

## Teaching Students How to Master Spoken Presentation Skills

Sladana Živković

College of Applied Technical Sciences & Faculty of Civil  
Engineering and Architecture, University of Niš, Serbia

Doi:10.5901/jesr.2014.v4n4p127

### Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to present the specifics of designing effective spoken presentations for professional purposes. In today's highly competitive world speaking effectively is extremely crucial for success in most positions in a working environment. Once students acquire fluency in communication skills, they can practice and develop spoken presentation skills. Teaching students to design effective spoken presentations implies training them insightful and well-trained thinking strategies that can produce clarity in communication. The success largely depends on judging all the specifics of the situation and responding to those properly, and the impression one gives as a person. By making students aware of basic points, types, characteristics and styles of technical or science-related presentations, the paper is to serve as a starting point in an attempt to make them expand and improve their communication skills.*

**Keywords:** communication skills, spoken presentations, professional settings

### 1. Introduction

This paper provides the essential elements on preparing, organizing and delivering successful spoken presentations for professional purposes.

In today's fast-changing and highly competitive world the need to present a professional image is more important than ever. Communicate effectively is extremely crucial for success in most positions in a working environment. Graduates need to be proficient in spoken communication skills in order to function effectively in the professional setting (Živković & Stojković, 2011), present new ideas or progress reports to their colleagues, or share the findings of their researches with their peers (Platow, 2002).

For successful spoken communication students need practice, and the best practice is to give a spoken presentation. A spoken presentation is a type of face-to-face communication where you inform, guide, inspire the audience to think about your topic, and convince them to agree with the idea that you put forth. It enables students to participate fully in their learning, to demonstrate their ability to communicate, and it helps them develop competencies in areas of their future working places. It demonstrates one of the most successful way "to get the student's attention, encourage curiosity, create challenges" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

### 2. Spoken Communication Skills – General Facts

*"It is no longer sufficient for a new graduate to have knowledge of an academic subject; increasingly, it is necessary for students to gain those skills which will enhance their prospects of employment" (Fallows & Steven, 2000).*

Today's global society needs young people who are flexible, active innovative and creative in problem solving and decision making, who can communicate effectively and work collaboratively. This rapidly changing world needs young people to develop their potential as individuals in order to be prepared for the unique demands of the 21st century world. The ability to communicate is important in order to be able to operate effectively in the real world (Hedge, 2000).

In the present era of globalization employability skills include, among all, communication and presentation, planning, creative thinking, problem solving critical thinking, active and reflective application of knowledge (Driscoll, 2000). The ability to communicate is the most important goal that language teaching aims to reach. It is to be able to operate effectively in the real world (Hedge, 2000).

Communication for professional purposes occupies a significant part of language teaching classes. They should be designed to meet the job-specific needs of students (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998), and allow them to present the acquired academic knowledge in the professional environment. Students need a lot of opportunity to practice language in situations which encourage them to communicate their needs, ideas and opinions.

Communication skills are required by students (future specialists) whether they are expected to give presentations

at conferences, symposia or other meetings. Because of the necessity for these skills, students need instructions and guidance in preparing, organizing and delivering spoken presentations.

Teaching students principles of spoken presentation skills at university level is an especially relevant curriculum segment, and is done with the ultimate purpose of better communicating professional knowledge to other professionals. It implies training them insightful and well-trained thinking strategies that can produce clarity in communication. The results are substantive, i.e., improving the quality of presentation actually improves the quality of thought, and vice versa.

Teaching students how to master spoken presentation skills presupposes two goals: enabling students to function successfully in the future professional surrounding, and preparing them for their possible further academic career. In that sense, the author of this text, both ESP lecturer and syllabus designer concludes from her own teaching experience that teaching principles of spoken presentations is a necessity if students are to perform well in the professional setting.

Spoken presentations provide "a rewarding and stimulating experience both for teachers in developing facilitating skills and for students in training themselves to have confident presentations in public" (King, 2002). If properly guided and organized, spoken presentations provide a learning experience and teach lifelong skills that will be beneficial to students in all school subjects, and later in their careers (Meloni & Thompson, 1980).

### **3. The Basics of Spoken Presentations**

Speaking is the mode of communication most often used to express opinions, make arguments, offer explanations, transmit information, and make impressions upon others. Being able to communicate effectively is the challenge of the current global job market. Communicating and, thus, connecting with colleagues and business partners is an essential skill in career development. Graduates need to speak well in their personal lives, future workplaces, social interactions. They will have meetings to attend, presentations to make, discussions and arguments to participate in, and groups to work with. If basic instructions and opportunities to practice speaking are available, graduates position themselves to accomplish a wide range of goals. As Halliday (1978) explains, "communication creates, maintains and modifies social reality through the exchange of meanings and understandings in the process of communication". It is a dynamic, interactive process that involves the effective transmission of facts, ideas, thoughts, feelings and values. It is tailored according to the needs of specific professions and allows students to present the acquired academic knowledge in both academic and professional environment.

According to Murphy & Hildebrandt (1990) "knowing the content of the functional areas of business is important, but to give life to those ideas - in meetings or in solo presentations - demands an effective oral presentation." The success largely depends on judging all the specifics of the situation and responding to those properly, as well as the impression one gives as a person.

In order to be effective communicators, innovators, critical thinkers and problem solvers today's students "enhance their skills and capacities by improving their means of linking their skills and capacities to the world market" (Reich, 1991).

Students' spoken presentations are a common part of many courses at colleges and universities as they are one of the ways to improve learning of course material. They represent an opportunity for developing real-world communications as well as leadership skills (King, 2002). The potential benefits of students' spoken presentations include (Girard et al, 2011):

- greater class interaction and participation,
- increased interest in learning,
- new perspectives not covered otherwise, and
- improvement in communication and presentation skills.

Students can gain knowledge not only from the research they and other students perform, but also by observing the other presenters' strengths and weaknesses to develop better communication and presentation skills" (Girard et al, 2011).

Spoken presentations represent an opportunity for developing real-world communications as well as leadership skills (King, 2002).

Among the many advantages of designing spoken presentations for students are (King, 2002):

- bridging the gap between language study and language use;
- using the four language skills in a naturally integrated way;
- helping students to collect, inquire, organize and construct information;
- enhancing team work;
- helping students become active and autonomous learners.
- to develop learners' confidence that they can achieve communicative goals,

- to give learners chances to try out communication strategies (Willis, 1996),
- to engage learners in using language purposefully and cooperatively.

Students are involved in their own learning process as active participants, they are engaged in real-world experience, and they build creative and critical thinking and problem-solving skills as important characteristics for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The final goal is to help students maximize their potential, both personally and professionally.

#### 4. Delivering a Spoken Presentation

Since spoken presentations involve multi-skills, a carefully planned and constructed guideline will help develop students' receptiveness to these presentations. Listing instructional objectives and explaining reasons for this activity can increase student participation and may always result in a heightening of satisfaction and achievement.

The fundamental purpose of scientific discourse is not the mere presentation of information and thought, but rather its actual communication (Gopen, 1990). The fact is that spoken presentations are much more than a simple delivery of one's scientific or professional knowledge. The preconditions of an effective, but most importantly good spoken presentations are many. Sole mastery of the required knowledge is insufficient in this case. The success largely depends on judging all the specifics of the situation and responding to those properly, and the impression one gives as a person. A spoken presentation should never be a monologue, but an active dialogue in which verbal communication is not the only constituent.

The content element of the spoken presentation includes aspects that need to be assessed such as knowledge shown, logical appeal, fielding of objections, questions posed, improvisation shown, and conclusion (Carroll, 2005). Separating your presentation into meaningful sections achieves some of the cognitive work for your audience (Platow, 2002).

The important aspects of spoken presentations are the following:

1. Introduction - Content: what the presenter will do;  
- Procedure: how the presenter will do it (Jordan, 1997);
  2. The main body - Methods, Results;
  3. Conclusion - Discussion; Participation and invitation in discussion.
1. Introduction – Greet the audience, Introduce yourself, Explain the purpose of your talk – Start by introducing the topic, Outline the main points - State your purpose and announce the outline of your presentation in very simple, precise language. A good introduction will capture an audience's attention.
  2. The main body (methods, results) – Move to a point – outline your talk, State main ideas clearly and present examples, Introduce a visual aid Use visual aids to engage the interest of your audience. The information in the body needs to be well-structured. Decide on an organizing principle. It could be by chronological order, theme or order of importance.
  3. Conclusion (Discussion) – Conclude your talk, Summarize the main points, Invite questions and comments.

The facts that need close attention are the following (Živković & Stojković, 2013):

##### 4.1 Identify the audience

The first thing to be done when preparing a spoken presentation is to identify the audience as precisely as possible (experts, technicians, executives, nonspecialists). Different audiences require and are prepared for different amount and depths of information. The success of a presentation depends on knowing those in advance.

##### 4.2 Determine the aims of presentation

The presentation can have one of these aims: to inform, to persuade, to teach. Depending on these, the structure and the shape of the presentation will vary significantly.

##### 4.3 Shape the presentation

Students should gain the mastery of organizing and selecting their arguments or pieces of information so as to respect the time allotted. Also, for the sake of their assertiveness they should familiarize themselves with the physical space for their presentation and visualize their movements within. The organization will depend on the overall purpose of the talk, but basically it may be of the following kinds: classifications, cause and effect, problem and solution, experimentation.

#### 4.4 *Introduce appropriate visual aids*

The main thing is to encourage students to use support material and visual aids. When designing a visual, students should consider its effect on the audience. To help the audience follow the presentation, it is a good idea to use some of the visual aids: Slides, LCD and DLP Projectors, Laptops, LCD panels, Video, Multimedia, Laser Pointers, Lapel Microphones, Overheads, Photo-quality printers. There are a great many presentation tools available to presenters. "Even the simplest visual aid can provide a grasp of the structure and direction of the argument, which will help the listeners to understand and remember" (Turk, 1985).

Some advantages of using the visual aids (Walters and Walters, 2002):

- they can contain more details,
- they are good for audience participation,
- they can show motion,
- they are easy to modify or create,
- they keep room lights up,
- they can be a concrete reminder of the message.

#### 4.5 *Gain the audience's attention*

The introduction must draw the audience's attention, identify the topic, and create expectations in the audience that the presenter will satisfy in the course of the presentation. Gain the audience's attention by connecting their needs/values/knowledge to the topic of the speech.

#### 4.6 *Familiarise the audience with the aim, content, and the structure of presentation*

The audience should know what to expect and should be immediately persuaded that these expectations will be fulfilled. This requires clear statement of the content organization at the very beginning.

#### 4.7 *Prepare a closing summary*

An effective conclusion develops naturally from the structure and content of the preceding material. It reaffirms the connection between the audience and the material presented.

#### 4.8 *Delivery*

During the presentation a presenter need to:

- face the audience - maintain eye contact with the audience as much as possible,
- use natural hand gestures,
- look presentable - it means to dress well for the presentation, usually a formal outfit is preferred to show the level of professionalism. Appearance says a lot about someone's personality and confidence,
- speak in a clear and audible voice to get your presentation through to the audience even the ones sitting further away,
- pause periodically - it gives your audience a chance to digest your information and it also gives them permission to participate,
- be aware that nervousness is to be expected, just should be turned into enthusiasm,
- Engage your audience - pose a question to see how much they know about the subject you are about to discuss,
- give the talk a clear, logical structure with an introduction, the main body and a conclusion,
- emphasize key words to allow your audience what they really need to pay attention to; if you speak in the same voice tone throughout the entire presentation, no one knows what is really important.
- make the visual aids clear and easy to understand,
- respond to questions politely, good-humoredly, and briefly,
- summarize your main points and give a strong concluding remark that reinforces why your information is of value.
- invite questions from the audience at the conclusion of your presentation. A well-managed questions and

answers at the end of the presentation are of real value. Encourage the presenting student to invite questions and the audience to ask them.

As a well-known fact, English language instruction today is often one of the crucial aspects of preparing students for their vocation in a highly competitive international professional environment. Teaching principles of spoken communication at university level is an especially relevant curriculum segment and is done with the ultimate purpose of better communicating professional knowledge to other professionals. Every professional is involved in some aspects of communication which usually involve gathering, analyzing, and distributing scientific and/or technical information efficiently and accurately for specific audiences.

As a summary to all mentioned above, it is important to point out that spoken presentations for professional purposes need to occupy a significant part of language teaching classes. By their nature they can be taught only as an interactive kind of lecturing. Through practice work students reproduce the knowledge lectured through their own examples. The aim of such classes is practical and concrete. It is made according to the needs of specific professions and allows students to present the acquired academic knowledge in a professional environment.

## **5. The Changing Role of the Teacher in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

In this new information and communication society teaching is facing challenges from traditional ways of instruction and learning towards more innovative ways. The challenge for the teacher is to provide a relevant framework for students upon which they construct knowledge and become active participants in the learning process.

Being a teacher today may prove a difficult transformation. Importantly, the teacher is no longer perceived as the knowledge dispenser and decision maker. Instead, the teacher has become the facilitator of learning whose main task is to set goals and organize the learning process accordingly. The teacher creates social and intellectual climates, where collaborative and cooperative learning methods are supported. The teacher is responsible for leading and coordinating the work and make learning progress easier.

Besides, the teacher is the supporter, one who supports the learner by means of suggestions that arise out of ordinary activities, by challenges that inspire creativity, and with projects that allow for independent thinking and new ways of learning information.

In Vygotsky's (1978) theory of constructivism, the teacher serves as the mediator who coaches and encourages students to formulate their own level of understanding.

In the Bruner's (1979) classroom, the teacher is the instructor, (direct and guide the learning process) who should try and encourage students to discover principles by themselves.

Moreover, there is a demand for the teacher in the classroom not to be only a guide, organizer, and supporter, but, as King (2002) comments, to hold questions and answers sessions, provide feedback, and evaluation of students performance.

We have to agree with Crystal (2003) who claims that the actor and the teacher inhabit the same stable. They both have to put on a show (the actor on a stage and the teacher in the classroom).

The teacher involves preparing detailed guidelines, organizing groups, helping students to select topics, guiding their research and helping them learn the use of various visual aids, providing feedback on the sequencing of ideas, and evaluating their performance (King, 2002).

## **6. Student-Centred Learning**

Unlike the traditional classroom model (i.e. teacher-centered pedagogy), student-centered learning requires students to take an active role in forming new understandings, and are not just passive receptors (Dunlap & Grabinger, 1995). More specifically, the focus is on the practical experience and direct activity of students. Student-centered learning requires students to set their own goals for learning, and determine resources and activities that will help them meet those goals (Jonassen, 2000).

Students function as designers using the technology as tools for analyzing the world, accessing information, interpreting and organizing their personal knowledge, and representing what they know to others" (Jonassen, 1994). Students must be given opportunities to be active in ways that will promote self-direction, creativity and critical analysis of problems requiring a solution Jonassen (1994). "Learning becomes a continuous, life-long process which results from acting in situations" (Brown et al., 1989).

It has been observed by Kim et al. (1999) that students have more positive attitude towards learning as they share their experiences with their peers and the teacher, as well as they experience increasing discussions in the classroom.

Brown (1996) has proved that spoken presentations help students to work collaboratively and focus on a specific area useful for future work.

## 7. Transformative Teaching and Learning

In order to meet the challenges, it is the task of the teacher to introduce innovative pedagogies following up the trend in shifting the focus from teaching to learning. The design and implementation of pedagogical and technological knowledge in the teaching process is one of the most demanding tasks. So, the key challenge facing teachers is to refocus their teaching strategies and adopt new approaches, and to effectively and efficiently incorporate technologies in the language learning process. Within such context, to be prepared for the new role in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the teacher needs to maximize the potential of learning, and to provide models for the practical work.

An important issue to consider is the dialogue in the classroom – students' interaction with peers and the teacher. The teacher should encourage communication through dialogue interaction aimed at mutual development and enrichment. The Socratic method, as a form of dialogic discussion, can be really efficient in courses, as it can empower and support group learning based on either individual or a social constructivist approach. It highlights students' engagement in the discussion with a specific topic as a central focus.

Consequently, students learn to think critically by examining one another's ideas and questions in an attempt to create a better understanding, and "to have their voices heard and build on their previous experiences and interests to plan for their continuing growth" (Dewey, 1938). According to Kennedy (2007) in-class debates are a means (for students) to cultivate both critical thinking and spoken communication skills.

All in all, the above points to the fact that transformation requires a teacher "whose main function is to help students become active participants in their learning and make meaningful connections between prior knowledge, new knowledge, and the processes involved in learning" (Copley, 1992) for multidisciplinary teaching and learning process. Teachers should also reflect on their own practice, and be willing to experiment with new instructional tools. Therefore, the existing programs should be updated by incorporating modern student-centered teaching methods and techniques (i.e. group work, simulations, case analysis, etc.) which would help to create a comfortable, high-quality learning environment, and encourage students to participate in the learning process more actively.

## 8. Concluding Remarks

We are currently facing globalization as "the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life" (Held, 1999). In this new world speaking effectively is extremely crucial for success in most positions in a working environment.

Graduates need to be proficient in spoken communication skills in order to function effectively in professional settings. Mastering the skills of professional presentations is more important than ever. The success largely depends on judging all the specifics of the situation and responding to those properly, as well as the impression one gives as a person.

The ultimate result of a successful presentation is communicating professional knowledge to other professionals. This innovative framework provides a holistic approach in assessing a student's performance based on the content and the delivery of their presentation (Carroll, 2006).

## References

- Brown, J. S., Collins, A., & Duguid, P. (1989). "Situated cognition and the culture of learning". *Educational Researcher*, 18 (1), 32-41.
- Brown, D. L. (1996). Kids, computers and constructivism. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 23 (3), 189-196.
- Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Carroll, C. (2006). Enhancing Reflective Learning through Role-Plays: The Use of an Effective Sales Presentation Evaluation Form in Student Role-Plays. *Marketing Education Review*, 16 (1), 9-13.
- Copley, J. (1992). "The integration of teacher education and technology: a constructivist model". In D. Carey, R. Carey, D. Willis, and J. Willis (Eds.), *Technology and Teacher Education*, Charlottesville, VA: AACE.
- Crystal, D. (2003). *English as a global language* (2nd ed). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dudley-Evans, T., & St. John, M. J. (1998). *Developments in English for Specific Purposes: A Multidisciplinary Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dunlap, J. C., & Grabinger, S. (1996). "Rich Environments for Active Learning in Higher Education". *Constructivist Learning Models in Higher Education*. B.G. Wilson (ED.) Englewood Cliffs, Educational Technology Publication: NJ.

- Fallows, S., & Steven, C. (2000). Building Employability Skills into the Higher Education Curriculum: A University-wide Initiative. *Education & Training*, 42(2), 75-83.
- Girard, M. P., & Trapp, P. (2011). "An exploratory study of class presentations and peer evaluations: Do students perceive benefits?," *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 77-94.
- Gopen, G. D., & Swan J. A. (1990). The Science of Scientific Writing. *American Scientist*, Volume 78, 550-558.
- Halliday, M.K. (1978). *Language as social semiotic*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Hedge, T. (2000). *Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom*. Oxford: OUP.
- Held, D., McGrew, A., Goldblatt, D. & Perraton., J. (1999). *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hutchinson, T., & Waters, A. (1987). *English for specific purposes*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Jonassen D. H., (1994). Thinking technology: Towards a Constructivist Design Model, *Educational Technology*, April, 34-37.
- Jonassen, David. H. "Revisiting activity theory as a framework for designing student-centered learning environments". In Jonassen, D. H., & Land, S. M. (Eds.), *Theoretical foundations of learning environments*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000: 89-121.
- Jordan, R.R. (1997). *English for academic purposes: A guide and resources book for teachers*. London (UK): Cambridge University Press.
- Kennedy, R. (2007). In-Class Debates: Fertile Ground for Active Learning and the Cultivation of Critical Thinking and Oral Communication Skills. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 19(2), 183-190.
- Kim, H. B., Fisher, L. D., & Fraser, J. B. (1999). Assessment and investigation of constructivist science learning environment in Korea. *Research in Science and Technological Education*, 17 (2), 239-249
- King, J. (2002). Preparing EFL learners for oral presentations. *Journal of Humanistic Studies*, 4, 401-418. Retrieved August 20, 2012.
- Meloni, C., & Thompson, S. (1980). Oral reports in the intermediate ESL classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 14 (4), 503-510.
- Murphy, H. A., & Hildebrandt, H. W. (1990). *Effective business communications*. UK: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited.
- Platow, J. M. (2002). *Giving professional presentations in the behavioral sciences and related fields*. New York: Taylor & Francis Books, Inc.
- Reich, R. (1991). *The work of nations: Preparing ourselves for 21st century capitalism*. New York: Knopf.
- Turk, C. (1985). *Effective Speaking, Communicating in Speech*. London: Chapman & Hall.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1962). *Thought and Language*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Walters, E.D., & Walters, G.C. (2002). *Scientists Must Speak: Bringing Presentations to Life (Routledge Study Guides S.)*. Routledge.
- Willis, J. (1996). *A framework for task-based learning*. London: Longman.
- Živković, S., & Stojković, N. (2011). Modernization of English as Foreign Language Studies in University Education, in *University Education in Transition, Transition in University Education – Modern and Universal*, Belgrade, pp. 213-223.
- Živković, S. & Stojković N. (2013). To Modernize or not to Modernize - There is no Question. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*. Rome-Italy: MCSER Publishing.