Teaching Note

Developing Undergraduate ELL's *Quick Response* Skills

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After spending several years investigating the needs of non-native English speakers in undergraduate courses at a large public university, it became apparent to me that one of the main challenges facing these students is speaking up during large lecture classes. In such classes, two specific speaking skills students need are 1) asking questions for clarification, either to the professor or other classmates, and 2) conferencing with nearby classmates to answer clicker questions (Sheppard et al., 2015). Clickers are a type of personal response system used by instructors to make large lecture classes more engaging and participatory (Mayer et al., 2008). Instead of asking 100 or more students to raise hands to answer an adjunct question, clickers allow everyone in the class to answer the question, giving the teacher an immediate opportunity for formative feedback. This becomes a speaking task when students are given the chance to confer with neighbors about the possible answers, which is common practice.

Both of these speaking tasks – asking clarification questions and conferencing with nearby classmates – require students to quickly formulate utterances in English. However, the introductory listening and speaking course for undergraduate ELLs at my institution has no such objectives and does not offer students much practice with these *quick response* skills. The course instead focuses on planned speaking tasks like presentations and leading discussions. Seeing this gap, I recently piloted the following objective in the course: ELLs will be able to quickly formulate short, meaningful, coherent comments and questions in response to an audiovisual message.

In order to give students adequate practice and create a valid assessment of these skills, I collected videos of undergraduate lectures – in this case, an undergraduate introductory chemistry course for science majors. I combed through the videos to create an archive of two different types of one-to-two-minute excerpts: 1) when the professor was posing a clicker question to the class, and 2) when the professor was describing a diagram or concept that involved an important visual component.

Once I had prepared these collections of shortened video clips, I used them in class for formative assessment. To do this, I would simply play a shortened excerpt in class and have students respond appropriately, based on a prescribed set of characteristics for each response. For posed clicker questions, in order to mimic conferencing with a neighbor in a large lecture class, students were to respond to a neighbor with a quick (less than 30 second) comment that included the following characteristics: comprehensible grammar and pronunciation, a clear opinion, brief support for that opinion, and a phrase that passed the turn to the interlocutor. For the other type of quick response practice (asking clarification questions), we would listen to the excerpt together, then students would ask me questions, as if I were the professor in the excerpt. They needed to include these parts in their questions: getting the speaker's attention, creating context for the question, asking the question, listening to the answer, and briefly responding to show some level of understanding. These clarification questions needed to be formulated in under 30 seconds, using understandable grammar and pronunciation. Throughout the term, we practiced these *quick response* skills a number of times in class.

To summatively assess these *quick response* skills, I utilized our institution's learning management system, Canvas. I set up an online assignment in which students had to watch a short video excerpt (not one that we had practiced with, but identical in style and length) and then create a recording of an appropriate *quick response*. Students needed to complete the assessment within a short amount of time, as soon as class was dismissed. These individual recorded responses were evaluated with a simple rubric (*Fig. 1*).

Figure 1.

Making a Quick Comment

____ Giving a clear opinion
____ Supporting reasons / examples / explanation
____ Passing the turn
____ Using understandable grammar
____ Using understandable pronunciation
____ Being reasonably fluent

+ = excellent
√+ = good
√ = so-so
√- = not good
- = incomplete or poor

Asking a Quick Question

____ Getting the speaker's attention
____ Creating context for the question
____ Asking a clear question
____ Indicating some level of understanding of the response
____ Using understandable grammar and correct question form
____ Using understandable pronunciation
____ Being reasonably fluent

Scoring video submissions can take much longer than scoring written submissions, but since these online student recordings were short (less than 30 seconds each), it was

very manageable. Using the rubric above, it took me little more than one minute per student to score these assessments.

At the beginning of the term, I noticed that students particularly struggled with the skills of "passing the turn," "creating context for the question," and "using the correct question form." We spent much of the allotted time focusing on these three specific *quick response* skills. By the end of the ten-week term, students were almost always correcting each other automatically, offering phrases like "What does _____ mean?" instead of something like "What means _____?" They were also much more likely to ask for each other's opinions after offering their own, and had developed the ability to create context for questions with teacher-provided stock phrases like "I understood the part when you were explaining about _____, but I'm still confused about _____. Could you help me with that?" On the last of three summative *quick response* assessments, all students earned at least a passing score (a minimum of √ on the rubric), with half of them earning an A (a mix of + and √+ on the rubric).

Adding *quick response* skills to the ELL's listening and speaking course filled a gap in the curriculum and allowed students to practice the unique speaking skills that they need in large undergraduate lecture classes.

References

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