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L2 English learners as public speakers: generic and language-specific features in learner narratives

In working-life and especially in academic contexts, a common speech genre is monologic oral presentation. Advanced learners are expected to be able to communicate fluently in their L2 in different settings. Giving presentations is therefore often part of university-level education in foreign languages. This study focused on autobiographical narratives written during a presentation skills course. We analysed narratives written by 83 Finnish advanced learners of English in order to discover whether learners considered oral presentation skills as universal or language-specific, and which features of language were identified as challenging for their L2 speech performance. According to our findings, presentations in L2 were regarded as both similar to and different from presentations in L1. Giving a presentation in L2 both presented a challenge and provided a way of alleviating the pressure of the situation. The most typical level of L2 identified as a cause of concern by the students was pronunciation.

Keywords: L2 speaking, oral presentation, narrative

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1 Introduction

Fluent speaking skills are often the goal in second language (L2) learning.² As Thornbury (2012: 198) notes, in common language use *knowing* a language often means the same as *speaking* a language. The importance of speaking skills, including oral presentations in academic and professional fields, is brought up in *The Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR)* (Council of Europe 2001: 14). Moreover, according to *CEFR* (Council of Europe 2001: 27, 58), proficient users of a language (on levels C1 and C2) are able to present clear, detailed descriptions or arguments of complex subjects with a logical structure and using an appropriate style in their spoken language. Many of these features also apply to oral presentations. Addressing audiences or giving speeches at public meetings is a language task or genre which is often taken into account in language teaching (e.g. Goh & Burns 2012 or Nowicka & Wilczyńska 2011: 37).

The purpose of this study is to investigate how the L2 aspect emerges in advanced learners' narratives on public speaking and personal development. We particularly aim to discover whether using a foreign language makes the speech situation more demanding or not. In the latter case, public speaking would be viewed more as a universal, generic skill, that is, independent of the language used but clearly linked to a particular speech genre. In addition, we also intend to examine how the different levels of language are associated with learner performance: which levels do students identify and discuss when distinguishing between L2 speaking and native language (L1) speaking? As a public speaking situation can be challenging in itself, even advanced learners may find controlling all linguistic levels of L2 speech difficult under the demanding circumstances.

Studies focusing on public speaking have demonstrated that many people find giving speeches demanding, even frightening (a state known as glossophobia), which may lead to communication apprehension, but there also seems to be a lot of variation in attitudes towards speaking situations (Daly 1991; Robinson 1997; Bodie 2010). For example, in a recent student health survey of five thousand Finnish university students, over a quarter of the students considered performing in front of people, including oral presentations (presumably in L1, although language was not specified in the survey questionnaire), a distinct or severe problem (Kunttu & Pesonen 2014: 165). However, as just under a third reported positive experiences and almost as many were neutral and did not view public speaking as a cause of particular concern, it is evident that the student body was and is divided on this issue. It is likely that there are similar opinions towards L2 public speaking. L2 oral presentations are, nevertheless, both good language practice

2 In this paper, 'foreign' and 'second' language are used synonymously to refer to a language additional to the mother tongue.

and preparation for future language use at work, and therefore commonly employed in language classes (cf. Johnson & Szczupakiewicz 1987, Crosling & Ward 2002 and Kassim & Ali 2010 for other working-life speaking needs).

While many people today use additional non-native languages at work or in other social situations, very few studies have focused on how language learners evaluate their performance when practising public speeches in L2 (cf. Salo-Lee & Tuokko 1996). Mostly the focus of studies on oral presentation skills has lain on foreign language anxiety (e.g. Horwitz 2010) or intercultural communication needs (e.g. Kim 2006). Overall, L2 public speaking situations are interesting from a linguistic point of view as they combine a challenging language task with the use of a non-native language.

In order to investigate how learners view public speaking in L2, we collected learning journals written during a practical course on L2 English oral presentation skills at the university level. Learning journals and autobiographical narratives have become common sources of data in second language acquisition (SLA) studies (e.g. Kalaja, Menezes & Barcelos 2008). Narrative studies have a relatively long history in applied linguistics: they have been conducted since the late 1960s (see, for example, Benson 2004 and Pavlenko 2007 for a brief survey of the key studies), and the term 'autobiographical studies' has been adopted quite widely among researchers. Following Benson (2004: 12) and Kalaja (2011), we understand autobiographical narratives as learners' self-authored stories, written in the first person, of their development and experiences as language learners (and users). Typically, these have a long-term perspective on learning, and they focus on the learners, their experiences and learning processes instead of the learning outcomes. In SLA studies, narratives can be used to explain individual learner differences or learner diversity (Benson 2004: 4).

2 Oral presentation in L2

Oral presentation is a type of talk where talk is seen as performance (e.g. Richards 2008: 27–28).³ This type usually refers to the genre of monologues which focus on both the message and the audience, and the language is written-like with predictable organisation and structure. Oral presentations are an activity which language learners encounter during their education in L1 and many of the other languages they study. Naturally, in a school context, presentations are also used in other subjects, which place more emphasis on content than language. The L2 dimension does alter the speaking

3 This is a reinterpretation of Brown and Yule's (1983) original idea of talk as interaction and talk as transaction. One could certainly argue that public presentations also include features of talk as interaction and transaction.

situation: as pointed out by Bailey (2003: 48), “[a]lthough speaking is completely natural, speaking in a language other than our own is anything but simple”. L2 learners have a dual task: they have to learn the language and be able to perform in that language (Foss & Reitzel 1988). According to L2 speech production models, formulation and articulation processes become more automatic with higher levels of proficiency (e.g. Dörnyei & Kormos 1998: 355–356). The more experienced and advanced the L2 learners, such as university-level students of English in Finland, the better and more automatised are also their L2 speaking skills.⁴

By giving academic monologues in L2, learners practise their academic competence in the target language instead of improving their interactive or interpersonal competence. Saville-Troike (2012: 143–145) suggests that for general academic competence, reading, listening and writing are higher priorities than speaking. In foreign language departments at the university level, training future professionals (including teachers and researchers) in the language in question, speaking skills are emphasised more as they reflect overall language skills and are relevant for students’ prospective professions. In SLA studies, speech is often described as a process which requires online planning and constant interaction with the interlocutors. Nevertheless, as Saville-Troike (2012: 176) also notes, non-reciprocal spoken communication may be considered easier with respect to these characteristics, as speakers can prepare their speech before the speaking situation. Reading a written text aloud, however, is not normally encouraged in explicit presentation skills teaching.

The oral proficiency of Finnish L2 learners has been studied by, for example, Pietilä (1999). Her subjects were university students of English who, among other things, gave oral presentations. Pietilä (1999: 51) observed that some features more typical of written language (such as noun phrase complexity and lexical density) were found in student presentations, where the speaker mostly relied on written notes rather than spoke freely. However, her results also suggest that the most proficient speakers used structurally more complex language even when speaking freely. Pietilä (1999: 6–7) also notes that some spoken language forms, such as spoken conference papers, may not be completely speech-like, but also not “written language spoken aloud” as suggested by Brown and Yule (1983: 7).⁵ Hence, when our subjects attended a course on oral presentation skills, it was emphasised that while the register of the presentations is to be quite formal, the speaker should also take the audience into account and make the possibly complex subject-matter accessible and listener-friendly.

4 Ringbom (1993: 302) would refer to such students as near-native speakers who can potentially sound very nativelike in many contexts.

5 For characteristics of oral language see also Bygate (1987; 2009: 405–407).

Oral presentations have also been used in SLA research as contexts of language use when studying (foreign) language anxiety. Woodrow (2006), for example, discovered that giving oral presentations and performing in English in front of classmates were the activities that caused most anxiety in an L2 class. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994b) showed that language anxiety affects L2 performance negatively, but not L1 performance. Young (1990) suggested that the source of anxiety might, in fact, be speaking in front of a class and not speaking in a foreign language. Moreover, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994a) demonstrated how anxiety caused by the use of a video camera affected language learning and production negatively. These studies show that oral presentation performance as a language classroom exercise can be affected by many contextual variables, such as the audience and group dynamics. Finally, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) identified communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation as the main factors in language learning anxiety. These factors can affect L2 spoken performance. Generally, anxiety and self-evaluation are linked and intertwined with willingness to communicate in either L1 or L2. L2 confidence, which has an effect on presentations in L2, is understood to consist of a cognitive component (speakers' evaluation of their proficiency level in L2) and affective component (discomfort experienced in L2 situations) (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei & Noels 1998). The questions of confidence and (dis)comfort are prominent in section 4 below.

3 Methodology

The narratives used in this study were collected during a course focusing on oral communication skills. The course was an obligatory proficiency course offered during the second or third year of the student's BA degree, and subsequent to the primarily pronunciation-oriented spoken English course in the first-year programme (see further Pietilä 1999, 2001: 103–104). The objective of the course was and is to develop the student's skills in preparing and giving presentations, especially academic ones, and participating in discussions. The syllabus contains a very short impromptu talk, a short presentation on a non-academic topic (which is recorded on video) and a full 20-minute paper on a topic related to university studies (i.e. an academic monologue), by each student, and some exercises. Often the course is taught in one quarter of the academic year, which means two 90-minute classes each week for six weeks. In addition, each student has to keep a learning journal in English and attend a personal feedback session with the teacher at the end of the course.

There are written instructions for the journals, including content-related issues, such as topics to discuss and questions to answer, as well as the recommended length

and format of the journal. For example, the suggested first topic deals with the 'speaking history' of the student and his/her attitude towards public speaking; this makes up the most autobiographical section of the journal, which is otherwise a reflection on what happened in and between classes. The speaker autobiographies reveal that students have quite different backgrounds and experiences as regards spoken English, including their formal education before university. Memories of school and thoughts about public speaking are often expressed quite explicitly, which is more typical of "[e]licited journals" than of entirely private diaries, which allow greater implicitness (Pavlenko 2007: 178).

As this is not an academic writing class, the language of the narratives may be less formal than in most other written coursework, which is expected to promote a personal, reflective style of writing. Overall, students have a fair amount of freedom to compose the journal in a way that best suits them. The narratives examined in this paper were written in their authors' L2, which may be reflected in their contents and the quality of language; the learner's vocabulary skills, for instance, may have influenced the choice and treatment of some topics. Also the instructions given can influence the way learning and experiences are described (see Pavlenko 2007, Kalaja 2011: 126).

Although both of the authors have taught the course with the same syllabus for many years, the material examined for this article came from one teacher's groups only. The practical reason for this was that they were the only ones available in electronic form; moreover, this meant that there was less variation in the input received from the teacher by the students in the class. The data for the present paper consist of 83 learning journals submitted between October 2007 and October 2011. These came from ten different groups, with five to eleven journals included per group.⁶ The required length of the journal varied little over the years; in the last year of data collection it was four to eight pages. On average, the journals were 2,435 words (median: 2,340; range: from c. 1,300 to c. 4,000 words; 41 (=c. 49.4%) were 2,000 to 3,000 words). Seventeen of the journals were submitted by male students (c. 20.5%), who on average wrote nearly 500 words shorter journals than the female students. On the whole, the journal corpus contained c. 202,000 words.

The journals were analysed in their entirety, but as mentioned, the autobiographical topics most important for our research were typically discussed in the first few sentences or paragraphs of the journals, which made working with the corpus easier. The journals were gone through systematically, and themes were identified following qualitative content analysis. We need to acknowledge that the researchers' subjective interpretations may affect the analysis in these kinds of studies (see e.g. Dörnyei 2007:

⁶ Only those journals were used whose writers gave permission. In addition, students who did not have Finnish as their L1 were excluded from the data. For this reason student numbers in the examples go above 83, as the total number of our students was higher.

38–42, 245–246). In a similar manner, when using journals and asking learners to analyse themselves, the limitations of introspective methods must be taken into account (e.g. Mackey & Gass 2005: 77–79, 176–177).

In order for autobiographical data to be studied thoroughly and systematically, Pavlenko (2007: 174–180) recommends analysing three interconnected and interdependent aspects of the narratives: their content, context and form.⁷ Having already introduced the form of the learning journal and the context in which they were elicited and written, we now primarily focus on the contents of the narratives and the subject-reality information they provide. Subject-reality refers to the learners' views on their experiences in the process of learning an L2, as opposed to life and text realities, which relate to common events or sociolinguistic settings of language learning and ways of constructing identities through narratives (Pavlenko 2007: 165–171). These types of reality are not mutually exclusive as objects of scholarly interest.

4 Analysis and discussion

In the following section we focus on two aspects of oral presentations in L2 which were salient in the narratives produced by the learners. First, we examine similarities and differences between public speaking as a native speaker on the one hand and as a language learner on the other; as will become evident, some features can be either positive or negative, and relate to generic public speaking skills according to some learners but to L2 speech according others. Our second concern is the interplay of different levels of language and their influence on presenting in a foreign language.

4.1 Performing in L1 and L2

As the students had not been explicitly instructed to compare giving presentations in L1 and L2, it is hardly surprising that the narratives did not consistently refer to this distinction. In fact, in their autobiographical sequences most students clearly wrote about presentations given in Finnish at school without necessarily specifying either the language used or the class in which they had performed. Finnish was thus understood as the default language, requiring no further specification, which occasionally made it difficult to distinguish between L1 and L2 in the journals. It was also conspicuous that few students mentioned anything about giving presentations in foreign language classes in secondary school; oral communication teaching may rely on other types of tasks,

⁷ Pavlenko (2007: 174) also recommends examining the choice of language for writing life histories, but this is not relevant here, as all written coursework was set in English as standard practice.

or the relatively small role of spoken language in the Finnish upper secondary school may reflect the washback effect of the matriculation examination, which does not yet have a compulsory speaking component.⁸ Preparing and giving a proper presentation in English was a new experience for many, and this was frequently mentioned in the narratives, as in Example 1.

- (1) In upper secondary school, the lack of practise started to make me more nervous in front of an audience. We rarely had to do presentations and when we did, people made a big deal out of it. [...] This [English department speech] was also the first presentation that I had to give in English completely on my own. (subject-number 73)

In Example 1, the student reported that presentations had rarely been practised at school, which made them unsure about speaking to an audience. The anxiety level of the speaking task may be reduced by acquiring a routine through more practice.

The many students who did not distinguish between L1 and L2, but wrote about their weaknesses and strengths (as instructed), seem to have been thinking of oral presentation not as a language proficiency task but, instead, as an exercise towards acquiring a non-language-specific skill, which many felt they had not (yet) mastered. Public speaking anxiety was thus identified as a universal, generic feature (Example 2). Some learners also associated certain personal traits with their performance in any language (Example 3).

- (2) I have finally realized that I'm not the only person in this world who gets nervous when speaking in public: that's only human! (22)
- (3) Something I have noticed by myself while speaking is my tendency stutter, regardless of the topic or the language I use. (72)

Such observations thus focused on the nervousness or anxiety raised by public speaking situations instead of concerns over language skills. We can consequently attempt to distinguish between *generic speaking skills* and *language-specific speaking skills*, the former associated with personality, general self-confidence and routine, the latter with proficiency and L2 confidence. Example 2 also helps to corroborate Foss and Reitzel's (1988) observation that speaking anxiety is reduced when the speaker realizes that others are also anxious in the same situation.

⁸ This situation is bound to change soon because of the restructuring of the final examination in upper secondary school. For more on washback, see, for example, Pietilä, Taanila-Hall and Vainio (2009: 220–225).

Closely linked to generic speaking skills are public speaking anxiety and the ability to cope with it. Many students wrote about being nervous before or during their presentations in class, and many also mentioned nervousness in their life stories about earlier presentations. Public speaking situations were usually described as making the learner “nervous” or, less commonly, “anxious”⁹. Some learners also mentioned that they were shy, which had had a negative impact of them in the past (Example 4), but this was discussed in the narratives only occasionally.

- (4) I’ve always been really shy and therefore horrified of public presentations. We’ve always had quite many of them at school and I have skipped my turn intentionally more than once. (30)

If “shy(ness)” was rare, its antonyms were even more so; see, however, Example 5.

- (5) I think myself to be a brave and active communicator. I have always been able to perform in front of audience when needed. I do not feel myself threatened when in front of people but I do feel nervous. I think that to be somewhat normal. (28)

In Example 5, the learner discussed how easy public speaking is for them in general and also mentioned that nervousness did not diminish their self-confidence as a speaker as they had realised that this state was natural in this type of task. Moreover, “shy” may have been a near-synonym used for something else at times, such as “uncertain” or “self-conscious”. Example 6, associating anxiousness with language-specific proficiency and not with generic speaking skills, is reminiscent of Horwitz’s (2010) idea that foreign language anxiety is a situation-specific state and not a personal trait.¹⁰

- (6) In addition, I really am a shy speaker when it comes to English. I am afraid of making both grammatical and pronunciation mistakes when talking, and it does not make it any better that after the Basic Studies I am more conscious of my own mistakes and I also recognize them scarily often. (24)

In our search for explicit references to our research question, comparing L1 and L2 performance, we found that some students contrasted oral presentations in different languages quite overtly, contemplating on the L1/L2 distinction in their narratives.

9 Although the word choice was likely to depend on the greater familiarity of “nervous(ness)”, the word “anxious” or “anxiety” may have been consciously avoided. As Pavlenko (2007: 177) observes, “speakers use linguistic and narrative resources to present themselves as particular kinds of individuals”; with its multiple connotations which even include a medical condition, “anxiety” may have been a potentially misleading word or, if not completely inaccurate, difficult to admit to a teacher. “Nervousness” and “anxiety” refer to states, whereas “shyness” can be considered a personal trait (but cf. Example 6).

10 The example also refers to the fear of making errors. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) refer to this phenomenon as test anxiety.

Although the students were very advanced learners of English, many felt that L2 speaking was more difficult than L1 speaking and considered the L2 situation an additional challenge for their performance (Examples 7, 8 and 9).

- (7) Further anxiety factor is speaking in public in a *foreign language*. When I started studying English at the University I was horrified at the thought of giving a presentation in English. (45)
- (8) I am not afraid of making presentations or speaking in public but when it comes to speaking English I get really nervous. (31)
- (9) I have a monitor inside my head that reacts to every mistake I make. This happens especially when I perform on another language. (40)

Presenting in L2 was thus identified as frightening and stressful, which corresponds to results from foreign language anxiety studies. The notion of errors was also mentioned (Example 9), implying that fear of errors makes L2 performance a more demanding task than giving a speech in L1 (e.g. Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope 1986). We can also see a reflection of Krashen's (1981) notion of a monitor through which consciously learnt foreign language rules can be used.

A further cause of L2-specific stress may have been the video camera used to record the shorter presentations (Example 10), which corresponds to MacIntyre and Gardner (1994a). The learners acknowledged both the foreign language and the recording situation as extra challenges in the speaking task. This shows how, in addition to the use of L2, the speaking task and the situation-specific variables can affect performance. This observation was also supported by many comments on how successful group dynamics and a friendly audience made the task easier and the presentation more successful on a general level (see also Pertaub, Slater & Barker 2002). However, not everyone was discouraged by the camera but found it useful (Example 11).

- (10) This was my first presentation in English and on tape. The fact that the presentation was videotaped had an effect on me and not in a good way. (44)
- (11) Watching a part of the presentation on film afterwards was very useful. I paid attention to my habit of repeating certain linking words and other trifles, only to find out that nobody else had even noticed. This was very encouraging and probably boosted my confidence. (18)

As an opposite tendency to the stressfulness of performing in L2, we discovered that the use of L2 in public speaking situations may not always be considered as an extra challenge but may, in fact, be described as a positive feature. Some students wrote about

overcoming communication apprehension and in this context described speaking a foreign language as easier than giving a speech in one's L1 (Example 12).

- (12) The few recent nice experiences communicating with an audience have usually been instances where I have played a role. Speaking in English worked as a role for me as well, for I felt as if I could somehow hide behind the language. I suspect that I even adopt different mannerisms when I switch languages, as my level of comfort varies quite a bit between different languages, going so far that I sometimes don't even feel like myself anymore. [...] I have come to the conclusion that at least previously, I was at my most vulnerable when I had to give a speech in Finnish, as then I would be closest to who I truly was on stage, without any barriers between my personality and the audience. (50)

In this example the learner wrote that speaking in English resembled playing a role which was far from their own personality while using L1. Here, speaking in L2 changes from an impediment into a resource: presentation is seen as a performance, and the learner constructs a new identity in L2 (e.g. Norton 2000). L1, on the contrary, is directly linked with the speaker as an individual and offers no disguise or distancing device: giving a speech in one's mother tongue is potentially a source of personal vulnerability, and the fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope 1986) can be even higher in L1 than in L2. However, when the same idea of playing a role was discussed in another narrative (Example 13), the comparison between oral presentation in front of an audience and acting on stage suggests that assuming a "stage persona" may not be just an L2-specific source of relief.

- (13) I think because of my theater experience I have learned to separate my stage persona from me as a person. It's easier to play a role in front of an audience, and sometime during upper secondary school I learned to separate myself from the role I play. It's hard to explain to someone who's never done theater, but when I'm giving a presentation, it's not me in front of the audience, but at the same time it still is. Every performance or presentation is my own, but I hide behind a role of some kind. I guess it could be called a defense mechanism; it's easier to give a 100% performance onstage when you don't have to be worried about losing face. And you can't lose your face if you're playing a role. If there's failure of any kind, it happens to the person you are pretending to be, not you personally. (86)

Moreover, some of the most experienced learners with previous teaching experience also mentioned that it is easier to speak as a teacher in front of a class, that is, in an expert role. The speaker's role in the speaking situation may thus override the language used and the type of spoken task.

As shown above, we were able to find both generic and language-specific factors influencing the learners' L2 speech performance. While the stress induced by public speaking in general, or public speaking in English in particular, was discussed in many journals, it was not uncommon that the same feature was language-specific to some learners but generic to others; the L2 context even made the speaking task easier for some learners. Next we discuss language-specific speaking skills further, with regard to the different linguistic levels of L2. This enables us to analyse which features of English are regarded by advanced learners as challenges when performing a demanding speaking task.

4.2 Features presenting challenges in L2 speech performance

The narratives discussed some general features of oral presentations, such as logical structure, use of visual aids and maintaining eye-contact, which contributed to the success of the performance from the perspectives of the speaker and of the audience. However, instead of these technicalities of presentation skills, we focus on what the students wrote about the levels of language. Although the narratives also included many observations about the features of language affecting the listener, in this study we concentrate on productive activities and the speaker.

The medium of communication was often discussed on a general level, as in Example 14, contrasting spoken and written language. This suggests an overall impression of speaking as a more challenging mode than writing. The student also said that, as a consequence, they had avoided speaking situations (cf. Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope 1986) or been less willing to speak. Following MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei and Noels (1998), we can see here a reduction of L2 confidence both cognitively and affectively (see also Council of Europe 2001: 160–161). This attitude may have a negative effect on L2 skills, as SLA studies have shown that successful language learners use and even create opportunities to speak (e.g. Takeuchi 2003: 389–390).

(14) I have always felt much easier to convey my thoughts through writing and refused to talk whenever it was possible. (12)

It should also be observed that the overall proficiency among English students may have had an impact on the learners' opinions, as they were prone to comparing themselves with the other students in the same group (Example 15). This may have made the students overly critical towards their own skills, as most students were successful learners and fluent near-native speakers of English.

- (15) In Finnish and even in Swedish I can speak without worrying my mistakes all the time but in English it is still different. Maybe this is because I know that all of the students attending our course are so talented in English that I cannot help comparing myself to them. (62)

Interestingly, Example 15 mentions Swedish as another language besides L1 in which language errors do not cause much concern. While it is tempting to treat this as a reflection of the different roles of Swedish and English in Finland, and of generally different proficiency levels in these languages, the motivation behind this comment is likely to be this particular student's experience in studying both of these languages at the university. It was also explicitly observed by some students that language students and learners may be too critical about their own skills. Some further emphasised that university-level learners use the target language very fluently despite possible minor problems in some areas.

The most commonly discussed features of language in the narratives were, not surprisingly, pronunciation and intonation, since the tasks involved spoken language use.¹¹ Moreover, articulation and the phonemic level of English had been prominent in the students' previous studies, as they had already attended a pronunciation course at the university. A common tendency was to link pronunciation and perfectionism (Example 16) in a way which would not be applicable to L1 speaking. Example 17 shows how pronunciation was associated with being too self-conscious in certain situations of this one level of language which caused insecurity. This may again reflect their previous experiences as students or the fact that the speeches were given in connection with their studies and in a teacher's presence.

- (16) If I make a single mistake with a phoneme, it is all I can think about and I get distracted from what I was going to say. (26)
- (17) [A]fter a while of speaking I relaxed a little and stopped thinking of my pronunciation that much – the thing about which I am the most unsure while speaking English. (24)

Some students also mentioned that the possible limitations in pronunciation skills were actually beneficial for the speaking task. Students commented on their heightened awareness of pronunciation and how that had a positive effect on the overall performance, for example when it comes to objective speech rate (Example 18).

11 These features (especially intonation) were also commonly commented on from the listener's perspective as contributing to the clarity of the presentation.

- (18) When speaking Finnish in front of audience I tend to speak too fast but I am still so conscious of my pronunciation in English that speaking too fast is impossible for me. (62)

Thus students also discussed their unautomatised language skills as contributors to success in the speaking task. While nervousness can make people speak faster than they usually do, unautomatised L2 skills – lexical (see below) as well as articulatory – were considered a balancing factor, helping to achieve an optimal speech rate.

The second most frequently mentioned linguistic level was grammar. Grammar was also discussed in connection with the fear of performing badly. The students often gave similar comments on both pronunciation and grammar, which were again linked to L2 perfectionism, as in Example 19 (see also Example 6 above), or to being too self-conscious of those levels of language which had little effect on the spoken performance on a general level (Example 20).¹² In Example 20, the student noticed that only the speaker's attention to a certain linguistic unit made the listeners notice it. Spoken communication allows for many inaccuracies.

- (19) I am really afraid of making mistakes with the grammar and pronunciation. (43)
- (20) After noticing a grammatical mistake or error in pronunciation I might come back to it and repeat the sentence until I get it right. I noticed from other people's presentations that this often just hinders comprehension. Listeners probably aren't even aware of the mistake until the speaker highlights it by trying to fix the problem. In addition to this I also tend to dwell on these mistakes while the presentation continues. I replay it in my head – again I find myself analyzing my speech during the presentation. (39)

While there are concerns that pronunciation is a neglected area at school, grammatical correctness, on the other hand, is often emphasised in language teaching. These learners had also already attended at least one grammar course at the university, which may have influenced their common comments on grammatical accuracy.

Lexical issues were also discussed in the narratives. As with pronunciation, the positive effect of limited L2 skills or paying extra attention to language was mentioned also with reference to vocabulary: the spoken performance can be slower because it takes more time to find the appropriate words in L2. However, the limited size of active vocabulary was also identified as a feature affecting spoken performance negatively. One student observed that their active vocabulary might be larger for written language (Example 21). This reflects the pressure from online planning during speaking and the effect of the speed of lexical retrieval. As a communication strategy, using near-synonyms was found unsatisfactory (Example 22).

¹² Following Krashen's (1981) terminology, these learners could be characterised as *monitor overusers*.

- (21) I am very aware of the fact that my vocabulary needs improvement. Especially when speaking I am not able to use a wide variation of expressions and vocabulary but end up repeating the same phrases. When I write, it is easier to find several possibilities to express an idea, but orally there is not as much time to plan. (7)
- (22) As for speaking in public, I was again very nervous and forgot even some most familiar words in English, so to compensate them I had to use two words that were not exactly right ones for the purpose. (77)

In addition, register problems and academic vocabulary were also discussed in connection with word choice. Register problems can be partly due to a lack of practice with the specific task type, as the learner may be more used to informal speaking situations. Formal speaking registers can be challenging in L1 and L2 if the speaker does not have much earlier experience with different speaking tasks.¹³ As mentioned above, *CEFR* (Council of Europe 2001: 27, 58) emphasises that fluent language users should be able to use the appropriate style required by the context, that is, speak in the appropriate register. The ability to accommodate to various speaking situations is therefore important for advanced, university-level learners.

There was little discussion of pragmatic features of language in the narratives. Some students did, however, explicitly point out that the discrepancy between their cultural background as a whole and the language used in class made the speaking situation more challenging (Example 23). The speaker and the audience shared the same cultural background, which was different from the culture of the language used. This naturally adds to the difficulty of the speaking task, as the speaker would have to observe the cultural and pragmatic expectations of both L1 and L2. The speaker's identity may approximate L2 culture, but at the same time they have to remember who the audience are and possibly adjust their linguistic and cultural choices to serve both the target language and the shared L1 needs.

- (23) I think one major point is that we all have the same cultural background as Finns but at the same time we are presenting in English, which usually means that the presentation should differ quite strongly from what we as Finns are used to see. What I'm trying to point out is that the culture of ours differs quite strongly from the culture of the language we are about to give presentations in and that is something that makes at least me feel a bit confused sometimes. (78)

Our analysis showed that certain linguistic features and levels were emphasised in the students' narratives concerning their spoken performances and personal development. These areas can be partly explained by the spoken task type and the learners' earlier

13 This can also be applied to written language skills.

studies. The comments implied that all areas of language had not become automatised for our advanced learner subjects. However, limited language skills could be discussed in a positive light by some students.

5 Conclusion

In this study, we examined whether advanced learners of English considered public speaking a generic or a language-specific skill. Our analysis of learner narratives found support for both views. For instance, public speaking stress was discussed as a generic feature of presentations in any language. In contrast, some learners specifically reported that giving a speech in English made them more anxious and that the use of L2 made the speaking task more complex. On the basis of these results it seems that public speaking is often considered a transferable skill from one language to the other in the sense that the experiences, failures and successes with earlier public speeches may affect future speeches in any language. Therefore, for L2 learning and teaching, it is important to note that the skills needed for L2 performance can be practised in L1 contexts as well – the affective aspect of generic speaking skills applies to both. On the other hand, even if practice and routine are helpful, we did not locate any overtly expressed notions that learning to give L1 speeches with ease would automatically relieve the discomfort experienced in L2 public speaking. Therefore, practice in L2 is naturally needed as well.

Our analysis of the different levels of language revealed that L2 speakers, even at advanced levels, have to invest much effort in the speaking situation, which adds to the cognitive load of the L2 speaker. The role of pronunciation was discussed in many narratives, which implies that this level of language is difficult to automatise; it still requires attention and control at the university level. This result can be partly explained by the task type or by the learners' earlier studies. Their curriculum followed a traditional bottom-up approach with accuracy-oriented activities preceding fluency-oriented ones, which also made them more aware of different linguistic units and more analytical in their approach to speaking.

We do need to remember that the instructions provided for the narratives did not explicitly guide the students towards analysing those specific features of L2 speaking skills and development in which we were interested. With explicit instructions we could have achieved a greater variety of different perspectives on public speaking, with a clearer focus on the questions at hand. Our goal was, however, to analyse the aspects which the learners themselves identified as relevant for their skills and development without overtly guiding them into any particular direction. Our next goal is to combine these findings with learners' thoughts about the features of successful performers and

performances. By combining these approaches, the perspective of the speaker and that of the audience, we can accomplish a more comprehensive understanding of L2 public speeches. As observed, it is very common that the language of the speech or presentation is neither the speaker's nor the audience's L1. In order to understand effective and successful L2 speech performance better, we need more information about the relevant features of L2 speaking which L1 studies alone cannot answer.

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