

Causes of Academic Oral Presentation Difficulties Faced by Students at a Polytechnic in Sarawak

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to identify the causes of oral presentation difficulties encountered by the students at a polytechnic in Sarawak. It also examines the differences in the causes of difficulties in academic oral presentation faced by the engineering and commerce students. The total number of respondents who participated in this study was 223. Questionnaires and interviews were used to collect data from the respondents. The information gathered from the questionnaires was then analysed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (independent samples t-test). The interviews were then transcribed and coded. Based on the results, the main cause of oral presentation difficulties faced by the students was lack of practice. Moreover, the researcher found there were significant differences between engineering and commerce students in the causes of oral presentation difficulties such as psychological factors, lack of practice and role of teacher(s). For example, the engineering students were less prepared than the commerce students when dealing with oral presentations probably because engineering students focused more on their engineering subjects that involved engineering projects, which needed much of their time and efforts. It is hoped that the findings of this study would enable the lecturers to have a better understanding of how to prepare and train the students well in oral presentation skills before they enter the working world.

KEYWORDS: Academic English, presentation skills, Malaysian polytechnic students, engineering, commerce

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Introduction

Mastering good communication skills is essential because it serves as the key to success in one's life, career and relationships. Communication involves the delivery of ideas and feelings to others (Abdul Aziz Yusof, 2003). An effective communication is conducted "in a manner which is clear, fluent, and to the point, and which holds the audience's attention, both in groups and one-to-one situations" (Idrus & Salleh, 2008, p. 62). A person who cannot clearly articulate his or her thoughts may be wrongly judged as uneducated or poorly informed. Thus, upon realizing the importance of mastering good communication skills, most academic courses offered at Malaysian institutions of higher learning require their students to conduct oral presentations as part of their course assessments. Most students find it challenging when asked to present orally, especially in English. Students often encounter difficulties such as lack of proficiency in using the English language correctly as well as lack of confidence when speaking in front of an audience. Thus, this paper looks into the causes of academic oral presentation difficulties faced by students at a polytechnic in Sarawak.

Problem statement

There is an issue which has become a major concern in many institutions of higher learning. The problem is many students from these institutions have graduated with excellent results but remain unemployed. One of the causes of unemployment among graduates is being unable to communicate well in English (Hanafi Zaid & Kamarudin, 2011). They face difficulties in pronunciation, the use of correct grammar and fluency.

In addition, a study conducted by Zainuddin and Selamat (2012) mentioned that "many employers who employ polytechnic graduates have voiced their concerns that these graduates have great difficulties in communicating effectively at work despite having excellent technical knowledge in their areas" (p. 78). In other words, they are not well prepared for effective communication. That is why students often feel frustrated and intimidated each time oral presentations are assigned to them, especially when they are dealing with research matters and communication skills required for a successful presentation (King, 2002). Besides, it is also stressful for students who are not fluent in English and are expected to speak in the target language, especially during their English lessons (Khairi & Nurul Lina, 2010).

Therefore, the purpose of the study is to explore the perceived causes of academic oral presentation difficulties faced by the students at a polytechnic in Sarawak and also the differences in the causes of difficulties faced between engineering and commerce students.

Research questions

The research questions of the study are:

- (a) What are the perceived causes of academic oral presentation difficulties faced by polytechnic students?
- (b) Are there statistically significant differences between polytechnic engineering and commerce students in regard to the causes of academic oral presentation difficulties?

Literature Review

The literature review focuses on components of language anxiety and related research that has been carried out to identify causes of difficulties in oral presentations.

Components of language anxiety

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) categorized language anxiety into communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Some students find that giving an oral presentation is a difficult task because of their inner fears. Students are afraid of making mistakes, of being criticized or rejected by the audience, and of forgetting what they want to say. All these fears are known as communication apprehension. Communication apprehension is defined as an “individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (McCroskey, 1977, p. 78).

Test anxiety is defined as “an apprehension over academic evaluation which is a fear of failing in test situations” (Horwitz & Young, as cited in Joy, 2013, p. 2). In the context of this study, polytechnic students who have taken or are taking English courses are evaluated for their proficiency in speaking English. They are evaluated in the form of carrying out an academic oral presentation, which is considered the main assessment that has a 30% weightage (AE 501 Communicative English 3 Syllabus, 2011). Students who encounter test anxiety often put impractical demands on themselves and feel that anything less than a perfect test performance is a failure. Thus, they may become too concerned and start thinking that they will never be able to pronounce a word correctly or give a good presentation (Horwitz et al., 1986). This makes them unfocused and nervous during presentations.

Carleton, McCreary, Norton, and Asmundson (2006) defined the fear of negative evaluation as “the apprehension and distress arising from concerns about being judged despairingly or hostilely by others” (p. 297). Students who encounter this fear 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.

Studies on causes of oral presentation difficulties faced by students

A study conducted by Juhana (2012) showed that linguistic factors such as lack of vocabulary, lack of understanding of grammatical patterns and incorrect pronunciation are obstacles for students to present in the English class. Besides that, Tanveer’s (2007) study revealed that sociocultural factors such as “limited exposure to the target language and lack of opportunities to practice speaking in such environments” (p. 24) are setbacks to the development of students’ communicative abilities. As a result, students feel embarrassed or stressed when they are required to present in front of the class. There are also other sociocultural factors such as cultural differences, social status, self-identity and gender, which contribute to students’ difficulties when they engage in oral presentations.

There are several reasons that demotivate students to carry out an oral presentation. Some students are afraid that their peers or the teachers may judge their proficiency in English, and this makes them feel embarrassed. Therefore, they prefer to remain passive, and unwilling to participate in oral presentation tasks. Another reason is the students are not interested in the English subject; thus they are not motivated to take part in any form of speaking activities,

such as oral presentations (Mezrigui, 2011). Besides, students' lack of knowledge about the speaking activities also demotivated them to participate (Juhana, 2012).

A classroom with a large number of students provides little opportunity for students to practise their oral presentations in class (Mezrigui, 2011). The teacher is not able to give individual attention in providing guidance or training to each student. Besides, the students do not have their share in oral presentation tasks due to time constraints, especially if the oral presentations are conducted individually. In addition, classroom atmosphere also influences students' performance in conducting an oral presentation. A carefree and jovial atmosphere encourages students to present well and confidently. On the other hand, an apprehensive and tense atmosphere caused by a number of circumstances gives rise to invisible barriers that hinder the students from doing well in their oral presentations (Mezrigui, 2011).

Generally, students are given the freedom to select their own presentation topics based on a theme assigned by their teachers. The teachers would recommend the students to choose presentation topics that they are familiar with, in terms of their connection to real life and topics that suit the level of the language required to talk on them; this step is aimed at increasing students' interest and making the presentation easier for them (Mezrigui, 2011). However, some of the students face difficulties in choosing the right topics. Consequently, they might choose a topic that they are not able to handle and tend to perform poorly during their oral presentation sessions.

Methodology

This study employs a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, using a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire and an interview, to collect data. The sample of the study consisted of 230 students. They formed a proportionally stratified sample in this study. These students are from the engineering and commerce departments of a polytechnic in Sarawak. At the time of the study, they were in their fifth semester and were registered in the AE 501 Communicative English course. All of them have given academic oral presentations in previous courses such as AE 101 Communicative English 1 and AE 301 Communicative English 2. They were also required to give oral presentations in their current English course. The questionnaire was adapted from a study by Nguyen Thi Van (2010). A reliability test was conducted on the questionnaire and the Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient was 0.94, which indicated a high level of internal reliability. An Alpha value is considered satisfactory if it is equal to or greater than 0.70 (Pawar & Thakurdesai, 2013).

The researcher also carried out a semi-structured interview with some respondents in the study in order to further support and explain the quantitative findings. The interview questions elicited information such as the respondents' perceptions of the importance of oral presentations and difficulties faced in oral presentations.

Data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed using the SPSS version 20.5. The findings were then computed in terms of means and standard deviations. The independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the differences between engineering and commerce students in the areas of difficulties in oral presentations.

As for the data obtained from the interview, they were transcribed and coded into categories. Eight respondents were selected for the interview using the convenient sampling method, according to their respective departments, i.e. one respondent from each department. 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).

Findings

This section is divided into two parts. The first part presents the analysis and findings of this study in relation to the first research question: "What are the perceived causes of academic oral presentation difficulties faced by polytechnic students?" The second part presents the analysis and findings in relation to the second research question: "Are there statistically significant differences between polytechnic engineering and commerce students in regard to the causes of academic oral presentation difficulties?"

Causes of academic oral presentation difficulties

This part presents the questionnaire and interview findings in determining the main causes of difficulties faced by the polytechnic students when giving oral presentations in English.

Questionnaire results

The results are presented in means and standard deviations for each aspect as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Causes of Oral Presentation Difficulties

Causes	M	SD
Linguistic factors	3.09	0.98
Psychological factors	3.09	1.01
Lack of practice	3.12	0.97
Role of teachers	2.65	1.00

Note: M – Mean, SD – Standard Deviation

Table 1 shows that the primary cause of the academic oral presentation difficulties encountered by the students is lack of practice ($M=3.12$, $SD=0.97$). Besides, most of the students disagreed that the role of their teachers caused them difficulties when carrying out academic oral presentations, which is reflected in the lowest mean score of 2.65 ($SD=1.00$).

Interview results

According to the interviewees, the causes of their difficulties in oral presentations are grouped into the following major categories. Interview excerpts are selected to illustrate the main ideas.

1. Students' perception that it is difficult to conduct an oral presentation

Because maybe, the student itself, they don't want to learn English or they don't want to learn about oral because maybe their mind-set set that the oral is hard. Maybe that is the main cause. [ES1]

2. Lack of opportunities to speak in English

But when come to Poly, my English is become very wrong because when I with my friends like a...Malay friends,

they...they always use “kamek kamek” (I in Sarawakian Malay) so I’m so difficult to...to use my English... [ES2]

When we...in Sarawak mostly, people talk Sarawak language lah, not speak English at the class. Sometime, mostly speak Malay. We only speak English when doing presentation for English, English subject, like that. [ES3]

Maybe, for me... it is because I seldom converse in English, and I always speak with my friends in Malay, Iban. So when I speak in English, it’s a bit awkward for me because sometimes when I... [CS1]

3. Lack of preparation

I think...maybe I’m not really prepared before the presentation [CS2].

4. Lack of English proficiency

Next, I’m very-, my English language is not good. I’m-, my language is very broken [ES4]

The causes, maybe I’m lack in...in this one...English. [CS3]

5. Lack of self-confidence

I’m very, my English language is not good. I’m, my language is very broken so, when I’m, my English is not good, so, my confident is very low [ES4].

we make mistake and then we not too confidence that...what to say...the answer that we present is not that right and then it’s so difficult in presenting the ideas [CS4].

Differences between Engineering and Commerce students in the causes of academic oral presentation difficulties

This part presents the findings in determining any statistically significant differences between engineering and commerce students in the causes of difficulties students encountered when giving academic oral presentations.

An independent samples t-test, using an alpha level of 0.05, was conducted to find out whether there were significant differences between engineering and commerce students in the causes of difficulties in oral presentations. Table 2 shows the results of the t-test. From this table, it can be seen that the Levene’s test result showed $p > 0.05$, indicating that equal variances were assumed.

Table 2
Independent Samples Test Results on Causes of Oral Presentation Difficulties

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Linguistic factors	Equal variances assumed	.028	.866	1.984	221	.049	.241	.122	.002	.481
	Equal variances not assumed			1.976	74.405	.052	.241	.122	-.002	.485
Psychological factors	Equal variances assumed	.001	.969	2.997	221	.003	.383	.128	.131	.635
	Equal variances not assumed			3.002	74.950	.004	.383	.128	.129	.637
Lack of practice	Equal variances assumed	.059	.808	2.094	221	.037	.252	.120	.015	.489
	Equal variances not assumed			2.036	72.054	.045	.252	.124	.005	.499
Roles of teacher(s)	Equal variances assumed	1.355	.246	2.242	221	.026	.298	.133	.036	.559
	Equal variances not assumed			2.388	82.075	.019	.298	.125	.050	.546

In terms of linguistic factors, there was no significance difference between engineering and commerce students, $t(221) = 1.98$, $p = 0.05$.

For the psychological factors, the difference was significant, $t(221) = 3.00$, $p = 0.003$. An examination of the group means indicated that the mean score of engineering students ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 0.78$) was significantly higher than the mean score of commerce students ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 0.78$).

For lack of practice, the difference was significant, $t(221) = 2.09$, $p = 0.04$. An examination of the group means indicated that the mean score of engineering students ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 0.73$) was significantly higher than the mean score of commerce students ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 0.77$).

For roles of teacher(s), there was also a significant difference, $t(221) = 2.24$, $p = 0.03$. An examination of the group means indicated that the mean score of engineering students ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 0.83$) was significantly higher than the mean score of commerce students ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 0.75$).

Discussion

The most common cause of oral presentation difficulties faced by the engineering and commerce students was lack of practice. This may be due to the fact that they gave priority to their core subjects, namely, engineering and commerce subjects that were challenging and required a lot of their time and effort to study. Besides, the students might not be very interested in the oral presentation tasks as they assumed that oral presentations were not necessary in their field of studies.

Another common cause of oral presentation difficulties faced by the students was linguistic factors. Linguistic factors refer to the lack of English proficiency among the students when delivering oral presentations. A possible explanation for this was the students did not have many chances to speak in the target language as they were inclined to communicate in Sarawakian Malay or their mother tongues, especially outside of the classroom, as mentioned by three of the interviewees. Tanveer's (2007) study revealed that "limited exposure to the target language and lack of opportunities to practice speaking in such environments" (p. 24) do not enable students' communicative abilities to develop fully; this situation causes embarrassment or stress for the students when they are required to present in front of the class. Thus, the students became highly apprehensive when they were required to deliver their presentation in English, and this emotion affected their performance. This situation has been known as "oral communication apprehension" (McCroskey, 1977, p.78).

The last common cause of oral presentation difficulties faced by the students was from a psychological perspective. One of the psychological factors that most students face is lack of confidence. Based on Awan, Azher, Anwar and Naz's (2010) study, the students were not confident when they were required to conduct an oral presentation because they might feel embarrassed with their broken English due to their low English proficiency. They became very worried about getting low marks in their oral presentation assessments and started to have negative thoughts that affected their level of confidence. Every student tends to compete with one another for better grades (Hassan & Selamat, 2002). This condition is known as "test anxiety" (Horwitz & Young, as cited in Joy, 2013, p. 2).

In terms of the differences in the causes of oral presentation difficulties between engineering and commerce students, the results of the independent samples t-test revealed that there was a significant difference between engineering and commerce students in some of the causes of difficulties, namely, psychological factors, lack of practice and roles of the teacher(s). These three causes of difficulties were found to be more pronounced among the engineering students.

The engineering students stated that one of the reasons they faced oral presentation difficulties was lack of guidance from their lecturers in delivering an effective oral presentation. This was probably because the students rarely interacted orally with their lecturers in the course (El Enein, 2011), therefore the lecturers did not know specifically the difficulties encountered by the individual students in their oral presentations. Besides that, these students also stated that lack of experience was their main cause of their oral presentation difficulties. The possible explanation for this was that they seldom or never participated in any public speaking activities when they were in their secondary schools. Due to little exposure then, the students found it a challenging and intimidating task when they were required to conduct an oral presentation and speak in front of a group of people when they enter tertiary education. Besides lack of experience, the engineering students stated that

lack of preparation was also the cause of their difficulties in oral presentations. The engineering students were less prepared than the commerce students when it came to oral presentations. This was probably because engineering students focused more on their core subjects, involving engineering projects, which demanded much of their time and effort; thus leaving them little time to prepare for oral presentations.

Lastly, the engineering students stated that lack of confidence was also the cause of their difficulties in oral presentations. Based on the researcher's observation of his students, he noticed that the commerce students can speak confidently, are open-minded and persuasive, and tend to be outspoken. This is probably due to the nature of their future career, which requires them to be good communicators and speak convincingly in order to succeed in securing business deals and investments. On the other hand, the engineering students were more interested in theories and calculations, with the view that these were more important than oral communication; thus they did not see the importance of oral presentations, resulting in them to lack confidence when required to do so.

Conclusion

From the results and discussions, the research questions have been answered with sufficient evidence. This study has identified the polytechnic students' causes of their difficulties in oral presentations as well as revealed the differences between engineering and commerce students in this respect. Overall the students from both disciplines deemed lack of practice to be the principal cause of difficulties in oral presentations. However, this study was limited to the oral presentation difficulties encountered by students in one polytechnic in Sarawak. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be generalized to students from other polytechnics in Malaysia. The findings obtained, nevertheless, have contributed to research in the ESL context at the tertiary level where oral presentations in English are a part of the academic activities of the students. It is hoped that further research in oral presentations on a wider scale can be conducted to inform pedagogy leading to improved performance of the students.

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