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“Listen and click”: enhancing Listening Comprehension Skills in the Language Classroom through the Use of Clickers

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Abstract

The following article relates to an experiment with a group of second year students learning an applied language as a minor subject of their degree. Personal Response Devices were introduced to improve the students’ listening skills by creating more engagement with the course material. It led to 100% participation in class activities run through clickers, facilitated the students in self-evaluating their performance at the tasks and was fun, despite some technical issues occasionally. The experiment fell short however on the reflective aspect. Students were either incapable of or unwilling to reflect on the questions they found difficult. The lecturer was left with improved performances in listening assignments, but no usable feedback on how to support her students in transferring those improved skills to the related area of speaking performance.

Background

I first found out about clicker technology at our annual Showcase for Learning and Teaching in 2009.

I was immediately interested as its multiple-choice format echoes the prolific use of MCQs in language teaching. Closed questions are extensively used to teach, train and test various aspects of a target language, including grammatical accuracy, vocabulary choice and listening comprehension. Moreover the rapid growth of online resources for language learning has significantly accelerated the use of this technique over the past 15 years.

I was particularly struck by the participative philosophy at play in clicker pedagogy. Since I teach a participative subject, any tool that can enhance student engagement with the subject matter is bound to catch my attention. Notwithstanding the fact that clickers are normally advisable to involve large cohorts of students (Caldwell, 2007), and that I teach comparatively “small” groups, I felt that some of my classes could also benefit from a motivational push.

I decided on introducing Personal Response Devices, or PRDs, with the second year of the B.A. in Hospitality Management (DT408/2) because, year on year, overall results for the group were declining at an alarming rate, while the gap between the top and bottom of the class was widening rapidly.

In first year, DT408.2 had also benefited from their participation in a project on the correlation between class attendance and retention run by their tutor, Mr. Adrian Davis, from the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management, with the help of Mr. Mark

Russell, formerly DIT retention officer. The project quantitatively improved attendance and focus for this cohort relative to previous classes. This was therefore a good group to experiment with.

Despite good progress in attendance however, academic results did not immediately match this change of attitude (Mr Davis's study over two years hinted at delayed academic benefits towards the second half of the course; regrettably, the study was not extended to the final year of the degree). As the language component intervenes early on in first and second year of the course, improved attendance did not translate automatically into improved performance. Clearly, some students were attending class more frequently than in the past, but not progressing proportionately, a clear indication of their lack of actual engagement with the module.

Rationale for project

In September 2011 I set out to use clicker technology in order to enhance the listening comprehension component of the module TFFR2005 French 3.

This module is the third core language module offered by the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management across its seven degrees. French 3 runs in semester 3 of both ordinary and honours degrees (semester 4 of the evening degree). The listening comprehension element forms part of the 50% continuous assessment component. It also underpins the speaking element of the module. Both components are therefore closely linked in their content, depth and format.

Continuous assessment in French 3 is divided into 2 tasks. Both are ultimately assessed in a face-to-face assignment:

the first task is a role-play which takes place in a professional context, for instance dealing with a room cancellation over the phone;

the second task is a presentation, in this case of an Irish hotel, to develop the students' performance in their chosen field of study.

In both instances, oral production is arrived at via exposure to audio documents which act as examples of good practice.

Each lesson introduces the student to at least one audio activity (the listening comprehension part). Various exercises and activities, audio- or written-based, then highlight pertinent issues of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. The class gradually progresses towards a short oral production mimicking the input document. There are 5 lessons leading to production of the first task (the role-play) and 5 further lessons preparing the student to his/her individual presentation at the end of the module.

In the field of second language acquisition, listening comprehension skills are traditionally developed through a variety of activities: multiple choice questions; true or false questionnaires; cloze tests; open-ended questions, etc. Up to this point students had been completing listening exercises on the worksheets I used to distribute at the

beginning of each lesson. Those worksheets, along with solutions and transcripts of the listening material, are also available on the students' webcourse. Now my aim was to transfer those activities to the Turning Point software for use in class through clickers.

Through this project it was hoped that the use of clickers would:

- enhance student participation in class activities;
 - help students measure their individual performance against the group's;
 - yield immediate feedback to the teacher, leading to better module delivery, both synchronous and asynchronous,
- ... and add a fun element to the classroom.

Development of project

Ten slide shows were produced over the course of the semester, one for each teaching hour I had with the group. However I limited the use of Turning Point to one activity per session, as opening the correct files, distributing the clickers and attempting to register the students, took about 4 minutes of each class. I continued to use worksheets on occasion alongside the clickers.

There were technical glitches due to the fact that I was handling several technologies at the one time: a CD or .mp3 file for the audio material, then the Turning Point questionnaires, then the transcripts as word documents for the correction phase.

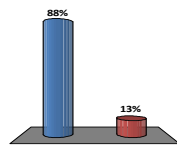
Overall I found the system easy to design with and easy to use, up to the point when the classroom computer was upgraded to Word 10. From there on the Turning Point software (2008 version) had to be reinstalled and malfunctioned every week, refusing to register the students initially, then to register their clicking at all in the last 2 sessions.

I experimented with various types of questionnaires, and became more ambitious with each new session, graduating from simple "True or False" exercises to multiple choices with 3, and then 4 entries.

Item 2

33 1 47 88 00 99

1. Identique
2. Différent

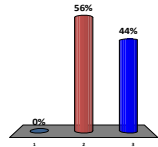


Week 1: A 2-choice slide:

"Is the telephone number you are hearing identical to or different from this one?"

À quelle heure ?

1. Before 7 pm
2. Before 5 pm
3. Around 17:00

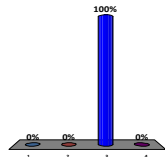


Week 2: A 3-choice slide: “What time should you be calling back?”

I found out that transferring my paper-based exercises to a multiple-choice framework sometimes stretched my imagination. And so the focus of my questionnaires seemed to progress naturally from the particular skill of listening comprehension (my original goal) to spelling, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, or even the odd cultural quiz.

... les midis

1. tout...
2. toute ...
3. tous ...
4. toutes ...



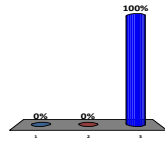
*Week 8: A 4-choice slide for agreement of the adjective:
“What is the correct spelling of “every” in “every lunchtime” ?*

This development coincidentally mimics the extensive use of multiple-choice type activities in the field of second language teaching, as I mentioned at the beginning of this article. “[Audience Response System] technology is a flexible tool limited only by the imagination of the instructor and the question format itself.” (Caldwell, 2007, p.11)

Eventually, as part of our last lesson, I used the medium to create a revision activity in preparation for the final role-play assignment.

Wish the guest a speedy recovery

1. Bon recouvrement
2. Bon établissement
3. Bon rétablissement



Revision slide: 100% accuracy on this item!

Outcomes

In undertaking this project, my expectations were three-fold:

1. To ensure that every student participated in the activities as Turning Point allows you to monitor how many participants actually respond to the quizzes;
2. To provide the students with immediate feedback on their individual performance by displaying the group's overall results;
3. To generate discussion within the group and with the lecturer as to the reasons of their underperformance, if any.

Moreover the clickers would introduce a playful atmosphere for about 10 minutes in each session in which they were used.

Through this experience, I am satisfied that there is added value in running questionnaires through clickers as goals number 1 and 2 were clearly achieved. Data on participation was displayed for each question, albeit discreetly at the top of the screen. It was this lecturer's choice to do so, and the data can be hidden if desired. Participants quickly understood that their involvement was being monitored, and all participated. Where we found difficulties in registering the signals, students were actually disappointed. The group also responded well to the quick feedback provided by the software. Individuals became genuinely motivated by the monitoring of their performance

However I am less satisfied with the reflective aspect of our interactions in class. The use of PRDs did not always generate discussion. Indeed the interaction was very uneven from week to week. External factors such as having an assessment in their next class, or an assignment due the following day impacted on some students' engagement. Overall the technology cannot solve the problems students have in analysing their performance, identifying their weaknesses and working out solutions for their language learning. This is a very different area of study which should be developed as a complement to the use of clickers.

Evaluation

Because our PRDs became increasingly unreliable as the weeks progressed, I was unable to formally use them to assess impact on the classroom. However, in an informal discussion, students immediately reported that they felt more motivated into participating in the activities because of the competitive aspect it introduced. We witnessed an effect of positive competition, based on self-evaluation, rather than negative competition based on undermining the weaker participants.

Self-evaluation operated on three levels:

- evaluating one's actual performance against expected performance (*"the learning is in the gap"*);
- evaluating one's progression over several clicker sessions _ some sessions were deliberately designed with an identical format and an identical number of items in order to facilitate the learner in that regard;
- evaluating one's performance against the overall group's performance.

Moreover an analysis of the students' results in the four elements of their continuous assessment as against the results scored by the two previous cohorts reveals that progress has been achieved.

AVERAGE CLASS SCORE	Listening test 1	Listening test 2
2009	58 %	79.5 %
2010	55 %	67.3 %
2011	69 %	77.7 %

In the listening components of the module, the average mark went up by 11% in the first test, and by 10.4 % in the second test compared with the previous year. The class average for the listening test remains below that achieved by the cohort of 2009, although that very high score looks anomalous in view of the overall profile of that year's group.

AVERAGE CLASS SCORE	Oral test 1 (role-play)	Oral test 2 (presentation)
2009	44.2 %	48.4 %
2010	58.2 %	48.6 %
2011	58.5 %	44.6 %

In the oral components however, little progress was achieved in the professional simulation (role-play) over the previous year, and there was actually a decrease of 4% in the class average for the second oral assignment (individual presentation).

I would argue that these results actually confirm the outcomes discussed in the previous section. While the introduction of clickers did have a positive impact on the issue they were brought in to deal with (improving listening skills by facilitating student

engagement), learners were unable to draw on their improved skills in one area to improve their performance in another related area.

Further work

Overall this short experiment with PRDs in the language classroom was certainly fun for all involved.

It created increased participation and student motivation thanks to rapid and clear visual feedback.

It demonstrated that clicker technology can be used for enhancing listening comprehension skills, among others, in a second language. Ideally, audio files would be integrated into each slide, bringing all input, written and aural, into one package. Such technology forms the basis of most internet-based language learning courses.

The use of clickers also generated discussion, even if somewhat unfocussed. Supporting student reflection on their performance seems to me a necessary correlate of the use of clickers.

I am happy to report that in 2012 I will be persisting with the use of clickers in my classroom with a second project entitled "Clickers-ready lessons for French". It is being developed with the support of the NDLR (National Digital Learning Repository). It will focus on improving language accuracy (i.e. mainly, but not exclusively, grammar) for PLC students in Irish institutions who are learning a language as a minor subject (less than 3 hours per week) as part of their programme.

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