

〈Research Note〉

Affect and Language Improvement in Relation to Out-of-Class Assignments at Three Proficiency Levels within Control & Value Theory

OKAMURA Akiko

Introduction

Classroom is an emotional place (Pekrun 2024, 37). So is the process of working on out-of-class assignments to be submitted online. In fact, this type of assignments has become a common feature of the course work, in particular since COVID-19 (Baczek 2021; Liu 2023; Yan, et al. 2021; Zhang 2023). In the field of foreign language learning, online platforms enable students to hand in out-of-class assignments in various digital forms including recorded videos and sound files to the teacher. Out-of-class assignments could provide students with precious learning experience.

On a foreign language course, both learners' proficiency levels and types of out-of-class assignments can influence their emotions in their learning process and output of their assignments. It would be useful to investigate how they can be emotionally involved because of these variables.

Recently the appraisal studies about the use of online platforms have been carried out (Almendingen et al. 2021, 2023; Banihashem 2023; Dirzyte et al. 2021; Shekhar 2022; Tomaszek and Muchacka-Cymerman 2022; Zhang et al. 2023). In Japan, the ministry of education and sports carried out a questionnaire about the use of online platforms in higher education (Furue, Kigawa and Yamashita 2022). The results showed that during the COVID-19 as many as two thirds of 1583 students stated that they had difficulties in obtaining feedback on their out-of-class assignments from the teachers. However, few studies have analyzed students' emotions on them.

To investigate the emotions in out-of-class assignments in some details, Pekrun's control and value theory (CVT) can be applied because CVT is able to distinguish emotions in the process of learning activities from those at the output (Pekrun 2006,

2018, 2024).

Therefore, within the framework of CVT, this preliminary study tries to show how emotions can be influenced by their English proficiency levels and types of assignments in both the process and output of out-of-class assignments. Their English proficiency levels were measured by a four-skill English language test, GTEC. Although the studies on emotions based on CVT have often adopted quantitative analysis based on a large amount of questionnaire data (Pekrun et al. 2011; Shao et al. 2023; Waters et al. 2022), this preliminary small study would adopt interviewing to obtain details of learners' experience in the out-of-class assignments. Furthermore, by taking the same four skill examination at the beginning and the end of the semester, it also aims to find a link between emotions and the possible change in English language proficiency.

The pedagogical implications will also be discussed in relation to the support to the lower proficiency level learners.

Studies on emotions and Pekrun's framework

Researchers in educational psychology were originally concerned about negative emotions such as a fear and anxiety in the situation like the examination (Pekrun 2002). However, it was also found that some students were resilient against the stressful context because of the positive emotions that they have towards learning and the online support coming from teachers and/or classmates (Waters, et al. 2022). In fact, it was found that positive emotions were equally influential in the learning context (Fredrickson 2001, 2003, 2006; Pekrun 2006, 2018, 2024; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000).

Many distinguished researchers in educational psychology proposed frameworks of the analysis of positive emotions (Fredrickson 2004, 2006; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000; Seligman, et al. 2009; Pekrun 2006, 2018, 2024 for example). Among them, Pekrun (2006, 2018, 2024) has proposed control and value theory (CVT) which illustrates emotions from two dimensions; one is "control" to be related to capability, a close link to self-efficacy (Bandura 1982) and the other is to identify "value" in learning. Learners need to possess capabilities to perform an action and to find "value" to observe the meaning in output of learning. His reference to "control"

indicates the involvement of cognitive dimension in the analysis of emotions. Pekrun (2024) gave examples of the application of “control” and “value” among the learners. For example, learners in control of the task can have more positive emotions than those with little control. Also if learners can identify the “value” of the task, they are likely to have positive emotions. However, if the learners are in control but do not find the “value” in the task, they would be less likely to have positive emotions (Pekrun 2024). The learners’ competence and their perception of the value of the task seems to play a role in their emotions.

Pekrun’s another contribution (2006, 2018, 2024) to the analysis of emotions is to divide emotions into two timeline categories: process and outcome emotions. This distinction can spotlight the difference in emotions between the time when learners are in the process of learning and when they have the output as a result. In these two categories, some learners have positive emotions in both the learning process and the outcome, while others may only have them in either. The variation may represent what they possess such as the proficiency levels and the purpose of learning. It seems necessary to investigate the influential variables on emotions in the two categories.

In foreign language teaching, negative emotions such as a fear and anxiety were also the main concerns at the initial stage of the analysis of emotions (MacIntyre & Mercer 2014; Dewaele, Chen, Padilla & Lake 2019; Dewaele 2022, Cassady & Johnson. 2002; Cheng 2002; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner 1994; MacIntyre 2017; Zhang 2000, 2001, see the review, MacIntyre 2019). However, it was also found that two opposite types of emotions such as anxiety and enjoyment can be felt together in a highly tense situation such as an examination (Dewaele & MacIntyre 2014, 2016). Students were happy to face the examination when they were capable of answering the questions but they are also worried about the possibility of mistakes. Then studies flourished to investigate the relationship between learning and positive emotions in foreign language teaching (Gkonou, Daubney & Dewaele 2017; Dewaele et al. 2019; Dewaele 2022; MacIntyre & Mercer 2014; MacIntyre, Gregersen & Mercer 2019; MacIntyre & Vincze 2017) These studies on positive emotions have involve a large number of learners in schools and universities (Yinxing Jin & Lawrence Jun Zhang 2018; Derakhshan et al., 2023; Derakhshan et al., 2022; Derakhshan et al., 2021; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2021; Wang, 2023).

The use of questionnaires is a useful method to obtain cross sectional data from a

large number of learners in foreign language learning (Alrabai 2022 ; Derakhshan et al. 2022; Derakhshan et al. 2021; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2021; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2021; Hejazi & Sadoughi 2022; Jin & Zhang 2021; Lee & Hsieh 2019; Tsang & Dewaele 2023, Yinxing & Zhang 2018; Wang, 2023; Waters et al. 2022). Thus Pekrun's framework has been applied to emotions in English language teaching through a questionnaire collected from thousands of students in China (Shao, et al, 2023).

In contrast, interviewing can handle a small number of learners to obtain their personal experience in a given context, which can be critiqued as a collection of anecdotal stories.

However, as was argued in Complex Dynamics Systems theory (Larsen-Freeman 2017, 2020; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron 2008), what is important is not always the generalization of the findings and statistical significance. It is necessary to observe how emotions are involved in learners' development of language skills. Because few studies have explored the learners' emotions on out-of-class assignments in academic courses, interviews may reveal their complex emotions in the process of working on and output of assignments. Thus, Pekrun's CVT can be applied to the interview data to analyze students' emotions in learning from out-of-class assignments.

The current study

The current study aims to investigate Japanese college students' emotions about the out-of-class assignments and the possible influence on their English four skills. The data was analyzed within CVT (Pekrun 2006, 2018, 2024).

Data collection

This study interviewed 19 Japanese students on English courses who volunteered to respond to questions on the learning process and output of three out-of-class assignments. To evaluate their English proficiency levels and the change over four months, the students took one four skill English proficiency test (GTEC) twice at the beginning and the end of the semester, beginning of October and the end of January.

Research questions are as follows.

1. What emotions did the students have in the process and the output of each out-of-

class assignment?

2. Is there any potential relationship between learners' emotions and their English language proficiency?

3. Are there any English skills that can be improved after the out-of-class assignments?

GTEC test

The GTEC is an English language test to investigate communicative competence of English learners' four skills. Listening and reading sections are mainly to ask questions about the general grasp of the content. Speaking and writing sections are to provide them with tasks such as to make a complaint or to ask for the direction. This commercially available English four skill test was adopted because the focus of this test is on communicative skills in a given context, which helps learners to interact with other people, rather than on the accuracy of grammar on its own.

Out-of-class assignments to be submitted online

Prior to COVID-19, assignments to students in the educational institutions were likely to be submitted in paper to the teacher. The pandemic transformed this manual submission to online submission which can be in more than one form such as video recordings or sound recordings (Camacho-Zuñiga, et.al., 2021; Cramarenco, Burcă-Voicu, Dabija, 2023; Yan, et al. 2021; Aroonsrimarakot, et al. 2023; Furue, Kigawa and Yamashita 2022; Coman et al. 2020, for example).

Below are the details of three out-of-class assignments:

As the course was a weekly English course with the main purpose to improve speaking skills, learners should listen to and watch English videos, practice by repeating English phrases in the videos and write their own speech drafts as out-of-class assignments.

There are three out-of-class assignments each of which takes place three times each during the four months of teaching weeks in one semester. The first was a cognitive

task of finding listening difficulties of a video on the textbook and TED Talks to identify the part they find difficult to catch and explain why they found difficult to listen to of 2 minutes' spoken English there. The format was provided on line and the students should fill in it and submit it by the deadline. Then they are given some comments and scores out of 5 point by the teacher.

The second one was the recitation of the first 100 words of the same texts as was used in the first assignment, 'Listening difficulty analysis'. The purpose was to learn fluency by repeating the speech many times to memorize part of it. They had to videotape their performance with their eyes covered by their hands or an eye mask to avoid any cheating, and should make it clear that they did not have any earplugs in the ears. After the submission they were also given some comments and scores out of 5 points by the teacher.

The third was to write 3 speech drafts for the presentation in class. The length was about 150 words each in English. The structure of the speeches was shown in class. Students should think about the story such as "the company they would like work for in the future" in English by themselves. The students should submit it by the deadline on the online platform as they did for the previous two assignments. Again comments and scores were given by the teacher online.

Students

Participants were 19 first year economics major students who volunteered to participate in this project. The reason for recruiting students is to obtain data from those who would be happy to take tests and respond to questions so that the data would have voice from those interested in learning English. Obviously it is useful to ask range of students. But here the type of students need to avoid those without any motivation to learn because the purpose is to investigate the influence of English language proficiency levels and types of out-of-class assignments on learners. The test fees were paid by the funding provided by the university, which also invite those interestad in learning English.

They were divided into three proficiency levels according to GTEC scores as shown in Table 1.

They responded to questions in an interview session with one of their English

teachers about their learning of three assignments performed three times each over four months from October to January. They also took the four skill English language tests GTEC at the end of January, four months after the first time to observe any improvement in English four skills over this period.

Table 1 19 students' GTEC (four skill test) scores

Group No	Range of scores	Equivalent to Common European Framework of reference	Number of students
1	Less than 500	A 2 minus	6
2	Between 500 and 550	A 2	8
3	More than 551	B 1	5
Total			19

Interviews

Interviews were in a semi-structured format of asking about what they felt in conducting out-of-class assignments and the output of them. Most of them lasted about twenty minutes in Japanese but four cases with group 3 students took more than thirty minutes because they had more comments. The interview recordings were all transcribed.

Results

it was interesting that both positive and negative emotions were raised from all the groups in the learning process and the output of the out-of-class assignments. The results are shown according to the assignments. Here positive emotions refer to happy and enjoyable feelings, while negative emotions refer to both boring and hopeless feelings.

Emotions in the process and output

Assignment 1: listening difficulty analysis

The half of Group 1 (4 out of 6) and all of Group 2 (8 out of 8) students showed positive emotions to the process and output of this cognitive assignment of finding listening difficulties. They explained the reasons why they found difficult to catch the sounds based on English speeches (video recordings such as TED Talks

adopted in the textbook). These students stated that they liked this assignment because this is a rare opportunity to listen to the same places many times to think about the reasons why they could not catch the sounds. They felt they were able to improve their listening skills by this exercise. They found the value of this assignment as output so they were happy to have carried out this assignment as shown in the comment 1

The comment 1 from a Group 2 student

I was happy because I started understanding the sound change such as the deletion of “t” sound at a word final when spoken at the natural speed in English.

However negative comments also appeared from 3 students in Group 1 as shown in the comment 2 & 3.

The comment 2 from Group 1 student

I tended to write the same comments such as I could not hear some sounds each time and found the work rather repetitive and boring. It is not so useful to do more than once.

The comment 3 from another Group 1 student

I was able to say it was difficult to catch but that was all, I found it difficult to explain why this is so.

Two Group 3 students did not find this assignment useful for a different reason and thus they did not have positive emotions by carrying out this assignment in the process and the output. They said that they did not find any parts difficult to catch so that this assignment did not have much value for them. One of the examples was shown below.

The comment 4 from a Group 3 student

I was able to catch the sounds so I was not taking this assignment so seriously, to be honest.

The task should have demanded a little more challenge for them.

Assignment 2: Recitation (memorization of 100 words speech to video tape with eyes closed or covered)

All of the 14 students of Group 1 & 2 did not like this assignment because they said that it is not easy to remember the sentences in a short time and as it is easy to forget all what they memorized, the assignment itself is pointless. It seems that they did not have control and did not find value to work on this assignment. They have only negative emotions in the process of completing this assignment and output of it.

This made a sharp contrast with the comments made by students in Group 3. It was interesting that unlike Group 1 & 2 students, Group 3 students did not mention the value of the output so much. They referred to the experience of memorizing as something they enjoyed or they can handle without much difficulty. Positive emotions came in the process of this activity instead of output. Examples were shown as the comment 5 & 6 below.

The comment 5 from a Group 3 student

I liked this assignment because I wanted to practice speaking English as I did not have a lot of opportunities to speak English. It was fun to talk English with the English speaker's model.

The comment 6 from a Group 3 students

...as the speech has a video to go with, imitation of English accent with some emotions made me play a role of an actor. I felt as if I were on the stage as an actor. It was really fun.

Another Group 3 student (The comment 7) expressed her confidence in memorization saying that *"I quite like memorization because I am good at it. I can memorize this size of speech quite easily."*

The statements of Group 3 students suggest that they are capable of memorizing, which shows their confidence in the learning process. These Group 3 students described the benefit of this assignment in output, although they were not too sure about the value to memorize as was described by one Group 3 student (The comment 8).

“I think I cannot remember everything later, but I am pretty sure that I can use some part of the speech in the future. So I do not think it is useless to memorize.”

The difference between Group 1 & 2 and Group 3 students is that the most proficient level learners (Group 3) had positive emotions in the process of learning due to their control over the linguistic skills, while less proficient learners (Group 1 & 2) had negative emotions in both process and the output of the learning because they did not find any value in the output of the assignment.

Assignment 3: writing speech drafts

Regarding the production of speech drafts, each group found its own value in the process. Group 1 students tend to focus on the topic and story, while Group 2 became involved with the organization of the speech. Group 3 tried to spend time on the better way to convey the story.

Assignment 3 gained more positive emotions from all the groups in the process and output of assignments.

For example, one Group 1 student showed a positive emotion while thinking about the story of his speech.

Comment 9

I enjoyed thinking about my talk. It was interesting to think about how my story goes and I write about it.

A Group 2 student stated that he also spent time on his presentation strategies.

Comment 10

I spent on organizing my talk to draw attention from the people in class. I thought I could not just repeat what others would say.

As opposed to Group 1 & 2 students, Group 3 students were concerned about both organization and grammatical accuracy as shown in Comment 11.

Comment 11

I was not too sure what to say here so I was thinking of a couple of ways but I

thought the teacher's suggestions about language use was able to make it clear.

It was interesting that Group 3 students tend to refer to the teacher's feedback as a value.

Change in mean scores of GTEC

Overall, the results of GTEC (each linguistic skill has 250 maximum scores making the total scores 1000) showed that listening and reading skills had changed little over the four months. Listening test mean scores went down from 137.6 to 131.6/250: $T=1.24$ $P(T \leq t)$ 0.11 and reading test mean scores increased slightly from 128.8 to 133.8/250: $T=1.15$, $P(T \leq t)$ 0.13. By contrast, speaking and writing skills showed some improvement. Speaking test mean scores went up from 123.4 to 130.8 ($T=2.05$ $P(T \leq t)$ 0.027) and writing skills test mean scores also improved from 124.9 to 131.9 ($T=1.86$ $P(T \leq t)$ 0.038) when 19 of them were treated as one group as shown in Figure 1.

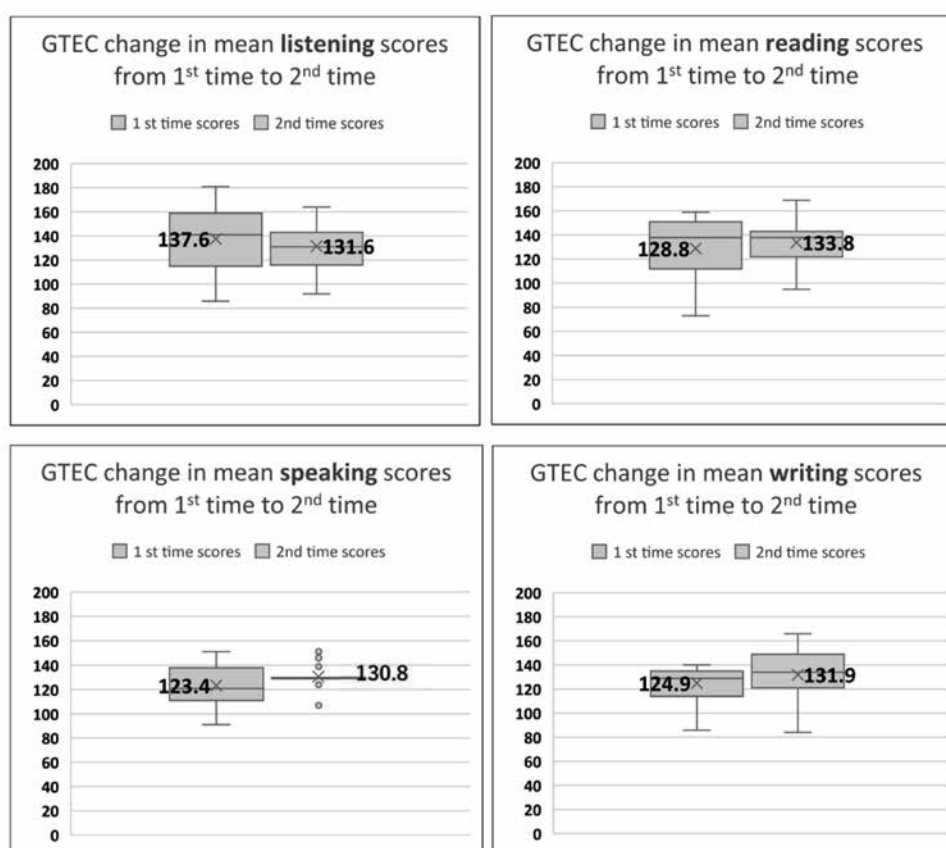


Figure 1 Change in four skills in GTEC scores from the first time to the second time (four months apart)

When the scores were analyzed by the group, some difference emerged as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Change in 19 students' 4 skill GTEC scores over four months (one semester)

	Number of students with increased scores in each skill				Total number per group
	Listening	Reading	Speaking	Writing	
Group 1 ~499 scores (6 students)	4 (66.7%)	4 (66.7%)	6 (100%)	2 (33.3%)	6 (100%)
Group 2 500~550 scores (8 students)	2 (25.0%)	4 (50.0%)	6 (75.0%)	5 (62.5%)	8 (100%)
Group 3 551~ scores (5 students)	1 (20.0%)	2 (40.0%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (100.0%)	5 (100%)
Total number per each skill	7 (36.8%)	10 (52.6%)	12 (63.2%)	12 (63.2%)	19 (100%)

The results of the second GTEC taking showed that speaking skills have increased most among the students in Group 1 and 2 while writing skills have only increased among all the 5 students of Group 3. As the main purpose of these groups is to improve speaking skills, it can be said that the purpose was achieved by Groups 1 & 2, but not by Group 3. However, it has to be remembered that Group 3 students had already achieved more than the scores of the Group 1 and 2 students for speaking skills. Thus it should be said that as speaking skills are backed by writing skills, that is, as students had to write a speech draft for their oral presentation, they transferred their speaking skills to writing skills. It seems that improvement of writing skills needs more time than other skills in the learning process of English. It was interesting that listening skills were the least improved (36.8%) as opposed to speaking skills' increase (63.2%) among the four skills shown in Table 2.

Discussion

Interviews with the 19 students showed that English proficiency levels of the interviewees influenced the learners' emotions in the learning process. According to Pekrun's division of learning process and outcome, this study shows that in the learning process the most proficient level learners (Group 3) tended to have positive emotions, while those at lower proficiency levels (Group 1 & 2) failed to have positive emotions. This seems to be related to their ability to control the challenging assignment such as recitation, "memorization of English sentences". All of the most

advanced proficiency levels students did not have negative emotions in the process of working on the recitation assignment because they could do it or they found some fun to do it. They seem to feel a confidence and positive emotions in the process of carrying out the assignment. But when the task is too easy for them, they would have negative emotions “Control” rather than “value” seems to prevail over their emotions among these learners.

By contrast, when lower proficiency levels learners face the same assignment such as “recitation”, they tend to focus on the value of output. They complained the lack of “value” for the assignment. They may need some information on the value because they do not want to spend time completing something that has no value for them in particular if the assignment is challenging for them. The difference seems to lie in “control” skills.

Indeed, it was interesting that the majority of students in all the groups had positive emotions in the learning process of writing speech drafts assignment. Because the assignment has some structure to follow with samples provided, they feel they can have control over the writing and possibly they see some value as they need the draft for the speech presentation.

For students to complete the assignment, this study showed that both control and value influence learners’ emotions in carrying out out-of-class assignments. Obviously if they feel they are in control of English to complete the assignment and identify the value of it, they are happy in the process and output of the required assignments.

However, this preliminary small study also showed that control is a more powerful force to have positive emotions in the learning process than value. Learners’ English proficiency levels seem to play an important role in controlling their emotions in the learning process. Thus it can be said the more control of the language skills, the more positive their emotions become in the learning process. Nevertheless, sometimes advanced learners need to be pushed a little more to have some extra challenge to make the best use of their capabilities. By contrast, if the assignment is beyond their capabilities, learners would have negative emotions in the process and output of the assignments. In this context, the learners should have assignments that they can handle with their capabilities.

In terms of the improvement of GTEC scores, two interesting results were found. One was about the improvement of writing skills by the most proficient (Group 3) learners. As all of them spent most of the time on speaking skills, the improvement in speaking skills was expected. However, the interviews indicate that the improvement in writing could be supported by their learning of the organization of speech and the linguistic forms from the teacher's feedback to clarify their message in the speeches. Although all the students have similar feedback, Group 3 students may have made the best use of teacher's feedback to revise their writing.

Another interesting result was that decrease in scores in listening skills among the students. The results may represent a difference between what GTEC asked about in listening tests and what the students focused on in out-of-class assignments. They listened to the videos of speeches many times to find listening difficulties, which was expected to improve students' listening skills. However, the students were listening to the sound rather than the meaning or message of the oral English. The bottom up approach to trying to identify sound change such as deletion and linking did not help to understand the message so much. It seems that students need to combine both top-down and bottom-up strategies for listening and pay attention to meaning for listening comprehension.

Limitation of the study

The limitation of this study is because the students were volunteers with most of them more motivated than other students in class, the data here may not represent the actual comments students would provide. We need to have more data to claim what was found here.

Conclusion and pedagogical implications

This is a small preliminary study on the emotional involvement and their possible influence on the students learning English skills. The results showed that the most proficient level learners had positive emotions in the process of assignment which is a sharp contrast to students at lower proficiency levels. Their capabilities or control enhances the positive emotions in the learning process. Students at the lower proficiency levels can see the "value" of assignments but their lack of "control"

prevents them from overcoming the challenging learning process. To help them to cope with the learning process, it would be useful to adjust the challenging elements to suit to their proficiency levels. They need to enhance their “control”.

(Professor, The Faculty of Economics, Takasaki City University of Economics)

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Acknowledgements

This project was supported by the 2023 Takasaki City University of Economics research funding.

Appendix

Assignments 1 & 2 Texts for listening difficulty analysis and recitation

1. TED talk listening difficulty analysis: 5 x 3 =15 points

You need to write in English for this task.

Procedure (手順)

Step 1	1. Listen to the first two minutes of each TED talk for this task.
Step 2	2. Write down more than five sentences which include words/phrases that you had difficulty catching the sounds. 3. Underline the sounds which you did not catch such as <i>talk <u>to</u></i> .
Step 3	4. Describe how you heard the sound for each case and find the reasons for why you found difficult to catch/understand for each phrase. Then hopefully you can find a pattern of sound changes. For example, I did not hear /y/ in “you” or /r/ sound in “for” disappeared when pronounced or they were unknown words etc.
Step 4	5. Provide your solution to overcome your difficulties.
Step 5	6. Repeat the same procedure for TED Talk 2, 3

Assessment / 5

5 points: The student showed his/her difficulty based on the analysis of listening and the examples from the track analyzed. They need to find rules of sound changes so that they can show how to cope with the possible listening difficulties in the future.

3 points: The student provided examples of listening difficulties but not clear analysis of the reasons for the difficulties.

2 points: The student provided examples of the listening difficulties without any analysis.

1 point: The student submitted work after the due date.

0 points: The students did not submit the work at all.

Submission Form

Class	Student No:	Name:
1 Your difficulties Write down more than five sentences that you had difficulty catching the sounds. Underline the sounds which you did not catch such as <i>talk <u>to</u></i> .	0 “We’re looking <u>for a venue for our annual</u> sales conference in September. 1 2 3 4 5	
2 Your analysis Describe how you heard the sounds for each case. Try to find the reasons for why you found difficult to catch for each phrase.	0 “for a “ was pronounced like /fora/. I did not know “for a” were pronounced together like one word. I could not catch /our/ because it was pronounced very weakly. 1 2 3 4 5	
3. Solutions Provide your solutions to overcome your difficulties for all the cases.	0 I need to understand the linking of sounds in English and increase my vocabulary.	

Recitation 1

TED 1

1. Every summer, my family and I travel across the world, 3,000 miles away to the culturally diverse country of India.
2. Now, India is a country infamous for its scorching heat and humidity.
3. For me, the only relief from this heat is to drink plenty of water.
4. Now, while in India, my parents always remind me to only drink boiled or bottled water, because unlike here in America, where I can just turn on a tap and easily get clean, potable water, in India, the water is often contaminated.
5. So my parents have to make sure that the water we drink is safe.

----- 5 points

00:45

6. However, I soon realized that not everyone is fortunate enough to enjoy the clean water we did.
7. Outside my grandparents' house in the busy streets of India,
8. I saw people standing in long lines under the hot sun filling buckets with water from a tap.
9. I even saw children, who looked the same age as me, filling up these clear plastic bottles with dirty water from streams on the roadside.
9. Watching these kids forced to drink water that I felt was too dirty to touch changed my perspective on the world.
- 10 This unacceptable social injustice compelled me to want to find a solution to our world's clean water problem.

10 points