of English language teaching. Fascinatingly, a point has been reached in the history of methods that it is simply not possible to evolve the best or super method, for every method is not suitable to every teacher and learner. It is in this context; online teaching has evolved as an alternative. Although virtual classroom has its own uses, it is for every English teacher to
question their own understanding of method and teach English in the best way they can. When approaches change, tools and teaching practices change. As a result, there is a perpetual production of new materials and teacher training. In all this commotion of commercial activities, language takes a back seat and the language-learning situation remains as it has ever been. Sometimes, the situation has deteriorated so badly that alarming warning bells have rung by different stakeholders, including academics and employers (Bernabas 2013).

Farhan Raja in his article titled “Anxiety Level in Students of Public Speaking: Causes and remedies” (2017), states that many learners despite being competent in their field of work they struggle in their workplace because of their lack of public speaking skills. The study gives importance for the students to overcome public speaking anxiety before they transit from academic life to professional life. It also analyses the reasons behind the anxiety level in undergraduate students of a public speaking class and recommends strategies to overcome fear. This study was entailed quantitative research paradigm on a sample of fifty students using convenience sampling technique from a reputable private sector business school in Karachi. The findings showed that students who fear public speaking can perform well if they use certain strategies to fight their fears. Research revealed that exposure to virtual environment can facilitate student confidence and enables them to face audience irrespective of the size.

According to Pertaub, Slater and Baker (2001), professionals are expected to present numerous talks to both small and large groups of audience at different intervals of their professional lives and if they become victims of public speaking anxiety, they face a backlash and this anxiety can have a severe influence on their career. Their research also describes the results, which illustrate that social anxiety induced in people is directly proportional to the variety of feedback received from the audience. They explain that this creates a strong impact on the confidence of the individuals and it traces significantly into their public address.

 Spijck (2011) conducted a research in which eighty out of every hundred people experienced Public speaking anxiety at a small or large scale. Many people in the group ranked public speaking as a fear more dreadful than death. Psychologists refer this fear as an irrational one which could be often overcome with proper strategy and practice. Akin and Kunzman (1974) conducted a research in which their study outlined the symptoms of Public speaking anxiety among students. The evaluation showed that mixed behavioural format emphasizing practice situations similar to the desensitization approach, which teaches participants to control their anxiety by enabling them to gradually face it through exposing them again and again to the anxious situation. Hence, those who practice well before they speak in public are most likely to be confident and deliver good presentation.

3. Methodology and Procedures

During unprecedented Covid-19 situation, Virtual Classrooms are used to support traditional classrooms for which it is worth carrying out an experimental study which tries to account the
challenges and benefits of training public speaking and presentation skills on virtual platform. The approach to develop this project funded by MHRD- RUSA 2.0- BEICH is via experimental study which is understood as a research methodology in direct opposition to descriptive case study.

3.1 Samples Chosen for the Study

The sample for the experimental study was chosen based on the requirements and interests of the learners.

Sample I

Virtual Classroom Environment: III Year Students of Bharathiar University Arts and Science College, Thondamuthur

To conduct this experimentaton “A Twelve Day Online training cum workshop on Public Speaking and Presentation Skills” was specifically organised for Ninety, Third year students of Bharathiar University Arts and Science College, Thondamuthur at Coimbatore district, Tamil Nadu, India. The learners’ involvement, learning process, technological literacy of the trainers and learners and challenges in the online training were experimented. The training was conducted on Google Meet for two hours a day. The training was conducted on Google Meet for two hours a day. Various resource people were invited to train the rural students on the ins and outs of communication and presentation skills.

3.2 Research Tools

• Pilot Study
• Entry Level Proficiency
• Process based activities
• Exit level test

3.3 Pilot Study

The researcher as an initial step towards the journey of research conducted a pilot study through Google Meet by asking the learners to introduce by turning on the mic. This was done to analyse the interest levels of learners in public speaking and also as an attempt to study the sample size and to make further improvement upon the research design.

Objectives of Pilot Study

• To plan the strategies to carry out the study
• To study the interest level of learners in developing the language learning skills in English especially while speaking
• To gather information essential for research
• To promote quality and efficiency of research

Advantages of Pilot Study
- Careful planning is possible
- It helps in identification of issues before carrying out an experimental research
- It provides researcher alternative measures through which clear results from the main study are produced

3.4 Entry Level Proficiency Test

Entry level proficiency test was conducted for the participants of the training programme. The students were asked to speak on their favourite topic for three minutes. They were analysed on the parameters of Confidence, Voice, Articulation, Eye Contact, Topic Focus, Creativity and Performance. By analysing them the following hurdles while speaking were identified. They are:

- When learners are unfamiliar with the target language, all that they say is easily misunderstood
- Limited Vocabulary
- Inaccurate Grammar
- Lack of Fluency
- Imperfect Pronunciation
- Quite many learners are comfortable speaking among themselves in a small group, but are not comfortable facing the audience
- Lack of active listening
- Fear of speaking in public
- Fear of expressing certain views
- Some students write well, but they are not able to express themselves orally.

4 Process Approach in Class

Lesson Plan for the course was designed according to the needs and requirements of the learners. The lessons handled during the training programme were understandable even to people who belong to regional medium. In pilot study, the learners had hurdles while communicating. To shed the fear, the resource persons motivated the learners and had friendly approach. The students were open to discussion in the process of training. Liberty to speak wrong English confidently enamoured the courage in the learners to speak English confidently.

5 About RUSA 2.0- BEICH Training Programme

Twelve Day Online Training cum Workshop on Public Speaking and Presentation Skills is a unique programme offered by the Ministry of Human Resource Development and Government of India and the Department of Higher Education through RUSA 2.0- BEICH of Bharathiar University. The ultimate objective of this programme is to enrich the Public Speaking and Presentation Skills of the students and to make them well equipped to compete the challenges of the job market and the profession.

4. Results and Discussion
Exit Test

The exit test was conducted based on the below parameters to test the public speaking skills of the students.

- Confidence
- Voice
- Articulation
- Eye Contact
- Topic Focus
- Creativity
- Performance

The performances of the target students were video recorded and analysed. Comparison was made to assess the level of improvement found in the target students, which will help to assert the findings of the research.

6.1 Qualitative Analysis

The chart above states the transformation of learner’s performance during Entry level and exit level. The learners were assessed based on the above parameters. It can be seen that learners during entry test had apprehension to face the audience while speaking. During the exit test it is seen that there is a slight increase in the performance of the learners. This chart shows that after the training programme, the learners have got confidence to face the audience without fear and can logically organize their ideas while speaking.

6.2 Adaptability and Technological Literacy
Human beings are differentiated from other living species because of their ability to think. The twenty-first century is witnessing drastic transformation and potential advancement in each and every arena of human life. While analysing the developments of the past with the present, the advancement in various fields in the past has taken a long course of time with the strenuous effort undertaken by many people. But in an ICT environment, technology can update its efficiency within the blink of an eye. Taking the case of an application named ZOOM as a perfect example, the application is developed by China during the time of March where the entire world was shackled down due to the COVID-19 outbreak. By developing the applications, like Cisco Webex Meetings, Google Meet, Jitsi Meet, Skype Meet Now and Zoom with user friendly interface, millions of people have benefitted to gather in a virtual forum which is instrumental in advancement of learning and knowledge sharing. With the rapid advancement in human beings thinking, they enable themselves and the society with a concept of ‘Future-Ready’. So the need for technological assessment in educational sector turns inevitable starting from accessing journals, gathering study materials, equipping and updating oneself with sufficient knowledge regarding various subjects for achieving professionalism as well as for attaining academic excellence.

The first and foremost trait needed for a human being in the technologically built society is Adaptability. Adaptability turns out as one of the essential human characteristic traits needed for survival in the twenty-first century. According to the words of Charles Darwin “It is neither the strongest nor the intelligent species will survive, it is the one who adapts to change will survive” (Web). This is one of the beautiful concepts put forward by Darwin some centuries ago which is very much relevant to the present scenario, where people adapt themselves to function efficiently with the aid of technology. If anyone fails to adapt to the change they might miserably lose themselves in the fast flowing stream of life. One can successfully adapt with the change by gaining technological literacy. Technological Literacy is gaining adequate knowledge about the various innovations that took place in the area of Information and Technology which is very much essential in contributing for the betterment of one’s life.

The second most important trait is the ability to critically interpret various essential elements needed for human being’s existence, because Technology can be considered as a double-edged sword which can be used for both constructive and destructive use. Many people around the globe have turned as panic sellers and are cooking up fallacies through technological platform which need to be understood and ignored. Developing critical thinking is very much influential in understanding the credibility and authenticity of any piece of information. The third and the crucial trait needed for establishing a strong role in academic forum is Communication Skills. As Steven Pinker, Canadian born American Cognitive Psychologist famously said “Language enables thinking and it enhances the way of thinking in multiple dimensions” (Web). So Language not only meets the demand of Communicating with others but it also helps for articulating one’s idea to a larger audience which is helpful in kindling one’s thinking and cognitive capabilities. Here in the present pandemic times, a speaker needs to perform in a virtual technological forum rather than on a traditional setup where he lacks the real ambience and face to face interaction. These are some of the practical
difficulties faced by a speaker in a virtual forum. Mark Edmundson, English professor at the University of Virginia, states that online education creates a “monologue and not a real dialogue” in the learning environment.

7 Challenges on Training Online

When students were trained online on Public speaking and presentation skills, it was a challenging task. In the beginning of the training session, most of the students were finding difficulty to access Google Meet. To simplify the process a mock session was conducted on how to access Google meet. The students were active listeners, they had the keenness to know new things but when all started responding turning on their mic and video, bandwidth issues were severely found and the voice of the participants started breaking and echoing. This interruption was a barrier. When students were taught the twenty strategies for public speaking, each learner came forward to present their speech but few students faced network issue which made their presentation not to sound good. There was little or no face to face interaction.

8 Findings

- Adaptability is the best trait for existence in technological built society.
- Technological Literacy is important for the teachers and students of 21st century.
- Technical feasibility is a major hindrance to train rural students online.
- Virtual classroom has forced economically poor parents to go for smart phone to meet the school or college’s requirements.
- In traditional classroom, teachers lack interest in keeping the learners engaged whereas, in online classroom teachers need to be more creative to make the classroom engaged and involved. How efficient or fluent the speaker may be, the learners may start losing their interest after forty-five minutes whatever be the digital mode, if there is no activity.
- Affordability is an important crisis during the pandemic. While all trainings are conducted online, it is a question whether all participants are able to join.
- As education is getting upgrading e-learning will be the future.
- Rural students have minimal exposure to technical accessibility than urban students.
- Teachers those who are not digital users are forced to learn how to use technology effectively.
- Pandemic has created forced learners.
- Group Activities are not possible on online platform.
- Effective online training on Public Speaking and Presentation skills is possible provided network connectivity should be strong for all participants.
- Trainers should be provided laptop with good network connectivity for vivid clarity in presentation. Later it can be uploaded on YouTube so that students who face network issue can see it later for their reference.
- Creating free app with advanced facilities is essential where it should be cost effective and drainage of data should be reduced.
By turning off video and audio it is a question whether are all participants are actively involving or pretending to be actively involved.

5. Conclusion and Suggestion

Teachers are under force to integrate ICT in their everyday practices. Constructing mutual relationship between an instructor and learner requires more effort on an online platform. In order to overcome these kind of difficulties one should be self-driven and one need to acquire the skill of time management for becoming an effective speaker as well as effective listener. The complication also exists among learners, where they exhibit manipulating tendencies on online platform by diverting themselves in various activities during the session. In order to assure quality in E-learning platform there is a need for flexibility on the side of both learner and teacher. Conscious effort need to be taken on the side of the instructor who need to adopt and modify themselves efficiently in establishing a strong lively interactive forum using their communicative competency and with practicality in understanding the audience as well as the learners need to be more diligent and open-minded to enhance oneself in the process of learning in the new digital medium. By overcoming these kind of drawbacks enhances learning experience during the time of pandemic outbreak which results in Social Isolation. All together the above mentioned traits should be observed and analysed both sides in order to build a healthy Educational forum with the help of technology, so that one can sustain and gain the momentum to fight back the challenging situations which may happen in the near future.

Conflict of Interest

The author of the article declares no conflict of interest.

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