

The oral presentation as a context for learning and assessment

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Abstract

Tests are said to be a common determiner of what actually happens in the classrooms. There are claims for both positive and negative washback. However, there is still very little evidence of how washback from tests affects teaching and learning in classrooms. This article explores how the assessment format (oral presentations) of a Public Speaking in English course in a Thai university shapes students' group discussions in the classroom. Classroom observation data document interaction processes in order to investigate the relationship between classroom discussions and the oral presentations. We present an analysis of the group discussions using a conversational analysis approach and explore the structure of oral presentations through a 'lexical signal' framework (Tadros 1985; 1989; 1994; Boyle 1996). The analysis illustrates how interactions develop and are sustained to facilitate collaborative learning. We relate the findings of this analysis to the structure, linguistic features and quality of the oral presentations of the students from the group discussions. This article argues that washback does exist, that the assessment format can shape classroom activities so that there are enhanced opportunities for learning, and that the particular format investigated here – the oral presentation – merits further investigation.