Practice and Perception of Oral Presentation: A Study on ESL engineering Students in Odisha

Gopa Nayak
English Language Centre, O.P. Jindal Global University, Haryana.
Email: gopanayak@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This exploratory study seeks to uncover the disparity in practice and perception of oral presentation competence in English among engineering students from an institute in Odisha. The practice of oral presentations was examined from the video recordings of students' presentations. The perception of oral performance competence was assessed on the basis of responses of participants given in the questionnaire, the participants' evaluation of their own performance and views of participants shared during the semi-structured interviews. The findings showed that some participants could not put into practice their knowledge of what makes a good oral presentation. A few participants had knowledge about the competencies involved in oral presentation and could practise them but failed to evaluate themselves while viewing their recorded presentations. The study has implications for the teaching of oral presentation skills to ESL engineering students. Knowledge about the competencies involved in oral presentation, opportunities to practise them, followed by provision for self-evaluation of recorded presentations could help in bridging the gap between practice and perception.

Keywords: ***Oral presentation; ESL engineering students.***

Introduction

Oral presentation is a formal mode of communication that constitutes an integral part of the repertoire of skills required for a graduate engineer, in both education and employment. Despite the importance of oral presentation as a measure of communicative competence, literature on oral presentations in English as a second/foreign language classrooms (Morita, 2000; Otoshi & Heffernan, 2008) is scant. A few qualitative studies examined the challenges experienced by ESL students during oral activities in higher education (Weissberg, 1993; Morita, 2000; Zappa-Hollman, 2007). These studies showed that oral presentation was a challenge for ESL students. Most of them were unaware of what needs to be done to improve their oral presentation skills (Nakamura, 2002). Students often encounter the task of doing an oral presentation by practically making a presentation without any knowledge of what makes a good oral presentation. Sometimes students know about what makes a good oral presentation but fail to practise it during their presentation. This often results in students making amateur presentations

in spite of having good academic or content knowledge on the topic of making oral presentations.

Research shows that oral presentation skills can be improved by receiving feedback from recorded presentations through self-evaluation (Quigley & Nyquist, 1992; Brown, Bull & Pendlebury, 1997; Quiglcy, 1998; Grievson & Lowe, 2000; Rosenstein, 2002). Self-evaluation is defined as the self-judgment of oral speech by the student (Boud, 2013). De Grez, Valcke and Roozen (2009) emphasize the importance of feedback that can be obtained from videotaped recordings of oral presentations. These authors reiterate that feedback from recorded presentations can help in improving the oral presentation skills of students pursuing higher education. When students are made to view their own performance they are able to judge themselves. They come to realise their weaknesses in their own presentations making them liable to improve. As proven in a recent research by Oi (2012), self-evaluation can also motivate the students.

The Present Study

The present study draws on this rationale and adopts video-recorded presentations as a tool for self-evaluation of oral presentation in English by engineering students in Odisha. In this study the practice of oral presentation is examined and compared to students' perception of what makes a good presentation. However, the study limits itself to a few competencies involved in making a good oral presentation. They include paralinguistic features of speech and nonverbal behaviour of the speaker which enables the speaker to connect with the audience.

Paralinguistic features, a widely researched topic on speech, has different connotations leading to a lack of clarity and conciseness. The present study draws on Crystal's (1974) explanation of paralinguistic features by restricting the scope to 'vocal factor' and excluding visual communication. Moreover, in this study 'vocal' includes paralinguistic features such as speed, rhythm, pitch, stress and intonation, and does not include 'cough' or 'smile' even though these can be included under 'vocal' and they can be embedded in linguistic messages to add to the meaning of the spoken text. Similarly, the pitch of the voice is taken into consideration for the meaningfulness of the text and not for the emotional content of the messages involved in paralanguage.

Audience connect was investigated in this study, as this is an important aspect of a good oral presentation (Gurak, 2000; Otoshi & Heffernen, 2008). Otoshi and Heffernen (2008) emphasize that in the context of EFL classrooms it is vital to connect to the audience in a convincing manner. However, audience connect is often manipulated through nonverbal behaviour as in standing posture, hand movements, facial expression, eye contact and gestures. These aspects of nonverbal behaviour help in connecting to the audience and thereby making the presentation effective (Gurak, 2000). The CEFR (2001) scales also include gestures, facial expressions (e.g., smile or scowl),

posture (e.g., slump for 'despair' or sitting forward for 'keen interest'), eye contact (e.g., a conspiratorial wink or a disbelieving stare), body contact (e.g., kiss or handshake) and proxemics (e.g., standing close or aloof) as body language under the category of paralinguistic features while describing nonverbal communication.

To sum up, good presentation skills are important for every student both during education and for employment. However, there is not enough scope for understanding the application of theoretical knowledge in practical settings as in oral presentations. Hence there remains a gap in implementing theoretical ideas into practice, resulting in poor performance in spite of knowledge of academic content. This study aims at bridging this gap between practice and perception of what makes a good presentation.

Methodology

The study was an exploratory study with a mixed-method design where both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed. Quantitative data was obtained through a questionnaire as a survey instrument and the analysis of video recordings of oral presentations. This data was used to examine the relation between practice and perception. This examination added to the rigour of the study and thereby increased its reliability. Qualitative data furnished the possible explanations of perceptions behind the practice. Triangulation of data obtained from the questionnaire, video recordings and focused group discussions helped to establish the reliability and validity of the study.

Sample

The sample of this study consisted of first year engineering students in a private educational institution in Bhubaneswar, the capital of the state of Odisha. A total number of 65 students out of which 25 students from the Electronics and Tele-communications branch and 40 from the Computer Science participated in the study. The mean age of the students was 18. The socio-economic background of the participants was not investigated. However, the fees for the course they were enrolled in was around 5 lakhs, which gives an idea of the economic background of the students. With respect to language exposure, the medium of instruction is English in the Institute. However, Hindi and Odia (the local language) are used for informal communication. All the first year students have English as part of their curriculum, which includes oral communication.

Tools

A questionnaire was used as a tool to examine the knowledge of the participants about the competencies investigated in the study. The questionnaire consisted of twenty questions to be answered mostly with an 'yes' or a 'no'. Every such question was followed by asking for reasons behind the responses given. Some of the questions were directly on the role of specific features identified for this study in making a good presentation. A sample questionnaire has been attached for reference. The recorded presentation of the participants was the other tool used in this study. This enabled the examination of the practice of oral presentations.

Tasks

The task designed to assess the competencies involved in oral presentations was to give a formal presentation. The participants were asked to give this presentation for not less than one minute and not more than three minutes. The topic was 'introducing yourself'. The presentations were video-recorded. The evaluation of their own video-recorded presentation was also one of the other tasks the participants had to undertake.

Procedure

The participants were asked to give a presentation introducing themselves in their own convenient time, in a classroom with video recording facility. They were video-recorded by the researcher while doing the presentation. This was not their first time they were being video-recorded. During their normal classroom hours they are often video-recorded. Hence this was not a novel experience for them. However, they were told that they were being recorded this time for a study.

After the recording the students were given the questionnaire and asked to give their views on the different competencies involved in the oral presentation investigated in the study. The next phase was viewing the video recordings by the researcher and individual participants. This was followed by semi-structured interviews by the researcher with the participants to get their responses on their own presentations. There was discussion only on the features of oral presentation identified for investigation in this study.

Data Analysis

Data from the three different sources including video recording of the oral presentations, students' responses to the questionnaire, students' evaluation of their own presentations, and the views and opinions expressed in the semi-structured interviews were analysed separately to seek answers to the research questions.

The video recordings were first viewed by the researcher to examine the practice of the different features investigated in the study. The paralinguistic features of the speech were identified and their presence in the presentation noted. This was followed by watching the videos for observing different kinds of nonverbal behaviour such as eye contact and posture to examine the presenter's ability to connect to the audience.

Individual participants were shown their video recordings and asked to evaluate themselves on each of the features investigated in the study. They were asked to state whether they thought the speed of their presentation was right and whether they felt they used intonation, rhythm, pitch and stress in the right places in their presentation. They were asked to review whether they made connection with the audience. Their answers were followed up with questions asking for the reasons behind their judgements. They were asked whether connecting to the audience was important during oral presentation. They were also questioned during semi-structured interviews if they felt their non-verbal behaviour in the recorded presentations was enough to make

connection with the audience.

Findings

Paralinguistic features of the presentation

The number of 'yes'/'no' responses in the questionnaire to the questions on paralinguistic features was calculated by the researcher. The participants' self-evaluation of their recorded presentations on the practice of the paralinguistic features was recorded. The total number of participants who gave responses in the questionnaire that these features matter and the total number of those who felt that they practised them are given in **Table 1** below.

Table 1: Knowledge and Practice of Paralinguistic Features

Paralinguistic features	No. of Participants who said 'yes' to these features in the Questionnaire	No. of Participants who felt they practised these features in the Presentation
Speed	65	40
Intonation	65	23
Rhythm	57	25
Pitch	61	35
Stress	60	28

If we compare the data in the questionnaire column with that in the presentation column, we find that the numbers are higher in the questionnaire column, suggesting that theoretical knowledge was easier to acquire than the implementation of practical skills for this group of students. This was not surprising, as the participants had studied them in class but their experience in practising these skills might not have been adequate.

Table 1 shows that all the participants had knowledge that '***speed***' is one of the essential features of oral presentation. This again was not surprising, as 'speed' is an easily recognisable feature compared to others in the list. However, according to participants' own analysis, only 40 participants out of 65, nearly two-thirds of the sample, were able to put their knowledge into practice in maintaining speed in their own presentations.

With reference to '***intonation***', it can be observed that all 65 students had knowledge of intonation. The discussion during the semi-structured interviews revealed that this was because they had been given a very simple definition of intonation, i.e. rising and falling tone. However, when it came to practice, only 23 participants thought their intonation was right, again reflecting that this was a difficult skill to practise.

'***Rhythm***' was the least understood among the five competencies investigated, with 8

participants lacking in knowledge and awareness of 'rhythm' for oral presentation. The reason behind this as reflected in the semi-structured interview was that rhythm is often taught in the context of poetry and training opportunities had not focused on rhythm in oral presentation. **Table 1** shows that only 25 felt that they had done their presentation with proper 'rhythm', reflecting that only about one-third of the participants could practise rhythm in their presentation. More participants knew about 'pitch' and 'stress' than they did 'rhythm'.

For '***pitch***', 61 out of the 65 participants thought that this feature was essential for good oral presentation. This reflects that the majority of the participants had adequate knowledge and awareness about the role of pitch in oral presentation. However, only 35 out of the 65 could identify this feature in their presentation. The reason that the speakers gave during the semi-structured interview was that they became aware of their weakness in making the right pitch only while listening to their own presentations. This suggests that feedback from recorded presentations can help in improving this skill as it is very easy to identify this feature in recordings rather than during the presentation.

'***Stress***' remains one of the features of oral presentation where the gap between theoretical knowledge and practice was the widest; only 28 out of the 60 participants were aware of its role in making a good presentation and could identify it in their own presentation but failed to practise it.

Evaluation of the presentation by the researcher and the participants

Video recordings of the practice session were also examined by the researcher. The results of this examination were compared to the ones made by the participants themselves. This comparison revealed that there was lack of agreement between the researcher/ teacher and the participants, which was also reported by Oi (2012). Some participants were not able to evaluate themselves correctly by failing to identify the features in their practice. The students' responses to the questionnaire and their own evaluation of their practice showed that there were some who had the knowledge and were able to practise those features. However, when they reviewed their own presentation, they failed to evaluate their practice of some paralinguistic features. **Table 2** below presents the findings.

Table 2: Disparity in Evaluation between Researcher and Participants on Paralinguistic Features

Paralinguistic features	'No' by Participants	'Yes' by Researcher
Speed	25	2
Intonation	42	3
Rhythm	32	6
Pitch	29	3
Stress	41	4

It was found that out of the 25 students who had the knowledge, 2 had practised speed in their presentation but could not evaluate their speed effectively in their presentation. Three students had intonation in their presentation but could not identify it in their oral presentation while evaluating themselves. Six students had knowledge of rhythm and they practised it also during their presentation but failed to evaluate themselves correctly. Similarly, three and four students could not identify pitch and stress respectively in their presentations. Failing to identify these features in their own presentations shows that the students' theoretical knowledge had not translated into conscious awareness. Practical expertise could be a reflection of unconscious learning. If evaluation is to be adopted as a tool for self-improvement, explicit knowledge on both theory and practice of these features is vital.

Audience Connect

The video recordings were analysed for evidence on audience connect. Eye contact and body language as in hand and leg movements were observed to measure the level of connection with the audience. It is difficult to judge exactly how much eye contact and body language helps in making the necessary connection with the audience (Otoshi & Heffernen, 2008). However, in this study, an attempt was made to examine this feature not in the amount of eye contact but by qualitatively analysing each recording and making a judgement on the effectiveness of the behaviour in connecting with the audience. The researcher led the participants to evaluate themselves on what they felt about this feature. All the participants felt that their eye contact was not adequate enough to connect to the audience. Out of the 65 participants, only 6 felt that they needed improvement in their posture. A few participants felt that their hand and finger movements needed correction.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study point to a gap between perception and practice of oral presentation with this group of engineering students. With reference to paralinguistic features the findings show that certain competencies like speed, intonation, pitch and stress were not difficult for the students to understand. However, it was difficult for them to put these competencies to good effect. This conclusion is in conformity with that made in other studies (Weissberg, 1993; Morita, 2000; Zappa-Hollman, 2007) and implies that explicit teaching of these features should be accompanied by conscious practice in oral communication with learners of English as a foreign /second language.

Based on the findings on rhythm, it can be concluded that mere classroom instruction in oral presentation competencies may not be adequate to provide complete knowledge or its application in actual practice. As the findings of this study show, the students failed to understand the role of stress and rhythm in oral presentation because rhythm was usually taught in the context of poetry and not related to other modes of language use. This suggests that classroom

instruction in ESL/EFL should provide elaborate examples of use in different contexts to enable a clear conception about the different competencies involved in oral presentation (Joughin, 2007).

The findings also provide evidence that feedback can help bridge the gap between practice and perception. By listening to their own presentations the students realised their lack of correct pitch in their presentations. As shown by other studies (Brown, Bull & Pendlebury, 1997; Grievson & Lowe, 2000), this study also provides evidence that feedback in the form of watching one's own video-recorded performance helps to show the disparity between practice and perception.

The findings also suggest that the gap between practice and perception can be bridged by self-evaluation. Some students had knowledge and could practise some of the competencies involved in oral presentation and yet failed to evaluate themselves. This finding is similar to that of Oi (2012), who also came to the conclusion that agreement between self-evaluation and teacher evaluation might be low. This implies that teaching and learning of oral presentation should focus not only on theoretical knowledge but should be followed up with opportunities for practice and feedback (Quigley, 1998). Moreover, self-awareness, which is the first step for self-assessment (De Grez, Valcke & Roozen, 2009; Oi, 2012; Boud, 2013), could be developed through feedback on recorded presentations.

The findings also shed light on another important feature of oral presentation, namely nonverbal behaviour or body language (Gurak, 2000; Otoshi & Heffernen, 2008). The self-evaluation of non-verbal behaviour by the students helped in receiving vital feedback on their role in connecting to the audience. Self-evaluation of recorded presentations made the students realise how their practice of their non-verbal behaviour was different from their perception.

Conclusion

The small size of the sample and the evaluation of student presentations only by the researcher without a co-evaluator could be mentioned as the limitations of this study. The single-rater practice might raise the issue of reliability (Bachman & Palmer, 1989). However, the present study brought in self-evaluation as a means of improving competencies into the purview of research on oral presentation skills of ESL engineering students. Future research could extend the study to other branches of higher education such as law and business administration, and include a variety of tasks on oral presentations.

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