

Revising Rubrics: Encouraging Listener Participation in Online EFL Presentations

ANDERSON Lauren Margaret
FUJISHIMA Cecilia Smith

Abstract

This study investigated the use of a two-part rubric to promote listener participation during post-presentation discussions. The rubric was split into two sections; presentation and follow-up discussion. After presentations, students in the audience were awarded up to four points for asking three or more intelligible follow-up questions. Up to four points were allocated for integrating discussion strategies into the follow-up questions. Various discussion strategies had been practiced in the previous weeks of the course, including asking for more detail and using clarifying and *wh*-questions.

By including the follow-up discussion in the rubric, students in the audience were incentivized to participate by asking the presenter questions. Feedback from the students via questionnaire suggested that using a two-part rubric encouraged participation, increased enjoyment, and was well-suited to online learning overall. However, the questionnaire also revealed that audio problems made asking follow-up questions challenging at times. This is a serious concern as it could lead to unreliable grading and unfairly disadvantage students in online assessments.

Introduction

In the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, record numbers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers scrambled to adapt in-class teaching materials to online formats. Facing a rapid shift to online learning, the initial preoccupations of educators were largely technical. After settling on the right video conferencing tool and course management system, secondary concerns emerged. With less ability to facilitate active participation, what could teachers do to keep students engaged without the energy of a traditional classroom?

Research has shown higher dropout rates for online classes compared to traditional, face-to-face courses (Heyman, 2010; Jagers, 2011). Also, students are more likely to withdraw from online courses later in the semester (Jagers, 2011), in part because of motivation factors (Bawa, 2016; Jagers, 2011). However, student attitudes towards technology and course design also play important roles in boosting student retention in online classes (Bawa, 2016).

EFL educators facing online oral communication classes may also have concerns over students withdrawing into silence. Classroom silence is well-documented in East Asian countries, and studies have found that the roots of the behaviour lie in various linguistic, psychological, and cultural factors including communicative style, confrontation avoidance, and groupism (Donahue, 1998; Harumi, 2011).

Having experienced low listener participation during EFL presentations, the researcher was concerned that an online setting could cause problems with low student motivation, high drop-out rates, and reluctance to participate. To avoid these issues, it was crucial to create interactive content and assessment in an online learning environment; developing an effective rubric was a core component in this process.

What is a Rubric?

A rubric is a scoring guide that communicates the expectations for an assignment (Reddy and Andrade, 2010). Rubrics have three key features: evaluation criteria appropriate to an assessment, guidelines that provide examples or descriptors for each level of performance, and a scoring scale (Brookhart, 2018; Reddy and Andrade, 2010). For an example of a rubric, see Appendix 1; the leftmost column shows criteria, while the second to fifth columns contain guidelines and a scoring scale.

The Value of Rubrics in Online Courses

With less face-to-face time in online classes, rubrics can function as a valuable communicative tool between educators and learners. In a learning environment that is generally less interactive than a traditional classroom, effective rubrics help students understand the course objectives and give them more independence to monitor their learning. Rubrics also allow teachers to communicate their expectations, save time when grading assignments, and help prevent inconsistent scoring (Brookhart, 2018). They encourage teachers to look more critically at their syllabus design, and consider whether there is a strong connection between course content and assessment.

Material and Methods

The Two-part Rubric

This study focused on two EFL oral communication classes (Class A and B) held on the video conferencing service Zoom. The course was intended to be held in a traditional classroom, but had to be moved online because of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Class A's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) levels were B1-B2, with 12 students ranging from intermediate to upper intermediate. Class B had 13 students with a CEFR level of A2, or pre-intermediate. The courses culminated with two 60-minute sessions dedicated to individual presentations. The presentation rubric was broken down into two parts; students received up to 20 points for the presentations, and up to 8 points for asking questions during the follow-up discussions (See Appendix 1). Both classes used the same rubric. The rubric was introduced and explained to students two sessions before the presentations

began, giving them sufficient time to absorb its contents and adapt their discussions during practice activities.

The presentation section of the rubric consisted of five criteria in line with the performance objectives of the course: *Fluency, Grammar and Pronunciation, Eye Contact, Content, and Comprehension*. This paper will elaborate only on the *Content* and *Comprehension* criteria.

Class A's presentation title was *The Soundtrack of my Life*. Students completed a planner (See Appendix 4) which asked key questions that should be answered over the course of the presentation. Class B's presentation title was *The Key to Success*; the students also filled out a planner in the session before the presentations (See Appendix 5). Covering the key questions in detail would result in a high score for *Content*. A time limit was not included in the rubric criteria, but students were encouraged to give presentations that were around three minutes in length.

For a strong *Comprehension* grade, the presenters had to understand all follow-up questions asked (within reason) and give clear, detailed answers of a few sentences or more. To help the presenters respond to follow-up questions, the class practiced the following clarifying expressions and questions:

“Sorry, I didn't understand that.”

“Did you say/ask _____?”

“You said/asked _____, yes?”

In the session prior to the presentations, students practiced clarifying expressions and questions. The goal of this activity was to normalize asking for clarity when speaking in English, and provide a strategy to help students cope with technical problems. Presenting students were instructed to use *Sorry, I didn't understand that* if connectivity or language issues majorly affected comprehension. It was then the responsibility of the questioner to rephrase the question or add more detail. This technique was successful; there were no instances where a presenter was unable to answer a question because of comprehension issues.

The follow-up discussion section had two criteria: *Discussion Strategies* and *Interaction*. For *Discussion Strategies*, students had to integrate the conversation skills practiced in the previous ten sessions of the course. The discussion strategies were chosen to help students develop the skills needed for high level English interaction. Prior to the presentations, students practiced *Asking for More Details* and *Clarifying*, and were given the following examples:

“Can you tell me why/who/what _____?”

“Could you give me an example of _____?”

“I'd like to know more about _____.”

“What do you mean by _____?”

To achieve the highest score in *Interaction*, students in the audience had to regularly ask questions (three or more per session), speak clearly, and ask questions that were easy for the presenters to understand. Students who were giving presentations during the session were not obligated to participate in the follow-up discussions.

In the first session, half of the students gave their presentations, while the non-presenting students listened and asked follow-up questions. The roles were reversed in the second session, requiring the instructor to complete the grading over two weeks.

The goal of the rubric was to help achieve the following elements during the presentations.

1. Encourage students in the audience to listen attentively and participate in the follow-up discussions.
2. Preserve a classroom culture that promotes peer support and facilitates learner autonomy in an online setting.
3. Strengthen the link between active listener participation and a strong grade in the presentations.

Students' Questionnaire

One week after the presentations, 22 students completed the questionnaire. The questionnaire was made using Google Forms, as it allowed the teacher to collect data efficiently. The procedure for completing the questionnaire was explained and modeled by the teacher using the Share Screen function on Zoom. Students were then able to complete the survey in their own time.

The questionnaire followed a mixed method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data within a single project. Quantitative research was represented by the Lickert-style items (See Figures 3,4,5,6,7) and qualitative data was gathered with the inclusion of open-ended questions (See Comments 1,2,3,5,8).

The questionnaire consisted of 3 parts; Part I focused on the rubric and sought students' opinions on its design and suitability in online classes. Part II asked students for feedback on materials used earlier in the course, and it is not relevant to this study. Part III focused on the follow-up discussion, asking if the two-part rubric encouraged students to participate and if it made the presentations more enjoyable. The latter section of the survey also asked about two potential problems with online follow-up discussions; was it stressful asking questions after presentations, and did audio problems affect student's ability to hear the presentations and actively participate?

Respondents do not always provide honest answers to questionnaires. Prestige bias is a common explanation for this type of behaviour, in which respondents choose answers that they think are desirable or expected regardless of what they really think (Dornyei and Taguchi, 2010). Given the teacher’s close relationship with the students, prestige bias was a key concern. To discourage prestige bias care was taken to use neutral language when describing the grading system, and the potential benefits of a two-part rubric were never mentioned. The manner in which the questionnaire was presented was also carefully considered. The students were told that the purpose of the questionnaire was to collect honest feedback. Participant anonymity was also stressed.

Results

Figure 1

Class A		
Student	Number of follow-up questions asked by student	Number of times student used discussion strategies during follow-up discussion (Asking for More Details, Clarifying, WH Questions)
1	3	3
2	2	1
3	3	2
4	3	2
5	3	2
6	3	2
7	2	2
8	3	3
9	2	2
10	1	2
11	2	2
12	n/a	n/a

Part of the quantitative research for this project involved the teacher noting the number of follow-up questions asked per student, and the number of times the discussion strategies were used during those questions. Class A consisted of 12 intermediate to upper intermediate EFL freshmen. Student 12 dropped out of the course midway. In Class A, students asked an average of 2.45 questions, and used the discussion strategies an average 2.09 times during the follow-up discussions. The range of number of questions asked was 1-3, with six students (54.54%) asking three questions, four students (36.36%) asking two, and one student (9%) asking a single question.

Figure 2

Class B		
Student	Number of follow-up questions asked by student	Number of times student used discussion strategies during follow-up discussion (Asking for More Details, Clarifying, WH Questions)
1	n/a	n/a
2	2	1
3	2	2
4	2	3
5	0	0
6	2	3
7	3	3
8	1	2
9	3	3
10	4	3
11	0	0
12	n/a	n/a
13	3	3

Class B consisted of 13 pre-intermediate EFL sophomores. Student 1 was largely absent throughout the course, and student 12 was unable to participate in the presentations due to external connectivity issues. In Class B, students asked an average of 2 questions, and used the discussion strategies an average 2.09 times during the follow-up discussions. The range of number of questions asked was 0-4, with one student (9%) asking four questions, two students (18%) asking three, four students (36.36%) asking two, one student (9%) asking one question. Two students (18%) did not ask any questions.

Responses from Questionnaire: Motivation and Enjoyability

A key goal of the two-part rubric was to motivate students to actively participate in online discussion. Figures 3 and 4 show students' opinions on the two-part rubric and asking follow-up questions after each presentation.

Figure 3

Having a two-part rubric (Presentation for the presenters, Follow-Up Discussion for the audience) motivated me to listen more carefully during the presentations.
22 responses

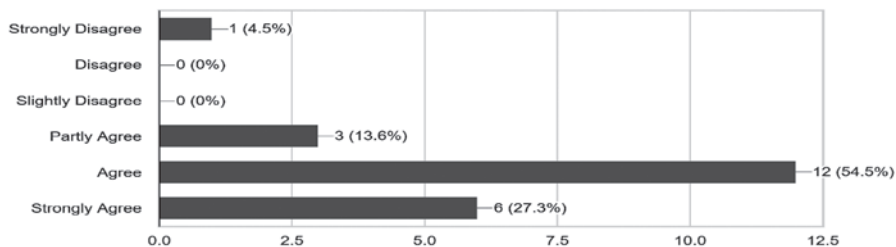
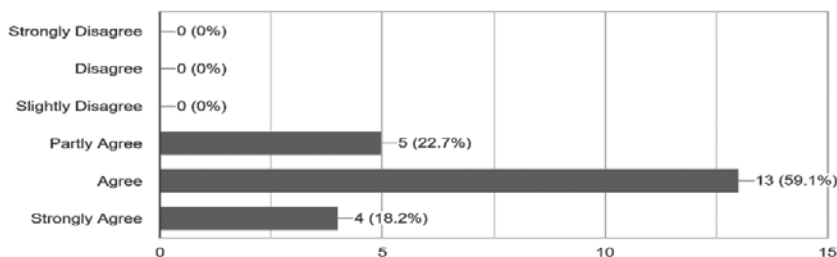


Figure 4

Asking follow-up questions to the presenters was enjoyable.

22 responses



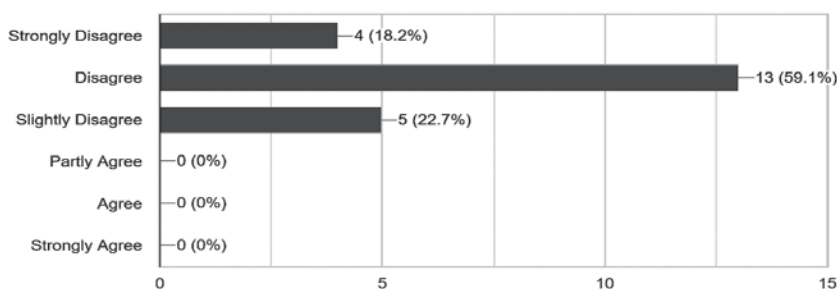
The results suggest that the two-part rubric motivated students to pay attention to the presentations and listen attentively. In Figure 3, 18 students (81.8%) selected *Agree* or *Strongly Agree* when asked if the rubric motivated them to listen more carefully. Asking follow-up questions was also perceived positively by the students; all of the students agreed the post-presentation discussions were enjoyable.

Questionnaire: Suitability of a Two-part Rubric in an Online Environment

Figure 5

The group discussion rubric is not suitable for online (Zoom) classes.

22 responses



One concern was that the students would not be receptive to a rubric that graded them not only on their performances, but also on their ability to listen actively and ask questions, particularly in an online environment. Figure 5 suggests that students were open to the two-part rubric, with all respondents disagreeing that it was not suitable in online classes.

Dornyei (2002) argues that the advantages of open-ended questions are that they help reveal problems that the researcher was previously unaware of, and add depth to the data, “By permitting greater freedom of expression, open-ended items can provide far greater “richness” than fully quantitative data” (47). In the final item of the questionnaire, students were asked to write any additional thoughts they had on the presentation rubric. This item was not mandatory, and received 8 comments in total. Two students remarked that they found the rubric clear and comprehensible, and another said that it was well-suited to

online learning. These responses support the results from Figure 5.

Comment 1

Presentation rubric it was easy to understand because there are evaluation criteria.

Comment 5

It was good, cause easy to understand.

Comment 8

This way suitable for zoom class.

Responses from Questionnaire: Learner Stress and Technical Issues

The students had likely experienced significant turmoil at having a traditional course suddenly moved to an online format. As a result, the teacher had to consider preventing learner stress when developing assessment materials. Figure 6 shows that four students (18.2%) selected *Partly Agree* and one student (4.5%) selected *Agree* to the statement *Asking follow-up questions to the presenters was stressful*. More in-depth questioning is needed to ascertain the nature of this stress. It would be valuable to better understand if technical issues related to online learning played a significant role in the anxiety reported in Figure 6.

Figure 6

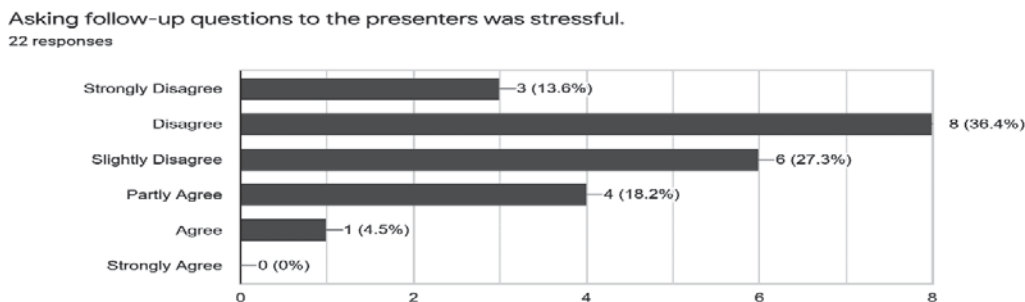
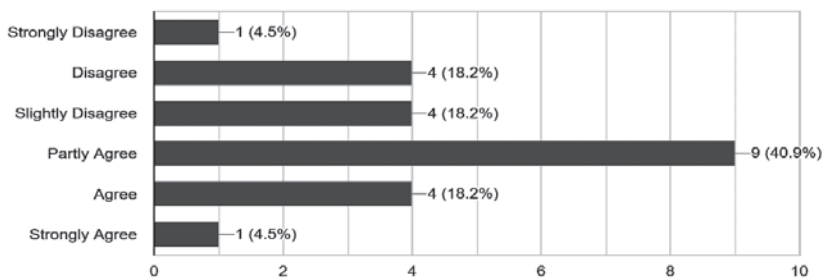


Figure 7

It was often difficult to ask follow-up questions, because It was difficult to hear the presentations clearly on Zoom.

22 responses



Slow internet speed and poor audio quality could potentially hamper the students' ability to hear the presentations, resulting in lower participation and unfair grading. In Figure 7, students responded to the statement *It was often difficult to ask follow-up questions, because it was difficult to hear the presentations clearly on Zoom*. The feedback suggests that audio issues presented a serious problem when using a two-part rubric online; 9 students (40.9%) *Partly Agreed*, 4 students (18.2%) selected *Agree*, and one student (4.5%) chose *Strongly Agree*. It was unexpected that 63% of students would experience some level of difficulty asking questions because of audio issues, considering that the rubric was unanimously considered appropriate for an online environment (see Figure 5).

It is possible that the inclusion of clarifying expressions in the discussion strategies helped lead to high student satisfaction with the two-part rubric, despite significant audio problems. To help prevent some students becoming unfairly disadvantaged by technical issues, students were awarded points for using clarifying questions, such as "Did you say _____?" and "What do you mean by _____?" As asking follow-up questions was considered an enjoyable element of the presentations (see Figure 4), students may have been more willing to be patient with technical issues. Literacy problems and poor question design also frequently contribute to conflicting responses (Dornyei, 2003). During the design phase, more attention should have been paid to checking the questionnaire items for internal consistency.

Technical problems were also mentioned in the open-ended question, which asked students for any additional thoughts they had on the presentation rubric. Two respondents cited connectivity issues as a problem.

Comment 2

I had a bad connection and my screen stopped frequently, so it often hard for me to hear anyone's speech.

Comment 3

Reaction is delayed.

The open-ended question provided valuable insight, as these opinions were not clearly reflected in Figure 5. Although the general feedback from students maintained that the rubric was suitable in online courses, maintaining fairness and consistency in grading is crucial. For a two-part rubric to deliver consistent grading in online classes, educators will need to anticipate audio problems and provide students with strategies on how to cope.

Limitations

In this study, the class sizes were small (12 and 13 students). Ultimately, 11 students in each class completed the course and gave presentations, making for a manageable grading workload. Each session required the teacher to give 5-6 presentation grades, and 5-6 follow-up discussion grades. In larger

classes, it may be less feasible for one teacher to keep track of a two-part rubric.

Time restraints and the relatively small number of participants meant that there was no control group from which to draw more meaningful comparisons. This will be addressed with a follow-up study to observe the frequency of questions asked and discussion strategies used when the Follow-up Discussion section of the rubric is removed, and instead students are verbally encouraged to actively participate.

Conclusions

Teachers looking to optimize listener engagement and discussion during online presentations should consider using a two-part rubric. Feedback from the questionnaire suggested that the rubric encouraged students to listen more attentively to the presentations. It also supported learner autonomy as it was easy to follow, giving the students a clear framework for success in the assessment. By awarding points to students who participated in the follow-up discussions, peer support and cooperation were incentivized. The students also reported that asking follow-up questions was enjoyable; adding a fun, dynamic element often lacking in online classrooms (Bawa, 2016).

Technical issues challenged the efficacy of a two-part rubric in an online classroom; the majority of students experienced some level of difficulty participating in the follow-up discussion because of connectivity problems. Rubrics should help assess learners' performance consistently and objectively; two-part scoring that evaluates questions and answers in addition to a presentation may not be suitable for online classes with significant technical issues. Any use of a two-part rubric in online presentations should be based on positive student feedback, and the practice of appropriate strategies to prevent inaccurate scoring.

Encouraging the use of clarifying questions and expressions during discussion seems to help students and teachers mitigate scoring and communication issues. With suitable strategies in place, two-part rubrics help to build online classrooms that promote listener engagement, deepen learning, and empower students to overcome technical problems.

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Appendices

Appendix 1- Two-part Rubric for Presentations

Rubric for Oral Communication (Presentation)

Criteria	4	3	2	1	Score
Fluency	Continuous, clear, and well-organized speech	Continuous speech with some pauses	Frequent pauses to organize ideas/for lack of vocabulary	Frequent long pauses	
Grammar + Pronunciation	No or very few errors	Some errors that do not affect understanding	Many errors that occasionally affect understanding	Major errors that affect understanding	
Eye Contact	Holds the attention of the audience with direct eye contact, occasionally looks at notes	Regular use of direct eye contact, regularly looks at notes	Minimal use of eye contact, reading mostly from notes	No eye contact with audience, presentation is entirely read from notes	
Content	Presentation answers all key questions in detail. Details are interesting and relevant	Presentation answers most of the key questions in detail	Presentation briefly covers most of the questions, contains some irrelevant information	Presentation very briefly covers some of the questions	
Comprehension	Presenter understands all questions and gives clear, detailed answers	Presenter understands all questions, gives mostly clear answers	Presenter understands one or two questions, gives mostly clear answers	Presenter does not understand/ answer questions	

Follow-up Discussion

Discussion Strategies	Natural, varied use of discussion strategies	Natural, occasional use of discussion strategies	Discussion strategies are used once or twice	No use of discussion strategies	
Interaction	Regularly asks questions. Pronunciation is clear and questions are easy to understand	Occasionally asks questions. Questions are clear and easy to understand	Asks questions once or twice	No attempt to participate in follow-up discussion	

Appendix 2- Discussion Strategies Worksheet (Class A)

Follow-up Questions + Rejoinders	Asking for More Details + Clarifying	Presentation- Model Discussion
<p>What is your favourite album?</p> <p>When do you listen to music?</p> <p>Why do you like K-pop?</p> <p>How long...? How often...?</p> <p>Who...? Where...?</p>	<p>Asking for More Details (For Audience)</p> <p>Can you tell me why/who/what ____?</p> <p>Could you give me an example of ___?</p> <p>I'd like to know more about _____.</p> <p>What do you mean by _____?</p> <p>Did you say _____?</p>	<p>A... I like <i>Blinding Lights</i> by the Wknd because it has a perfect balance of light and dark. The lyrics are quite heavy and depressing, but are also catchy and easy to sing. For example:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Sin City's cold and empty No-one's around to judge me</i></p> <p>The song features one of my favourite genres, synth- pop, and sounds like it was written in the 1980s. It feels nostalgic and fresh at the same time, and has kept me dancing during the lockdown. Thank you.</p>
<p>I see, Okay, Uh-huh, Oh, yeah?</p> <p>Really? Seriously? Oh, wow.</p> <p>That's great! Nice. Oh, cool.</p> <p><i>Oh, I'm sorry. Oh, no!</i></p>	<p>Clarifying (For Presenter)</p> <p>Sorry, I didn't understand that.</p> <p>Did you say/ask _____?</p> <p>You said/asked _____, yes?</p>	<p>B: What do you mean by <u>catchy</u>?</p> <p>A: Catchy means memorable. A catchy song gets stuck in your head. A lot of pop songs are catchy.</p> <p>B: Oh, thank you.</p> <p>C: <u>Can you tell me why</u> you like depressing lyrics?</p> <p>A: <u>Did you ask</u> why I like sad songs?</p> <p>C: Yes</p> <p>A: Hmm, I like sad songs because I think sad songs are often more thoughtful and meaningful.</p> <p>C: I see!</p>

Appendix 3- Discussion Strategies Worksheet (Class B)


Rejoinders + Follow-up Questions	Asking for More Details + Clarifying	Presentation- Model Discussion
<p>What have you done that you are proud of?</p> <p>When have you felt unsuccessful?</p> <p>Why do you think <u>inner peace</u> is important to be successful?</p> <p>How long...? How often...?</p> <p>Who...? Where...?</p>	<p>Asking for More Details (For Audience)</p> <p>Can you tell me why/who/what ____?</p> <p>Could you give me an example of ___?</p> <p>I'd like to know more about _____.</p> <p>What do you mean by _____?</p>	<p>A... I think Oprah Winfrey is a very successful person. Oprah is one of the most successful broadcasters, publishers, and entrepreneurs in the world. Oprah had a difficult childhood, but was very intelligent and determined. She became one of the first African-American news anchors in the US when she was still in her twenties. Her talk show was very popular in the 1990s, and I grew up watching her. I think she is successful because she is extremely generous and passionate about helping other women and girls succeed. She has donated millions of dollars to various charities and opened up a school for girls in South Africa.</p>
<p>I see, Okay, Uh-huh, Oh, yeah?</p> <p>Really? Seriously? Oh, wow.</p> <p>That's great! Nice. Oh, cool.</p> <p>Oh, I'm sorry. Oh, no!</p>	<p>Clarifying (For Presenter)</p> <p>Sorry, I didn't understand that.</p> <p>Did you say/ask _____?</p> <p>You said/asked _____, yes?</p>	<p>She wanted to help girls who grew up like her, "economically disadvantaged, but not poor in mind or spirit". From Oprah, we can learn to be self-reliant, stay true to our ideals, and to each try and make this world a little better by helping others and pushing for change when it is needed.</p> <p>-----</p> <p>B: What do you mean by <u>entrepreneur</u>?</p> <p>A: An Entrepreneur is a person who starts up their own business.</p> <p>B: Oh, thank you.</p> <p>C: I'd like to know more about Oprah's school.</p> <p>A: <u>Did you ask</u> about Oprah's school in South Africa?</p> <p>C: Yes.</p> <p>A: Okay. Oprah's school allows smart girls from poor families to get a top education. Unlike most schools in South Africa, the students can study there for free.</p> <p>C: That's great!</p>

Appendix 4- Presentation Planner Worksheet (Class A)

Presentation: *Soundtrack of my Life*

In the final activity this term, you will give a short presentation on the music you enjoy. After the presentation, the presenter will take questions from the class. For a strong grade, actively participate by asking questions after the presentation.

Try to answer the following key questions during the presentation. Feel free to include additional information.

1. What music did you listen to growing up? How has your music taste changed over time?

2. What genres of music do you enjoy now? How does this music make you feel? Who are some of your favourite artists?
3. Focus on one of the artists from Question 2. In your opinion, what is one of their best songs?
4. What is the song about? Briefly tell the story of the song/mention some of its themes. Why is this song meaningful to you/ why do you like it?

Presentation: *The Key to Success*

In the final activity this term, you will give a short presentation on your definition of success. After the presentation, the presenter will take a few questions from the class. For a strong grade, actively participate by asking questions after the presentation.

Try to answer the following key questions during the presentation. Feel free to include additional information.

1. How do you define success? What key qualities are important to be successful?



2. Do you consider yourself successful? Why? What are your goals or dreams? Will achieving these goals/dreams make you feel more successful? Why?

3. Introduce a person that you consider successful. What has she/he achieved in their life? What can we learn from this person?