PROBLEMS OF MAKING A PRESENTATION IN THE CLASS ENCOUNTERED BY SECOND-YEAR STUDENTS IN ENGLISH DEPARTMENT AT BA RIA-VUNG TAU UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Making a presentation is one of the most popular activities in the classes of the English department of Ba Ria – Vung Tau University (BVU). But in fact, there are a number of students unable to deliver a good presentation. They often feel depressed or extremely anxious when orally presenting their ideas in English in front of their instructors and classmates, and their performances are certainly not interesting or impressive to attract the audiences. Therefore, this paper is aimed at determining the problems that students have encountered in making class presentations in English. The data of this research is collected during the teaching and learning process of the academic course "Presentation skills" by observing and recording the presentations of 54 sophomores in the English Department at BVU. The findings reveal that there are two main kinds of problems that are associated with the content of the presentation and the way of delivery. Some recommendations in the light of the findings are also presented in this paper.

Keywords: class presentation, problems, content, delivery

1.0 INTRODUCTION

English is known as an international language and widely used in many fields including business, science, politics, and education all over the world. So, it is obvious that the ability to make a good presentation in English, which is believed to be a means of expressing opinions, conveying key messages, or communicating with many people from different cultures, has been becoming ESL learners' desire. Many schools and universities have assigned presentation skills as a requirement of many courses in the academic curriculum. Since oral presentations in the classroom will offer greater class interaction and participation, increase students' interest in learning, give them valuable learning experience and make noticeable improvements in their communication and presentation skills. It can be also beneficial for their future career as in the current context of globalization, most recruiters have been looking for candidates who own the ability of public speaking in English. However, making an English presentation has been a big challenge for many ESL learners. This situation has been occurring in the English department, at Ba Ria-Vung Tau University (BVU) in Vietnam for years. In many classes, the lecturers ask students to orally present certain topics in English, which will occur for a limited duration, include visual aids, and be done individually or in a group in front of the class. This aims at providing with ESL students more opportunities to practice delivering compelling and informative presentations. But in

fact, a large number of sophomore students admit that they are often too anxious to present their ideas fluently or others claim that they do not know how to deliver a presentation successfully.

Therefore, this research is conducted to find out the common problems the second-year students encounter in giving class presentations in English as well as to suggest some feasible solutions to handle the situation.

2.0 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Presentation and presentation skills

There are a number of definitions of "presentation" by many researchers. A presentation is defined as "a preplanned, prepared, and structured talk given in formal or informal circumstances to a small or large group of people" by Ellis and Johnson in Bereczky [3], or it is usually "given to more particular audiences" by Mandel [8]. In addition, Barras [2] states that "presentation is a special kind of talk". According to him, in-class presentations, the presenters will introduce the topic, explain the focus term, and persuade their audiences to give a contribution to a group discussion or share their opinions.

Similarly, Thornbury [10] views a presentation as "a special term of discussion". Or according to Chivers and Shoolbred [5] presentation is an activity used in academic courses in conveying the content of learning and giving the opportunity to the students for developing team working. In this case, students playing the role of presenters will have more chances to use the English language to present a topic, and deliver the main ideas; other students who are their audiences will develop listening skills as well as the ability to share opinions or debate the certain topics, or giving feedback.

Furthermore, in the book "How to Prepare Stage, and Deliver Winning Presentations", Leech [7] claims that presentation is not entirely speech. It differs from a formal speech in three main respects: (i) It might be given impromptu, prepared only in outline form, and spoken from visual aids and notes rather than fully written and delivered word for word, as speeches may be; (ii) It often involves visual aids, while many formal speeches do not; (iii) A presentation is usually given to an audience which is highly participative - people rapidly ask questions and engage in dialog. For most speeches, the audience listens and possibly asks questions later.

From the definitions above, it can be inferred that a presentation is a complex interactive process that is usually structured, prepared carefully, and often employs visual aids. In this typical event, presenters try to convey key messages to their audiences as well as encourage them to get involved in the discussion by giving feedback, putting questions, sharing their points of view, etc., which creates a sense of interaction effectively.

It is a fact that presentation skills play a crucial role in delivering messages to the audiences or enhancing the ability of public speaking. Tkachenko [11] views presentation skills as the set of techniques and skills required to successfully present oral information to others which cover a variety of areas such as the structure of the presentation, the design of the slides, and the tone of the voice, the body language, etc.

2.2. The importance of class presentation

Students' presentation in the classroom is considered "an important element in delivering positive learning experiences" in the study of All share & Hindi [1]. Similarly, Chivers & Shoolbred [5] argue that students' presentations may serve the aim of advocacy/persuasion, training, teaching and learning, informing, and assessment. It has been increasingly used in academic courses in universities to stimulate students to be more active and develop their autonomy to gain a positive learning experience.

Besides, when making an oral presentation in the class, students are required to use all four language skills in a naturally integrated way to create great class interaction and participation. The listeners can ask the speakers questions or give comments; then they can engage in conversation after the presentation (by Markel [9]). Thus, their communication skills will be improved effectively.

In short, oral presentations play an important role in (i) encouraging students to become active and autonomous learners; (ii) enhancing students' English skills and communication skills.

2.3. Main features of a good presentation

According to Brown and Priyanvada [4], there are two primary aspects of a successful presentation: (i) content means the appropriate function of the students speaking in-class presentation. In addition, the sub-indicators in the content of speaking performance are purpose, introduction, main idea, supporting point, and conclusion; (ii) delivery includes speaker gesture, language, pronunciation, visual aids, and response to the audience.

Moreover, Thornbury [10] also emphasizes some main features of a presentation: (i) the presenter should provide a well-prepared structure, concise summary, and list of relevant implications in making a presentation; (ii) he is required to engage and evoke audiences' interest; (iii) he should have an effective delivery style and be able to manage the time.

Consequently, it can be concluded in this paper that in order to give a good presentation, presenters have to ensure:

1) Content consists of the purpose, a well-prepared structure containing the introduction, the main points, the supporting ideas, and the conclusion
2) Delivery, which is the way of transferring key messages to audiences as well as stimulating audiences' interest and interaction, includes the use of English language and pronunciation; the use of body language/ gesture, visual aids; the confident and professional style.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The research employed a qualitative design with a descriptive approach in order to examine the common problems of sophomore students in making class presentations in English.

The subject of this research was 53 second-year students of the English department of Ba Ria – Vung Tau University (BVU), in Vietnam, who took the "Presentation skills" course and had class presentations in English during the fifth semester.

The research has been carried out as follows:

1) Collecting data through the teaching and learning process by means of observing, recording, and note-taking during students' presentations in the classroom
2) Synthesizing and analyzing the collected data
3) Drawing out conclusion

4.0 FINDINGS AND SUGGESTIONS

Through observation, it is found that most students (93%) of being able to determine their presentation's purpose as well as propose a well-organized structure. But in fact, there are only 12 students who deliver interesting introductions to get the audience's attention, the others (77%) do not achieve this due to the fact that they just simply greet the audience and immediately move to the main points. Some suggestions for those are observing and learning useful ways that good presenters use in the first part of their presentations like putting lead-in questions or showing related videos to catch the audiences' attention. Additionally, while 48 students (90%) remember to have the conclusion to restate key points mentioned in their presentation, the others (12 students) finish their presentation without any summary. In this situation, teachers need to emphasize the importance of a conclusion, which helps learners remember and avoid such an unexpected problem.

It is also noted that although almost all of the students state the main points to the audience, 32% of them provide a clear and persuasive explanation as well as suitable illustrations to clarify those main ideas. Thus, the audiences find it difficult to fully comprehend the content and they will not listen to the presenters attentively. To deal with the problem, the lecturers should let the students spend more time doing activities that relate to making arguments. Following the PEEP principle of John, H and Andrew, M [6] is also the best choice for presenters. It suggests that after introducing the main points, presenters need to give an explanation or/ and examples and restate the points if necessary.

Lastly, there are still some spelling, grammatical, lexical, or even expression mistakes on PowerPoint slides of 17 students' presentations (about 32%). This might result from students' carelessness, their poor writing skills, or the translation from their mother tongue. Therefore, students need to be careful when writing information on slides as well as try to improve their writing skills by doing more grammatical exercises, and actively taking part in activities in writing classes controlled by teachers.

It is noticeable that only one-third of students (17/53 students) are able to use grammar and diction properly and suitably when making a presentation; most students are still not good at speaking English since they do not have sufficient vocabulary resources (28/53 students), or they lack grammar knowledge (16/53 students), or have difficulties making sentences to express their opinion (35/53 students). Besides, mispronunciation is a common problem in giving oral presentations with many students (41%). According to Thornbury [10], learners not only need to equip themselves with mechanics of language elements (pronunciation,

grammar, vocabulary) which emphasize on use of the right words in the right order with the correct pronunciation but also the functions of language that deals with speaking performance in the form of transaction and interaction and the knowledge of how native speakers use the language in the context of structured interpersonal exchange. In order to help students overcome those problems, lecturers need to prepare good lesson plans containing clear explanations and useful tasks for grammatical points as well as provide more opportunities for learners to practice pronouncing English words and making sentences to express their ideas in the previous modules of the curriculum including Grammar, Phonetics, and Phonology and Speaking. For instance, students are guided to learn grammar and vocabulary in contexts, play down the role of a bilingual dictionary, and are encouraged to determine the meaning of words and grammar use. Besides, there are some ways that can be done by EFL learners including consulting the dictionary if they find unknown words to search for their meanings easily as well as know-how to pronounce words correctly, reading more authentic English materials or watching English speeches, presentations, etc. in order to understand the vocabulary use or way to presenting topics of native speakers. Furthermore, learners need to try to remember vocabulary items and grammatical points and use them in sentences every day as much as possible, which facilitates them to make meaningful, natural speech acts or complete sentences to express ideas in English.

Furthermore, the students tend to be monotonous speakers. They often maintain a flat tone, slow speed without emphasis patterns (65%) or they even make many pauses, and repetitions (52%) when presenting in the class. Those features significantly influence the accuracy and fluency when they present in English.

Additionally, it is impossible for many students to give class presentations successfully since they might not remember the content or the planned structure. Hence, they tend to show slides and then read the scripts without paying attention to audience, keeping eye contact with them (68%); or they do not often use body language and gestures (82%) during their presentation, which makes them become passive presenters.

To deal with the problems, teachers should pay attention to provide more chances for learners to work in groups then present their opinions with their peers or debate on a particular topic in the class; show them model samples of excellent presentations, which stimulates their participation and develops their presentation skills. It is also suggested that students need to have good preparation, master the presentation's topic and structure as well as do rehearsal many times. That might help the presenters improve the fluency and accuracy of their performance. Another important thing presenters need to remember is that try to remain in the eye contact and interact with the audience, and use gestures, body language, and physical movement during the presentation as much as possible, which will enable them to attract or leave a strong impression on the audience.

Another problem discovered in this investigation is although most of the students employ various kinds of visual aids like PowerPoint slides (100%), videos (64%), handouts (22%), and flipcharts (13%), this employment is not really effective. 60% of them encounter popular mistakes in designing slides related to the great number of information/ words on a slide; the font, the size of words; the contrast between the color of background and word; the overuse of animation, picture, etc; therefore, many audiences find it difficult to read or remember the

main ideas. Some of them (8 students) even choose the unsuitable videos which are too long or contain unrelated information. Therefore, instructors need to take account of those problems in their lessons in many different ways such as emphasizing the rules of designing power points slides; showing the presentations containing those errors above, then asking students to examine and give some suggestions. This could help learners remember rules or tips of using visual aids effectively.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that BVU'S English sophomore students encounter many problems in making a class presentation in English. They are divided into two main kinds relating to content and delivery.

With regard to the problems of content, there are only a few students who do not succeed in identifying their presentation's purpose or proposing a well-organized structure as follows: (i) many presenters do not deliver impressive introductions to get the audiences' attention; (ii) they do not provide a clear and persuasive explanation as well as suitable illustrations to support the mentioned main ideas; (iii) some presentations even lack the conclusion whose aim is to restate the main points of the presentation. Also, (iv) there are still some spelling, grammatical, lexical, or even expression mistakes still found in the presentation slides of some students.

In addition, the researcher has found that a large number of students meet the delivery-related problems when giving oral presentations in English. The most frequent items are: (i) they do not master English speaking skills, which is revealed through their lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge, their poor pronunciation, their difficulties in making sentences to express opinions; (ii) they seem to be monotonous speakers with the flat tone, slow speed or many pauses, repetitions during their performance; (iii) they passively read slides without using body language, gesture or maintaining eye-contact with the audiences. All of these features reduce their presentations' accuracy and fluency. Another common item is (iv) their errors in designing PowerPoint slides associated with the great number of information/ words on a slide; the font, the size of words; the contrast between the color of background and word; the overuse of animation, picture, etc and the unsuitable choice of video clips. This prevents them from attracting audiences' attention.

English instructors, consequently, are expected to recognize the common problems of making class presentations in English faced by students, so that they can seek solutions to enhance students' presentation skills. It is also suggested that EFL learners should learn experience from excellent presentations of their friends, their teachers, or professional speakers as well as practice presenting ideas more frequently due to the fact that practice makes perfect.

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