

PUBLIC SPEAKING SCRIPTING: TO MEMORIZE OR NOT TO MEMORIZE?

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Abstract: In his book *Ted Talks: The Official Ted Guide to Public Speaking*, Chris Anderson raised the question of whether to memorize scripts while delivering a talk. He highlighted his doubts of whether the lyrical written language is suitable for talks or not. Also, many researchers disfavor the memorization of script and dialogues mainly because of the heavily-criticized Audiolingual Method. However, in our public speaking classes at International University, Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam, students prefer memorizing the whole script and reciting it. They claim that it helps them from struggling with fluency and language repetition in their speech. This paper specifically aims at confirming the usefulness of memorizing script in our public speaking classes. 60 students were divided into one experimental group (n=30) and one control group (n=30). They were pre-tested and post-tested using the in-class assignments and final tests, respectively. The data were treated using Minitab. The findings show that the experimental group has a higher mean score in language and total scores compared to those of the control group. The results reveal that in certain cases, memorizing scripts may have a positive impact on language use as well as fluency and time management skill.

Keywords: *public speaking, script, memorization*

INTRODUCTION

Mark Twain has a famous saying “It usually takes me more than three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech.” This implies that speakers need to have a good preparation for their performance in public. To control the speech well, a script is key. For decades, however, people have been arguing over the question: to memorize or not to memorize the script?

In the school settings in Vietnam, presentation is part of the study program. From primary school to high schools, students get involved in different activities which require them to speak in front of the classroom. Though getting familiar with this kind of activity, students are not officially trained for public speaking skills. At International University (IU), Vietnam National University, HCMC, presentation skills are taught in the course Academic English Speaking 2 (AE2 speaking). This course, which lasts 15 weeks, is compulsory for students of all majors in IU. Though the course offers valuable information on various aspects of a good presentation, a large number of our students still find it challenging to give confident speeches. As we tried to seek for professional advice, we came across the wise words of Stevenson (2016), storytelling keynote speaker and trainer at TED - a nonprofit conference which offers short, powerful talks in a wide range of topics, that most TED talks are normally scripted and memorized. This has led us to believe that we can apply these pieces of advice to our classes and help our students.

Background and Literature Review

It is a fact that presentation literacy in this century is just as crucial as computer literacy in the previous century. Presentation has become such an important skill set for students’ future career, as it is estimated that 70% of the professions nowadays involve some form of public speaking (Aras, 2012). Chris Anderson, President of the famous organization Ted Talks, has also stated in his book *TED Talks: The Official Guide to Public Speaking* (2016) that “*however much public speaking skills matter today, they’re going to matter even more in the future*” (227).

As a result, making public speaking courses obligatory to undergraduates is a must. However, for many Vietnamese students, especially those of a shier nature, the prospect of

standing in front of a crowd to give a speech is rather daunting. This is no difference at International University (IU), Vietnam National University, HCMC. Our students at IU, despite their different academic background, have one thing in common: they struggle to deliver their message when it comes to speaking in front of the audience. Most surprisingly, our students claimed that they would feel more secure and confident if they have their speech memorized. Therefore, we wondered: will memorizing the script help them improve their overall performance? If they know their scripts well enough, maybe they would not worry about choosing the right vocabulary or grammar structures, etc. and focus on other things like body language and eye contact. It is this thought that has fueled us to carry out this research to clarify this matter.

The history of the method of script memorizing goes back a long way to the Elizabethan times in the 16th century. During that time, actors had to memorize scripts and recite them live on stage. Although the writers were provided with “cue scripts” on which key words of their lines were written, they were required to study their lines outside of rehearsals (Penda, 2016). Stephen Greenblatt, an American Shakespearean, even suggested that it is possible that Shakespeare himself acted in some of his plays and had a copy of the scripts in front of him as he was trying to remember the play (2005). The scripts included long soliloquies that very much resembled the one-way talk of presentations. Thus, there is a kind of parallel between the 16th century and the 21st century about the sense of memory and its use (Lees-Jeffries, 2013). This is also backed up by Penda (2016), who stated that the plays of that time and the art of acting itself still prove to be relatable to us today.

The next milestone for script memorization comes in the 1950s, with the emergence of the Audio-Lingual Method, which was the first to emphasize the importance of memorization in speaking a language (Bygate, 2001). According to this method, when giving language instructions, the instructor would just present the model form of a sentence and the students would be requested to simply memorize the form and repeat it (Mei, 2018). This method can back up the method of memorizing scripts for presentation. However, it was strongly criticized by later researchers because they think students just recite things, but not use any real language, as Harmer comments: “Audio-lingualism lost popularity because commentators argued that language learning was far more subtle than just the formation of habits. For example, students are quickly able to produce their own combinations of words, whether or not they have heard them before ...Methodologists were also concerned that in Audio-lingualism students were not exposed to real or realistic language, and were therefore unlikely to produce natural-sounding language themselves” (Harmer, 2007: 49).

As a result, for a long time, memorizing script for spoken context was disfavored. From the 1970s onwards, there was an opposition to the Audio-Lingual method in general and in memorization in particular; thus causing a shift towards a more meaningful and contextualized learning (Romero, 2013). Indeed, a study by Helga Noice in 1992 revealed that professional actors claimed that line-by-line memorizing is unnecessary. This study interviewed seven actors about the methods they used in preparing and learning their theatrical scripts. Those protocols were later analyzed to identify any shared features among them. The result was that the actors preferred to employ a more “active understanding” of the text rather than memorizing the lines in a rote-type method. To be specific, they indeed read the scripts many times to try to acquire the underlying meaning and the motivation behind each utterance, so that they could understand why their characters use those exact words. This research undoubtedly denied the Audio Lingual Method and also denied the purpose of script memorizing.

The matter got more complicated as time progressed, as some later time in 1996, Ur stated that for less confident learners, memorizing the script could enhance students' use of vocabulary and collocations. Some other researchers like Brown and Nation (1997) also lent support to this view by claiming that the use of memorized language could be the foundation to a later use of improvised language.

Then, the 21st century saw the explosion of the famous video podcast series TED Talks. And with its wonderful speeches, it leaves people wonder about how the presenters prepare for their presentations. Interestingly, TED states that if "a speaker sounds too rehearsed, they're not done rehearsing." TED goes on to explain, "Speakers should run through the talk again and again, until they don't have to think about that fact that they're reciting a script."

In accordance with TED, Fasbinder, CEO of MOXIE Institute, an international agency for high-level presentations, events, video production, and performance training, states that memorization is key (2017). It is a common misconception that a speaker might become "off the cuff" or might sound unnatural if he/she tries to memorize their speech. However, Fasbinder believes that a speaker must put more effort in preparing even the improvised lines and practicing those lines until they no longer sound prepared. His view is proven by Hansen (2018), a TEDx Speaker and Speech Trainer, who stated that for all her life, she had always hated memorizing speeches and had spent thousands of hours as a presenters without script memorization. However, when she had a rehearsal for the most important speech of her life in TEDx, she experienced a "blank" period and as a result, had a "rehearsal from Hell".

All of this mixed review of language has generated a need for a research to confirm the usefulness of script memorization in the teaching of public speaking skills.

Aim of the Study

Within the limited range of this paper, the writers aim at finding out whether script memorization can improve students' language scores and total scores in presentation classes at IU, HCMC, Vietnam. By comparing the results of a pretest and a posttest of an experimental and a controlled group, we focus on answering the following questions:

Research questions:

1. Are the mean language scores of the experimental group significantly greater than that of the control group in the post-test?
2. Are the mean total scores of the experimental group significantly greater than that of the control group in the post-test?
3. Is script memorization effective in enhancing students' language scores and total scores in public speaking?

METHOD

Participants

56 Speaking AE2 (Presentation Skills) students are divided into 01 experimental group (n=26) and 01 control group (n=30). These students all have an English competency of IELTS 5.5 or above.

Pretest

Students in both groups are required to give a 1-minute self-introduction at week 2, which also serves as a pretest. There is no requirement for their presentations so that they can freely express themselves using their own language. A third-party trained judge marks all the students' use of language "blind" to avoid any bias. The rubrics for marking the language score is as follows:

Table 1. Marking Rubrics For Language Score

Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	Excellent
1-2	3-4	5-6	7-8	9-10
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Frequent grammar or spelling errors - Inappropriate level. For the audience. Misuse vocabulary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Noticeable errors - Often too simple or sophisticate, inconsistent. Some vocabulary incorrectly used 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Minor errors - Generally appropriate , little variation or creativity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No errors, but simple language - Always appropriate for the audience. Excellent use of vocabulary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No errors. Excellent use of grammar to support ideas - Creative use of language

In-Class Procedure:

For both groups, instructors use the same teaching slides and materials, and provide equal instructions and comments. However, the experimental group is required to prepare and memorize complete scripts for all their presentations. Meanwhile, the control group is not required to do so.

Post-Test:

The Speaking AE2 Final Test at IU is chosen as the post-test. In this test, students are evaluated by third-party trained examiners on 7 different criteria, such as voice techniques, use of language, organization, body language, etc. However, only the language score and the total score are analyzed to compare with the pre-test. The criteria and rubrics for marking the use of language are the same as the pretest.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The data collected from the pre-test and post-test of both groups are used for the analysis. In the pre-test, we only get the language scores (LS). In the final test, both the language scores (LS) and the total scores (TS) are collected. The researchers use the 2-tailed t-test to determine whether there are statistically significant differences in the mean scores between both groups. First, the results for the LS of the two groups in the pre-test are as follows.

Sample	N	Mean	StDev	SE Mean
Exp. Grp. Language scores –pre	26	6.38	1.06	0.21
Con. Grp. Language scores – pre	28	7.536	0.881	0.17

Figure 1. LS Of The Control Group And Experimental Group In The Pre-Test

The mean language score of the experimental group and that of the control group are 6.38 and 7.536, respectively. The researchers then check to see whether the mean LS are significantly different or not by running the 2-tailed t-test. The null hypothesis is that there is no significance difference in the mean LS between two group.

Difference	95% CI for Difference
-1.151	(-1.687, -0.615)

Figure 2. Estimation for Difference in the Mean LS of the Control Group and Experimental Group in the Pre-Test

The p-value is 0.000, which is smaller than α ($=0.05$). Also, with the CI of -1.687, -0.615, we can reject the null hypothesis, which means that the difference in the two mean LSs is significant. The boxplot also reveals that the mean LS of the control group is higher than that of the experimental group.

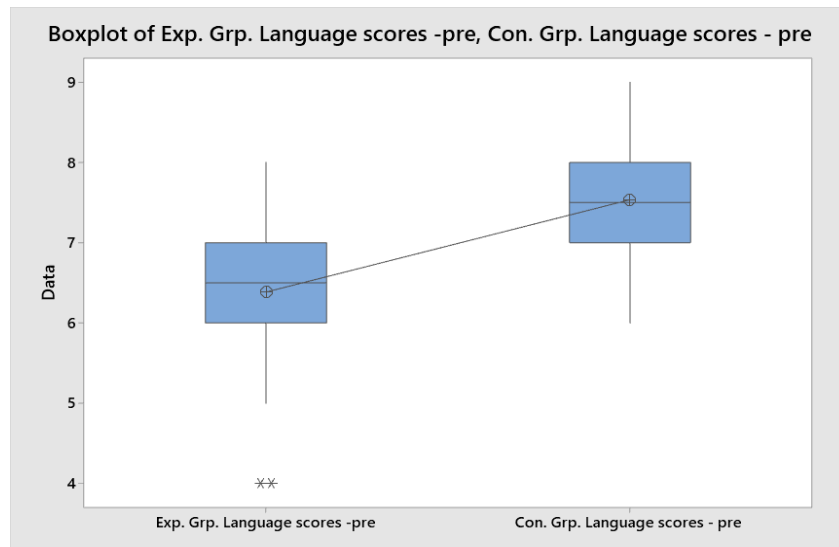


Figure 3. Boxplot of The Exp. Grp. LS and The Con. Grp. LS in The Pre-test

For the post-test, the researchers look at the LS and TS scores of both groups. The mean scores for LS of the experimental group and the control group are 7.923 and 7.067, respectively. We make the alternative hypothesis that the mean LS in the post-test of the experimental group is greater than that of the control group. Here is the result.

Null hypothesis H_0 :	$\mu_1 - \mu_2 = 0$	
Alternative hypothesis H_1 :	$\mu_1 - \mu_2 > 0$	
T-Value	DF	P-Value
4.23	53	0.000

Figure 4. Hypothesis for LS in the Post-Test

Again, the p-value is 0.000, which is smaller than α ($=0.05$). This time, we also look at t-value which is 4.23. It is in the shaded area (as in figure 5). The p-value and t-value as mentioned reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis. To be more specific, it means that the mean language scores of the experimental group in the post test is significantly greater than that of the control group.

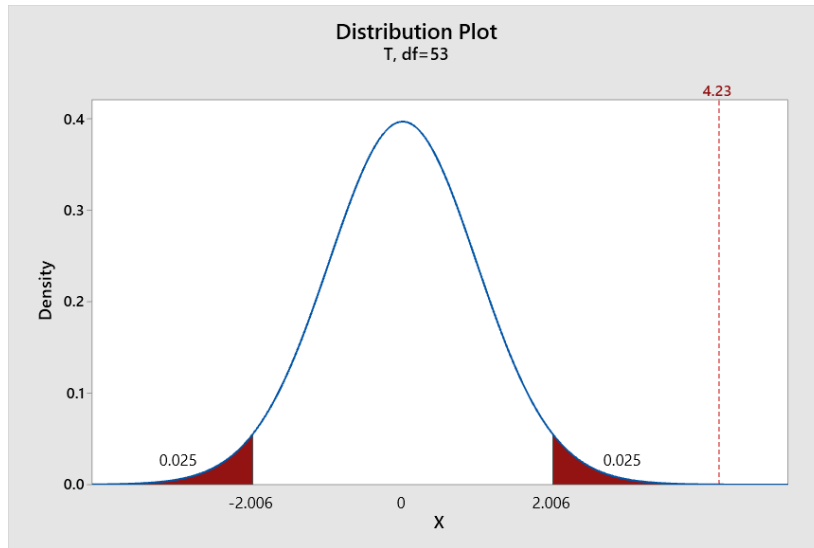


Figure 5. Distribution Plot for LS in the Post-Test

We repeat the test get the result of the total mean scores of the experimental group and control group at 76.08 and 70.7, respectively. We make the alternative hypothesis that that the mean TS in the post test of the experimental group is greater than that of the control group. Here is the result.

Null hypothesis H_0 :	$\mu_1 - \mu_2 = 0$	
Alternative hypothesis H_1 :	$\mu_1 - \mu_2 > 0$	
T-Value	DF	P-Value
2.21	54	0.016

Figure 6. Hypothesis for TS in the post-test

The p-value is 0.016, which is smaller than α ($=0.05$). T-value is 2.21, which is also in the shaded area as shown in figure 7. The p-value and t-value as mentioned reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis. To be more specific, it means that the mean total scores of the experimental group in the post test is significantly greater than that of the control group.

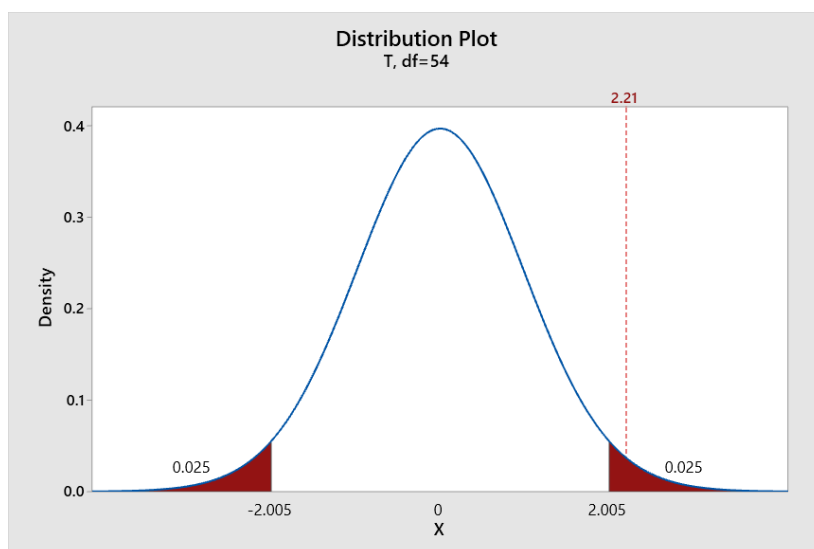


Figure 7. Distribution plot for TS in the post-test

Implications and Limitations

The results clearly answer the three research questions. In the beginning stage, the control group has greater mean scores for language skills. The students in the control group seem to be better at using language compared to the other group. By using scripts and memorizing the scripts, however, the students in the experimental group achieve considerable progress in the post test. Both their language scores and the total scores are better comparing to the students in the control group. This helps answer the last research question: script memorization proves to be useful in the improvement of students' public speaking performance for the sample we collect.

The reasons behind students' improvement can come from the fact that students prepare better when memorizing what they have written down. Firstly, when they prepare the script, they can check for the organization of the entire speech and make proper adjustment. Next, in memorizing the script, they spend many times rehearsing the speech which help them control the time better. Time management is one of the crucial parts of speech delivery. Last but not least, knowing what they need to present enables speaker to gain confidence. All these factors contribute to better performance in the post test.

Though the sample is sufficient to get reliable results, we believe the range of the research is still small. A replication of the research should be carried out with more students involved. Another drawback can be observed in some students with low level of proficiency: They did not sound very natural in their presentations. We wonder whether students with high level of proficiency can take greater advantage of this method. This suggests that further research should be carried out to answer the question.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, as public speaking is gaining importance in the world of work, educators should put as much effort as possible in preparing their students for what lies ahead of them in at least 40 years to come. In this process, certainly there will be many occasions of self-doubting about which methods would be best suitable for our students. We hope that this research can be of some use to teachers who have been bugged with the same question as we have. Hopefully, there will be more research into this field to guide us and the young generations towards future success in both of our careers.

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