

## TACKLING ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS' ENIGMA THROUGH PRESENTATIONS AT HIGHER EDUCATION

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### ABSTRACT

*This investigative study discusses how to tackle the oral communication skills' problem of students, who study English as a second language at postgraduate level, through presentations at the public sector institutions. Oral presentation skills are significant for post graduate students as they not only help them in academic but also in their professional life after formal education. The study was conducted on 40 M.A English students and students' reflections, after six weeks investigation and participatory observation, were recorded in the form of checklist used as tool. The results show that presentation focused teaching is comparatively better for the enhancement of oral skills of the students at post graduate level as the students manifest better performance in the understanding of the subject matter by considering all the aspects of communication and overcome their communication barrier by mustering up self-efficacy in them and interacting more with their peers and instructor because of presentations. In the light of the findings, the study suggests that teaching with a special focus on quality models, like presentations in the present case, should be encouraged and due weight age may be given to this aspect for the enhancement of oral communication skills in English language of the students. It further recommends that presentation focused teaching through technology at post graduate level in our educational environment is the need of time because of the growing importance of English language in the professional set ups and the global village.*

**Keywords:** Oral communication, presentations, communication skills, peer, instructor

### INTRODUCTION

A presentation involves motivating listeners to accept a new idea, alter an existing opinion, or act on a given premise (Rafe, 1990). The core aspect of employability is considered to be oral communication these days. The benchmark statements of all higher education courses emphasize that the university students must be able to impart information orally. Clarity and effectiveness of oral communication and well-developed interpersonal skills, in a group or one-to-one setting, are the key features that make students more successful professionals and all round communicators. Despite the growing demands from the employers to have effective communicators in English as professionals in their organizations, the prevalent situation is not so encouraging. Here neither the students are to be held responsible nor the curricula, rather the very methodologies or pedagogical strategies used by such teachers who do not make use of quality teaching models and ultimately become responsible for this sad state of affairs. It is no doubt encouraging to know that the Higher Education Commission is strenuously working on getting this message across that the teaching lens has to be refocused. It's not the teacher who is in center; it is the learner.

However, the current instructional scenario in our higher educational institutes is still replete with lots of instances of traditional way of teaching with passive role of students who are not

shown any quality models following which they can improve upon their skills such as presentation skills, problem solving skills, effective leadership qualities, and other models of oral proficiency skills. This is making teaching of English language to higher classes a challenging job for the teachers because of the poor communication skills of students in English language. Our educational set up provides fewer opportunities to graduates to interact in English language with teachers or peers due to syllabus completion compulsion, over crowded class and examination system. This problem is not unique to particular subject graduates immediately entering the work force; rather a majority of graduates irrespective of their subject areas such as of M.A English or MBA (business graduates) reportedly lack strong communication skills (Hanson, 1987; Knight, 1999). Despite this weakness many students owe their success to their ability to give good presentations and to participate confidently in discussion.

In Pakistan, the moment we look at the public sector institutions our experience reflects that their graduates of almost all the subject areas including M.A English programmes do not have sound oral communication skills. It is imperative to enhance communication skills of graduates so that they may be in a position to use English in their academic and social life appropriately. Considering the quality improvement that presentation skills may bring in the performance of students the present study offers opportunities to students by:

- i. Supporting learners in developing oral communication practices by delivering presentations through technology
- ii. Encouraging self-efficacy, confidence to gain theoretical and professional perspectives with regard to oral proficiency in English

## DESIGN OF THE STUDY

It is an investigative/participatory study conducted on 40 M.A English students (male and female).

## METHODOLOGY

A six-week teaching was conducted with a focus on students' presentations. Students' reflections and participatory observation were used as tools for the study. Based on experiential learning qualitative and quantitative data analysis was done to determine how effective the presentation focused teaching could be for enhancing oral skills in communication, especially when assisted with technology. The students were given various aspects of the plays in their Drama Module of the course. They were asked to gather information regarding the given tasks and then share their work with their fellows in form of formal presentations. Besides, the students were briefed about the features of effective presentations which mainly required accomplishing of three things:

- a. to learn the concepts well enough to teach them,
- b. to adjust their presentation style to fit an audience with less experience and knowledge,
- c. to divide the topic into sub goals.

During the span of six weeks each student had to present 3 times whereas the researcher observed the presentations in the light of an 8-point checklist prepared to measure the effectiveness of the presentation and the students' confidence. After six weeks, all the students were asked to write their reflections about their experience as presenters.

**Table 1. Participatory Observation**

<i>Sr. No</i>	<i>Observations</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	Presenter is really clear about his/her audience.	65 %
2	Students get opportunity to interact with peers during presentations.	70 %
3	Students get opportunity to interact with instructor/teacher during presentations.	53 %
4	Presentations enhance theoretical knowledge of the students related with subject matter.	67%
5	Self-efficacy (confidence) level of students gradually increases.	78%
6	Presentations enhance language skills particularly listening and speaking of students.	72%
7	Presentation sessions activate the students' interest in the class.	81%
8	Presentations generate sense of competition in the classroom.	67%

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

With the advent of Communicative Language Teaching (Savignon, 1983; 2002) in EFL contexts, which emphasizes one's ability to use English for communicative purposes in authentic contexts, there has been tremendous pressure on teachers to improve the oral English proficiency of the students in order to help them become 'effective, self-confident, and satisfied professional' (Medgyes; 1999, p. 179). Today is the era of technology and students of level are well acquainted with the names of technical gadgets. As (Atkinson, 2004b) says that classroom technology continued to improve, the 1980s saw the introduction of overhead transparencies and videotapes, while the 1990s gave us first videodiscs and then CD-ROMs, the World Wide Web, and eventually digital projectors with the mixed blessings of Microsoft PowerPoint. And if presentations are based on multimedia it can improve students' confidence as well as their communications skills.

Several dozen studies indicate that computer-based multimedia can improve learning and retention of material presented during a class session or individual study period, as compared to "traditional" lectures or study materials that do not use multimedia (see Bagui, 1998; Fletcher, 2003; Kozma, 2001; Mayer, 2001). According to Najjar (1996), this improvement can be attributed mainly to *dual coding* of the information presented in two different modalities—visual plus auditory, for example (Clark & Paivio, 1991; Paivio, 1986)—leading to increased comprehension of the material during the class session, and improved retention of the material at later testing times (Mayer & Moreno, 1998). There is general agreement that multimedia presentations are most effective when the different types of media support one another rather than when superfluous sounds or images are presented for entertainment value which may induce disorientation and *cognitive overload* that could interfere with learning rather than enhance learning (Mayer, Heiser, & Lonn, 2001).

'Critical Period Hypothesis' which proposes that 'there is a limited period during which language acquisition can occur' (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 198) is being refuted as more and more effective strategies are being discovered for learning a foreign language at any age.

Communication skills are critical to effective job performance, career advancement, and organizational success (Cohen, 1999; Curtis et al., 1989; Flatley, 1990; Messmer, 1999; Roebuck et al., 1995; Warner, 1995). Oral communication is considered an important competency in hiring decisions (Maes et al., 1997).

Researches have proved that the oral presentation encourages students to understand course material well enough to communicate it to others. In general, this category of assignment gives students an opportunity to speak to an audience from a position of expertise. This strategy leads the students to a certain level of self-efficacy, which is one's estimate of one's ability to perform a specific task (Gist and Mitchell, 1992). Bandura defines self-efficacy as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (1997: 3). Self-efficacy plays an integral role in scholastic achievement, because people's beliefs in their efficacy influence the courses of action they choose to pursue as well as how much effort they will expend in given situations (Bandura, 1997; Lent et al., 1987; Stumpf et al., 1987). In response to employer needs, many institutes have begun to address the quality and quantity of written and oral communication skill development in their curricula (Eckert and Allen, 1986; Roebuck et al., 1995; Smeltzer and Leonard, 1986).

Among oral communication skills, presentation skills, in particular, pose a challenge for English language students because of low feelings of competence and high levels of apprehension. Recognizing the importance of effective presentation skills and students' lack of confidence, the class presentation assignments can be used as a vehicle to improve students' presentation confidence levels. Students learn oral presentation by trial and error rather than through teaching of an explicit rhetorical model. The consciousness of the presence of the audience for the presenter is an encouraging aspect while preparing or giving presentation. This consciousness prepares the presenter to fully understand the subject matter, define goals, and analyze the aims of the presentation, etc. because audience plays a vital role during the presentation, as there is instant feedback from them. Indeed, the students report a need to become more proficient in communication skills and affirm the importance of self-confidence as a critical component of being an effective communicator. In one study, graduate students ranked self-confidence as the most crucial skill for effective communication (Reinsch and Shelby, 1996). Rubin et al. (1997) in his research found that presentation apprehension decreased and competence increased for students enrolled in a basic communication class, due to practice of those skills over the course of the semester.

Presentations are a means to involve the students in the collaborative teaching/learning process because at the higher education students need to talk to get the ideas clear and during the process of presentation, especially at the time of question/answer session, the audience gets understanding of the subject matter as (Davis, 1993) says that students learn best when they are actively involved in the process. Effective interactivity facilitates the promotion of more active learning environments, the building of learning communities, the provision of greater feedback for lecturers, and it also contributes towards student motivation (Anderson, 2002; Markett et al., 2006; Muirhead & Juwah, 2003; Prammanee, 2003).

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

As the study aimed at investigating the role of presentations in improving the oral communication proficiency of the students studying at masters level, the students of M.A English were assigned 3 presentations in the 'Drama' module to enhance their understanding of the text on one hand and to make them overcome their lack of confidence and language barrier on the other. At the end of six weeks the students reflected on their experience as presenters, and unanimously favoured this way of teaching with their active role in it.

The subjects regarded presentation skills as the most important for their academic and professional success. Every student made significant progress and seemed to gain confidence from presenting. This created an opportunity for students with low self-efficacy who felt incompetent or anxious during the first session to become assured of their capabilities through repeated successes, managing setbacks and failures by experiencing improvement over time. Despite having time management and language problem they found improvement in themselves, as one of the students reflected:

Though I was having shortage of vocabulary, still I managed to give the presentation. I feel more confident now. And if we give more presentations like these, we can become much, much better in our speaking skill.

Another student felt:

Initially I did not like the idea of making myself active in the class. I always had a laid back attitude towards my studies and relied heavily on cramming the stuff. But the moment our teacher made it compulsory for us to participate in the class presentations, I had to do it unwillingly. However, after presenting three times in the class I feel that I have better comprehension of the text in syllabus and find myself more vocal in the class when engaged in such process with the help of technology.

It becomes rather more important for the post Graduate Programmes like one run at the University of Education, Lower Mall Campus Lahore, which has included both English language and literature in the course of studies. Since the requirement of literature oriented subject may be to teach with a focus on teacher centered teaching, but it does not guarantee the enhancement of communication skills of the students as in the teacher dominated teaching students are the listeners whereas teacher is supposed to give presentation on the subject matter. Hence it becomes imperative to have such a way of teaching which not only enhances students' comprehension of the literature of English but makes them impart and share their comprehension to people at large in a professional set up.

During the observation of the students' presentations, the researcher found that the respondents reflected good understanding of the subject matter as they appeared aware of the importance of goals, benefits, explanation, design, audience and team work, etc, while giving presentations. With composed body language they involved the audience to maximum extent by interacting with them without getting conscious of their limited language repertoire. The results of the second tool, observation, also manifest that the respondents favour teaching with a focus on presentations at higher education as they not only enhance the subject knowledge of the students but also enable them to communicate the same subject matter to the audience in an appropriate way by improving their oral communication skills. They feel presentations improve their language skills, especially listening and speaking skills, inter personal skills and make them interactive with teachers and peers alike. The results also show that presentations are conducive for the proper understanding of subject matter because while preparing presentations students keep all the important aspects of learning into consideration.

As the present study is investigative in design, it hints at other quality models of teaching, which might be practiced in order to prepare our students for effective communication at their future work places. Although the researcher faced some resistance initially by the students, shortage of time and lack of some administrative support regarding presentation paraphernalia i.e. availability of internet, computers, over head projectors, multimedia etc, still there was a lot to get encouragement from. Hence, the current study is just a little step

forward on the way to bring about quality change in education and to open new research vistas in educational institutes, especially the public sector institutes which need to keep abreast with the pace of quality education being imparted in the private sector of our educational set up.

## IMPLICATIONS

In light of the findings, the study draws the following implications:

1. Higher education institutes/institutions should include presentations as a mandatory portion in the scheme of studies.
2. There must be due weight age of presentations in the prescribed syllabi at higher education.
3. Considering the modern educational challenges we must focus on English language/oral communication.
4. Students of English language should be given ample opportunities in the class to chow their assimilation of language through presentations.
5. Teaching at higher education level should be held in technologically equipped classrooms.
6. Students should be given a chance at higher education levels to partake equally the process of teaching and learning.
7. Presentations stimulate students' cognitive and affective domains resulting in their greater motivation for education, so such models of teaching must be brought more in practice.
8. Investigation in exploring the presentation skills of higher education students should be encouraged.

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