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The Influence of Public Speaking Prosody on Delivering Academic Presentations

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Abstract

The article reports on a study of public speech's influence on making academic, public presentations more efficient. The paper draws on the findings made in the auditory and peer analysis of presentations delivered by students of IT English divided into two stages: before training and after public speech training. The article contains an overview of prosodic and extralinguistic factors that are responsible for ineffective academic presentations. Particular focus is given to the feasibility of academic presentations (to inform, motivate to study, expand knowledge on the subject, and others) from the university students' reviews of their presentations. The author argues that a good balance between visuals and the speaker's rhetorical competence is vital for effective academic presentations. The observations made in the article may be useful to develop expertise in the delivery of academic, public presentations as a part of professional training.

Keywords: Academic presentations, communication, prosody, public speech, visual aids

Introduction

Many researchers address educational technology and digitalization of information as modern educators focus on using a wide range of technology tools that offer different ways of achieving academic objectives (Shoffner, 2013). Mayer (2003); Scheiter (2016); Ploetzner, Fillisch, Gewalt, and Ruf (2016); and Scheiter (2017) emphasize that developing interactive learning makes it more dynamic and efficient. Technology also contributes to the realization of academic presentation since it is commonly done using especially PowerPoint presentation. Students typically prepare educational presentations for seminars, workshops, examinations, and conferences. Teaching students to make presentations is divided into two parts: preparing the presentation slides and the presentation delivery. Generally, the teacher promptly instructed how to make the production material understandable, well-designed, and concise. The presentation delivery can pose definite problems for students since it must be performed in a foreign language. Speaking English in public only contributes to the teacher's problem and demands to consider academic, public speaking training for the students (Vu, 2019). Regrettably, not many teachers and students distinguish between "speaking in public" and "oratory." Teaching rhetorical discourse and its prosodic realization may make academic presentations more effective and professional. Moreover, foreign language acquisition by students may only benefit from this approach.

However, two essential aspects give rise to certain contradictions in academic presentations. Traditionally the art of public speaking implies two parties of communication: the orator and the audience. The orator aims to influence and engage the audience. On the other hand, presentation is "presenting, introducing something new to the public," in other words, presentation is just informing the audience. It is concentrated on the information itself, not the audience. Effective rhetorical discourse is now being transformed from "oratory" and "public speech" to "presentation." Professional competence necessarily includes the ability to make presentations, but if they are always a useful tool is disputable due to the contradiction mentioned above. The difference between the traditional public speech and presentation includes formal aspects of performing and communication—pragmatic and structural properties of discourse. Considering these observations, the following questions have been considered to improve students' academic presentation skills and avoid common mistakes.

RQ1: What are the roles of sounding speech and visuals in an effective presentation?

RQ2: Can visual tools enhance or interfere with the perception of the spoken information?

RQ3: Can visual tools promote public speech's creativeness and contribute to the individual style and orator's image?

Methodology

The experiment was divided into two stages: i) general observation of students' presentations and ii) devising effective presentation training. The experiment was conducted during the lessons on English for Specific Purposes (ESP), namely "English for IT students." The experiment was followed by considerations of the results. The data collection methods were both quantitative or qualitative.

The first stage included passive observation of the pre-trained students making usual presentations during their English examinations for IT students at the end of the term. Ninety-six students with B1 level (students of intermediate level of English) in English were instructed about making presentation slides and presentation delivery, which included the definite structure of a presentation text and special presentation phrases. Presentations had to include the following sections: Introducing yourself (We haven't all met before, so I'd better introduce myself, I'm ... from), Introducing the topic (This presentation focuses on the issue of ...), Ordering information (I'll start/begin with ... Then / Next I'll look at ...), Delivering the message (At this point we must consider ...), Referring to visual aids (If you look at this table you can see that ...), Presenting a point of view (Most people/scientists would argue that ...), Checking to understand (Is that clear?), Making conclusions and summarizing (Before closing I'd like to summarize the main points.), Finishing (That's all I have to say for the moment). The information on the slides had to be concise, well-designed, illustrative, logically connected. The students were asked to use bullet lists, avoid a heavy load of text, give each slide a heading and subheading, add the conclusion in the end. Their oral presentations were limited to 10 minutes. The students were also not allowed to read the text from their notes, but look-ups were permitted. The results of empirical observations of students' presentations revealed several common presentation mistakes that may hinder comprehension and withdraw the audience's attention from the presentation.

The second stage of the experiment comprises both training and making improved presentations in front of peer students. Three groups of presenters were to make the presentation, which fully met the formal requirements mentioned above. Presenters 1 didn't receive any additional training. Presenters 2 and Presenters 3 attended a short-term public speaking course and practiced reading the presentation text according to intonation marks before they learned it by heart. Moreover, they spent at least two hours working on pronunciation and mimicking the prosody of rhetoric speech with the computer program Speech Analyzer 3.0.1. It is necessary to give a short explanation about how it was done and make reference to Figure 1, which illustrates this process. The student listens to a short sounding statement and then presses the record button and repeats it. Then he compares the overlay of the contour of his voice to that of the rhetor, and after that, he may try again to achieve better output.

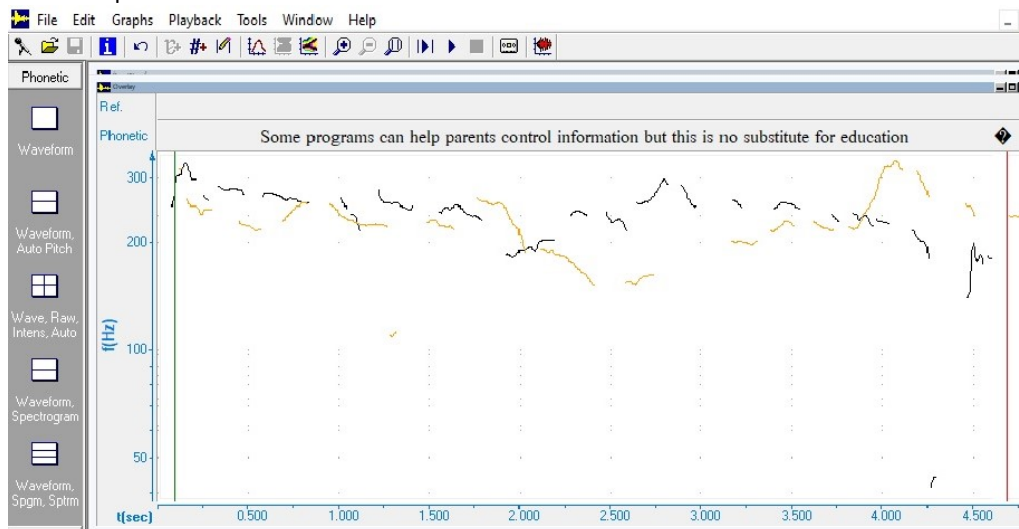


Figure 1. Practicing rhetoric intonation in Speech Analyzer 3.0.1

Presenters 1 and 3 were giving PowerPoint presentations before the peer students of their respective groups. Presenters 2 didn't use any visual aids and PowerPoint presentations while addressing the audience in Group 2. After that, the students from Groups 1, 2, and 3 were to complete a questionnaire (the students had been informed about writing "a test" after the presentation). The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions covering the presentation's content (10 open-ended and ten closed-ended questions) to assess understanding and how much information was remembered by them. Also, the students from Groups 1 and 3 were asked two additional questions concerning the manner of presentation: (i) Was the manner of presentation appealing to you? (ii) Was the presenter's speech clear and understandable?, and (iii) What features of the presenter's style did you like (dislike)? These questions are believed to be essential for further consideration and processing of the research results.

Results

The experiment's introductory stage revealed several difficulties and mistakes typical of the students' presentations. The research included general observations conducted by the author during three years of teaching English for IT students. The findings contain the following serious drawbacks, which were most often noticeable in the students' presentations (rating %):

- (i) Concentrating presentation speech around the slides solely, substituting speaking with reading (80%). Most students read from their notes during the presentation. Sometimes they raise their eyes from the text just to look at the screen when switching the slides. Thus, they are unable to keep eye contact with the audience. There is only one major reason why they do that: their knowledge of the language is insufficient; they are not confident enough to speak in front of the class continuously. When a B1 student memorizes the presentation text before he delivers it, his language experience and confidence are rising every time.
- (ii) Neglecting the audience. The speaker often turns his/her back to the class (63%). Unfortunately, not many students perceive the role of a public speaker. They don't even check if the class can hear them. Students sometimes notice their university lecturers do the same while writing on the board and speaking, so they must be quite aware of the situation, but, surprisingly, they are not.
- (iii) Reading a text from slides. This is the most common mistake; reading what others can read from the screen is admitted by the class as the most irritating thing. Strangely enough, they do the same when delivering a presentation (91%). This mistake is one of the worst because it demonstrates an incompetent and weak presenter who doesn't respect the audience and wastes its time.
- (iv) Integrating elements of a written text, which is not intended for listening comprehension, into a sounding public speech (75%). This mistake can relate to the lack of language speaking experience. Students spend most of the time doing an academic reading and writing essays, while they are taught speaking in public shortly before their examination or thesis defense. English for professional use implies public speaking at meetings and conferences, so even for B1 students of English debate clubs, oratory courses and other public speech training are essential. During the experiment, Presenters 1 and 2 were attending a supplementary public speaking course, which brought visible results, which are given in this article.
- (v) Blurring of the thesis with an abundance of facts and details (84%). This mistake refers to poor speech planning. The presentation text must be edited from a sounding speech's point of view before making the presentation. Turning a written text or an article without changing it into a presentation is an amateur approach.
- (vi) The predominance of visual aids over spoken text (76%). This may distract the class from listening to perception. Presenters often want to impress or even entertain the audience with highly creative presentations with much animation, numerous illustrations, sound effects, tricky design of slides. But instead of keeping the audience's attention, the only thing they achieve is tiredness and loss of the point. Complicated charts and diagrams are also inappropriate. Students may thoughtlessly copy them from high-brow scientific books and reports but may be unaware of how they look like on the screen from the last row in the room. Students must be reminded that the crucial part of their presentation is the text accompanied by visual aid.

- (vii) Presentation slide sequence doesn't compensate for phonetic imperfectness but only exacerbates it (67%). The auditory analysis of the public presentation speech of B1 students was also conducted during the experiment. The following prosodic markers are given below (Table 1).

Table 1. Prosodic features of students' presentation speech before training

Pitch ranges	Medium, narrow
Terminal tones	Mid-level tones, Low fall tones
Key	Low, medium
Heads	Falling head, Mid-level head
Segmentation	Long intonation groups
Pauses	Numerous hesitation pauses (filled and unfilled), syntactic pauses.
Rate of speech	Slow with accidental accelerating fast.
Sound pressure	Average or low.

The auditory analysis showed that the prosodic features are determined more by speech planning than pragmatic goals and speech expressiveness.

During the delivery, students often interrupt their speaking to transfer to the next slide. The speaker's attention is scattered and distracted by slides, occasional reading the notes, attempts to address the class. He/she commonly fail to concentrate on the topic. As a whole, all these mistakes inevitably contribute to the presenter's inability to keep to the standards of the prosody of public speech.

The next stage of the experiment consisted of students' practical training to improve their presentation skills and assess the results with their peer students' reviews.

During the experiment, Presenters 1 was delivering the presentations in Group 1 of his peer students. As mentioned above, all students from Groups 1, 2, and 3 have a B1 level of English and have been studying English for IT for a year and a half. This fact lies in the core of awareness that students from all target Groups are equally able to comprehend the presentations' information. Presenters 3 are pre-trained orators who show a good balance of addressing both the audience and the visual aids. However, during the presentation, 3.3% to make notes because they were preparing for the "test" after the presentation. After that, students from Group 3 answered 20 questions and showed excellent results: 98.2% of their answers were correct. Half of the questionnaire questions were open-ended because they suggested a deeper understanding of the topic, remembering more details. In Group 3, students answered open-ended questions (OEQ) and closed-ended questions (CEQ) practically in equal proportions. But it is interesting to note that many of their CEQ answers contained not only "yes, no" but some extra information even though CEQ was intentionally devised as true CEQ without inviting the respondent to speculate on the topic. For example:

Q: Can microchips implanted in our arms contain our medical records?

A: Yes, it can; besides, it can serve as ID cards, but not many people agree to have microchips so far.

The number of such excessively detailed answers was up to 31%.

According to Peter Worley (2015), there are two different kinds of CEQ: grammatical and conceptual. He argues that grammatically, the question may elicit a "yes, no" reply; however, conceptually, it is open and invites the person to elaborate and inquire. OEQ is preferable to CEQ in education because they demonstrate better understanding and invite discussion. True CEQ is only suitable for testing, but a cognitively open style of questioning "gives [educators] the best of both worlds: the focus and specificity of a closed question ... and the inviting, elaborating character of an open question". Worley developed his ideas in his pedagogical concept of "Open Questioning Mindset." OQM provides teachers with a tool to move the learning process from the teacher's head to the cognitive content of students' contributions. True CEQ in the experiment was not explicitly designed to inquire or simply extended the answer. This entirely unexpected result only raises another question: is the presenter's style responsible for this reaction? Did he manage to interest the listeners with the topic? It can be concluded, the oratory of Presenter 3 succeeded in provoking audience response and willingness to discuss the topic. The arithmetical mean (the average number) of OEQ and CEQ are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Presentation comprehension results in Groups 1, 2, and 3

Presenters and Groups	Correct answers (total)/20	OEQ/10 (arithmetical)	CEQ/10 (arithmetical)	Students keeping notes
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		mean)	mean)	
Presenter 1	83.8%	7.16	9.6	34.6%
Presenter 2	89.4%	7.98	9.9	46.1%
Presenter 3	98.2%	9.64	10	3.3%

In Group 2, the students listened to Presenters 2, who didn't use any visual aids, relying on his oratory abilities solely. Group 2 also represent perfect results (89.4% of right answers). Nevertheless, nearly half of them preferred to make notes during "the lecture": this is the most significant number of the three groups. They also made quite a few mistakes, mostly in OEQ, presumably because they constituted a particular difficulty for them: they may have missed the point or not remembered the information. What is more, Group 2 CEQ has short answers precisely as expected, with a minor exception of 14% of detailed answers, explaining why not and why yes, though that was not required.

In Group 1 (the control group) – Presenters 1 didn't receive any special public speaking training. However, the slides and the presentation text were designed according to the rules of "the standard presentation." In this group, the correct answers are 5.6 – 14.4% less than the Groups 3. The data is even more interesting if we look at the number of students writing memos during the presentation delivery: only 11.5% less than in Group 2, which performed better. As some of the respondents mentioned, one of the reasons was that they were "distracted by the slides while they were writing." Their relatively poor performance is also marked by the smaller number of correct answers to OEQ, which is less than Group 2. In this group, only two students out of 16 tried to give detailed answers to "yes/no" question.

Table 3. Distribution of OEQ and CEQ correct answers

	Comprehension Test Result for	
	CEQ	OEQ
Group 1	50.9%	49.1%
Group 2	55.4%	44.6%
Group 3	57.3%	42.7%

Table 3 illustrates the distribution of open-ended question answers and closed-ended question answers in three audience Groups. In Group 1, students were delivered a presentation by untrained Presenter 1, and they show the worst result for OEQ among the other groups (they missed important information). They had difficulty remembering more details because of two reasons: (i) they weren't listening while making notes; (ii) they were making notes to compensate for the improper delivery of the presentation. Group 2 showed better results for CEQ because they were not distracted by visuals while making notes.

The other criteria considered were the students' attitudes from Groups 1, 2, and 3 to the Presenters, to their public speaking style. The questionnaire also included three questions about the rhetor's style and image. The students were free to choose the form of the answer: either short or extended. The peer students' answers and some of their reviews can be found below (Table 4).

Table 4. Audience attitude to Presenters 3

1. Was the manner of the presentation appealing to you? 99% - "yes"	Most frequent reviews: "pleasant"; "very professional"; "clear, easy to remember"; "nice"; "good English"; "thought-provoking."
2. Was the presenter's speech clear and understandable? 95% - "yes"	Most frequent reviews: "good pronunciation"; "emotional"; "everything was simple."
3. What features of the presenter's style	Likes:

did you like (dislike)?
"he was speaking slowly enough – I could

"he wasn't reading from the paper";
understand everything";
"the presenter was making pauses, and I had time to think it over";
"he wasn't boring";
"the slides were very helpful";
"bright and emotional speaking style."
Dislikes:
"he was too loud";
"he looked like an actor on the stage."

As one can see from Table 4, most students made favorable judgments about both the presentation and presenter styles. The speaker managed to draw the audience's attention to the presentation and achieved his goal – engaging the audience. For Group 3, the results were given in Table 5.

Table 5. Audience attitude to Presenters 1

1. Was the manner of the presentation appealing to you? <u>43% - "yes", 23% - "no", 34% - "cannot say"</u>	Most frequent reviews: <u>"rules for making presentations were observed";</u> "boring and dull"; "usual as always"; "everything was normal"; "nothing special"; "uninteresting."
2. Was the presenter's speech clear and understandable? <u>78% - "yes", 22% - "no"</u>	Most frequent reviews: <u>"I understood everything";</u> "almost every word"; "sometimes he was indistinct"; "wrong word stressing and poor pronunciation."
3. What features of the presenter's style did you like (dislike)? <u></u>	Likes: <u>"beautiful slides";</u> "pleasant voice timbre"; "when he was switching the slides, I had time to write down important information." Dislikes: "he was speaking very fast and rarely made pauses"; "he was monotonous, I nearly fell asleep"; "too many words, too many facts – difficult to remember"; "he didn't seem interested in what he was doing." "he wasn't looking at anybody, I reckon; he was reading from the screen."

The listeners pointed out that the speakers seemed uninterested and uninteresting, and they didn't keep eye contact: he was not audience-oriented. Besides, they didn't bother to check the pronunciation of the words new to them. Another sad thing is that the Presenters were hurrying to give as much information as they could. Still, they didn't make enough effort to make presentation delivery coherent and logical and failed to emphasize main intonation points.

For Group 2, the audience attitude questions were not included in the questionnaire because Presenters 2 had not been supposed to make a PowerPoint presentation.

As one can see from the respondents' reviews, sounding speech prevails over the visuals' role, which can only contribute to the effective presentation. On the other hand, visual tools can seriously interfere with delivering a presentation and perception of the spoken information. This often happens when the presenter fails to find the right balance between visual aids and the presentation text. On the contrary, creative and well-designed slides may contribute to the orator's style.

Discussion

According to educational researchers, PowerPoint presentations can increase students' cognitive activity (Barabanova & Telnoy, 2011). PowerPoint presentations may enhance students' perception and have other advantages: practical and differentiated, modularity, visualization, and learning motivation. Research results show that students remember 10% of information during reading, 30% of information during listening, and 50% of what they see and hear. The experiment results confirm this fact—Group 1 demonstrated 11.6% better results than Group 2. On the other hand, two information channels, visual and auditory, must not interfere. According to Stuttard (1996), visual aids are for eyes, and sounding speech is for ears, but a conflict between the two must be avoided: many public speeches were spoiled by visuals. This situation may seem paradoxical: visuals are aimed at helping an orator to deliver information. The academic presentation generally is distinguished from classical rhetorical public speaking because its main goal is to inform, while oratory is aimed at interacting with the communication act participants. To fulfill the function of informing, the presenter should find an excellent balance to integrate visuals into the oral discourse. It is even more complicated in the engagement of phonetic means of speech.

According to researchers (Collins, 2012; Pchelina, 2013; Bloch, 2011; Hughes, 2004; Stuttard, 1996; Borodina et al., 2019), prosody is an inalienable part of the logical structure of a sounding text, is responsible for rational and emotional impact, helps establish and carry on a communication act, makes sounding text emphatic and contributes to the individual rhetoric style of a speaker. Group 1 reviews included such descriptions of the public speaker's style as "emotional, bright, clear." Freydina (2018) emphasizes another vital feature of a practical rhetoric discourse: a fascinating function. Fascinating deals with the "interesting," motivating, captivating and mesmerizing effect of a public speech. Prosodic realization of fascinating-sounding speech includes the variability of prosodic parameters such as wide pitch range and variety of heads and prominent text elements.

On the contrary, counter fascinating prosody is characterized by monotonous speech with irrelevant intonation patterns that do not correlate with the text's information centers. Thus, Presenters 1 demonstrated "boring, uninteresting, monotonous" speaking, as marked by listeners from Group 1, who showed the worst results from the comprehension test among the three groups. These findings are supported by other researchers' results, who argue that combining words and pictures cannot create an effective presentation. Hadfield-Law (2001) defines presentation making to get a message across effectively to make a difference. It conceptually refers to the ability to make yourself understood by others. The research conducted by Simona (2015) shows that knowing the requirements of an effective academic presentation and experience in delivering such presentations within the course of ESP are the prerequisites for successful communication and achieving career goals in society.

However, this attitude can raise a justified objection that not always academic presentations have the initial goal to fascinate and impress the audience: for example, for such university majors as engineering, mathematics, and technology, the purpose of information may be the key one. In this case, engineering discourse has official unemphatic speech features, including explaining, illustrating, confirming, assessing, concluding (Komochkina, 2019). However, addressing the audience, the speaker may switch from official to unofficial speech register to keep the audience's attention. Shifting to prosodic patterns typical of unofficial style can also be referred to as rhetoric discourse variables.

It cannot be denied that oratory has many individual features because a successful presenter has his/her speaking style in public. However, there are general requirements defined by Bannov (2011): (i) To be a leader, not a participant, monitor the audience; (ii) To combine the functions of a facilitator and an expert; (iii) To motivate and fascinate the audience; (iv) To keep to the main point, not to drown in facts and details; and (v) To make timely conclusions during the presentation.

As mentioned above, prosody plays an equally important role in creating an efficient English presentation. In this respect, ESP students may face specific difficulties caused by the interference of their native language. Recent research (Vishnevskaya, 1985; Prokhorova, 2019; Dubovsky & Zagraevskaya, 2014) has revealed several prosodic interference elements: key, pitch range, head, terminal tone, and some others. Interference leads to the following prosodic impairment: monotonous accent-tone contour of a phrase, univariable pitch level, wrong choice of Heads, the unclear rhythmic structure of speech, inadequate distribution of terminal tones. The findings correlate with the experiment results, which illustrated narrow or medium pitch range, unfair distribution of pauses (most of them filled), unvaried Falling, or Mid Level Heads. The students also demonstrated insufficient reduction of unstressed vowels and incorrect use of weak and strong forms, wrong word stressing, and improper accentuation impeded communication.

Conclusion

The conducted research exposed the importance of training EFL (English as a Foreign language) students to prepare academic presentations. While most students meet the requirements of making a well-designed presentation and preparing a well-structured presentation text, the prosodic realization leaves much to be desired. EFL students should be taught public speaking, including special phonetic training, to escape their native language interference. Using visuals tools may seriously interfere with presenting and aggravate pronunciation mistakes unless presenters undergo public speaking training. On the contrary, a wide range of visual aids can be used by a presenter to discover individual style and orator's image and creativity, which is remarked by the audience. The research also confirmed that PowerPoint presentation, which combines appropriate visual aids and presentation delivery following public speech requirements, yields the highest communication and comprehension results.

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