EVALUATING PRESENTATION SKILLS

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Abstract

Good presentation skills are a must in today's world – even, or especially, for engineering students. The paper presents a study of Cluj Polytechnic students' behavior upon a presentation course attendance. Motivation, reasons, cultural issues and some of their most common mistakes are considered in relation to the course, highlighting aspects connected to the students' speaking skills.

Introduction

It is well-known that more and more people want to be effective presenters and it is also evident that more engineering students give spoken presentations either during seminars or design works and projects. Some of the presentations are part of the course work related to that specific subject, some of the presentations are simply spontaneous ways of taking turn during seminars, debates, final year report defending etc. The audience usually consists of their fellow students or teaching staff. This is that reason for which courses on how to deliver a spoken presentation are part of the curricula or syllabi in our institution too. This paper tries to point out the most important and persistent mistakes that are evident during a "live" presentation with Romanian students in engineering topics.

Who were the students included in the research?

For the purpose of this study I have focused on a group of 25 students in Industrial Design and 23 in Civil Engineering from the Technical University of Cluj-Napoca. The students have been under scrutiny for 10 weeks out of 14 in a semester. Both groups had the same number of classes (a two - hour course and a two-hour seminar). They were of the same age and background, in the same year of study (the second out of five academic years) and the number of boys exceeded the number of girls by three in each group (mere coincidence!). Each group had the following syllabus. This syllabus is translated from Romanian into English.

Subject matter in relation to specialization

Modern engineering requires not only high level specialism knowledge, but also a very attractive and competent presentation of the environment and creativity of the industrial robots in the business world. The course and seminar in communication skills emphasizes upon the communication skills which enable the student be a good professional when he wants his ideas and solutions be made known.

Objectives

The acquisition of concepts and methods required in modern communication skills be clear, brief, accurate in oral, written and computer based presentation.

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Syllabus

Nr.	Chapter	Study hours
1.	**Study skills for higher education**	**10**
	Problem solving	1
	Group and pair work	1
	Brainstorming	1
	Time schedules	1
	Abstract writing	1
	Technical reports	2.5
	Project writing	2.5
2.	**Presentation skills**	**8.0**
	Introduction	2
	Efficient oral presentations	4
	Evaluating a presentation	2
3.	**Multimedia and presentations**	**5**
3.1	Classical presentations	1
3.2	Transparent foils and their constraints	2
3.3	Modern multimedia	2
4.	**Presentation strategies with multimedia support**	**5**
4.1	Computer based presentations	2
4.2	Evaluating the impact of presentation	1

Relation with other subject matters

Communication skills combine engineering knowledge with linguistics, rhetorics, body language and graphical techniques.

Teaching methods

Course-notes;

-hand - outs for seminars;

-transparencies, computers, multimedia projector;

-1-2 case studies

-free discussions and questionnaire.

Seminar:

-individual and group exercises;

-use of specialized software;

-video cassettes;

Methods of evaluation

Course and seminar:

-oral presentations

Individual work

- Individual assignments

Observation: individual work is compulsory.

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As one can see from the above, most of the course work was focused upon presentation and visual aids. In the final oral presentation, the researcher has focused upon the following checklist items :

1. Did the student look at the audience?
2. Did the student communicate with enthusiasm for the subject?
3. Did the student make good visual?
4. Did the students make good use of the visuals?
5. Did the student finish on time without rushing?
6. Did the student answer questions well?

Results of the Study and Comments on Intercultural Issues

1. The sessions of presentations were not very intimate as all the students in the group had to be present; they were instructed on how to behave, when and how to interfere or to comment and they were advised to be helpful with their fellows.
   We noticed that all the presenters stood up and that at the beginning they have tried to assess the availability of their peers by means of eye contact, but as time went on most of the presenters avoided (more and more and in subtler ways) to look at their colleagues. After the presentations, discussions were held. and We found out that the reasons of not keeping too much eye contact was either because the audience scared the presenter or because they had been advised by other family members to stick to their job and not to take care of the audience. The first attitude mentioned can be overcome by careful psychological training during other meetings. The second attitude is to be fought with from the perspective of the culture behind it, as most of us are taught that school is competition, finding a job is also competition and that the most important thing to be done is to complete one's job irrespective of the ways of presenting it to your public. In very few cases, the students confessed that they were afraid of their peers because they had not prepared the content well enough. As for the introductory sentences, all the students used them and not by merely copying the phrases learnt during the course, but also by making them more personal.
2. In so far enthusiasm is concerned, it lacked in the majority of the presenters. This surprised the teacher who had allowed the learners to select the topic of their presentation from a list of topics related to their specialism. Later on, we found out that they had been advised of not being very enthusiastic, but rather serious, polite, introvert. This attitude is also part of our cultural heritage, that supports the notion of politeness as associated to self-containment and lack of active involvement.
3. and 4. All my students had prepared various types of visuals, from transparent foils to computer-based presentations (Power Point), the only means missing entirely in both groups being the flipchart. None of the students used it, because they felt no need for supplementary explanation of their topic. Some of the most common mistakes in this respect were:

a) Most of the students presented all the slides or photographs or foils in spite of the fact that it became obvious they had not enough time. They considered that if they skipped one of their visuals, their presentation was ruined.

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b) As a consequence, they spoke extremely quickly, and that impaired upon their final impression a lot. Another consequence lied in the loudness with which they spoke, that made some of the attendants uncomfortable.
c) Humour lacked (with the exception of four cases) and that can be explained by the rush and by the fright that they could be put off by the audience if they made a joke to which the public would not respond.
d) Hands were shaking, but no major mistakes on visual handling were present.
e) Rushing did not prevent the students to reveal progressively the subheadings or switch off the OHP, when not necessary.
f) The most evident problem lied in lacking verbal expression of the slide content. Slides were not introduced in the flow of the presentation, no special pointing to the slide content existed and the motivation was that the visual "spoke for itself". This is also part of our cultural background as we teach our students that content is more important than form.
g) Most of my students did not read the sentences on the visuals, but they kept some of them only for a second and the audience was also uncomfortable with this. That is mere lack of practise.

5. Timing and pacing represented the most difficult aspects. Students either continuously looked at their watches, or spoke too quickly or used "I'm sorry, I just have two more words to say:…" . This proved that no special technique should be applied, only careful preparation, practise and keeping on the time.
6. Responding to questions was not relaxed at all. Most of the students have confessed they had not expected questions and they had not been prepared. They showed weakness and a lot of self-criticism.

Conclusions

Most of the students admitted they had previously known the importance of good presentation skills or that they were worth developing, but very few looked for opportunities as they had some general feeling of apprehension, also named "nerves". There are techniques for controlling nerves, but the only truly effective way of overcoming their effects is good preparation. Each good presentation is a well-prepared presentation.

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