What's Covid19 Got to Do with My Communicative Competence? Self-reflections of Pre-service English Language Teachers in Turkey

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
  	With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly all theoretical and practical classes and methods of assessment had to be delivered on digital platforms. This paper reports the use of task-based assessment of the communicative competence of first-year pre-service English language teachers. The aim was to explore the role of the platform where the tasks were held on the students' self-assessment of their spoken performances. The participants (n=50) evaluated their linguistic, discourse, strategic and sociolinguistics competence on two public speaking tasks. The face-to-face speaking task required elaborating on two famous quotes, whereas the online speaking task had to do with the semiotic analysis of a TV commercial which was decided upon by the teacher candidate. Student evaluations of their communicative competence ranged on a scale from one to five, where one meant very poor and five meant very good. The results indicated that the only component of communicative competence that was viewed to be good was discourse competence in the face-to-face task; however, all the elements of communicative competence were considered to be good except for the sociolinguistic competence in the face-to-screen task. The main findings were (i) that the students had a more positive evaluation of their communicative competence when making online presentations and (ii) that they mostly attributed the differences in their self-evaluations either to the platform or to a combination of the platform and the nature of the task. Yet, face-to-face interaction seems to act as a requirement to improve the sociolinguistic competence of foreign language teacher candidates.

1. Introduction

English has become as one of the main tools for communication and negotiation between countries and cultures especially in the fields of education, trade and medicine. There is an increasing demand for foreign language instructors with excellent communication skills in

the present job market. This has fueled the need to equip pre-service English teachers with the elements of communicative competence. The term 'communicative competence' was first put forward in the 1970s (see Hymes, 1972) and today has enjoyed its righteous place in the field of second and foreign language education (Canale & Swain, 1980; Kunschak, 2004; McKay, 2002; Davies, 2015; Fraser, Davies & Tatsukawa, 2015) with the widely accepted definition of 'the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning between two interlocutors or between a text and its readers' (Kramsch, 2006, p. 36). In simpler terms, it refers to the syntactic, morphological, phonological, that is, linguistic knowledge of the language user as well as the social, cultural, discourse and strategic knowledge of how and when to use the language appropriately.

The dimensions of communicative competence to be investigated in this paper are classified into four subcategories: linguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence, and sociolinguistic competence (Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980, pp. 2-26; Davies, 2005; Hedge, 2000). Linguistic or grammatical competence includes the theoretical aspects of language, that is the knowledge of the target language, as proposed by Chomsky (1965). From a generativist perspective, learners are equipped with the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) which mediates the accessibility of the rule-governed grammar knowledge in second language acquisition with respect to its knowledge of grammar, syntax and vocabulary. It is the ability to create grammatically correct utterances. It basically deals with accuracy and fluency in the use of say collocations, phrases and sentences.

Sociolinguistic competence is engaged with human interaction in multiple sociocultural contexts. Being equipped with sociolinguistic competence is a prerequisite for socio-culturally appropriate interaction to take place. By considering the given setting, the topic and the nature of the relationships between the interlocutors, it questions the appropriateness of words, phrases and syntactic fragments. It also requires a solid understanding of attitudes such as courtesy, authority, friendliness and respect that are shared between the interactors. To wrap up, it is the ability to produce socio-linguistically and socio-culturally appropriate utterances. Discourse competence incorporates the skills necessary to produce and understand language at a larger context such as the text or sentence level. One indicator of discourse competence is to be able to produce a coherent and cohesive discourse. It demands an understanding of what phrases or sentence structures make a coherent whole in interacting through different discourse styles such as conversations, e-mail exchanges or public speeches.

The last component, that is, the strategic competence, embodies verbal and non-verbal exchange of ideas for the sake of efficient, effective and fluent interactions. It can be summarized as the ability to use a number of interactional (e.g., rephrasing, expanding), compensatory (e.g., restructuring, code-switching), avoidance (e.g., message replacement, topic avoidance), time gaining (e.g., using hesitation devices, fillers and gambits) and self-monitoring strategies (e.g., self-initiated repair, self-rephrasing) to check comprehension and to resolve misunderstandings (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1995, p. 25), and to improve the effectiveness of communication (Bagaric & Djigunovic, 2007, p. 98). Being equipped with this component of communicative competence means learning how to use the language in contexts in cases of, for instance, communication breakdowns, repairs of misunderstandings and inappropriate self-expressions. In a nutshell, it is the ability to solve communication problems as they arise.

The overall need to be empowered with the elements of communicative competence in a second or a foreign language comes from the necessity to become tactful interlocutors avoiding any kind of communication breakdown in multicultural and multilinguistic contexts. Foreign or second language teachers need to possess a solid understanding and working knowledge of these four components of communicative competence to ease communication in the target language and also to act as role-models for their students.

When it comes to assessing the communicative competence of language learners, traditional methods of testing proved to be ineffective and have been challenged by alternative and authentic tools to assess the spoken performance in a second language (Reeves, 2000). One way to measure the dimensions of communicative competence of undergraduate foreign language teacher candidates is through task-based language assessment (TBLA), an alternative to traditional testing (Norris, 2016) thanks to the meaningful context it offers to explore the examinee's ability to use the target language (Mislevy, Steinberg & Almond, 2002; van Gorp & Deygers, 2013).

Studies focusing on a comparison of second language learning gains on online and offline modes of teaching platforms are quite limited. Volle (2005) reports a significant difference in college students learning Spanish as an L2 when they were required to record their speech and to participate in online conversations. Murugaiah (2016) suggests that students with a high level of proficiency in the L2 benefitted from online task-based presentations when they were given the necessary training and pedagogical support even though the experience was quite challenging for students with lower levels of proficiency. Students reported that they got bored since their peers were reading the slides most of the time. Castillo (2016) states that as long as the adult learners are well-acquainted with web-based technologies and digital platforms and skills, they would benefit from the listening and speaking tasks conducted online. McDougall and Holden (2017) observed the positive attitude of tertiary level students about online speaking programs if the guidelines such as the topic, audience were set clear that would make the oral presentations fulfilling and meaningful. Galindo, Gregori and Martinez (2020) emphasized the role of making the assessment criteria clear so that the students would perform better in their second drafts of online explanations to the assigned homework. Martin (2020) concludes that the L2 learners of German who received an online pronunciation training program outperformed those who did not receive such a training when their accuracy in L2 perception and production was considered. Al-Jarf (2021) investigated student and teacher responses to their online learning and teaching experiences. The teachers reported to having used a variety of online debates, problem-solving questions and games. The students had the opinion that visuals and slides aided their understanding of the presentations.

This paper aims to contribute to the existing literature of TBLA of first year undergraduate foreign language teacher candidates by comparing their perceptions of oral skills via presentations held on an online platform vs. face-to-face classes. Their communicative competence was measured through the extent to which the goals of interaction have been attained on two communicative tasks. The research question addressed in this paper is whether the change in the medium of instruction impacts the way these students perceive their linguistic, discourse, strategic and sociolinguistic competence. The self-assessment of their performance on two tasks, one of which was conducted before and the other after the

March 2020 lockdown will be reported. Below is the specific research question and the relevant predictions with respect to the expected outcomes:

Research question: Does the medium of presentation play a role in ELT students' self-evaluations of linguistic, discourse, strategic and sociolinguistic competence before and after the March 2020 lockdown?

Prediction 1: Overall, the students are expected to have more positive evaluations of their communicative competence on the online platform since the affective filter and the possible experienced level of anxiety are expected to be lower on the online platform.

Prediction 2: The nature of the task might also be a reason for the difference in self-evaluations.

Now, turning to a discussion of previous work on communicative competence and task-based assessment of speaking skills in contexts of English as a Foreign (EFL) as well as English as a Second Language (ESL).

2. Literature Review

Empirical work investigating communicative competence in a foreign language has mostly been limited to responses to questionnaires and semi-structured interviews on beliefs and attitudes obtained through face-to-face data collection procedures. In the Indonesian context, for example, 5th year English language education department students (n=10) were observed and interviewed to explore the extent to which student metacognitive skills were affected by their perceived communicative competence in learning a foreign language (Herdiawan, 2018). The findings revealed that the students favored a curriculum that focused on socio-cultural communication where discourse, interactional, linguistic and strategic appropriateness in the foreign language were emphasized. Baykal (2010) gave a questionnaire to 75 pre-service foreign language teachers in Turkey to elicit their opinions on communicative activities in the target language. More than 75% of the students reported that they appreciated the use of communicative activities in class, yet they felt quite anxious since they had to communicate in English. The increasing levels of anxiety seemed to be rooted in their lack of self-confidence and fear of negative evaluation due to possible grammar and pronunciation mistakes. When they were asked how to overcome communication barriers, they listed solutions such as residing in the target language country for some time and forcing themselves to speak English in class. In another study in the Turkish context, a questionnaire was conducted on 503 EFL pre-and in-service teachers to explore the extent their opinions and attitudes about intercultural competence matched up with their classroom practices (Atay, Kurt, Çamlibel, Ersin & Kaslioglu, 2009). Even though the teachers were aware of the place of culture in foreign language learning, they reported that they did not integrate much of the target language culture in their teaching practices. A similar picture emerged in other EFL contexts. Despite willingness to be empowered with intercultural communicative competence and to integrate the culture of the target language in teaching practices, language teacher (candidate)s reported that they needed guidance in explicit teaching of intercultural competence in the Chinese (Lessard-Clouston, 1996) and Spanish (Castro, Sercu & Garcia, 2004) EFL contexts. In short, despite their acknowledgement and awareness of the need to integrate intercultural communicative competence into the foreign language teaching curriculum, language teachers' beliefs did not reflect upon their teaching practices

(Sercu, Bandura, Castro, Devcheva, Laskaridou, Lundgren, Garcia & Ryan, 2005; Liddicot, 2004).

In the literature, problems mastering the elements of communicative competence such as sociolinguistic competence in a second language are claimed to emerge due to negative sociolinguistic transfer from the first to the second language where differences between social situations, routines and functions exist (Richards & Sukwiwat, 1985). Lack of linguistic control and taking directness as politeness in conversations can result in communication breakdowns (Tanaka, 1988). In EFL contexts like Turkey and China, where traditional grammar-based methods are favored over the communicative ones, students shy away from verbal display of the foreign language (Baykal, 2010). Students' reluctance to communicate in a foreign language can be due to the fear of being negatively evaluated (Mak & White, 1996), unfamiliarity with communicative tasks especially in exam-based educational systems (Rao, 2002), fear of not being able to convey their messages across (Daubney, 2002) or not having the exposure to the target language or the opportunity to interact with the native speakers (Rababah, 2003). In some EFL contexts, like in Korea for example, students prefer to keep silent in English classes since this is what is appreciated in the culture (Chen, 2003).

Several suggestions have been made to improve the communicative competence of EFL and ESL learners. In China, for example, despite proficiency in English, to improve the oral communication skills of students with 'Dumb or Deaf English', the education of college instructors was given specific attention to (Fang, 2010). Involving students in role-play activities where dialogues and expressions were contrasted between the first and the second language helped them possess the necessary sociolinguistic competence (Ya,2008). To boost the communicative competence of Nigerian speakers learning English as a second language, the integration of classroom activities such as storytelling, role-playing, drama and getting engaged in internal monologues was suggested within the framework of communicative language teaching (Regina & Chinwe, 2014). In the Iranian context, where English is taught as a foreign language, certain teaching principles via computer mediated communicative teaching were suggested so that the learners can enhance their communicative competence in the target language (Larsari, 2011). For one, EFL learners needed to be motivated to get involved in contexts that involved meaningful and interactive communication in which target language exposure was maximized. For other, opportunities to take part in the target sociocultural contexts needed to be created. Further, learner autonomy, social equality and identity needed to be promoted. This is achievable since learners would feel more comfortable in taking part in online discussions rather than traditional face-to-face discussions. This is probably because in online discussion groups, the students were not under the spotlight or being stared at by the whole class (Hansen, 2001). Another study from the Iranian context reported that the college students who received training on communicative strategies for 10 weeks through tasks requiring discussion, storytelling and picture description had significantly better use of communicative strategies when compared to the control group (Alibakhshi & Padiz, 2011). One other suggestion to upgrade sociolinguistic awareness, self-correction, grammatical accuracy and native-like pronunciation was to integrate student-centered communicative activities and tasks into foreign language classes (Brandl, 2008). In addition, selecting class materials that would oblige students to get involved in communication and to give personal interpretation of various contexts would

contribute to student confidence, fluency and enthusiasm for learning (Littlewood, William & Swan, 1981).

After the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face instruction and testing had to be replaced by online classes and tools of assessment. Yet, research reporting a comparison of online and face-to-face student presentations is quite sparse in the literature. Research findings have mostly been restricted to online vs. face-to-face oral presentations of business, engineering or medical science students. For instance, Woodcock (2012) reported that online mode of presentations decreased student anxiety. Students were satisfied with the feedback and evaluations they received to their presentations especially when they were video recorded (Barry, 2012). Just like the design of this study, Campbell (2015) asked the students to prepare two public speeches: one online and one face-to-face. Again, the reported level of anxiety was a lot higher in the face-to-face mode when compared to the webinar mode. Braun (2017) compared the role of gender and familiarity with English in the in-class and online presentations of medical science and engineering students in Australia. Only 37% of the participants were second language learners of English. The presentations were made in groups of three. No significance difference was reported in the academic performance, gender, anxiety and familiarity with English across the two presentation modes. Shofatunissa, Sukyadi & Purnawarman (2021) explored three teachers' experience of assessing tertiary level students' self-constructed Youtube videos. Despite the use of a specified rubric, differences in teachers' experience and language background influenced their assessment process. The present paper is one of the very few papers comparing learner self-evaluations of communicative competence before and after the March 2020 lockdown with respect to public speaking in the field of English language teaching. Now, I proceed with the methodology section to introduce the current study.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Procedure

The necessary ethics permission was taken from the university board of ethics (ID: 2022/27). English language teacher candidates, doing their first-year undergraduate studies in a state university in Turkey, were recruited as participants. First, the participants were given a demographics questionnaire. Next, they were assigned two speaking tasks as a part of the mandatory first year first semester undergraduate course 'Oral Communication Skills'. After the students were introduced the components of communicative competence, they were lectured on how to plan and prepare a public speech on the first given genre, elaborating on famous quotes. The first set of speeches was given in-class in the face-to-face mode on the third and fourth weeks of the Spring Semester 2020. After the lockdown starting in March 2020, due to the necessity to conduct classes online, the second set of speeches was made on the webinar mode on the eleventh and twelfth weeks of the same semester on a digital platform provided by the university to deliver online classes. A similar procedure was followed in familiarizing the students with the second task. The planning and the delivery of each task was modelled by the instructor first. Both tasks were monologic in nature and the participants were given a week to practice and get ready before each task.

Each student was required to submit a verbatim transcription of their speeches, the audio recording (for the first task) and video recording (for the second task) along with the comments suggested by a peer and their self-evaluations of the four dimensions of

communicative competence. The students were asked to evaluate their speech on each component of communicative competence on a 5-point Likert Scale, where 1 meant very poor, 2 poor, 3 fair, 4 good and 5 very good. The rubric was adapted from Torky (2006) and Celce Murcia, Dörnyei, and Thurrell (1995). The data obtained from the participants were numbered and entered anonymously for descriptive and inferential statistical analyses.

3.2 Participants

The students were asked to make two public speeches lasting from 1 to 3 minutes. A total of 68 students made a speech, but data from 50 students (M=24 and F=26) ranging in age from 18 to 28 with a mean age of 20.04 (SD=1.49) were included in the analysis. Eighteen students were excluded from the data analysis due to not being able to complete the tasks within the allocated time or failure to complete both tasks. The mean time for the first speech was 150.06 seconds (SD=47.32) and for the second one, the mean time was 133.52 seconds (SD=6.76). As one sample t test results showed, the duration of speeches was approaching significance across the tasks, t (49) =1.97, p=.054.

3.3 Instrument

The first task involved making a self-reflection on quotations from two famous writers (see Appendix 1). The students were expected to make an outline of their speech first. The outline involved an introduction of the main theme emphasized in the quotes, an explanation of what the quotes meant and its importance for them and a conclusion by relating them to the examples from their personal lives. The second one asked for making a semiotic analysis of a TV commercial (see Appendix 2). The framework adopted for the semiotic analysis of the commercial was based on Berger (2004). The students were asked to analyze the relationship between the *signifier* and the *signified* in the advertisement that they picked. They were expected to focus on the message, mood, design, background, use of space, characteristics of figures (e.g., facial expressions, education, relationships with each other) in the advertisement. They were also asked to explain the theme(s), use of language, action, cultural, sociological, political and economic attitudes and aesthetic decisions in the commercial. Technical effects (e.g., sound effects, close-ups, music, special effects) and common attention-getting hooks (e.g., emotional transfer, fear, humor) constituted the expected components of semiotic analysis of the advertisements to be discussed in their speech. The validity of the instrument and the rubric was established through expert opinions obtained from three experts in the field. The responses to the items on the scale had satisfactory internal consistency (α=.75).

3.4 Data Analysis Procedures

Descriptive and inferential statistics were reported. Since the data did not meet the assumptions of normality, Wilcoxson's Rank test results and correlation coefficients were reported to investigate the research question. The statistical analyses were carried out using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, version 25).

4. Findings

First descriptive statistics are reported. Figures 1 and 2 give a visual summary of the student self-evaluations of each component of the communicative competence before and after the lockdown.
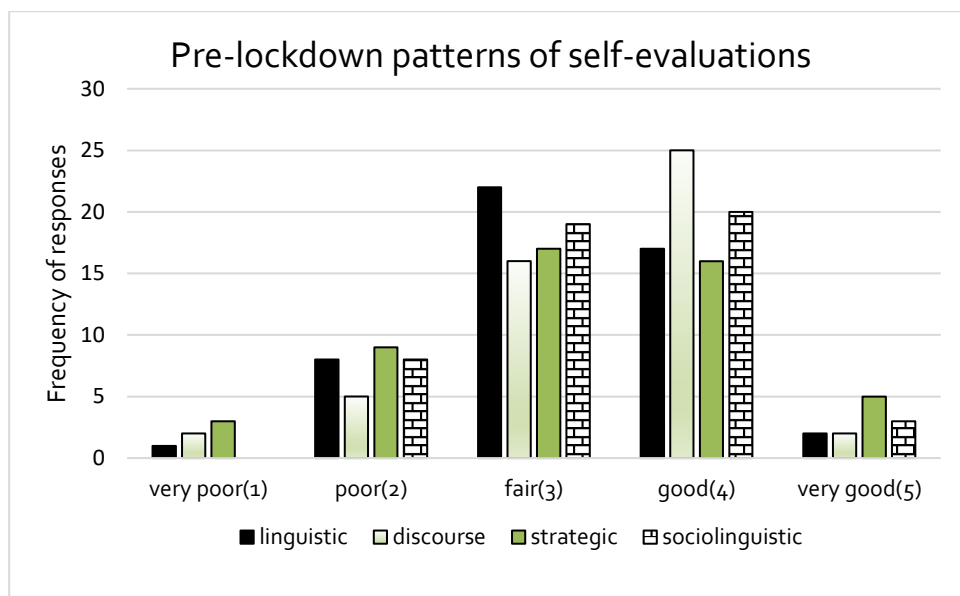
Pre-lockdown patterns of self-evaluations

Figure 1. Student self-evaluations of their communicative competence before the lockdown

As illustrated in Figure 1, most students had the opinion that they were fairly competent in linguistic and strategic domains. Many thought that they had good knowledge of discourse and sociolinguistic competence before the lockdown when the presentations were made in the classroom. Figure 2 visualizes the student tendencies after the lockdown.

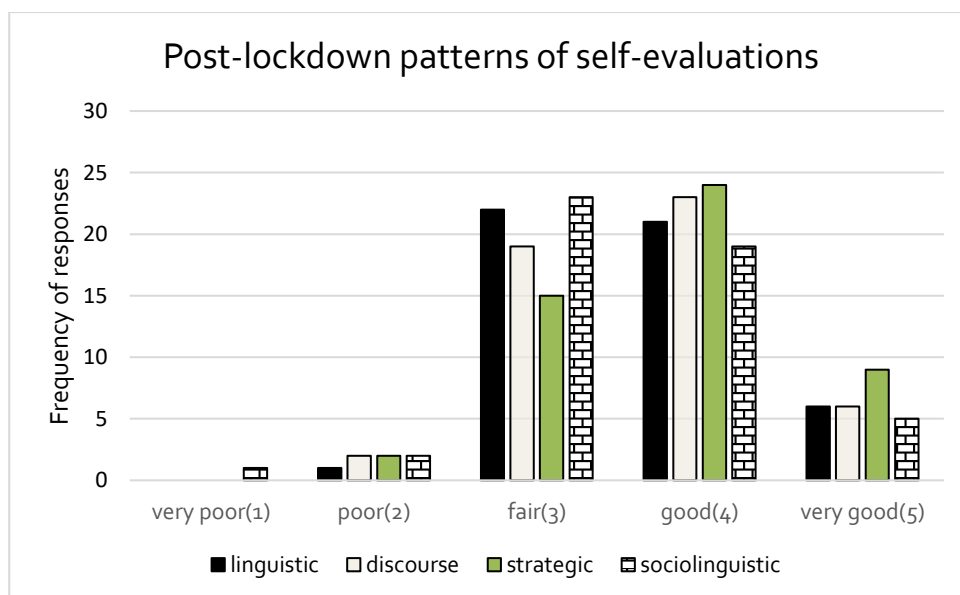## Post-lockdown patterns of self-evaluations

Figure 2. Student self-evaluations of their communicative competence after the lockdown

As given in Figure 2, the students had more positive self-evaluations of their knowledge of communicative competence after the lockdown. They mostly had a better self-evaluation of their linguistic, strategic and discourse competences when the presentations were made online. Some students evaluated their knowledge of sociolinguistic rules in the foreign language as poor and very poor even though the presentations were made on an online platform. In both figures, student self-evaluations centered on *fair* and *very good*. The

students had a higher frequency of more positive evaluations of their performances especially after the lockdown. Table 1 presents a breakdown of student tendencies of their perceived proficiency in each of the four components of communicative competence before and after the lockdown.

Table 1: Student perceptions before and after the lockdown[1]

Time	Components of communicative competence	Mean (SD)	Median	Tendency
Before the lockdown	Linguistic	3.22 (.84)	3.00	Fair
	Discourse	3.40 (.88)	4.00	Good
	Strategic	3.22 (1.05)	3.00	Fair
	Sociolinguistic	3.36 (8.82)	3.00	Fair
Time	Components of communicative competence	Mean (SD)	Median	Tendency
After the lockdown	Linguistic	3.64 (.72)	4.00	Good
	Discourse	3.66 (.74)	4.00	Good
	Strategic	3.80 (.78)	4.00	Good
	Sociolinguistic	3.50 (.81)	3.00	Fair

As given in Table 1, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks results indicated that the median post-test ranks evaluations of linguistic competence after the lockdown, Mdn=4.00, was statistically significantly higher than the median pre-test ranks evaluations before the lockdown, Mdn=3.00, z=2.93, p=.003, r=.29 with a moderate effect size. Similarly, the median post-test ranks evaluations of strategic competence after the lockdown, Mdn=4.00, was statistically significantly higher than the median pre-test ranks evaluations before the lockdown, Mdn=3.00, z=3.38, p=.001, r=.33. No such statistically significant difference existed for the median rank evaluations before and after the lockdown in their perceived proficiency in discourse, Mdn=4.00, z=1.63, p=.102, r=.16 or sociolinguistic competence Mdn=3.00, z=.923, p=.356, r=.09.

Next, the perceived values before and after the lockdown were correlated to investigate the self-assessment trends. Student self-evaluations of linguistic competence before and after the lockdown had a low positive correlation, r(50)=.36, p=.017. The student evaluations of their strategic competence also evolved in a positive trend, but that was a low one, r(50)=.33, p=.021. The evaluation of the discourse competence was a positive though a negligible one, r(50)=.09, p=.548. Although negligible, student self-evaluations of their sociolinguistic competence turned out to be negative after the lockdown, r(50)=-.09, p=.530.

One might question the fact that the difference in self-evaluations might not solely be due to the platform where the presentations were delivered. To examine the other possible contributing factor, namely the nature of the task, the students were sent an online questionnaire to gain some insight about their public speech experience and the factors that

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[1] It would be interesting to see whether the instructor evaluations of the student performances would match with the self-evaluations of the students. Yet a comparison of student, instructor or/and peer evaluations would be beyond the scope of this paper.

might have possibly affected their self-evaluations. The questions were (i)which task was more difficult for you and why, (ii) which platform was more difficult to present and why, (iii) which one caused a difference in evaluating your spoken performance, the task, the platform or both. Out of the fifty participants, forty of them responded to these questions. Only seven (17.5%) of them thought that the platform made a difference in their self-evaluations, whereas thirty-two (80%) of them thought that the difference was due to both the platform and the nature of the tasks. Only one (2.5%) participant opted for the nature of the task to be influential in his self-evaluations. Three of the students (7.5%) reported that both tasks were easy and another three (7.5%) thought that both tasks were really tough. Twenty-one participants (52.5%) believed that the three-minute speech task was more difficult than the semiotic analysis. Here are some of the comments made by the students who found the three-minute speech task more difficult:

> S21: '*In the three-minute speech task, I had a hard time with grammar. I wrote my notes and tried to organize and memorize them. I was ready, but still I had a hard time when I was talking spontaneously. I had a difficult time meeting the three-minute challenge.*'

> S14: '*I really struggled with the three-minute speech task, because it was in the face-to-face time and I was really nervous because it was the first time that I made a speech in front of lots of people. And they were all looking at me and I was really nervous, and I was shaking, my hands were shaking.*'

Thirteen of the students (32.5%) held the opinion that the semiotic analysis task was tougher. Here are some student comments:

> S2: '*In the three-minute speech task, I felt free to express my own ideas and thoughts, but in the semiotic analysis, I had to use a specific framework to express my ideas about the commercial. Since it limited me more, the semiotic analysis was more difficult.*'

> S22: '*In the semiotic analysis, I had to review certain points based on the content I learnt in the course. In contrast, the three-minute speech task was easier because I was freer in shaping my speech.*'

Lastly, the students were asked to reflect upon their public speaking experience with respect to the platform that the speech was delivered. One student (2.5%) reported that public speaking was difficult regardless of the platform the speech was delivered. Twenty-five students (62.5 %) had the opinion that delivering a speech on the face-to-face mode was more difficult. Here are some specific comments from these students:

> S3: '*We are all freshmen at college and did not know each other much, so I was anxious about making mistakes and being mocked by my peers.*'

> S17: '*During the face-to-face presentations, everyone was looking at me while I was trying to express my opinions in front of the class. I had to take care of my body language and other details while facing the audience. However, it was less effortful and anxiety provoking to make a speech on an online platform.*'

> S11: '*Almost everyone suffers from social anxiety when giving a face-to-face speech, but presentations are a lot easier on online platforms since you are in a familiar environment which you belong to.*'

Fourteen students (35%) thought that presenting online was more challenging. Here are some of the related comments:

> S5: '*Meeting people face-to-face reduced my anxiety, and it feels good to see people's real reactions since I can understand what went right and what went wrong in my speech. However, on an online platform, I was alone in my room and couldn't control my excitement, so I paused a lot while I was speaking, and I even did not know whether my class-mates were listening to me.*'

> S12: '*It was a lot easier to make face-to-face presentations, maybe because the home environment did not put me into the right mood. I think the feedback I got from the teacher was more effective while making face-to-face presentations. I could not make effective use of my body language while presenting online.*'

> S19: '*Compared to face-to-face presentations, there are a lot more distractions at home when I make online presentations. The voices of the other people in the house or the doorbell may be heard. There may be Internet connectivity problems during online presentations. Such distractions worry me a lot while making an online presentation.*'

5. Discussion

This study investigated undergraduate English language teaching department students' self-evaluations of their communicative competence in two public speaking tasks, one of which was given in-class before the lockdown and the other of which was given on a digital platform after the lockdown. The students reported that their self-evaluations largely depended on both the differences in platform and the nature of the task. The results indicated a positive correlation between the students' self-evaluation of their linguistic, discourse and strategic competence before and after the lockdown. One exception was the observed negative evaluations of the sociolinguistic competence after the lockdown. Despite a positive trend and obvious reported progress in the three components of the communicative competence, the students worried about their development of sociolinguistic competence in English. Recall that linguistic competence relates to the use of grammar, syntax and vocabulary. Discourse competence asks how phrases and sentences are put together to construct larger units of discourse. And strategic competence has to do with strategies used to recognize gaps in conversations and repair communication breakdowns.

The problematic area for participants in this study turned out to be mastering sociolinguistic competence in English. Recall that it deals with appropriateness of language with respect to setting, topic and the relationship between the interlocutors. It requires having an understanding of the others' attitudes and expressing one's attitudes and beliefs in socially and culturally appropriate and acceptable forms of linguistic behavior. It is not surprising that sociolinguistic competence can best be practiced in face-to-face interaction rather than face-to-screen interaction. This finding lends support to previous findings in the Turkish context (e.g., Atay et al., 2009; Sen, 2020) in the sense that pre-service language teachers are well aware of their limited understanding of intercultural communication. Moreover, developing an objective measure of sociolinguistic competence is not easy. It is most of the time limited to self-ratings of non-native speakers' utterance appropriateness according to some sociocultural criteria such as politeness (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981, p. 114). The teaching of sociolinguistic competence in class requires caution since teaching materials for

sociolinguistic competence do not mostly go beyond the speculations of material writers and developers (Tarone & Yule, 1989).

Similar to the other findings in the literature (e.g., Campbell, 2015; Hansen, 2001), the students in this study felt less threatened and anxious while delivering their speech on a digital platform since they did not have to face the whole class. Although, teachers are hesitant to integrate intercultural learning in their pedagogical practices (Izumi, 1996; Lazar, Huber-Kriegler, Lussier, Matei & Peck, 2007), the findings of this study point out the need to improve the intercultural or sociolinguistic competence of the pre-service foreign language teachers. As Sen (2020) suggested specific courses to promote intercultural communication need to be offered to pre-service teachers along with possible exchange programs to promote sociolinguistic transfer between two linguistic systems. A strong positive correlation has been reported between the time spent abroad and the level of intercultural communicative competence of the pre-service English teachers in the Turkish context (Sariçoban & Öz, 2014).

The feelings provoked throughout these two modes of interaction also show parallelism reported in the literature although the students pointed out different sources of worries in different modes of presentations. The face-to-face presentations are viewed to be anxiety provoking since facing a group of newly met people can be challenging. Face-to-screen presentations, on the other hand, can be challenging since student presenters cannot thoroughly observe the verbal and nonverbal responses of the audience. Overall, the students agreed that to have benefitted from the online presentation experience as reported in the literature (e.g., Castillo, 2016; Volle, 2005). Along with the findings of Murugaiah (2016), the students in the current study emphasized the importance of teacher feedback in shaping their upcoming presentations.

One take-home message of this study is to take certain steps to improve sociolinguistic competence of foreign language teacher candidates which was evaluated to be the weakest link in their overall communicative competence. Inviting distinguished experts, holding multicultural student conferences and encouraging students to pursue joint degree programs can help to improve the sociolinguistic competence of the students (Han & Song, 2011). Sociolinguistic competence of the students can also constitute a part of their course evaluations (Messerhi, 2017). As final words, to prevent pragmatic fossilization and to promote an in-depth understanding of the target culture, engaging materials that lead to discussions, role-plays and public speaking can be integrated into classroom practices so that language learners would have the opportunity to practice the ways culture interacts with the language.

6. Conclusion

This paper concludes that the communicative competence of first year English language teacher candidates can be affected by both the platform and the nature of the task where the spoken interaction takes place. In addition, the students tend to evaluate their experience of online presentations quite positively. However, speaking tasks on online platforms may not be as beneficial for foreign language teacher candidates as it sounds. To improve the linguistic, discourse, strategic and sociolinguistic competences of pre-service language teachers, a face-to-face platform can be more helpful since they can use of their body language more effectively by observing the reactions of the audience and employing

appropriate strategies to make the communication more effective. One limitation of the study was that the students were not familiar with task-based teaching of speaking skills before they started college and the two tasks used on different platforms were different in nature. For future work, similar task types can be introduced to assess the speaking skills of pre-service language teachers both on face-to-face and webinar mode.

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Appendix 1: Three-minute speech task on two given quotations
Instructions: Comment on one of the quotations below for no longer than 3 minutes. Include the transcription of your speech and upload your audio file.

(i) "There is no such thing as conversation. It is an illusion. There are interesting monologues, that's all."
—Rebecca West (1892–1983), English writer

(ii) 'All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts…'
— William Shakespeare (1564–1616) from the play *As You Like It*

Appendix 2: The semiotic analysis of a TV commercial.
Instructions: Choose a commercial-no longer than 2-3 mins. By using the guidelines discussed in class, prepare a three-minute speech to give a semiotic analysis of the video you have chosen. Give a semiotic analysis for no longer than 3 minutes. While giving your speech, use as fewer prompts such as your notes as possible. Include the transcription of your speech.