Investigating Public Speaking Skills in an Online Synchronous Course

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Abstract. This study aims at investigating the application of public speaking skills in online classes based on class observations and students' perception on their experiences. Using the Exploratory Sequential Mixed Design coupled with Thematic Analysis, 67 university students participated in this study. The observations show that the areas of public speaking: physical, content, and visual are the salient elements in the class activities. The survey indicates that the participants felt less anxious to present online because it was on camera, however, due to the limited screen view, physical messages were more meaningful offline. Secondly, they found no difference between the content of online and offline presentations. Lastly, visual aspects are regarded as 'most useful', and 'most powerful' in the online presentation pertinently for gripping attention. In reference to the predominant role, online public speaking courses should cover the area of visual message comprehensively.

Keywords: content, online, public speaking, physical, visual

1 Introduction

Public speaking skills are undoubtedly crucial for university students to prepare them to become professional speakers. Public speaking courses are usually construed as programs that provide students with skills (Lucas, 1999) supported by ELT, particularly to promote careful listening, critical thinking, careful delivery of information, coherence, and routines, to lead natural communication (Iberri-Shea, 2009; Leopold, 2016). The authenticity and reflection of the target language (Buendgens-Kosten, 2014; Siegel, 2014) should enable the speaker to convey a message as realistic as possible. However, student-related factors such as shyness, nervousness, fear of speaking, not confident to speak, and fear of making mistakes (Moulida, 2019) and motivational aspects may cause the oral assessments to be anxious and stressful (Nash et al., 2016). The nervousness could be recognized in a form of unstable breathing, intonation, sweat, and blur vision (Taman, 2020).

The exponential growth of online teaching through the incorporation of ODE (Online Distance Education) into the education programmed by most universities means a broader offer of online education for students (He et al, 2020). Evidence shows that students attending either hybrid classes, a mix of online and live classes or exclusively online delivered ones did not

show differences in terms of public speech performance (Clark & Jones, 2001). Another study also claimed that there were no significant differences in the amount of anxiety between delivering a traditional face-to-face speech and a speech given using web-conferencing technology (Campbell & Larson, 2013), and that the advent of online education has made it possible for students with busy lives and limited flexibility to obtain a quality education. Time and venue flexibility (Miller 2010), as well as course fees affordability leads to the increasing number of students' enrolment (Tichavsky et al., 2015) of online courses. Web-based instruction has made it possible to offer classes worldwide through a single Internet connection (Paul & Jefferson, 2019).

However, educational institutions need to recognize that merely offering students courses in an online format is not the same as preparing students to offer presentations to a web-based audience. To seek better effectiveness, the pedagogical medium of academic institutions should redesign the way they want to deliver their course content (Paul & Jefferson, 2019). The transformation of course content from offline into online platform, time management and workload, technology challenges, student motivation, communication with students online, obtainability of appropriate institutional support, motivation support (Vanhorn et al. 2008), followed by requirement of greater personal discipline and motivation (Miller, 2010), have been a considerable challenge regarding the effectiveness on online classes. Universities and colleges demand fundamental preparation of online teaching and learning activities. Challenges such as high dropout rate (Bawa, 2016) began to worsen particularly for university students below the age of 24 (Wladis et al. 2015). This is known to be caused by lacking face to face interaction with classmates and lectures, and insufficient direct social interactivity (Miller, 2010).

A study recommends physical message application (Harrington & LeBeau, 2013) to augment participants' online engagement and to create more interactive online presence (Tichavsky et al., 2015). Although numerous language skills said to be effectively developed in an online format (Ward, 2016), namely active listening (Cheon & Grant, 2009), negotiation (Cockburn & Carver, 2007), music performance (Pike & Shoemaker, 2015), and clinical social work (Wilke et al., 2016), there are limited studies which explore the quality of public speaking performance conducted online versus offline classes (Clark & Jones, 2001). One even stated that there is no study to date evaluating the effectiveness of public speaking delivered online versus offline (Broeckelman et al., 2019). Due to the difficulties and hesitations arising from online public speaking, a study recommended reconsidering conducting a Public Speaking Course online (Wibowo & Khairunas, 2020).

By their very nature, public-speaking courses depend on interactions between speakers and audiences (Nicolini & Cole, 2020). Therefore, any L2 public speaking classroom may potentially show similar factors inherent to L2 development, such as interlanguage and interlanguage pragmatic development. The aforementioned factors are crucial because adults tend to spontaneously use unmastered language to express their ideas (Tarone, 2018) despite a lack of pragmatic mastery (see Bardovi-Harlig, 2013; Leopold, 2016 for relevant discussions). However, following Morreale et al., (2019) we believe that more than barriers, these aspects are design-focused factors to consider when designing online public speaking classes.

Therefore, while considering that faculty and students find face-to-face instruction preferable (see Koenig, 2019), any online public speaking intervention should consider practical constraints. We back up this following Broeckelman et al., (2019), who found no significant differences in terms of quality between traditional and online delivery of this sort of class. Likewise, recent research has mainly focused on exploring explicit aspects of the instructional experience, such as peer feedback (see Nicolini & Cole, 2020) and how participants feel when the context has forced online instruction (see Ratcliff, 2021).

The teaching of public speaking and its research

To date, many sources have explored public speaking; however, the majority has focused on student-related factors present in face-to-face settings, such as self-perception (Grieve et al., 2021; Pierini, 2020). Other students have explored the nature of public speaking itself (see Tsizhmovska & Martyushev, 2021). Therefore, although online delivery constitutes standard practice in public speaking teaching (see Morreale et al., 2019), the study of this delivery method remains neglected. It is believed that online public speaking teaching entails—at least theoretically—the same challenges any L2 language course has, such as speech content, usage, forms-related constraints (Bardovi-Harlig, 2019), and linguistic development (Tarone, 2018). As such, we argue that online classroom is no different from a traditional one from a developmental perspective. We support this rationale following Wu's (2015) study, which found no significant difference in effectiveness between online and traditional instruction.

As for traditionally delivered public speaking, attitudinal aspects seem prevalent among students; instruction and coping strategies, in turn, seem to remediate issues (Lusianawaty & Masful, 2021; Pierini, 2020; Grieve et al., 2021). Notably, communication apprehension or anxiety seem to improve when the lecturer actively engages in coping mechanisms—a process akin to scaffolding with demonstrated success (Whitworth & Cochran, 1996; Al-Tamini, 2014). Moreover, instruction seems to palliate communication apprehension issues, such as student nervousness, eye contact, gestures, and comfortable speaking in front of an audience (Al-Tamini, 2014). Interestingly, though, women showed higher levels of fear of public speaking at the college level (Marinho et al., 2015), while Paradewari's (2017) findings suggest that the classroom atmosphere impacts perceived negative perception, ability, self-assessment, and anxiety. These results are believed to arise from self-efficacy and self-perception while performing public speaking tasks.

Along similar lines, Alhabbash (2012) stated there is evidence on the effectiveness of instructed delivery. This author argues that learners are more likely to master public speaking skills via instruction. Alhabbash's (2012) findings resonate with SLA principles in that reduced stress optimizes cognitive resources use. This author also argues that offering models—skills and knowledge to carry out communication—seems to impact public speaking performance. Others like Raja (2017), claim that practicing and rehearsing before a presentation or speech may provide a level of command and reduce anxiety. According to Raja (2017), when lecturers sympathize with students, their anxiety levels decrease while preparation and reassurance from the audience contribute to better performance.

However, despite the valuable insights from traditionally delivered-focused endeavors, online-delivery focused research has primarily dealt with students' reaction to online content delivery (see Campbell & Larson, 2013; Hasibuan et al., 2021; Kinasih, 2021; Moulida, 2019) and while valuable, it does little to clarify operational factors at play in the design of online-delivered courses—a contradiction given the acknowledged frequency of online delivery for this course type (Morreale et al., 2019, p.77). Finally, and although only related to feedback, online teaching seems to offer benefits to students from the standpoint of access to more written feedback and reduced levels of intimidation (see Nicolini & Cole, 2020). The same may be argued from online public speaking classes, but assumptions are nothing but claims without data.

At the moment, there are many tools available, such as Google Classroom, Zoom, Google Meets, or Teams. However, Zoom is nominated to be one of the most popular applications across countries due to its interaction-promoting features, ease of use, and laptop or smartphone-based operation (Baron, 2020). Exploring whether or not Zoom is adequate for online public speaking, despite its current widespread use deserves attention given the urgent need to remain

compliant and accountable even during the pandemic (see Hardy & Melville, 2019 for a discussion on these matters).

Online lessons and curricular considerations

Until the COVID-19 pandemic, online education was part of the available delivery options. The pandemic put educational systems worldwide under considerable pressure, as venues had to transition from traditional or blended classrooms to virtual classrooms. Also, the pervasive belief that online-delivered education is inferior to traditionally delivered classes (Kyodo, 2021) added even more pressure, although there is no evidence supporting this assumption (Wu, 2015) and while online education is expected to increase in the future (Castro & Tumibay, 2019).

However, the current quick transition certainly seems to contradict the literature in terms of careful implementation and consideration of stakeholders (Chambers & Bax, 2006; Gruba et al., 2016), constant improvement of teaching practice (Kiely & Rea-Dickins, 2005; Norris, 2009, 2016; Rea-Dickins & Germaine, 1992), and avoidance purely accountability-driven endeavors due to the potential washback (Koretz & Hamilton, 2006; Koretz, 2008; Slomp et al., 2020; Smith & Holloway, 2020; Skedsmo & Huber, 2021). The aforementioned aspects deserve attention because of the effect accountability has as an improvement-driving factor (see Norris, 2016; Lumino & Gambardella, 2020; Picciotto, 2013) and because online teaching should respond to good-practice design principles found in the literature (Chambers & Bax, 2006; Jones, 2007; Gruba & Hinkelman, 2012; Gruba et al., 2016) as they foster a virtuous cycle.

Up to before the pandemic and emergency online teaching, the formats in online distance education—ODE—were synchronous and asynchronous. Asynchronous distance education (ADE) may well be pre-recorded lectures or the use of tools, such as Moodle. Conversely, synchronous distance education (SDE) entails the simulation of traditional education communicative models to a certain extent synchronizing teaching and learning mimicking classroom interaction (see He et al., 2020). Regardless of the approach, SDE and traditional delivery have not shown any differences other than increased satisfaction in the case of SDE (He et al., 2020; Wu, 2015).

These SDE-related findings deserve attention because public speaking research has found that eliciting students' perceptions, emotions, and experiences before and after the activities triggered increased levels of satisfaction and lower levels of fear, indecision, and confusion (Nash et al., 2016). The positive outcomes listed earlier may well be present in the case of SDE-type online public speaking classes and be used to justify future online public speaking initiatives from a standpoint checking the alignment of teaching methods, expectations, and in-class experience (see Koretz & Hamilton, 2006, p. 555 for a similar discussion) while keeping stakeholders' needs visible (Barnes et al, 2000; Kenna & Russell, 2015; Pinto, 2016).

The effectiveness of online classes can be evaluated from the curricular alignment and accountability (Norris, 2016) and that basically seeks to demonstrate the value of the program. Referring to how participants feel with regards to the learning process to gain a deeper understanding and more meaningful experience and effective learning, which is a crucial component in evaluative literature (Kiely & Rea-Dickins, 2005; Norris, 2009, 2016; Rea-Dickins & Germaine, 1992). A study by Rice & Leonard, (2017) stated that the most successful method for teaching or learning public speaking is the mixture of instruction, imitation, and practice. This study focuses on examining the application/practice of the skills in measuring the effectiveness of skills in an online instruction setting. This study, therefore, aims at answering the following questions:

a. What public speaking areas are taught in the online classes?
b. What is the respondents' perception of their learning experience in applying the public speaking skills areas taught in the online classes?

c.   What do the respondents perceive about the online presentation compared to the offline?

2 Research Methods

This research used the exploratory sequential mixed design (Cresswell & Clark, 2018). With this method, both qualitative and quantitative approaches of data collections were applied while considering the richness of the site. In the first phase, in order to find the lessons taught in the subject of public speaking, the data were gathered from documents of syllabus, books and the power point presentations used in the classrooms. Secondly, observations to the class were conducted to find out the classroom activities.

Lastly, to gather information on how the respondents conceive their learning experience, a survey in which questions were generated from the documents and observations was distributed. Creswell (2012, 2014) suggests surveys to elicit opinions, attitudes, emotions, beliefs, perception, and behaviour from the respondents. However, since surveys may suffer from potential self-reporting issues, the analysis is complemented with open-ended questions which were part of the survey. Those questions were analyzed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
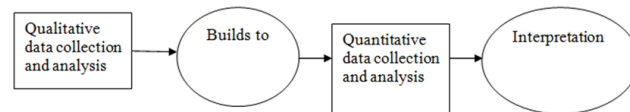

Fig.1. Exploratory Sequential Mixed Design (Cresswell, 2014)

Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012) outlines six phases of analysis: familiarizing the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The bottom-up approach is used in this data analysis where codes and themes are generated from what is in the data, rather than the top-down approach that generates the codes and themes based on a certain concept.

3 Results and Discussion

The results from class observation yield on two aspects: the documents of teaching such as syllabus, textbook, PowerPoint presentations used in the classroom and the learning activities. The documents show mainly Harrington and LeBeau's (2013) that focuses on these areas of public speaking skills: 1) Physical message: comprises the use of posture, gestures, eye contact and voice inflection. 2) Visual message: chart and graphs, pictures, fonts, colors on the presentation slides, and other additional visual aids such as videos. 3) Story message: stages of speech (introduction, content, conclusion), structure of informative and persuasive speech, IEE (introduction, Explain, emphasize) to describe data on graphs and charts.

Whereas the class activities were about practicing those three areas of public speaking skills. Students were given the opportunity to rehearse, apply the skills and have the feedback given by the lecturer (Figure 3). Students practiced using their hands to show gestures and to adjust the position for the gestures to be seen on the camera. In addition, the use of voice inflection to stress, stretch, or pause their utterances were used to emphasize the points of message in their

presentation. The lesson of structuring content in the speech showed students follow the structure of IEE (introduction, explain, emphasize) to explain the charts on the slides. Lastly, students also practiced choosing colors, images and fonts for their slides. Rice & Leonard (2017), Whitworth & Cochran (1996), Norris (2009, 2016), and Al-Tamini (2014) highlighted the importance of students' interaction, involvement, and peer influence through instruction, imitation, and practice for the most successful method in learning.

Similarly, in this study, the observation has found more students became more confident in practicing the skills of public speaking after seeing their teacher and classmates' examples. It is surprising that this has similar fundamental touch of theory of learning from the Sociocultural perspective. This is in line with Rahayu (2020) that stated the sociocultural theory underlies studies on classroom interaction, in this case, including the online context.
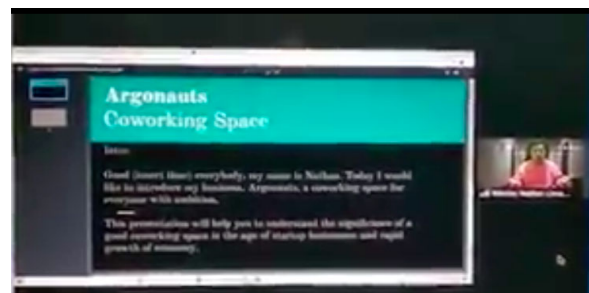

Fig.2. Class capture: practicing visual and physical skills

The respondents' perception of their learning experiences

The findings in this part are divided into sections based on the previous findings in part 1 about the materials the respondents learn in the online course. The first is the physical message, the respondent's perception of their learning experience is almost homogeneous. Around 50% of respondents found that physical messages could be seen and experienced but were sometimes interrupted by the internet signal (see table 1). The intensity of the interruption is more or less equal with the interruption that hinder the clarity of the online presentation.

Table 1. Respondents' perception of Physical Message

Questions	Yes	No	Sometimes
Did you think that you could see the posture of the presenter clearly on the screen?	44%	5%	51%
Did you think that you could have eye contact with the presenters?	51%	16%	34%
Did you think that you can see the presenters' gestures in their presentations?	43%	3.5%	55%

	Yes	No	Sometimes
Could you have a good interaction with your audience or with the presenter?	48%	16%	34%
Could you hear the presenters' voice inflection clearly?	63%	0%	37%
Did you feel more anxious in performing the physical message?	41%	26%	34%

In contrast with the physical message, according to 60-88% of respondents, visual messages are found as clearly shown (88%) and become more powerful in the online presentation. This is the part of public speaking skills that is presented more clearly, compared to the other skills. In addition, the respondents could use the Zoom features at ease (76%) so that the visuals presented were clear.

Table 2. Respondents' perception of Visual Message

Questions	Yes	No	Sometimes
Could you see the presenters' slides clearly?	88%	0%	12%
Could you use the zoom features to show your visuals ?	76%	0%	24%
Did you think that your visuals became more powerful?	60%	13%	27%

Lastly, the story message or the content of the presentation was perceived as equally understood and clearly presented both online and offline. This means there is almost no difference on how the content of a presentation was structured online and offline.

Table 3. Respondents' perception of Story Message

Questions	Yes	No	Sometimes
Did you think that you could understand the messages delivered by the presenters?	65%	2%	33%
Did you think that the presenters had structured their presentation well enough?	53%	5%	41%
Did you think that the content of the body message and the evidence were clearly stated by the presenters?	56%	1%	42%

Did you think that delivering a message became more complicated?	35%	38%	37%

Comparisons to the offline classes

Table 5 shows the points of differences on how physical messages are presented in synchronous and asynchronous settings. The first point that is different is shown as the 'interaction' theme, which codes are varied around the view of the screen, which is small compared to the offline setting, gestures that cannot be clearly seen and eye contact which seems indirect when it is conducted online.

However, in contrast to negative comments on the view, most respondents admitted that they were less anxious and felt more confidence during the online presentation because the audience were on camera. A similar study resulted in the same finding that in online classroom context the feelings of intimidation are reduced (Nicolini & Cole, 2020). Raja (2017) also found that a virtual environment could bring up confidence to face audiences. Offline presentations are more stressful as what the respondents stated 'more pressure offline' and in contrast with the online presentations as 'no emotion'. Overall, the general comment is that physical messages are more effective when the presentation is offline.

Table 4. Physical Message Online Versus Offline

Codes	Themes
hard to see on camera limited gestures online gestures are not on limited frame hard to see on zoom half body view online all gestures seen offline gestures cut by the camera offline gestures are clearer full body offline hard to engage online real eye contact offline physical message is clearer offline captured better offline\offline gestures are effective more effective offline	unclear Interaction
expose to pressure offline more confident online no emotion online more pressure offline impossible to pay attention to the class no emotion in online delivery	less anxiety

zoom errors	technical
depends on the internet	distraction
camera small and blur	

In contrast with physical messages, most respondents stated that they relied on visual messages during the online presentation. Mostly, they agreed that visuals have a prominent role in online presentations with most common comments on visuals as 'crucial', 'important', 'more useful', and 'powerful'. Therefore, they admitted that preparation on creating visuals was done more seriously because of its importance in online presentations. On the screen, when having online presentations, even when there is a signal problem, the visuals could still be shown and seen clearly. In comparison to physical messages, visuals are less affected by signal problems.

Table 5. Visual message Online Versus Offline

Codes	Themes
online visual is clearer PPT is clear presentations are bigger online visual is easy to understand online graphs can be seen clearly online visual can be seen wholly	Clearer online visual
online PowerPoint is more useful online visual is more powerful online visual is important online visual is crucial efforts in creating slides	Importance of online visual
can be delivered similarly shared screen to replace projector both are important exactly the same both are clear both can share slides can be applied online and offline	no difference

When the respondents were asked about the distinguishing factors between online and offline structure of the content of presentation, most of them confirmed that there was no difference (table 6). In both contexts, the content needs to be structured effectively in order of 'introduction', 'main content', and 'conclusion' and the tools used to deliver the content are the same when online and offline. The same result was found by Bardovi-Harlig (2019) in that communication should cover the content of speech and the forms, just like public speaking classes.

Table 6. Codes and themes on story message

Codes	Themes
both use PowerPoint no difference story message must be applied in both no different in content the story message understood the same both can be spoken both are explained thoroughly both depends on the presenter the same delivery important for both the same slides the same thing	no difference
stronger story message when online online content is well delivered	Online story message

4 Conclusion

In this study, the experiences on what public speaking skills are applied and how the students perceived them are emphasized. The qualitative data shows that the lessons are found to be in three areas of physical, visual and content/story message. Those skills become the salient elements of the class activities. Furthermore, differences in all of the physical aspects are found, including gestures and eye contact that seem unreal. From the aspect of the content of the speech, the participants found no significant difference between online and offline courses.

However, they assure that the use of visuals is where the primary concerns should be put in online presentations. Having highlighted this, it is paramount that online public speaking courses in the future, blended with technology advancement, should include technical training on how to present visual messages sufficiently and appropriately.

Nevertheless, based on the finding that the minority of respondents claimed to experience internet connection problems in their online classes, this study was not hindered by the issue. More respondents did not find internet connection as a problem. This result is a proponent of Castro & Tumibay (2019) that online education is expected to increase in the future, and this also means less internet problems are expected to be found.

This study, however, has some limitations. It would be beneficial to the findings if the respondents could have been more than 67. Furthermore, as these are of the same classes in the same institution, it would be needed to broaden the participants to the other classes of public speaking in other institutions. With the comparison to the application of the online public speaking courses elsewhere, there could be more findings to what areas of public speaking are practiced in these online learning contexts. Therefore, there could be more and not limited to the physical, visual and content/story message.

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