Designing a Program-Wide Self-Assessment System for Academic Speaking: Preliminary Results and Issues

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In 2008, 15 instructors of the Academic Speaking (ASP) course at International Christian University (ICU) collaborated on creating and piloting a new self-assessment system to help approximately 520 first year students at ICU analyze and set goals for improving their own academic speaking. The assessment was based an audio or video recording of a three to four minute speaking sample of each student expressing an opinion on an issue and then leading a short discussion. Following the recording, each student submitted a self-analysis of his or her own speaking including a typed transcript and a list of self-identified speaking difficulties and improvement goals. This paper presents the rationale, design, and results of the piloted assessment system and then discusses issues and needs for improvement.

"Do I really sound like that?" is an almost universal response given by people when they hear their own voices played back from a recording. The frequent shock and dismay at how we sound to ourselves arises from the fact that our impressions and memories of how we speak are nearly always different from what we actually produce. This phenomenon has implications for students' self-assessment in academic speaking courses, including ASP, because in the absence of an audio or video recording of their own speaking, students have only the memory of a speaking activity to rely on for any self-assessment. Until recently use of recording technology in speaking assessment has been expensive and problematic; however, with the development of small, inexpensive and easy to use digital audio and video recording devices, used in conjunction with web-based file sharing and well-designed materials and activities, it has become far more practical for teachers and students to make, copy and share high quality voice and image recordings to use in self-assessment of speaking skills.

Rationale

The ASP course description currently offered in the English Language Program (ELP) Staff Handbook states that ASP classes should "give students as much opportunity as possible to work on communication skills and develop fluency. The main goal of the speaking course is to develop those skills necessary for participating effectively in an academic setting. At a functional level this will include being able to make an appointment with a teacher, ask for advice, and participate in academic discussions. Students will also learn how to introduce topics, summarize ideas and analyze opinions" (2008, p.38). Within these guidelines no specific mention is made of any activity requiring students to self-assess. In other words, the course description does not include any program wide system for students to reflect on their own speaking and devise strategies for self-improvement. The practical advantage of self-assessment lies in its reflective nature, and while reflective practice is "well-established as an effective way of introducing self-observation, enhancing self-awareness, and fostering [autonomous] development" (Watanabe, p.109), this reflective aspect has long been an underdeveloped element in the mix of training and assessment activities provided in the ASP classes in the ELP.

The established sequence of ASP activities described by Hemmert et. al. (1993, p.7-12), starting with presentation of target structures, progressing to controlled practice, and finally to creative communication is highly effective in terms of helping students master target skills, but fails to provide students with sufficient opportunity to develop their ability to productively reflect on their own performance. The importance of self-assessment for improving speaking performance is noted by Lynch (2005), who points out that "research suggests that learners make relatively inefficient use of negative feedback on their ongoing L2 speech, whether that feedback is implicit, as with teacher recasts, or explicit, as corrections from teachers or peers" (Lyster and Ranta 1997; Nicholas *et al*. 2001; Truscott 1999). Moreover, with regard to the use of transcription and analysis of recordings by his own students in self-assessment, Lynch states, "roughly 40% of changes [students] made to their original performance were improvements rather than corrections (2001, p.131). This statistic points out the utility of self-assessment through recordings as a tool for not only raising awareness of problems and how they might be solved, but also refining and building on successful speaking behaviors.

Fortunately, the current ASP syllabus with its emphasis on group discussion is easily adapted to include this additional self-assessment component. Making audio recordings of individual presentations and group discussions provides excellent samples of students' actual spoken interactions, giving them

an easy and reliable way to examine an extensive array of communicative aspects including spoken grammar, logical coherence, general and specific vocabulary choices, pronunciation, intonation, reciprocity, interlanguage, and many others, any of which can become a focus for systematic self-improvement depending on the needs of the individual student. Use of video recording opens up additional possibilities for focusing on eye contact, gestures, proximity, and other aspects of visual communication. On a higher level, self-assessment of this kind opens the way for students to engage in discourse analysis, which even at a basic level can "offer the possibility of fine-grain descriptions of how participants orient themselves toward mutual goals and negotiate their way forward in highly specific [communication] situations" (McCarthy, 1998, p.20).

Another possible advantage of the above-mentioned form of self-assessment is a more logically consistent program-wide measure of student performance in terms of engagement in ASP classroom activities and homework. In its description of ASP, the ELP Staff Handbook states that evaluation "will be based largely on attendance, in-class performance, and either a written or spoken test" (ICU ELP Staff Handbook, 2008, p.38, Hemmert, et. al., 1993, p.17). These criteria are helpful up to a point, but ultimately fall short in that the first two criteria rely on subjective interpretations of students' attitudes and levels of engagement in class activities, and on records of attendance, which may often not be indicative of any achievement. Prior to the advent of the self-assessment process, use of written or spoken tests was inconsistent with no consensus on what, why and how such tests should or could be done. Additionally, established criteria lacked any clear relationship to specific in-class homework assignments. Experienced instructors may be able to work around such ambiguous criteria and develop fair-minded evaluation of students' performance. However, the highly individual nature of the judgments involved in determining students' class grades using these criteria works against an objective standard by which all ASP students can be evaluated in a somewhat equal manner. The self-assessment process developed by the authors can be graded easily in an objective and standardized way and can provide a reliable benchmark that is consistent from one instructor to another.

Design

The ASP Assessment consisted of an initial assessment in the third week (fifth and sixth classes) and a final assessment in the ninth week of a ten week term (For a sample syllabus, see Appendix A). The Initial Assessment acted as the first opportunity for students and teachers to identify strengths and weaknesses and set goals for improvement. The Final Assessment was a chance to evaluate improvement in comparison to the Initial Assessment as well as set

goals for further improvement beyond the ASP course. Both the Initial Assessment and the Final Assessment were designed with the following components: an introduction to the assessment's format, recording, self-analysis, peer consulting, and teacher evaluation.

Introduction to the Assessment

The seventy-minute class period prior to the assessment was dedicated to introducing the goals, format, and schedule of the assessment, and included one or two timed simulations of the assessment using sample topics. The timed simulations were designed to help students be familiar with the process of getting a topic, preparing notes, stating an opinion, and leading a short discussion within a limited time.

Recording the Assessments

Each student came to the recording room designated by the teacher at the appointment time indicated on their schedule sheet and went through the following recording process.

Selecting a topic and preparing ideas. First, students chose a topic randomly (by picking a strip of paper with a topic out of a box etc.) from a range of topics prepared by their instructor. Students had no knowledge of the topics in advance and had to prepare their ideas spontaneously rather than depend on extensive preparation or memorization. Once a topic was selected, students were given 3~4 minutes to prepare ideas for their opinion. This preparation was done just outside of the recording room, and writing down ideas on paper to use as notes was allowed. Use of a dictionary was allowed as well. The range of topics varied somewhat from instructor to instructor, but most instructors used topics that were related to college education and were argumentative with the basic prompt format of "Should...? Why or why not. Support your opinion with specific reasons and examples." Some examples of the topics used were "Should all ICU students be required to study another foreign language besides English?" and "Should all ELP instructors be native speakers of English?" For the final assessment, a new set of topics was generated to ensure that students would not know the topics in advance.

Entering the room and starting the recording. After the previous person finished, each student entered the recording room, sat down, exchanged short greetings with the instructor, and on cue from the instructor, started their recording by stating their name, section, and topic. Recordings for almost all students were audio only; only one class was video recorded on an experimental

basis due to the relative logistical difficulty of arranging for students to see and analyze their own video.

Since the audio recordings needed to be made available to students for self-analysis, students were asked to bring their own recording device such as a cell-phone with a voice recorder function. As back-up for students who did not have a recording device, all instructors prepared recording devices. Most instructors who were PC users recorded student assessments directly onto a Moodle website using the Wimba Voice Recorder tool. This made it easy for students to access their own recording from a different computer just by logging into ICU's Moodle site. On the other hand, due to some compatibility problems that occurred with Wimba, Macintosh user instructors recorded the assessments using Garage Band and then emailed or transferred the files in MP3 format to students who did not bring their own recording device.

Recording an opinion and discussion. Each student stated an opinion on the selected topic for 1~2 minutes and then led a short discussion for 1~2 minutes using the instructor as a discussion group member. Only the student doing the recording and the instructor were present in the room. Due to the need to finish the recordings of ten to twelve students per 70 minute class period, each recording had to be 4 minutes or less, so students were told to manage their time and conclude the opinion and discussion in about 3~4 minutes. For a sample transcript of a student's recording, please refer to Appendix B. During the recording, the instructor listened to the opinion of the student, interacted with the student in the discussion, and also took notes for feedback purposes. After the recording was finished, the student left the room and the next student entered

Self-Analysis of the Recorded Assessment

Most students were surprised to learn that the main task of the assessment was the self-analysis of the recording and not the recording itself. To foster an independent attitude toward identifying weaknesses and improving speaking skills, assessment of speaking skills was conducted by the students themselves rather than by the instructors. The self-analysis consisted of transcribing the entire recording, identifying main areas of speaking difficulty, setting goals for improvement, and doing a self-evaluation of the quality of the self-assessment. For a sample of how a student filled out the Self-Analysis form, see Appendix C.

Peer Consulting

The first class meeting after the recordings was a chance for students to share their self-analyses with a group of peers and receive suggestions on methods for overcoming the weaknesses they identified. The Peer Consulting class also included a section called "Try it again" where students attempted the assessment again using the same topic, paying attention to the weaknesses that they had identified, and then gave each other feedback and suggestions on those areas.

Teacher Evaluation and Feedback on the Assessments

After the Peer Consulting class, students submitted their Self-Analysis sheets to their instructors on paper or electronically. The course coordinators allowed each instructor to decide their own system for evaluating and commenting on the self-analyses. Some instructors only recorded the self-evaluation score submitted by each student. Other instructors added a speaking performance score out of 10 points, subtracting points for areas where students had much difficulty. Other instructors provided written suggestions for how to overcome areas of difficulties that the students identified by themselves. Evaluation and instructor feedback on student self-assessments will be discussed more fully below.

Results

Approximately 520 students enrolled in the ASP course were able to record their academic speaking in the initial and final assessment sessions and reflect on their speaking improvement needs in their self-analysis documents and class sessions. This section will discuss the results of the 2008 ASP Assessment based on student perceptions and instructor perceptions provided in responses to surveys taken at the end of the term.

Students' Perceptions of the ASP Assessment

201 students voluntarily responded to an anonymous course evaluation survey sent to them by email and collected on a Google web form in the final week of the course. Overall, the survey results seem to show that most students had a positive reaction regarding the usefulness of the ASP Assessment. To the statement "The ASP Assessment was a good way to help me improve my speaking skills." 87.4% chose "Strongly Agree" or "Agree." Also, in response to

the statement "The Self-Analysis homework (listening to the recording, transcribing etc.) helped me find my difficulties and weaknesses," 85% chose either "Strongly agree" or "Agree." As one student commented, "*Honestly speaking, I did not like having to listen to my voice and transcribe my own speaking...However, in most situations, you just speak and it is done. In the Assessment, we were able to listen to and reflect on how we spoke. That made the task very meaningful to me.*" Many other comments from students reflected that sentiment that the recording and reflection were useful.

Unfortunately, the roughly 15% of students who chose "disagree" or "strongly disagree" to the statements tended to not provide detailed comments on their reasons for disagreement. However, the few comments that were provided from students who disagreed with the usefulness of the task are valuable points of feedback and deserve to be mentioned. For example, one student wrote, "*I did not need to transcribe my speech to know that my English has many problems. I already know my English is bad.*" It is understandable that some students may become frustrated with the transcription and reflection process if they do not see it as yielding new insights into their own speaking, or if they do not understand how self-assessment may contribute to their improvement.

Another student who had a generally negative evaluation of the ASP Assessment commented, "*I wanted my teacher to give me suggestions about my weaknesses in addition to my own self-analysis.*" If students do not feel confident about their own analysis, it is understandable that they would feel dissatisfied with a lack of teacher comments. Critical comments and suggestions such as these are extremely valuable and should be taken into consideration in the planning for future assessments.

Instructors' Perceptions of the Assessment

Like those of the students, instructor perceptions of the assessment were largely positive. Of the eleven instructors who responded to the anonymous online survey, nine "Strongly Agreed" and two "Agreed" to both of the following statements: "The new ASP Assessment is a positive addition to the ASP syllabus and should be continued next year" and "The new ASP Assessment is an effective way to help students become aware of their main weaknesses in academic speaking." Notably, on the issue of whether "The new ASP Assessment is an effective way to measure student improvement in academic speaking skills," agreement was more reserved, with only one instructor choosing "Strongly Agree," nine choosing "Agree" and one instructor choosing "Disagree." Reservations on the issue of student improvement seem understandable since there is only about one month between the initial and final

assessment recordings; some students clearly showed improvement in their opinion stating and discussion leading abilities while improvement was not clearly seen for others. Based on comments of some of the instructors, it seems that improvement among Program A (intermediate, TOEFL average 450) students was more easily seen than Program B (high intermediate, TOEFL average 500) students, possibly because the speaking task was not as challenging for students in Program B even on the initial attempt. Thus, while the instructors who tried the new assessment system support it and agree it is effective, refinements in using the assessment to measure student progress seem necessary. Instructor comments on how to improve the assessment will be discussed further in the Issues section below.

Issues

As with any new component introduced into a curriculum, practical use very quickly brings out issues in planning, executing and evaluating the activities and processes included. Most issues brought out in student and instructor feedback on this newly incorporated part of the ASP course relate to methodological and pedagogical considerations, including the simplification of the orientation to the assessment, the provision of model recordings, types of choices for speaking topics, the choice of doing individual recordings versus group recordings and the process to be followed in each of these situations, the use of video recording instead of merely audio, the method and criteria for evaluation of students' efforts and progress, and the overall workload for students in relation to the amount of credit received for the course. Technical considerations include how to produce and provide access for any self-access materials, and how to enable all participating instructors to create and disseminate video recordings. Each of these will be discussed below.

The Orientation Process

The orientation process currently done in class to acquaint students with how to effectively participate in the self-assessment needs to be simplified or streamlined. In addition to streamlining the process, presenting the orientation in the form of self-access resources instead of a class presentation will allow students to move at their own pace through the explanatory materials, repeat the presentation if necessary, and consult privately with the instructor about points of individual concern. An explanation video that shows the recording, analysis, assessment process and goals could be made available on the ASP website. This form of presentation should shorten the amount of time needed for the instructor

to explain and model the sequence of activities in class, and should create a clearer idea among students (and instructors) of what to expect and how to prepare.

Provision of Model Recordings

An additional orientation resource to consider making available is model recordings for students to see and learn from. Based on experience gained through the first series of speaking assessments, coordinators or instructors can create recordings that could show examples of effective opinion stating and discussion leading, and offer more salient examples of what amounts to effective speaking versus ineffective speaking. A variety of models may be included – native speaker instructor, non-native speaker instructor, native speaker college student, returnee, Program C, B, A, all under similar conditions. Such models may also serve to emphasize that speaking well on a spontaneous basis is challenging even for native speakers, and further encourage participating students.

Types of Topics

Some suggestions have been made to more clearly connect the topics to specific reading assignments used in ARW and RCA courses to increase the relevance of the topics, recycle knowledge, concepts and vocabulary from those readings, more concretely connect the skill-building in ASP with that done in other courses within the curriculum, and present students with a more familiar topic, and therefore reduce anxiety associated with this exercise. Additional questions were raised concerning how the handling of choice of topics would or would not facilitate improvement in students' speaking skills, as well as what is fair in terms of inherent difficulty.

Amount of Preparation Time

Instructor feedback showed that there was considerable variation in how much preparation students are given prior to the recording in terms of both the time allowed for preparation and degree of advance notice of topics. Some instructors advocated giving students the opportunity to know the possible topics prior to the day of the recording, while others preferred to give students topics some minutes prior to the recording in order to present the students with a more spontaneous speaking task. Consensus is needed on the handling of this aspect of the process.

Individual vs. Group Recording

Doing some recording in pairs or small groups rather than solo recordings was also mentioned as an issue to consider. Students as well as instructors expressed a desire to put the speaking into the context of a presentation by students to other students, followed by discussion between students as a way to create a more realistic speaking situation that reflects what students are required to do in ASP, ARW and other classes. Instructors expressed a desire to be removed from actively participating in the presentation or discussion in order to be free to focus on managing recording procedures, taking notes, and giving feedback.

Audio vs. Video

Initially, the first trial asked all instructors to make audio recordings. However, almost immediately one instructor began to experiment with video, citing the increased value of video in terms of showing non-verbal aspects of communication such as gesture, facial expression, kinesics and proxemics. Feedback among instructors points to a growing consensus to experiment with using video for some or even all students next year using web-cams in the ILC to allow students to see non-verbal aspects of their communication and reflect and improve on these aspects as well.

Workload Relative to Course Credit

One persistent concern voiced by instructors is whether the amount of work required of students in the speaking assessment process is commensurate with the amount of credit students receive for their work in the course. For example, full transcription of a three to four minute recording is a time-consuming process. Many students told us that they took approximately 90 minutes to finish typing the transcription and self-analysis of their weaknesses and improvement goals. Some students seem to have taken even more time. What amount of out-of-class work on the assessment is reasonable should be discussed with the aim to avoid overworking students relative to weighting of the ASP course grade in the overall curriculum.

Evaluation of Self-Assessment

The evaluation system of the self-assessment remains an open question. As coordinators of the course, we provided various forms to be used by instructors and students for peer and self-evaluation. While virtually all of the

forms could benefit from revision, replacement or deletion, most problematic among these was the speaking skill evaluation form used by instructors during the recording. Instructor feedback shows that many instructors found using the form impractical, and discussion on what kind of form to use, when and how to use it, and whether there should be form used at all is recommended. Addition questions relating to evaluation focus on how evaluation can help students to be more motivated to practice and improve, what kind of rating or feedback teachers should give back to their students, how to handle students who were unsure about the standard of evaluation, and what weight the evaluation of the self-assessments should have in the overall course grade.

Conclusion

As an addition to the ASP curriculum, student self-assessment through transcription and analysis of recordings provides significant advantages to instructors and of course to the students themselves in terms of deepening the learning experience, positively engaging students in taking an active role in their own development, and providing instructors with a reliable, consistent and much needed objective measure of student progress and performance. It is entirely consistent with the overall instructional goals of ASP, and while there are technical and logistical considerations to its implementation, it has already proven to be sufficiently easy to arrange, carry out and evaluate. By virtue of its utility and practicality, student self-assessment through the use of recordings belongs in ASP.

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APPENDIX A
The 2008 ASP Syllabus Including the Assessments

Academic Speaking

Course Goals:
-To improve your skills and fluency for participating in university life in English, with an emphasis on being able to state opinions and lead discussions in English.
-To help you become a more effective speaker and listener.
-To improve your ability to improve your own (and others') speaking skills autonomously.

Class No.	Class Content (Chp = Chapter in Communicating on Campus text)
1	Self-introductions and conversation skills (Chp 1, Chp 2)
2	Participating in a group discussion-Part 1 (Chp 7, SGW back cover)
3	Leading a discussion-Part 1 (Chp 8, SGW back cover)
4	**Intro to ASP Assessments**
5	**Initial ASP Assessment**
6	**Initial ASP Assessment**
7	**Initial Self-Analysis Discussion and Peer Consulting**
8	Visiting a teacher's office (Chp 5-6, SGW p.6)
9	Controlling a conv., active listening (Chp 3, Chp 4)
10	Intro to P&D (SGW p.95-100)
11	Practice of P&D (SGW p.95-100)
12	Reporting on a discussion (Chp 9)
13	Strategies for fluency (circumlocution etc.)
14	Giving peer feedback
15	Speaking Skill - TBD
16	**Practice for Final ASP Assessment**
17	**Final ASP Assessment**
18	**Final ASP Assessment**
19	**Final Self-Analysis and Goal-Setting**
20	Final class of ASP – Summary/Review of Skills

Appendix B
Assessment Transcripts of a Program A Student

Initial Assessment on 5/2
My name is Taro Suzuki of section AZ. My topic is "All ICU students should live on campus in the dormitories." In my opinion uhh I disagree this topic uhh because I think college student should independent. Uhh...I think college student should should experience many things uhh uhh for example uhh make money uhh baito uhh club uhh uhh uuun and uhh make friend uhh cooperate family family job...so college student uhh should should need time so ICU don't uhh get rid of time for student I think uhh and also...uh...if a stu uhh one student live in near ICU he he must uhh his home he must must live his home because it is money is waste uhh live in dormitory he live in home it it is not need it don't need money live in dormitory...so...so it is my opinion...how about this topic?

Teacher: Well, in my opinion, um freshmen should live in the dormitory because that's the case in the university I went to in the United States and that makes it easy for freshmen who have first period. If they have to commute for two hours it will be difficult. What do you think?

So...yes...I agree I agree you. But this topic is all ICU students so so I I I think freshmen live dormitory is good thing but all ICU students is not...is not don't live ICU.

Teacher: OK, that's a good point. So can you summarize what you said in conclusion?

Uhh I uun students make choice live live place un should. (*Teacher: Thank you very much.*)

Final Assessment on 6/11
My name is Taro Suzuki of Section AZ. My topic is "ICU should build more dormitories."
I don't agree this statement. Uh there are two points. Firstly, uh there are many nature at ICU. I think we don't break more nature ICU. In Tokyo, very small nature, but ICU is ICU have much nature, this is legacy of Tokyo (laugh). And next, secondly, I think ICU spend money more all all students' benefit. Dormitory Dormitories is used by only...local local students used by local students only so it means it means almost student live Kanto so they can commute own home so these dormitories don't their benefit. OK how how about you?

Teacher: OK, I think you made some good points but I think local is not...local means near so I think you mean far away people from far away?

Hokkaido or Kyushu...(Teacher: *Regional?*) Yes...regional

Teacher: Um let's see yeah...in the US they require all freshmen to live in the dorms because there are many first period classes the first year. And it is hard for students to spend two hours to commute. What do you think? (Student Yes, I think so.) What's your commute time?

My commute time? 20 minutes. So in myself, for example, if I live dormitory this is very waste of time and money So all students live dormitory is doesn't benefit (*Teacher: OK, thank you.*)

Appendix C
Final Assessment Self-Analysis of a Program B Student

Name: Hanako Tanaka, Section: BZ
Final Assessment Date: 6/12 (Videotaped and watched for reflection)

Step 1: Type a Transcript
[Name/Topic] I'm Hanako Tanaka, in section BZ. My topic is, "Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? All ICU students should be required to learn another language in addition to English."

[Opinion] I disagree with the statement. Ah...Of course, ah...learning …learning language is good because…ah…it…it…enable to for us to mor…more than culture…more and than to get more opportunity to communicate more number of people…so…it…it…in fact, it's…it have a good aspect, but English is ah…English is enable to for me to communicate enough number of pe…people, so…it's…it's…ah international language, it become. So…it…is more important to learn English…ah…to master English than to study another language a little. So…ah…so…ah…mastering language is difficult too…difficult. So…It's wasting time. So…I disagree with this statement. Yes, that's my opinion. (Note: *Discussion part continues*)

Step 2: Self-Analysis
How is your self-analysis of each of the following points? (Not Good, So-So, or Good)
Opinion about topic was clearly stated. Not Good
Supporting details were logical and coherent. So-So
Discussion leadership/time control was effective. Not Good
Voice was fluent, clear and easy to understand. So-So
Body language (eye contact etc.) was appropriate. Good
Self-Analysis Comments:
Silence seems to be less than before, probably because stumbling and thinking time was shorter. And First opinion before discussion became longer and more detailed. Body language war more energetic, and also eye contact was improved. I am glad that gathering the little improvement seem good improvement of whole the discussion.

Step 3: Remaining Difficulties and Practice Plans for the Future (Describe Two)

1. I am liable to miss the main point of question, and I dwell on too detailed problems. In this discussion, I took the utility of anther language too much time, though I cannot mention the primal opinion to the statement until the last. The problem is because of my bad characteristics regardless of spoken language. Therefore, I should modify this habit in everyday life. For example, if I kept my valuable questions which I think out when I watch the TV news, it help me with modifying it.

2. I still have the problem about summary. My summary of this discussion did not cover both sides (agree/disagree) of the statement. The problem seem to be related to a lack of my leadership. In any kinds of ELP class, when I listen my friends' opinions, I should make summary of his/her opinion at the same time. And also taking notes will be helpful to summarize.