

## I'd Like to Present But How Are You Going to Score Me?

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### **Abstract**

Presenting competently needs language awareness and non-verbal skills which can be difficult to assess. This paper presents a framework for understanding the demands of presentation speaking and suggests approaches to scoring and giving feedback with attention to sub-skills. The framework for presentation skills assessment draws on research and the writer's experience in Southeast Asia. Guidelines for classroom practices which move beyond an assessor's intuitive response are suggested.

### **Introduction**

Oral presentation may be scored or assessed in a quantifiable way for two major purposes. Presentation skills may be assessed for diagnostic feedback or assessed for testing achievement levels. Scoring for learner feedback is often a very real form of preparation for latter achievement testing.

Central to both assessment for diagnostic feedback and assessment to attain a test score are questions of how useful these two approaches are - the why? It is also important to establish the effectiveness of testing spoken performance in the public speaking mode. Implementing effective scoring of an oral presentation is another real concern in classroom practice.

The paper will therefore address :

- Why test oral presentation?
- How can oral presentation be assessed?
- What aspects of oral presentation are assessable?

### **Testing Oral Presentation and Motivation**

When learners study English, it is often as an enabling skill acquired for academic or vocational reasons. In many English as a

Foreign Language environments, students do not accord a high priority to spoken English as it is not used in the wider community. Yet spoken English in the presentation mode, or public speaking to use a popular term, is becoming increasingly important in the business world (Poon, 1991).

Many learners in pre-work situations may not be fully aware of the importance of presentation skills in the workplace. For better or worse, motivation is often driven by the accountability systems (Hall, 1994) in terms of passing exams and test scores. In such situations, it is unlikely that learners will be motivated by an untested subject.

Testing can add validity to teaching presentation skills as teachers may approach the syllabus in terms of passing exams. If spoken skills are not assessed and the more quantifiable reading, writing and listening are assessed, spoken performance may not be seen as a 'serious' part of syllabus (Calderbank & Awwad, 1988). Once teachers are given specific performance criteria, the syllabus can be implemented linked to the rather pervasive motivation of 'passing the exam'. Learner motivation may then move beyond the external motivation to intrinsic motivation in attaining

good performance levels, an area which will be detailed later. Critical to learners awareness of oral presentation testing is clarity of the assessment purposes

### **Assessing for Feedback and Testing**

Assessing a learners' first presentation in front of an audience will rarely give a true indication of his or her skills. Stage fright is a reality in all presentations whether in the first or second language. It is therefore useful to provide practice sessions and assess a presentation in order to give feedback and provide learning. The assessment or scoring can therefore be for feedback, a learning process or for a second purpose of achievement testing (Underhill, 1987). Thus two purposes, diagnostic feedback and achievement testing will be addressed.

### **Diagnostic Feedback**

Diagnostic feedback is based on the assumption that one is assessing for the purpose of providing information for better performance. Feedback is therefore that which follows an error and precedes other efforts to attain more effective communication (Long, 1977). Feedback is useful as it provides opportunities for 'consciousness raising' of errors. There is debate about how to handle errors but in many cultures it is recognised that the teacher is expected to provide models and note errors in a sensitive way. The teacher has a role "to let learners know within the limits of their overall proficiency when what they're doing does not conform to the target" (Lightbrown, 1986 : 10).

Providing meaningful feedback to oral presentation needs a set of performance descriptors. Many researchers call for a clear distinction between assessment based on tests of "knowledge" and assessment of "performance" (Shohany, 1983). Performance tests go beyond knowing about the language to focus on expected behaviour. Behaviour in presentation speaking involves linking an awareness of the audience, preparation and non-verbals with the delivery of effective language. Performance testing of oral presentation is clearly an assessment of more than words.

Describing oracy performance in the public speaking setting requires more than language description. Mendelsohn in his work (1990, 1991-1992) notes that many teachers

focus on the details of language form, rather than on the sociolinguistic features of the learners' performance. A focus on language form can contradict the notion of communication where getting the message through to the receiver is a central concern. Diagnostic feedback based on performance would involve detailing the effectiveness of a speaker's communication in front of the audience and this includes other than linguistic skills.

Building skills awareness needs effective diagnostic feedback with metalanguage of a level appropriate to learners. It is critical to focus on performance using objective descriptors in learner terms rather than descriptors which appear to highlight personal traits. For example, a presenter is described as needing to increase volume and use greater body movement rather than being labelled shy and timid and needing greater confidence.

The metalanguage can develop through peer discussion as well as teachers' input so that definitions of the **why?** and the **how?** of assessment are built with a sense of shared responsibility. Reluctant learners facing the assessment process may build their metalanguage by setting their own objectives. Creating learner responsibility in terms of having to perform with defined criteria and to engage in actual skill learning is reported to be effective (Acton, 1984; Firth, 1987; and Ricard, 1986 cited in Graham, 1994). This writer has found that promoting learner ownership of the evaluative process is an important part of assessment.

### **Achievement Testing**

Achievement testing of oral performance needs to build on earlier feedback. The distinction needs to be made between accountability for further learning in diagnostic feedback and the greater external weighting that goes with achievement testing. For achievement testing, a learner can build on earlier 'teaching' based on feedback (Mendelsohn, 1991-1992) to develop a more communicative performance for 'scoring'.

The teacher will be extended to work with oral presentation skills if oracy is given credence by counting as an examinable subject. Yet testing oracy is notoriously difficult as it is a performance test involving aspects other than language. It is behaviour oriented and so many

teachers fall back on the linguistic detail as a safer area for defining competency. The variables in testing oracy are limited by certain aspects that are central to 'scoring' a presentation :

- Oral presentation is a one-way speech act with the exception of question and answer sessions. There is little focus on interaction skills.
- Oral presentation is defined in a speaker's role and levels of formality.
- Oral presentation differs from conversational language as it is prepared and involves longer turns of speech. It is a performance.
- Specific non-verbal techniques can be learnt.
- Many techniques relate to speaking in any language.
- Assessment can be detailed and weighted according to specific learner needs.

### **Criteria for Diagnostic Feedback and Testing**

A variety of oral presentation evaluation forms have been developed in order to make assessment easy for teachers. Effective assessment needs clear criteria for assessment so that both teachers and learners can link curriculum, teaching and testing (Lynch & Davidson, 1994). Not all lists of criteria focus on the relationship between the criteria and the target use situations, that which some have called "situational authenticity" (Hoekje et al., 1994; Bachman, 1990). While criteria need situational authenticity, that is to be a reflection of the target use situation, they also need to be clear and pragmatic. Criteria need to be clear enough that learners can see that the performance areas are useful skills to master in order to be effective communicators.

Criteria would then be most effective if balancing occurs between ease of teacher use and testability based on target needs. Part of the situational authenticity would then be that the learner sees the usefulness of criteria and is able to develop skills to match them through feedback sessions. Motivation would therefore come from seeing the applicability of criteria to the real life situations beyond an achievement test.

A detailed form of oral presentation assessment was that of Wood (1982 cited in Poon, 1993) which uses a five point scale for each of the following criteria : introduction, development and conclusion; data and sources; organisation, information and response; vocal and non-verbal effectiveness and oral style. Poon mentions that in this approach and other approaches the macro-categories of content, organisation and delivery are commonly used. While one sees the validity of the macro-categories of content organisation and delivery, greater detail is needed in order to move beyond subjectivity.

A further dynamic is that first language public speaking texts often work with these categories while second language trainers often tend to emphasise language and delivery. Clearly both the form of delivery and content are important and often the link is the organisation. In the next section broad criteria are outlined. These skill areas are based on the writer's experience and an adaption of Mendelsohn's (1992) feedback instrument for individual oral presentation (see Appendix 1).

### **Detailing Criteria Areas**

- **Content**  
Common issues are the clarity of the key ideas and the interest level of the information. Detail and examples that illustrate the point are features which are part of assessing content. Preparation for this aspect includes detailed research of a topic and attention to engaging listeners through well selected information.
- **Organisation**  
Traditional public speaking courses focus on
  - the introduction
  - the thesis
  - the supporting examples and details
  - the conclusion

In introducing a topic, the techniques of exciting an audience and gaining their attention are well worth teaching. There are many parallel aspects with presenting a memorable conclusion. Yet central to organisation building are two linguistically based skills. Firstly, the recognition of levels of generalisation in

language so that key ideas and supporting examples are clearly understood as different levels of statement. Many beginning speakers are either too general or too specialised. Secondly, the need to write effective notes based on a macro-framework such as past-present-future, local-national-international, chronology, or pros and cons of a viewpoint. Developing organisational skills for writing speech notes provides a strong opportunity for integrating presentation skills with thinking development and writing. Thirdly, there needs to be (a) "explicit marking" of "junctures" (important decision points) of problem; (b) explicit...organizing and chunking material and marking overt transitions between topics; and (c) developing cohesion and continuity by repetition and linking devices" (Rounds, 1987 cited in Hoetjke & Linnell, 1994)

- **Non-Verbals**

Non-verbals are a critical part of oral presentation. Eye contact techniques can be taught and may often need to be understood as part of cross-cultural awareness. Hand movements and body stance are part of how we naturally assess a speaker so it is important that these aspects are given recognition in more formal assessment. Video recordings are extremely useful in heightening self-awareness in this area.

- **Visual Aids**

In some criteria schemes, the use of visual aids are included as an important part of presentation skills. With the growth of presentation technology, this aspect is becoming increasingly important in the world of international business. The inclusion of this aspect and the weightage of it would depend on an educator's view of the target situation that the course is based on.

- **Fluency**

Assessment of spoken delivery involves other than just the word level of delivery given that listeners are listening for meaning (Brown, 1990). The speed of the message is important as is the use of timing. Hesitations can be perceived in terms of their appropriacy and frequency while confidence is often judged in terms of a speaker's control of these tools of delivery. Fluency can often be judged by how the

speaker uses his or her notes or whether he or she has used memorisation, a tool used rather frequently in the Southeast Asian region. Effective outline writing with marking of stress and timing is an important area of learning.

- **Pronunciation**

Individual sounds need to be assessed in terms of effective communication with an audience. Accent is very different from misunderstanding due to syllabus level difficulties, while tone is another factor to consider as it can influence listeners. Stress on key words play an important part in listener perception and will relate to both the speaker's and listeners' awareness of how key words link to key concepts. Breaking speech notes into the utterances and underlining key words is a technique that can be incorporated into a course (Hall, 1995).

- **Vocabulary and Grammar**

This criteria aspect is placed last as listening research suggests that these aspects of language teaching may not be the primary focus of what listeners pay attention to (Brown, 1990:3). However as a measure of discrimination, vocabulary and grammar are often the most accessible to those with EFL or ESL training, particularly if schooled in a structural methodology.

Vocabulary may effectively be assessed in terms of communicative effectiveness rather than complexity. It is useful to recall that one of the most widely used acronyms in presentation training is "Keep It Short and Sweet". Complexity can be a hindrance to effective oral presentation.

The following language suggestions may assist learners:

- ◆ use shorter words
- ◆ do not overuse adjectives or complex sentence structures
- ◆ use the active voice whenever possible
- ◆ be straightforward and use a SVO order
- ◆ use concrete examples to make listeners hear, see, feel or smell something
- ◆ use personal pronouns to personalise the message
- ◆ use skillful repetition

## Conclusion

Oral presentation skills assessment can be aided by teaching for the special features that mark one-way presentation speaking from the complex interaction of conversational English. In presentation speaking one can research and prepare. A speaker works with longer turns or units of speech and can develop a framework for thinking and delivery. These frameworks can be taught and used to provide a structure for practising key utterances or phrases, unlike within a rapidly shifting conversation.

With research, practice and rehearsal it becomes easier to present. Most courses in presentation skills recognise confidence building as critical (Carnegie, 1962; Ellis & O'Driscoll, 1992) and it is useful as second or foreign language teachers to point out that confidence is an area of development for all presenters in all languages. Confidence is also built by practising defined skills prior to assessment.

As in all language development, the purposes of assessment need to be clear to teachers and learners. Oral presentation assessment with an emphasis on possibilities for improvement forms the basis of diagnostic feedback. When a test involves accountability outside course-based learning, then clarity of criteria and purpose are especially critical. In both areas there are issues of weightage in terms of the mark allocation to features such as non-verbals, pronunciation, etc., which will affect learners' attention. The mark weightage can reflect a particular group of learners' special needs as with some softly spoken Thai learners who may need to develop appropriate projection. With principle attention to techniques and practice opportunities, learners will develop effective content, organisation and delivery.

Once an educator has defined the learners' needs and skills and related these to criteria for performance, one can develop tasks to effectively teach and test the valuable skills of oral presentation.

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