

The value of class participation as an assessment tool in the English Language classroom

Choo Li Lin
Stella Picca Hong Sin

Centre for Pedagogical Research and Learning
Raffles Girls' School (Secondary)
Singapore

Abstract

This paper reports on a study conducted in a secondary school in Singapore that explored the value of class participation as an assessment tool. The study was designed to investigate the alignment between student and teacher interpretations of a scoring rubric through a comparison of sets of data: the peer-assigned scores and teacher-assigned scores. Quantitative analyses reveal that differences arising in scores were not due to students' academic level (i.e., whether they were in Year 3 or 4) but could be due to other factors such as differing teacher and student expectations in assessing class participation. This report concludes by discussing the pedagogical implications of this study for developing teachers' competence in assessing class discussion in a way that can support and maximise students' learning.

Introduction

While prior research has recognised the value of class participation as an effective learning strategy and a valuable pedagogical tool (e.g., Bean & Peterson, 1998; Burbules & Bruce, 2001) little has been said in favour of class participation as a form of assessment.

Our study aims to explore the alignment between student and teacher expectations in terms of graded class participation.

Literature Review

The Importance of Class Participation

Although class participation can take many forms, at its core, it involves discussion (Jones, 2008). Previous research has shown how classroom discussion is a frequently used active learning strategy. Class discussion includes listening closely, taking a position on an issue, speaking up to defend one's position, and questioning another student's logic (Desiraju & Gopinath, 2001). Research has shown that class participation is valuable as a pedagogical tool (e.g., Litz, 2003). Other benefits of class discussion include the following:

- Discussion allows students to experience diverse perspectives and processes of democratic

discourse and to develop synthesis, integration, and communication skills (Brookfield & Preskill, 2012).

- Students who participate actively in class discussion retain more information after the end of a course (McKeachie, 1994).

The Complexity Surrounding Class Participation

Although class participation has been widely recognised as a useful pedagogical tool, it is not without its detractors where the measuring of participation is concerned. Gilson (1994) raised three points of concern where class participation is designed to be graded:

1. The ‘incompatible’ roles played by the teacher: having to be both supportive (as facilitator) and evaluative;
2. Students ‘playing for points rather than knowledge’; and
3. The same grading scheme being used for every student of the class when participation is rarely uniform across the student body.

Others, such as Jacobs and Chase (1992), argued that including student behaviours in a course grade contaminated the grade as a measure of achievement of the course objectives. One common thread across previous studies is the problem posed by impressionistic marking. Bean and Peterson (1998) recognised that impressionistic marking could be a problem in assessing class participation but also argued that the problem of impressionism in assessing classroom participation could be substantially alleviated through scoring rubrics analogous to the holistic or analytic rubrics used in assessing writing. In addition, Mainkar (2008) proposed a grading system that addresses the following:

1. Compatibility between facilitation of class discussion and evaluation of student participation;
2. Students’ focus on learning instead of grades; and
3. Student motivation.

In light of the issues raised by prior studies, our study is based on a grading system that is standards-based (i.e., through the use of rubric). Prior to assessing class participation, the English Language (EL) teachers in the present study were instructed to familiarise the students with the expectations articulated in the scoring rubric. Class participation was assessed continually and embedded in the learning of new knowledge.

The Research Context

The research context for this study was the Integrated Programmes (IP) in a secondary school in Singapore. The IP curriculum was implemented in Singapore at the beginning of 2004 in order to provide a seamless secondary and junior college enriched education without requiring pupils to take the GCE O-Level Examination, a national level examination normally taken in the fourth year of secondary education. The time ‘saved’ by not having to prepare for the GCE O-Level Examination is used to develop pupils’ intellectual curiosity, encourage them to undertake research work and provide a broad-based education that is more in tune with desired real-world competencies (Ministry of Education, 2012). In line with the rationale for integrated programmes, the institution under study has adopted a seamless six-year programme catering to academically gifted students.

Methodology

This section begins with a description of the participants and the data. This is followed by a brief discussion of the assessment process before we delve into data analysis and a discussion of our

findings.

Data for this Study

Table 1 provides a profile of the data set. Data was collected from three classes of each cohort, (i.e., three classes from the Year 3 cohort and three classes from the Year 4 cohort) sampled on the basis of class participation scores – the class with the highest mean score, the class with the lowest mean score, and the class with a mean score closest to the mean of the whole cohort based on the scoring rubric described below.

Table 1
Profile of the Data Set

	n	Mean [%]	SD
Year 3 overall	461	78.23[cohort mean]	8.54
3A [highest mean]	28	84.98	5.66
3B [lowest mean]	31	73.78	7.64
3C [close to cohort mean]	30	77.98	7.69
Year 4 overall	459	76.52	10.24
4A [lowest mean]	30	72.67	7.15
4B [close to cohort mean]	30	76.75	10.87
4C [highest mean]	30	78.75	8.61

The Assessment Process

The Scoring Rubric

There were four criteria in the scoring rubric (which was crafted by the EL teachers involved in this study); each criterion spelt out the expected skill that students needed to demonstrate proficiency in speaking within a community (in this case, the classroom). The four criteria were: Quality of Ideas, Level of Engagement, Listening skills, and Language Use. A brief description of each criterion and standard is given in Table 2.

The assessment required that each candidate be assessed by two of her peers and her teacher using the scoring rubric. Each candidate was assessed using the abovementioned criteria. Each criterion was based on a four-point scale for a total assessment mark of 16. The final grade was calculated by taking a percentage (30%) of the average or mean scores of the two peers and a percentage (70%) of the teacher's score.

Table 2
Scoring Rubric

STANDARDS	EXCELLENT	PROFICIENT	ADEQUATE	NEEDS IMPROVEMENT
CRITERIA	4	3	2	1
Quality of Ideas	Student offers compelling insights in class discussions.	Student offers meaningful insights in class discussions.	Student offers obvious insights in class discussions.	Student offers tenuous insights in class discussions.
Level of Engagement	Student proactively contributes in class discussions by offering ideas, and initiating discussions.	Student contributes regularly in class discussions and frequently volunteers ideas.	Student is reluctant to take risks and participates sporadically in class discussions.	Student rarely or never contributes to class discussions.
Listening Skills	Student listens actively when others talk, and often takes into account, incorporates or builds on the ideas of others.	Student listens respectfully when others talk, and makes some attempts to build on ideas of others.	Student listens respectfully when others talk, both in groups and in class.	Student does not listen when others talk, or may be intolerant of the opinions of others and interrupts when others speak.
Language Use	Expresses views and ideas clearly and succinctly , using precise vocabulary to enrich discussions.	Expresses and develops ideas clearly , using appropriate vocabulary.	Expresses views and ideas in a cursory manner, using mostly basic vocabulary.	Expresses views and ideas superficially , with confusing vocabulary.

Data Analysis

In order to find out if there was alignment between student and teacher expectations of performance, we compared the scores assigned by the teacher and student assessors via a series of one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). The ANOVA was used to determine whether there were any significant differences between the means of two or more independent (unrelated) groups.

Findings and Discussion

To ensure that differences arising in class participation scores were not due to other factors such as the students' academic level, a one-way ANOVA was run. There was no statistically significant difference between the Year 3 and Year 4 cohorts as determined by the one-way ANOVA ($F(1,179) = .002, p = .963$), suggesting that differences arising in class participation scores were not due to the students' academic level (i.e., whether they were in Year 3 or 4), but could be due to differing teacher and student expectations in assessing class participation.

Table 3
Mean Class Participation Scores of Year 3 and Year 4 Cohorts

	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	95% CI for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Year 3	89	76.11	9.26	.98	74.16	78.06	53.75	98.75
Year 4	92	76.04	9.16	.96	74.15	77.94	53.75	98.75
Total	181	76.08	9.18	.68	74.73	77.42	53.75	98.75

Within the Year 3 cohort, a one-way ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference between teacher-assigned scores and peer-assigned scores ($F(1,176) = 4.355, p = .038$).

Table 4
Year 3 Teacher-assigned and Peer-assigned Mean Class Participation Scores

	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	95% CI for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Teacher-assigned scores	89	80.18	8.54	.91	78.38	81.98	56.25	100.00
Peer-assigned scores	89	82.74	7.78	.83	81.10	84.38	62.50	100.00
Total	178	81.46	8.25	.62	80.24	82.68	56.25	100.00

In contrast, for the Year 4 cohort, there was no statistically significant difference between teacher assigned scores and peer assigned scores as determined by a one-way ANOVA ($F(1,182) = .120, p = .730$), suggesting that there was a clearer alignment between teacher and student assessors in interpreting the rubric, with the students perceiving their peers to have contributed to quality class discourse to a similar degree as that observed by the teachers. (See Table 5 for mean scores assigned by teachers and peers).

Table 5
Year 4 Teacher-assigned and Peer-assigned Mean Class Participation Scores

	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	95% CI for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Teacher-assigned	92	75.82	10.45	1.09	73.66	77.99	50.00	100.00
Peer-assigned	92	76.34	9.72	1.01	74.33	78.35	53.13	96.88
Total	184	76.08	10.07	.74	74.62	77.55	50.00	100.00

Pedagogical Implications

Our findings suggest that in order to ensure that there is alignment in terms of teacher-student expectations, the teacher has to be explicit in articulating the expectations and the desired outcomes of class participation to the students before embarking on the assessment cycle. Apart from the tangible aspect of grades, Mello (2008) suggested giving students some 'voice' and say in how their participation would be assessed as this could greatly assist in gaining their belief in and commitment to not only the process of graded class participation but its outcomes as well. Of course, the grading of participation should not be cursory but rather linked to specific learning objectives and outcomes in order to be effective.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

The present study has found a statistically significant difference in the way teachers and students appraised class participation among the Year 3 classes. In contrast, quantitative analyses suggest a clearer alignment between teacher and student interpretation of the scoring rubric at the Year 4 level. Some limitations exist in our study that could perhaps be revisited in further research, the first being our focus on quantitative data rather than qualitative analyses of classroom discourse. Qualitative analyses may have shed light on discursal features used in graded class participation. More research is needed in the area of classroom discourse analysis to uncover how students interact with one another and negotiate meaning with their peers during graded class participation. One other aspect which could be seen as a limitation in our study is the de-emphasising of teaching experience as a possible influencing factor in the facilitation and assessing of class participation. This is a result of the participating teachers all having more than three years of teaching experience at the point when the class participation was graded.

Conclusion

Our study has found that there is a clearer alignment between teacher and student expectations at Year 4. However, while all teachers reported that they had explicitly instructed the students on how to interpret the rubric prior to embarking on the process of grading class participation, the lack of uniformity in interpreting the scoring rubric suggests that more can be done in terms of developing teacher competencies so that class participation can be accurately reflected in both peer and teacher grading.

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