

Oral Presentation Difficulties – Experience of Students at Politeknik Tuanku Sultanah Bahiyah

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates areas of oral presentation difficulties experienced by students at Polytechnic Tuanku Sultanah Bahiyah (PTSB). The participants of this study were 223 students from commerce and engineering departments. The data were gathered through questionnaires and interviews. Findings from the data analysis show that the topmost predicament of the students in dealing with oral presentation is delivery, especially where language usage and anxiety management are concerned. Another clear-cut aspect of the findings is that engineering students differ significantly from commerce students in coping with oral presentation difficulties such as preparation, organization and delivery.

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, graduate unemployment has been attributed to poor communication skills. An issue, which has become a major concern in many Malaysian tertiary education institutions, is concerning the large number of graduates who graduate with excellent results but remain unemployed. Some of the graduates are no doubt very good technically, but they are unable to express their ideas well. They are unable to communicate in English proficiently; they have difficulties in pronouncing words properly and using grammar correctly. The industry's evaluation generally shows that Malaysian graduates do not have good communication and presentation skills. Research done by Hanafi Zaid & Kamarudin [6], stated that the main reported complaint from prospective employers are local graduates' lack of communication skills, especially to communicate in English, anxiety and fear of making mistakes prevent them from making efforts to speak in English. Singh and Choo [16], also showed similar perceptions of the wanting English language proficiency skills of graduate employees by employers in the Malaysian manufacturing industry. They opine that some of the employees have poor written and oral communication skills, which affect their work performance.

According to King [10], before they enter the workplace, students' performance in oral presentations in colleges and universities already indicate that they are not well prepared for effective communication. Besides, Abdullah, & Abdul Rahman [1] state that it is also stressful for students who are not fluent in English but expected to speak in the target language, especially during their English lessons. They often leave the task of making oral presentations to the more proficient members of their group. However, students cannot avoid oral presentation tasks just because they lack the relevant skills or confidence. It is important for students to master oral presentation skills, as they may need to use these skills when they enter the working world, such as attending a job interview or presenting a paper to a group of colleagues or superiors in a meeting.

College and university students should be taught oral presentation skills as these provide opportunities for them to hone their public speaking skills and develop stage confidence when they stand before audience. For college and university lecturers to have the right focus when teaching students' oral presentation skills, it is important to find out the specific difficulties that students encounter in relation to oral presentations. Some studies have been conducted to investigate students' difficulties in delivering oral presentations. Kakepoto, Habil, Omar and Said [9], carried out a study on factors that influenced effective oral presentation performance of engineering students. The results indicate that the main factors that hinder the engineering students from delivering oral presentations effectively are poor presentation skills, poor confidence and nervousness. Even though the engineering students were aware of the oral presentation delivery skills, they did not use appropriate delivery skills when giving oral presentations. Habil, & Ab. Rahman [5], stress that this is probably due to a lack of practice among the students. In the context of language anxiety, results indicate that communication anxiety prevented the engineering students from making effective presentations.

Other studies have identified fear of communication apprehension as the main cause of anxiety besetting students making oral presentations. Studies conducted by El Enein [4], Nguyen Thi Van [14] and Chen [3] found that the common challenge in oral presentation encountered by the tertiary education students is low level of language proficiency such as fluency, inaccurate pronunciation, lack of vocabulary and grammar inaccuracy. Moreover, the students also encountered difficulties in coping with psychological factors such as lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes. These problems are probably due to a lack of rapport between students and their lecturers, coupled with inadequate practice – which adds to their limitations of language proficiency and communication apprehension.

Thus far, research done by Zainuddin & Selamat [17], has identified various difficulties related to oral presentations have been on tertiary students but less is known about the oral presentation difficulties of polytechnic students whose academic training is more skill-based. The employers in the study on efficacy of polytechnic students' interpersonal communication skills are concerned that the polytechnic graduates have "great difficulties in communicating effectively at work despite having excellent technical knowledge in their areas". Further research is needed to understand better the specific difficulties faced by polytechnic students in making oral presentations, and the findings would help lecturers in having the right focus when they teach oral presentation skills. The purpose of this study is to investigate academic oral presentation difficulties faced by commerce and engineering students at Politeknik Tuanku Sultanah Bahiyah.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theoretical framework used in this study is language anxiety, which comprises communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. This framework used in a research done by Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope [7]. The first aspect of language anxiety is *communication apprehension*. McCroskey [12], defined it as an "individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons". Some students find giving an oral presentation a difficult task because of their inner fears. Students are afraid of making mistakes, criticism or rejection from the audience; they are worried they may forget what they want to say. All these fears are known as *communication apprehension*.

The second aspect of language anxiety is *test anxiety*. Joy [8], defined it as "an apprehension over academic evaluation which is a fear of failing in test situations". They may become too concerned and start thinking that they will never be able to pronounce a word correctly or give a good presentation. Students who encounter test anxiety often put impractical demands on themselves and feel that anything less than a perfect test performance is a failure. As a result, they are unable to focus and become nervous during presentations. The third aspect of language anxiety is *fear of*

negative evaluation. Carleton, McCreary, Norton & Asmundson [2], defined it as “the apprehension and distress arising from concerns about being judged despairingly or hostilely by others”. Students who encounter the fear of negative evaluation often feel worried when they are required to do oral presentations in English, as they fear getting low marks from their lecturers, being often corrected for their mistakes such as in pronunciation and being laughed at by their peers when making mistakes while speaking in front of the class.

The lack of practice in giving oral presentations has also been identified as a cause of language anxiety during such presentations. For example, Mahfoodh's [11] study on six international undergraduate students who enrolled in a B.A. program in a Malaysian university revealed that when the students were required to deliver an oral presentation, other than linguistic difficulties, presentation skills and content preparation, insufficient prior experience in conducting oral academic presentations are also found to be a leading cause among these students.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods; questionnaires and interviews were used to collect the data. The sample of the study consisted of 223 students from the engineering and commerce departments of Politeknik Tuanku Sultanah Bahiyah. They were in their fifth semester and registered in the DUE50032 Communicative English 3 course. All of them had given academic oral presentations in previous courses such as DUE10012 Communicative English 1 and DUE30022 Communicative English 2. They are also required to deliver oral presentations in their current English course. A decision was made to compare the language anxiety of the engineering and commerce students because the first researcher's observations indicate that the commerce students tend to do better in their oral presentation assessment as compared to the engineering students during their English course even though they are taught by the same lecturer.

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section focused on the areas of oral presentation difficulties. There are four constructs in this section: preparation, organization, delivery and evaluation. The construct “Delivery” is further categorized into sub-constructs such as getting and maintaining audience's attention, body language, language use, time management, anxiety management and handling the audience's questions. The second section focused on the causes of oral presentation difficulties. A reliability test was conducted on the questionnaire and the Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficients showed a value of 0.94, which indicates high levels of internal reliability. An Alpha value considered satisfactory if it is equal to or greater than 0.70, according to Pawar & Thakurdesai [15].

On the other hand, the researcher employed interviews in the study in order to further support and explain the quantitative findings. The interviews conducted are a semi-structured type, which consists of questions that elicit information such as respondents' perceptions of the importance of oral presentations and difficulties faced in oral presentations. The interview was conducted in a pre-arranged session with eight students (i.e. four engineering students and four commerce students). Their English lecturer recommended the students who participated in the interview. Data obtained from the questionnaire were analysed using SPSS version 20.5. The findings were then computed to obtain means and standard deviations. In addition, an independent sample t-test was conducted to ascertain the differences in difficulties in oral presentation between engineering and commerce students. Data obtained from the interviews were transcribed and coded into categories. The respondents were identified by the codes assigned to them: ES1 (Engineering student 1), ES2 (Engineering student 2), ES3 (Engineering student 3), ES4 (Engineering student 4), CS1 (Commerce student 1), CS2 (Commerce student 2), CS3 (Commerce student 3) and CS4 (Commerce student 4).

RESULTS

Areas of Academic Oral Presentation Difficulties

This part presents the questionnaire and interview findings in determining the main area of difficulty faced by the polytechnic students when giving oral presentations in English. Table 1 shows that the students' least difficult area of academic oral presentation is preparation, with the lowest mean score of 2.95 (SD=0.82) and evaluation is not a difficult area too (M=2.99, SD=1.02). The students' most difficult area of academic oral presentation is delivery, with the highest mean score of 3.24 (SD=0.93).

Table 1 Areas of Oral Presentation Difficulties

| Areas | M | SD |
|--------------|------|------|
| Preparation | 2.95 | 0.82 |
| Organisation | 3.16 | 0.94 |
| Delivery | 3.24 | 0.93 |
| Evaluation | 2.99 | 1.02 |

Note: M – Mean, SD – Standard Deviation

The area of delivery is further divided into a few sub-areas such as getting and maintaining audience's attention, body language, language use, time management and anxiety management. Table 2 shows that most of the students faced difficulties in language use and anxiety management, with both sharing the highest mean score of 3.41, standard deviations of 0.91 and 0.93 respectively. These two sub-areas of delivery will be focused on in detail.

Table 2 Difficulties in The Area of Delivery

| Difficulties | M | SD |
|--|------|------|
| Getting and maintaining audience's attention | 3.11 | 0.98 |
| Body language | 2.97 | 0.97 |
| Language use | 3.41 | 0.91 |
| Time management | 3.30 | 0.90 |
| Anxiety management | 3.41 | 0.93 |
| Handling the audience's questions | 3.25 | 0.90 |

Note: M – Mean, SD – Standard Deviation

In terms of language use, the students did not highlight difficulty in expressing their ideas but instead focused on difficulties in their pronunciation, as shown by the following excerpts:

The first thing is of course the English itself. The pronunciation. I mean we need to practice more [ES1].

First, my pronunciation is sometimes, sometimes good, sometimes bad [ES2].

Sometimes, with my English pronunciation, and there's a lot from my pronunciation because my English is not so good [CS3].

Sometimes when I'm presenting, I, not to say lack of confidence but when I want to present, it's just that we have difficulties in pronunciation [CS4].

If the pronunciation is far from what Malaysians are used to hearing, then this might affect

comprehensibility. However, if the pronunciation is within the acceptable range, the students need not feel overly anxious over their pronunciation during oral presentations. Besides pronunciation, another aspect of language use mentioned by students in the interviews is proficiency in English. Two interviewees mentioned that they had problems with their English proficiency, which posed a big challenge to them when conducting their oral presentation.

Ok and then second is, I am not very good speaking in English even though I love to, love to hear English songs [ES2].

When how to speak in English correctly, or combine the words, like if we speak in Malay for example, we know how to speak Malay fluently, but when we want to speak that word in English, we get confused [ES3].

One interviewee mentioned that he had difficulty in elaborating his main points during his presentation. The difficulty arose because the topic of presentation, which had been assigned by his lecturer, was unfamiliar to him.

Second, we don't know how to elaborate our point, main point because sometimes student asks questions, but we don't know what is it about, what the topic we present to them because this topic, certain topic is given by the lecturer. So, we have to explain even though that topic is not required, I mean that topic is not from our self [ES4].

The problems in elaborating main points and handling the audience's questions arise from the student's lack of familiarity with the topic, and the terms needed to talk about it. This problem would be compounded if the topic is more complex and academic. Other than language use, the students also reported having difficulty with anxiety management when delivering their oral presentations. Three interviewees mentioned that they felt nervous when they were required to conduct an oral presentation. The nervousness caused them to make mistakes in their grammar and forget their ideas when presenting.

I feel nervous, and when I feel nervous I have grammar errors, and... I don't speak well in front of people because of my nervousness [CS1].

And I... when I feel nervous also I have no idea what I'm... what that I'm going to speak [CS1].

The first thing is ... unable to control my nervousness [CS2].

Yes, I face it, because first time it's nervous but then I'm trying to calm down, trying to control it, and then after a few minutes I feel ok and I'll present it- present well [CS3].

The results show that the interviewees' nervousness affected the delivery of their oral presentations.

Differences between Engineering and Commerce Students in Academic Oral Presentation Difficulties

This part presents the findings on significant differences between engineering and commerce students in their areas of difficulties when giving academic oral presentations. Using the alpha value of 0.05, an independent samples t-test was conducted to find out whether there were significant differences between engineering and commerce students in the areas of difficulties in oral presentation. The results of the Levene's test show that $p>0.05$, and this indicates that equal variances have been assumed.

Table 3 Test Results On Areas of Oral Presentation Difficulties

| | | | Engineering Students | | Commerce Students | |
|---|--|--------|----------------------|------|-------------------|------|
| Areas of Oral Presentation Difficulties | | t(221) | M | SD | M | SD |
| Preparation | | 2.75 | 2.99 | 0.51 | 2.77 | 0.54 |
| Organisation | | 2.85 | 3.23 | 0.66 | 2.93 | 0.59 |
| Delivery | | 2.29 | 3.22 | 0.58 | 3.01 | 0.52 |
| Evaluation | | 1.81 | 2.25 | 0.36 | 2.21 | 0.42 |

In the area of preparation, the difference between the engineering and commerce students is significant, $t(221) = 2.75, p = 0.007$. An examination of the group means indicates that the engineering students ($M = 2.99, SD = 0.51$) faced more difficulties in preparing for oral presentations than the commerce students ($M = 2.77, SD = 0.54$).

In the area of organisation, the difference is significant, $t(221) = 2.85, p = 0.005$. An examination of the group means indicates that the engineering students ($M = 3.23, SD = 0.66$) faced more difficulties in organising the content of their presentation than the commerce students ($M = 2.93, SD = 0.59$).

In the area of delivery, there is also a significant difference between the two groups of students, $t(221) = 2.29, p = 0.023$. An examination of the group means indicates that the engineering students ($M = 3.22, SD = 0.58$) faced more difficulties in delivery than the commerce students ($M = 3.01, SD = 0.52$).

In the area of evaluation, there is no significant difference between the engineering and commerce students, with $t(221) = 1.81, p = 0.071$.

Table 4 Independent Samples Test Results On Areas of Oral Presentation Difficulties

| | | Levene's Test | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | |
|--------------|-----|---------------|------|------------------------------|--------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| | | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2 tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference |
| Preparation | 1* | 1.332 | .250 | 2.745 | 221 | .007 | .229 | .084 |
| | 2** | | | 2.660 | 71.769 | .010 | .221 | .086 |
| Organisation | 1* | 1.451 | .230 | 2.849 | 221 | .005 | .299 | .105 |
| | 2** | | | 3.038 | 82.222 | .003 | .299 | .098 |
| Delivery | 1* | 1.166 | .281 | 2.293 | 221 | .023 | .211 | .092 |
| | 2** | | | 2.434 | 81.615 | .017 | .211 | .087 |
| Evaluation | 1* | 1.023 | .313 | 1.812 | 221 | .071 | .220 | .121 |
| | 2** | | | 1.776 | 72.825 | .080 | .220 | .124 |

* Equal variances assumed

** Equal variances not assumed

The results of the independent sample *t*-tests show that there are a number of significant differences between engineering and commerce students in the areas of oral presentation difficulties, except for the area of evaluation. The engineering students found preparation for the oral presentation more difficult than the commerce students did; this is probably because the former focused more on their core courses, especially their engineering subjects, which involved project work that required much time and effort. They tended to copy the points obtained from the internet and pasted them in the slides in order to reduce their own burden. This resulted in

the students' inability to explain the information in their slides during their oral presentations. Besides, they might worry about getting low marks in their oral presentation assessments due to their poor communication skills in English and started to have negative thoughts that affected their level of confidence. This condition appeared to be closely related to "test anxiety". In addition, engineering students generally prefer practical tasks such as hands-on activities rather than oral presentations.

In addition to the area of preparation, the engineering students also faced greater difficulties in the organization. Based on the researcher's years of experience in conducting oral presentation assessments at the polytechnic, engineering students tend to merely highlight the salient points from an article, then copy and paste the points onto the PowerPoint Slides. Therefore, their presentations appear disorganized and they have trouble elaborating their points.

DISCUSSION

Based on the questionnaire and interview results, the most difficult aspect of delivering an oral presentation for most participants is anxiety. They felt nervous when delivering their oral presentations and the nervous affected their performance. In a research by McCroskey [13], nervousness is one of the psychological factors that affects the students' presentation skills, which hinders them from delivering their presentations effectively. In other words, the audience anxiety leads to "fear, tension and [they become] disorganized in front of an audience". They might have assumed that the audience expects their presentation to be perfectly delivered or they will be laughed at when making mistakes while speaking in front of the class.

The second difficulty encountered by the students in their oral presentations is language usage. Most students stated that they tended to make grammatical errors and felt that they were unable to use appropriate vocabulary and sentence structure when presenting. Two students mentioned in their interviews that they were not able to speak English as fluently as Malay or their mother tongues. Thus, the students became highly apprehensive when they were required to deliver their presentation in English, and this emotion affected their performance. McCroskey [13], named this situation as "*oral communication apprehension*".

Also contributing to the oral communication comprehension is the students' perception of their inability to deliver their presentation with clear pronunciations (in terms of sound, words, sentence structure and stress). In the interview, four students said that they had difficulty in pronunciation. Problems in pronouncing English words probably stem from the influence of the students' non-English mother tongue. Hence, the mispronunciations of words by non-native speakers reflect the influence of the sounds, rules, stress, and intonation of their native language.

In the area of delivery, the results support other research findings that even though the engineering students were aware of the oral presentation delivery skills, they did not use appropriate delivery skills when giving oral presentations. This is probably due to a lack of practice and nervousness, especially when they were required to present in front of their lecturer or peers.

CONCLUSION

This study has identified the polytechnic students' areas of difficulties in delivering oral presentations in English. The findings from this study show that delivery is the most challenging area for students in giving oral presentations in English. There are several ways can help students to hone their weak side. Educators should start train their students from root in presentation. Besides, courses related to oral presentation skills must be included as a compulsory subject in

the polytechnic's curriculum. For the time being, this course only being taught as optional subject for polytechnic students. Moreover, Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) programmes also should be conducted especially focusing on communication skills for the students. This could cultivate the interest among the students and able to set up English speaking environment. This study has its limitation; it covers only the oral presentation difficulties encountered by students in Politeknik Tuanku Sultanah Bahiyah. Further research on students from other polytechnics in Malaysia would lead to a better understanding of the common difficulties of students in skill-based academic programmes so that the teaching of communication skills becomes more relevant to meet their needs.

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