

## **Portfolios and Presentations for University Students Who Major in English to Improve their Speaking Skills**

**Basil Skaik**

*Al-Azhar University – Gaza*

### **Abstract**

In English as a foreign language (EFL) environment of Gaza, university students who specialize in English usually lack the opportunity to interact or to expose themselves to English speaking community. This has created a real problem for many of them. In an attempt to help these students improve their speaking skills, the researcher as a teacher used two techniques to investigate possible improvement of their speaking performance: portfolios and presentations. Students have been asked to keep an individual digital file of some video and audio clips which they download from internet by their own choice with some guidance from the teacher. These clips together with a paper file where they put their reflection logs, comments and questions comprise their portfolios. At regular stages, learners are asked to present some topics from their files in front of their peers. They have to use video and audio clips in their presentations. A questionnaire and semi-interviews have been conducted to collect data. The experimental group showed a great interest in such a process and their performance in speaking has improved to a good extent.

**Key Words:** Video and Audio clips, Portfolios, Presentations, Speaking Skills

### **Introduction**

“Of all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), speaking seems intuitively the most important.” ([28]:120). However, the main problem that EFL learners face in developing this skill is that there is a limited space to practice speaking. First of all, students do not have many courses in speaking and listening. Second, lectures are almost done by their teachers. Third, their contribution in developing such a skill is fairly limited as they live in an Arabic speaking community (Gaza, Palestine). They compensate by listening or

doing some kind of chatting via internet. In the researcher's experience, EFL students need more practice and follow up activities to enhance their speaking skills. Therefore, this paper comes to investigate the effect of students' portfolios and presentations in developing their speaking skills.

## **Research Questions**

### **Main Question**

Can Portfolios and Presentations help EFL students to improve their speaking skills?

### **Secondary Questions**

1. Does portfolio facilitate and support students speaking skills?
2. Does presentation accelerate and enhance students' speaking performance?

## **Theoretical Background**

Teaching speaking as a skill has become a necessity those days [2]. Students need to expose themselves to various discourses in order to be able to develop a good awareness of the cultural, social and even psychological aspects of speaking skills [26]. They need to practice speaking from time to time in terms of interaction in a meaningful manner ([20]:206) where they feel that they can present their ideas and feelings to others and evaluate their performance in such a communicative manner [8] & [26]. The following literature will cover the main areas of investigation in relation to speaking.

### **Portfolios**

Portfolios can be defined as "a purposeful, interrelated collection of student work that shows the student's efforts, progress or achievement in one or more areas" [25]. Research shows that there is a great benefit of using portfolios as a means of assessment in ESL/EFL language classroom [3], [31] & [13]. EFL students would engage more and take ownership of their own learning as well as reflect on their learning process and therefore enhance their autonomy by using portfolios [24] & [30].

Portfolios, in this study, were investigated to see if they can be a good tool of helping learners to organize, collect, select and experience studying various aspects of speaking (e.g. body language, intonation, stress).

Students were asked to keep a portfolio where they can collect, select, reflect and present the subjects they like. The idea of encouraging them to collect is to widen their scope of awareness of how and what variety of speech acts are [23]. This in its turn would help them not only to watch and listen to authentic or semi-authentic English but also to interact willingly with these texts. This means they can make questions, comments, stories, presentations..etc.

Allowing students to select from their clips whether audios or videos and to present a topic or a sketch around would encourage learners to check or double-check their interaction with the authentic texts [31].

### **Presentations**

The presentation experience in itself has emerged from what learners showed of interest to do similar clips from "Youtube" and other websites. They want to sound English in their talk and in their interaction. The presentation was a free choice where students can decide the way they feel comfortable to perform. Some chose to present alone. Others chose to present in pairs or groups. Some students used LCD and Laptops, whereas others used posters and the white board. However, the most interesting thing in this process is the variety of techniques and methods of selection and presentation which the researcher believes is very necessary in enhancing the productivity of the speaker [26].

### **Speaking**

The following analogy (See Table 1) which was done by the researcher after reviewing the literature in the three areas (portfolios, presentations and speaking) has encouraged the researcher to focus his investigation on presentation and portfolio together and to check whether it can facilitate bringing

about most of the speaking skills that EFL students actually need [6], [7],[17] & [18].

## **Research Methodology**

### **Participants**

The study was applied to 192 third level EFL students (160 female + 32 male) of the Faculty of Education at Al-Azhar University – Gaza last semester (2011-2012). Those students did at least two courses in conversation before the Listening and Speaking course after which the researcher conducted this study.

### **Instruments**

#### **Findings and Discussions of the Questionnaire**

A quasi experimental method was used in this study. A questionnaire including 11 statements was developed in order to find out students' preferences and views in using portfolios and presentations in developing their speaking skills. On a four-point-scale ranging as "Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly disagree", participants put their responses which best indicate their level of agreement on the situation.

*Table (1)*  
*An Analogy among Speaking, Presentation and Portfolios*

	In Speaking	In Presentations	In Portfolios
1	producing the sounds, stress patterns, rhythmic structures, and intonations of the language;	Voice plays a very important part especially stress, rhythmic structures and intonations.	Design and structure of the digital and non-digital materials reflects SS' views
2	using grammar structures accurately;	Using appropriate language where accuracy is preferable	Neat Design and presentation of the collection in writing
3	assessing characteristics of the target audience, including shared knowledge or shared points of reference, status and power relations of participants, interest levels, or differences in perspectives;	Audience is a key element in the interaction [26]	Audience-based presentation either digital or written [30].
4	selecting vocabulary that is understandable and appropriate for the audience, the topic being discussed, and the setting in which the speech act occurs; [8]	Selection of appropriate vocabulary is very essential in presentation	Selection is a key element [ 23 ]
5	applying strategies to enhance comprehensibility, such as emphasizing key words, rephrasing,	Eye-contact and evaluating the audience understanding	Panel presentation is another key element for evaluation [31]

	or checking for listener comprehension;		
6	using gestures or body language;	Gestures and body language are important elements in making the presentation successful	Students are encourage to be more artistic in presenting their materials on the portfolio (pictures, drawings, etc.) [1]
7	paying attention to the success of the interaction and adjusting components of speech such as vocabulary, rate of speech, and complexity of grammar structures to maximize listener comprehension and involvement.	Adjusting interaction according to the rate and complexity of listeners' comprehension and involvement.	Regular conference with the teacher and the final conference of presentations [32]

Table (2)  
Students' answers in percentage

	The Item	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	Exposing to audio and video clips is necessary	63%	32%	6%	1%
2.	Keeping a portfolio for audio and video clips is important	68%	24%	8%	0%
3.	Selecting clips was a real experience of unintentional study	61%	30%	4%	5%
4.	Downloading and keeping a portfolio taught me to be selective and evaluative	72%	18%	6%	4%
5.	Watching and listening to people speaking in English makes it easier for me to attempt speaking	79%	14%	4%	1%
6.	Practicing presentation has helped me to become fluent in English	60%	27%	7%	6%
9.	Presenting in English has helped me to be more aware of my pronunciation and grammar	58%	34%	7%	1%
10	Discussing and interacting inside the class after presentation were of great benefit	60%	30%	8%	2%
11	Using the sheet of assessment has helped me a lot in paying extra attention to my speech.	44%	33%	9%	0%

Table (2) shows the results of the questionnaire. It is clear that most of the students tend to believe that using portfolio and presentation has a great value (more than 60% of the respondents strongly agree). The remarkable result of statement (5) indicates that more than 80% of the students believe that watching and listening to English spoken by others makes it easier for them to speak. It seems, though, that using a sheet of assessment has not received that much attention where the percentage of those who agree is around (70%).

Semi-structured interviews:

The researcher asked students the following questions and recorded students' views:

1. Do you think that keeping a portfolio is a good idea in developing your speaking skills? How?
2. What is the most important thing that you have learned in presentations?
3. How did you evaluate your speaking skills after you have done your presentations and you attended your friends presentations?
4. Do you believe in collaborative evaluation where you and your peers as well as the teacher evaluate your speaking?

#### **Findings & Discussion of Interviews:**

In terms of the qualitative measurement, the researcher interviewed 30 male and 35 female students who studies the course of Listening and Speaking during the second semester of the academic year (2011-2012). The researcher reviewed the recorded interviews and made a list of the most repeated and used terms which in a sense reflect the underlying perception or attitude of the interviewees [12]. Coding and analyzing interviewees' views concerning portfolios by using the ground theory of ([15] & [12] has resulted in the major codes in Table (3).

Table (3)  
Portfolio Codes

	Codes	35 female and %	30 male and %
1.	Less anxiety	24 (80%)	21 (76%)
2.	Encouraging	31 (90%)	22 (74%)
3.	Enriching knowledge	30 (86%)	19 (70%)
4.	Recording information	28 (76%)	25 (85%)
5.	Rehearsing	31 (90%)	23 (84%)
6.	Searching and selecting are good for learning	29 (88%)	17 (67%)
7.	Authenticity	22 (72%)	20 (71%)
8.	Free choice	26 (77%)	27 (90%)
9.	Strategies stimulation	23 (72%)	24 (84%)

The results of the study indicated that the EFL students at Al-Azhar University – Gaza tend to accept and like keeping portfolios. Almost, 75% of the students prefer the less risky technique of keeping a portfolio. They believed that it is good for helping them to better manage not only language and vocabulary but also develops their knowledge of the language as cultural and social aspects are concerned. It can be seen that the codes that the researcher came up with indicate how far the learners benefited from keeping a speaking portfolio. For example, in terms of strategies simulation, almost 76% of both males and females believe that portfolios have helped them to be more aware of their speaking strategies as they make a good record of them in their files. Another good example is the authenticity, where around 70% of both males and females believe that they can speak or behave like native speakers if they develop their speaking awareness of watching, listening, commenting and presenting things from their speaking portfolio.

On the other hand, 29% of the students believed that files or portfolios are not serious. Their claim came into the interviews. They indicated that their attempt to present a

portfolio has not always be successful as they used to bring anything and even sometimes cut and paste from the internet without even reading and interacting with. Their complaint comes as there is no extra effort from their part and from the part of the teacher to sit and to talk to them in more serious English or as some of them put it "business English".

The majority, however, indicated that such techniques of keeping a portfolio as a flash disk and a written file has benefited many of them in various ways. As far as the importance of keeping a portfolio is concerned, most of the interviewees indicated a psychological influence the portfolio has on their learning. One male student said,

*"When I knew that this portfolio is up to me to do what I want, I felt very calm and relaxed."*

Another female student said,

*"I like the idea of keeping a file, it really helps in organizing and enriching my knowledge."*

A third female student said,

*"I used to be very afraid to speak, however, when I started to see how people speak in youtube and other websites, I become more aware of how to ..and I can say I was encouraged to speak."*

A fourth male student said,

*"I have learned a lot of how to download and how to read extensively and how to search the internet.. it is really a very interesting way of teaching as I learn by choosing what I like."*

This implies that there is a tendency among those students to be self-motivated and self-centered in their learning [28].

Table (3) shows clearly that this kind of interaction has been praised by the majority of the respondents (82%). They find it mostly participatory where they work cooperatively and collectively presenting in front of each other [10].

Table (4)  
Presentation Codes

	Codes	35 female and %	30 male and %
1.	Challenging: provoke thinking and acting	32 (92%)	25 (86%)
2.	Demanding: needs effort and time	26 (83%)	27 (90%)
3.	Activating knowledge and skills	28 (86%)	24 (84%)
4.	Developing evaluative skills	27 (85%)	22 (80%)
5.	Stimulating spontaneous reaction	26 (83%)	24 (82%)
6.	Stimulating reflection: thinking of strategies	25 (82%)	23 (81%)
8.	Participatory: working together	24 (81%)	20 (78%)
9.	Fun: interesting	26 (83%)	25 (86%)

Presentations as a technique was of a great help and the effect of this technique was obvious in what most of the students said (activating knowledge and skills) [1]. One female student recommends,

*"All our teachers at the university should help us to do presentations and to assess our work not only by a written test... I like to interact with others and presentation helps me to feel that I am speaking."*

Another male student comments on the development of the fluency and improving his pronunciation (activating knowledge and skills),

*"I have been wondering how I can improve my fluency in speaking, but when we were asked to search the internet and other available books and magazines and bring a topic for our presentations, I could say, I will make use of this golden opportunity... I really encourage other students to ask for more presentations in other subjects."*

A third female student's comments on that presentation is a very interesting way of studying English and encouraging students to speak (Fun and challenging),

*"It is really fun to go for a presentation. I like it even I have to prepare things. It is really interesting to feel that I can stand and speak and discuss things in front of the whole class."*

However, the researcher can realize from the experience of teaching and researching the course that portfolio should be more systematized. This means, students should present their files on a regular basis as this could ensure constant work and could develop the critical and the creative abilities [5] & [2]. In terms of speaking skills, keeping a portfolio and presenting it on a regular basis in terms of a student-teacher conference would develop further awareness and understanding of the skills and the strategies of speaking [9].

### **Discussion**

To answer the questions of the study, the statistical findings in general and the students' comments in their interviews show that there should be a kind of interaction and socialization in order to develop their speaking skills. This view has been reflected in many researches [2], [20], [27], [31]. The manifestation of these teaching and learning tools can be best seen in encouraging EFL students to keep a digital portfolio where they can download video and audio clips from the internet and they can interact with

them through their paper files by writing comments, questions or doing presentations and discussions about.

As far as the portfolios are concerned, the findings show that more than 70% of the students prefer to use this tool to learn by themselves to develop their own performance in speaking. This highlights the importance of scaffolding for helping EFL students to work on their own [14]. Many of the students reflected how much fun and challenge they had during presentations which added to their interest and concern of discovering and exploring more strategies and skills through interacting and attempting to speak in their presentations.

In terms of presentations, the findings of the questionnaire agree to a good extent with the findings of the interviews in that presentations are can stimulate the learners various strategies to become a competent speaker of English.

### **1. Conclusions and Implications**

This study was conducted to investigate the effect of using two tools (portfolios and presentations) on developing speaking skills of EFL students at Al-Azhar University - Gaza.

The results show that there is a good tendency towards keeping and searching for information and knowledge by using portfolios and developing this process through presentations. Students, in general, like and benefit from keeping a speaking portfolio. They indicated in their questionnaire and interviews that portfolios have a good influence especially in enriching their information and ideas of how aural/oral language works. In terms of presentation, they showed a great interest in doing presentations in whatever way they like. They explained that presentations have encouraged them to study more in order to experience speaking and discussing in English.

Therefore, the researcher believes that speaking can be a very interesting skill to study if students go and search for authentic and semi authentic materials to enrich their linguistic, social, psychological knowledge [17] & [2]. Presentation, on the other hand, would work as a demonstration where EFL

students consolidate and evaluate to what extent they have learnt from what they have collected in their own portfolios. This would agree with what [16] postulated that learners should be given at least "one-minute presentation" to talk in "a meaningful way" in order to improve their speaking performance. The teacher can facilitate this process by supporting learners to be "hands-free" or independent speakers of English [21], [4], [19] & [22]. This can also be done electronically nowadays by making use of the internet facilities such as blogs, websites, wikis and others[11].

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