

ARE THEY WITH IT? STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE USE OF AN ORAL PRESENTATION AS A FORM OF ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

Research has shown that oral presentation or public speaking as it is synonymously called, is a requisite employment skill. Employers generally want employees who are eloquent as only such employees would potentially “sell” their organizations to customers. In the light of this, it has increasingly become necessary to equip University of Botswana students with oral presentation skills alongside their major areas of study to make them relevant and prepared for the world of work. Based on this demand for eloquence by employers, this study explored students’ perceptions on the use of oral presentation as a form of assessment in their year one Professional Communication and Academic Literacy Skills course. The primary aim of this study was to highlight and possibly address issues that students might have when undertaking oral presentation assessment tasks. It also aimed at unearthing reasons for students’ complaints whenever they were given oral presentation tasks, and their thoughts with regard to using oral presentation as a form of assessment. Using a questionnaire and structured interview methods, this study has unearthed that students have a positive attitude towards oral presentations assessment tasks as they appreciate the value of being a great public speaker in life.

Key words/Concepts: Oral Presentation, Eloquence, Assessment

Introduction

The importance of eloquence and being a good public speaker can never be overemphasized. This primarily emanates from the fact that oral presentations are a cornerstone of many people’s working lives. In the studying environment, students are normally called upon to present their research studies. In the working terrain, workers are normally called upon to give public lectures, talk at seminars, and give reports and many others. It is for this reason that at the University of Botswana (UB) there exist the Academic and Professional Communication course which covers the Speaking Skill among other language skills.

The Academic and Professional Communication course is taught for one academic year, and is compulsory to first year students across all faculties. As captured in the preceding paragraph, the main aim of this course to equip first year students with oral presentation skills to help them “sail” through in their academic work, and to prepare them for life in the work places. Teaching the topic helps to equip the students with lifelong skills of making compelling oral presentations without fear, but with utmost confidence.

The teaching of oral presentation skills at university level is basically an extension of the teaching of the same language skill at both primary and secondary school. However, at the University level, students are required to be hands on in order for them to appreciate the relevance and importance of the skill during and after their studies and be able to actively practice it. In most cases, students’ presentations are assessed and awarded marks which subsequently form part of their Continuous Assessment. In other words, the skill is imparted and used both as a form of assessment and as a way of initiating students to the real life ahead of them. The assessment part entails giving students topics or making them choose from the list prepared beforehand. In their preparation for the presentations, some level of research or information gathering is involved.

The authors of this paper have through interactions UB students observed that they (students) have varied perceptions and attitudes towards the use of oral presentation as part of their assessment. These perceptions were seemingly more on the negative side, thus prompting the undertaking of this research study to confirm what actually was students’ perceptions on the use of oral presentation as a form of assessment? To this end, this research study was premised on the following three questions:

- How do UB students feel about the use of oral presentation as a form of assessment?
- Do UB students understand the purpose, relevance and importance of conducting an oral presentation?

The authors of this paper hoped that the answers to these questions would open a “window” of opportunity for all those who teach oral presentation skills to interrogate their classroom practices, and if necessary, craft new ways of making UB students understand the value of learning oral presentation skills, including the value of their being used as forms of assessment. It is an undeniable fact that for oral presentations to gain traction as forms of assessment, they should be embraced by learners as well; hence the need to find out whether or not UB students “were with it”.

The Etiquettes and Challenges of Public Speaking

Taylor (2005) defines presentation as an opportunity for one to communicate their point of view or ideas to an audience. It is also referred to as public speaking, mainly because often times a presenter would make a presentation to members of the public in a variety of forms such as: public lecture, seminar, or marketing a product or service to people from varied socio, economic and political backgrounds. The purpose of the presentation would very much be determined by the purpose and message of the presentation.

Gil-Salom and Benlloch-Dualde (2016) observe that students are normally scared of making oral presentations especially when it is their first time to do so. On the contrary, De Grez, Valcke and Berings (2010) in their study observed a very positive attitude among students towards learning oral presentation skills. Given that these contradictory observations are outcomes of two separate but related studies which were conducted at different times on different study populations, they set a fertile ground for assessing University of Botswana Students' perceptions and attitudes towards oral presentations.

The teaching of principles of oral presentations at the university level is a needful and relevant curriculum segment and is done primarily for the betterment of communicating professional knowledge to other professionals and non-specialists (Živković & Stojković, 2013). Oral presentations provide rewarding experiences to both teachers and students: they help teachers to develop facilitating skills, and students to become greater and confident public speakers (King 2002). Being a confident and greater public speaker is an attribute that students need in order to succeed academically as they may be enabled to enter into debates and sustained reasoning (Morley 2006). This therefore necessitates the inclusion of presentation skills in academic curricular (Živković 2014). Morley (2006) asserts that for students to develop presentation skills, they should encounter in-depth instruction and practice, and the best practice is to give oral presentations tasks.

As repeatedly elucidated in the introductory section, oral presentations have become requirements in the world of work as employers seek prospective employees who can make presentations on behalf of their companies anytime and anywhere (King 2002). For instance, marketing is often markedly characterized by the quest to attract more clients into businesses. The world is abuzz with conferences where employees are expected to make presentations on different issues that directly and/or indirectly market company products and services to potential clients. Every business aims to grow in order to make more profit and that growth is mandated to employees as they find different ways of communicatively making their companies well known. This shows that presentations skills go beyond classrooms into the work place as people are expected to make presentations at some point in their work life (Reich 1991). As Taylor (2005) also confirms, everyone will at some point or another, be required to make a presentation of some kind.

Employers require employees who are not just competent in communication, but those who are also excellent oral communicators. In a quest to become effective communicators, students resort to enhancing their skills and capacities by improving means of linking their skills and capacities to the world of marketing (Reich, 1991). Capp and Capp (1990) embrace this point when they say that students with good presentation skills have enormous disadvantages at the work place. The inclusion of oral presentation skill in the Academic and Professional Communication course thus suggests that the course focuses on one of the characteristics which employers value most.

Most often, workers need to prepare in advance for oral presentations in order to diminish discomfort and possibilities of becoming blank in front of people. Courses on oral presentation are meant to help presenters overcome all these problems and become confident presenters. In as much as students are expected to go through the task of making presentations, one cannot ignore the fact that it is not an easy thing. Fielding (2014) posits that some people are terrified of standing in front of a group of people to make presentations.

He indicates that research has shown that some people fear making a presentation more than they fear death. Facing an audience is not an easy task; it needs a lot of preparation, research and confidence. A presentation can make or break the presenter. That is why a thorough preparation is necessary. Steinberg and Angelopulo (2015) agrees with Fielding (2014) when they assert that good public speaking can help to decision regarding who can be considered to be the next president or chairperson of a board of directors and in ensuring one's success in social and work situations. It is for this reason that institutions have had to align their curricular to the demands of employers and inject their curricular with presentation skills. This is attested to by Capp and Capp (1990) when they say:

The advances in communication have caused educational institutions to revamp their curriculums. Speech communication shares in these changes with emphasis on such courses as organizational,.....and public communication. These changes have resulted in increasing demands for persons skilled in oral communications.

As part of the international community, the University of Botswana aims to produce employable graduates by all standards, and one of the means of doing so is crafting curricular that will prepare students for the world of work by equipping them with requisite knowledge and skills, and such include being able to make compelling oral presentations. The benefits of communication skills in the world of work are aptly captured by Alfred & Ritter (1984) when they assert:

Students with inadequate communication skills are at an enormous disadvantage in the job market.....In terms of employment potential, the speech communication major appears to be moving into a favoured position.....The speech communication degree focuses upon one of the characteristics which employers value most...

Besides public speaking being a necessity for employment, the skill is part of classroom discourse where teachers employ learners to communicate with one another through presentations. Such classroom presentations afford students opportunities to gain knowledge not only from research they undertake, but also from observing other presenters' strengths and using them to develop their own communication and presentation skills (Girard & Trapp 2011). In preparing for a presentation, learners engrave the content in their minds, and that leads to mastery of the topic at hand.

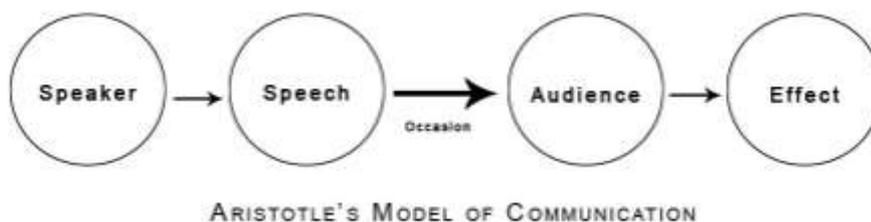
Prior to making a presentation, one has to engage in a lot of preparation which includes researching the topic at hand or gathering information before one can actually choose what to present and what to leave out. This indicates that research skills are prerequisites for making good oral presentations. Hyland, (1991) confirms this when they say that training in public speaking cultivates confidence and clear articulation, develops useful research skills, and encourages careful planning and preparation in the use of language.

It is on the basis of the knowledge and appreciation of the importance of good presentation skills for learning and performance in the world of work that this study sought to discover students' attitudes and perceptions on the use of oral presentations for assessment. This study was thus conducted with the following question persistently nagging the authors of this paper: could the negativity on presentation skills by some UB students be pertaining to the rest of the students?

Aristotle's Model of Communication as basis for Oral Presentation

Based on the literature above, and the questions this research study sought to answer, this study was informed by Aristotle's model of communication. Aristotle's theory was chosen because of its coverage of the major aspects of oral presentation. As it may be common knowledge among communication scholars, Aristotle was the first philosopher to take an initiative to design a communication model. According to Aristotle's Model of Communication, the speaker plays a key role in communication. He is the one who takes complete control of the communication at hand. According to Aristotle's theory the sender/speaker, first prepares content by carefully putting his thoughts into words with the objective to influence listeners or recipients, who would then respond in the sender's desired way. The content is critical in the sense that it has to be impressive enough to convince listeners to believe what the speaker says. In the light of this, Aristotle's model emphasises persuasion by the speaker. The model is built up by five (5) basic elements as shown below.

Figure 1



Source:<https://www.communicationtheory.org/aristotle's-communication-model>

Figure 1 above presents the following explanation: speaker is the initiator of the communication; speech constitutes the message; occasion can best be explained as the purpose of the message such as: speech, sermon, presentation in class or any speech event; audience would refer to targeted listeners; and effect is the impact of the message on the audience.

As Aristotle's theory depicts, the speaker "drives" the whole presentation and this accords with Cleary's (2002) contention regarding what the speaker should do to achieve effectiveness of the delivery of a message. Cleary (2002) contends that during the delivery of the presentation the sender has to consider vocalics, eye contact, gestures and postures. In terms of vocalics, the speaker has to pay attention to voice pitch, inflection, tone, and the pauses, among others. According to Cleary (2002) while the speaker has to ensure that everyone in the room can hear them, they have to know that a low pitch sounds pleasant and sincere and is easy to listen to. Speakers should also not allow their voices to fall at the end of sentences to avoid creating questioning and uncertain expressions. Speakers have to use tones that may create open and friendly atmosphere instead of using patronising tones.

On issues of eye contact, gestures and postures, Cleary (2002) postulates that a speaker has to use eye contact in order to establish a relationship with their listeners. They should also use gestures to show that they actually believe what they say and that they are involved with what they say. Also, a speaker should use good postures such as using the floor space, standing on

their feet and facing the audience. All these attest to the statement made above that it is the speaker who has the influence on whether or not there is accurate reception of their intended message.

Methods of Data Collection

Since the research sought to get answers on students' perceptions on the use of oral presentation as a form of assessment, it was found befitting to adopt a multi-method approach to enable a coverage of a number of issues such as: how students felt about making presentations, what they learnt from the presentations they ever made and if they saw the need to use oral presentation as a form of assessment. Specifically, a questionnaire and face to face interview methods were used to collect data for this study. Using a multi-method approach encouraged collecting, analysing and integrating data from several sources using a variety of different types of research methods. Generally all the data gathering methods were premised on the following questions: (i) how students perceived the use of oral presentation as a form of assessment (ii) problems which students encountered during their presentations (iii) the benefits of learning to present beyond lecture rooms (iv) improvements in conducting oral presentation assessments.

i). Questionnaire

In total, 120 questionnaires were distributed and 91 were returned. The Communication and Study Skills lecture groups are divided according to faculties and the following were able to participate: 46 participants were from the Faculty of Social Sciences, 17 from Faculty of Business, 11 from Faculty of Science, 8 from Faculty of Health Sciences and 9 From the Faculty of Humanities.

Questionnaires were used to collect data because they were found to be advantageous in covering a number of questions which the respondents could answer at their own time, in their own spaces and without fear and under the guise of anonymity. Another advantage of a questionnaire which has been proven by this study is captured by Leedy and Ormrod (2001). According to these co-authors people are more truthful while responding to questionnaires regarding due mainly to the fact that their responses are anonymous.

The questionnaire had 20 questions, 10 of which the responses had to follow the Likert scale consisting of: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree. The Likert scale was found ideal for questions measuring attitudes, observations and opinions. 3 questions were yes/no questions, and each was followed up by a follow up question for elaboration. 4 questions were open ended questions and they were meant to enable participants to express themselves freely and share their experiences of oral presentations.

The questionnaire items were devised in such a way that they would fit the Likert Agreement Scale, and this gave respondents ample choice to pick from in much less time. For this part there were 10 items in statement form. The statements were geared towards soliciting information from students' on their experiences in making presentations. The statements were followed by the yes/no questions, each of which was followed by a follow up question to elaborate respondents' responses.

ii). Face to Face Interviews

A total of 27 participants were interviewed, and they were mainly from the Faculty of Social Sciences. Also, 12 group interviews were conducted. Interviews helped to fill gaps of information that questionnaire responses had created. This was made possible by the fact that the researchers were able to ask as many questions as possible, and they also asked for clarity through follow up questions where necessary. As postulated by Leedy and Ormrod (2001) the face to face interviews facilitated rapport with participants which in turn made participants cooperate with participants.

Results

The following table and graph present students' responses to the questions that were in statement forms as well as the yes or no questions.

Table 1

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Answer	Total
1. Oral presentations should be taught in year 1.	67	19	3	0	2	0	91
2. I like doing oral presentations	22	31	30	5	3	0	91
3. Making an oral presentation is an easy task.	5	12	49	18	6	1	91
4. I present with confidence.	17	19	41	9		5	91
5. I need to do more oral presentations for practice.	43	32	10	3	1	2	91
6. Oral presentation is a good form of assessment.	31	37	16	6	1	0	91
7. I got more marks for my presentation than any other form of assessment.	25	24	21	15	6	0	91
8. I need oral presentation skills for my other courses and beyond university study.	55	32	2	1	0	1	91
9. I understand why I should learn oral presentations.	57	30	4	0	0	0	91

10. I learnt a lot from my presentation.	38	37	14	0	2	0	91
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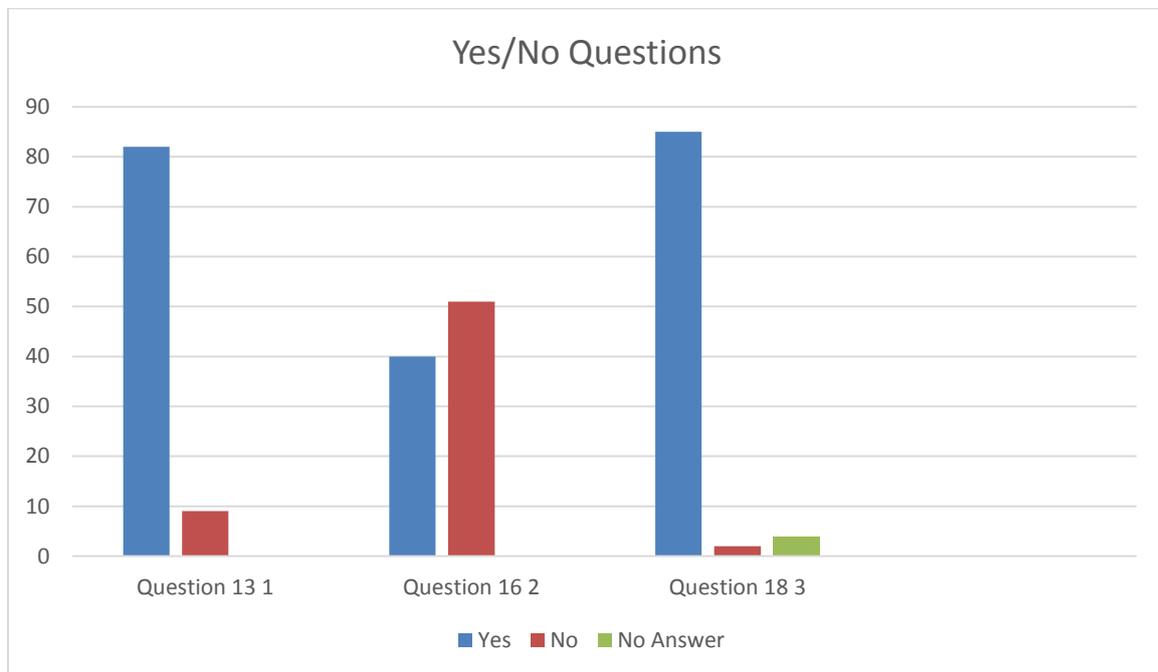
Yes / No Questions

Question 13: Would you do another presentation if given a chance?

Question 16: Did you encounter any problems during your presentation?

Question 18: Do you think you will need presentation skills in the future?

Graph 1



Interpretation and Discussion of Results

According to the results, an impressive 95% of the respondents agreed that oral presentations should be taught at year one. Having this high number agreeing that oral presentations should be taught at year one suggest that students do not object to learning oral presentation skills at that level. When asked if they liked to do the presentations in class, only 58% responded positively. This was not surprising as only 19% of them felt that it was easy to do oral presentation. 45% of respondents could not say whether or not they were confident when doing presentations, while 39% confirmed that they were confident when doing the task. It

must be reiterated that the students were still in year one. Consequently, this outcome was not that surprising as they were still adjusting to university learning styles. In the initial instances of making presentations, fear and a bit of reluctance are expected as at this stage students would still be going through a learning curve.

The need to do more oral presentations for practice was overwhelmingly positive as it was supported by 82% of the respondents. An impressive 75% agreed that using oral presentation as a form of assessment was good. This was in contrast to the researchers' observations that students were conflicted about undertaking oral presentation tasks. This outcome was further supported by 96% of the respondents who felt that they needed the skill in other courses.

The results indicated that students generally did not prepare well in time for presentations and this led to them having limited information and panicking during presentations. There was a general consensus that preparation is paramount in making a good presentation. It emerged that a number of students lacked the confidence to doing oral presentations. It emerged that the lack of confidence was caused mainly by the lack of preparedness. Quite a few cited stage fright as a hindrance. It has to be noted that whereas other people would feel that presenting to familiar audience would be much easier. Respondents in this study felt that in this case knowing the audience was a problem to the presenters as they feared they would be intimidated or even laughed at which of course never happened to them. The audience was more understanding, possibly because they appreciated the fact that they were listening to novice presenters. The respondents highlighted that audience consisting of people they did not know would probably not be that understanding of presenters' shortcomings. A suggestion was put forward by one respondent that in future, if possible, a different type of audience be used to see how presenters would perform.

There was an observation by the respondents that generally researching information on given topics helped them gain more knowledge of the subject matter than merely listening to a presentation by another person.

The issue of group work kept cropping up during the interviews, that many a times group members do not cooperate and this lead to poor preparation and performance by the whole group. 60% of the respondents indicated that they were let down by other group members who did not cooperate, lack of commitment and general lack of confidence. This brought up the question of whether or not teamwork benefitted students at this level. Students have to learn to work in teams at an early stage of their learning as teamwork skills are also prerequisite to employee recruitment.

i). Problems Encountered by Students

The following responses emerged from both the open ended and interview questions: (i) Lack of preparation- students agreed that they could have done better if they had prepared thoroughly by doing research well in time, meeting regularly as a group to discuss the research tasks and to consult lecturers. This, they admitted, led in part to their lack of confidence during presentations and to failing to answer questions from the audience. 6 respondents mentioned that their lecturer came to their rescue when they could not answer questions. (ii) Fear/fright- there were a number of students who indicated that they experienced stage fright which resulted in low voice projection. As one participant put it "*my group members looked confused as they had stage fright*" Another one said "*I was a bit uneasy and forgot some points.*" (iii) Being unable to balance reading notes and making eye contact with the audience- these students realised from the post presentation evaluations that they actually were reading more than presenting. They cited lecturers' comments that they

did not face the audience and have to improve on that. (iv) poor team work spirit- Students decried poor teamwork spirit from group members. Ironically, even those whose team members had reported were not cooperative blamed their group members of the same. This arose in one-on-one interviews. *“Group members were not cooperative,”* said one participant when asked to share problems they encountered. (v) Poor articulation of ideas due to poor language (English) skills- Few students stated that they had problems of speaking the English language. One respondent wrote that s/he had the problem of *“inability to say the words I wanted to and inability to answer questions thoroughly because I could not find the right words to use.”* Another one said *“I was not fluent in English.”* (vi) poor time management during presentation- this was cited by 40% of the students. They admitted to have prepared more material than they could present within the allocated time. This is despite the fact that they had been informed about the length of time each group was allocated. Groups were expected to have divided the allocated time among themselves and to have rehearsed their presentations to ensure that they would cover prepared content within required time slots. (vii) Appearance- Students were informed that they would have to be formal. However, it appeared like there was some resistance to dressing formally. Generally, formality is perceived as an issue of concern among the young people. (viii) Lack of consultation with lecturers for advice, which led to a number of those listed above. 75% of the respondents indicated that they did not consult after settling on a topic to work on. This led to a plethora of problems which could have been avoided in the write-ups and the presentations. This was confirmed by one participant who indicated that to improve on presentation skills *“next time I will ensure that I engage my lecturer more.”*

ii). Areas to Improve on

The following are samples of the responses from the participants on how they would improve on their presentation skills (the responses have not been edited):

1. *“I would boost up my confidence, make sure that I don't have stage fright by having faith that I can do it.”*
2. *“I will focus on my audio and speed.”*
3. *“I would find more information and face my audience more often.”*
4. *“I will be more confident and maintain eye contact with audience.”*
5. *“I would work on my vocabulary.”*
6. *“I would relaxing a bit and not be tense.”*
7. *“I would invest more in the preparations.”*
8. *“I would rehearse in front of friends before the actual presentation.”*
9. *“I would work on my confidence and conduct more research.”*
10. *“I would work on my stammering and levels of being nervous. I would also work on my voice projection.”*

Conclusion and Suggestion for Further Research

This research study has shown that although students inherently have the fear to make oral presentations, they are not against the idea of using them as forms of assessment. In fact, they are overwhelmingly positive about their use. The mixed reactions that the authors of this paper observed prior to conducting this research were just typical students' responses to any form of assessment before they undertake it. As shown in the discussion of results section, some of those interviewed expressed that contrary to their prior expectations, the audience

did not “grill” them with questions nor ridicule them when they made mistakes while they (presenters) were presenting. The students are aware that they have to apply themselves more than they have been doing in order to score more marks and master the skill of oral presentation. The respondents also emphasized the importance of feedback from lecturers as it helped them to improve and make impact during the presentations.

The results indicate that students are generally happy with the use of oral presentations as forms of assessment. They have shown awareness that presentation skills can be used in other areas such as presenting in other courses, and they further indicated that they would need to make presentations part of their jobs when they complete university education. There is a general realisation that preparing for presentations requires robust research. The issue of working in groups in preparation for oral presentations was raised as a stumbling block in a number of cases. In as much as learning to work as teams is a requisite skill for making good presentations, there is a need to look into the dynamics of group work as it appeared to be unpopular with respondents. This could be a possible area for future study.

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