

THE ELOQUENT CLUB: A SPEAKING IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM FOR GRADE 10 STUDENTS



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ABSTRACT

This research aims to address the speaking fatigue of grade 10 students by improving their conversational skills through the proposed speaking program, The Eloquent Club. Thus, this program sought to help the 10 identified students from the pre-speaking test, who had difficulties in terms of having social interaction to minimize their problems in conversations in terms of content, oral discourse, and non-verbal cues. After the intervention, the students underwent post-speaking test to examine their conversational prowess. The results from using Wilcoxon Ranked Sum Test indicate that the median scores of the students improved as the value of z is -2.803 based on negative ranks. The value of p is 0.00512. The result is significant at $p < .05$. Therefore, the result indicates that the hypothesis is rejected, and there is a significant improvement in the scores of the students. In subsequence, this illustrates that The Eloquent Club is an effective speaking program to improve the conversational skills of the students.

Keywords: *Conversational Skills, Content, Oral Discourse, Non-Verbal Cues, The Eloquent Club*

INTRODUCTION

The current situation we are in, brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, has created unexpected encounters and has influenced the decisions made by the Department of Education. Nobody has the liberty to say when this will end. Because of that, each country from all over the world is currently executing different strategies and steps in order to avoid the spread of virus, despite the growing number of infected individuals. However, in the educational environment, the new normal is considered as the paramount of every decision so that quality education is continuously delivered to learners (Tria, 2020). According to UNICEF (2021), Philippines, along with Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, and Venezuela, is just one of the few countries all over the world which has not picked up the face-to-face classes where it has left off because of the pandemic.

Therefore, an intensified need for a flexible learning set-up for the learners occurred. And distance learning in the Philippines has become the best choice for the country's education system to persist. From face-to-face method of learning, educational institutions have transitioned to a distance learning modality where learners have the freedom on a self-paced learning method and are not required to attend classes (Moneymax, 2021).

Distance learning signifies an instructional method where pedagogy occurs between the teacher and the students who are physically distant from each other during the learning process. There are three modalities under this method of learning. First is the modular distance learning (MDL) where personalized instruction is executed among the learners through self-learning modules (SLM) in print (books, photocopies, handouts, etc.) and in digital (PDF files, CD's, USB storage accessed through smartphones or desktops) format. In this modality, learners ask assistance from teachers through text message, phone calls, emails, and the most common nowadays, Facebook messenger message. Next is the online distance learning (ODL). In this modality, the teacher acts as facilitator while they are in a physically distant location from the students, encouraging students' active involvement in the discussion through the use of various meeting apps such as Google Meet and Zoom. ODL permits synchronous instruction, obliging the learners to possess a good and stable internet connectivity. Of all distance learning modalities, it is the most interactive. The last type of distance learning is the television-based instruction (TVBI/ radio-based instruction (RBI). TVBI and RBI use SLMs altered into video lessons for TVBI and audio or radio script for RBI. Selected teachers from Department of Education act as broadcasters in this set-up (Llego, 2020).

This remote setup has resulted to make a drastic utilization of English in global learning and profession. Hence, English expands from being a means of worldly communication to developing as a life skill. In lieu of this, teachers are encouraged to make classes conversational, for the students to be articulate in using the target language. (Chaudhary, 2020)

However, COVID-19 pandemic has histrionically changed the course of social interaction. Social distancing has polarizing tendencies to make a person feel anxious in engaging with conversations that need emotive expressions. (Calbi et al., 2021) Everyone's stress level increased with the scare brought about by the global pandemic, the unexplored zone of a nearly rotated full online education modality of learning, and the mysterious consequences of the current setting on the educational system. While our apprehension escalated, a new meaning out of public speaking and online presentations were developed with Zoom meetings and webcams. (Prentiss, 2021)

Rahmawati et al. (2021) revealed in their study that e-learning compelled the students to become timid and languid in speaking in front of an audience. This resulted to decreasing level of their speaking skills in terms of vocabulary, pronunciation, accuracy, and fluency.

On a qualitative observation, students stated that online classes decrease their level of listening and

speaking competencies. Moreover, the setup hindered them to be interactive and involved with friendly or casual conversations. These results suggest that the intensive use of virtual learning and limitations of physical interaction during this time have threatened students' language development in terms of their speaking skills. (Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020)

For most people, getting comfortable in front of the camera is a learned behavior, not an innate one. Just as adults can feel completely comfortable in person, they too can feel shy and self-conscious when you approach them. (Bologna, 2020)

Strengthening communication of students is vital during the adversities caused by the pandemic. Communication can help them become more aware and combat fears and misunderstandings. Students must acquire concrete understanding about these uncertain situations to people that are reliable and dependable in order for them to know how to manage and who to call when problems rise.

Alwamleh (2020) examined the effect of online distance learning among students. The participating students strongly convicted their preference of face-to-face classes over online courses due to their increased sense of isolation and lack of motivation to communicate among peers and teachers.

Taunton (2021) found that being stagnant in distance learning has long-term impact to the communication skills of the students. As they are socially isolated, they become distrustful towards other people. Instead of engaging with social interaction, they detach themselves from the virtual crowd, and attain self-isolation as their personal prophecy.

Consequently, the proponent is currently handling Grade 10 students for English subject. On a seldom circumstance, the students were also his previous students when they were in Grade 7. Consequently, the teacher has prior interactive perception towards his students. During their first synchronous meeting, 39 out of 40 students attended and participated in the virtual orientation. Then, the teacher asked the students to introduce themselves and share their thoughts about distance learning in general. Each of the students had the chance to speak in front of the online audience, and as usual, the following observations were noted by their teacher:

1. Only 6 out of 39 students did not stutter in greeting their classmates and teacher and introducing their names as part of their welcoming speech.
2. 12 students asked the teachers asked the teacher if they could speak in Tagalog.
3. Majority of the students suffered from sentence fragments and other grammatical errors.

4. 3 students initially hesitated to introduce themselves with cameras on as they were shy to show their faces to their classmates.
5. When asked of follow-up questions, most of the students were stunned and did not show enthusiasm to commit themselves with teacher-student conversation.

This scenario led the program to examine how an online conversation group can impact the progress of the speaking skills of the learners and to come up with a program that addresses the improvement of the learners' speaking skills as it is a skill they need to acquire as they enter the new world of senior high school. Henceforward, the intervention program, The Eloquent Club was born.

The Eloquent Club intended to be a helping ground for students, particularly Grade 10 students, who were in need of facilitation in improving their speaking skills. This aimed to help them enter the Senior High School with confidence and assurance that they can interact effectively with their classmates and teachers. This can also be a training opportunity once the community quarantine is lifted and face-to-face classes would be employed for the next school year.

This speaking program was designed to improve the conversational skills among Grade 10

students at Mamplasan National High School for school year 2021 - 2022. Thus, at the end of the program, the students should be able to:

1. reduce their speaking anxieties during varied conversations;
2. recognize the importance of proper etiquettes for conversation; and
3. converse effectively in various situations.

Statement of the Problem

This action research intended to help improve the conversational skills through the self-designed speaking program among Grade 10 students at Mamplasan National High School for the academic year, 2021-2022.

Specifically, it sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the speaking pretest median scores of the participating students in terms of:
 - 1.1 content;
 - 1.2 oral discourse; and
 - 1.3 non-verbal cues?
2. What are the speaking posttest median scores of the participating students in terms of:
 - 2.1 content;
 - 2.2 oral discourse; and
 - 2.3 non-verbal cues?
3. Is there any significant difference to the median scores of the students after The Eloquent Club intervention?

METHODOLOGY

The Eloquent Club is an online interactive program that was utilized as platform for improving students' speaking skills. However, instead of focusing on the pedagogical aspect of learning the target skill, this program highlighted the essence of interaction through dialoguing. It proved that practical conversations enable the students to convey their ideas clearly and engage themselves in speaking situations using the target language. It did not focus on grammatical nor technical aspects of communication but concentrated on the content, oral discourse, and non-verbal cues of the target participants in conversating using the English language. This program believed that converging on eloquence would have a domino effect in the linguistic competence of the students.

This study strictly followed the Solution Strategy flowchart to adhere with the effective implementation of the proposed program:

Figure 1. The Eloquent Club Flowchart



Figure 1 displays how the study was governed by the researcher. Before the program starts, the researcher conducted a speaking pre-assessment to the students to determine their speaking

engagement skills prior the implementation of the program. After the pretest, the researcher conducted its proposed program which attained a six-week speaking program targeting conversational tasks and activities. Concluding the program is the conduct of speaking post-assessment in which the participating students were evaluated in terms of their speaking engagement skills.

This program specifically targeted to facilitate selected Grade 10 students who are expected to move up to Senior High School and experience the needs of engaging with various conversations and speaking activities. The selection process was based on the initial speaking test that was conducted prior the implementation of the program. They were thoroughly evaluated by the proponent, along with other two English teachers. Students who need speaking improvement were processed into participating in the said program. However, to assure that there was an involvement of proficient speakers, the proponent handpicked students who took as peer interactors that accompanied the participants in accomplishing their oratorical journeys.

All participants had a consent from their parents or guardians to partake in this initiative.

This program included the following persons that were significant to the success of its implementation:

- **The Headmaster.** The proponent stood as the primary facilitator of this program. He was responsible in crafting and implementing the program. He also designed and executed the program paradigm in accordance with its objectives.
- **The Panelists.** They are English teachers at Mamplasan National High School. They helped the Headmaster to evaluate the needs of the involved students, as well as their speaking progress anterior to the program implementation.
- **The Peer Interactors.** They are Grade 10 students who are considered as proficient speakers. They were selected purposively by the Headmaster based on their initial speaking activity. Moreover, they assisted the participating students in fulfilling their interactive tasks and provided banter and feedbacks to ensure the continuous flow of the conversations.
- **The Talk Protegés.** They are Grade 10 students who are experiencing speaking difficulties during the online synchronous discussions conducted by their teacher/s. They were assessed in terms of their speaking abilities, and 10 selected Grade 10 students underwent and were part of the program.

The participants for this research were chosen through purposive sampling, with set criteria by the

researcher. The first criterion is the students should be enrolled in Grade 10 level at Mamplasan National High School. Furthermore, they should be part of the students of the researcher, so he could comprehensively assess the students who will be part of the program. Lastly, the students should undergo speaking assessment, aiming to select the students who were having difficulties in conversation or in speaking, in general.

These participating students were part of The Eloquent Club which only consisted of 1 Headmaster, 2 Panelists, and 10 Peer Interactors.

RESULTS

1. Median Pretest Scores of the Students in Speaking

Based on the given the data, the pre-speaking median scores of the participating students in the three subgroups are 2 or verbally interpreted as Emerging.

Significantly, the overall pretest median scores of the students in speaking is 6 with the verbal interpretation of emergent. The highest garnered score is 10 or Competent while the lowest is 5 or Emergent.

2. Median Posttest Scores of the Students in Speaking

Based on the given the data, the post-speaking median scores of the participating students in terms

of content is 3 or developing. On the other hand, in oral discourse and non-verbal cues, the students' median posttest both acquired 4 or Competent.

Significantly, the overall pretest median scores of the students in speaking is 11 with the verbal interpretation of Competent. The highest garnered score is 14 or Exemplary while the lowest is 9 or Developing.

3. Significant Improvement of the Students in Conversational Skills of the Students after Intervention

Comparing the speaking performance of the students before and after the Eloquent Club intervention, the value of z is -2.8031 based on negative ranks. The value of p is 0.00512 . The result is significant at $p < .05$. Therefore, the result indicates that the hypothesis is rejected, and there is a significant improvement in the scores of the students.

DISCUSSION

The pandemic pedagogy harshly affected the social interaction among students and teachers. In consequence, there were actual students who experienced speaking fatigue that gave them inconvenience in line with how they can interact or be part of classroom discussion. To address this issue, The Eloquent Club was crafted and implemented.

Using this speaking program, there were key results that the researcher observed. First, students were not fluent speakers of the target language not only because of their unwillingness, but also their lack of exposure in utilizing English in applied context. Henceforward, the researcher suggests that English teachers should focus on giving students authentic assessments that can improve more of how students can use English in practical situations.

The second observation of the researcher emphasizes the peer instruction. With the help of the peer interactors, the beautiful butterfly effect prospered during the intervention. Since the fluent speakers helped and guided their proteges in the speaking segment, the participants became more relaxed and comfortable to speak in English with less apprehension.

Lastly, the researcher also observed that the speaking program can only be successful if the participants and facilitators have harmonious relationship. They should build effective rapport to make the directive magic happens.

The Eloquent Club would not work successfully if the Headmaster, as well as his protégés and peer interactors, did not employ respect towards each other. This truly transpired that beneath the intervention, personal connection is the key element for successful communication.

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