Facilitating the Development of Students’ Oral Presentation Skills

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ABSTRACT

Oral presentation or public speaking is a form of communication which is intended to convey certain ideas, messages and information. In order to make effective oral presentations, certain communication skills need to be employed so that the ideas, messages and information that have been created are easily understood by the audience. However, in many classroom situations, it has been observed that most students are not able to deliver effective oral presentations, even though they may have done thorough preparations in written form. It is common to find most students getting the jitters, which get even worse especially if oral presentations are part of their coursework. Even though these students undergo courses that are specially designed to develop the strategies and skills which are considered necessary for effective oral presentations, many of them are still not able to deliver effective speeches. In this paper, some of the problems faced by the students have been elicited and some solutions are suggested in order to assist them to deliver better oral presentations.

Keywords: Oral presentation, Public speaking, Oral presentation skills

Introduction

Oral presentations have become part and parcel of most courses offered in institutions of higher learning. The importance of oral presentation, also termed as public speaking, has been recognized and emphasized widely, and many undergraduate programmes require students to make oral presentations as part of their coursework. Developing oral presentation skills is deemed very important in the present era because students who equip themselves with such skills stand to benefit in a number of ways. Good oral presentation skills will empower students to communicate complex ideas and information in a manner that would be easily understood by the audience. Students will be able to influence the attitudes and behaviour of other people. Furthermore,
mastering good oral presentation skills will also help the students to achieve their career goals (Verderber, Verderber & Sellnow, 2008).

In Universiti Teknologi MARA, the English as a Second Language (ESL) courses that are designed for diploma and degree students also emphasize on developing their oral skills. Students usually find such courses a daunting task, especially when it comes to speaking in class and assessed by the lecturer. The performance of many students just tend to be on the average, with very few of them obtaining slightly above average grades.

One of the English language courses that students of Universiti Teknologi MARA need to enrol on is ‘Presentation Skills’ (Course Code: BEL 492). This is a compulsory course for all degree students and they have to obtain at least a ‘Pass’ score (i.e. Grade C). Students who fail this compulsory paper will not be able to receive their degrees. This course is aimed at developing the strategies and skills necessary for effective oral presentations. The course is structured in such a manner that lecturers provide guidance from the preparatory right up to the final stage of delivery. Emphasis is placed on the importance of verbal and non-verbal communication skills and the use of appropriate visual aids in oral presentations. The students are also taught to anticipate and respond to questions and comments orally during the question and answer session. ‘Presentation Skills’ is a 100% assignment based course with two on-going assessments (Assessment 1 and Assessment 2) and there is no final examination.

The present classroom scenario: Conversation and communication skills

Students of the ‘Presentation Skills’ course have been taught that oral presentation or public speaking is a form of communication which is intended to convey certain ideas, messages and information. As a matter of fact, it is a form of conversation with the audience besides the other ways of communication, such as through written documents and interviews. In oral presentation, the conversation involves a process in which one has to employ certain communication skills in order to create and share clear ideas so that the messages and information are understood by the audience.

In a normal ESL class, students usually do not seem to exhibit much anxiety when expressing their ideas to their fellow students on a one-to-one basis. In fact, the students are actually expressing their ideas to one another and since it is a daily routine, it becomes everyday conversation. On the other hand, when ideas are presented in front of an audience, it becomes public speaking, which actually involves oral presentation or specific communication skills. It was in such situations that students have been found to become tongue-tied and nervous, some even terrified, when they were asked to make
an oral presentation in front of a small audience, even though the audience comprised of their fellow course mates or peers.

Daily conversations and public speaking may comprise of certain similarities, but there are some major differences between both forms of communication. Lucas (2004) has listed three major differences, viz. public speaking is more highly structured; it requires a more formal language and a different method of delivery. Perhaps this can explain why students who usually feel at ease when carrying out their everyday conversation suddenly get the jitters when it comes to oral presentation in front of an audience, even if the members of the audience are familiar to them.

Some problems faced by the BEL 492 students
In order to get an idea of the problems and difficulties faced by students during their first oral presentation (Assessment 1), information was elicited from 35 degree students pursuing the Bachelor Degree in Islamic Banking programme. These students had enrolled for the ‘BEL 492 – Presentation Skills’ course (Semester July 2009 – November 2009). They were required to write down the problems they encountered after the first oral presentation (Assessment 1). Their problems and difficulties have been placed under four different constructs. Among the students’ most common problems and difficulties were:

1. Language / Grammar / Vocabulary
   • Cannot speak well in English
   • Making grammatical errors
   • Wrong sentence structures
   • Wrong pronunciation
   • Lack of vocabulary

2. Contents / Ideas
   • Incorrect points and out of topic
   • My topic may not be interesting
   • Difficult to find suitable topic
   • Not good in giving appropriate examples
   • Tendency to read
   • I feel blurred during presentation
   • Afraid my points are not true

3. Personality traits
   • Nervousness / Feeling uneasy when standing alone in front
   • Cannot remember the points / Cannot memorise
   • Lack of confidence
   • Seldom speak in front of the class / Lack of experience
• I’m a shy person
• My voice is soft
• I talk too fast
• Fear of getting low marks

4. External factors
• Lack of time to present all my points
• Afraid of criticism from friends
• Afraid audience (peers) will laugh at me
• Audience (peers) who do not seem to understand my presentation
• Lack of preparation
• Afraid of what the lecturer and others (peers) will think of me

Based on the problems faced by these undergraduates, oral presentations could therefore become difficult, discouraging and even nerve-racking for many of them. The feedback suggests that most of them may lack the skills that are deemed necessary to deliver effective speeches. It is essential for ESL instructors to have an understanding of the problems faced by the students as it would enable them to place extra emphasis on skills that need to be developed in order to improve the students’ oral presentation skills.

Some self-help guidelines for BEL 492 students

ESL instructors would certainly be daunted with a hefty task if they were to tutor the students on a one-to-one basis in developing their presentation skills. The lecturer usually provides the students with lecture notes, guidance and classroom practice sessions. However, frequent classroom practice sessions are not possible as the sessions depend on the number of students and the availability of time. In this respect, creating a certain degree of self-awareness in the students is vital in assisting them to develop their skills. Apart from the lecture notes, guidance and classroom practice sessions conducted by the lecturer, students would be better prepared for an assessment if they are encouraged to put in some extra effort on their own before making an oral presentation. In fact, the students should be strongly encouraged to take charge of their learning process, as this will go a long way in helping them to improve their presentation skills in future.

The self-help guidelines given below could be of some assistance to them in preparing for an oral presentation. For the beginning, these guidelines would be able to bring about the intended improvement if the students were to implement them with enthusiasm as part of their learning culture. However, it should be borne in mind that these are not the only guidelines. The list is inexhaustible and as the students progress, more guidelines can be added to the list.
1. **Read widely and surf the internet.**

Before getting started or deciding on a topic for the presentation, it is vital to do a little research, as this will greatly improve a student’s speech. Students must read widely as it will help them to get a variety of ideas. The information can be gathered from a variety of sources such as books, journals, magazines, databases, Web sites, etc. Students should fully utilise the university library which is packed with full of research and reference tools (Kushner & Yeung, 2007; Brantley & Miller, 2002). Surfing the internet gives access to a multitude of information, complete with pictures and graphics which the students can select and use to enhance their oral presentations.

2. **Watch some samples of video clips.**

Students should make an effort to watch video clips of various samples of oral presentation. They should not merely rely on the prescribed textbooks for information and samples of video clips. They should explore other reference materials as well. There are a lot of video clips on oral presentations and public speaking in the internet. Lecturers can aid students by showing them pre-recorded videos of public speaking contests. Other than that, students can also watch oral presentations and public speaking video clips of toastmasters in the internet.

3. **Conduct brain-storming sessions.**

Brain-storming sessions are very helpful to decide on suitable topics, set precise objectives, listing out main ideas, supporting details, relevant examples and appropriate conclusions. The brainstorming sessions can be carried out in small groups, between three to five students per group. During brain-storming, students can also tell each other what is going on in their minds. Indirectly, this will give them an idea of what would be going on in the minds of the audience during the presentation (Jay & Jay, 2000).

4. **Write down some main ideas.**

After doing some initial research and deciding on the topic for oral presentation, students should then seek more information on the topic they have decided. During the process, they should write down some main ideas first and then build a presentation around the selected points. This is essential as it will help the students to set a clear and precise general purpose, specific purpose and central idea of the presentation. Moreover, it will also help the students to reinforce the central idea and conclude their oral presentation effectively. Students should gather all the required information before proceeding to write out the contents of the presentation. Each main point must
be clear and fully supported with details and relevant examples. Development strategies should be used and the organization of ideas must be clear.

5. **Develop a catchy introduction.**

Developing a catchy introduction is important as it grabs the attention of the audience and makes them eager to listen to the presentation. The specific purpose must be stated clearly and central idea must be reinforced. The introduction reveals the topic therefore, the student must try to connect to the audience by establishing rapport and gaining their attention. Once their attention is captured, the audience will be motivated to listen further to the student’s presentation (Wilder, 2008; Campbell, 2002).

6. **Write short notes using key words only.**

Students tend to write notes and refer to them during the presentation session. However, it is important to bear in mind that the notes should be as brief as possible and limited to key words only. Lecturers must caution the students against writing out the whole manuscript. Such action should be totally avoided because there will be a strong urge and tendency for the students to finally end up reading a paper to the audience instead of speaking using the key words (Jay & Jay, 2000). Students should practise to speak using the key words as much as possible before their presentation.

7. **Have mock presentations with minimum focus on notes.**

Mock presentations or rehearsals are very useful in the sense that they allow the students to practise what they are going to deliver during the oral presentation. During the rehearsals, students should give minimum focus to their notes and maximum attention to the audience. The students (peers) from the brainstorming session can act as the audience and give feedback to the presenter(s). Rehearsals are vital for a good presentation later on because during rehearsals, flaws in the oral presentation can be identified. Rehearsals allow students to go over the use of proper grammar, precise vocabulary and appropriate sentence structures that accompany the visual aids. Students can also develop good techniques of delivery, such as pauses for special moments, extra loudness and softness of voice and tone, planned hand movements at key times and eye contact (Bailey, 2008; Kushner & Yeung, 2007; McRae & Brooks, 2005).

8. **Use correct grammar, vocabulary and sentence structures.**

It is important to pay particular attention to the use of correct grammar, choice of appropriate vocabulary and good sentence structures. A good topic and an interesting delivery can still confuse the audience or make an oral presentation
difficult to be understood merely through incorrect grammar, poor choice of words and bad phrasing of sentences (Jay & Jay, 2000; Kushner & Yeung, 2007).

10. Record and review your practice sessions.

Apart from having rehearsals and getting feedback from peers, students should also get their friends to record their practice sessions. They can then view the recordings later and identify their own strengths and weaknesses. By doing so, the students are not only getting help in the form of constructive comments and feedback from their peers, they are also able to see for themselves their own performances. This practice can create self awareness in the students and act as a catalyst to further improve their oral presentation skills.

Conclusion

Students can be made to develop and improve their oral presentation skills if they are guided appropriately and also strongly encouraged to be autonomous in their learning process. Their oral presentation skills can be nurtured and developed to benefit them. ESL practitioners can assist by creating self-awareness in the students that will make them take charge of their learning process and instil a zest for improving their oral presentation skills. Students should be made aware of the fact that once the barriers that hold them back are removed, speaking in front of an audience would no longer become a daunting task. Perhaps the words of Carnegie (2006), who was a pioneer in teaching people on how to overcome the fear of speaking in front of an audience, could serve as a motivation for students to conquer their basic fear in oral presentation:

*Is there the faintest shadow of a reason why you should not be able to think as well in a perpendicular position before an audience as you can sitting down? Is there any reason why should you pay host to butterflies in your stomach and become a victim of the “trembles” when you get up and address an audience? Surely, you realize that this condition can be remedied, that training and practice will wear away your audience fright and give you self-confidence."

Dale Carnegie

Changes would have to come from within the students themselves. ESL practitioners need to create a certain degree of self-awareness and self-nurturing in the students so that they are able to take charge of their learning process. When the students exhibit enthusiasm in developing their oral skills, they would then be able to deliver effective oral presentations.
References


