# *WHAT TO TEACH LEARNERS TO MAKE THEM SPEAK LIKE PROS – TIPS ON SUCCESSFUL ORAL PRESENTATIONS*

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*Abstract: Within the international context of professions in today's multicultural world, an oral presentation becomes a very complex act of communication whose success does not depend only on the language used but also on the social interaction that is established with the audience. Thus, the presenters' verbal and nonverbal behaviours occuring in social interaction should be backed by a certain degree of intercultural awareness in order to communicate an idea, a piece of information or research effectively to other people who are not like them in terms of language, education or social and professional background.*

*Stemming from the experience of teaching 'oral presentations' to engineering students as part of the course on English for Professional Communication for several years, the paper will consider some imporant aspects involved in the expected outcome: the learners' prospective ability to deliver a successful oral presentation. After setting the educational context and the need for oral presentation skills, the paper will look at the psychological insights, required knowledge of language and structure as well as at the cultural awareness that should be approached in the classroom in order to tackle the elaborateness of an oral presentation.*

*Keywords: communication, oral presentations, psychological, social and intercultural approach*

## 1. Preliminary remarks

The current paper is the result of the author's experience of several years of teaching oral presentation skills to engineering students in the "Politehnica" University of Bucharet. The paper discusses some essential elements and tips that have been included in the preparation, organization and delivery of a successful oral presentation in English, taking into consideration the fact that, according to the speech act theory, utterances have three components: the actual utterance (the locution), the act performed by the utterance (the



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illocution) and the effect the act has on the hearer (the perlocution). Thus, if we wish to guide our learners toward the ability to speak like professional presenters, due consideration must be given to all these three elements.

In the "Politehnica" University of Bucharest, English is usually taught for one year, in the first year of study. The module is called English for Professional Communication, and one unit focuses on oral presentations. The immediate rationale for approaching oral presentations in the foreign language is justified by obvious learning needs. First of all, at some stage in their studies, not to mention their prospective professional activity, the engineering students will be expected to give a formal presentation. This could be reporting on progress in their research, merely responding to a set task in a specialized subject or presenting their graduation thesis at the end of the four years of undergraduate studies in Science and Technology. As some authors[1] underline, oral presentation skills are some of the best "career enhancers" that professionals can add to their marketable qualities. Secondly, there is a clear learning need related to the practice of English as a foreign language. As the field literature[2] points out, the practice of oral presentations in the classroom offers non-native speakers the necessary confidence to use the foreign language proficiently. This is one of the prerequisites of training students to speak like professional presenters.

Oral presentations are acts of communication totally dependent on the speaker's ability to communicate an idea effectively to an audience. Yet, most of our students do not do very well in spite of their relatively high proficiency in English, and their overall performance fails to make an impact on the audience. Therefore, if the learners' proficiency in the foreign language is not the cause of the insufficient success, then it means that there are other factors at work which need due consideration. Communication is a complex entity which goes beyond the mere verbal. It covers both the nonverbal aspect, such as gestures, actions, facial expressions, body language or physical appearance, and the 'cultural' rules or conventions inherent to a particular context of communication. On the one hand, we are all aware that the majority of what we communicate to people is done without words at all. In a face-to-face encounter, 93 percent of the impact of the message is nonverbal while only 7 percent is verbal.[3] On the other hand, the increased academic and professional mobility across the

[1] Cohen, J. & Jensen, D. (2000). "Oral Presentations Skills". Search Masters International. www.searchmastersinternational.com
[2] Boyle, R. Modelling Oral Presentations. ELT Journal, Volume 50/2, 1996, 115-126
[3] Knapp, M.L.&Hall, J.A. (2002) Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction. Wadsworth Thomson Learning, p.5



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intercultural interaction network that today's world has become requires the understanding of the intrinsic cultural meaning of words which "is by no means guaranteed because conversants share the same dictionary."[4] Different communities are likely to react differently to the same presentation, for example, a scientific forum or an assembly of engineering professionals. Each one will have specific expectations and reactions according to the linguistic, academic, scientific or business 'culture' they are familiar with. This will govern the different conventions depending on to whom, where, when and why the presentation is delivered. Given that communication is essentially an act of social interaction, all these questions are vital to be taken into consideration during the preparation of an oral presentation.

While the classroom teaching offers a kind of training in presenting with specific guidelines, it should not lose sight of the fact that the students will develop their own personal style. That is the reason why teaching oral presentations also needs to address the psychology and personality of the learner. Starting from the assumption that anyone, whether naturally extrovert or introvert, whether endowed with 'the gift of the gab' or not, can give a good presentation with adequate preparation and practice, teaching oral presentations must develop the students' awareness of appropriate verbal and nonverbal behaviour, psychology of communication and social interaction strategies. All these aspects must go across the preparation, planning, structure and language of the oral delivery touching upon visual aids and their use with a view to creating interest and establishing the desired relationship with the audience.

## 2. **What to teach learners to help them speak like pros**

In this part of the paper we are going to focus on some examples of the psychological, social and cultural tips that have been added to enrich the traditional teaching of oral presentations in an engineering context. Successful communication requires more than the students' ability to use a range of formulaic expressions since it is context dependent and embedded in interacting with a particular discourse community.[5] Thus, apart from language, a speaker should be able to communicate effectively in other ways, too. Such skills relate to a degree of mastery over nonverbal communication, social and psychological interaction with the audience (e.g. understanding and adapting to the audience) as well as over cultural norms

[4] Barnlund, D. (1994). Communication in a Global Village. In Samovar&Porter (eds.1994), 26-35.
[5] Bizzell, P., 1989. Review of the book "The Social Construction of Written Communication". College Composition and Communication 40, pp. 483–486.



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regulating interaction, e.g. politeness. At tertiary level, the students are at an intermediate or upper-intermediate level of linguistic proficiency, so teaching simple speaking skills is much less relevant than teaching communication skills. For this the students need to be initiated into a more profound approach to communication which will involve psychological and cultural awareness.

Mention should also be made of the fact that the students have been actively involved in all the activities provided for this purpose. Learning, memory and reasoning are enhanced when students have the opportunity to perceive and interact with practical examples which play an important role in fostering understanding and recall of what is being taught or learned. Teaching oral presentations is not meant to be didactic, i.e. transmit knowledge from teacher to learners, but evocative and heuristic. Evocative teaching will assist students in discovering the personal meaning of the topic, while heuristic teaching is intended to engage the students in a process of inquiry and discovery in order to help them develop appropriate verbal and nonverbal behaviours when they themselves take on the role of presenters.

In the preparation stage, besides the 7 necessary steps[6] of considering the audience, objective, structure, visual aids, language, practice and location of the oral presentation, we have included an awareness-raising activity in which the status of the presenter is approached. Brainstorming of the students' previous experience of attending an oral presentation and video illustrations on dress code and body posture are used to highlight the role and the position of the presenter himself within the presentation. The activity also looks at the notions of 'space' and 'movement' in terms of where and how presenters should stand and move to be seen and to make their visual aids easily visible to the audience at all times. In order to give practice, students are invited to demonstrate different instances, and the strong and weak points of each situation are discussed with the whole class. Sometimes, lists of do's and don't do's are compiled by groups of learners and compared. Studies on the psychology of learning have shown that, when students generate their own answers to a problem, learning is enhanced more than when the teacher shows them how to solve that particular problem.

Another example is associated with the approach to the introduction to the oral presentation. The component elements, e.g. greet the audience, introduce oneself, give the title and structure of the talk, state the length of the talk and advise on the policy of questions, have been expanded to include insights into each step. Such additions are justified by the goal of

[6] Sweeney, S. (1997). English for Business Communication, Cambridge University Press, Module 3, p.45



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achieving a prospective enhancement of the students' awareness of the sociolinguistic and cultural norms that govern communication in English. For example, simulation games and role plays followed by discussion are used to make the learners aware that greeting the audience is a cultural 'must' in English because it is a distinctive mark of observing 'linguistic politeness.' Based on the term "face" [7] which is associated with the individual's 'positive face needs', i.e. a positive self image that is appreciated by others, and which includes speech acts such as greetings and compliments, students are invited to reflect on how they themselves feel when greeted in different ways during the simulation or role play activities. Such activities are intended to help students construct a conceptual framework that will allow them to integrate and organize new knowledge and experiences into a coherent mental structure.

An overall concern when dealing with oral presentations is to transmit the truism that presentations are not made for presenters, they are made for the audiences because oral presentations are acts of communication that presuppose social interaction skills. Identifying the audience and speaking 'for' them, not just 'to' or 'at' them, is essential for effective oral communication. Making the students sensitive to the fact that, in every act of communication, human beings need to connect, teaching oral presentation skills should focus on giving students some practice in constructing the desired rapport with the audience; besides using the logic and factual information of the content to make an intellectual connection, students as prospective oral presenters should also consider what it is that they want the audience to feel. A few strategies have been included in an activity called "means of arousing the audience's interest", and these offer examples of evoking the audience's curiosity, challenging their thinking, using stories, personal experiences and analogies. Special attention should be given to the speaker's energy and enthusiasm which can command the audience's attention and get them to feel the speakers' passion and belief in what they are saying. One of the key tips for success in oral presentations is to make the students realize the obvious fact that it is not only what they say that matters, but also how they say it.

Another psychological insight into delivering a professional presentation is provided with reference to ending the presentation. Last minute impressions are as important as first minute impressions, and keeping the audience's attention alive from the beginning to the end is a necessary means of achieving the desired impact. "At the end, don't just let the talk die;

[7] www.linguistik-online.de/20_04/rash.html. F. Rash - Linguistic Politeness and Greeting Rituals in German-speaking Switzerland



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your message will die with it. Close in some logical way, summarizing your key points or putting your message into some group context."[8]

As for cultural cues, students should be aware that nonverbal behaviour supports and endorses verbal communication. Nonverbal communication includes eye contact with glances and blinks, gestures, facial expressions, postures and so on. It contributes to the clarity of speech and it can add interest to what is being said. Sensitivity to body language and nonverbal cues is part of the cultural awareness that a professional presenter should display. In class we provided activities for students in which they discussed pictures of people and their body language, watched short videos of oral presentations and solved quizzes on the cultural connotation of body language in English-speaking cultures.

**Conclusions**

Teaching oral presentations complies with the widely recognized understanding that language plays a powerful role in human society. Communication is not only a mere exchange of words between parties, it is "a sociological encounter", and through the exchange of meanings, social reality is "created, maintained and modified" (Halliday, 1978:169). Learning how to deliver an oral presentation from psychological, social and cultural perspectives is a process of intellectual maturation and personal transformation. On the one hand, students are guided to develop a capacity for self-direction, self-monitoring and generation of ideas; on the other hand, they are expected to operate transformations in their self-perception and thinking, and this will have an emotional bearing on them as individuals. By embedding psychological and cultural cues in teaching and learning how to deliver an oral presentation, we tried to give the students more confidence in using the language as well as some expertise in trialling with diverse communication strategies in order to participate in a complete interaction and achieve an actual communicative goal.

To conclude, we can say that approaching oral presentations in the classroom is one of the ways in which oral communication can be taught to EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. Learning to speak and more importantly, how to speak responds to real-life learning demands as students will be equipped with a set of skills they can use to express opinions, make arguments, offer explanations, transmit factual information and interact with other people in their future professional or personal lives.

[8] Cohen, J. & Jensen, D. (2000). "Oral Presentations Skills". Search Masters International. www.searchmastersinternational.com



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Last but not least, we would like to remark on the fact that the approach to teaching oral communication discussed in this paper is felt to have much potential, but quantitative and qualitative research is needed to demonstrate that it ensures the desired success in the field of EFL instruction. At present, the study is a brief account of a classroom experience but it may be a promising start for future empirical research.

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